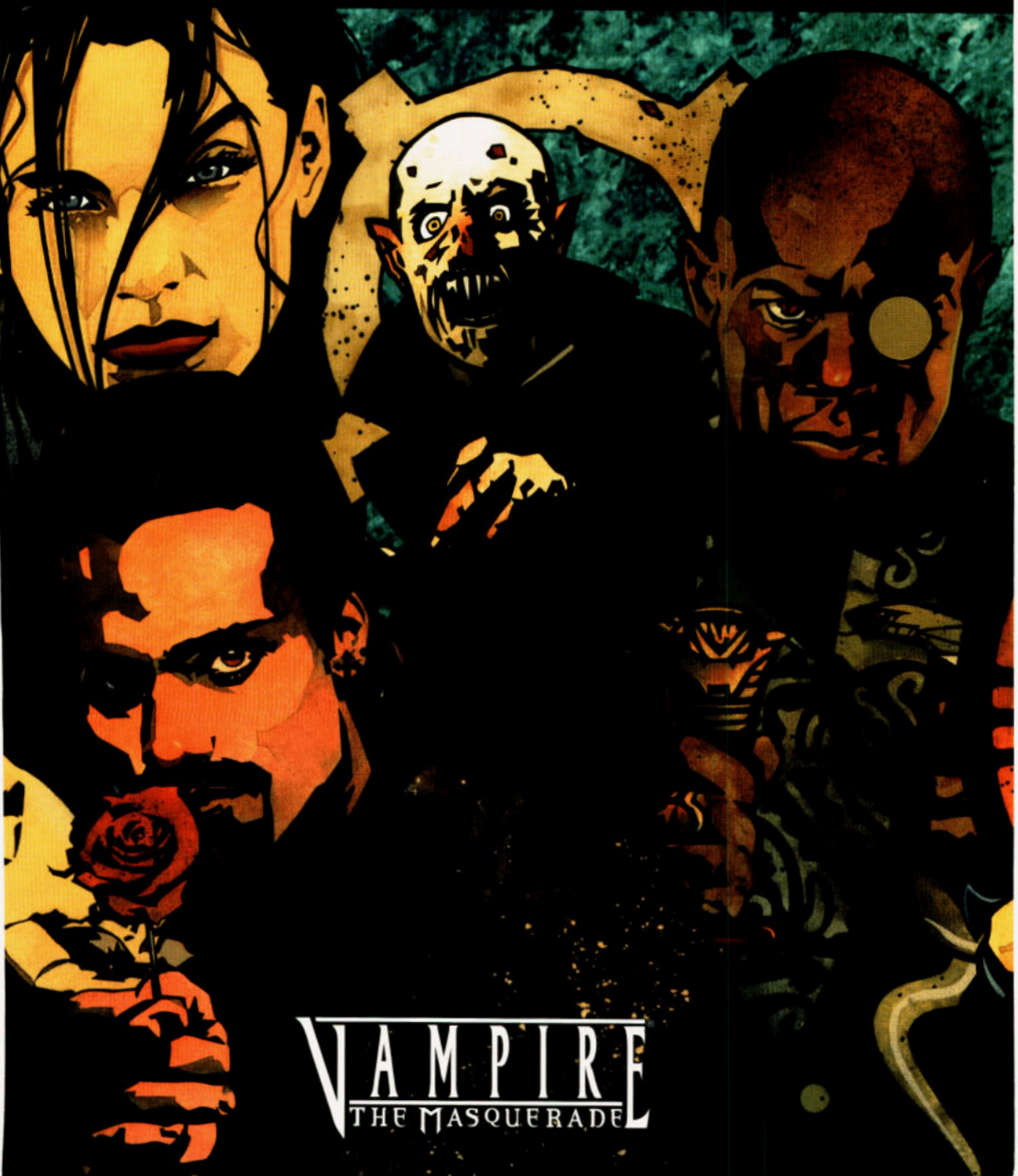
CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: VOLUME TWO

THE EYE OF GEHENNA

wieck, fleming, griffin, et al.



VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE

CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: VOLUME TWO

THE EYE OF GEHENNA

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CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: Volume Two

THE EYE OF GEHENNA™

From Friday, 2 July 1999
to Friday, 30 July 1999

Book Two of Four



by
Stewart Wieck, Gherbod Fleming and Eric Griffin
with Kathleen Ryan, Justin Achilli and Richard Dansky
and additional contributions by Stefan Petrucha

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our story so far

It is the summer of 1999 and the newspapers and television reports are full of stories of a rash of violence, rioting and gruesome murders up and down the East Coast of the United States. Behind these headlines lies the hidden truth that a war is afoot among the unliving vampires—called Kindred by some, Cainites by others—who have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time.

Facing off in this war are the two major sects among the undead: on one side, the genteel, haughty **Camarilla**, dedicated to remaining hidden from human eyes so as to prey in peace; on the other, the utterly inhuman and zealous **Sabbat**, dedicated to the principles of vampiric supremacy and the freedom to feed as they would. On the night after the summer solstice, the Sabbat took the Camarilla stronghold of Atlanta and sent its enemies running. Other cities fell quickly in the following two weeks, culminating in the collapse of Washington, DC and the installation of the fiendish **Sascha Vykos** of Clan Tzimisce as its unliving archbishop. In this, Vykos was assisted by the Assamite assassin **Parmenides**, sent to liaise with the Sabbat but who has fallen under Vykos's sadistic sway. No one seems to know where his true loyalties now lie—not even Parmenides himself.

Camarilla refugees from Atlanta, Charleston and the rest of the fallen burgs have gathered in Baltimore at the behest of its prince, **Alexander Garlotte**. Notable among his guests is his former lover, the Toreador beauty **Victoria Ash**, who was ready to make herself prince of Atlanta before the solstice assault ruined her grand ball. She fell into the hands of Sabbat torturers, but escaped—although not unscathed. Together, Garlotte, Victoria and Washington's displaced prince **Marcus Vitel** prepare for the city's defense.

The war, however, is only the stage dressing and backdrop for other tales—both personal and epic in scale. Victoria Ash's disrupted solstice ball was also the site of the sale of goods between Rolph, an agent of the Nosferatu schemer **Calebros**, and Erich Vegel, the agent of **Hesha Ruhadze**, an unliving researcher into the mysterious past and a Follower of Set. There Vegel obtained the ancient **Eye of Hazimel**, a powerful artifact said to be the actual eye of a vampire older than living memory, and something Hesha has been seeking for over a century. In the chaos of the Sabbat assault, Vegel was lost and with him, the Eye. To aid him in his effort to locate and recover it, Hesha has recruited art historian and restorer **Elizabeth Dimitros**, a mortal woman only beginning to suspect the dark world she has stumbled into.

Calebros, meanwhile, has his own worries besides the Eye. In his mind, the solstice party and sale of the Eye had only been a blind to cover the kidnapping of **Benito Giovanni**, a powerful necromancer, businessman, and member of Clan Giovanni—a band of Kindred who have steadfastly refused to ally themselves with Camarilla or Sabbat. Several years earlier, Benito had apparently betrayed the Nosferatu and set up an elder of theirs to be murdered. Calebros and his clanmates intend to find out why. But Clan Giovanni has no intention of

abandoning Benito, and has assigned two members to carry out the search—Italian elder **Isabel Giovanni** and American tough-man **Chas Giovanni Tello**. They've already followed one dead end to Las Vegas, which cost them nothing but another fraction of their dwindling souls.

Hesha and Calebros would likely be surprised to know that the Eye has fallen into the hands—or the eye-socket, to be precise—of **Leopold**, a Toreador neonate who barely escaped the attack on Atlanta.. A frustrated sculptor in life and undeath, Leopold is now in the thrall of the Eye—whom he feels to be his muse. But is Leopold's "muse" the ancient Hazimel himself, or something even more terrible? And what is the thing that stirs in the so-called "dragon's graveyard"—the ancient printing-press catacombs under Times Square? Perhaps only the Malkavian prophet **Anatole** knows, and he is too mad to discern prophecy from reality.

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Foreword:
Direction (and Misdirection)

by Eric Griffin



For Rafe,
Who slipped in between Tzimisce and Tremere and upstaged both.

Sunday, 18 May 2003; 9:07 PM
St. Columcille's

The book you hold in your hands is something of a curiosity—an experiment in the reanimator's art. It is a lumbering golem of a work, conjured to life by a process one part mad science, one part voodoo, and one part hubris.

The Clan Novel series was originally released as a thirteen-volume, multi-author series. Over the course of a mere two years (1999-2000), an eclectic team of writers and editors (or perhaps, a team of eclectic writers and editors) created a series of novels highlighting each of the thirteen clans in the **Vampire: the Masquerade** setting. A volume of short stories (also thirteen in number) brought the series to a graceful repose and when the last spade of earth was tamped down, we had put to rest a million-word epic:

Clan Novel: Toreador by Stewart Wieck (1999)
Clan Novel: Tzimisce by Eric Griffin (1999)
Clan Novel: Gangrel by Gherbod Fleming (1999)
Clan Novel: Setite by Kathleen Ryan (1999)
Clan Novel: Ventrue by Gherbod Fleming (1999)
Clan Novel: Lasombra by Richard Dansky (1999)
Clan Novel: Assamite by Gherbod Fleming (1999)
Clan Novel: Ravnos by Kathleen Ryan (1999)
Clan Novel: Malkavian by Stewart Wieck (2000)
Clan Novel: Giovanni by Justin Achilli (2000)
Clan Novel: Brujah by Gherbod Fleming (2000)
Clan Novel: Tremere by Eric Griffin (2000)
Clan Novel: Nosferatu by Gherbod Fleming (2000)
The Clan Novel Anthology edited by Stewart Wieck (2000)

I include this ordered list here for three reasons. One, because I want you to go back—after you have finished this book—and read the series as it was originally conceived. Two, to put you on your guard against the fact that there is misdirection at work here already; the books were not released in the order in which they were originally conceived. (Don't say I didn't warn you.) Three, because I want you to pay particular attention to the authors, the men and women behind the green-marbled curtain. More on this anon.

Now I'm not going to say that a single story, spanning thirteen books, told in six different voices is an unprecedented achievement. Wait, yes I am. That's exactly what I'm going to tell you. The Clan Novel series was an audacious project from its very conception. Gherbod Fleming (who should know) claims the very act of setting this series in motion was the work of a madman. That is a professional opinion and thus admissible as evidence in a court of law, were it not for the fact that Mr. Fleming has been dead since the eleventh century. Misdirection within misdirection.

Up until the Clan Novels, when you thought of a multi-author series you thought of projects like Lynn Abbey and Robert Asprin's *Thieves' World*—wonderful collections of short stories all sharing (and, in turn, adding to) a single setting. Or you thought of the Cthulhu Mythos tales,

where a setting originally created by H.P. Lovecraft was later bequeathed to his disciples. Or again, something like Pern, where a living author (Anne McCaffrey) sublet her creation.

The Clan Novel series was something other. From the beginning it was conceived of as a single "threaded" story—each individual novel a polished glass bead strung together on a braid of several overarching series plot threads. Sometimes this vision was artfully realized, sometimes less so. But the point I wanted to make is that if you're watching the shining beads arcing through the air, you're going to miss the trick. You probably already suspect that there's more than a little sleight-of-hand involved in pulling off a million-word illusion, and you're right. It's the act of stringing the beads and knotting the cord into the final completed mystic circle that is significant—a feat of magic and unbridled hubris.

Which brings me back, full circle, to the current volume. If we think of the original Clan Novel series as a threaded strand of glass beads—and you do, don't you? that's called suggestion—then what the current edition does is smash each of the pretty glass beads and then meticulously arrange the shards on an overarching series timeline—like icicles hanging on a clothesline.

It's a striking image and a beautifully deconstructive project with just the right hint of violent behavior. Here's how the trick is done: when the series was first released, each scene opened with a newspaper-style dateline. The series begins on:

Saturday, 20 June 1999, 4:29 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

and concludes on:

Tuesday, 30 November 1999, 11:31 PM
The underground lake
New York City, New York

In between, it covers a lot of ground. What this current edition does is sever all the scenes from their novels, shuffle them up and rearrange them in chronological order. See, it's fun and easy and nobody gets hurt?

Well, nobody but the little glass beads.

The danger of separating the individual scenes from their authors is twofold. First, it unravels the (hopefully fluid) transitions between scenes, giving the work a choppier, more music-video feel. Second, in jumping rapidly from one author's voice to another, you run the risk of aspiring to mere cacophony. I will leave it to the reader to judge where this re-visioning has distracted and where it has attained the artistic.

There is a final hazard here that I wanted to warn you about (and being a perceptive reader, you are now asking yourself how many hazards I chose *not* to warn you about)—and that is the danger of the authors themselves getting lost in this artful shuffle.

Now I'm not going to claim that an author is something necessary for fiction—much less something actually desirable. In certain early Chinese dynasties, novels didn't have authors. Oh, they had writers, of course. Somebody put the characters to parchment. But novels were anonymous works; the author was not a significant factor in the decision to pick up a book.

This should not be a totally alien concept for us. We select many of our non-fiction books—computer manuals, car-repair guides, etc.—without ever thinking about who the author is. We trust that the friendly folks at Microsoft know something about how their product works (!) and that they publish accordingly.

With the proliferation of game- and media-tie-in novels, however, there is a disturbing tendency—among both readers and publishers—to view the author as secondary to the license. The belief that a reader will pick up a novel based solely on the word "Toreador" on the cover—without a thought for the name, much less the talents and achievements of the author—much as he would select a "Windows" manual, is an insidious one. It is a dangerous slide along the slope to viewing the authors for such projects as essentially interchangeable widgets and to seeing tie-in books as being, in their very essence, something less than "real" novels.

This trend has already led to a ghettoization of tie-in novels and a worrisome degradation of the rights of authors working within this ghetto. You will remember that I asked you to pay particular attention to the men and women behind the green-marbled curtain. That is my real goal in this foreword—did I manage to catch you unaware?—to take the creators and put them back center-stage. There, you can love them (for a while there, even I was receiving emails from readers propositioning Gherbod Fleming, under the mistaken impression that he was a she) or hate them (my favorite response to **Clan Novel: Tzimisce** was from a reader who told me that reading it "made her eyes bleed"), but you can't ignore them.

So let's do that. Let's talk about the authors.

I'll start with **Stewart Wieck**. Some of you may recognize Stewart as the talented and accomplished author of **Clan Novel: Toreador** (as alluded to earlier) and **Clan Novel: Malkavian**. What many folks do not know is that he is also an owner and founder of White Wolf. He is the mad progenitor of the Clan Novels. At the time, he also headed up the fiction line and acted as co-editor of the Clan Novel series. A visionary with more hats than good sense.

Stewart is a physical presence, instantly taking over a room when he enters it. He towers well over six feet tall and has a bad habit of appearing in public armed with exotic weapons ranging from klaives to South American war clubs.

Stewart says things like:

Eric,

Hello. Stewart here.

I know that John has spoken with you a bit about the possibility of you writing one of the upcoming clan novels, but I wanted to finally get in touch directly to make the offer official. I'd like to offer you the Tremere novel. This book is scheduled for November 1999 release, which means a final draft will be due sometime in the Spring of that year.

I make this offer to you based on good word from both John and Justin, as well as the very good scene in THE WINNOWING that John says you wrote. This was the one with the bits of the songs quoted back and forth between the dueling Garou. Very nice.

So, let me know if you're interested. I'm trying to wrap these assignments up ASAP.

–Stewart Wieck

Publisher

White Wolf Inc.

This is the email that suckered me into... er, that was my first introduction to the Clan Novel series. The "John" in the note is **John Steele**, the other co-editor of the series and a familiar WOD author in his own right. John unreasoningly insists that I am the foremost living writer of the mystical and mythical—a notion of which I am reluctant to disabuse him.

John and Stewart had hatched the idea of the **Clan Novel** series in the previous months and had already bitten off the Herculean task of lining up story ideas, settings, plots and characters for the unprecedented 13-novel series.

John is also the one who drew the short straw and ended up being the Keeper of the Continuum. That left him writing and updating the Character Bible, a descriptive write-up of all the characters appearing in the series. And the Series Plot Outline. And the Series Timeline, which is, ironically, a direct forebear of this edition of the work.

Johns says things like:

```
Stewart,
Eric and I were discussing plot ideas last night, and this is what
we came up with. I wanted to run it by you before sending it to
Kathy. If possible, give it a quick peek and then give me a call.
-- John
Hazimel, The Eye, Etc.:
Hazimel, in the days of prehistory, was a great architect and
the most skillful worker of stone. His greatest endeavor is one
that has lived in legend long after his name was lost to the
memories of mankind. A great tower Hazimel set out to build, a
tower that would reach to Heaven itself.
```

(That's only the first bit of a fourteen page email containing thousands of years of the myth and history of Hazimel and the Eye. You get the idea.)

John is also the one who pitched in to help when a tornado blew my house away (shades of *The Wizard of Oz* and the man behind the curtain) in April of 1998. It would be another seven months until my family was able to move back into our home. At the risk of reenacting a Monty Python sketch, after the house blew down, we moved into an apartment building, which promptly burned to the ground (and then sank into the swamp). Sparing the sensitive reader the full excruciating sequence of disasters which followed (events which were becoming increasingly difficult to avoid taking personally) I will simply say that we moved no fewer than six times before our house was put back together again.

On each occasion, John found himself drafted into the continuing effort of moving my ever-dwindling store of personal possessions around a four-county area. He's one of my favorite humans.

I'm not sure who I could possibly follow an act like John with, except **Gherbod Fleming**. Gherbod *is* White Wolf fiction. Not only is he White Wolf's most prolific author, he is also its most gracious.

As mentioned above in Stewart's note, I had previously "pinch-hit" some scenes in an earlier White Wolf novel. Gherbod, who is a terribly good sport about all this, insists that he cannot discuss that book with anyone without them instantly saying, "Oh I loved that scene where..." And, bless him, every time he puts on his long-suffering smile and tells them who wrote it.

There was some scene-swapping within the Clan Novel series as well, particularly when insane deadlines loomed or when the series plot called for one author's signature character to appear in another author's book. Looking back, there are only four of the fourteen books in which my writing does not appear. There are none that do not contain Gherbod's words.

Gherbod says things like:

```
Justin,
Do you have any problem with us killing off the three Kindred
mentioned in Rage Across Appalachia (pp. 121-2; Nathan Van de
Brook, Joshua Stein, and Jasmine)?
—Gherbod the Vampire Slayer
```

Justin is, of course, **Vampire: The Masquerade**'s own beloved Justin Achilli—the game developer you love to hate. Justin's online persona, a scathing wit crawled directly from the bottom of a vodka bottle, helps him keep the more rabid fans at arm's length. Justin is the author of the wonderfully gritty **Clan Novel: Giovanni** and served as our compass for all things Vampire. This may explain our brash stagger.

I had worked with Justin back when he was developing the **Dark Ages** line on **Three Pillars** (incidentally, my favorite sourcebook for any game). He actually gave me my first assignment for White Wolf, so he has no one but himself to blame.

In response to Gherbod's polite inquiry, Justin says things like:

```
KILL 'EM! KILL 'EM ALL!! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHA!!
Er, you can kill them off if you'd like.
—Regards, Justin
```

Richard Dansky was our other resident White Wolf guru. Rich wrote the excellent **Clan Novel: Lasombra** and is perhaps best known as the developer for the **Wraith: The Oblivion** line. It is not inappropriate, then, that we consulted Rich after the fashion of an oracle. He always had a handy answer on topics as arcane as the feeding habits of orthodox Islamic vampires.

Rich says things like:

```
I find that when naming Lasombra, it's easiest to go to the John
Benson baseball register and steal the names of ballplayers
from the Caribbean. It's the best way I know to get a nice wide
range of authentic Hispanic names fast.
—deadguy
```

Rich is also nice to have around at conventions because he's easy to talk to and he scores big points for being nice to my kids. One Dragon*Con, he passed the time at a long signing by sharing his light-up Eye of Hazimel™ ball with my oldest son (who I think was signing books as Gherbod Fleming at the time), and encouraging him to hurl it at random passersby. He's good folks.

The final Clan Novel author, **Kathleen Ryan**, is also a White Wolfer from way back. Kathy long held the dubious distinction of being the official Layout Maven, which I think meant that she got to clean up everybody else's production messes. Like spelling the authors' names wrong on the front covers (happened) or omitting them entirely (ditto). This lumped her in firmly with the other unsung hero of our creative team, Copyeditor **Anna Branscome,** who had the singularly unenviable task of rendering my purple prose (and even more horrendous Latin) into a form that was not toxic to unsuspecting humans.

Kathy had written several excellent signature stories for the **Mage: The Ascension** line, and her work on the Clan Novels was something of an encore command performance. Her **Clan Novel: Setite** and **Clan Novel: Ravnos** were even more highly lauded, and justifiably so. Kathy is always both sharp and gracious, offering help to get around problems you hadn't even realized you had backed yourself into yet.

Kathy says things like:

```
Do the Powers behind the Plot (that'd be Stew and John, not the
ancient vamps running around these books) have a take on the
nature of the statuette and little eye in Hesha's possession?
I intend to give the readers and the art historian a good
look at the thing Saturday evening, and it'd be nice not to
contradict ourselves.
Ta.
-Kathy
```

To this day, I do not know whether or not Kathy had actually whipped up a replica Eye and Statue with the intention of running them past an art historian to check for authenticity. But I wouldn't put it past her.

In response to which, I say things like:

```
Oh, was this an eye? I was under the impression it was a nose.
It seems I will require some additional time for rewrites...
-Eric
```

But by now you're probably about tired of hearing what "I say things like." I appreciate your bearing with me for so long on what may already have become a long nostalgic ramble. In my defense I have to say only that my cause was noble and my subjects deserving of whatever praise my meager words may have paid them.

Look on the bright side; you've only got 750,000 or so words left to go.

—Eric Griffin

[Editor's Note: The reader will note that the compilation's editor—wielder of the bead-smashing hammer—has been kind enough to provide you with those handy little initials at the beginning of each scene (in the outer margin), that tell you who wrote it. Oh, and for a little more evidence of The Amazing Griffin's misdirection, see the author bio for Gherbod Fleming in the Appendix to this volume. —PB]

part one:

Home ports

From Friday, 2 July 1999

to Thursday, 15 July 1999



Friday, 2 July 1999, 6:20 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Elizabeth strained to see through the twilight. The woods around them looked much like the woods they'd been traveling through for the past ten minutes, and the road was the same nearly unmarked, two-lane affair it had been. She knew that Columbia was a large, built-up suburb. Logically, there should be houses, shops, lights and larger streets nearby, but she hadn't seen any since the last stop sign.

The sedan passed a yellow diamond with the most elaborate squiggle on it that Elizabeth had ever seen. She grasped the armrest tightly, and they took a series of curves like a drunken roller coaster. Thompson flicked up the headlights halfway through a sweeping arc, and gray tree-trunks flashed by in a blur. They sped around one last corner and turned up a driveway. It clung to a creekside and then edged its way up the side of a hill, passing a mailbox, unmarked. They bumped gently and slowly over gravelly macadam, crested the shoulder of the hill, and Elizabeth had her first sight of the house of Hesha Ruhadze.

In the center, facing the drive, was a solid massif—a majestically proportioned old house with tall, mullioned windows, grand double-doors under a neoclassical lintel and perfect symmetry. As the car pulled around, she saw a later addition, tacked on by a lesser architect for a larger family. The back wing tried to echo the front, but it was cluttered with odd side-roofs, long eaves, dormer rooms and gables that projected at impossible angles. The whole mess was painted white—not recently, and not for the first time. Good red brick showed at the corners, where the winds had had the best chance to knock the flakes away. The roof was verdigris-green copper in excellent repair, and behind a morass of bracken and wildflowers, Elizabeth could see a real fieldstone foundation running underneath it all. It was shabby. It wasn't what she had expected. It did have charm.

Thompson eased the car over the weed-eaten drive and pulled up to a slightly more modern-looking barn. He touched a button on his console and the broad doors slid open. The black sedan rolled gingerly into place beside a car that might have been its twin and stopped.

Elizabeth stepped onto the clean-swept brick floor. She dragged her carry-on, her purse and satchel out with her. Thompson walked around, pulled her checked bags from the trunk and groaned.

"What do you have in here, bricks?"

"They're books. I'm working on my doctorate in Art History. That one rolls, by the way. We can pile everything else on top of it."

"What's your concentration?" he asked, as he swung the lighter suitcase into place and clipped it down.

"It's rather obscure…call it comparative symbology."

"What does that mean?" Thompson began trolling the double-decker baggage along a moss-covered path of slate flagstones.

"Um. Take a bull in a painting—a painting you don't have captions for because you can't read the script the people wrote in. Does it represent fertility? A sacrifice? An amount

of goods for barter? A god? If it is a god, which god is it, and why did the painter use the allegory of 'god as bull'? And did it represent that god before or after an invasion from another culture that happened to have a thing for cattle?"

Thompson manhandled the cases up three wooden steps to the porch. "Why can't it just be a bull?" He punched a code into a keypad next to a wasps' nest and opened the door to let her through.

"Sometimes it is. But my specialty is very primitive motifs. The farther back in history you go, the less plain doodling you get, and the more each symbol *means* something important to the person who made it."

Elizabeth turned to look around her. They'd come into the long, narrow kitchen. The appliances were ultra-modern, but the cabinets and table looked, to her experienced eye, as if they were original to the house. She drifted a little into the working end of things and fiddled idly with a white enamel drawer-pull.

"Just set your stuff down here," said Thompson. "You have your choice of rooms, so I'll show you around and let you pick before I take your bag of bricks anywhere. Come on."

He led her through a wide hall into the older half of the building and up a dark and creaking staircase.

"My room is down that way," he said, inclining his graying head to the back of the house. "And the cook's, too; you'll meet him later. The guest rooms are in the front." Thompson leaned into an open doorway, turned a lamp on inside and stepped away for Elizabeth to have a look. "Or, if you aren't claustrophobic, you can come downstairs. Some people don't like the idea of basements...."

"No, that's fine. I worked under the Met four summers running, and you feel the traffic through the tabletops down there."

The cellar door from the kitchen still led down to the cellar—but where the original inhabitants had left packed earth floors, Hesha Ruhadze had laid shining planks stained nearly black. The fieldstone foundations formed the walls and support pillars four feet square stood in carefully cut gaps in the dark wood.

The main room was filled with display cases and glass-fronted shelves. Here and there a couch and table, a chair and desk, or stool and workbench were grouped near the exhibits. Several huge tables held binding supplies, pieces of pottery in reconstruction and other temptations for the historian. Elizabeth dragged her feet past a long, low table full of *things* that needed her ministrations, and only when Thompson cleared his throat and called her could she turn away. On the other side of the long hall—at what she thought must be the outer edge of the house upstairs—he waited at the bottom of a short flight of wide, slate steps, holding open a door made in the same style as the floor.

"This was Mr. Vegel's room," he said.

"Mr. Vegel?" The little apartment was richly furnished in a very Victorian, masculine fashion. Three walls were paneled and the fourth was wood only to waist height; above the chair rail it was covered in white satin fabric, and discreet silver pins held papers, photographs and pieces of fabric to it as if to a huge bulletin board.

"Mr. Ruhadze didn't mention him?" Thompson asked. She shook her head but didn't show much curiosity. He let the subject go. "Books and so forth here," he said, unnecessarily. The entire wall was shelves, not full, but comfortably crowded. He and the Asp had had

a rough day going through Vegel's apartment. Hesha's list of items forbidden to the newcomer was long, and there weren't many safe places to store the really dangerous things. After the clean-out, Thompson's practiced hands had massaged the gaps in the shelves. Unless you knew how full Vegel had kept his office, you'd never realize anything was missing. Thompson watched the girl react to the room, her fingers wandering along the rows of rare and expensive editions, and decided that the boss's guess had been correct. It always was.

"Mr. Vegel was the previous curator. He lived down here, mostly. Of course, you're the only guest. You could turn this room into office space, work area, whatever you need, and actually sleep upstairs. The guest rooms do have nice views, particularly in the summer."

"Oh, no," said Elizabeth, looking at the desk and the library. "This will be perfect."

"I'll bring down your things." As he left, Thompson smiled in satisfaction. *Trust Hesha to know what was catnip] and for which kitties....* He pressed a code on the kitchen intercom and spoke into it. "Sir?"

"Yes, Thompson?"

"Miss Dimitros is here. She's chosen Vegel's room. I'll bring her things down in a moment. I've left the impression that you won't be available for at least an hour yet."

"Thank you. I'll see her when Janet and I have finished."

Thompson cut the connection. He picked up Elizabeth's carry-on and took from the closest drawer an object that manifestly did not belong in a kitchen—a hand-held metal scanner. All the bags were clean.

He looked longingly at the hall leading into the old house. In the space between the walls, there was a hidden elevator. But Elizabeth might not be in her room when the car opened in the first basement, and so he slung her bag full of books over his broad shoulders and used the stairs. The girl was deep in a book when he brought the luggage in, but she smiled and offered to help.

"No thanks," said Thompson. He put the heavy case in a convenient corner—blocking her off, he hoped, from finding the door hidden there—and in two more trips all her things were with her.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I have some chores to see to and business arrangements to make for Mr. Ruhadze's townhouse. If you need anything, there's an intercom here by the door," he said, sliding open a wooden panel. "Just press the green button and speak into it." He closed the tiny cabinet again, walked out and shut the door softly behind him.

Friday, 2 July 1999, 8:15 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Elizabeth looked up from her unpacking. *Was that a knock?* She closed the drawer on her socks, crossed the room—now rather cluttered with open suitcases and boxes of notes—and opened the door.

"Good evening, Elizabeth."

"Hello, Hesha."

They wavered on the threshold. "Come on in," she said, smiling. "I'm still in the messy stages of the explosion, I'm afraid." She backed into the room and gestured vaguely.

Hesha lowered himself into Vegel's chair, stretched his legs out and watched her move. She rattled off expressions of gratitude, compliments for Thompson and amazement at the house. She had questions about the building, and he answered them with his connoisseur's voice and attitude…a stock character, a mask held up for her to look at while he studied her. She was nervous, but comfortable with the surroundings. It was he himself who made her fingers restless and the tiny muscles of her face unsettled. Every time she looked to him, a question was in her eyes, and he made sure to keep all the answers out of his own.

He found himself relieved that the Beast remained calm in her presence…and was shocked to realize that he had been worried unawares. What was it that had given the thing so much strength in her apartment? The statue? His worries about the Sabbat's machinations? Vegel's disappearance? He determined to watch the Beast and his own mind more closely—the weakness could not be allowed to remain.

"Are you tired?" he asked, changing the subject.

Elizabeth stopped in mid-fold. "No."

"But you had to think about it?"

"It's nearly ten, isn't it? I suppose that I should be—I had to be up early to pack—but I'm too excited about the work. I caught a glimpse of some of the pieces coming down here."

He nodded understandingly. "Would you like a tour?"

"Absolutely." Halfway to the door she stopped and faced him earnestly. "Unless *you're* tired. I don't want to keep you from your schedule…."

"I confess that I succumbed to temptation earlier. West Coast lawyers are the worst, I think. I had the cook bring down some coffee…Turkish coffee. I'll be awake all night," he sighed, "but it was the only way I could deal with the fools who were chattering at me. Besides, tomorrow is Saturday. Only my international affiliates will try to get at me, and my secretary can say 'No' in forty languages."

Elizabeth chuckled and followed him out.

An hour later, they'd made it to the main workshop. "And the ventilation system is fully labeled," Hesha said, indicating a discrete control panel. "If you have any problems, do let Thompson know." He turned to another corner of the room.

"This flat file is full of paper that needs acid-balance treatment. The vertical stores contain ten or twelve paintings that need work of one kind or another, and I have all kinds of stabilization projects, of course. I know that painting restoration is a specialty of yours. If you'll finish just that section during your stay here, I'd be amply compensated for your expenses. However, if you'd like to try your hand at more unusual things..." He paced back into the main room at a businesslike clip. "Here," he said, almost smiling, "is the emperor of all jigsaw puzzles."

It was under glass, on the longest, narrowest table in the entire museum. On smooth fabric lay what once had been a scroll. "Papyrus," said Hesha. "Part of the grave goods of a pharaoh. Thieves robbed the tomb but the left the 'rubbish' behind—baskets, clay pots, food. This was in a plain wooden case, and they ignored it. More literate thieves picked it up later. Unfortunately, it has been shaken and jarred, and some fool tried to unroll it." He turned and asked of her, "Do you read the hieroglyphs?"

"No."

"Vegel left notes of the script in use at the period," he said, opening a small drawer built into the table. He offered her a sheaf of hand-made sketches. "Also, the tweezers..." He held up a bizarre-looking pair of tongs. "To keep the dust and the air currents from playing havoc with the shards, we had to cover the whole piece with glass. These slip into the gaps at the edges." He demonstrated, setting two halves of a glyph closer together. Gingerly, he tilted the tweezers up and away from the scraps and slowly drew the tool back out of the danger zone. "You might want to practice with the sections at the top of the scroll first. The damage is less extensive, and the pieces are easier to read."

He whisked her away from the long table and continued. "Vegel's particular hobby horse—" he led her to an area carpeted in canvas. An unfinished wooden frame ten feet square and one foot high hemmed in the dusty white cloth. On low shelves on three sides, fragments of jars and bowls freed from the matrix reposed in little trays; one half-reconstructed amphora-like vessel stood above the detritus. In the midst of it, a small boulder of dried clay lay at a resentful tilt. Edges of pottery shards stuck out of it from every angle.

"What is it?" asked Elizabeth.

"We—I'm not sure. Vegel collected it from someone; no provenance available." Hesha thought of the haven the thing had originally occupied. They'd never found out why the Malkavian had treasured the boulder, or where it had come from. But Vegel insisted that it hid something unusual, and the elder Setite had agreed—after certain tests and precautions—to let the archaeologist bring the boulder home. "I don't know whether Erich expected to find anything particularly interesting in it. He had been an archaeologist earlier in his career, and I think he simply liked to keep in practice."

Hesha stepped back, regretfully. "That's all for now. If I'm going to sleep in tomorrow, I have to work tonight, and I'm sure you'll want to finish settling yourself. I can spare the time to show you our finished pieces Monday, perhaps."

"Thank you."

He shook his head. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

She laughed. "Thank you for rescuing me from Aunt Agnes." Her eyes sought out his. Hesha felt the glance coming, avoided it so deftly that she never knew he'd shunned her and began the walk back to his office. Behind him, her footsteps tapped a trail across the floor—not toward Vegel's room, but to the long table.

"You're not thinking of starting on that tonight, are you?" he asked without looking.

"I thought I'd just go over it to see what's been done so far."

"Well," he said, nodding to himself. "Try not to stay up too late. If you get hungry, there are all kinds of things in the kitchen...just be careful not to wake the cook."

Hesha left his new protégée hard at work and joined his other servants in the crypt. Even the Asp was shocked to see the smile on the master's face.

Saturday, 3 July 1999, 3:18 AM
(Friday, 2 July 1999, 8:18 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Caves of Ten Thousand Sorrows
Near Petra, Jordan

Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, walked silently through the darkness toward his destiny. His sandals were left miles behind, neatly arranged before the threshold of the caverns. His feet, the soles of which had not felt the fire of sun-scorched desert sands since the first days of the Holy Prophet, did not so much as displace a single pebble or disturb a granule of dust from its resting place upon the sandstone.

Elijah's mind was quiet. Calming scripture arose from his soul like the cool evening breeze blowing from the north. *He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.*

The darkness was complete, yet the caliph stepped with surety. Countless passages branched off from the winding tunnel he followed, but Elijah's deliberate pace did not once slacken. Never before had he traversed this path, but the twists of the rough-hewn corridors were as familiar to him as the weave of his simple muslin robe. He could not deny that which drew him forward. He could not lose his way.

The passages wound this way and that, seemingly without reason: sharp, spiraling curves that nearly met themselves, broad arcs to the northwest, squared turns to the south, zigs and zags leading tangentially eastward but never directly toward the rising sun. Among the sculptured chaos, however, Elijah Ahmed's steps carried him always down, always deeper toward the heart of the earth.

He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.

When finally Elijah had taken his last step, he stood not in one of the corridors of the past hours, but in a vast chamber. Darkness opened before him like the void, but not even the absence of light could hide from his eyes the presence of the herald.

It sat upon an arrangement of mammoth stones, an unadorned throne crafted from bedrock. The herald, too, was unadorned. Its naked, childlike body resembled a sculpture of hard-packed coal, each fissure, each crack in the kiln-hardened surface actually a jagged scar streaking like black lightning across the blackest midnight sky—black except for a crescent and a handful of matching bone-white stars. The crescent moon of this midnight was a necklace of bone that lay draped across the chest of the herald's perfectly motionless body. The stars were bone as well, though no mere accoutrements; they were the bones of Ur-Shulgi, visible where the midnight skin had peeled back or cracked and fallen away; they were the sheaths of the herald's essence, and his marrow was vengeance.

Thus was the being Elijah Ahmed faced.

Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, one of the tripartite *du'at*, looked into the deep emptiness that should have been the herald's eyes. The sockets were set beneath sharp ridges of bone, and the gaping nothingness was like an accusation of wrongdoing and injury thousands of years old, as if Elijah himself had gouged out the eyes in sport or cruel jest.

And yet the herald looked upon Elijah, and the herald did see.

"Elijah Ahmed," spoke Ur-Shulgi.

At once, Elijah prostrated himself before the herald. The sandstone, which should have been cool within the womb of the earth, burned the caliph's forehead. But he did not stir.

"Childe of Haqim," spoke the herald. "Blood of his blood of his blood of his blood." Ur-Shulgi's voice filled the chamber like the south desert wind. His words stung like the first pricks of the sandstorm that gnaws flesh from bone.

"Rise, Elijah Ahmed."

The caliph obeyed, as would he have even had he desired otherwise. He rose to one knee. The sandstone, to the touch, had become the wide desert floor at noon. He needn't look at the palms of his hands to know that his own dark skin crisped—the left knee, on which his weight rested; the sole of his right foot; the top of the left. Head bowed, eyes downcast, Elijah ignored the fire of his body and paid silent homage to the herald of his master.

But a storm was rising.

The desert winds, an open furnace stoked by the rage of ancients, tore at him. His thin muslin robe quickly burned away, as did his hair, his eyebrows and lashes. The caliph closed his eyes against the heat, but his eyelids soon curled back like singed paper. He had no choice but to look upon his reckoning.

In that instant, Elijah Ahmed knew fear. It was a mark of his wisdom. For who but the fool does not fear the power of heaven unleashed? In that instant, Elijah knew also the unvoiced question given form in that fiery desert wind:

Who gives you life, Elijah Ahmed?

Elijah could no longer reason, so great had become the heat, but he didn't need reason in the face of this challenge. The question was not new to him; it had dogged him as long as he remembered, since before wise Thetmes Embraced him into unending death, since Elijah's mortal days following behind in the footsteps of the Holy Prophet. From deep within Elijah's soul, the answer rose full like a gourd dipped in an oasis well.

Allah gives me life.

The fiery wind grew to a raging maelstrom. It roared in Elijah's ears, those fragile shells of flesh that began to melt and run down the sides of his face. His naked eyes, too, were assaulted by the storm. His tears dried before he could cry them.

And then the herald was no longer sitting far across the chamber upon his great throne. He had not moved, but now Ur-Shulgi stood motionless before Elijah, mere inches from the caliph. The herald's craggy, coal-black skin shone amidst the violence of the vortex.

"Young Allah," said Ur-Shulgi. "Are you certain, childe of Haqim?"

Elijah's face was now upturned, though he did not remember moving. His eyes became pools of blood, as the tender flesh disintegrated beneath the fury of Ur-Shulgi. The caliph's skin cracked and peeled away. As the last of vision fled, Elijah was not aware, could not be aware, of the eternal moment in which he resembled nothing so much as the herald before whom he knelt. Elijah wanted to open his mouth, wanted to speak, but the muscles of his jaw were beyond use and his tongue was shriveled away to a smoldering lump.

As flesh burned away, one belief resounded from the core of Elijah Ahmed's being: *Haqim has stretched my existence, but it was Allah gave me life. He, Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him.*

"Very well," said Ur-Shulgi. His words found their way through Elijah's ruined ears, within the mind that was beyond pain. "In the name of the Eldest, I reclaim that which is rightfully his."

No sooner was it said than the blackened form that had been Elijah Ahmed, caliph of Alamut, vomited forth the blood of Haqim into a large earthen pot.

Many hours later, the winds settled, and all was again silent stillness of the void.

Saturday, 3 July 1999, 11:42 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Feeling late and guilty, Elizabeth trundled up the stairs to the kitchen and found herself confronted by a small, unexpected man in an apron, washing dishes. His hair was very dark and slightly curly. His skin was a shade or two deeper than her own—a clean, tanned, Mediterranean olive color. His rolled-up shirtsleeves exposed arms thick with wiry black hair. He reached for another bowl and smiled at her.

"Good morning. I'm sorry I'm up so late," Liz said.

"Why are you sorry? It's Saturday, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry for missing breakfast," she began, then hesitated. "Aren't you the cook?"

"Oh. That's just Ron and the Man being polite. I can cook, but mostly I just buy the groceries. Are you hungry? Of course you're hungry. You just woke up, right? Want an omelet?" He gave her no chance to protest. "I was only washing up from breakfast so I could start lunch. We'll call it brunch. I make the best Italian-American French cooking you've ever had." His twinkling black eyes gave her the once-over. "A big omelet. You're too skinny, as my Mamma would've said." He dried a hand on the dishcloth and extended it. They shook vigorously. "I'm Angelo Mercurio. But just call me the Asp; everybody does."

"Elizabeth Dimitros. Liz," she said back. Then, "The Asp?"

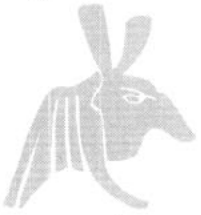
"I bite," said Mercurio with a conspiratorial wink, thoroughly enjoying himself in the role of colorful, harmless houseboy. "Anyway. Noon is fine. Ron Thompson's the only early riser I know, and he cheats. Naps from about five to eight. Hesha—Mr. Ruhadze—well, the boss just comes and goes as he pleases. Jetlagged half the time, working himself to a frazzle the other. I can't remember the last time he had anything like a good night's sleep," said the Asp, in total honesty.

"How many other people live here?" asked Liz, watching as the Asp cracked eight eggs into a bowl one-handed.

"Just Ron and the boss and me, since Vegel's gone. House guests, of course. And occasionally the boss will have some of his assistants in for a working party. We're not precisely 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' here."

"What happened to Mr. Vegel?"

The Asp's bright eyes dimmed for a moment. "Heart attack. Very sudden. Just a few weeks ago...and he was a young man, too. Mid-thirties." He picked up a spatula and began to do clever things to the cholesterol-laden omelet. "Maybe we'll have salad for lunch tomorrow, huh?"



Saturday, 3 July 1999, 9:07 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Hesha came down the stairs from the kitchen holding a briefcase and a *Wall Street Journal*. He passed the papyrus table on the way to his own study and broke his slightly weary stride to look over Elizabeth's shoulder as he went by. It was only a moment's pause: long enough for the woman to expect comment, short enough that the lack thereof would not seem dismissive or curt. In his study, he laid down the props. In his apartment, he shed the suit and shoes, pulling on khakis and a worn-looking linen shirt. Quick change complete, he stepped back into the basement hall.

"Nice work," he said over his guest's shoulder.

Elizabeth nearly dropped the tweezers into the papyrus. "Lord. You'd think you'd make some noise, walking across a wooden floor, Hesha."

"Sorry."

"Can you take a look at the text near the topmost illustration? I'm sure the painted parts go together, but I can't tell a faded ibis from a faded owl from a faded vulture."

He pulled a chair up to the table's edge and fixed a monocle into his left eye. "Tweezers?" Elizabeth handed him hers and fetched another pair from the drawer. They worked quietly for some time. "It's a falcon," he said eventually.

"That would explain the confusion."

Silence reigned once more, though Hesha could feel that the woman's attention strayed to his face quite often. He kept his eyes on the text, and his conversation on the work. At length, Hesha peered into the scraps directly beneath him. "I think there's another illustration coming here. See if you can fill that in." He stood up. "But don't wear yourself out. I hear you were up past four last night." Elizabeth smiled, shrugged and nodded. "Well, do as you choose. But if you find yourself keeping owl's hours, don't blame me." He started to leave.

Reminded, Liz looked up and asked, "Is there an alarm clock I could borrow?"

"You might talk to the Asp or Thompson," said Hesha, watching her. "I don't use one." He added, "Have a nice night," and was pleased to see her distress as she realized he was going for good.

Saturday, 3 July 1999, 10:34 PM
A private office, the Harrison Building
Baltimore, Maryland

To Prince Garlotte's way of thinking, Marcus Vitel was a worthy beneficiary. The two Ventrue, rulers of cities in such proximity, had been rivals for just over thirty years, since Vitel had come to power upon the demise of Washington's previous prince, Marissa of Clan Tremere. Over those decades, Vitel had enjoyed the greater prestige, global geopolitics being what they were. He had woefully neglected clan affairs and kept largely to himself, yet still others constantly had fawned over him: What would wise and powerful Prince Vitel think of this; what of that?

Not that Garlotte was bitter.

However little he trusted Vitel, or however much the prince of Baltimore was galled by the unseemly, sycophantic behavior of those within Clan Ventrue and beyond, Garlotte rested more easily knowing that a fellow clanmate, rather than a Tremere witch, held the reigns of power in the District of Columbia.

And now, after thirty years of rivalry, Vitel was almost completely dependent upon the obviously superior stewardship of Garlotte. *Ah, perhaps there is justice in this lifetime,* Garlotte thought. *As long as the lifetime in question spanned several centuries.*

None of these thoughts broke through Garlotte's studied demeanor of interest and concern, but surely Vitel, seated just across the desk in this quiet office of Garlotte's, knew. Surely Vitel knew that, despite the Ventrue custom of extending succor to a clanmate in need, his host was compiling a long list of favors granted—a list of which Garlotte, in a hundred polite and unassuming ways, would never tire of reminding Vitel.

Currently, less pleasant matters demanded Garlotte's attention. "The governor wisely agrees with me," Garlotte continued with what he and Vitel were discussing, "that it is only fitting that he offer the use of Maryland's National Guard, considering the scope of lawlessness in Washington."

Vitel considered this for a long while. The expatriate prince had largely kept to himself since arriving in Baltimore. Though Garlotte had to concede that six nights, for a Kindred, was a paltry amount of time to grieve for childer lost, he nonetheless felt that prudence demanded he make use of any resources still available to Vitel that could bolster Baltimore's resistance to the Sabbat.

"Why not encourage the introduction of federal troops?" Vitel asked finally. "They would be more reliable."

"More *disciplined*," Garlotte, raising a finger, corrected him, "but for our purposes also more difficult to influence. Unless you have more connections within the Pentagon than one might reasonably expect...?"

Vitel shook his head almost imperceptibly. He appeared somewhat recovered since his arrival in the city, thanks mostly to the replacement of his torn garments with a new tailored suit. But still he retained some of the stunned or shell-shocked bearing that had accompanied his displacement, as if it were a struggle for him to remain fully engaged with those around him.

He seems so...defeated, Garlotte thought. Of course, no one had enough highly placed moles within the federal military to reliably influence large-scale troop deployments for any length of time. Garlotte would have been shocked if Vitel did—almost as shocked as he would have been if Vitel had admitted as much.

"So you see," Garlotte continued, "the state troops will best suit our needs. The governor is ready to deploy them. All that remains is for the mayor in Washington to accept the offer."

"The mayor or the Congressional oversight committee," said Vitel, still seeming to pay only half attention. "May I...?" He gestured toward the phone on Garlotte's desk.

"Please do."

"Secure line? Good." Vitel punched in a number and did not have to wait long. "Good evening, Senator. Forgive me for disturbing you at home.... Yes, Senator. I'm *acutely* aware of what's happening...."

As Vitel spoke, Garlotte could see the fire creeping back into his rival's eyes. The sight was at the same time heartening and alarming—heartening because Vitel in his right mind, resourceful and insightful, was much more valuable in defending Baltimore; alarming because Vitel in his right mind, devious and cunning, might seek to remedy the loss of an old city with the acquisition of a new one.

"If I remember correctly," Vitel was saying into the phone, "your friends on the District oversight committee owe you several favors? And I believe they are already on the verge of declaring a state of emergency and relieving the city officials of control.... Yes, yes. I would appreciate your encouraging them in that direction. Best for everyone, don't you think?"

Garlotte noticed that Vitel was careful not to mention names, not the senator's, not the "friends" on the oversight committee. Probably Vitel had dialed through an intermediary exchange or phone bank as well, though Garlotte would certainly examine the records later.

"Yes, that's correct," said Vitel. "The governor is going to offer the Maryland National Guard. It's imperative that the oversight committee accepts this offer. And a citywide curfew is advisable also. How long can we reasonably expect these measures to be authorized for?" Vitel listened, nodded. "Yes. I understand. I know you'll do your best.... Pardon me.... Yes. I've heard your name mentioned as a vice-presidential candidate.... What do I think? I think your services are far too valuable in the Senate. Goodnight, Senator."

Vitel hung up the phone. Already the fire was beginning to fade from his eyes as the thrill of the deal receded and grief and loss reasserted themselves. "Thirty days. The troops will go in: state of emergency, curfew. But unlikely the oversight committee will authorize beyond thirty days." He tossed up his hands.

Garlotte leaned back in his executive's chair. "It's thirty days more than we had." Grudgingly, he started a new mental list—favors he owed Vitel. Thankfully, it was a much shorter list at present.

"Everything has been so hectic since your arrival, Marcus," said Garlotte, feeling that a change of subject might be to his advantage. "Tell me of your childer." He was sympathy incarnate, wanting nothing more than to ease the pain of his rival.



Sunday, 4 July 1999, 8:56 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Thompson? Report."

"The Asp has two new refugees. Three of the originals have found havens with closer kin under Prince Garlotte. Miss Dimitros took a walk earlier and tripped the perimeter alarm, but otherwise not so much as a raccoon."

"How did she spend her day?"

"She began on one of those modern things…the bluish one…did some more work on the painting she'd already started; some reading in her room; dinner with the Asp and me. I believe she's on the papyrus at the moment."

"Did she get her alarm clock?"

"I lent her mine. It 'mysteriously' shorted out when we plugged it into the socket."

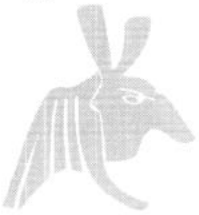
"Good." Hesha thought for a few moments. "Have my car ready."

"*Your* car, sir?"

"Yes. Follow if you like, but I think Miss Dimitros needs a night away from work. Today is a holiday, you know." The old cop looked at him blankly, and he went on, "Independence Day, Thompson. In fact, take the night off. Tell the Asp the same thing."

"Both of them, sir?" Hesha's man's voice was incredulous.

"Yes."



Sunday, 4 July 1999, 10:00 PM
Aboard the sailboat Lotus, Baltimore Harbor
Baltimore, Maryland

Over the water, the last strains of *The Star Spangled Banner* could be heard—confusingly mixed with the orchestral finish that came, a second and a half sooner, over the radio. The diva's voice gave way to the master of ceremonies, and Hesha switched off the channel.

In total silence, the first fireworks went up...and by the time the second round had risen, the popping, crackling noises of the bright red, white and blue rockets came to Elizabeth's waiting ears. She slid a little deeper into the deck chair, happier at that moment than she could remember being for years...since her father died. Dad had taken her to Atlantic City once, to see the fireworks fly off a decrepit old pier. Her eyes filled with the shooting stars and she forgot her troubles.

Hesha closed his eyes to slits and enjoyed the flashing colors through the shield of long lashes. But eventually, as at his age he supposed was inevitable, the charms of the celebration faded. He let his dark eyes roll toward the woman beside him. Elizabeth, still entranced by the spectacle, didn't notice his attention, and he took full advantage of the opportunity to see her in this secret way. The colors above them reflected off the water around the boat, off the night-pale skin of his guest, in the spheres of her eyes and from a tear on her cheek, which he didn't understand. Red and gold burst above them, and the water, the girl and her eyes turned to flame...blue and white and yellow together, and they were tarnished silver...in green and blue, she'd risen from the ocean, and the streaking tears were only seawater falling from the naiad....

The Beast began to stir. Hesha shook himself mentally and retreated in his mind to the icy core of his nature. This was the opportunity he had looked for to analyze the weakness that had touched him in her loft.

She was not beautiful. That might have tempted what few urges of the flesh remained to him, but in the circles with which the millionaire Ruhadze mingled, beauty—of kine or Cainite or his own kin—was common enough and had not bothered him in such a way for centuries.

She was not brilliant. Intelligent, yes. Perceptive in an unusual manner, perhaps. But again, he surrounded himself with geniuses of one kind or another—Thompson and the Asp both in their way, Janet a wizard in hers, and Yasmine Oxenti...who *was* beautiful, though he had never considered the fact before except as an asset to her utility.... Vegel had been brilliant. Kettridge was brilliant.

She was not devious. He had a deep admiration for that twist of mind in others, of course.

Was it because he had placed her off limits to the Beast? In the sheer perversity of the thing's instincts, the forbidden nature of the girl—too valuable to be swallowed whole, not yet controlled enough to be kept for food, too unknown to be Embraced—could be enough to drive the creature to frenzy. But again, Doctor Oxenti should be the more tempting. Beautiful, brilliant, devious and so valuable a retainer that he could never hope to bring her to Set until

an equal pawn arose to replace her…if he sought a childe, a victim, a companion or a—he laughed to himself—a mate, Yasmine should be the kine that took the Beast's attentions.

Elizabeth stirred in her chair and curled her bare legs beneath her. Her gaze was still on the sparks and the stars, but one hand moved toward her cheeks.

Hesha reached out and wiped the tears away for her. The woman's grateful, troubled face turned to meet his. From within the ice, he directed his face to show a little kindness. He pulled a clean handkerchief from his trouser pocket and handed it to her silently, as though there were genuine sympathy behind the act.

"I'm sorry," she began, but he shook his head. Elizabeth persevered. "No, I really have been enjoying myself. Thank you for bringing me here. It's just…" she started to sob, quite quietly and without losing control.

And Hesha pulled her closer to him, held the shaking girl in his arms—warm arms, in the Baltimore summer—and let her tell him about her father, about everything he'd learned from reading her papers. He listened, and he contemplated cold-bloodedly how best to repair her wounds, and what weaknesses he would leave to control her by, and how soon she could be the equal of the Mercurio twins and Janet Lindbergh and Yasmine Oxenti and Ronald Thompson.

GF



Sunday, 4 July 1999, 11:24 PM
Subway tunnel 147, Manhattan
New York City, New York

The repairs were still unfinished. They would remain so for the foreseeable future. The union refused to allow any of its laborers to continue the job, although the renovations were only a few weeks from completion.

Six workers. All that was found were their skeletons, relatively intact, the bones picked clean by rats.

Jeremiah made his way along the defunct metal umbilical of this aborted fetus. The third rail was dead. Purely from habit, he listened for trains that were not coming. Although he had fed earlier in the evening, Jeremiah was cold. The cement and unfinished tile seemed to draw the warmth from him. He imagined them leaching the very blood through his pores and drinking deeply of him. *Did the tunnel workers feel that?* he wondered. *Did they feel the first nibbles of the rats? The first hundred bites, the first thousand?*

Subway officials had speculated that some mysteriously released toxic gas had overcome the six workers in the tunnel. Jeremiah, noting the growing number of hungry eyes tracking his every move, questioned the accuracy of that hypothesis. *But rats, even a large number, would never attack several strong, active, full-grown men. Would they? These weren't sickly children. The workers must have been incapacitated in some manner.* Jeremiah nudged an abandoned wrench with his foot. *Did one of the workers try to ward off the vermin before being overwhelmed?* The Nosferatu spied an unused flare in the dust. He picked it up, inspected it and then tucked it into the canvas sack he was never without.

The six workers were merely a memory, but the rats were still very much in evidence. Municipal exterminators be damned. The rodents had returned like a conquering army after the fumigation. They had feasted on their poisoned brethren, whose tiny bones now littered the ground from which the mortal remains had been removed. Now the scavengers—hunters?—scuttled among the shadows. Watching through red eyes.

Jeremiah conducted his investigation, but he kept moving. He had the feeling that if he stopped for more than a few seconds at a time, he would be mistaken for carrion—or that he might become it, if he wasn't already. After all, what was he, if not a walking corpse? Only motion separated him from the more normal fare of the rats.

Jeremiah quickened his pace ever so slightly. He forced himself to continue looking for clues to what had happened. Was it his imagination, he wondered, or were the red eyes—growing ever more numerous—yielding less and less ground to him? The berth they granted him was not so wide as it had been. He could make out more of their forms—curved backs with bristling fur, distended bellies gorged on flesh. But there had only been six workers, and the attack had occurred almost two weeks ago. *What else were these creatures feasting upon?*

Pausing in his trek, Jeremiah met the eyes of one of the encroaching horde rising like floodwaters. He was struck by the hostility in that gaze as he peered into the psyche of the creature. Their eyes locked, and an image formed behind the red eyes: a craggy expanse of

concrete, its surface cracked and rough. More cracks formed—created by a rugged, splotchy vegetation growing at a speed reminiscent of time-lapse photography. The concrete bulged in areas, cracked, broke apart. Rats stormed in, thousands of them, and devoured the stalks. The strange plants...*not* plants, Jeremiah realized, but pustules of—

Flesh.

Jeremiah took a step back, jolted from the image and facing again the gathering swarm of rats. Flesh. Had the word formed in his mind or the rat's?

Flesh.

He heard it again. Or felt it. Like an echoing whisper spreading through the tunnel. Countless red eyes glared at him angrily, hungrily. He could feel the gazes boring into him, attempting to make contact as he just had with one of their number—attempting to gain control.

Jeremiah turned to continue down the tunnel, but found his way blocked. The circle had closed around him. A few of the snarling rats refused to yield to his advance. They crept closer. More were pouring in beyond, filling the tunnel.

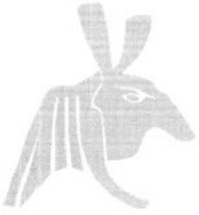
"Away!" Jeremiah barked with a threatening gesture. The throng wavered but did not break. He gestured again, "Away!" but to less effect. He felt a tremor of fear take hold of his hand. A different, quite distinct tremor rippled through the tunnel and the rats like a wave of chittering laughter.

Propelled by rising terror, Jeremiah snatched the flare from his canvas sack. In one motion, he ignited the device and flung it at the closest rats. They recoiled from the flash, but, in the next instant, their filth-encrusted fur was ablaze. They were packed so tightly that the panicked gyrations of the burning rodents carried the flames to those all around them. A piercing screech almost knocked Jeremiah to the ground. The sound was a single cry, a collective scream of rage and pain.

Jeremiah's first impulse was to cower from the flames as well, but he forced himself to take advantage of the few seconds he had. With all the strength and speed he could summon, he leapt directly over the sputtering flare and the burgeoning wildfire of rats.

He didn't turn back to see how long the fire burned or how many of the malevolent creatures pursued him. He ran for all he was worth, canvas sack flapping at his side and pounding against his thigh with each frantic stride. The screeching of burning rats filled the tunnel. He could not escape the sound, no matter how much distance he put between himself and the horde. Their screams lingered in his ears—their screams and the single, drawn-out, eerily lustful word: *Flesshhh...*

KR



Monday, 5 July 1999, 8:46 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Hesha emerged from his resting place to find Thompson already waiting for him. "Good evening, sir," said the retainer, obviously nervous. "I've…I've made up my mind, sir. About the 'living will' we were discussing." Hesha sat down on the edge of the stone bench. "I would like to become one of the Family, sir."

Hesha nodded, and in his least human tones, asked, "You have decided to become accursed, damned, forbidden the sun, forbidden a heart, bound to the service of Set and through him bound to the service of Apep?"

Thompson faltered. "Sir?"

"You have a purpose in your mind that will fill centuries and drive you forth every night without despair?"

Thompson said nothing. Hesha stood and advanced on his servant. They stood face to face, within inches of each other, and the mortal could feel the chill of the other's robes—the temperature of the rocks around them—cave-cold.

"You accept the risk that you may lose your mind, like the Cainite we destroyed in Mexico?" Hesha took his man by the jaw. The Setite lifted until the feet no longer touched the ground and stared golden-irised and slit-pupiled into Thompson's blue-gray eyes. They remained locked together for nearly two minutes…and then Hesha set his servant gently down.

"You have thought about what you know," he said. "Tonight I have told you things you did not know. Think about them. Ask me questions. Consider that your education has begun, and start looking through your men for a replacement for your position. If, after you have learned a little more of the consequences, you still desire Set's blessings, we will need a security man as good as you yourself."

Hesha threw a glance back at the mortal. "And do relax, Thompson. You passed a test just now. There will be others, but if you change your mind at any time, you may turn off the path. There is no *necessity* to 'graduate.'"

"Now," he resumed, in his accustomed tones, "Report, please."

He did so for a half-hour, and then, Hesha and he sat at a horseshoe-shaped console to watch the records of the day. In black and white, color, and heat-register, the various views from the farmhouse's security system surrounded the main display. Outside, a stiff wind created a confusion of swaying trees and bracken. The interior shots were calmer. The Asp moved from one screen to the next—leaving the kitchen for the main staircase and his upstairs room. Elizabeth sat in the center of another, motionless except for one hand and arm and the long tweezers they held. Her precise movements went on without hurry or hesitation, but she might have been a statue otherwise.

"Elizabeth Dimitros," murmured Hesha, "is, for all practical purposes, an orphan. You've read her dossier?"

"Of course."

"Good. She needs a family, Thompson. We are going to provide one." He paused and met the eye of his prospective heir. "It is my intention that she come to see me as a father figure. I would like you to use what talents you possess to put yourself in the role of an older brother or an uncle, whichever you prefer. Consider this your first assignment on your new path. Don't act, but bring the parts of your personality that will be more useful into play. Tell no direct lies, if you can help it. Imply what you will. Less is more, Thompson. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. Get the car ready. I'll make a token appearance to our guest and join you in the garage in twenty minutes."

KR



Tuesday, 6 July 1999, 3:41 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Ron Thompson loped easily in through the workshop's open door and called out. "Liz? Liz?" He rounded a corner and found her dabbing slowly at the surface of a painting. "There you are," he said unnecessarily. "Wait—is that the little square thing you started on last week?"

Elizabeth nodded and carefully brought the cleanser away from the canvas. "The genre painting."

"Genre?" Thompson put a friendly, interested spin on the single word and was pleased to see her reaction; she smiled and turned the picture to him, explaining it in a manner neither patronizing nor dry.

"Norman Rockwell circa 1630. Life as lived by the simple folk in the Benelux."

"Wow." He stepped up to see it better, carefully not looming over her. "That looked just like mud before you came. What are they doing?"

"Farm chores. There'll be more detail tomorrow." She dabbed at it again.

Thompson watched for a while longer, waiting. "I was wondering if you wanted to run some errands with me. I need to do a hardware run for the house and some shopping for myself—I don't know if you need anything, but if you want to give me a list or come along yourself, there's a mall and an art-supply store Vegel used to go to."

"Can you wait half an hour? This is almost done."

"Sure."

Tuesday, 6 July 1999, 9:23 PM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York

The lamp's flickering light wasn't enough for a mortal to read by comfortably, but Calebros didn't notice. His wide, deep-set eyes were used to near and total darkness. A good thing, that. Because he spent his nights poring over the reports. Some came electronically via SchreckNET; Umberto brought him the printouts if Calebros didn't feel up to navigating the dank tunnels to the terminal. *I could hook you up a terminal of your own if you got rid of that fossil of a typewriter and cleared off your desk*, Umberto had offered. Calebros had boxed the youngster's ears at the suggestion.

Other messages came via messenger. The largest number of the reports, by far, was of Calebros's own compilation. His sire, Augustin, had taught him the value of putting seemingly extraneous facts together on paper. Often the results were fruitless, but sometimes patterns emerged where none were thought to exist.

The data was flying fast and furious these nights: The Camarilla non-resistance in Washington, D.C. had finished crumbling within the past week, with the exception of the Tremere chantry which had circled the wagons and not lifted a finger to save the city. The insular warlocks had sent a particularly mid-level representative, one Maria Chin, to Baltimore, where Prince Garlotte was attempting to create some sort of order from the chaotic streams of refugees inundating his city. His task was made no easier by the maneuverings of Victoria Ash, Toreador ne'er-do-well, socialite and eye candy.

And then there were reports of local rats hostile to Nosferatu. To Nosferatu! At least the matter of Benito Giovanni was proceeding apace.

6 July 1999
Re: unexplained

FILE COPY

6/22 --- Manhattan, subway tunnel 147: six workers found dead; newspapers said bones picked completely clean by rats (and our man at the morgue confirms).

7/2 --- Manhattan, old auxiliary presses, NY Times: freak flooding of presses ("dragon's lair") in bedrock chamber; service elevator fails, one worker drowns.

Jeremiah inspected- reports rats in area of tunnel agitated & aggressive and fat. Rats near Times presses also unusually aggressive; not a problem Jeremiah's had before.

FILE COPY

6 July 1999

Re: Benito Giovanni; Las Vegas

Montrose reports – two East Coast Giovanni lightweights (Victor Sforza, Chas Giovanni Tello) asking questions about Benito; meet w/Milo Rothstein 6/29; return 6/30 AM, unceremoniously dispose of Rothstein. Tello flies out next night; Sforza terminated by unknown assailant(s).

Repercussions of M.R. death – few or none; already cultivated connections with other Giovanni-related elements in L.V.

Commend Emett - False pointers to L.V. successful

→ Now that the ruckus out west has died down, Las Vegas might be the safest place to move Benito. They've already looked there.

GF



Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 12:34 AM
A tenement in Harlem
New York City, New York

Quiet. Or as close to quiet as Zhavon was ever likely to hear. True silence was something she wouldn't have recognized. Even in the middle of the night, there were cars in the distance. And maybe gunshots, but they didn't bother her unless they were really close. She could even block out the sounds from the street below: a drunk, or a prostitute, sometimes one and the same—a faceless, skanky woman who might once have been beautiful (it was hard to imagine), but the drugs and the never-ending game of musical pricks had worn her out, until she was not much more than a skinny collection of gaudy colors and harsh angles: tits and elbows, lipstick and high heels.

Those noises were background, the undercurrent of life. Zhavon would've missed them if they were gone.

She almost didn't hear anymore the stomping and screaming of the Hernandez children downstairs. They were in bed now, and the late-night almost-calm had reluctantly settled over the apartment building.

The particular sounds that Zhavon strained to hear were not in evidence. The next room was quiet. Mama had gone to bed. Half an hour later, just like every night, she'd gotten up for a glass of water and then gone back to bed. That had been an hour ago. If this were going to be one of the sleepless nights, the TV would have come on by now. Not loud, because Mama wouldn't want to wake Zhavon, but with walls thin enough that she could hear someone on the other side scratch an itch, each commercial came through clear as day. But not tonight. Mama was asleep. She had to get up early in the morning and catch the subway to work.

Zhavon dressed silently. Mama might be willing to sleep her nights away, but her little girl wasn't.

Little girl, hell, Zhavon thought.

She was fifteen, a grown woman. She had friends who already had little babies. But that wasn't the life for her. No how. No way. She'd seen what her friends went through, lugging around screaming children or dumping them off with an aunt or cousin just to get away once in a while. Nothing wrong with babies, but they were a lot of work and a lot of money.

At least Mama had a job. She wasn't about to sit back and rot on welfare, and neither was Zhavon. She was going to finish school. Someday she'd have a job and a baby, but not yet.

Of course, that didn't mean boys were off limits.

The window was open and beckoning. The beat-up air conditioner they'd had didn't work any more. Sure, it rattled and dripped, but that was about it. Didn't condition much air. Next paycheck, Mama was going to buy a fan, but for now, Zhavon slipped easily enough through the window, after checking the fire escape to make sure that Mr. Hernandez wasn't sitting out below.

Some nights, especially when it was really hot, he would sit out there and drink beer. When he did, Zhavon could smell the cigarette smoke and hear the clink of bottle caps as

they bounced through the iron ladders down to the street. He wasn't there tonight, but blue TV light flickered from inside his apartment.

Zhavon cautiously climbed down to the Hernandezes' window and peeked between the worn curtains that hung lifelessly in the still air. Mr. Hernandez was asleep on the couch. His wife sat next to him and stared at the TV. Mrs. Hernandez, like Mama, was pretty, but it was a tired pretty. Four babies had taken it out of the Puerto Rican woman, had drained the life from her, but despite the sunken eyes, her face was still attractive and thin—small nose, high cheekbones. She was lucky not to have any scars from the times that Mr. Hernandez drank too much and hit her. It didn't happen often, but when it did, Zhavon and Mama heard it like they were right there.

Hell, the whole block hears it, Zhavon thought.

Last time had been the worst. So loud Zhavon had thought she could feel his fist. Mama'd had enough. Zhavon tried to stop her, but Mama went down there and said if he was going to hit his wife again, he'd have to hit Mama first. All the yelling back and forth, Zhavon had been afraid he'd do it, but after a while, he stomped out cursing and slammed the door. Pretty quiet since then.

Squatting there on the fire escape outside the window, Zhavon noticed the almost-empty beer bottles by her feet. She picked one up. There was no cigarette butt inside, so she took a swig. She tried not to grimace—*Tastes like piss!*—but couldn't help it. Her friends always teased her about that whenever Alvina stole a six-pack from her daddy.

Still wondering how anybody could like the stuff, Zhavon put the bottle back down, but the glass knocked against the metal fire escape. The hollow clink, as it echoed through the still night, sounded to Zhavon as loud as the garbage truck rumbling down the alley at 6:00 in the morning. She jerked back from the window and held her breath. Her heart pounded furiously. Zhavon waited for what seemed like forever, holding so still that she thought she'd pee her pants.

Nothing happened. The chatter from the TV continued unabated. The blue light still flickered from inside. There was no sign that anyone had heard the bottle, but Zhavon still wasn't sure. She edged toward the window again and peeked in.

Mr. Hernandez hadn't budged. He was still dead to the world with his head lolled back against the couch. Mrs. Hernandez, however, seemed more alert than before. She'd tilted her head to the side and was listening more closely.

She heard! Zhavon realized. She went completely rigid—afraid to move, afraid to breathe.

Eventually Mrs. Hernandez, probably satisfied that whatever she might've heard was not one of her children, returned her attention to the quietly droning TV. Mr. Hernandez stirred in his sleep, and she lovingly stroked a curl on his forehead.

Zhavon breathed a long, silent sigh. Just to be safe, she waited a few more minutes—it seemed like hours—then snuck one more look in the window to satisfy herself that Mrs. Hernandez wasn't on to her. The older woman sat oblivious as before.

Four babies in a one-bedroom apartment, thought Zhavon, shaking her head in disbelief. The same size apartment was small for just her and Mama and that with Mama giving Zhavon the bedroom and sleeping on a pullout sofa. Zhavon shook her head again. But that was Mrs. Hernandez's life, and Zhavon had her own to lead.

The last two turns of the fire escape passed only blank wall and ended ten or twelve feet above the alley. Lowering the last length of ladder would make too much noise, so Zhavon

instead dangled from the bottom step and dropped. Later, she would climb the drainpipe to get back to the steps. She was fairly athletic and coordinated, but this time she landed hard and had to catch herself to keep from falling on her butt. A sharp, stinging pain shot through her right hand.

"Ow! Shit!" she half whispered, half blurted out.

She raised her hand to find a beer-bottle cap stuck into her palm. It must have been lying on the ground with the jagged edge pointed up. Zhavon plucked it from her hand and blood welled up from the tiny but deep ring of holes. She was more angry than hurt as she threw the bottle cap against the wall and glared up at the Hernandezes' window.

Stinkin' Rican drunk.

There was nobody in the alley. No one to have seen her or heard her call out when she hurt her hand. Even so, Zhavon remained crouched low and looked carefully around. Sometimes, even when she was alone in her own room, she had the feeling that someone was watching her. For a moment just then, she'd felt that way again. But, she knew now, there was no one there.

Zhavon turned her thoughts to what had brought her out tonight:

Adrien.

Just thinking about him sent shivers down her spine. He was tall and fine, and he didn't wear his pants falling down off his ass. Sure, she'd smacked him the other day when he felt her up, but that was because she wanted respect from the man. Not because she didn't want him. Zhavon wasn't about to let him crawl down her pants that easy, not yet. She knew the ratty club where he hung out. He wasn't old enough to get in either, but his brother worked the door, and as long as no cops were around and nobody was starting fights, who really cared anyway?

Zhavon turned right, away from the main street, and headed deeper down the alley. She had about twenty blocks to go, and she didn't want to draw the attention of anybody who would be driving around at this hour—policeman or pimp. There were plenty of alleys crisscrossing the middles of the blocks, and she was quiet enough and fast enough to scoot by anybody who might be trouble. She'd be gone—past or doubled back the way she came—before they even knew she was there.

She tried to think of what she was going to say to Adrien when she saw him. She didn't want him to get bigheaded and think that she was desperate for him, because she wasn't. But why was she tracking across half the city to see him? No way he was going to believe that she just happened to be out and stopped in to get her under-aged ass a beer. She had to think of something. She could see him laughing, and the way his eyes shone. Zhavon had seen the way he looked at other girls. She wanted him to look at her that way, but she didn't want him to be a man who was on her, off her and then out of her life. That's what had happened to her friends. The boys swarmed around like a bitch was in heat, but once they got what they wanted, they were gone until the next time they got an itch to scratch. Zhavon didn't want it that way.

She paused and hugged the wall as the alley opened into a larger street. An old, beat-up car was cruising along. Zhavon could make out the silhouettes of two people, and the glowing ash of a cigarette hanging from the mouth of one. They didn't seem to take any notice of her as they drove by. She looked again, then ran across the street and partway down the block to the next alley. Seven or eight blocks down. Almost halfway.

One time a few weeks ago, Zhavon had mentioned Adrien to Mama, and Mama had gone off on the "car-stealin', dope-smokin', gangsta wannabe." Mama said that she knew his mama, and that he might as well be growing up in a crack house. She said not even the good Lord could make that apple fall far from the tree.

"But you don't even know him!" Zhavon had insisted. "You're always saying we should act charitable to people."

"I know him," Mama'd snapped. "I know his *type*. Why you think your daddy ain't 'round anymore? I'll be charitable to Adrien, all right. I'll be charitable when he brings hisself to church instead of sellin' drugs and chasin' girls."

But Mama was wrong. Zhavon winced at the thought of them yelling at each other. They'd never fought much. Never used to, anyway. Lately there seemed to be more to fight about every day. But that was only because Mama was as stubborn as she was wrong.

"If you're so smart, how come you work yourself to death and we're poor and live here in this stinkin' place?" That's what Zhavon had said, and she'd wished she hadn't the second the words were out of her mouth.

Mama had exploded. "You get your poor self to bed right now! Not another word! Not another word, or so help me…!" But that night Zhavon had heard Mama crying, even over the sound of the TV.

But she's wrong! Zhavon still held onto that. Mama couldn't always know what was right for Zhavon. She knew what she was doing. That's what she was thinking as she turned the corner and bumped right into a scraggly man out of nowhere.

Zhavon yelped in surprise. The man, she realized as he grabbed her, wasn't surprised at all. His dirty hand clamped down over her mouth flat and hard enough that she couldn't bite him. He lifted her almost off the ground—only the tips of her shoes brushed the pavement—and dragged her farther back into the dark alley. With the hand that wasn't over her mouth, he was grabbing at her chest, pressing and squeezing her breasts. She tried to bite again. Too tight against him to grab his balls, she reached up with her free hand, the arm that wasn't pinned, to scratch at his eyes.

Then she heard another noise—the sound of a switchblade clicking open. But the man pawing at her wasn't holding a knife. She saw movement in the shadows to her right. There was someone else.

For an instant, Zhavon thought that maybe someone was going to help her, to jab that knife into the dirty-handed bastard who had hold of her, but then she saw the twisted grin of the squint-eyed man who stepped out of the shadows. "Well, well, well. Whatcha got here, Reggie?" Light glinted on the blade of his knife.

Reggie didn't answer but guffawed and groped even harder as Zhavon stopped struggling. She could feel his hard-on pressed up against her ass.

"That's more like it," said squint-eye. "Don't want no trouble, do we?"

He moved the knife to her face and with the tip of the blade lightly traced a line from her chin down her neck. Zhavon's heart pounded until she thought it was going to explode out her ears. The stink and taste of Reggie's filthy hand overwhelmed her senses. As Reggie reached under her shirt and squint-eye fumbled with her belt, she began to feel sick to her stomach. Maybe that would make him let go of her mouth—if she threw up. Or maybe he wouldn't, and she'd choke on her own puke.

The knife pricked her skin at the collarbone. Squint-eye was getting excited, careless. His hand was down her pants, probing, but her knees were squeezed together. Frustrated by her resistance, he punched her in the eye. Lights danced in the darkness, and the strength drained out of Zhavon's legs. As squint-eye tugged at her pants, the knife dug more deeply into her shoulder.

The lights cleared and Zhavon twisted. The sudden move caught them off guard, but not so much so that Reggie lost his grip. Squint-eye cursed and hit her again in the face. The darkness closed in. She only faintly realized that he had her pants down to her knees. Reggie had ripped apart her bra and was bruising her nipple between his fingers. His stale breath and dripping spit were hot on her neck.

Don't kill me, she prayed as the lights danced for her. *Don't kill me.* But why should they rape her and leave her alive to call the cops?

"Mama..." Zhavon heard her own voice. Reggie had let go of her mouth and was grabbing at her crotch as squint-eye worked at his own fly.

Suddenly, in a snarling flash of motion, squint-eye was gone. The knife fell to the ground. Squint-eye cried out in pain and fear.

"What the...?" Reggie loosened his grip just enough that Zhavon was able to squirm out of his grasp. She spun as she dropped to her knees and, as hard as she could, swung her fist up into his crotch.

Reggie doubled over and crashed to the ground, where he lay wheezing. Zhavon fell back away from him. Her vision flickered as again the dancing lights smothered her.

Dear God... dear God... dear God...

The pavement was rough beneath her bare hip. She lay in a ball and clutched her ripped shirt to her chest. A few feet away, squint-eye no longer struggled. The night was full of savage growling and the sound of tearing—clothes? Skin? A rabid dog. Zhavon thought she saw the flash of canines. It pounced on Reggie. He started to scream, but the sound was cut off, lost to the snarling and rending.

Zhavon knew that she should get up and run. The dog would be on her any second. But she couldn't move. Her will had retreated deep within her. She could do nothing but hug her knees and rock back and forth and call for Mama. The alley was spinning. The taste of Reggie's hand was in her mouth, on her tongue. She flinched as his blood splattered across her face from several feet away. Lingering moans. The seconds and minutes ran together. She felt hands on her. Squint-eye was tugging at her pants. Reggie was grabbing at her chest, lifting her off the ground. But weren't they gone?

Don't kill me.... Dear God... "Don't kill me."

Dancing lights. Darkness. Spinning.

Zhavon's eyes fluttered open. Rusty iron. Ladder. Fire escape. And she saw a face, a girl not much older than herself—*Is that blood on her face?*—kneeling over her in the darkness. The girl held Zhavon's hand...was kissing it—no, *licking* her palm.

Darkness again.

Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 5:45 AM
A tenement in Harlem
New York City, New York



Zhavon opened her eyes, and it was morning. The first pink light of sunrise was visible, and the city was already hot, sticky.

Zhavon hurt all over—her head, her shoulder, her chest, her legs. But she was home, lying outside her window. She was alive.

Lifting her right hand from her chest, she remembered the first and by far the least serious injury from the night, but the ring of tiny punctures from the bottle cap was gone.

KR



Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 2:03 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Morning, Asp." Elizabeth leaned over the central island of the kitchen and watched the cook work on some kind of pinky-gray mixture in a steel bowl. She raised an eyebrow.

"Tuna-fish pâté," he said. "We're playing 'guess that meal' again. It's breakfast for you, isn't it? The boss is having early lunch—or late lunch, I'm not sure, and good old Ron hasn't made an appearance yet. So the plan is sandwiches."

In the bowl's mirror-like finish, he watched the woman sit down at the table with her book and soda. He concentrated on the ingredients his brother had left ready for lunch. He wished Gabriel had a less professional hand in the kitchen....

"Relish?" he asked, when the bread was sliced and ready.

"Relish what?" she punned shamelessly, but the Asp didn't catch the joke. "Sorry. Yes, please. Sweet relish—provided it's pickles and nothing weird like okra or guava or something."

Raphael laughed again. Elizabeth looked up, startled.

"You have something against nouvelle cuisine?" He frowned into the condiments; he wasn't paying much attention to her.

"Don't you?" she inquired, watching him.

"Well, I'm with Ron. If it's such a bad idea that you have to say it in French, he's against it...with," snickered Raphael, "a *few* exceptions...." He brandished his wide knife over the various mixtures in front of him and began pasting relish onto slices of bread. Elizabeth took the food with a smile, fled down the stairs and looked back toward the kitchen with something like fear. Silly, she knew, to suddenly shun a man because his laughter was...a little...different. Had she misjudged his sense of humor? She'd come to think of Angelo as a—not yet a friend, but certainly as a potential friend. She was afraid, now that she knew him better, that he would be someone to be tolerated rather than liked.

Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 9:10 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



"Thompson," said Hesha. "Your new assignment?"

The old cop closed his notebook. "Miss Dimitros and I are completely Liz and Ron now, sir. She likes baseball, chocolate, mysteries, and drama. She thinks Vegel had wonderful taste in adventure stories and whodunits, and we dropped in at a bookstore on the way home. She's started me on Shakespeare, and I found a police-procedural series that she wasn't familiar with. She's the little sister I never had—"

"Yes," Hesha said dryly. "Very well. Look to business. I'm intending a long session with her this evening." He walked to his apartment door, disappeared within, and came back out wearing his most elderly-looking spectacles.

"They add ten years, sir."

"Good. I hope that's enough."

GF



Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 9:39 PM
The Bronx
New York City, New York

Water. Dripping. Ramona opened her eyes, but the darkness within mirrored the darkness without. Which way was up, which down? A sharp pain in her neck told her that she had been knotted into a ball for too many hours, but she didn't move. She listened to the water dripping. A distant *plink*. Eventually another would follow. The interval between them stretched out toward infinity. How long had she been lying there? Ramona's ears pricked up. She would pluck the sound of the next drop from the vacant hours. She was the ultimate predator. Patience would bend time to her will. She imagined, somewhere miles of rock and ice above her, the rays of the sun breaking through thick clouds to play on the blinding surface of a glacier. Even beneath the biting wind, a single droplet of water formed and, a prisoner of gravity, worked its way through cracks and crevices. Down, down. Hours? Days? It clung to the underside of a boulder above the void, elongated, contracted, began to fall, drew back to the rock. Finally, it broke free. Falling, falling.

There. The distant *plink* of water dripping.

Ramona pressed a button on her watch, and a wan, greenish light illuminated her little space. Water dripping. Or maybe antifreeze. She read the digital numbers. Twenty-eight seconds.

"Shit." Ultimate predator, indeed.

She drew her knees up to her chin—only a few inches—and a sharp, double kick popped open the trunk. Ramona's junked car was near the bottom of the stack, so she didn't have far to drop to reach the ground.

Towers of dented and twisted metal surrounded her on nearly every side. Narrow paths wound like canyons in several directions. As Ramona stretched and yawned, dried blood cracked and fell away from her mouth.

Almost as soon as her feet touched the ground, the barking began from somewhere on the other side of the yard. The sound came rapidly closer through the maze of scrap, until the two Rottweilers, teeth bared, frothing at the mouth, barreled around the turn closest to Ramona.

"Evenin', boys."

Instantly, they quieted and lay down, shaking and licking the foam from their jowls. Ramona scratched Rex behind the ear. Rover, who she'd noticed before had a bad case of ear mites, grunted appreciatively as she knelt down and licked out his pink ear. Rex and Rover. Ramona had named them after the attributes of a hooker she'd once known whose "twin, pink-nosed dogs" had always been happy to greet a customer.

Ramona was tempted to curl up with the boys and spend a quiet evening. Her belly was full, so she wouldn't need to feed for several nights. After last night, though, a vague restlessness tugged at her. She should probably check in with Jen and Darnell at some

point, but the thought didn't really excite her. Still not sure what she wanted to do, she patted the boys one more time and then wandered away through the automotive heaps.

She let her feet take whatever path fell before her, and with an easy leap over the barbed wire atop the fence, she entered the greater wilderness that lay beyond. Ramona knew little of New York, and she didn't care to learn. How differently she looked at the city than she would have just two years ago. This borough or that, the names of streets and neighborhoods—all were meaningless distinctions of the daylight world. The single, essential lesson she had learned long before setting foot in New York: *Beware*. Its permutations were many.

Beware the sun; it burns flesh.

Beware lack of blood; the hunger will take control.

Beware too much blood, the sight and smell; the hunger, again, will take control.

Beware your own kind; they are everywhere.

Even in her wandering, Ramona was alert. She knew enough to be wary, if little more. As she walked the nameless streets, the mortals going about their lives did not concern her. But which ones were, like they seemed, really mortals, and which were like her? With no way to tell, Ramona tried to stay away from them all. She remembered the gang in Los Angeles that she had assumed to be mortal, and how they had laughed when they should have run away. She remembered the *thing* out in the mesquite thickets in Texas, and her close escape.

Ramona crossed the street to avoid the light and activity of a convenience store. From that distance, she stared at the clerk in the bulletproof booth, at the black man at the payphone. Were they just what they seemed or something more? Ramona's curiosity failed to get the best of her, and she continued on. As she did, however, a shift in the slight breeze brought her up short. A faint, vaguely familiar scent caught her attention. Her flaring nostrils held onto it for only a moment before it was gone.

I know that smell, she told herself, but from where, and what was it?

She stood and sniffed at the air, but the briefly teasing breeze on that sticky summer night was dead.

She knew that scent. *What* is it? she tried to recall.

Suddenly, Ramona turned to her right, upwind, and dashed in that direction. If the wind wouldn't cooperate, she'd find the source of that smell herself.

One block then another fell behind her. She scanned the street and kept alert for the odor she was tracking. The mortals driving past probably didn't see her. She moved with a speed that only recently had ceased to surprise her.

After six blocks, she stopped and again sniffed at the air. The scent was gone, or else it was masked by the rich, layered stink of the city. Ramona felt sure that she could pick it out if it was still there.

She stood for several minutes half-heartedly sniffing. Nothing.

Maybe, she began to think, she was just overreacting to her surroundings. New York offered hundreds of new odors every night, and the potency of her sense of smell still caught her off guard at times, even after two years.

Putting the enigmatic and possibly imaginary smell behind her, Ramona realized that she was in a familiar neighborhood. The route of her wandering was unintentional

but didn't surprise her. Last night. Tonight. Many nights before. She had passed over these particular streets numerous times since her arrival in the city.

From two blocks away she smelled the blood. It didn't bring the hunger screaming to the surface, because she was full, and the blood was not fresh. But with each step she smelled it more clearly. No one had bothered to spray off the pavement. Ramona heard the buzzing flies even before she turned the corner and ducked under the police tape. Those two men would not be mourned. Bloody footprints betrayed the carelessness and indifference of the police.

She had not planned to save the girl. In fact, Ramona had followed at a distance and found herself, disconcertingly, drawn into the mindset of the hunt. She'd stalked silently and waited for the perfect moment to strike. Never mind that she wasn't hungry, that she didn't need to feed. Her instinct for the hunt had grown so strong—almost too strong to be denied.

Last night was the closest Ramona had come to losing control, but it wasn't the first time that she'd watched Zhavon after dark or listened from outside while the girl joked or argued with her mother.

She does argue, Ramona had to admit.

In fact, the first time she'd noticed the girl, just past dusk one night several weeks ago, Zhavon had been involved in a minor altercation. She'd been on a corner near her home with a few friends, talking to a boy about her own age. Ramona had watched unnoticed from a rooftop across the street. The boy had been goofing around, putting his arm around Zhavon, then he'd reached a little farther and copped a feel. The smack of her hand across his face had split the still night like a gunshot. Ramona had laughed and watched the embarrassed boy slink away. She could still see the fire in the Zhavon's eyes, the raw defiance.

Before that night, Zhavon had been like any other of the millions of people in the city, but from that point on, Ramona had paid close attention to her, had come back night after night. How many times—ten, twenty? Ramona could only guess. She had come wanting to see that flash of bravado in Zhavon's eyes, the sound of it in her voice. Even in her hours of sleep, the steady rise and fall of her chest seemed a challenge to anyone or anything that would oppose her. She stood against all that was out there in the world.

The difference last night was that Zhavon had gotten a taste of what actually was out there.

Ramona had a bit more of an idea than Zhavon did about what was out there—she herself was part of it, after all—but she too had questions, questions about the hunter instinct, about the bloodlust that had all but taken over as she'd followed Zhavon through the dark alleys. It had been while she struggled with these predatory urges, to hunt, to feed, that the other predators had struck.

Zhavon had stumbled right into the trap where they had lain in wait for her, and as Ramona had watched her prey taken by others, a wave of rage—not hunger, but welling up from the same place—had washed over her, and she'd found herself pouncing on them. Her fangs ripped into the neck of the one with the knife—not just searching for blood, but rending flesh, leaving a gaping wound. And then the second one.

Their blood had appeased her, soothed her rage, the frenzy that was almost as strong as the hunger could be. All the while, Zhavon had huddled on the ground and cried. Ramona had lifted the hysterical girl in her arms and had seen her once-defiant face twisted with fear and desperation. Her invulnerability was chipped away to expose the victim beneath. Ramona had seen and had understood.

Ramona breathed deeply of the blood-aroma from the pavement. She thought for a moment that she could see the two men lying there before her with their eyes staring blankly, but it was only the false memory of the blood within her, like the phantom itch of an amputated limb.

For the second time that evening, Ramona turned and ran, almost before realizing that she was doing so. Her legs carried her forward with long strides, more powerful than she would have appeared capable of.

She retraced her steps of the night before, this time unencumbered. A very few minutes found her leaping and effortlessly reaching the familiar fire escape, scrambling up the steps.

Ramona squatted at the open window. Her eyes sifted through the darkness inside, and her gaze fell upon Zhavon, asleep in her bed. The low sound of a TV in another room hung in the air. The girl rested quietly. The already dark skin of her face was bruised and puffy around the mouth and eyes. A wet towel lay on the floor beside the bed. Despite the heat and humidity, Zhavon clutched a sheet up to her neck as if the thin cotton would protect her from harm.

Stay inside at night if you want to be safe, Ramona thought, but she of all people knew only too well that there was no real protection.



Wednesday, 7 July 1999, 11:45 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

During conversation over the papyrus, Hesha turned the subject toward his goal. "What's all this I hear about your dissertation?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Thompson's been going on about bulls and eyes and fish for almost a week now. Somehow," he smiled, "I have the feeling he's gotten things a bit garbled."

Thompson, listening in from the security bunker, snorted. He'd reported the bull story in total accuracy and understood every word. Still, if it took the boss where they needed to go.... Yes. There she went.

Elizabeth brought out a sturdy manuscript box, and Hesha pointed to the largest empty table. Talking with the speed and enthusiasm displayed only by graduate students in mid-theory, she spread notes, drawings and timelines across the polished surface. She pulled up a straight-backed chair and sat in it cock-eyed, one leg tucked beneath her, passing diagrams and summaries to Hesha as fast as he could read them. The glasses came out of their case, and his best professorial, fatherly manner came out with them.

A good two hours later, Thompson, taking a rest from his own work, turned up the sound on the central screen again. Elizabeth's notes now completely covered the surface of the huge table, and there were open books—some of them Vegel's—scattered on top of them. Light blue sticky-notes nearly hid the edges of the largest volume, and he recognized it as one she'd fastened onto the moment she was shown the dead man's room.

"...Good. Strong argument, strong defense." Hesha settled back into the big chair. "But you'll never make a dissertation of it."

Elizabeth went red and started to speak. Hesha cut her off with an open hand.

"How long have you been trying?" The girl's face grew angry-white. "There's too much here, Elizabeth. You have an entire book, possibly a multiple volume work in this. Take five percent of it, limit the scope and write that. Take the degree and start publishing pieces in the journals. But this...this is too much."

Relieved, resentful, but generally pleased, Elizabeth relaxed a little into the straight-back. Hesha patted her hand reassuringly.

The debate went on, but Thompson wasn't listening anymore. He'd seen what happened to the girl's eyes when Hesha touched her. Ten-year glasses weren't going to be enough. He hoped that Hesha had noticed the look on Elizabeth's face—and he prayed that Hesha had expected it.

Thursday, 8 July 1999, 2:15 AM
A tenement in Harlem
New York City, New York



Zhavon's eyes opened but were still full of sleep. She'd been dreaming again of the girl—about Zhavon's age, maybe a little older; skinny but muscular; smooth skin several shades lighter than Zhavon's; short hair, curly, messy. And could Zhavon be remembering correctly that sometimes the girl had blood on her face? But not tonight.

Mama was still up. Zhavon could hear the TV. She thought sleepily that if she hadn't been hurt and scared so badly, Mama probably would've beaten her senseless for sneaking out. As it was, they had spent most of the day at the hospital and then with the police. She started to roll over but was too sore. Face, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, pelvis, thighs—bruises everywhere.

Zhavon pulled the sheet more tightly about her and squinted through her swollen black eyes. Everything was as it had been when she went to sleep, except the ice in the towel had all melted. She tried to shake off the unsettling feeling that someone was watching her. The room was empty. The fire escape out the window was empty. Zhavon laid her head back and listened to the comforting sound of the TV on the other side of the wall until she again fell asleep and dreamed of the girl.



Thursday, 8 July 1999, 3:02 AM
Governor's Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

The gas logs in the fireplace blazed. Victoria seemed to enjoy a sense of power from being able to command fire to spring forth by simply turning a knob and all the while not having to get very close herself. She'd turned the air conditioner up to full, so the warmth of the fire was welcome, yet the French doors to the balcony stood open, allowing the breeze off the harbor to play with the floor-length draperies.

"So you've spoken with Vitel?" asked Gainesmil. He brushed a speck of lint from his mint-green silk jabot.

Victoria watched him fussing with the ruffle. "That shirt is hardly worth worrying about, Robert." She stood and walked to the French doors. "Just because it's expensive doesn't mean you should wear it. But then again, some people's taste is all in their mouths."

Gainesmil sat speechless in the face of her rebuke. Earlier, she had treated him quite graciously, even affectionately, but at times Victoria seemed to forget that he was Prince Garlotte's closest advisor and treated him as merely any other Toreador underling. Gainesmil decided to ignore her comment.

"The prince was quite surprised when Vitel arrived, you know," he said.

Victoria turned her back to him and gazed out over the harbor. "Old news, my dear. That was a week and a half ago."

Gainesmil stuttered but could think of nothing to say. His color rose in consternation. This woman confounded him. Just when he thought their partnership was solidifying nicely, she turned cold and condescending. And if Gainesmil was going to stray from his rewarding loyalty to the prince, he had to be sure of his new ally. Otherwise—unless he was sure of Victoria and of the rewards of pursuing her cause—the risks were not worth his while. He remembered too clearly the tin cup, and how Malachi, at Garlotte's direction, had clipped off Isaac's last two fingertips. The very thought made Gainesmil blanch. He suppressed the images and concentrated instead on Victoria. In the breeze of the open doors, her white linen gown seemed one with the long, flowing curtains. Gainesmil could imagine that she stood naked among the billowing draperies, with the sea air caressing her pale body—he *did* imagine it, in fact, much to his annoyance.

"You didn't answer my question," he said crossly.

But if she heard him, she gave no indication and continued merely to gaze over the harbor. Gainesmil resolved to wait her out. He refused to nip at her heels like some yapping dog. If she didn't value his contributions, then he would leave her to her own devices soon enough, and the loss would be hers.

As he waited, Gainesmil noticed a round locket on a chain lying on the coffee table before him. He remembered having seen Victoria wear the locket at the conference; he could picture how it had lain on her chest…he shook away that image as well. Gainesmil leaned forward in his seat. *It's large enough to have something inside*, he thought, inspecting the sparkling piece of jewelry from

the short distance. Victoria might have forgotten his presence, as little notice as she paid him. Slowly, Gainesmil reached toward the golden locket.

"I saw Vitel this very evening," Victoria said.

Gainesmil jerked back his hand so quickly that he cracked his elbow on the end table at his side. Tingling pain shot up his arm, but he managed to steady the lamp, which had begun to totter dangerously.

"Vitel seems very..." She turned away from the open doors but still didn't look at Gainesmil. Her chin was raised, as she stared at some indeterminate midpoint and pondered the issue. "Sad. Very sad."

Now her gaze locked onto the other Toreador. "Did you feel his loss, Robert?"

Gainesmil lost himself in her sorrowful green eyes. He couldn't quite follow her train of thought but didn't want to admit as much. "I...yes, I...suppose he was sad."

"He lost a childe in the attack on Washington," Victoria explained with barely suppressed emotion. She closed the French doors. "He doesn't know the fate of his other childe. Have you ever Embraced, Robert?" Again her eyes held him.

Gainesmil wetted his lips. "No, I...no."

"The prince has childer, no?"

"Prince Garlotte? Oh, yes." Gainesmil emerged from his confusion as the conversation returned to familiar ground. "You've met Isaac...." He faltered slightly as the image of the bloody, truncated fingers assaulted him again.

"The sheriff."

"Yes," Gainesmil nodded, "the sheriff. The prince has two other childer. Neither show much interest in Kindred affairs. Katrina is a beautiful girl, though she has a bit of a mouth. He dotes on her so." Gainesmil shook his head disapprovingly. "Anyone else who defied him the way she does, he'd have put down long ago."

Victoria slowly crossed to the fireplace and turned off the gas. The flames died away. "Defied him? How so?"

"Oh, however she can think to." Gainesmil rolled his eyes. "Not too long ago she Embraced two mortals without his permission—not one, mind you, but *two*."

"And he took no action?" Victoria sounded unconvinced.

"Brushed it under the rug," Gainesmil explained. "Never has come up as an official matter, though everyone knows.

"Now, Fin, the third, is quite another story, but just as disappointing," he continued. "Can't seem to leave the mortals behind. Has some little wench...er, girl...whom he's mad about."

Victoria took a seat on the end of the couch closest to Gainesmil. She placed a finger on his knee. "Vitel told me something very interesting," she said, abruptly changing subject.

"What was that?" Gainesmil tried to keep up with her, but there were her eyes so close, and her finger tracing circles on his knee.

"He said that the Tremere didn't raise a finger to save Washington."

Gainesmil nodded agreement. "Yes, we've confirmed that from several sources. No thanks to Ms. Chin. It seems that Dorfman, Peter Dorfman, the Pontifex, was out of town, out of the country, in fact, and his underlings felt it more important to protect the chantry than to protect the city."

"And now the Tremere chantry is the only vestige of Camarilla power in Washington," said Victoria. "They should be castigated for such cowardice."

"Or praised," Gainesmil offered and was satisfied by Victoria's apparent confusion. "Oh yes, that's how they'll play it. How much worse off we'd be without a toehold of any sort from which to retake the city."

"But the city might never have been lost!" Victoria protested.

"Ah, but who among us can testify that the strength within the chantry, if scattered, would have been sufficient to reverse the Sabbat onslaught?" Gainesmil asked, playing devil's advocate.

Victoria understood and continued his line of reasoning: "And the chantry is more valuable as a defensive post and as a hindrance to the Sabbat's lines of supply and communication should they continue to advance." Victoria nodded. She squeezed Gainesmil's leg and rose from her seat. "Those devils. I will have to speak with Ms. Chin. How long before the next conference?"

Gainesmil glanced at his watch. "Tonight is the eighth. We gather again on the sixteenth, or rather midnight the seventeenth."

Victoria stood above him and placed a long, thin finger over her lips. "And the news from the justicars…?"

Gainesmil shook his head. "Nothing, as far as I know. Prince Garlotte petitioned Justicar Lucinde, but we've heard nothing in way of reply. Those European elders—time is different for many of them."

"Well, I suppose," said Victoria, "they're not in danger of watching their own domains disappear before their wizened old eyes."

"Speaking of disappearing," Gainesmil remembered one of the reasons for his visit tonight, "there's the matter of a certain employee of the inn—a bellboy?"

Victoria cringed and smiled sheepishly. Gainesmil thought he might even have seen a hint of blush. "They do call it room service…."

Gainesmil sighed. "Please try to control your impulses, Victoria. The staff are only to be used in dire emergencies. Otherwise, with the number of guests in town, we'll be waiting on ourselves."

"Now, we can't have that, can we? I'll control my impulses, Robert," she said, running her fingers through his hair, "if you control yours."

Gainesmil's mouth went dry. Victoria walked past him and opened the double doors to the bedroom. The flick of a switch extinguished all the lights, except for those outside around the harbor. She turned another switch, which began the closing of the specially installed blinds that would block out any exterior light.

"Why doesn't the prince come visit, Robert? I've barely seen him this past week. Has he grown tired of me?" Victoria leaned with her back against the doorway.

As the blinds gradually closed out the last of the light, Gainesmil's eyes adjusted to the increasing darkness. His tongue felt as thick as a brick. "I…certainly not…uh, the prince, that is…he's been incredibly busy with the defense of the city, the…uh, stream of refugees has not abated, despite the Sabbat's seeming inertia…."

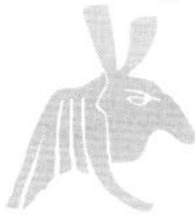
"I see," Victoria said wistfully. "I'm just not that high among his priorities."

Gainesmil was unable to turn away as she sauntered through the darkness to the bed in the adjacent room. With barely any motion at all, she slipped out of her gown and, naked, beneath the sheets.

"I miss him so," Victoria sighed. "And Robert, do let yourself out."

As if in a stupor, Gainesmil rose and went to the door—the other door, the exit. Not until it was closed behind him did he manage to swallow the lump in his throat.

Thursday, 8 July 1999, 9:14 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Ronald Thompson awoke with a jolt.

An alarm—somewhere *inside* the house, by the tone. He threw off the covers and opened a panel by his bed—the perimeter lights were green—the house itself secure, according to the system—but an intruder had made it so far as Vegel's vault. The sun streaming in through the windows reminded him that Hesha would be asleep—sound asleep....

Thompson ran down the hall and jumped most of the stairs to the first floor, bellowing for the Asp as he went. Thank god it was Raphael here—if they had to fight, that murderous little creature was the better of the twins.

He whipped the elevator door aside and took the car down to the second basement as fast as it would go. His stomach objected to the drop, and he cursed Liz for the charade they all had to play. He belonged in his room off the security bunker, not upstairs in that drafty relic of a house. Thompson swore and snatched one of the guns from the rack by the shaft doors. His eyes scanned the light codes as he ran through the surveillance station, and he swore again. No need to curse Liz. The intruder's entry point was from her room; the damned Cainite would have taken care of her before cracking the door open. Vegel must have been captured, not killed....

The door from Vegel's vault into Hesha's was still closed. *Good. There might be time to see who or what had found its way inside.* He brought the lights and the camera into full play in the carved stone room and stopped cold.

Elizabeth Dimitros, clad in light-blue striped pajamas, was stumbling aimlessly around the crypt. The door into her room—Vegel's room—hung ajar behind her. No light shone from the apartment.

Thompson set down his gun. He hit the intercom to his ally and called the killer off. "It's only Liz, Asp. Looks like she's sleepwalking."

"You're shitting me."

"No. The catch on the door must be faulty. I'll go up and put her back to bed before she knocks her head on a rock and wakes up." Thompson turned the lights in the vault down to a candle's power, replaced the automatic and set about putting the house in order.

Friday, 9 July 1999, 1:10 AM
(Thursday, 8 July 1999, 6:10 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Hall of Ikhwan, Alamut
Eastern Turkey

Eight killers circled Fatima al-Faqadi in silence. They watched her closely and tested the weight of their various blades.

Fatima watched them also. She had no need to test the jambia in her right hand. The thin dagger with its slightly curved tip was as familiar to her as her own almond-shaped eyes staring back from a mirror. How many nights had she carried it on her belt? How many souls had it reclaimed for the greater good of Haqim?

She rotated slowly in the center of her assailants and noted the telltale signs that they had not yet learned to conceal completely, signs that would be invisible to most but told Fatima what she needed to know about which assassin would strike first.

Fatima knew their names, but that knowledge was held in a part of her mind that, for the moment, had relinquished control to more primal awareness, to skills that had been practiced and used over the centuries until her trained responses were more instinctive than instinct itself.

For now, the circle of killers was a collection of stances, head tilts, weapons and careful movements. As Fatima turned, she noticed and prioritized a multitude of details: The Omani held a three-and-a-half-foot sword; the Irishman, only light-skin among the group, wielded a war-hammer. The rest carried smaller blades of various design, though the Algerian and the Egyptian had broken with the tradition of choosing ancestral weapons. The Tamil Tiger held his piha-kaetta an inch or two lower than he should. The Kurd separatist's stance was slightly off; his shoulders were taut instead of relaxed and flexible.

The eight circled, moved almost imperceptibly closer.

Without warning, Fatima lunged to the right with her dagger. As the assassins reacted to her feint, she lashed out with her left foot and crushed the knee of the Omani. His sword clattered to the stone floor, and he collapsed, his leg at a distinctly unnatural angle to the rest of his body.

Before his first moan had died, Fatima leapt from the path of the strike aimed at her back—she'd known it would come; the only question was from whom? The Russian. Former KGB, only other woman present. Simultaneously, Fatima snapped the Russian's wrist, wrenched the woman's arm around so that her own kinjal stabbed her in the back and shifted her into the path of the war hammer's arc.

The Irishman's attack caught the Russian square across the temple. A sharp crack echoed from the stone walls of the Hall of Brotherhood. As the slightly built KGB operative crumpled, Fatima snapped the new assailant's forearm and jabbed her dagger into his vitals for good measure. Having disarmed him to her satisfaction, she dove through the now large gap in the circle, turned her back to the wall and, in a rare show of charity, waited while the remaining five assassins adjusted their positions.

But Fatima's pause was not an act of benevolence. These assassins were her pupils. With almost half their number disabled in fewer than thirty seconds, panic—or at the least frustration—might set in. If she defeated them all in such short order, Fatima would be unable to observe their responses to a desperate situation.

So she waited, and she watched. Bare feet moved silently over the cool stone of Alamut.

The five remaining killers cautiously closed ranks. Fatima, though she had never before fought this group of *fida'i*, had in these first few seconds of combat familiarized herself with the movements of her opponents and gauged the threat that each posed her: very little. With the war hammer and the Omani's sword out of the mix, and the numbers now five to one, the odds had swung dramatically in Fatima's favor.

Not long ago, these *fida'i* had been among the deadliest of mortals, but among the children of Haqim, they were babes. For each of their years since being brought into the fold, Fatima had plied her trade for a century. Though accomplished killers, they were still mastering the subtleties of the newfound strength in their every muscle. There were some, Fatima knew, who never regained the intuitive command of their bodies after the Becoming, some who never achieved in unlife the balance of physique and temperament that in life had rendered them so lethal. But this group showed promise.

Torches in wall brackets were the only furnishings in the Hall of Ikhwan, and the flames cast dancing shadows across the rich browns and smooth olive tones of the assassins' faces. In time, their skin would darken, more like Fatima's, and in the bosom of Alamut they would find a unity denied the unworthy.

As they inched toward her, Fatima spared a handful of seconds to glance at their faces; there were none among the lot strong enough in blood to bend her will. Five hawks—detached, centered, inscrutable, predatory—regarded their prey. Of the five, only the eyes of the Kurd displayed the slightest agitation. Fatima noted that he might need to revisit earlier trainings of the *fida'i*, but her reprieve, and with it the moment for reflection, was no more—

The Yemeni closed with a slashing attack. His jambia didn't draw blood, but his strike wasn't intended to do so. He continued his swipes. They were defensive in nature, useful to turn aside any attack Fatima might launch, as he maneuvered to her side hoping to force her to turn and face him, in the process exposing her back to the others.

Suddenly Fatima's right hand swept high. The Yemeni slashed high to counter—but Fatima's jambia was now in her left hand. She slashed upward and rent his abdomen, and then, with a flawless shift of her weapon back to her right hand, whipped around to fend off the Kurd's attack from her rear.

She intended only to force the Kurd back, to turn aside his attack and then launch an attack at the Tiger back to her left. But the Kurd did not dodge. He did not make the least pretense of avoiding her blow.

Instead, he charged onto her blade. Fatima's jambia dug deep into his gut. Between the force of his charge and her in-and-upward thrust, hilt and fist alike plunged into his belly, and in that instant, that split second before he fell backward disemboweled to the floor, the Kurd's khanjar sliced across Fatima's forearm.

She felt the poison at once, knew it for what it was.

Gin-gin.

The skin of her lacerated forearm blistered and popped. Fire shot through her bones to the tips of her fingers. Already the muscular spasms began. Instinct took control. There was no time for thought of how this impossible treachery could ever have come about, from what quarter betrayal could have originated. Fatima shifted her weapon back to her left hand fractions of a second before the cramps rendered her right useless. She tried to clench her right hand into a fist and managed not even to move a finger.

The fire was spreading up her arm.

Fatima had long studied the assassin's concoctions, both modern and ancient. Gin-gin was one of the oldest, one of the most obscure, one of the most potent. Few substances, few poisons, remained deadly when subjected to the blood of Haqim; few could prove fatal to one of his childer. Gin-gin was one of those few, and it flowed now in Fatima's veins.

A broad swipe kept her three remaining opponents at bay for the moment. There was no surrender in such training, only victory or defeat. Defeat for a teacher was practically unheard of, but Fatima faced worse than embarrassment.

She willed blood to the burning arm. A weaker poison she could boil away in an instant, for she could transform her own blood into a potent toxin, but gin-gin resisted her attacks. With time and complete concentration, she'd be able to cleanse the poison from her body, but currently she could afford neither. Unless she dispatched her remaining pupils, and quickly, the gin-gin would keep spreading through her body, crippling her muscles as it went. And if she lost consciousness—a certainty, if she were paralyzed in the face of her pupils' attacks—the poison would eat away her insides until there was nothing left for even the blood of Haqim to heal.

The three assassins now seemed to Fatima more like vultures than hawks; *but what*, she wondered, *does it matter to the desert hare whether noble hawk or opportunistic vulture gorges upon its carcass?* She stared at the three, scouring their faces for the slightest sign of complicity. A conspiracy among the *fida'i*? They lacked both cause and ability, not to mention access to gin-gin. It would take an elder....

But the truth would have to wait until later—if she survived.

The Algerian to her right saw opportunity in the arm that hung useless at Fatima's side. He swooped in—but not quickly enough. Left-handed, Fatima deflected his wide-bladed dha and, almost simultaneously, smashed her forehead into his face. A spinning kick snapped his neck and left two opponents.

Or so Fatima thought, until she noticed movement from the direction of the downed, treacherous Kurd—the Kurd who *should* have been down. He was climbing to his feet, a task made more difficult by the tangle of his entrails underfoot.

Fatima was surprised, but not distracted as was the Egyptian killer. His distraction cost him. Two quick swipes of Fatima's blade and he was doubly hamstrung and lay writhing on the floor in agony.

Now Fatima directed a thrust at the Tiger, which he easily sidestepped; but his dodge allowed her to return her attention to the Kurd. He still held his poisoned blade, and the agitation Fatima had noticed in his eyes earlier had given way to madness. He stumbled toward her.

Fatima's arm throbbed from hand to shoulder. Her blood fought the poison and slowed its spread, but, lacking her full attention, the gin-gin ate away at muscle and nerve. Soon the bones in her arm would grow brittle and snap under their own weight.

The Kurd, his eyes glazed with hatred and madness, was on her now. Fatima moved, for her, awkwardly, the dead weight of her arm a drag on her maneuver, but she compensated enough. A sweep and flick of her wrist brought jambia against khanjar, and the Kurd's weapon clattered to the floor. Fatima slashed upward, and her blade laid open his throat and the underside of his chin.

Still the insane Kurd, his intestines trailing behind, pressed her, despite injuries that should have disabled any childe of Haqim or get of Khayyin. *What is this creature?* Fatima didn't sense elder blood in him, yet there was a power about him, a wildness in his mad eyes, violence as old as the earth itself.

The Tiger, too, was closing, seeking to do that which had proven beyond his comrades: to strike the telling blow against their teacher. *Is he confederate or earnest pupil? Either way....*

In one fluid motion, Fatima turned and flung her jambia at the Sri Lankan. The weapon was not balanced for throwing, but hundreds of years of practice proved their worth. The blade sliced through larynx and esophagus and held fast. The Tiger dropped to his knees, as if his feet had been cut from beneath him, then tumbled over to the floor.

Without hesitating, Fatima spun and kicked. Her foot snapped the Kurd's head sideways. The crack of his jaw almost covered the sound of teeth rattling on the stone floor. He dropped to one knee, but not in defeat. His hand shot out toward the poisoned khanjar that lay nearby.

Fatima snatched a torch from its bracket and smashed the flaming club onto the Kurd's head, then again across his face. He sprawled on his face to the floor. Fatima was on him in an instant. She crushed one of his hands with her heel and slammed the torch down on the back of his neck. Then she held the firebrand there against his neck, allowing the flame to go to work on his hair and undead flesh. He bucked and screamed, but Fatima's grip, even one-handed, was firm.

The fire licked greedily at the skin and sinew that should have turned to dust years before. After a few seconds, Fatima had to jump back; she was no more immune to the ravages of flame than was the Kurd. The Kurd who, somehow, clambered to his feet and charged at her again like some fiery jinn.

Fatima swung the torch again. It struck him square across his burning face and wrenched his head around and up with a series of pops and cracks. The force of her blow checked his forward progress, and for a long moment he stood there, as if staring at the ceiling behind him. Then he collapsed, and the flames completely engulfed him.

Fatima sank to the floor, pulled down by the weight of her dead arm. She was surrounded by smoke and the moans of those of her disarmed pupils who remained conscious. She barely felt her face strike stone. She was lost within herself, bringing the full force of her blood, the blood of Haqim, against the poison in her arm. She kept expecting another blade at her throat. Where was the accomplice to the Kurd? This would be his chance, as she fought the poison. She could not hope to defend herself. But no conspirator stepped forward to claim his prize. There was only the fire burning in her arm.

Gin-gin. Essence of gin-gin root boiled with sulfur in a goat's bladder. Slowly the blood of Haqim pushed the invader back down her arm, overwhelmed the toxin, tore it asunder. Icy numbness replaced the burning pain. Fatima's thoughts were a jumble. *Has treachery truly come to pass in the halls of Alamut, in the Hall of Ikhwan?* Her strength lasted just long enough to see the poison destroyed, and then torpor rose up to envelop her.



Thursday, 8 July 1999, 9:00 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Hesha emerged from his resting place to the outer chamber. He was mildly surprised to see Thompson already in the room and still more put off by the fact that his servant was not waiting for him. The door to Vegel's apartment was open, and Thompson's hands were busy with the delicate mechanisms that held it shut.

"Thompson?" Hesha lifted an ebon eyebrow, and his man rose to speak.

"The catch was loose, sir." He opened his mouth to go on, but Hesha cut in.

"Where is Elizabeth?"

"I asked her to pick up the mail. It's all right—I set up the box with only the kinds of things she ought to see there. But I had to get her out of the house to work on this."

"And we absolutely must fix this catch today because—?"

Thompson clenched his teeth at the Setite's tone, but answered calmly enough. "Because our Liz sleepwalks, and this morning she stumbled through Vegel's door without realizing it. I thought you'd like the secure areas *secure*, sir."

Hesha nodded. "Of course." He looked at the door's lock edge and scrutinized the work. "Thank you, Thompson."

After the sundown conference, Hesha followed Thompson to the bunker, and the mortal pulled the morning's tapes for his employer.

Elizabeth, they saw through the cameras, was working on the boulder, steadily whittling down a previously untouched area of the mud. Hesha dismissed Thompson to double-check all the concealed doors, panels, drop chutes and caches in the other parts of the house.

Hesha sat down at the console and popped video after video into the machines. He set the counters to start the entire bank of recordings at the same time—roughly an hour before Thompson's frantic morning dash. He waited with the patience of death, and eventually movement began in the view of Vegel's room.

The woman's sleeping form tossed uncomfortably on the massive bed. The sheets tangled around her legs, and her pajama top had slid up until the first button nearly choked her. In another ten minutes, her jerking, unconscious movements had freed her legs, but now they dangled over the side of the mattress. A toe touched the floor, and she sat up. She slipped off the bed and wandered to the closets. Uncertain hands opened a drawer, and she pulled apart a pair of socks. The socks were then set on the bed and apparently forgotten.

Elizabeth, her eyes half open, shuffled to the desk now. With the eraser end of a pencil, she wrote nothing—partly on the pad of paper that sat cockeyed on the desk, partly on the wood and leather of the desktop. She followed the pincushion wall back to the closet end of the room, playing vaguely with the tacked-up notes and articles. Her body hid the spring-latch from the camera's eye, so he couldn't see how the accident

happened, but the door opened a crack, and the woman walked through onto the cold stone floor of the crypt.

Hesha observed idly as the other cameras began to show action—half-clad Thompson running about the house like a jumping jack—the Asp gliding sinuously down the stairs from the kitchen, weapons ready—Thompson in the elevator, in the bunker, in the room with the sleepwalker, plucking her sleeve, closing the door and nudging her gently toward the bed.

Hesha watched Thompson watching Elizabeth as she slid back into real sleep. The old cop stood still as a statue for eight minutes, then turned and went out by the visible door. For the full eight minutes the Setite watched the mortals captured on camera, and then his finger jabbed the off button.

"Secure?" Hesha asked Thompson, who was just returning from his rounds.

"Yes, sir."

Their eyes leapt at the same moment to the center monitor. With the players off, the settings had reverted to Thompson's last arrangement, and Elizabeth and the boulder were displayed in soundless color. The Asp had just entered the view.

Raphael Mercurio carried a tray—chili, which Thompson knew gratefully was the reheated work of the other twin. Elizabeth smiled politely, but moved to the farthest corner of the work zone.

The Asp dusted off a little table. He set his burden down upon it, just outside the canvas, with a graceful flourish, smile and jest. Elizabeth smiled again, but her eyes shivered and she stayed where she was. A dusty finger pointed to the mud, and she said something—Hesha leaned forward and called up the sound.

"—This last inch beforehand." Her thin smile came out again. "But thanks for bringing it down. It's very nice of you."

"No, no. It's my job—I got to make sure you don't starve, Liz. You're a pretty girl—you should keep the skin on your bones and the roses in your cheeks, you know? It's not just me here; you're dealing with generations of Mercurio grandmothers standing over my left shoulder, and they keep going on about it." He laughed, and she tried to smile.

The Asp left Elizabeth to her dinner. She didn't leave the safety of her canvas carpet until his foot was off the top stair cleat, and the relief in her face was patently obvious.

"Holy shit..." whispered Thompson. "She knows?"

Hesha watched his guest wipe her hands clean and sit down to eat. She sniffed at the food suspiciously and took up the spoon without enthusiasm. "No," said Hesha. "I think not. Merely good instincts. She's afraid of him...and that's interesting." He swiveled in the console chair and faced his protégé.

"Should I call Gabe in from town?"

"I think that would be for the best. Fear can induce restless sleep. Keep Raphael out of her way until we can make the switch."



Thursday, 8 July 1999, 11:50 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Would you care to do the honors?" asked Elizabeth, steadying a nearly freed fragment of shard and mud between her gloved hands.

"Thank you," Hesha said evenly. He took up the dentist's pick and, with professional skill, scraped away the thin ridges of clay that supported the jug-side and handle in the boulder. In less than a minute, the fragile pottery piece shifted in the matrix, and he took up the receiving tray.

Elizabeth tipped the leaf-shaped fragment gently into the little bin, taking time to select a position that kept the shard's own weight from endangering it. "Down," she said.

"Down," confirmed Hesha, and he set the tray aside.

They leaned back against the canvas steps and regarded their hard-won treasure. Still covered with dirt and dust from its prison, it was an unimpressive, crumbly brown.

"It's not much, is it?" mourned Elizabeth.

Hesha shook his head and smiled. "It's older than we are. That's enough, for the moment. And it may match some of Vegel's shards."

"It's still not much. I'm sorry I dragged you out here for this, but at that last stage…two hands weren't enough, and I couldn't find Ron."

Hesha nodded, but ventured, "Mercurio's in the kitchen…."

Elizabeth turned pink and dove back into the boulder.

Hesha read the flush, keeping Thompson's briefing in mind. It might be fear of the Asp that brought her color up, but he suspected she hadn't even looked for either man…a loose fragment was a fine excuse for seeing him, Hesha, personally. He determined to keep the footing businesslike for the evening. Perching on the edge of the canvas box, he silently examined the progress of the work. The woman had given up entirely on what Vegel had always thought were the most promising sections, and her hands were busy inside a large crater below them.

Elizabeth grimaced inwardly. So the Asp, now that she knew him better, made her back hairs rise and her fists itch—she still should have gone to him, rather than bothering her employer. Self-consciously, she tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ears. Foolishness had its advantages, however. She confessed to herself she was glad that Hesha had come out of his office. He was sitting not three feet from her. His perfect white shirtsleeves were rolled up, creased and dirty from the work; his jetty eyes were smoldering… intent on the rock, completely oblivious to her, of course.

"What are you doing?" Hesha asked. He used the scholarly voice she'd responded to well over her dissertation. Elizabeth stuffed cloth wadding into the deepest part of the hole and tested the top section with two fingers. She cleared her throat.

"Well, Professor," she began, playing (as he had hoped) the earnest young student, "it occurred to me that the layer Mr. Vegel had exposed was far too cluttered for real progress to go on. I intend to isolate the shard-laden projection and remove it from the body of the excavation. I expect that it will then be easier to separate the shards…working from the rear, as it were."

"Go on, Miss Dimitros."

"That's it." She laughed self-consciously. "If Vegel's guess as to the sedimentation order of this thing is correct, I'm probably going to have to go back to doing it the hard way. But I think he was only mostly right."

Hesha studied the rock. "And the rock is just 'this thing'?" She stared blankly back at him. "It's not a he, or a she, or…" Elizabeth reddened, and Hesha grinned. "What is it?"

"Oh, Lord." She kicked resentfully at the canvas draping. "I tell you a story once…."

"Go on."

"This is an it. This is the rock of Sisyphus. It's big and bulky, and whenever you get to the goal with it—" she gestured at the leaf-shaped shard in the bin, "—you wind up back where you started, horrendously disappointed that there was nothing beyond the goal but another goal, exactly the same as the first." She scowled into the hole. "How long did Vegel work on this thing?"

Hesha frowned. "A long time."

"And Sisyphus is probably still heaving his misery and guilt and shame up that mountain. He's supposed to have been a smart guy; you'd think he'd do something about it." She caught Hesha's inquisitive gaze and went on. "There must be other rocks in hell. If he picked up one and gave the boulder a good whack in the same place every time, eventually he'd have a crack started…and one of these millennia, the whole thing would break open as it bounded down the mountain. Sorry; I'm babbling. They probably rolled up his wisdom somewhere in the rock…it's an allegory, after all."

Hesha said nothing, and Elizabeth returned to the crater she was boring into metaphor. *Sisyphus… futility… how appropriate… keep your mind on the job, Lizzie… and keep away from him.* Resolutely, she kept scraping away at the rock. *Best to go home to the Rutherfords without making a fool of yourself. Important client… strong* business *relationship… give you one up on Miss Agnes… he wants paintings done; you're damn good with conservation…*

"What next?" Hesha asked.

"Stabilization of the inner surface. It's glazed…." she tapered off, looking at the rock. *And maybe you'll find something decent in this thing… unbroken… or finely decorated… or bones… or even metal….*

"Your next *project*," Hesha clarified.

"Sorry. I was planning to keep plugging away at this for a few hours more, then begin swabbing down another canvas."

"No papyrus tonight?"

Liz stretched herself and regarded the huge mass in puzzlement. "I see hieroglyphs in my sleep, at this point. I need a change… and there's just something *satisfying* about digging into this. Put something together over there," she gestured at the long table, "take something apart over here." Elizabeth clicked her tools lightly into one hand and shrugged a little. "I can work on the papyrus, if that's what you'd prefer?"

"Please, do what you like. The paintings are coming along well enough." He waited, half-expecting her to draw the encounter out longer. For the moment, though, she seemed more interested in Vegel's boulder than in him. *Good,* he thought. *Thompson must have been mistaken.* He rose abruptly, slapped the dust off of his clothes and skin, and turned to go to his study. Elizabeth didn't even look up, and Hesha stalked out of the room in a perversely dissatisfied mood.

Friday, 9 July 1999, 10:43 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Hesha?" Liz asked without looking up from the papyrus.

The Setite stopped in surprise, glanced at his silent, stocking feet, and replied, "Yes." He sat down across the table from her and picked up his own set of tongs. "You're making good progress tonight," he remarked.

"It's an easy section, I think."

Hesha compared her several nights' work—this piece was no simpler than the others; it must be that she had begun to memorize the hieroglyphs. And she'd slept more soundly the night before, though she could hardly be expected to know that. But Elizabeth seemed rather elated—pleased with herself to an incomprehensible degree.

He watched her deftly lay five scraps together to make a single feather sign, and though the next glyph was uncommon, her eyes looked to the notes spread out over the glass for only the briefest instant before finding it. There was something odd about the way she was sitting as well...he began manipulating shards on his own half to disguise his curiosity.

Her chair angle was as normal...her hips curved into the seat in the same way...her back slightly twisted to keep her long neck and delicate shoulders positioned comfortably over the work...but her shoulders were wrong. The hand with the tweezers—no, the other hand—instead of loose, relaxed fingers flipping through Vegel's transliterations, her fingers were closed in a near-fist, flattened against the table top. Her pulse was quickening the longer he sat with her...what was in her hand? He felt Elizabeth's eyes on him and bent earnestly over the work.

"I have a present for you," she said eventually. Hesha looked up into the sweetest cat-canary smile he'd ever seen, and the amber lights in her eyes were absolute sparks. "Open your hand and close your eyes, et cetera, et cetera."

"Pardon?"

"Here."

She turned her left hand over, and lying on the palm was a metal ring. It was a shining dark brown, completely untarnished, and Hesha had never seen it before. He took it warm from her body and peered at the sculpted surface through his old-man glasses.

"It's the crackerjack prize out of Mr. Vegel's rock," said Elizabeth. "The wisdom of Sisyphus, so to speak."

"Ourobouros," whispered Hesha.

"Bronze," she said eagerly. "Though why it hasn't greened away completely I can't imagine. I intend a pH study of the surrounding material."

Hesha hardly heard her.

Bronze, yes, though he had a better guess as to why the metal had been preserved. No inscription...no marks on the interior of any kind. He turned his attention to the design—

two snakes, both self-devourers, twined around each other in opposite directions. The heads and tails met together on what must be the top of the piece, and the interweaving bodies formed a tight knot.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

She laughed. "If you like snakes." She leaned back in her chair. "Seriously, though, I agree with you." Elizabeth watched him stare at the little ring and decided to let him alone with it. She reached for her tongs again and began picking at the scattered scraps.

The Setite ran his fingers around and around the outside of the ring.

"Have you tried this on?" he murmured to his companion.

"Yes," she admitted. "Briefly, to see what the approximate size was. I've full measurements and excavation data written down in the 'boulder log' that Mr. Vegel had been keeping."

No traps, then. Still, he would have to examine it more carefully to make sure it was truly safe. He'd keep a close watch on the woman, too...there was a chance the thing was active in some way, and any after-effects would be informative.

"Greek, don't you think?" she said, noticing that his close scan of the prize was finished. "I can't remember any identical designs, but I thought that the two-snake motif might be helpful in tracking down the period and the purpose. Herculean cult object, or perhaps prophetic paraphernalia. Teresias and the snakes in the stable, you know. There's an outside chance of medical symbology, but I think that if the sculptor had meant a caduceus, he'd have made a caduceus."

Hesha slipped the ring into his breast pocket. "Good work," he said abruptly.

"Just luck," replied Elizabeth, modestly.

Hesha wondered.



Saturday, 10 July 1999, 9:28 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Ronald Thompson woke with his jaw clenched tight. *Damn good dream, ruined. Didn't dream often. Forgetting it already....*

Goddamn alarm.

He flicked open the panel without quite leaving the soft cocoon of his bed. It was an interior breach: Vegel's apartment to Vegel's crypt again. He swore in the foulest language he could think of and tossed a robe over his grizzled chest. The door was fixed... yes, the door was fixed... she must have subconsciously triggered the actual latch... probably the door had never been loose in the first place... well, this time he'd wedge it shut from the stone side, and no matter how much her sleepy fingers played with the catch, there'd be no more midnight—mid-morning, curse it—alarms.

He pounded down the old house stairs, down the basement stairs and across the wood floors of the basement rooms. His step grew lighter as he approached Elizabeth's end of the complex, and he laid his hand gently on the knob of her door.

Instantly, the alarm's tone changed. From a persistent, low G, it rose and clamored an octave higher—his earplug throbbed with the shuddering note. He drew back his grasping fingers, as if to stop the noise, but he knew the sound. There had been a second breach somewhere; hand and knob were coincidence. He threw the door open and found Vegel's apartment abandoned. He switched on the lights and saw that the door into the crypt was shut.

"Asp," he whispered into Elizabeth's intercom. "Turn on the mike and follow me." Thompson stepped quietly to the secret panel, disengaged the alarm and opened the way to the crypt. The tone in his ears died completely and unexpectedly.

"Where is she?" he asked the empty room.

"She's not on your damn screens," said his earplug.

Thompson finished looking through the irregular curves and obstacles in the vault, and his stomach turned. There was only one room in the complex that couldn't be seen from the security bunker.

"Run the log back, Asp."

There came a series of keyboard sounds, a low whistle and Raphael's voice, soft and purring over the circuit. "Her door at 9:28:17. It shut at 9:28:39. She probably... bumped into it. *His* door at 9:29:27. It shut automatically ten seconds later. Sorry, Ron. I know you liked her."

Thompson sat down heavily on the end of the stone bench. "Damn." He looked at his bare feet, his flimsy, plaid flannel robe and repeated, "Damn. Damn. Asp, pick up the hook, the light, my fire boots and the kit. Bring 'em down here."

Raphael Mercurio opened his mouth to object, but the sight of Thompson's broad back and clenched jaw on the monitor shut him up. He reached for the kit.

Saturday, 10 July 1999, 9:37 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Ronald Thompson stood on the threshold of his master's tomb. He was shod in thick, thigh-high boots. His pajama bottoms were tucked tightly into the boot-tops, and the tightly belted, cut-down remnants of his robe had been tied down around his waist. He held a long, hooked stick in his left hand, and his right index finger was poised above a palette carved in the hands of a scribe. Behind him, the Asp stood ready and silent.

Thompson pressed the latch, and the door to Hesha's sanctum swung open. He pressed a second carving, and the door settled slightly on its hinges. It would stay open now, as it had not for Elizabeth.

The Asp turned on the floodlight. It was curiously baffled and shielded; only dim illumination shone through its cloudy lens. It was enough for the two men watching; their eyes were accustomed by now to the semi-darkness of Vegel's chamber. When the sluggish head of the snake nearest the door began to move, Thompson prodded it gently with the blunt end of the hook, and the viper slithered away into a hole in the wall, seeking its den in sulky temper.

Thompson stepped forward, and the Asp nudged the lamp along behind him. There were two short corridors ahead of them. They took the left and trod gently along the right edge of it. At the first turn, they passed around a shallow pit, and seven sleepy sets of double-lidded eyes watched them from its depths. At the second turn, for no apparent reason, they waited a full minute, standing close together on the same solid stone.

"Ron," began the Asp, "She's dead by now."

"If she's dead, where is she?"

"In the right-hand passage."

"I didn't hear anything from there. Did you?"

Raphael subsided. He drew forth his own hook-and-loop without comment and dislodged a curious neighbor from a ledge close by.

They started forward again and arrived safely at the last landing of a narrow, winding stair. The Asp put the lamp into his partner's outstretched hand and turned to watch the steps behind them. He didn't see into the chamber; the ceiling of the stairs was low and steep, and he was on rear guard before the opening door finished its slow arc.

Thompson saw.

He saw the faint, tall curves of barely lit paintings fading into blackness. He saw the shadows of nearer mysteries, ranged along the walls. He saw, at the edge of the light, the closed sarcophagus. He saw his master's still, night-dark form stretched out upon it, bare to the waist. He saw a woman, draped in folded white cloth that clung tightly to her body. He saw her dark hair, plaited and knotted into a thick headdress. He saw shining gold flash dully at her neck, her wrists and ankles. The girl—the queen—the goddess—she took up the black hand of the man before her and wordlessly bid him rise.

Thompson stood in the doorway in shock; it was so much a scene from a painting of Vegel's—and he knew it was a trick of the light. The illusion faded—the chance resemblance died as the woman went on moving, and he saw the truth.

Elizabeth stood over Hesha's dead, cold corpse, holding a lifeless hand to her cheek. She was crying in half-formed sobs, quietly, but as if her heart would break. Her eyes were closed, and if there were words in her mourning Thompson could not hear them.

He took a step down, and the lamp came with him. The linen gown was a plain white nightshirt, wrinkled and twisted until the creases looked like pleats from a distance. Her hair was tangled. As he moved, it looked less and less like the highborn lady's wig and more like fever-locks. Her jewelry was not gold, but living copper....

And the floor was covered—covered so thickly that the light gray stone showed through only in tiny patches—with the same deadly, molten metal: hundreds upon hundreds of copperhead snakes. Thompson looked out across the sea of brazen backs and shuddered. "How many shots are there in the kit, Asp?"

"Two."

"You stay here, then."

"That was *my* plan."

Thompson crept slowly across the stone floor of the crypt, making a clear path before himself with the hook. The Asp moved onto the bottom step and adjusted the lamp to help the walking man—Thompson could sense the assassin's eyes on his back. The light did odd things to the shadows, and the edges of the darkness moved with the bodies of its inhabitants. The old cop could feel, instinctively, the closing of the way behind and wondered how in hell he could ever bring a body out with him—whether dead, sleeping or in the panic and shock of snakebite.

"Wait, Ron."

Thompson swiveled through his shoulders, hips and knees. He didn't dare move his feet. Uncomfortably, he looked up at his partner. Raphael's hands held a thin cord: the drop line for the lamp. A tiny knife cut it free.

"Here, catch. Tie it to your waist." He knotted his end to the kit and anchored the plastic box behind the door's slack hinges. "I'll bring down stronger rope and some gloves. You're going to need them." And the Asp disappeared up the stairs.

Thompson watched him go resignedly. He made a neat bowline around his hips and concentrated his attention on the floor.

Hook, clear, step. Step.

Hook, nudge, angle, hook again. Clear. Step.

Step. Halfway, now.

Step wide. Hook away the heavy body that blocked the straight way.

Step again. Step—

—and Thompson's boot slipped on an old, flattened, silvery skin. It rasped silkily under the rubber cleats and threw him. He jerked wildly to catch his balance—the hook swung free from his right hand, and it clattered against the stone. The other foot slammed down near the head of a small, skittish creature, and the vibrations of the whole incident traveled throughout the room. When the frantic movements stopped, there were hardly any snakes in sight, but three adults had their bodies coiled ready. Thompson left his feet and the hook where they were and dropped into breathing that almost wasn't—tight, shallow motions of the ribs that made the head and sides ache but which caused very, *very* little noise. One by

one, the challengers relaxed and laid themselves down. Thompson straightened his legs and ankles, raised the hook with the smallest, weakest fingers of his left hand—the only two that had kept the tool from crashing altogether—and began again.

Step.

Step, hook, clear, step.

He was at the sarcophagus. He touched her shoulder, and she muttered something incomprehensible. She slept still, somehow, and her color was healthy—she hadn't been bitten. Thompson hoped the miracle would go on and prayed that miracles were contagious.

"Ron."

Thompson looked to the stairwell. "Yeah."

"Pull in your line."

Thompson took the straight end of the cord and began to draw it after him. A cardboard box sledged along behind it. More rope trailed from the box. It made a god-awful racket, and more snakes fled from the monster. He grinned maniacally as his three opponents struck at and then scattered from the strange and hideous thing that hurt their teeth.

There were gloves in the box, and Thompson put them on. He clipped a strong rope around his waist and would have hooked Elizabeth into it....

But when Thompson looked down into the eyes of the old, old copperhead that had draped itself around the woman's neck and chest, he knew that the creature would never willingly let him do it. Where his gut had turned before at the danger, his mind turned now at the knowledge that the ancient reptile *thought* and fought in the same idiom that he did.

With one eye on the 'collar,' he reached for the young, slender, gleaming form of a bracelet. In the blink of an eye, he had the little one behind the neck, and he threw it far into the dark places of the tomb. He shuffled his feet to bring himself closer, and the hatchling from her other wrist joined its cousin. The head of the collar turned toward him, and it blinked golden eyes resentfully.

Thompson sighed. He hooked clear a large space on the floor around them and bent—slowly—to kneel at Elizabeth's feet. The anklets were larger, older yearlings. He took a deep breath and reached for the left one. Above him, the collar hissed, and he stopped in mid-motion. Nerve lost, he leaned back on his haunches and flexed his hands inside the gloves.

When he—and the collar, too, he hoped—least expected it, his right hand darted out of its own accord. The instinct was good. He could feel the delicate jawbones clamped between his fingers, and he unwound it from her leg in a quick, smooth motion. He leaned back to throw, and the other anklet struck him just beneath the knee.

"Fuck," he cried and nearly dropped the serpent he was holding. Impatiently, he flicked his wrist and sent the thin body flying into space. He heard it land, too close and audibly angry.

Thompson fairly tore the second anklet away. As he stood, he felt Elizabeth's legs for other snakes and found one curled like a garter about her thigh. It fled higher, and he had to raise her gown to the level of her hips to catch the thing—it would have bitten her belly, but his thumb got in the way. The leather wasn't thick enough, and this time he could feel the extra sting of venom in the wound.

The collar hissed again. From his awkward crouch, Thompson strained to see what it was doing. His head rose above the level of the sarcophagus just as something struck him in the side—from its markings, he knew it to be the first anklet, the one he hadn't thrown far enough. He stopped cursing. Nothing seemed adequate.

In a frenzy, Thompson hooked the space around them clear again. Without trying to dislodge the giant snake, he took Elizabeth's arm and began leading her away from Hesha. The collar hissed a warning.

Thompson kept walking.

The collar hovered over Elizabeth's jugular, wavering challengingly. Elizabeth herself stumbled. She was still weeping, and the pale streaks ran down her face, her neck and onto the dull body of the snake.

Thompson took a firmer, higher grip on her arm.

The collar, blindingly quickly, moved to take the open target. Thompson was ready, and he threw himself away from the girl the moment he was sure the copperhead was really coming for him, not for her. Thompson felt the huge, curved fangs enter the meat of his forearm, well above the glove. His arm tore open. Blood flowed freely onto the stones. The old serpent lost a tooth inside its victim, but the momentum of its strike and Thompson's lunge wrested its grip from Elizabeth's neck. Thompson regained his feet, tossed the unconscious woman over his shoulder, and ran headlong for the stairs.

Saturday, 10 July 1999, 8:48 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Hesha woke to a crowded and unexpected press of heavy bodies. The copperheads lay coiled over him in excessive, weighty numbers, and the Eldest had curled protectively around his shoulders. As he began to move, he felt the flickering whisper of the patriarch's tongue on his ear. "Light," he said softly, and the hidden bulbs glowed.

Hesha locked eyes with the old snake and hissed back.

The Eldest was wounded. He bared his broken fang and arched his neck, the better to display a replacement descending from the roof of his mouth. He complained. He coiled and recoiled, disturbing the lesser snakes. He was fretful. The nest was not safe. The guardians were halved. Those that could had found sanctuary on the body of their ally; those that could not had left for their winter dens in the fields around Laurel Ridge.

Hesha soothed the old and faithful servant. He ran his hands along the slim backs of the copperhead's descendants. In time, they found their necks and bellies secure on the floor again, and the stones did nothing unexpected. The Setite's bare feet slid smoothly among them without causing alarm; he was family, and his scent was theirs.

He satisfied himself that the intrusion had been limited—his treasures and projects were untouched—and made his way, though the center passage, to Vegel's crypt. He noticed with interest that Elizabeth's door was wedged shut with the chisel.

"Thompson."

There was, for the first time in fifteen years, no response.

"Thompson," he said again, with force.

"Sir." It was the Asp's voice. "Sir, Thompson's a little ill just now."

"Ill?"

"Yes, sir. Could you—could you come help me with him?"



Saturday, 10 July 1999, 8:57 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Thompson's quarters were comfortable but sparsely furnished. They ran to bookshelves full of old magazines, tapes, tattered true-crime case studies and a fine set of vinyl albums he never listened to. There were a few old certificates on the walls in thin, plain frames. There was one good rug; he'd bought it in Afghanistan. It was beautiful, and it was valuable, but it had attracted him chiefly because the design—though traditional in every other way—had substituted for random decoration the simplified shapes of machine guns and helicopters.

Hesha Ruhadze's chief security man sat in an old, battered recliner with a small trash bin in his lap. His face was unhealthily blue, his eyes swollen half shut. His right arm lay in a jury-rigged basin of newspaper, plastic bags and blood-soaked towels. Similar wadding covered the lower left half of his ribs.

As Hesha entered the room, the Asp had just come from the bathroom with a double armload of fresh towels. He lifted Thompson's swollen arm and exchanged red cloth for white and beige; the trash bin filled with the dressings, and Mercurio swapped the little can for a mixing bowl. Acidic fumes from the kitchen testified that some receptacle was necessary. The two men looked up at him with weary, resentful, smug expressions. Hesha took in the whole scene in a second, and then wiped the satisfied looks off his men's faces by turning on his heel and slamming the door behind him.

"Mercurio!" he shouted into the intercom.

"Boss, what the hell are you doing?" The Asp followed Hesha into the bunker, angry, annoyed and afraid all at once. "Ron's sick, goddamn it. He's gonna die, and you just—"

Hesha turned on him. "Wash your hands, you fool!"

Raphael looked from his blood-soaked cuffs and dripping hands to the animal eyes of his master. White with fear, he shrank away.

"Warm four bags and bring them here, quickly."

Raphael scuttled down the hall, running without turning his back on the bunker and the creature inside it.

Hesha sat down at the console to wait. The smell coming from Thompson's quarters was overpowering...old blood, new blood, fear, sickness, venom...fresh blood spilling, wasted on the floor, the cloth, the paper... fresh blood... his eyes drifted to the video display of Thompson's room.

He could not look away, but his hands obeyed his will. The monitor sparked off.

The curse fought him for control of his legs. The man's door was only five feet away. The man was too ill to fight. The man trusted him and wouldn't flinch from the Beast—wouldn't know the difference between the slave of Apep and the ascetic, thoughtful, rational being that the Setite had fought to construct over the centuries. And the man's choice was made; he was in pain, he would end his life willingly to start the new one now.

Hesha let the waves of persuasion crash against the bastions of his sanity. From the cold center of the storm, he took exercise and amusement in analyzing the onslaught. The Beast surged forward in raw and willful attack, monstrously strong but poorly armed. Hesha thanked Set that his mind was yet clear, and that the voice of the curse spoke in clumsy shreds of logic.

A plastic bag landed in his lap, body-warm and shockingly heavy.

He picked it up and drained it quickly. The curse cried out for more—in perfect concert, Hesha and the Beast lifted their hand—and the Asp tossed them the second bag. The blood streamed down his cold gullet as fast as the first. Hesha braced himself and began to sip, slowly, the third bag. The Beast clamored still, infuriated by the scent of Thompson's life, by the wretched flavor of the bagged blood, by the failure of its fight.... Hesha finished his drink, and the unthinking creature within him seemed to loll over, still angry, but caged...not sated, not too drunk to rage for more supper, but understanding on some level that there would be more soon enough.

"Snakebite," said Hesha.

"Yes, sir." The Asp had retreated down the corridor. One foot was actually inside the elevator. "This morning."

"Antitoxin?"

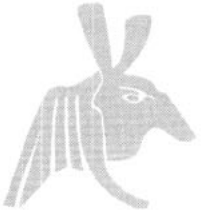
"Yes, sir. Right after the bite."

"Why is he bleeding?"

"Convulsions, sir. He was puking in the john, and he just lost it. He broke the mirror when he went down, boss. Then he rolled around in it. I've been pulling glass out of him for over an hour."

"Warm three more bags. Knock before you come in," Hesha directed, moving from his chair, "leave them at the door and get back out. Understood?"

Raphael nodded. He watched the creature walk into Thompson's rooms, and he fled back to the freezer chamber, glad to have the heavy, insulated doors between himself and his master.



Saturday, 10 July 1999, 9:17 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Thompson." Hesha knelt by his servant's side, clutching the fourth blood bag like a talisman between them.

"Sir." Ron's eyes fought crazily for focus. "Sir, were you here just now?"

"Yes."

"Thank god. Thought I'd imagined it." He leaned over the bowl and was sick in wracking, dry heaves that shook the old chair with him. Hesha patted him on the back, running his fingers along rents in the robe and open wounds in the skin beneath it. No glass was left there. The Asp seemed to have been thorough enough.

The Setite took Thompson's head in his hands, looked into his eyes and said, "Be calm." The vomiting slowly stopped.

"Is it time, sir?" Ron croaked.

"No," answered Hesha, understanding his man's question perfectly. "Tonight you merely have an unscheduled lesson in the powers of Set's blood." Thompson stared dully at him from swollen eyes. "Let me check your arms, first." Minutes passed with forceps and scalpel. A few shards of mirror were added to the bowl the Asp had started, and from the snakebites came forth a broken fang or two. The bowl and the tools went into the kitchen sink, and Hesha returned from the drain board with a knife and a large coffee mug in his hands.

"Drink this."

"I haven't been able to keep anything down, sir...."

"Drink *this*."

Thompson took a sip. His eyes flickered to the dark contents in apprehension, and Hesha could see the questions starting.

"Drink it all, Thompson."

When the mug was empty, Hesha filled it again from his wrist. Thompson took it back obediently, and they drank together...mortal from the cup, Setite from the bag. The Asp delivered the rest of the blood as ordered; it flowed into the cold body and trickled from it to fill the mug again.

"Enough." Hesha pulled up a chair opposite the wounded man. "Now burn that. Use it. Don't tell me that you don't know what I mean—keep listening. There is fire in your stomach...like fear..." said the Setite, softly. "Like anger...like adrenaline...like whisky..." his voice went on, hypnotically. "You've done a little drinking in your time, Detective Sergeant Thompson...take the fire, take the whisky, and force it out of your gut. Put it in your arm. The venom you were hit with today...that was fire in the veins, killing you. This is fire in the arteries, destroying the venom. Set your arm on fire...burn the venom away...torch out the glass and the cuts and the bruises.

"Look at your arm, Thompson."

Ronald Thompson moved his head painfully and saw his swollen, discolored limb changing. The streaks of white and red faded; the blue-purple that had begun to fester sweetly turned green-gold, then faint brown, and then his natural tan. The sickly colors shrank from his fingers, his wrist....

"Concentrate. Don't let it stop."

"What am I doing?!"

"Healing yourself. Set's blood, even diluted, can heal the living. So, I understand, can Caine's...." Hesha looked into Thompson's eyes, lifted the shredded robe from his shoulders and examined the knotted terrain of his back. "Move it away from your arm. Fix your feet. Then spread the fire to the back. You're still bleeding there." The gashes mended themselves. "Good. You have control over it. Now stand up and be sure every wound is closed."

Thompson stood and tried to obey. He shook his head. "The fire's out, sir."

"Excellent. It was necessary to burn it all. There are side effects. Think about how you felt before and after you drank my blood. With one night's drink, you probably felt gratitude, friendship, nostalgia, tenderness, unreasoning trust...."

Thompson's expression held none of those fine feelings now. Hesha's list was far too accurate.

"Two nights, and you should come almost to love me."

Thompson's still-puffy face took on fear.

"Three nights' drinks form a kind of slavery between the drinker and the one whose blood is taken. It is called the blood bond, or the Vinculum, or the coeur-vrai, or the oath, or the Coils of Apep, or a hundred other names...and it lasts forever."

As the implications sank in, Hesha's bodyguard turned chalk white. "Forever?"

Hesha stared at the floor. With a long, thin hand, he dismissed *forever*. "Until you die, or until you die again. Long enough. There are said to be seven ways to break it; five are legendary, three are impossible, four are impractical...all of them are difficult, and only one is quick."

Thompson's face lost none of its horror. "So you could...you could use this on any one of us...."

Hesha's eyebrow twitched. "But I do not, obviously." He paused. "Or you wouldn't be in a position to ask the question, Thompson." Without haste, he collected the empty bags, the bloodied knife, the red-stained mug, and took them to the kitchen. He returned with a glass of juice and a new bowl. Setting them in Thompson's hands, he commented, "It is far, far better to *earn* the loyalty of the people you are forced to trust. I find that slaves make unreliable servants. Many of my enemies keep their retainers in bondage—and that, Thompson, is a very useful thing." He sat down again, and his manner changed.

"Lesson over," he said. "Report."



Sunday, 11 July 1999, 12:07 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Elizabeth sat atop a tall, thin stool in the studio. She leaned on her left elbow, holding a loose bundle of cotton swabs. Her right hand took one up, dipped it into a jar and rolled it carefully over the flyspecked, smoke-stained surface of the painting. The swab, now a dirty yellow, she flicked into a waste tray by her side. Left hand fed right, the process was repeated, the clean path along the painting's edge growing steadily.

Hesha walked into the room. Where there were shadows, he wrapped himself inside them; where there was light, he merely slipped unnoticed within it. The woman heard nothing. There were new, weary lines around her eyes; the delicate skin was stained the color of old bruises; the lids were red-rimmed. He smelt salt on her cheeks.

Hesha walked back to the door and let the light strike him again.

"Elizabeth."

She looked up in surprise. "Hi." The swabs dropped to the tabletop. "I thought you'd all gone into town until tomorrow. Thompson left a note...."

"It was a lie."

Elizabeth's chin tilted up, her eyes narrowed defensively, and she turned on the stool to face him. She said nothing, but searched his face. It might as well have been carved from marble.

"Come here, please. I would like to talk to you." Hesha stepped back, leaving the way clear for her to go by. After a moment's hesitation, she rose and followed him. "In my study, if you don't mind." The Setite led her to a door she'd never been through. He held it open for her. Hesha paused at the precise distance into the study that would force the wall seat upon his guest, and she took it.

"Tell me about your dream last night," he began.

Elizabeth flushed. "Excuse me?"

"You walked and spoke in your sleep."

Her eyes shuttered against him. "Sleepwalkers don't necessarily remember their dreams, Hesha."

"But you do, Elizabeth, or you would have said: 'I don't remember.'" He almost smiled. "Yours is a very diplomatic dishonesty."

She clenched her jaw and said nothing. Hesha read the lines of her face—anger, caution, resentment, logic. Whatever harm the truth might do her, he had at least put her on her guard.

He went on, softly. "I expect that there are nightmares for you. I want to help." The stern note returned. "In fact, it is absolutely necessary that I intervene."

"I don't understand you."

"I intend to devote the remaining hours before sunrise ensuring that you do." Hesha paused. "Under ordinary circumstances I would never have brought you here. I picked

you up in New York as a diversion—" she winced— "from more pressing matters. You were... you are... unique. Contrary. Fascinating. I suspected you had an uncommon gift for observation. I showed you a statue that puzzled me. You put your finger on the crux of the matter in one night. You removed the eye. I was impressed, and I decided that I would visit you often... in New York," he finished heavily.

"Within a day, you had destroyed my plans. There were..." He sought, visibly, for words, and spoke slowly: "...worse things following Kettridge, and I could not, in good conscience, leave you to be found by them. So I brought you here intending to protect you and keep the truth of the danger from troubling you. In time, I would have returned you safely to New York. Or—" his voice lowered. "Or in time, I hoped we might have had a different, less hurried, less disturbing version of this conversation."

"We aren't having a conversation," snapped Elizabeth. "This is a monologue, Hesha."

She takes the truth by the heart, he sighed to himself.

His soft tones and feigned embarrassment dropped away. Curtly, he spelled out the essence of the problem. "In order to keep the reality of the situation from you, the Asp, Thompson and I have constructed an elaborate charade. The events of this morning prove to me that you, whether you know it consciously or not, have seen through the acting and the stage set. Our little masquerade has put each of us in still greater danger." With the last word, his voice fell, and what came next from Hesha's throat was like thunder.

"Now tell me your dream, Elizabeth, before your gift of perception gets one of us killed."

Elizabeth stared back at him through wide, hard-rimmed eyes. Her face was pale, her mouth shut and voiceless. Her throat was tight with tears and anger, her gut knotted in fear. *He's insane.* Her mind churned frantically, but nothing helpful rose to the surface. *Whatever I'm supposed to have seen, God, why can't I see it now? He doesn't look crazy, he looks... every sentence makes less sense, not more... but he obviously thinks he's explaining something... paralogia... paranoia... but his face....* She turned her eyes away. Whether he was sane or mad, the sight of his face hurt her. His eyes, so near black, guarded by strong brows and cunning smiles...once or twice there had been a gentler look in them, something encouraging and open.... Elizabeth watched his hands instead. The bones were long and beautiful, like a sculpture some god had hidden under flesh...the color of his skin was so rich and deep and mellow a brown. *There isn't a word for it. Like horse chestnuts and old saddles and...he's mad, I think.*

Hesha studied the woman's reaction clinically. Despite himself, he was impressed that she could sit silent after the treatment he'd given her—either she had no will at all, which he knew was not true—or she was stronger than he'd guessed. *Set below,* he thought irritably. *What am I doing guessing?*

He held out his hands. "Come with me," he said.

Elizabeth let him pull her up from the chair, thinking how cold his fingertips were, how impossible he was.

Hesha opened the door to the main hall and drew her behind him. He strode to a full and solid-looking bookcase and slid it aside. The passage beyond was dark and narrow, but the walls were ordinary enough. They turned a corner into lighter, wider space, and a sturdy metal door blocked the way.

"Unlock."

He had kept tight hold of her right hand. As the door swung open, he let go.

Elizabeth walked ahead of him into a long, low room crowded with steel, glass and black plastic. The Asp was there, and the expression on his face was insufferable. Liz took it as astonishment mixed with malice; Hesha knew more of Raphael's moods. He knew the killer was savoring the wreck of the illusion and why. Hesha smiled and decided that the Asp was having enough fun. *Pride goeth before a fall*, he thought wickedly and waited.

Elizabeth had drifted to the security station. The cameras were on—all of them—and the monitors up and working. She took a seat in one of the chairs. She looked at every screen in turn, coldly and without comment. The front hall. The kitchen. An outdoor scene. The staircase. The front drive. A wall...part of the garage, she remembered. Views of the guest rooms, of Thompson's austere bed, of the Asp's den. A shot of the stairs to the basement. Every possible angle of the museum. Blank corridors. A room she didn't recognize, very messy. Another, rather cleaner. Hesha's study and the two chairs empty there. Hesha's rooms from another angle, the back of the screen showing behind a large bed, a sliver of neatly kept dressing room to one side. More pictures of the woods, waving gently in night winds. Her own room, she saw without surprise. The bunker: a miniature Asp standing gaping over her shoulder, her own tiny figure motionless in the chair, Hesha looking up at her—into the camera—regretfully. Thompson lying in a chair in a room she didn't know. Stone hallways. Stone walls—carved walls.

Elizabeth leaned closer, staring at the reliefs. The picture was dim and the perspective was wrong, but there was a memory....

"Asp." Hesha's voice rang out. "Introduce yourself to Miss Dimitros."

Liz swiveled the chair. If the cook's face had been stunned before—which she doubted, realizing that anyone in this room would have known precisely who was coming—it was a grotesquely genuine mask of stupefaction now. The small, dark eyes narrowed with anger.

He said nothing, and Hesha filled in the silence. "Elizabeth, this is Raphael Mercurio."

"Not Angelo," she murmured tonelessly.

"There is no Angelo," said the Asp, in a voice clotted with resentment. "Raphael. Gabriel. My brother, my twin, he was here when you arrived. Angelo is... our creation. Our masterwork. The great alibi," he finished, throwing back his head and raising one glossy, defiant eyebrow.

"For what?"

"For everything," said the Asp, menacingly. He glanced at Hesha's face and backed away. With an air of pride and hatred, he swept out of sight.

Hesha touched Elizabeth lightly on the shoulder. She left the chair, and he steered her through the bunker to a plain, wooden door. Hesha knocked once, but opened it immediately.

"Thompson."

"Sir." Thompson grimaced apologetically. "Hey, Liz." He straightened the recliner, but remained seated. "Sorry about all this."

Hesha allowed no time for pleasantries. "Take off your shirt, Thompson."

Thompson and Elizabeth exchanged glances. He grimaced again. "Yes, sir. I'll need a hand, though. The cuts are closed, but the swelling's gone up...."

"Your right shoulder still?" Hesha frowned. "Help him," he ordered.

Liz bent over the chair and took the loose shirt up and away—gingerly, after she caught sight of the first gauze padding. Beneath the pullover, Thompson was a patchwork of cotton bandages and fresh scars.

"Unwrap his right shoulder. Look at it."

Elizabeth removed the gauze and a cold pack. The flesh of Thompson's arm was puffy and discolored. The fluids trapped within stretched tight two shiny, pink dimples of new skin at the center of the wound. She replaced the dressing with skill and without comment.

Sitting on the edge of the armchair, Elizabeth gazed searchingly into the old cop's eyes.

Thompson returned the stare unhappily. She loved the boss—or had, at least. And she'd trusted her 'friend' Ron. For the first time in—decades—he was ashamed of something he'd done. And there she went, the gaze broken—finished with him—following Hesha out, walking in his footsteps through the maze. Thompson reached for the mixing bowl, feeling slightly ill.



Sunday, 11 July 1999, 12:22 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Elizabeth stood nervously at the door. Light came from the corridor behind her, faint, but enough to throw her shadow far from her feet. Here, on the raised step of the threshold, she could hear Hesha ahead of her in the blackness, making soft noises…hissing and a fragile rasp like a broom. The sounds stopped, there was a long pause, and then his voice said quietly: "Light."

And Hesha's sanctuary was revealed.

The far wall—like all the walls—was covered in painted reliefs. In ochre, dun, black, brick red, and blue as dark as night, three tiers high, each section longer than her own body…there would be twelve sections, she realized. It was the Am Duat—the Book of the Dead for royalty—twelve hours of Ra's journey though the Underworld, each hour divided into three parts, each part depicting an event on the god's trip from dusk to dawn, from death to life. She stepped into the room and turned to look at the whole:

A bare floor, blue-black walls to waist height, then banded colors: red, black, ochre, black, a strip of dun-colored hieroglyphs, and then drawings done on the bare stone in black. The Ninth Hour covered the wall beside her, and she stared in fascination at the precision of the work. She looked up. Above the highest tier, the artist had reproduced exactly—so far as she could remember from photographs—the decorations that belonged there. For the ceiling, the sky by night: five-pointed, spindly stars covered it in elegant regularity.

The room was enormous. She had felt that from the door. Now she saw that it was nearly empty. Scattered at intervals along the wall lay small chests, low tables and benches made for them, and narrow boxes. Some were golden; some were dusty and worm-eaten. The walls curved with strange irrelevance, as though the masons had chosen to take a walk and the chisel had happened to lead the way. Only the floor and ceiling were parallel to each other. Where the room snaked away, she could see other things, half-hidden behind the living rock.

The largest, most obvious thing to see lay directly before her. Hesha watched in fascination as her gaze fluttered first to everything else in the room.

She was unwilling to notice it.

It was a plain box, simply made. The lid fitted tightly and squarely. It rose from the floor to a height of forty inches. It was forty inches wide and a little over eight feet long. Elizabeth stared at the thing for a long moment, and at last she walked over to the sarcophagus.

"I was here, in my dream. In this room."

Hesha stayed where he was and waited.

"But the floor was beaten bronze and there was no ceiling and no sky. The sun shone in, straight down like noon, and there were no shadows."

Her left hand strayed out and brushed the gray surface of the stone coffin with the edge of her palm.

"You were here, lying down. The light was on your face, and the rock and your clothes were brilliant white. I thought that you were asleep. I reached out to...to..." She stared at her hand, as if she didn't recognize it.

"I reached out to tell you something. To show you the sun, I think...but you wouldn't wake up." Her voice, trance-like until now, became a little desperate. "You wouldn't wake up. And I started to feel frost. The metal floor was cold; that was wrong, in the sunshine, and the bed...the mastaba?...was cold, and you were as cold and motionless as the stone.

"And suddenly I knew that you were dead." She choked back a sob. "You were dead, and I looked down at myself, and I wasn't Elizabeth anymore...."

Visibly, the spell broke. Her hands traced a line over her collarbone, where the Eldest had rested that morning, and her eyes cleared of the memories. Her skin reddened with anger.

"I don't have to tell you, Hesha." Her face was fire; her voice was ice. "You have your cameras and your spies. You can damn well watch my dreams from the outside."

Elizabeth sprinted for the door.

Hesha was three times farther away from the exit; he reached it before she took her third step.

She didn't see him get there; her eyes were open but her mind was too slow to catch the movement. Simply, suddenly, he was in the way, blocking the passage. The message came to her feet too late to stop the headlong rush. Elizabeth dashed into his arms, and the momentum carried her into the space between the monster and the wall. He caught her by the arm and spun her, gathered her in to face him, held her against his body. She didn't scream and wondered, later, why not.

He said nothing. His vision was tainted red; his fangs slid down from their sheaths and forced his jaw apart; the only sound worth hearing was her heartbeat, her quick, wet breathing, the faint start of a cry in her throat...and his hands, taloned, reached for that throat. His hands buried themselves in her long, dark hair and tilted her face toward him. His head bent to her neck—he lunged for her, she twisted in his grasp at the last possible moment, and his open jaw met her lips, not her jugular. Blood filled his mouth—living blood—and he let it go on; the Beast took Hesha and the woman with him; his last thought was filled with the taste of her.... *It is a deceit; it is an illusion; she is nothing different....*

Elizabeth, shaking and unable to stand under the flames of the kiss, dropped away, and Hesha fell with her, following the blood to the ground. She sprawled on the third step of the tomb; he knelt above her. His hands, supporting her, scraped stone, and the tiny pain brought him—barely—to himself again. He tore his mouth away, wiped her lips clean with his tongue, and sat back. For long seconds he watched her body...at last she breathed...and again...and she opened her eyes and turned her head away from him, struggling to get up.

Hesha rubbed his scraped knuckles and knew in that instant that the Beast had nearly taken her life; that the taking of it would have given him more pleasure than the

slaughter of any other living thing; that her murder would have caused him sorrow for the first time in centuries. And part of him wished that it had won.

Elizabeth, her feet not yet obeying her, had still managed to sit up. She pushed herself up to the fourth step with all four limbs, and she did not look toward him.

"Elizabeth. Wait." Hesha swarmed after her and hunted for her hands. He placed her struggling fingers over his wrist. "Take my pulse," he demanded.

She stared up at him in fear. Dark, dark irises in the centers of wide-open white eyes...Hesha heard the roar of the Beast rising again, and he snatched her hands to his neck.

"Feel. Where is my heartbeat, Elizabeth? You won't find it."

She stopped fighting him. Her fingertips searched his jawline, the hollow beneath his ear, the curve of the neck into windpipe. "The first night we met," said Hesha, in a nearly normal voice, "when I fell, you were going to take my pulse. And I stopped you." Comprehension and denial rose in the dark eyes below him. She was trembling now.

"How many nightmares have you had since you met me?" She blinked, and the fighting flush drained from her face. "I think, Elizabeth, that I wasn't fast enough, keeping your fingers from my wrist that night. Without knowing, you knew...just as you knew that one Asp was frightening and the other friendly...as you knew how to reach the ring in the stone...you knew what I was."

"What are you?" she whispered.

Hesha paused. He licked his lips, and his hands tightened, involuntarily, over hers.

"Deathless."

Sunday, 11 July 1999, 4:13 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Ronald Thompson waited angrily. He was sick; he watched the scene in Vegel's apartment through narrowed, puffed-up slits of eyes. He was irritable. Inaction suited him badly, convalescence still worse. Patience he had, and he could have endured the night creditably well—if Hesha hadn't switched tactics in midstream. Thompson was puzzled, and so, instead of lying down and resting (as Janet had pleaded with him by phone to do) he sat at the center of his net and waited.

Hesha came out of Elizabeth's room backwards, bidding the girl good night and better dreams. Thompson nearly choked. As his master turned toward the door of his study, his room and his sepulcher, Thompson flicked a switch with one swollen finger. Hesha looked up, waited, and then crossed the museum to the bookcase door.

Thompson straightened his abused body in the chair. He shot Hesha an expectant, a *challenging* glare.

Hesha regarded his servant impassively. "Yes, Thompson?"

"Sir," Thompson began. He ground rapidly to a halt. *How to go on?* "Sir, may I ask you a personal question?"

"You can ask me anything," said Hesha. The Setite's eyes clearly promised no answers.

"What happened," barked Thompson, "to the plan, sir?"

"Which plan?"

"The family plan," said the mortal harshly. Thompson bit his lip and fought for the right opening—for words civil enough to keep peace with his employer, but strong enough to vent his wrath—and all that would come to him was the blasted, vitriolic curse that had begun the day.

Hesha watched as his prospective heir stumbled over his own ire. The man's eyes hunted the air, and he radiated disapproval. Hesha drew up a chair, sank sinuously into the seat and said, "Put your thoughts in order, detective. Start again. You object to my handling of the Dimitros situation? Naturally, you have been listening ever since I brought her back to her own room...if you had not caught my performance live, I would have insisted on your review of the recorded version."

Thompson nearly exploded. A shout choked up his chest; his mouth opened—and he saw Hesha's lids twitch, lightly, in amusement. The old cop imploded, instead. So the boss was playing him. *A test*, he realized. *Another test. I wonder if I'm passing it or not.*

"I took her to the place where she felt most comfortable, Thompson. I told her what had really happened to her this morning. I gave you and the Asp hero's laurels, just as you deserve. In a few nights' time, she will recover from the shock of the—" his arcing arm indicated the bank of closed-circuit screens—"security arrangements, and I have no doubt that you and she will be fast friends again in a month or so. In fact, by Tuesday I expect that she will have thanked you for saving her life."

"I'm not talking about that."

"You don't care that she hated you tonight?"

"I do. And you say you've fixed that. And I believe you, because you're always right about people, and my gut tells me the same thing. But you said last week that we were going to be family to her—that you 'intended her to look on you as a father figure.'" He slammed his fist on the wide arm of the chair. "If you think those were paternal moves you put on her tonight—!"

"I think you have thrown yourself too deeply into the role of 'older brother,'" Hesha interrupted.

"Vampires are all very well, sir, but I wouldn't want my sister to marry one."

"A very Victorian older brother," commented Hesha, in a dangerous voice he had never used on Thompson before. "I am not a vampire, and you've had time enough to learn that. I expect you never to use the word again unless you are referring to Stoker or Hollywood's creations. Do you understand me?"

Thompson nodded warily.

"Furthermore. Elizabeth is *not* your sister, and you'll do well to remember that. Fall too deeply into any role, and you put yourself in danger; fall too deeply into this one and you may get Miss Dimitros killed. She's a target to be guarded, Thompson. Don't let your emotions sway you. Just do your job. As for marriage..." Hesha indulged in near-silent laughter.

"Now. We were discussing my conversation with our guest. I told her she would have many questions. I promised to answer them. There will be answers, Thompson, convincing ones. I told her that she was confused, vulnerable. I told her that I cared about her. I told her that I didn't want to say too much tonight, that I didn't want her to leave. I told her that there was more between us than I had realized. I told her that I had never met anyone else like her. I apologized, I confessed, I fell over my feet promising to make it all up to her."

"And did you mean any of that, sir?"

"What would you do if I didn't?" Hesha waited. "Did you believe it when you heard me say it?"

Thompson uttered "Yes," without tone or emotion.

"Good." Hesha paused and looked at Elizabeth on the monitor. She was getting ready for bed; conscious of the camera, she had decided to change clothes under the covers. "Then I trust that she believed it, too. You know me better. You have doubts. You should."

Drawing breath to speak with, he went out on a tangent. "How many times have you been in Vegel's chamber, Thompson? And in mine?"

"Sir?"

"In Vegel's room there are farmers and hunters and artisans, Thompson. Pharaoh's guards, lords and ladies, scribes, masons. They work at their stations in life, and the river flows past them, and the green fields support them, and the waters cool their thirst, and the fruits of their labor slake their hunger, and the sun beats down on them all, scribe and farmer, master and servant. And that is life.

"In my room, the king is dead, the souls of every man, woman and child are stripped apart and sent to judgment in pieces. They are defenseless as they wander without direction

from their tomb to the Place of Ma'at. The world is forever dark and cold, and once they leave the necropolis there is nothing. The desert is cold and full of monsters. The river cannot give them drink; the fields cannot feed them. Only what the living leave for them can sustain them. And that is death.

"Love can live in the sun. And it is said to flourish in the afterlife. But not in the desert between them, Thompson. Neither my kind, nor the Cainites, nor any of the brood of Apep know the meaning of the word after their rebirth. Two of my souls may be here, but my heart lies in the dark underworld, between the jaws of Ammit, the Devourer of the Dead. Understand that. Accept it. And tell me again whether you want to join Set's children."

"*Damn* you, Hesha," whispered Thompson.

"As you say." The creature's voice held nothing.

They sat together in silence for a good five minutes. The main lights went out in Vegel's apartment. Elizabeth lay on her side, reading by the lamp on the bedside table.

"You still," said Thompson, "haven't told me why you changed the plan. I was under the impression, even tonight, that we were going to continue the family game. No changes."

"Miss Dimitros is a very perceptive woman. I knew as soon as I saw her with the Asp that Raphael had no hope of deceiving her. He is limited. Gabriel is much the better actor; that's why I prefer to keep him in the townhouse. My visitors there can look through brick walls, given time...." He trailed off. "Remind me, at sundown, to readjust our arrangements there. I'll need to speak to Janet about the Greywhethers Building."

"But Elizabeth?"

"Let her be. Give her time." He rose. "Gild the cage."

The bunker door shut behind him.

KR



Sunday, 11 July 1999, 2:18 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Elizabeth lay in bed, pretending to sleep. Her body remained in the position it had held when she regained consciousness. Her mind was busy taking stock of her situation. She visualized Baltimore on the map and tried to remember the details of the drive out. She thought about the house and the cameras and the woods around the farm. She thought about Hesha, and she acknowledged the blind spot there—she absolutely could not analyze him, could not predict his reactions. She couldn't reach him unless he allowed her to.

But there were other things.

Elizabeth slid out of bed, weakly, and into the desk chair. She reached for the phone, picked it up, and listened. There was a dial tone. She punched in the number for Amy Rutherford's house and waited for the connection. The line opened...and closed with a click. A voice came to her clearly and crisply over far shorter wires.

"Good afternoon, Liz. Do you need something?" It was Thompson.

"I'd like to call New York. How do I get an outside line?" she asked, letting go the fact that she'd needed no extra codes to do so before.

"I'm sorry, Liz." He waited, holding the phone in his room, ready with prepared explanations, excuses, orders from above.

"I think I understand." She replaced the receiver. *Strike one, Dimitros,* she thought. Idly, she turned over the books and tools on her desk—Vegel's desk. One drawer held office supplies: pens, pencils, erasers, staples, cellophane tape.

Elizabeth unplugged the phone, set the roll of tape down thoughtfully and began—maddeningly slow and inexplicably light-headed—to search her room.

While she did so, Thompson dropped stiffly into the wide console chair. The lights were green, the cameras on and tracking well. The Asp was long gone, but a litter of crumbs and wrappers testified that he had, in fact, spent the day on duty. Ron swept the trash away and settled in to make check-up calls on his agents.

He'd finished the last when Elizabeth came out of Vegel's apartment. She was empty-handed, but wearing a light jacket—a kind of photographer's vest—that had several large pockets. With experienced eyes, he determined that she wasn't carrying anything in them.

The girl paused on the edge of the museum floor. She still held the doorknob; nervously, she looked around.

There was no one there, by order of the boss himself, but the little table the Asp had put her dinner on before had been moved to stand beside her door. The tray on top of it held breakfast...lunch by now. She lifted one of the covers away, scrutinized the food on the plate and dropped the dome back over the sandwiches. After a moment, she lifted the tray and disappeared with it into her room.

Thompson shifted cameras and watched as she put it on the bed. The desktop was empty, he noticed. *Why not put the food there?*

Elizabeth came back out, closed the door behind her and walked, with faltering steps, to the studio. She went through the drawers and bins quickly. Thompson put the workshop on the central monitor and zoomed in on her. *Aha. That's what the jacket is for.* She filled the pockets with her tools—Q-tips, bottles of solvent, masking tape, the discard tray, a magnifying glass, soft brushes, stiff brushes—and picked up the smallest of the paintings under restoration. She left the studio, returned to Vegel's apartment and spread her loot out on the desk.

Thompson nodded to himself. *Good. Work will take her mind off things.*He rubbed his eyes, stretched and went off in search of more of that remedy himself.

Monday, 12 July 1999, 12:01 AM
(Sunday, 11 July 1999, 6:01 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Executive suite, The International, Ltd.
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Jan Pieterzoon leaned far back in the overstuffed chair and massaged away the tiny red marks on his nose from the wire-rimmed glasses that now rested on his desk. He craved whiskey. *Needed* whiskey. But it never settled well these nights. He suspected that his stomach had atrophied and shrunken to nothing from the years of disuse. There were, of course, many such stories among the Kindred, but who knew which were mere flights of fancy and which to believe? And to ask an older, more knowledgeable Cainite would be too great an admission of ignorance. For ignorance was weakness, and the weak seldom survived. Not for long.

"Are you all right, Mr. Pieterzoon?"

Jan nodded but neither spoke nor opened his eyes. Marja would still be concerned. She would ask him what she could do for him, and at this moment, the question itself would be enough. Hearing her speak Dutch soothed his nerves. So many of his business contacts were in French, or German, or—God help him—English.

"Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"No thank you, Ms. van Havermaete."

Mr. Pieterzoon. Ms. van Havermaete. Jan allowed the pained smile slowly to spread across his lips. *How long have you served me, Marja?* Still, the formality. And so it would remain. Jan could not allow himself familiarity between them, and as long as he could not, she would not.

He ran his fingers through his short, blond hair and then rubbed the muscles of his ever-smooth jaw. Each muscle in his entire body seemed to be a reservoir of tension, and unfortunately he had no time to seek out his acupuncturist.

"We leave for the United States very soon," Jan said, opening his eyes.

This was news to Marja. "The States? *How* soon?"

"As soon as possible. Within a few nights."

He watched as she digested the information, made lists of the necessary arrangements in her mind. "Business?" she asked.

"Not technically speaking, no."

She nodded. That would impose another set of criteria on her preparations. A trip to meet investors or deal with labor representatives would have been entirely within her realm of operation. If the trip were related, however, to the shadowy dealings of the Kindred, of which she knew only and exactly what she needed to know, other considerations took precedence.

"Security?"

Jan thought for a moment. "Ton and Herman."

"Assistants for yourself?"

"Yourself and Roel." Roel was capable, personable, a good companion for Marja. Jan chose him for that reason. Neither had the slightest idea of the underlying commonality that tied them to Jan.

"That should do. We can augment personnel later, if necessary," Jan explained briefly. "I don't want to waltz in with a full-fledged entourage. Matters may be...sensitive enough without the perception of presumption."

Marja made her mental notes. "Destination?"

"Baltimore. We'll be staying at the Lord Baltimore Inn as guests of Alexander Garlotte. Please make the necessary arrangements," he told her more from habit than from need.

Marja turned to leave the office. Her skirt, longer than was the current style, hung almost to her knees. Her simple yet attractive sweater gave Jan the impression of unintentional seductiveness—or would have if he'd gone in for that sort of thing anymore. *Ironic*, he thought. *I sought a victim and found a trusted associate*.

"Ms. Havermaete," he called just before the door closed. She stepped back into the office. "The factory in Bonn—it will have to be closed. There won't be time to deal with it properly now."

"That's sixteen hundred workers' jobs, sir."

"I'm quite aware of that," Jan responded matter-of-factly. "There are also the financial interests of sixteen investors. The scales are hardly balanced. See that the paperwork goes out in the morning."

"Yes, sir." Then she left him.

Jan did not begrudge Marja her humanitarian impulses. Several of his corporations were ardent supporters of nonprofit organizations. That was how he'd found her in the first place. His own philanthropic tendencies might be more focused, but they were no less sincere for that. It was one of his few concessions to conscience.

As Marja's footsteps receded beyond the door, Jan reluctantly turned his thoughts back to the events that had necessitated his upcoming journey.

"Our friends across the Atlantic seem unable to deal with their difficulties," Hardestadt had said. Jan had made the trip down to Nantes, to one of Hardestadt's countless havens, at the behest of the elder Ventrue. Such a personal audience was not typical. "You are aware of the Sabbat disruptions on the North American continent?" Hardestadt asked as he passed a silver goblet to Jan across the small space between their matching Louis Quinze chairs.

"Yes, my sire." Jan felt so small next to the man. A backdrop of centuries lent additional stature to the elder's strong chin and aristocratic features. The study in which they sat, despite the plush rug, the velvet curtains and the inviting grain of the mahogany bookshelves, was cold. Sterile. Unchanging. As he raised the goblet to his lips, the mere bouquet of the vitae set Jan's head swimming. Just a sip—the life's blood of elders long ago sent to Final Death—burned his mouth and throat, but the burning danced maddeningly along the thin line between pain and pleasure. Warmth spread throughout Jan's torso, his arms and legs. He felt color rising to his usually colorless face.

"You will have to go over there and straighten out this mess," said Hardestadt.

Jan, dizzy after his second sip from the goblet, thought he must have heard incorrectly. There was much honor to be gained in such an affair, but certain niggling details demanded his increasingly fogged attention. "I am to accompany the military command?" he inquired.

"You *are* the command," Hardestadt said bluntly. "Events elsewhere do not allow us to expend unlimited resources in assisting our cousins. The Sabbat are delinquent malcontents, have been from the beginning. Return them to their place. And try not to be too long about it."

The significance of the words, the immensity of the task, slowly permeated Jan's reeling mind. Open warfare raged in the streets of America. The Sabbat had somehow achieved a coordination of action at a level that had eluded them for the centuries since their inception. It was a situation worthy of the attentions of a justicar, of a whole *band* of justicars. And Jan was being sent to take care of the matter. By himself.

"Yes, my sire."

Jan took a large draught from the goblet, as large as politely possible. The fire cleansed him from within.

"I know you will not fail me in this," Hardestadt said.

I will not fail you, Jan silently nodded agreement. *I will not fail you...and survive.*

Sunday, 11 July 1999, 8:42 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



"Thompson."

"Sir." Ron stood up; he'd been waiting, not in his customary position by the door, but resting as well as he could on Vegel's stone bench.

"You're looking better."

"I feel better, sir."

"Where is the Asp?"

"On the desk. He's been filling Janet in on the situation."

"Good." Hesha sat down on the bench. "Janet."

"Here, sir. Shall I patch in Mr. Mercurio?"

"Yes, please." More white noise filtered in. "Report."

Thompson began. "The townhouse and the city holdings are secure. The Asp reports no visitors. He says he's bored, sir. Bored and healthy."

Janet Lindbergh cleared her throat. "The last refugee is off our hands, sir. Mr. Vargas departed his safe house this evening with tickets for Seattle. He left a note for you; I'm sending it by courier."

"Good."

His secretary went on: "Dr. Oxenti's clinic has received a small commendation for volunteer services from the local Red Cross. The Doctor would like to return to Baltimore for the ceremony."

"Tell her no." Hesha replied immediately. "And keep an eye on bookings for flights in and out of Anchorage until after the presentation. Freeze her accounts if necessary. Other business?"

"Miss Dimitros tried to call out this morning," Thompson said. "New York number—"

"James and Amaryllis Rutherford, 6724 Lake Park Drive," Janet interjected.

"I told her she couldn't. She seemed to take it very well, sir. She took in lunch and one of her paintings at three o'clock; since then she's been quiet as a mouse and twice as well-behaved."

Over the intercom, there came the sound of snorting laughter.

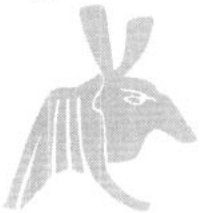
"Asp?"

"You have a comment, Mr. Mercurio?"

The Asp laughed again. "She's taking it well, sir. Oh, she's behaving herself beautifully. Quiet as a mouse. But we're not going to be able to see her being quiet anymore, Ron. She's found all the cameras in Vegel's room, and she's sticking masking tape over every goddamn one of them. Found the microphone, too."

The conference broke up shortly after that.

KR



Sunday, 11 July 1999, 9:11 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

The Asp lowered his tray onto the table outside Vegel's apartment and knocked once. With the family flair for stealth, he slipped away again.

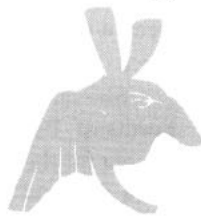
After a long delay—two minutes, at least—the door to Vegel's room opened a crack. The woman inside peered out. A hand mirror poked through. Its reflection flashed around the basement. The door closed again.

After another five minutes, Elizabeth herself emerged, pale, thin and nervous. Warily, she took up the tray. She backed into her hole like a badger, and the door shut immediately. The lock clicked after her, and through the thick wood came the sound of something heavy scraping across the boards.

In his study, the master of the house watched his prisoner's movements.

In the bunker, Thompson saw Liz gather in her dinner, he saw the Asp wolf down his, and he saw Hesha—sitting perfectly, unnaturally still—watch Elizabeth.

Monday, 12 July 3:18 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Elizabeth maneuvered the canvas through the barricade at her door. She set it down on the 'room service' table and then locked the apartment behind her. She picked up the painting, headed for the studio and puttered around inside the workroom for a few minutes. She pulled another piece, an oil panel, from the flat drawers. With that in hand, she walked back into the main room. Lunch had appeared on the table, but there was no one in sight. *Good*, she thought.

She propped the panel beside the little table and headed for the stairs. She checked the kitchen—empty—and tried the mudroom door. It was locked, and the deadbolt needed a key. She saw why. Even a novice housebreaker like herself could smash the glass above it and turn latches from the outside.

Elizabeth listened. The house was silent. She turned right, into the colonial wing and through the main hall. The front door had no windows set into it; there was just a chance that the bolt was simpler. She turned the knob. No luck. Perhaps she could find a spare key? Of course, this was hardly a house whose inmates would leave their spares lying around. Elizabeth bent to examine the shape of the keyhole and saw that it was parallel to the ground. Hadn't the kitchen door bolt been vertical?

She went back. After a minute, she found the problem; there were three bolts altogether. One turned with the handle and could be set by a spring catch. She'd fixed that. One was near the floor and turned with an odd-shaped knob—she hadn't noticed it the first time. The keyed bolt had been open when she tried it; in an instant the door was open, too. Liz double-checked the snap lock; if she couldn't find civilization in one hike (the word *escape* occurred to her and was promptly dismissed), she didn't want to have to ring the doorbell to get in the house.

The sun shone down through a bleached, thin blanket of clouds. The watery-gray ripples in the cover were moving quickly, but at ground level the air was stultifying: humid, thick, and still.

Elizabeth's eyes stung her. She'd forgotten how dark it was in the house. Through the faint blue afterimage, she set out up the hill. With slick fingers, she pulled open all the vent zippers in her photo jacket. It was bulky and uncomfortably hot inside it; already she was drenched with sweat. Still, she felt better—ludicrously better—knowing that every pocket was stuffed with something useful. The tools she'd gleaned from Vegel's desk and the studio weren't much, but...

In ten minutes she crested the ridge. It was a worn-out mountain, no longer even a foothill, but it was the backbone and a stump or two of rib from an old Appalachian. The granite spine of the giant lay exposed on the hilltop. Elizabeth rounded the curve of it and found a place to climb. The little wall's slope was too steep for the dirt to find much hold, and the blackberry brambles that grew solidly up the other sides were thinner here. She pulled herself up and looked around.

Damn. The landscape was beautiful; it was dark green, rolling country. It was full of trees, and between the contours of the country and the height of the trees, there wasn't much of what she had come to see...not even the house or the drive up to it.

She sat down on the highest point, pulled out a battered brass compass and found northeast. Baltimore would, or should, lie in that direction anyway, and if she kept her eye out for the broadcast tower as she walked, she'd hit something sooner. She hoped she knew the road to the house well enough to know it if she came to it. The last thing she wanted was Thompson driving up beside her in the sedan just as she reached the mailbox.

Elizabeth set out cross-country.

In a shadowy niche among the brambles, the Eldest watched her go with lazy eyes.

Monday, 12 July 5:45 PM
Howard County, Maryland



Elizabeth came out of a rhododendron thicket covered in spider webs. She wiped away the strands and dislodged a few hitchhikers. Struggling a little with the thick carpet of old, shiny brown leaves underfoot, she reached out to a wrist-thick sapling for support. It helped her with the descent, and when she had crossed the damp patch at the bottom of the gully, she used the thick roots of the oak above her for a ladder.

The Asp waited on the other side of the tree. He let her pass, and then he broke a dry branch between his hands. It sounded like a shot in the still air.

"Hello, Lizzie." The words were friendly; the tone was not. "Going somewhere?"

Strike two, she thought. "Nice day for a walk," she said aloud.

"Has been." Raphael paused, pursing his lips. "Looks like a storm coming in now, though. You'd better go back to the house. Don't want you getting caught out in it."

"Thanks." She shifted her weight uphill and took a step farther away from the Asp, his tree and the farm behind them. He watched her from half-closed eyes.

"Liz...you don't want to go that way."

She took another step. "I think I do, actually."

Raphael reached out a hand for her wrist. He was quick, but she was jumpy enough to be quicker. She eluded his grasp and they stopped, facing each other, two yards farther from the creek.

"You're supposed to be a smart girl, Lizzie." He lunged again, and this time his trained reflexes won out over her nervous instinct. He pulled her down the slope and onto the slanting trunk of the oak, not gently. "You didn't think it was going to be easy, did you?" He pushed his face up to hers. There was an inch, no more, between them, and the tight, hard gaze of the Asp flickered from eye to eye...left, right...back again. Liz stared back. Her wrist hurt her; he was holding it in a tight twist.

"Come on," he said. "This way."

The pain rotated around her hand. Raphael pushed her easily by the elbow along a path on the edge of the gully. The trees thinned out as they went. They descended into a hollow and began to cross the wetter ground at its base.

"Mercurio!" The shout came from the Asp's shoulder, as far as Liz could tell. "Goddamn it, Asp. Let her go." Static crackled around the voice. It was Thompson. "Let her go this minute. Fuck it, Raf. What if he checks these tapes tonight?"

Raphael released Elizabeth's wrist. She turned and put three yards between them, then stopped, chafing her burned skin. Neither of them displayed any expression. "She was trying to leave, Ron. I got a job to do."

"I know. I'm criticizing your style, not the performance. Hand me over to Liz for a second."

The Asp reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved a very small, flattish, black disc. He tossed it to her. The disc turned out to be a phone. "Hello, Liz," said Thompson's distant voice. "Do me a favor?"

"Maybe," she answered.

He sighed. "You know the path you were coming down? Get back on it and follow it to the drive. I'll pick you up in the car and bring you home."

"To Manhattan?"

Static. Then, "No."

"How far's the walk?"

"Fifteen minutes, twenty, tops."

"See you then."

"Thanks. Give me back to the maverick, there. He and I need to have a talk before the boss wakes up."

Monday, 12 July 7:02 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



"Coffee?"

Elizabeth nodded. "If you're having some."

Thompson clattered around the counter for a few minutes. With the steam rising and the pot filling, he leaned crookedly against the cabinets and watched the girl. She'd taken off her bulging jacket and hung it over the chair back. She sat with both elbows on the table, casually, and her hair was tucked behind her ears. Her hands traced the grain and scars of the battered wooden tabletop, stroking out the same patterns over and over.

Ron pulled two mugs off the rack and set them on a tray. Sugar, milk, the coffeepot, cookie tin. He scooped up the tray in one corrugated fist.

"Mind if we take these down to your room?"

"Why?" she snapped.

"Because I think you might enjoy a little privacy. It's against all my own regs, but hell—if something comes up through the floor, you run and sound the alarm." Liz said nothing. "I'm not kidding, girl. There's a *reason* we've got cameras every five feet. *And* the doors wired so we can keep track of the ones the cameras don't see."

Elizabeth's eyebrows united in disbelief.

Thompson shook his head. "You've seen *him*. Let me start you out easy. Imagine…two of him. Twenty of him. Weaker breeds in six-packs like bad beer. The invisible man sneaking in to steal stuff. God only knows. Now can we go downstairs?"

She led the way. At the steps down to Vegel's apartment, she paused to fish a key out of her jacket. She opened the door and shifted the barricades aside.

"What the hell have you got in there? There wasn't that much loose furniture in the…" Ron ground to a halt. Awestruck, he laughed. "Good job, Liz. Damnation."

Every one of the fancy cabinet doors—some floor-to-ceiling closet pieces, some as small as a medicine chest—had been removed from its hinges and piled up against the entrance. The heavy bathroom door leaned on the secret panel to Vegel's crypt, and its base was reinforced with pieces of the bed frame.

"The tray fits on the desk," Elizabeth directed. "Give me a minute and I'll liberate another chair."

They poured and mixed and sipped, and when she'd relaxed enough to explore the contents of Gabriel's cookie tin, he let her get through two chocolate monstrosities before he tried to talk.

Thompson cleared his throat. "Thanks for letting me come in here. I appreciate it."

"Thanks for pretending my carpentry would do a damn bit of good if you decided you wanted in."

"It would slow us down. And it was clever." He hesitated. "But really…I'm glad we're *here* and not in the kitchen. I've got a few things to say I don't want the Asp—or the boss—listening to later."

Elizabeth gave him steady, stony, sphinx-like attention.

"First—let me say I'm sorry," he began slowly. "I know that doesn't mean a damn thing to you now…but I've got to say it because I do really mean that." He ruffled his grizzled hair, pushing on. "And I want you to know that I…well, I can't say that I—we—haven't all lied to you in one way or another, right from the start. But what I told you about my hometown, about my folks and my high school and why I joined the police and why I left the Force to start my own business—that was all true, every word of it." He paused, and a kind of hopeless look filled his face. "Believe it or not, I like you. And I've got to say I like you even better since this thing blew up in our faces. You've fought it, but you haven't panicked after that first night, and if you're feeling sorry for yourself I can't see it on the surface." He grinned. "Not even the boss was expecting the masking tape, Liz."

The faintest echo of a smile played across her lips. Thompson, uncertain how to keep a good thing going, took a long, hard look into his coffee cup. He shrugged with his hands and reached for a cookie.

"And I want to apologize for Raphael. He's not a bad guy, once you get to know him, but he resents the boss telling you the Asp's names. The boss thinks—and I think, because I…well, I was watching you over the security system—that you knew the difference between the brothers. Raf doesn't believe it; he's too used to walking around as Angelo and feeling superior because of it. He doesn't know how to act around you, so he's playing the heavy. It'll wear off, I think. Gabe'll bring him around, anyway."

Elizabeth murmured, "You talk as if I'm going to be here a long time."

Thompson flushed a little. "I don't really know," he answered. His mouth twitched as if he'd tasted something rotten in the chocolate. "We're waiting for something on the outside to blow over. The boss is afraid if we let you go now you'd be killed by…"

"Killed by what?" Her voice was hard.

"Things," he finished inadequately. "Other people like him, but different; *other* things; a whole army of things tearing up the eastern seaboard. You saw the reports of riots in Atlanta, in D.C.? They're in the thick of it."

She said nothing, and Thompson could feel doubt pouring out of her.

"Look, Liz. You'll admit that he exists, I hope. If he exists, not breathing, not dying, what else is out there?"

"What else *is* out there?"

"The invisible man. Those six-packs. The late-late-late-show. I wish *I* didn't know," said Thompson, with such finality, with such weariness, that she let the matter rest. He freshened their mugs and took a sip. Minutes went by, and in each one, Ron nearly spoke. In each one, he thought better of it. After a dozen false starts, the words spilled out.

"About him, Liz."

"What about him?"

"About the two of you…don't look at me like that." Elizabeth's jaw had clamped shut. She was clearly unwilling even to listen to this. *Damn*, he thought. *He's really under her skin*. He took a long breath and prepared to risk deeper waters for Hesha's sake.

"Please, Elizabeth. I'm not blind. You're in love with him."

She almost laughed. "No. No, I'm not. I don't know him. You can't love someone you don't know." She set her jaw again. Her lips were abnormally pale and thin. "You can't love someone who locks you up," she said. "Someone who lies to you; someone who spies on you constantly; someone whose hired...guards...throw you around in the name of your own safety—and please don't be offended if I admit I still don't believe in the 'things' you say are waiting for me to set foot out there."

"No offense taken." He struggled to come up with more and said, "But it sounds like you're working awfully hard to convince somebody."

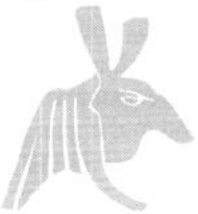
"You," she insisted. "You're the one with the theory."

"Sure. But you don't have to convince me. You could just say no and stop the conversation. But you're willing—you're eager to keep talking about him, because you really did give a damn, and now he's hurt you. So you want to talk. Therefore—I don't believe you. I don't believe *him* when he denies it, either," he said and realized that that, at least, was true.

"I've been married twice, Liz. I know the symptoms." He slouched back in his chair. "Let me tell you what's going to happen. Hesha will *not* come to see you. You think he scares you? You scare the hell out of him," said Thompson, crossing his fingers to ward off thunderbolts. Her eyes dropped—she believed that—*God help her,* thought Ron. *And God forgive me.*

"Now, if you don't care, or you can't get past the shock, or you're as scared as he is, you can stay here in this room for as long as the danger lasts, if that's what you really want. And then he'll send you home to New York, and you'll never see him again. But while you wait, each of you will know that the other is just on the other side of the wall—until *he* can't stand it and finds an excuse to run even farther away from you." Thompson, staggered by the size of the lie, foundered and reached for cliché. "I know it isn't fair that you have to make the next move." That was better. "What's wrong here is his...fault...because of what he is. But I can't go in there and talk to him like this. So I'm in here. And...I'm asking you." He shook his head. "Because I like you both." He played nervously with his empty coffee cup, and he sounded anything but sure. "Go see him. Talk to him. Maybe even let him try to explain."

Thompson checked his watch and stood up. "I've got to go now. Raf'll be looking for me." He looked over to her, but Liz had her eyes fixed firmly on the carpet. "Please, at least think about what I said. And don't...well, I'd rather you didn't tell the boss I was in here, meddling in his...personal...life...[.]" He picked up the tray and took it out with him. After a few moments the lock clicked to and the sound of shifting barricades came from behind the door.



Monday, 12 July 8:49 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

"Report."

"Miss Dimitros went for a walk this afternoon," said Thompson. "The Asp stopped her short of the interior fence and encouraged her to come back."

Hesha turned from his security chief to look at Raphael. "*Encouraged*," he said evenly.

"Yeah." Raphael sounded slightly defensive even to himself. "I brought her back. And I handed her off to Ron. And then," he said, seeing a way out of his employer's uncomfortable attention, "they disappeared into her room for an hour."

Hesha focused his cool regard on Thompson again. "Into her room?"

"I wanted a look at her arrangements." Ron folded back the cover of his notebook. "The barricade, sir. You can hear her moving it around from the outside, even over the system microphones. As it turned out, she's constructed it from the cabinet fronts of Vegel's storage shelves. I have a sketch here—really, it's no more complicated a construction than a house of cards, but it's reasonably effective and—"

"Resourceful," murmured Hesha, glancing at the piece of paper. He handed it back.

"It didn't take you an hour to look at her room, Ron," interjected the Asp. "What else was going on in there?"

Thompson ignored Raphael's leer and managed—by slow and careful folding of the sketch as he put it away—not to have to look Hesha directly in the eye, either. "After Raf's 'encouragement'," he began, "I thought she needed a little normality." Ron flicked up the next page of his notebook and met his employer's eyes calmly. "A little metaphorical hand-holding. We had a nice, long talk, sir. Just consider the cage gilded."

Hesha took a long time to speak. "Very well. Other business?"

Monday, 12 July 1999, 11:05 PM
Exit 33, Interstate 95
Laurel, Maryland



"There have always been devotees to hedonism, people living only for the pleasure of the moment," Christof said with his slight French accent, "but now there are *so many*."

"Now as opposed to when?" Lydia asked.

"As opposed to..." Christof suddenly seemed almost to forget their conversation, to become lost in his own thoughts. His relaxed, easy manner shifted almost instantly to brooding melancholy. "...To before. Long ago."

As Lydia guided the car to the exit lane, she glanced over at her passenger. It wasn't just his accent and mane of blazing red hair that made him stand out from the typical Brujah, she decided. The majority of her clanmates were fratboy-biker-excon-rolled-into-one types. To them, *revolution* was code for *tear up what's there now, and we'll figure out something better later*. Christof was one of the few with a more philosophical bent. He seemed to have a better idea of where he wanted to be going.

Must have something to do with that chick he's always talking about, Lydia thought; though to be fair, he wasn't *always* talking about her. In fact, it had been like pulling fangs to get him to say *anything* about her, and still all Lydia knew was that the girl's name was Anezka, or something goofy like that, and that Christof was looking for her. Lydia's pondering was interrupted by a commotion from her other passengers in the back seat.

"Hey, why you gettin' off here?" Frankie asked.

"Yeah," chimed in Baldur. "We ain't to D.C. yet."

"You want to pee gas into the tank?" Lydia asked. "And we're not going all the way into D.C." *Not with you assholes*, she thought. *And not without Theo*.

Probably they wouldn't go much past the Beltway. This was just a reconnaissance, not an assault. Besides, with the curfew in Washington proper, a lot of the restless Sabbat types had migrated northeast of the city. This stretch of road was dangerous enough without her trying to win the war backed up by only one philosopher, Tweedledumb, and Tweedledipshit.

"Hey Frankie," said Baldur, apparently satisfied with Lydia's answer and getting back to the important business of tormenting his companion, "wanna go to Hollywood?"

"Hey! At least I didn't name myself after a damn computer game."

"You can't even *spell* computer. Not my fault if you peaked with Space Invaders. Or was it Pong?"

"How'd you like my foot up *your* gate?"

Lydia sighed. Christof didn't seem inclined toward more conversation—sure, he was philosophical, but he was also fucking moody as a girl— so she turned up the radio in an effort to drown out the mindless drivel from the backseat. She turned off the exit ramp and into the first gas station, which was doing a brisk business. The others stayed in the car while she pumped. Freed for the moment from having to think about asshole drivers

on the interstate, not to mention the assholes in the backseat of her own car, Lydia's mind turned again to Theo Bell.

The archon, in many ways was her exact opposite—tall, dark and massive to her small, pale and skinny—but Lydia liked to think that they thought similarly. That wasn't to say that she didn't have a lot to learn from him, because she did. About tactics, about patience, about getting people to do what she wanted them to do. Of course, Theo had an advantage in that last department, being a life-size Mt. Rushmore, but beyond sheer intimidation, he knew how to read people. And he knew that the more you ordered folks around, the less they listened.

That night at the conference, when the news had first broken that the Sabbat was in Washington, Lydia would have been tempted to collar the anarch horde before they ran off for a slugfest in the streets. That wasn't a game the Camarilla could win. But Theo had let them go. He'd sat and not said a word as the younger Brujah had hightailed it south. They'd gotten their butts kicked. A few of them never came back. But most of them did, and by then they'd gotten that big adrenaline rush out of their systems and were ready to listen to Theo.

Since then, things had gone relatively smoothly. Theo had set up reconnaissance patrols along with the occasional raid south to gauge the Sabbat's strength and organization. The area between D.C. and Baltimore was still pretty much a no-man's-land, but if the Sabbat were preparing to come north in force, Theo would know.

As the gas pump whirred off the dollars and gallons, Lydia turned and found herself staring at the guy on the other side of the island who was filling up an old, beat-up Buick. It took several seconds to sink in, what had caught her attention: his unnaturally pale complexion, his drawn skin and almost skeletal profile.

Vampire? she wondered. She couldn't tell, but she did know that if he *were* Kindred, he wasn't one of theirs.

Just then, he turned and saw Lydia. For a long moment, they both stood there, not fifteen feet apart, staring at one another as the same realization sank in on both sides of the pump. Then he hissed.

He reached under his shirt, but Lydia was already in the air. Her steel toe-capped boot caught him in the face, and they both landed hard on the cement. Lydia rolled clear and took cover behind another car. She thought she'd seen other people in the Buick, and they might come up shooting.

"Christof! Frankie!" she yelled. She could hear car doors opening.

"Pop the trunk, Bubby," said somebody who sounded like he was holding a broken jaw.

Fuck this, Lydia decided. She grabbed the .38 from her pocket and jumped to her feet firing. The Buick's back window shattered. A second later, Christof's booming, long-barreled .44 joined the fray. Frankie and Baldur were right with him. Each had a 9mm, put to good use. The Buick rocked as the bullets struck home. Glass sprayed in every direction. Customers were screaming, running, throwing themselves behind cover.

But somebody inside the Buick had reached the lever for the trunk. It popped open...and the *thing* unfolded itself from inside.

Its head and torso were vaguely human, but as it stepped free of the car, its lower half resembled a five-legged spider. Long, jointed legs stretched out until it stood nearly eight feet tall. It scuttled straight for Lydia.

She fired her last two bullets into its chest. It didn't even slow down. Lydia reached into her pocket for more bullets, but the metal casings slipped through her suddenly clumsy fingers. She couldn't take her eyes from the charging monstrosity, not until one of its legs caught her across the chest. Suddenly she was airborne. She crashed to the pavement on her face, felt her nose crushed, skin scraped away. She tasted blood. Her hands were empty, the .38 gone.

Lydia looked up at the spider-thing above her—how could it move so quickly?—but she was too dazed to roll out of the way.

The flash of steel blinded her—that and the spray of blood across her face. The spider shuddered and bellowed in pain. Another flash. More blood.

Lydia made herself roll away from the monster. Christof was there. Instead of his .44, he was wielding his sword—the sword she had teased him for carrying around under his duster.

Then Lydia was wiping her hands across her face and licking the blood from them. She should help Christof, but he seemed to have things under control. And she couldn't help herself. There was so much blood. She was covered in it.

The bullet ripping into her leg got her attention. Christof might have dispatched the spider-thing, but there was still the small matter of Sabbat vampires. In fact, the sounds of combat had apparently gotten the attention of several other carloads of the fuckers on the other side of the gas station.

Someone nearby gunned an engine. A car—*her* car—was coming right for Lydia. It swerved and screeched to a stop right by her.

"Let's go!" Frankie was behind the wheel. He barely waited for Lydia and Christof to jump in before peeling away.

"Get on the phone!" Lydia yelled. "Get Theo!"

Monday, 12 July 11:07 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Elizabeth walked toward Hesha's study.

From the far end of the basement, there came a faint click. Hesha stood in the open doorway.

She held herself together, crossing the space between them at a slow pace that (she prayed) betrayed none of the anxiety she felt. "Good evening, Hesha," she said, taking his favorite greeting away from him. "I was hoping you would be in tonight. Do you have a few minutes to spare me?"

Her host stepped aside and invited her in with a gesture.

Elizabeth smiled. "Actually, if you don't mind…" She pointed with a careless hand toward her own room. "I was thinking of a slightly more private discussion."

Hesha didn't move. "I can override the system, if you wish."

Her upper lip twitched. "But I would have no way of telling whether you really did or not."

His sleek black head inclined toward her. "Very well, then, if you feel safer there."

"Marginally."

When both were seated, Elizabeth smiled as broadly as she could and extended her right hand. "Hello," she said. Hesha took his cue and shook with her. "My name is Elizabeth Dimitros. I was born in Brooklyn; I've lived in New York most of my life. I make my money restoring art for an antique gallery. I'm studying for my doctorate in an incredibly obscure field. I'm single and I'm twenty-nine and I'm not enjoying that very much." She finished with a shrug she'd inherited from her father—flourishing, Greek and involving the entire arm.

"Twenty-eight," Hesha put in. "Twenty-eight until September."

"Strike three," murmured Elizabeth.

"Pardon?"

"I've never told you my age, let alone my birthday. Not Thompson or the twins, either." A little of her smile disappeared. "I suppose Amy might have mentioned it, but she didn't, did she?"

"No."

"So you know me," she said deliberately, "very well. And I know nothing—nothing, really—about you." She took a deep breath. "And I was wondering if you would care to introduce yourself." Elizabeth swallowed a nervous, choking reflex. "Please."

Hesha put his hands together and gave an odd half-bow with his head and shoulders. "My name is Hesha, truly; it is a milk name that my mother gave me. I have many others. Ruhadze I took from a friend of mine after his death; he had no sons and I wanted to honor his memory. I have been Hesha Abn Yusuf, Hesha Washington, Hesha Abraham….

"I was born between the First and Second Cataracts, in Nubia, that is now Sudan, in a village that no longer exists because of the Aswan Dam, to a people who are disappearing, to a religion that was not supposed to have survived. I have traveled in North Africa, in India, in

Europe and in America. I made my money in antiques, but my current holdings are diverse. I spend most of my time studying old languages and cultures; I try to keep buried dangers from being uncovered by the wrong hands. I am a bachelor by nature," he stressed. "I am considerably older than I look; and until this summer I enjoyed my life a great deal."

"Until this summer," Elizabeth said evenly.

"At solstice, one of the most terrible dangers I sought to confine was exposed. I have no idea who wields it now. At solstice, Erich Vegel, who was my partner and my only...friend," Hesha said, "accepted an invitation to a gala and kept a business appointment there on my behalf. He was killed that night or very soon after, I believe. It is possible that he fell into the hands of our enemies. It is possible that our business associates set him up, that people I trusted are now a threat. At solstice, a night-war started for control of the East Coast. At solstice, I met you. Since then," he said, holding up a finger for each transgression, "you have brought Kettridge back into my circle, disordered my house, invaded my sanctuary, and nearly caused the death of my servant Thompson." With four fingers up, he began another list, in identical tones, and folded down one finger for each item. "You have also discovered how to remove the white eye from the statue, located one of the two missing stones, extracted the ring from Vegel's boulder, and revealed weaknesses in our security system without actually killing anyone under my protection." He finished with his hand closed again.

Elizabeth ventured, "I'm sorry about your friend. And I don't know anything about your danger or your war," she said seriously. Her stomach tightened in painful knots. "As for the last...are you trying to say we're even? Because I don't understand you." She reached for the fist he still held in the air between them. "There's more to this situation than four for four." Her hand closed over his, and Hesha allowed it to remain.

"No. You are correct. I have taken things away. Your liberty and your safety, for example—and I will remain in your debt until such time as I return them to you." His voice, distant and formal, fell on her like ice water, but his eyes found hers and were smoldering hot.

They sat in silence for a long time.

Without words, Hesha opened the hand Elizabeth held. He reached for her other hand, and they went on sitting, saying nothing. The knots in Elizabeth's stomach vanished and were replaced by butterflies—not the ordinary breed born of fear or hope or past loves, but rabid butterflies that hurt and tore her at the same time that they felt wonderful. Warm waves of contentment washed down her neck and shoulders to battle with a dreadful chill in her spine. She hoped he would speak. She was terrified of what he might say.

Hesha's hands held the mortal's lightly. His index fingers supported her wrists; he was enraptured by the rhythm of her heartbeat. *Pleasant music*, he thought. He waited patiently while the tempo changed. The matter could not be rushed...when the time was right, he brought out the words he had ready.

"Elizabeth," said the Setite softly, gazing into her eyes. "Don't ask me questions," he hesitated for a finely calculated second, "unless you're absolutely certain," again, a pause, "that you want the answers." He brought her hands together and brushed the knuckles lightly with his lips; he dropped them gently into her lap.

"I have a great deal of work to do tonight," said Hesha, rising. "But I would like to see you tomorrow. If you would care to work on the papyrus tomorrow at ten o'clock?" She nodded gravely, and with as solemn a countenance, he slipped through the barricade and away.

Monday, 12 July 1999, 11:15 PM
Thames Street
Baltimore, Maryland

Parmenides strolled casually along the edge of the harbor. None of the ghouls on guard duty outside the Lord Baltimore Inn would recognize him. To be quite honest, he had only recently begun to recognize *himself* on a regular basis. Glancing in the mirror and seeing the face of the ghoul Ravenna—dead at Parmenides' own hand—staring back at him was no longer a complete shock. With a minimum of forethought, Parmenides could pretend he was used to it. What the situation lacked in humor, it more than made up for in cruel irony, a quality that emanated from Sascha Vykos as steam and ash once had from Mount Vesuvius.

His limp, at last, was completely gone. Parmenides could get about as dexterously as ever he could, and on nights like these, when Vykos rewarded his good behavior with assignments that took him beyond the limits of the vampirically overrun capital of this brash young nation, he could almost forget that which he could not escape—the visage of the erstwhile Ravenna. To wear the face of another man—the face and the body, for there was no detail of his physiology that Vykos had neglected in her endeavors—was sometimes very nearly maddening. He found himself entirely too often speculating on exactly how deep beneath the skin, beneath the musculature and bone structure, were the changes that Vykos had wrought upon him. There were times that he found himself falling into the persona she had crafted for him, times that he was forced to remind himself—

Useless thoughts. Parmenides smoothed back Ravenna's dark hair and took the opportunity to dig his fingernails into his scalp, reminding himself of what was real and immediate, what among all of creation was unchanging: pain and blood.

Tonight, more so than at any time since he had been delivered into the hands of fiends, Parmenides was sure of who he was. Assamite. Childe of Haqim. The pain that Parmenides had suffered was nothing compared to the humiliation his clan had suffered for centuries—but no longer. And tonight, there would be a small measure of vengeance, one grain of sand to add to a desert that would in time stretch across the face of the earth.

He circled around the inn to the service entrance in the rear. Here also ghouls stood guard, two of them. But Parmenides' passing disturbed them no more than did the breeze off the harbor. To their eyes, all was as it should be.

The assassin slipped past others within the building as well. He quickly found a back staircase and made his way to the fourth floor, where security was relatively light. More sensitive areas, the meeting hall where Camarilla business was conducted, not to mention Prince Garlotte's personal chambers, were on the sixth and seventh floors. Parmenides, if his information was correct, had no need to invade those places tonight.

He made his way undetected past another ghoul sentinel—the Camarilla really did rely far too heavily on these untested creatures rather than treating them as the untrained children they were—and around the corner to the inn's sole passenger elevator. From one of many hidden pockets, Parmenides produced a small electronic device. One edge was a

flat, metal plate, which he slid between the elevator doors. He pressed a button on the device and, almost immediately, the doors slid open, prompted by a sonic pulse that the door sensors interpreted much as they would contact with a person while the doors closed. The bell that normally sounded at the opening of the doors was silent. In fact, nothing in Parmenides' direct vicinity made the slightest sound. Just as silently, Parmenides climbed onto the service ladder in the shaft and began his descent even as the doors above him closed, sealing him away from the brightly lit corridor.

Shortly, he was prone atop the elevator car itself. Waiting. Listening.

He didn't have long to wait before the elevator lurched into motion and began to take him upward again, past the fourth floor where he'd entered the shaft, all the way to the seventh floor. The elevator was at its uppermost point, and Parmenides lay patiently as a lone passenger boarded. The Assamite assumed the passenger to be female; her footsteps carried little weight, and even on the carpeted surface of the elevator floor, he recognized the sound and feel of concentrated impact—she wore high heels. The scent of a subtle and pleasant perfume wafted up through the cracks around the closed hatch as well.

Then the elevator shuddered again and began its descent. Parmenides couldn't help remembering an elevator journey of his own a few weeks before and not so many miles away in Washington, D.C. That time he had been the conventional passenger, while a stowaway had ridden above the ceiling hatch. For where else could the Nosferatu have been when he spoke to Parmenides?

But now Parmenides caught his error of logic, his unsubstantiated assumption that the sewer rat had ridden atop the mechanical carriage. It was possible, if not likely, that the creature had been inside the elevator *with* Parmenides, that it had occupied the same space without him knowing. Stranger, more impossible stories circulated among the elder children of Haqim. And Parmenides had not been at his best that night. He had struggled against his mistress, against the fresh infirmities of his newfound body, and he had struggled against himself. All of his pain and humiliation had been given release in a chance to *kill*—it was his calling, his eternal duty—and he had failed. That shock was heaped upon the physical tortures at the hand of the Tzimisce and the gut-wrenching realization that he'd been placed in the hands of the fiends by his own. His only comfort and consolation that night and those following had been in the arms of Sascha Vykos, his tormentor, his bane...his love.

Parmenides, in his discomfort, shifted position. His soft boot rubbed across the metal beneath him. He caught his mistake at once and cursed himself for giving in to distraction. But had he given himself away? There was no indication from within the elevator, now coming to rest at the lobby, that he had. He could flee, but he dismissed that thought as soon as it entered his mind, so distasteful did he find it. If he failed and was destroyed, there would only be himself and Vykos to blame—him for weakness, her for base inhumanity disguised as affection. But perhaps he, trained for years upon years in the art and science of taking life, was not the best judge of humanity and inhumanity. On the other hand, what throughout history was more consistently an element of human nature than killing?

Useless thoughts. Again intruding when they shouldn't.

Below, the passenger stepped from the elevator and was greeted at once by several people. "Ms. Ash," they called her. "Good evening, Ms. Ash." "Is there anything I can

bring you, Ms. Ash?" They fawned over her like slaves. Her sweetly worded responses dripped with condescension and contempt: "Why, thank you. How very dear of you."

Ash. Victoria Ash. Parmenides knew the name. He mused over how easily he could have destroyed the Camarilla elder, but why bother? Clan Assamite had no particular enmity against the Toreador. Even acting on Vykos's behalf, there was no reason to risk revealing his presence prematurely. Wiping out the entire Toreador clan might not significantly hamper the Camarilla war effort. In fact, it might help.

More importantly, despite the fact that his elders had handed him over to Vykos, Parmenides felt no compulsion to further the Sabbat cause beyond those areas where it coincided with Assamite goals. That was how he interpreted his overall mission. Why else would the elders have utilized the freakish Nosferatu to maintain contact with him? Certainly every morsel of information they relayed made its way also to the Camarilla. So even though Parmenides might personally be subservient to Vykos, the children of Haqim were by no means subjugated by the Sabbat. That revelation was one of the factors that allowed Parmenides to persevere through this ordeal rather than falling victim to despair.

Tonight's mission was one in which Assamite and Sabbat aims irrefutably merged. Knowing so, Parmenides was able to quiet the troubling thoughts, the rationalizations, that dogged him too often these nights. As he'd been taught so many years before, his mind assumed the silence of death. The minutes passed more easily thus, slipping by without the specter of self-doubt to impede them.

Then Parmenides heard Victoria Ash's voice again, the tone quite different from the one she used with the servants. Still patronizing, but in a more respectful manner. "Maria," she said. Two sets of footsteps were coming toward the elevator. Victoria babbled on. "I took it upon myself to wait for you personally—how very gauche, I know...."

The second set of footsteps was lighter than Victoria's. No high heels, not for Maria Chin, Tremere witch of the Washington, D.C. chantry.

Parmenides' entire being was focused on the sounds beneath him. The elevator doors slid closed. A key scratched against the brass panel, then slid into its proper place. The elevator rumbled to life and began to climb. Victoria chattered away.

Above, in complete silence, Parmenides reached into the folds of his cloak and withdrew the garrote he had crafted for this occasion—the wire longer than was customary, and the handles modified and reinforced to produce incredible leverage even if the victim was several feet below. No Toreador socialite would prevent him from claiming warlock blood. Under the tradition of *hadd*, vengeance, the Tremere vitae was forfeit.

And Parmenides would see that justice was done. He turned the handle on the elevator hatch.

Monday, 12 July 1999, 11:43 PM
The Sunken Cathedral
Cranberry Bogs, Massachusetts

From the moment he had first fallen into the hands of the Nosferatu, Benito Giovanni had fully expected to be tortured.

He had been resigned to it, prepared for it. Almost, he was looking forward to it. Not out of some perverse titillation, but rather in the same way he hung upon the handshake that sealed a tricky business deal. It was the serenity of closure he longed for—in this case, an end to the years of secrecy and anxiety.

They had snatched him from his penthouse office, his private sanctum, the very pinnacle of his worldly power.

His influence—the influence of the Giovanni family—overshadowed the city of Boston. It was *their* city. The Giovanni had held it against the advances of both the Camarilla and the Sabbat. The mayor, the police commissioner, the captains of industry, the archbishop, the old-money families—all of these powers could be summoned to Benito's aid at the tap of his speed-dial. He had been enthroned at the very center of the intricate web of connections and manipulations that made up the subtle framework of his domain.

And the Nosferatu had walked right in and taken him.

They would torture him, that much was certain. And he, in turn, would tell them everything he knew about this whole unpleasant business.

Unfortunately, Benito admitted, the sum of all he knew about this deal still amounted to very little. Too little, he feared, to satisfy a determined inquisitor.

He had arranged the commission, of course. But he was just the deal broker, the matchmaker. It was no great secret in Kindred circles that Benito Giovanni's connections in the art world were extensive. He had something of a reputation for conjuring up masterpieces that were widely held to be lost to the depredations of time and political upheaval. This reputation was due, in no small part, to Benito's crusade in the years following the close of World War II to quietly liberate many priceless works of art that had been plundered by the Reich. A steady stream of these treasures found its way to Boston and from there into the hands of a very select clientele of museums and private collectors.

Among the Toreador clan, with their almost religious devotion to the arts, Benito was romantically viewed as something of a cross between a saint and a rumrunner. If the truth were known, Benito found this tribute more than a bit embarrassing. He went to great lengths, however, to cultivate and maintain the goodwill of the Toreador. Although individually, *les Artistes* could be fickle and capricious, their knowledge and contacts were a peerless competitive advantage in his line of work.

One of the many benefits of his de facto partnership with the Toreador was the unending stream of invitations to the great fêtes, balls and galas with which *les Artistes* marked the unending progression of the seasons. These decadent outlets for their ennui

provided Benito with unrivaled opportunities to come into contact with the real powerbrokers—the princes and primogen of the major cities on both sides of the Atlantic.

Benito allowed himself a muttered curse as he tried to check his watch. It had been confiscated, of course, at the time of his abduction. This was perhaps the thousandth time he had caught himself in the middle of this little ritual. He had been thinking about missed appointments, about the Summer Solstice party that Victoria Ash had given in Atlanta. It was long over by now.

Missed opportunities.

Victoria was an up-and-comer, someone to watch in the nights ahead. She had only recently relocated to Atlanta in a bold play for a recently vacated spot on the city's primogen council. The Solstice gathering was something of a coming-out party for her—the opening volley in her bid for the big time.

As valuable a contact as Victoria was, however, she was not the sole attraction of the Solstice party. She had given him to believe that not only would the mad Prince Benison of Atlanta be present (which might be expected) but also that Julius, the Brujah archon, would be making a special appearance. This volatile combination threatened to explode dramatically, raining down shards of power, prestige and influence upon those bold enough to grab them. Benito keenly regretted not being on hand for the fireworks, but the phone call and that voice—that damnable voice that he'd hoped never to hear again—had necessitated that Benito cancel.

How ironic, that he'd again been assaulted by that voice and then fallen victim to these captors. Ironic, but certainly not coincidental.

His captors, the Nosferatu, had a reputation for extracting secrets. Benito had no illusions about playing the hero, about spitting in the face of his inquisitor. They would learn all, of course, in due time.

And still, they would demand to know more. Knowledge was a compulsion for them, an addiction. They would press him ever more closely, driving home their pointed inquires with fire and the stake. He would shamelessly blubber forth all he knew. Then he would progress to further details conjured from pure fancy and desperation.

Still they would pry deeper.

Benito had one hope and that a feeble one. He would give them everything they asked for. He would ration it out over a gratifyingly long period of time, long enough that they might be convinced of the veracity of his confessions—or at least the veracity of their instruments for extracting confessions. He would then throw himself on their mercy and beg the deformed, the hideous, the grotesque outcasts to have pity upon his poor broken body and suffer him to live.

It did not seem a likely thing to hope for, but it was all he had.

To maintain this fleeting and ephemeral hope, Benito first had to convince himself that, above all, the Nosferatu were true devotees of knowledge. If he could only bring himself to believe that their highest—in fact, their only—concern in this matter was learning the truth, then all was not lost. Once they had discovered the role that Benito had played in this matter—and that he was blameless of the blood spilled—they would release him.

The one nagging doubt that threatened to collapse this fanciful construct was that he was not entirely convinced the Nosferatu paid more than passing lip service to the

altar of Knowledge. Deep down, he harbored a tenacious suspicion that their idol was, conversely, the stunted god of Secrets.

Secrets, a very specialized form of knowledge—the power of which was diminished by the number of people who possessed them.

Once Benito shared his knowledge of these events with his inquisitor, the true power of the revelation would be diluted, diminished by half. The only way to restore the secret to its full potency would be to eliminate one of its keepers. It was not difficult to calculate the exact probability of Benito's surviving an encounter with the cult of secrecy.

Benito was prepared for hot irons and wicked knives and barbed stakes. What he was not prepared for was the maddeningly steady advance of the canonical hours.

The bell was tolling the office. Matins, he imagined, although it was difficult to say with any certainty. The muffled footfalls of countless comings and goings never seemed to slow, much less cease. But surely even the Nosferatu, bred to endless generations of subterranean existence, must still be subject to the primeval progression of day and night.

The bells were only the primary player in the complex tapestry of sound that filled his captivity. At times he heard whispers from beyond the confines of his ascetic cell. At other times, chanting. At other times still, the sharp scratch of pen on parchment.

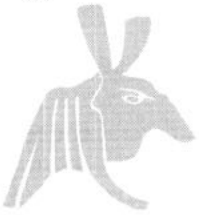
But at no time did he hear the sound he most expected: the turning of a key in the lock. The unmistakable sign that he was, at last, in the presence of his Inquisitor.

Entire nights, weeks, had passed, if the tolling of the bells was to be believed. Thus far, he had yet even to catch a glimpse of his circumspect captors. Benito, suspicious by nature, was not yet willing to rule out the possibility that the tolling of the hours might itself be a subtle form of torture—a way for his captors to play with his perceptions, to muddle his sense of time, to fuel his desperation. The cumulative message of the bells was clear enough. If his trail were already several weeks cold, Benito could have little hope of outside assistance, of rescue by his family or their many agents. With each clanging of the bells, it became more obvious that Benito was utterly alone, cut off from his resources and totally at the mercy of his captors.

The church bells had an additional effect of which his abductors certainly could not be ignorant. The holy clamor tended to ward off any possible intervention by allies from beyond the Pale. Benito had tried several times to reach out through the pathways of spirit to make contact, to send a message, to summon aid: But to no avail. The denizens of the spirit realm gave this sacred ground—though fallen into ruin and disuse many generations past—a wide berth.

With each passing night, the anxiety, the desperation and the hunger grew. Benito counted out the period of his captivity in missed appointments and lost opportunities.

And all the while, the Beast grew bolder, gnawing away at reason and straining at its tether.



Monday, 12 July 11:45 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Hesha stared at the bag of blood waiting in his apartment.

"Thompson," he said loudly, into the empty air.

A circuit opened. "Sir."

"Have my car ready."

"Your car, sir?"

"Unless you particularly desire to watch me hunt, you will prepare my personal car instead of the chauffeur model."

"Your car, sir," said Thompson, quickly.

The intercom died with a click.

Monday, 12 July 1999, 11:49 PM
Main lobby, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland



"May I get anything else for you, ma'am?"

Victoria raised the glass of rich, red wine and wet her lips, then deigned to acknowledge the costumed young man. "Not at the moment, thank you."

He bowed and backed away, as pleased as if she'd handed him a hundred-dollar tip. Victoria, ensconced in the padded armchair in the lobby of the Lord Baltimore, was holding court, of sorts, as various inn employees saw to her every need.

What's the point of having mortals around, she wondered, *if they're not performing the menial little tasks that make them feel so useful?* It was a situation that left everyone rewarded, not the least of all Victoria. She was in her element with others fawning over her, and it was a pleasant and innocent enough diversion from how she'd been spending most of her time the past nights—gathering information, and none of it too awfully helpful.

The flow of refugees into the city had now slowed to a trickle, two and a half weeks after the Sabbat had rolled into Washington, three weeks since her sabotaged social gala in Atlanta. And it *must* have been sabotaged. Of that, she was certain. And at least two other ideas were certainties in her mind: first, that she would discover who was responsible for her betrayal, and second, that they would pay.

The primary suspects seemed to be Rolph, the Nosferatu sewer rat she'd invited out of the goodness of her heart, and Erich Vegel, the Setite antiquarian whom Victoria had toyed with to such effect. Each had seemed to be missing shortly before the Sabbat attack fell, neither having taken proper leave by informing the hostess. Rolph's disappearance was not necessarily sinister. The Nosferatu were always skulking around on the fringes of respectable Kindred society and, truth be told, Victoria might have just missed him while he was still there. Vegel's case was the more perplexing, for it was a call from his master that had alerted Victoria to her guest's absence—*if* it really had been Hesha on the other end of that conversation, and *if* the call itself was not a ruse to suggest that Vegel's exit was spontaneous. Possible. A scheme within a scheme. But then the Setites who had inadvertently rescued Victoria from Atlanta had been seeking Vegel. That seemed to imply that he was in trouble as well. *Unless* the rescue, like the phone call, had been orchestrated to impart to Victoria exactly that impression! Could Hesha be so wily? Or could Vegel have gone rogue—if that was possible for a Setite—and given both Victoria and his erstwhile employer the slip?

Her investigations into these matters had gone… well, nowhere. Mainly because, as of yet, she had encountered no other survivors from Atlanta. None. From Gainesmil, eternal font of information that he was, she'd learned that Hesha actually kept residence in Baltimore—a situation to which Prince Garlotte had not completely resolved himself. But so long as the Setite kept a low profile, the cost of a full-fledged snake hunt seemed prohibitive.

There was also Benito Giovanni, who at the last moment had cancelled his trip to Atlanta for the party. Could he have known something about the Sabbat attack? Victoria would never rule out the possibility of a member of the treacherous Giovanni clan colluding with the

Sabbat, but finding out anything about the tight-knit clan was next to impossible. She had heard rumors—through Gainesmil, again—that Benito had disappeared sometime around the party. With the Giovanni, however, who knew what that might really mean?

Otherwise, Victoria had busied herself in meeting many of the refugees. On the whole, they were touchingly grateful, but Victoria felt certain that if she had to empathize with anyone else within the next, say, ten years, she would throw up. The masses would provide some support for her at the next conference, only four nights away, but the key players, the individuals who would determine the outcome of events, lingered beyond her control.

Once the flow of refugees had begun to slow, Prince Garlotte had visited her more frequently. Victoria raised a hand to her neck, slid her fingers along the chain to the locket that was never far from her. The prince seemed to take pleasure in seeing her wear the piece. Victoria, in her own way, took comfort from the soft metal resting near her heart. Despite Garlotte's obvious affection for her, however, the prince remained wary. Victoria didn't expect him to turn over his city to her—not that she would quibble if he did—but she did hope for more forthright support from him in public gatherings. If that support did not materialize, and soon, she might be forced to take stern measures. For now, though, he actively sought her company; he considered himself strong enough to resist her selectively, and perhaps he was. For now.

Gainesmil, on the other hand, was a clay pigeon that Victoria could pluck from the air whenever she pleased. She left him enough free will that he could imagine he was independent, and watched with amusement his noble struggle of conscience between his loyalties to his prince and to his clanmate. Victoria knew there was less of conscience and more of weather vane to his moral dilemma. Whichever way the wind blew, there would be Gainesmil.

The Malkavians, as usual, were irrelevant. Aside from Prince Benison of Atlanta, she'd never met a member of that clan who was worth a thimbleful of vitae.

She'd had no opportunity to speak with Theo Bell and suspected that he would not accept her invitation to a tête-à-tête, even if occasion did arise—which was not likely to happen. The brute had stayed busy with his rabble patrolling the stretch of real estate between Washington and Baltimore, and had even gone so far as to lead minor incursions into the hostile capital. *Good for him*, Victoria thought. His was the type of dedication that would keep her safe, and he seemed to be one of a rare breed of Brujah—those who know their place.

Marcus Vitel, prince of that other city, *former* prince—Victoria saw little hope of wresting the city from the Sabbat, despite all Brujah zeal—seemed to be in mourning, for his city or for his childer, Victoria didn't know. Rumor had it (and Gainesmil confirmed) that Vitel was responsible, at least in part, for the martial law that had been imposed in Washington and made more difficult the Sabbat's consolidation of control in the city.

Vitel had taken up residence in a private townhouse, and though he had not turned away Victoria's visits over the past two weeks, neither had he proven particularly talkative. Still, she had begun the process of feeling him out, of determining what it was that would open his inner desires to her. Perhaps it was sympathy for his poor childer that would hook him.

Dear God, Victoria thought. *More sympathy.*

For all practical purposes, that left only Maria Chin, the representative of the Tremere. Victoria felt the knowledge that the Tremere in Washington, Chin's own chantry, had watched idly as the city had fallen to the Sabbat might be of some use. Perhaps there was a deal to be made. Victoria could defend the actions of the Tremere in return for the clan's support in the

conference. There was, of course, the complicating factor that the Tremere might, as Gainesmil and later Vitel had suggested, simply take the position that they were more concerned with the long-term interests of the Camarilla—maintaining the sect's presence in D.C.—than in propping up a Ventrue prince in the short term. The Tremere might not need Victoria's defense. But surely, she hoped, they would see the benefit of having friends in the conference, and there was no harm in attempting to lay the groundwork for mutual support in the future.

That was why Victoria had ventured down to the lobby of the Lord Baltimore Inn in the first place. Chin had agreed to come speak with her. Victoria glanced at her diamond-studded watch and was completely unsurprised to see Chin walk through the lobby doors precisely at midnight, exactly on time. Victoria rose to greet her visitor, and completely ignored the mortal employees of the inn who scurried away in every direction, each fearful that he or she had somehow offended the elegant guest and was personally responsible for her departure.

"Maria," said Victoria, taking a friendly, familiar tone.

The Tremere's expression remained unchanged, neutral. "Ms. Ash." She wore a long gray-blue robe with the hood back. It struck Victoria as slightly anachronistic, but that was hardly a sin or even out of the ordinary with Kindred.

Victoria took her guest by the arm and led her toward the elevator. "I took it upon myself to wait for you personally—how very gauche, I know—but I'm afraid none of my servants made the trip north with me, and there's just been no time for interviews...." Victoria kept up the patter, quite innocuous talk to any mortal who might be within earshot. Chin did not contribute to the conversation or attempt to address Victoria's rhetorical questions.

Bubbling over with personality, this one, Victoria thought wryly, but wasn't that the case with all Tremere? As she turned her key to send them on their way to the seventh floor, the Toreador was tempted to seduce Maria right then and there, just to see some type of reaction from the woman. *I could do it before we reached the fifth floor,* Victoria thought, but decided against it. There was little sense in jeopardizing future gains for such petty gratification at this point.

What actually did happen before they reached the fifth floor was quite different. Victoria was chatting away, making up for the silence of her companion. Neither occupant of the elevator saw or heard the hatch open in the ceiling, or the specially crafted garrote that lowered through the portal. Not until Maria Chin's feet were dangling two feet above the floor did Victoria realize something was wrong, and even then it took a moment for the sight of the Tremere's bulging eyes and flailing arms to sink in.

Victoria saw the hands, the black gloves, pulling forcefully on the wire behind Maria's neck. Immediately, Victoria's instincts for dealing with danger took over—she screamed bloody murder.

It seemed to her that her scream provided the impetus for the wire as it sliced upward under Chin's jaw. Victoria was pressed back against the corner, her mouth still open wide, when the garrote completely separated skull from spine, and both portions of Maria Chin thudded to the floor.

Tuesday, 13 July 1999, 12:31 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland

Footsteps on the stairs stopped Ron where he stood in the kitchen.

Elizabeth reached the top and found him staring at her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey, Liz." Thompson answered. "Are you all right?"

"No. But what am I going to do about it?" Thompson kept quiet. "Any chance you could help me put my room back together?" Elizabeth looked up at him, wistfully. "I'm having trouble with the larger doors; I can't hold them up and stick the pins in the hinges at the same time."

"Sure."

"You talked to *him*?"

She nodded.

"Ron… I suppose I should have said this sooner, but… thanks." She paused, and Thompson was struck by a fleeting resemblance to his master in the girl's face. "For the advice. And for getting the Asp off my back the other day. And for pulling me out of there. The snake pit. Someday, Ron, explain to me why there's a room full of snakes in this house. Just not today. Thank you," she finished lamely, "for saving my life." She looked up at him. "God, that sounds so inadequate when you actually come out and say it, doesn't it?"

Thompson smiled and shook his head, but said nothing. He reached for the empty bottle. *Tuesday*, he thought. *'By Tuesday, she will have thanked you for saving her life.' Damn him.*

Helping Liz occupied a few hours and then he got on with the rest of the day's work. Raphael found him in the bunker late in the afternoon. "What're you doing, Ron?"

"Agency reports. According to these jokers, Kettridge was in St. Louis, Philly, *and* Memphis yesterday. Damn kids. Wouldn't recognize their own mothers in a line-up."

The Asp poured sympathy into his voice. "You need a drink, Ron."

"I have a drink. And I'm not downing any of that paint-stripper you call booze," Ron said, until he saw the bottle Rafael was offering. "Holy shit. Where'd you get that?"

"Present from the boss. For bringing our girl back without breaking her." He shrugged. "I figure I owe you some; I'd probably have at least torn something if you hadn't stepped in." Raphael set a tumbler on the console and filled it with a generous double.

Thompson took a sip, nodded thanks, and picked up his reports again. The Asp plopped down in the spare chair and watched the screens. On the center monitor, Elizabeth and Hesha worked at the papyrus table. The sound was turned off, but the sitting figures seemed to be talking companionably enough.

"So." Raphael refilled his own glass contentedly. "Everything back to normal, hey, Ron?"

Tuesday, 13 July 1999, 10:40 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Elizabeth sighed and put Vegel's notes neatly aside. The manuscript was defeating her. She scooted her chair a foot or two farther down the scroll to a more heavily illustrated portion.

"Tired?" Hesha asked.

"Frustrated." Liz plucked a scrap of vaguely red-tinged papyrus from the side of the table. There was a small black line running across the edge, which failed to match the section she thought it would. "I had such a lucky run on this last Friday."

Her host continued working without comment.

"How old are you, Hesha?" Elizabeth asked suddenly.

"Thirty-three, I think. Perhaps thirty-four," said the Setite, meeting her gaze with an amused, puzzled expression. Elizabeth raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Not counting the years since I failed to die, of course."

"How long ago was that?"

His face hardened. "You want the truth?" Elizabeth nodded. "It may have been 1700 C.E.; I often suspect that it was earlier. The old calendars don't match each other very well." He watched her. "You're not surprised?"

"No. I was ready for that one; you've dropped enough hints." Liz took up her tongs again, and found a match for the red shard. "Your grandfather's North African household goods from the fifteenth century." She smiled at his reflection in the table. "What does this papyrus say?"

"You think I can read this?"

She laughed. "Yes." She matched two more red pieces together.

His black eyes flickered up at her. "Truth? This is a temple copy of a folk tale about Nepthys. The picture you're working on shows her leaving her brother Set's court, the court of Upper Egypt, to visit their married siblings Osiris and Isis in Lower Egypt. This piece—" he drew her attention to an assembled section—"is a prayer, and this—" another sound fragment—"is a recipe for incense to propitiate the goddess."

"Oh." Elizabeth reached for Vegel's notes and a new piece of paper. She copied down the symbols for the four deities and the two courts and started a search through the scraps for the names.

"How did you meet Professor Kettridge?"

"At a dig in Lebanon. Baalbek. It's a long story."

"Are you going anywhere?" She grinned at him.

"No." Hesha waited, giving her the opportunity, but when Elizabeth neither asked for the truth nor looked for it with her eyes, he went on freely. Jordan Kettridge might not have recognized the events described in the Setite's version, but Hesha made a thrilling story of them. Professor Kettridge shone as an honest archaeologist swept up in

international events. Thompson made brave stands against unnamed terrorists; Erich Vegel protected the dig alone, by night, against overwhelming odds; and Hesha (with a fair amount of modesty) took the stage as the linguist, local guide, and quiet man behind the scenes. By the end of the account, Kettridge had discovered Hesha's secret, overreacted, and fled quite plausibly.

"And you haven't spoken to him since?"

The Setite paused. "I suspect I give him the same kind of nightmares I gave you," he looked up at her, "though for different reasons—" and the soft, embarrassed glance in his eyes was a masterwork of misdirection. With a slight, visible effort, he shook off the sentiment. "Kettridge is a scientist. I am… difficult to explain. I don't force the issue on him." Hesha set his tools down on the tabletop. "I think I'm done for the night," he said, stretching. Elizabeth watched his body move under his shirt, found herself staring, and looked quickly away. "You should get some rest, too."

They stood up together. Walking slowly, side by side, they traversed the length of the museum. At the point where Elizabeth would turn toward Vegel's room and Hesha would turn toward his own, she hesitated, and was relieved to find him still standing next to her. His hand reached up to her shoulder.

"Go," said Hesha, hoarsely.

Elizabeth bit her lip. She pulled her key from her pocket and took the steps down to her door. She listened to his soft footfalls take him farther, to his own threshold, and she turned the key in the lock. For another second she hesitated. *Go to bed, Lizzie. Don't think about it.* She snapped the key out of the wards and opened the door. Against her better judgment, she looked back—

—and saw him lying crumpled on the floor.

"Hesha!"

She screamed and ran at the same time, arrived breathless, and skidded to a stop on her hands and knees.

"Hesha!" Elizabeth's hands shook helplessly. No pulse to take, no breath sounds to listen for. His eyes—his eyes were shut, the lids and irises motionless. She struck the floor with her fist and jumped up again. *The bookshelf*—she flew to it and tried to slide it open. "Thompson! Thompson!" She kicked furiously at the heavy wooden case. "Damn it, Ron!" She whirled around, trying to remember… there were microphones everywhere, but where was the nearest intercom? Her apartment? Hesha's study? "Thompson!" she yelled again.

Elizabeth turned to run to her room. Behind her, the bookshelf slid aside, and Thompson and the Asp dodged around her to reach their master. She was nearly knocked down; she hardly thought about it.

Ron Thompson knelt by Hesha—carefully, without touching him or his clothing—and held the other two off with a gesture. "Sir?"

No one breathed.

"Sir?"

The Setite's left hand crept to his collar. From the cords hung round his neck, at a glacial pace, he selected the newest. "Eye," he said.

Thompson waved Raphael in. "Take his legs." The Asp obeyed, and together they lifted Hesha's unresisting carcass off the ground. "Liz, get the door to his room."

Wednesday, 14 July 1999, 3:56 AM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



"Light," said Thompson. "Sir? We're on the last step. We can't go any farther without..."

The creature in his arms hissed. Sibilant echoes filled the chamber.

"Thank you, sir." Thompson started moving again. "Careful where you step, Raf. They won't bite after he's said the word, but shuffle your feet just to be on the safe side. Turning right, now. Easy."

Elizabeth closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and waded—gently—into the ankle-deep confusion of snakes. The procession passed by the Eighth Hour and the Seventh. Elizabeth had to stop often to find a clear place to rest her feet. She felt as though the stars above moved with them and that the tangle of reptiles had eyes on her.

"Straight shot over to the sandbox, Raf. Liz? Crossing here." They stepped out into the empty center of the tomb. Elizabeth trailed after them, certain now that something was following her.

"Good. Set him down." Thompson laid his master on a long, thin, squat bench—nearly a cot—at the edge of a large, circular patch of white sand. From a tiny chest of drawers beside the circle, he took a bronze amulet on a black cord and a small bag shut tight by a drawstring. He handed them to Hesha without a word, and the Setite's fingers sprang into life.

"What's wrong with him?" Elizabeth whispered.

"Quiet," Thompson ordered. Looking at her face, he relented. "He's all right, he's just... concentrating. He doesn't have any energy to spare. Don't distract him." He pulled her up against the wall and cleared space for the two to sit. On the other side of the sand, the Asp did the same.

Hesha's hands stopped. For a moment, nothing happened. Then he sat bolt upright on the bench, stretched his hands out clenched tightly together, and moved his mouth as if he were speaking. The three mortals heard only a faint whistle, like a breeze. Hesha's right arm stuck straight out, steady as stone. His left arm descended, slowly, holding the bronze figure. The white eye of the statue had been tied into the knot above it. The tip of the amulet touched the sand; the Setite's left arm fell back to his lap, and though his body moved not at all, the pendulum began to sway wildly.

Elizabeth watched, fascinated. The little bob disobeyed half the laws of physics—after a quick whip to one side that stretched the cord to its full length, it zipped back just as fast to the center, changed direction, and swung sluggishly through a short arc. Slow, fast, short, long, making sharp turns, wide angles—*like a magnetic top*, she thought. *Like a toy*. She drew her knees in and braced both hands against the floor, sitting up straighter to see. Fine black lines appeared on the sand wherever the amulet went—

When it stopped, it stopped suddenly. The eye and the weight made one last desperate pull toward the long line, and stayed there, quivering, dripping dark powder onto the sand. Hesha reached out and grasped the amulet, and the line between his hands went slack.

"Kettridge is in Philadelphia," he said, in a perfectly ordinary voice. "Have the agency provide protection for him. He is not to know the team is there; he is not to be interfered with—but he will need more eyes and firepower than I suspect he can muster on his own. Who saw him there?"

"Pauline Richards, sir. With your permission, I'd like her to head the team. She's one of the candidates I've been considering as a replacement."

"As you will." Hesha opened his eyes. *Kettridge took my advice. Interesting.* The other red eye remained in New York City. He suspected that a warlock owned it; if true, it was completely inaccessible—but if true, why was it… unattended? There was no presence connected with it. The Eye itself lay in Atlanta. Very well. It could stay where it was, now that he understood the source. Hesha rubbed the white bead between his fingers. He took it off the cord and tied it again around his neck. The long line; the line too faint and too shaky to trace the first night in New York—now he knew where it ended.

He turned to the Asp. "Thank you for your assistance. Can you take the desk while Thompson and I conclude arrangements? Time is short." As an afterthought, he added, "Show her the safe way out, if you would."

"Yes, sir." Raphael danced nimbly away between the copperheads' bodies. Liz hesitated, hovering toward Hesha. "Good night, Elizabeth," the creature said sternly. Her jaw clenched tight, but she rushed to catch up to her guide and they vanished up the stairs.

"Thompson. The Eye is in Atlanta, but the Eye's source of power lies in Calcutta. We leave for India immediately." The Setite found his feet and made a beeline for the sarcophagus. The snakes opened a path for him. Ron walked in the wake. "Call Janet as soon as you leave me; prepare equipment for yourself and the Asp. Expect the worst. Conference at sundown as usual, but have Miss Dimitros attend."

"Sir? Are we… we *can't* take her with us?!"

"No?" Hesha perched on the edge of his stony couch. "We cannot leave her here alone, Thompson; we cannot send her back to New York until we are sure of her. The doctor is in Alaska. I doubt if her second-in-command would be quite so amenable to our usual storage solution… even if I cared to risk Elizabeth's health by placing her in a coma for the weeks or months of our absence. We could kill her, of course, but I think we will find her useful in Calcutta.

"Unless you would like me to reconsider, Thompson."

"No." Ron's ruddy face was pale. "No, sir, thank you."

"Leave me," said the monster, lying down. "The sun rises."

Thursday, 15 July 1999, 1:08 AM
(Wednesday, 14 July 1999, 6:08 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The outer walls, Alamut
Eastern Turkey

Fatima leaned heavily on Mahmud Azzam. Her steps were short and labored. Clouds lay all about them like thick smoke, and lazy snowflakes clung unmelting to their skin like ash.

"The caliph ignores your request for audience," Mahmud said, allowing his indignation to seep out among the clouds.

"As is his privilege," Fatima reminded her younger clansman.

"But he has always been supportive of you in the past."

"Not always," Fatima corrected, "but when he has been able. The caliph must be careful when he supports a woman over men, a Muslim over..." she paused, searching for a word suitably delicate, "over others."

"There have never been so many *others*," Mahmud said, mimicking her term but without the delicacy.

"Haqim walked the earth long before the Holy Prophet," Fatima reminded him. "We Muslims are, in our own way, but newcomers to the blood. You are correct," she cut off Mahmud's objection, "that never in our time have so many non-Muslims been accepted into the brotherhood."

The two walked in silence for some while. Every so often, the clouds would part and the surrounding peaks—an outermost ring of battlements—were visible through the gloom. Beneath Fatima's robes, her right forearm was still bandaged. Much of Fatima's strength had returned over the past six nights, though depending on Mahmud's support kept her from tiring as quickly. He had ministered to her in her convalescence, and al-Ashrad, *amr* of Alamut, had provided a libation derived from the blood of elders so that she might recover more quickly.

Once before, Fatima had been poisoned with gin-gin. During the first years after her Becoming, as part of her training as a *fida'i*, her wrist had been sliced open with a poisoned blade. She was left to draw on the power of her blood or perish. In that instance, the poison had not long stayed in her system. This time, there had been those other matters to attend to before she was able to combat the toxin, and the damage it had wrought on her body was many times more severe. Again, she had survived the gin-gin. All the questions remained, however, concerning how she had come to face such an ordeal a second time.

"What of Gharok?" she asked Mahmud.

"He still stands guard over the poisons, though he is branded every hour with hot irons, as he will be for one hundred nights. His attention will not wander again."

"He will be strengthened," Fatima agreed.

"Imagine the shame of having a *fida'i* sneak past and steal from the supplies." Mahmud shook his head in disbelief.

"If he did sneak past," said Fatima.

Mahmud stopped, forcing Fatima to stop as well. "You think Gharok was party to the attack?"

Fatima shook her head, motioned for him to continue forward. "Gharok would not do such a thing, but neither would he allow a mere *fida'i* to best him. Ever."

"Then who?"

Fatima shrugged. "The elders have spoken." The judgment of the elders was that the Kurd, whose name was never again to be uttered, so that his stain might be cleansed from the clan, had acted alone. For reasons unknown, he had stolen the gin-gin and poisoned his weapon to attack Fatima. She knew the way of such judgments—the explanation that would most strengthen the clan became "truth." Never mind that the crimes ascribed to the Kurd were beyond him.

Gharok was both competent and honorable. He would endure punishment so that the brotherhood might grow in strength. Fatima, eventually, would gain audience with the caliph and ask questions privately. Though she had disagreed with the judgment of the elders, she would not challenge the conclusion. Such would not be honorable. But neither would she forget.

Fatima nudged Mahmud forward again. She appreciated her protégé's presence and his strength, but she'd had enough conversation. She answered his other questions only with shrugs or abbreviated replies.

Long ago, as a *fida'i*, Fatima had accepted as a matter of course the pronouncements of the elders—had *believed* them. Now, as a *rafiq*, a full member of the brotherhood and an elder herself, she knew enough to question—patiently, cautiously—when intuition demanded. Still, that her intuition raised suspicion in her was troubling. Perhaps soon Elijah Ahmed, her broodmate as well as caliph, would agree to meet with her, and he would lay her doubts to rest.

Wednesday, 14 July 1999, 8:59 PM
Laurel Ridge Farm
Columbia, Maryland



Elizabeth appeared—uncertain but poised—in the door between her room and Vegel's carved crypt. Thompson stood, indicated the empty chair beside his own, and smiled reassuringly. He handed a thick stack of documents to Liz, including her own genuine passport, shot records, and university records, which she had left in her apartment in New York. He opened his notebook—a new one, dedicated to Calcutta and nothing else—and sat back with an air of expectation. Raphael took a seat, and after a theatrically appropriate interval, Hesha himself joined the group.

"Good evening," said the Setite, taking his place on the stone bench. "Janet?" He said to the ceiling.

"Here, sir."

Hesha faced Liz and gestured to the disembodied speaker. "Elizabeth Dimitros, Janet Lindbergh. Circumstances forbid a more personal introduction, I'm afraid. Miss Dimitros, we leave for Calcutta this afternoon."

Elizabeth's brows climbed in surprise. Her chin came up sharply, defiantly. The golden glints in her eyes flashed at, through, and beyond the Setite's face, and she withdrew slightly. Still, she said nothing, and Hesha, who had had a quick and quiet speech ready to convince her if it became necessary, set those words aside and went on. "Thompson and the Asp go with us; Mrs. Lindbergh and the Asp stay here as rear guard. Reports, please. Janet?"

Janet efficiently ticked off the arrangements and assumed identities they'd each be traveling under, including a diplomatic passport for the Asp.

"Diplomatic seal on all his baggage—including you, sir."

"Excellent," said Hesha. "Hotel?"

"The Oberoi Grand. Central, expensive, traditional but refurbished—and with an available suite exceeding Thompson's basic requirements, sir."

Ron spoke up. "We've hedged our bets with rooms under cover at various more appropriate places throughout town. I've got agents en route to take occupancy on schedule and form parts of the guard team. And there will be an H. M. Ruhadze making the appropriate border crossings to account for your public appearance and disappearance as needed."

"Munitions?"

Thompson glanced toward Elizabeth. He and the Asp had their choices ready, but... they were somewhat revealing. Instead of reading the list out loud, he passed his notebook to his employer. Hesha scanned it without expression. He reached toward Thompson without looking, and Ron handed the pencil to him.

"Bring extra supplies of the circled items; we may need them for trade on the black market. If not, we can distribute them for goodwill before we return.

"As for personal belongings: Be ready for anything. Asp, you can pass for local if you don't speak. I want your maximum range of costume ready as soon as we land. The same goes for my kit. We can pick up additional indigenous clothing once we reach the city, but we cannot do it without suspicion unless we blend in before we enter the shops.

"Thompson. Western dress. Tourist gear, business wear, bodyguard for any level from gutter to glitter. If you can pick up the accent we may add an Anglo-Indian range.

"Elizabeth. Pack your bags back up, but don't take all your books. Look over your supposed itinerary and select such volumes as would aid research on your dissertation at those places. Take from Vegel's library as you need, and bring anything we have on Bengali myth. You will study that and the hieroglyphs for most of our stay. As for clothes, I want your own things in your own cases. Thompson, see that she has a tourist, business, and jet-set wardrobe available at the Oberoi Grand when we arrive."

"I don't have jet-set clothes, Hesha," Elizabeth put in. "I suppose your men could steal my suits and things from my apartment—like they have my passport—but my silver dress is the only—"

He cut her off. "We will attend to that."

Elizabeth subsided. Thompson flipped to a new page in his notebook. The master of the house drilled them over baggage claim, shipping crates under separate labels, and the meeting dragged on.

A feeling like nostalgia settled into the old cop's bones. There was Hesha, captain of the expedition, his mind wrapped around every detail. The Asp, murderous but familiar, sleek and silent. Janet, sharp, thorough, thinking of everything almost as quickly as the boss himself. And if Vegel wasn't there to give efficiency a little twisted warmth, at least Elizabeth was finally on the team instead of pulling against it. He could see her a year from now, working in the museum, chatting with poor lonely Janet, kidding around with the twins, learning from himself how to scan and shoot and run the system at the farm. He glanced down at the sleek, brown head beside him and smiled.

Little sister, he thought. *Close enough.*



Thursday, 15 July 1999, 1:10 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

The sensation of the pen's brass nib scratching across the paper eased Johnston Foley's tension. The nib grabbed the grain satisfyingly. No slick modern grade of paper could hope to compare. Craftsmanship, tradition—this was the essence of the art. To Foley, the humble magic of pen and ink was a spiritual rite. Each sheet of hand-pressed parchment, each individually carved pen was a specially consecrated ceremonial tool.

His hand moved deftly, confidently, darting in and among the five oversized illuminated letters that already graced the left-hand margin. The fruit of his previous week's labor. Reading from top to bottom, they spelled out "Tylia"—a name to which Foley attached no particular significance.

Foley's scratchings did not pause until he reached the bottom of the sheet. With a flourish, he generously dusted the wet ink.

Then the waiting.

He let the moment stretch, savored it. A week of painstaking illumination might have been fulfilled or ruined in that single minute's mad scribbling. It was sublime. It was, in many ways, the legacy of his people, the birthright of the Tremere. The decades (sometimes centuries) his brothers spent in their patient plotting, their scheming, their jockeying for position—all leading up to a single night's gamble, the play for power and prestige. All or naught.

Foley turned the paper on end and tapped it gently on the desktop. A cascade of fine blue dust settled to the blotter. With mounting anticipation, he devoured the newly revealed words:

There is a quiet shadow
Between pen and page
The oldest of wards set
Perhaps to guard the art
From the casual hand

Yet even now after years
Of learning the feints, parries,
Attitudes of approach, I see
Not one opponent, but hundreds

Living and dead: readers
Lovers, rivals
Old works and masters
And I hesitate

If the pen is truly
Mightier than the sword, who
Is cut? Perhaps
I will write no more

Already the blood
Of people I will never know
Has run from the shadow
Streaking this page
With words and doubts.

Foley scrutinized each serif, each curve, each of the eighteen individual 'i'-crowning dots. Perfect.

Opening an upper desk drawer, he withdrew two pieces of tissue paper and a manila folder. He quickly crossed to an overstuffed file cabinet against one wall and filed the whole—parchment nestled inside paper inside folder—under "T" for "Tylia."

To anyone else, this filing system might have proved frustrating if not maddening. Foley, however, did not need a "system." His memory was infallible. He could just as easily have filed the piece under "F" or "Q," as the fancy struck him. It made no difference.

But the alphabet was a discipline. An ordered list. Foley appreciated order in all its guises. Over the years, he had become a creature of lists. Initially, the lists had provided him a means of establishing order amidst a world where entropy was only too willing to rush in at the slightest lapse in vigilance. An insane world, a world turned upside-down. A place where the nightmares were real, the dead walked, and the heroes drew pentagrams traced in stolen blood.

Even decades later, long after his faculties had progressed beyond the point that the lists were a necessity, he'd continued and actually redoubled his efforts to tabulate, to enumerate, to impose that perfect order that is a reflection of the truly disciplined mind and spirit. And his unwavering perseverance had not been lost upon his superiors.

Settling himself back at his desk, Foley shifted another sheet of parchment from the pile at his right hand to the blotter in front of him. He considered a moment before selecting a favorite writing implement from the display stand at his left hand. A quill unadorned with any ostentatious plumage. Its former owner, a porcupine.

His hand jabbed rapidly at the page. Words, numbers, formulae began to reveal themselves, rendered almost, it would seem, by pointillism.

Foley took great pride in his attention to detail. His writing table was clear except for blotter, inkwell and paper. His compact study was crammed to capacity with bookshelves, jars of pigment, rare woods, fine specimens of the taxidermist's art, and other curiosities. Nonetheless, it remained distinctly uncluttered.

Each book, each vial, each unseeing glass eye had its place, from which it was removed only when Foley required it and to which it was invariably returned.

A sharp knock broke the ordered silence of the room.

"Enter," he called, allowing his displeasure to be apparent in his voice. The knock should have come ten minutes earlier.

Jacqueline, Apprentice Tertius of Clan Tremere, stepped demurely into the small room. She was a mature woman, a former academician whose features continuously betrayed the torment of one accustomed in mortal life to speaking authoritatively to students.

In her new "adopted" family, she had found that she must now accommodate herself to taking instruction and directives from practically every other member of the community. The abrupt disjuncture obviously did not sit well with her.

Her personal contentment—or lack thereof—however, did not concern Foley.

"You are late," he said curtly.

"I was assisting Aaron with…" she began.

"Did I request an explanation?"

"No."

Foley narrowed his eyes. "And that is how you address your superiors?"

Jacqueline stiffened. "No, Secundus."

Foley paused, laying his quill across the inkwell and folding his hands deliberately.

"I mean, no, Regent Secundus," she corrected herself hastily.

Foley sighed in mock exasperation. The novice seemed adequately contrite, though an Initiate of the Third Circle should have been beyond such lapses of decorum.

It was a difficult situation, when an apprentice's capabilities clearly exceeded her understanding of her station. Jacqueline had proven her potential, but the Tremere could ill afford chinks in the armor of discipline that had allowed the clan to survive this long despite determined opposition.

Foley made a mental note to humble the novice publicly at the earliest opportunity. Tonight's ritual should prove a suitable occasion. If the problem persisted, he would be forced to advise Regent Quintus Sturbridge that Jacqueline was simply not working out. And that he had been forced to terminate her.

"I will not abide familiarity in a subordinate," he said at last, then paused again significantly.

"Yes, Regent Secundus."

When Foley was satisfied, he pushed the list across the desk to her.

"Here are the materials I require for a certain ritual next week," he said. "See that they are assembled in my sanctum by dawn of the 22nd."

Jacqueline studied the list. After a moment, Foley held out his hand. Realizing his meaning, she reluctantly returned the paper to him.

"That is all." Foley watched as she backed out of the chamber. He was gratified by the brief glint of alarm he'd seen in her eyes as she'd handed back the list. He'd allowed her ample time in which to commit the items to memory. If she'd failed to do so, that was her shortcoming, and she would be held accountable.

Of course, Foley was not about to let her potential incompetence interfere with his upcoming ritual. Dawn of the 22nd would allow him ample time to inspect her work and make any necessary adjustments.

The knowledge that ultimately he would be held responsible for the failings of his underlings was not lost upon Foley.

He rose with the list in his hand and moved into his sanctum. The adjoining room was, if anything, even more packed with oddities than the outer office. The effect was exaggerated, as the sanctum was only slightly larger than a broom closet. It was a point of some contention. He realized that the accommodations constituted no personal slight. But the arrangement still rankled.

With open warfare raging between the Camarilla and Sabbat forces—and the battle lines surging back and forth over their very heads—little time and effort had been spared for material comforts. The energy and resources of every Tremere present were required for defense. It had been thus for many years and the situation showed little sign of improving any time in the near future.

Foley supposed he should let the matter drop. After all, his appointment to such a prestigious chantry was not inconsequential. The Chantry of the Five Boroughs—or "C5B" as it was designated in inter-chantry memoranda—was renowned for the unique opportunities it presented. Its name consistently topped the lists of candidates for advancement within the clan. Upon closer examination, however, Foley was forced to concede that most of these promotions were of the battlefield variety.

Five Boroughs was one of the few places in the country where the hawks among the dovecote could openly ply their trade. Foley had endured the posturing of countless self-styled battle-mages, pyromancers, astral warriors and other abominations that were so much cannon fodder to be thrown in the path of the advancing Sabbat forces. With the recent Sabbat gains in the Southeast, however, more and more of the clan's hawks were being drawn off toward Washington, D.C. Some of the newcomers to C5B had been enticed by the persistent rumor that the chantry was, due to its somewhat tenuous position, more lenient in enforcing the Third Tradition—the granting of permission to embrace others into the clan.

Ridiculous, Foley thought. He wondered how such an improbable tale was perpetuated. He imagined the formula was one part wishful thinking to two parts never having met Aisling Sturbridge. If the truth were known—and it was not in Foley's nature to distribute a commodity as volatile as the truth without adequate compensation—during his entire tenure at Five Boroughs, not one had ever been granted leave to sire progeny. Not a single one.

Despite this curious—some might say, perverse—tradition, the chantry continued to enjoy a steady influx of new novices by way of transfer from her sister houses all across the US.

Foley supposed he should be grateful. It was this very turmoil that necessitated him being here.

Five Boroughs was something of a curiosity, a relic of an earlier age. It always reminded Foley of a medieval monastic house at the height of the order's temporal power—when the abbot of an influential house wielded feudal dominion over the surrounding countryside. C5B enjoyed just such privilege. It was probably the most prestigious chantry in the U.S. that was not the personal haven of some clan dignitary—a great lord or pontifex. Nowhere else in the country could a mere regent exercise such a free hand.

A *mere* regent. Foley snorted. He was a *mere* regent. Never mind that he would be leading any other chantry to which he might be assigned. Five Boroughs was one of the few chantries that supported two regents: himself as the Regent Secundus and his superior,

Aisling Sturbridge. It was not normal clan policy but, as Sturbridge so often pointed out to her superiors—and with such unaccountable and infuriating success—C5B was no normal chantry. Things just worked *differently* here.

It was not such an indignity after all, being a junior regent. Sturbridge herself had been a junior regent at one time. They said that *her* superior had been caught unawares by the Sabbat, just beyond the protection of the chantry defenses. A shame.

There was nothing to say that this same misfortune might not befall Sturbridge herself—some night when she was alone and abroad. Some night like tonight. The possibility that a well-earned promotion might conveniently fall into his own lap was not lost upon Foley. So he tried, if not with complete success, to tuck his resentment back into its appropriate niche. Probably Sturbridge's quarters were no more spacious than his own. He could not speak authoritatively on the matter, of course. He had never been invited into her chambers.

The limited real estate might not have been such an issue if it were not for the increased population pressure. Because of the Sabbat forces pawing at the gate, all of the apprentices, journeymen, masters and adepts attached to the chantry were required to reside on the premises.

Unfortunately, this led to Foley's having to work and exist at uncomfortably close quarters with mere novices like Jacqueline, Aaron and the others.

The prevalent opinion seemed to be that the chantry, tucked beneath the Camarilla fraction of the city, made up in strategic value what it lacked in acreage.

"There's only so much space between Barnard College and the Harlem River," Sturbridge had told him the one time he'd ventured to mention his cramped quarters to her. Her peculiar summary dismissal of his concerns had dissuaded him from asking why the chantry didn't expand in other directions.

From amidst the tightly packed shelves of curiosities, Foley's hand extracted a modest, wooden chest—no larger than a jewelry box—which held the object of his present obsession.

The preparations he had assigned Jacqueline were only a small part of his ongoing efforts to unlock the secrets of this little enigma. Foley did not like mysteries.

The chest was unadorned save for a tiny mother-of-pearl, fleur-de-lis inlay on the lid. Foley cupped his hands around the box. In the shadow thus created, the design gave off a faint milky radiance.

Excellent, he thought. *It's still active.*

With a steady hand, he opened the lid. Nestled in the felt-lined interior was a semi-precious stone no larger than a marble. It was a finely polished quartz, roughly spherical. Its color was a uniform cloudy red except for two black circles at its poles. The north pole was smooth and flawless. The south pole, slightly jagged. Raised areas on the stone's surface made no special pattern that Foley could discern.

He had never expected the gem to prove of much interest.

Sturbridge had presented him with the stone several years earlier, with the expectation that he would perform experiments on it. The exact nature of these experiments was never specified. The stone had a faint resonance, but then again, so did an amazing number

of trinkets, baubles and outright forgeries that found their way into the possession of Clan Tremere.

Foley had done some preliminary experiments, but to little effect. Before long, he'd set the gem aside. He had seldom even thought of it since and then mostly in disparaging terms—a semi-precious stone taking up precious shelf-space.

All that had changed three weeks ago.

Foley had entered his sanctum and found that the precautionary seal which he had placed on the chest was broken, and the lid thrown open.

The very idea that someone had been *handling* his things! It was unclean. It was a violation. Why, it was an outrage!

Foley had already flogged three novices for their recalcitrance when the event repeated itself the next evening. No one in the chantry would have been foolish enough to so mock him after such a pointed and public a display of displeasure. So he'd been forced into a pattern of watchful waiting. He'd checked the gem several times each night, resealing the chest following each inspection. For weeks, nothing changed except the normal degradation of the residual energies. Then last night, the gem had suddenly flared to life again and tonight, as indicated by the glowing mother of pearl, it still seethed with power.

To the naked eye, of course, the gem gave no such indication. Foley, however, had come to rely implicitly upon his little box. He had it on good authority that the chest had been brought out of Versailles just days before things had taken an irreversible turn toward the bloody and squalid.

He laid the list he'd shown to Jacqueline across a shallow copper dish on his worktable. He struck a match and held it to the parchment until the edges curled and blackened. Foley needed the list no longer; he'd taken it back merely on principle.

Before the paper was completely consumed, he took a tapering purple candle from a nearby shelf and held the wick to the fire. The candle was another of Foley's creations. To the casual observer, the only visible sign that the candle had been carefully crafted by hand was that its wick ran the entire length of the candle and peeked from its stump.

The flame caught, the melting wax releasing a faint scent of honey. A moment later, the lower end of the wick inexplicably flared to life. Foley rotated the candle slowly, allowing the lower flame to soften the stump end before slamming it down abruptly onto a wicked iron spike that protruded from the northwest corner of the worktable. A mound of hardened wax—the legacy of several nights of vigilant testing—lay sprawled around the spike.

Foley turned back to the chest already uttering the opening syllables of the proper incantation. Reaching into a recessed drawer, he produced a slender silver lancet. Slowly, he passed the fingers of his left hand through the candle's flame. It did not burn him, but he doubted that his handiwork would show the same consideration to anyone else foolish enough to attempt to duplicate the feat.

With a deft motion, he pricked the tip of his middle finger with the silvered needle and watched as a single drop of blood seeped, coalesced, swelled, and finally fell to the sputtering flame below. The fire drank eagerly, releasing a curl of oily black smoke that was heavier than air. The vapor coiled downward, winding languidly about the candle. Tentative tendrils drifted across the worktable and cascaded over its edge.

Foley placed the tiny chest in the precise center of the table and, with his index fingers, drew back the lid.

The candle sputtered and hissed. The flame seemed to arch its back in response to the presence of the lifeless red stone.

Foley took a pair of long, delicate, silver tweezers and gently lifted the gem from its resting-place. With great patience, he moved it closer to the flame.

Twenty inches away. No change. Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen.

The flame guttered as if buffeted by a strong wind. But it refused to be snuffed out.

The candle was shrinking visibly, wax pouring down its sides from the heat of its exertion. Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen…

There.

Foley had been expecting the candle flame to suddenly surrender the fight with the telltale pop of a small implosion. The same experiment had played itself out for many nights now with nearly identical results. The only variation on the theme was the exact distance at which the stone crushed the fragile flame. That distance, and by association, the gemstone's baleful influence, was increasing nightly.

What Foley was not expecting was for the candle flame to suddenly and inexplicable *rotate* ninety degrees. The tenacious lozenge of flame stretched out lengthwise upon its wick, as if felled by some mighty blow. Lying on its side, the flickering teardrop of flame looked like nothing so much as a tiny smoldering eye. Foley blinked twice in an effort to banish this illusion, but to no avail. Instead, he had the unsettling impression that the flickering orb winked back.

There was a darkness now at the heart of the flame. A shrewd narrowing of pupil. Foley found himself leaning involuntarily closer to the candle. Closer.

The flame no longer shrank from the stone in his hand. On the contrary, it seemed to expand in anticipation of its touch, of their long-frustrated reunion. The yellow eye sizzled, dripping viscous waxen tears. Foley felt as if he were being swallowed, consumed by the baleful stare. He could not wrench his gaze away. His right hand, forgotten, flapped clumsily as if he had lost all feeling in the extremity. It groped, fumbled for pen and parchment.

Finding, as if by chance, the sought-for pen, Foley bore down with a desperate palsied grip. He scribbled wildly. The mad lines staggered off the edge of the page. The delicate brass nib gouged agonizingly into the wood of the worktable.

JA



Thursday, 15 July 1999, 1:27 AM
Seasons Restaurant, Bostonian Hotel
Boston, Massachusetts

"So, you're proposing what, exactly?" Isabel looked sternly at the Kindred before her. He had been sent from Baltimore at the behest of Jan Pieterzoon to entreat Giovanni support against the Sabbat. His name was something French, or maybe Canadian, but his English certainly didn't have any accent.

"Recognition of the Giovanni claim to Boston," replied the agent. "The Camarilla will formally acknowledge the supremacy of Clan Giovanni in Boston and its immediate environs. That is, in exchange for the support of the present members of the clan against the Sabbat's efforts along the eastern seaboard. It's in your best interests, you know."

"Don't patronize us, you fucking pindick," barked Chas from across the table. This meeting had convened at the last minute, by request of Francis Milliner.

Francis was the eldest member of the Milliner family, the Boston branch of the Giovanni. Isabel believed him to be more than a bit paranoid, but she indulged him. Much had recently taken place in Boston, including the execution of one of the most dangerous loose cannons ever known to the clan. Genevra Giovanni had been a Sabbat sympathizer, having use for the Giovanni family only insofar as it served her immediate needs. Not that every Giovanni vampire—and probably every vampire, period—didn't harbor similar selfishness, but the open display had made her powerful enemies among the clan. Masterfully, the Milliners had hidden her elimination beneath a veil of organized crime violence. Isabel had to give Francis credit—he had crafted an almost century-long ruse to use as a smokescreen for whatever untoward befell him and his brood, and never thought twice about playing it out to take Genevra out of the picture. For his foresight and cleverness, the elders of the clan decided to allow him to drink the heart's blood of the rogue, bringing him closer to the power of the elders themselves. Who knows how many other contingency plans Milliner had up his sleeve?

To that end, Isabel had little interest in talking details with a second-rate yes-man. Francis was the man with the plan, but she was his smokescreen, she knew. The Camarilla probably didn't even know that it was Milliners and not Giovanni who exercised the most influence in Boston. Outside a few individuals, everyone knew that the Giovanni were the preeminent power there. Of course, the Milliners *were* Giovanni, but such semantic games were the coin of the Kindred realm. Misdirection and subterfuge could take a Kindred much farther than brute force, and Isabel was walking, unliving proof of that.

"Chas, please. Settle down," Isabel remarked. He was still headstrong, ostensibly here to deal with the Benito Giovanni affair, and a liability to this discussion. Chas was a testament to the fact that sometimes nasty and brutish did the job, particularly in America. He wasn't especially strong, powerful or clever, but he had a mean streak a mile wide and had less and less reservation nightly about showing it to a rival. That had begun to shine through—his eyes had sunk in the few weeks since Isabel had met him, and his once-full

lips were pulled back into a perpetual growl or sneer. His hands were always white-knuckled, as if only by the most persistent concentration could he keep the Beast in check. Isabel knew: Chas was bound to snap soon. She had planned to play her cards right, however, and unleash Chas when it was most convenient, watching him go down in a blaze of glory that would no doubt take a few others with him. The key was to do it subtly, however—again, discretion made sure one need not keep escalating her efforts—and to make sure his inevitable kamikaze took place somewhere visible only to Kindred eyes and nowhere she'd have to call upon favors to cover up among the media, police, etc. Still, he had a point. The liaison sneered at Chas, who bristled visibly.

"But don't let that mislead you—I'm sorry, what was your name again?" She put the diplomat in his place.

The guest's eyes narrowed to slits, regarding Isabel coldly. "Gauthier. Jacques Gauthier. Childe of Paul Levesque, childe of Shlomo Baruch, childe of Christianne Foy, childe of Vidal Jar—"

"Yes, yes," Isabel interrupted, "very impressive. Archbishop of Canterbury, extract of vanilla, Milk of Magnesia, and so the old joke goes. We realize that you're here to represent the Camarilla's interests and that you're supposed to butter us up and make this seem like the most fantastic deal ever to fall into our laps. But let me offer you my counter position. Your approval means nothing to us. Your high-handed 'recognition of sovereignty' and other quasi-political jingoism won't work in this room. You're not dealing with rank neonates. Your Camarilla is not a government, nor is it a military body. It is a simple social convention, a contract supported by its members in the interests of furthering its own ends. Quite frankly, it is a civil sinecure with which bored, effete elders play games and delude themselves. Am I to believe that, if we could not reach an agreement in this room, before the next dawn Boston would face a liveried phalanx of Camarilla shock troops? It's more likely that a few rowdy insurgents of your sect would swagger among Boston's Kindred like a mob of drunken soccer hooligans for a few nights until routed by the very same Kindred whose havens they disturb.

"Your recognition means nothing. Your support means nothing. Your sect is incapable of maintaining the quiet influence it has along this entire coast of one of the most affluent nations in the world, just as it has proven powerless against the unknown Kindred of the East sweeping in from the West Coast. Oh, Jacques Gauthier, don't be so shocked—I've looked into matters. I wouldn't dream of entertaining an envoy such as yourself without knowing the full ramifications of the relations you propose. When weighed against other options, the only benefit that a loose agreement of support provides is in the hope that the Giovanni of Boston could simply turn their backs on the whole matter and allow the Sabbat and Camarilla fanatics to shred each other in the streets. How does that sound? Is that answer satisfactory?"

Jacques had risen from his seat, his mouth open wide, his head turned slightly downward and his teeth clenched. At Isabel's side, Chas twitched, undead veins bulging, like an epileptic bound to his chair in the throes of seizure.

"Do not presume that we are so powerless, Isabel Giovanni," retorted Jacques. "The Camarilla, as you say, is not a military organization, but to believe that that renders us powerless is pure folly. Neither is the Sabbat a military power, but these are not battles fought exclusively in the trenches. For every brawling fool who sees this solely as a matter

of martialry, three more Kindred behind him make their moves through quieter channels. This is a war of influence, and the resources of the Camarilla are orders of magnitude more than the resources of Clan Giovanni. We are merely interested in minimizing and localizing the influence of our enemies—and your enemies as well—the Sabbat."

"The resources of the Camarilla! Absurd. The Camarilla has no resources! The only power it wields is that which is voluntarily afforded to it by its members. Your sect is far more fractious and selfishly motivated than you would have us think. The Camarilla does nothing as an entity, and you know it."

"Nor does Clan Giovanni, by that rationale," countered Gauthier.

"True, but Clan Giovanni in this case is a community of Boston's Kindred. We will more than certainly protect our own interests and put aside our personal grudges when opposed with a greater opposition. Whether that opposition is Sabbat or Camarilla—or both—is irrelevant. I know the man who has sent you here. I know Jan Pieterzoon. He has made quite a name for himself among the Kindred, and I suspect he may one night find himself among the—what do you call them?—archons and justicars of the Camarilla. But he will not do it by playing the role of firebrand. Rather, he will master the game of politics, promising one thing, delivering another, and then convincing those beneath him that what they wanted in the first place was what he actually delivered. I know that Boston is only part of Pieterzoon's larger move at this stage, but I'm not going to pretend to know what cards he still holds in his hand. Jan is a much more proficient plotter than I will ever be, but I am far better at seeing the secrets within. Pieterzoon and those like him depend upon Kindred like me to provide the pieces with which they play. I—we, the Giovanni of Boston, may be pawns in that game, but we know that we are pawns. And a pawn that turns against the side that pushes it forward is a dangerous piece, indeed." Isabel stood straight up, arms crossed high over her chest, staring imperiously at Jacques.

Gauthier showed no sign of backing down, however. Pieterzoon had charged him with this negotiation—warned him that the Giovanni were deadly as vipers in their nest—and expected no failure. "You're speaking in metaphors, Isabel. You're occluding the issue. This is not a game, as you want to rush to conveniently reduce it to. Pawns and pieces and chess allusions are the stuff of florid fiction, and we're dealing in matters quite tangible. We need your help. In return, we are willing to leave Boston be. You will not receive such a plain or sincere offer from the Sabbat, as their dominance of the East Coast attests. It may be that you are truly prepared to weather the storm. But I have no reason to suspect that you would prefer to stand against this conflict if we offer you a chance to avoid it altogether."

"It would seem, then, Jacques, that we are at an impasse for the time being. I will take the details of your proposed alliance back and peruse them. You know where to reach me. I suggest we meet again in a few weeks to finalize the nature of the relationship—should I decide one exists."

Thursday, 15 July 1999, 1:48 AM
Seasons Restaurant, Bostonian Hotel
Boston, Massachusetts

"What the fuck were you doing in there?" Chas asked Isabel as they left the building, headed for the silver Audi coupe she had borrowed for the trip. Normally, the car had only a one-point-eight-liter four-cylinder, but Isabel had arranged to "preview" one of next year's upgrade prototypes with the six-cylinder.

"Quiet down, Chas. And don't speak to me like that or I'll have your tongue. Literally."

The pair climbed into the car, which was slung low to the ground. Isabel disdained driving, so she handed the keys to Chas. She preferred luxury cars, of course, for their amenities, but in a city that was about to be torn apart by three rival factions, speed and maneuverability were preferable to cabriolet leather.

"But there's no way you're going to cut a deal with the Sabbat, right?"

"Are you out of your mind, Chas?"

"No, but why were you busting his balls so hard?"

"Who says I have to throw in with anyone? And who says the Milliners would honor it if I agreed to it?"

"But isn't that why you're here, Isabel? To negotiate the deal?"

"I'm here because Francis Milliner asked for me. I'm here to get the most out of this little venture with the least investment on my part or the Milliners'. Why are *you* here, Chas?"

"Benito thing."

"That's right. So why don't you worry about that and I'll worry about this, okay? Have you made any progress on Benito's disappearance?"

"No," Chas had started to scowl, his hands gripping the steering wheel with a new fervor.

"Were you expecting to get something out of that meeting?"

"I figured maybe they'd offer some information about Benito as part of the deal."

"And maybe they will, Chas. Now you see? Putting Jacques over as many barrels as I can means that if he really wants this support arrangement to go through, he's got to give me what I want. Pieterzoon wouldn't suggest this unless it was necessary, so I know I've got a lot of leverage. And Pieterzoon didn't want to come himself, so he sent that little lickspittle so it would look like this is no big deal. So he thinks I think this is nothing. But that's not what I think, get it?" She smiled. Chas was playing the same game of "she thinks I think" with her and she had called him on it, if only allegorically.

The Audi swung around a corner, its wide tires grabbing the road and holding tight as the chassis rolled low to keep the turn radius tight.

"In the meantime, Chas, I've got a side project for you. It'll teach you some fundamental investigation skills."

"Whoa, hang on. I'm not here for you on this deal. I'm still working for Frankie Gee."

"Yes, well, you need the practice. I'll bill Frankie later."

Chas sighed, pointedly, as if to remind Isabel that since he didn't breathe, he meant something by it.

"That's my boy. So tomorrow night, you find out what you can about Jacques Gauthier. And tell me who calls the shots for the Sabbat in this city."

"I already know part two. It's Max Lowell."

"How do you know that?"

"Shit, my haven's in New York. Boston's just a shot up the road. Frankie's moved more stuff through Lowell than I care to think about. Fuck, if this shit comes down to a shootout, it'll probably be with Frankie's guns."

Isabel looked unwaveringly at Chas.

"See," he said with a smirk, "I'm not so stupid as I pretend."

Nope, Chas thought to himself as he boarded the T to ride back to his hotel, *I'm not so stupid at all.* And when he arrived, he dialed Frankie's number—the one with the **# area code.

15 July 1999
Re: Eye of Hazimel FILE COPY

Atlanta---Hesha's courier confirmed among dead from raid; Rolph reports--- no sign of Eye in city. Has it fallen to Sabbat? Not according to info via Vykos's pet assassin/ghoul.

Where IS the blasted Eye?

↳ HELL of a 'raid': Atlanta, Savañah, Columbia, Charleston, Raleigh, Wilmington, Norfolk, Richmond, D.C....

Note: file action update: Pieterzoon, Jan, to arrive in Baltimore tonight.

Part Two:
Far Shores

From Friday, 16 July 1999
to Monday, 19 July 1999



KR



Friday, 16 July 1999, 8:06 PM
(10:36 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Hesha woke rapidly. The sun now setting over the Ganges delta had abandoned Baltimore some ten hours earlier; the long journey had taken them into and out of the night an unsettling number of times. Freed from sleep in the cargo compartments of the jets, he had had time to himself. Since the ruin of Atlanta, his prayers to Set had been too rare, his meditations interrupted too often by the Eye and all that came with it. He let his mind dwell a moment on the dreams his god had sent him—painful but promising visions—and the plans now concrete in his thoughts.

Rolling over, the Setite stretched himself. The casket, lined in suede and filled with fire-retardant gel, only gently confined his contortions. In a short time, he had hands, feet, and proper ears again. With a slickly scaled claw, he felt through the darkness. There was a small plug of gel and leather near his head; he pulled it aside and listened.

"Raf? What in hell did you bring *these* for?"

"Black market. They're very hot over here."

"Fine. You stow them. C'mere, Liz."

Hesha opened a tiny hatch that the plug had hidden. The light outside was dim and slightly blue. Satisfied, he prepared to make his appearance.

Thompson's assured baritone continued outside. "Calcutta has no phones worth speaking of, right? We wouldn't use them anyway. Take this. There's a list of numbers you'll need to memorize, I'll give them to you in a second. But the first and last security protocol for our phones is: no names. Ever. Someone dials up and calls you Dimitros, Elizabeth, Liz, Lizzie, anything—or asks you for any of us by name—you hang up. It's a trap call. After we've got the codes beaten into your head, I'll go over whether you leave the phone where it is, call us, call scram, or what. Now. First rule?"

"No names."

"Last rule."

"No names."

Hesha slipped from the aluminum travel-case into blue-curtained dimness. His personal items were strewn convincingly around the room. His truly private bags sat next to the gel-filled casket and had, by order, not been touched. The bedclothes, rumpled, testified to a jetlagged traveler. The bathroom showed enough signs of use; he seemed not to have had a shower before napping. He proceeded to take one now, and in half an hour a clean, rested Hesha, dressed well but lightly, opened the connecting door to the rest of his suite.

"Good evening."

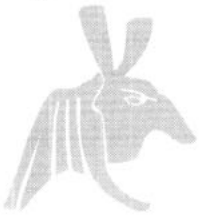
His retainers stopped in their tasks. The Asp set an elaborate machine-gun back into its case. He dropped down beside it on a couch now cluttered with armament. Thompson put down a computer hook-up and found a chair near an empty sideboard. Elizabeth looked up from the central table. Her new phone, a notepad, some guidebooks and a stack of local newspapers lay piled in heaps around her place.

"Report, please. Thompson?"

"Janet's news is waiting on your laptop. Everything here—so far—has gone without a hitch, sir." He made a short, dismissive gesture with his hands. "We're only half-settled in, of course."

Hesha picked a pistol out of one of the Asp's cases and weighed it in his hands. "Reports at dawn, then." Discarding the weapon, he turned and left them.

KR



Friday, 16 July 1999, 11:27 PM
(1:57 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Albert Hall Coffee Shop
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Hesha walked into the old, smoke-filled café with a book in his hand. It was a worn-out, rebound, foxed and tattered copy of Calcuttan folk tales. The Setite obtained a cup of coffee, a small table and a straight, slat-back chair. He settled in as though he had all night to read. Through the haze and the variety of lights—none of the bulbs in the lamps seemed to have come from the same country, let alone the same box—Hesha made, without haste, eye contact with a man at the corner table farthest from the door. The Indian was white-haired and bearded, dark-skinned and hollow-eyed. He spoke, smiling pleasantly, to two earnest-looking young students both bearing, in case an onlooker might doubt, university crests and young people's causes blazoned across their T-shirts, books, and bags. Hesha did not doubt; he was certain these two (whatever their former intentions) would never attend lectures in the sun-lit rooms of Calcutta's classrooms again. He raised his coffee cup to his lips and opened his book to a random page, but he kept one eye on the trio in the corner.

Slowly, courteously, the elder man shooed away his guests. They left, dissatisfied but saving face, without taking notice of the clean-shaven black newcomer who had cut short their audience.

Hesha waited respectfully for a nod from the bearded man, then crossed the tangled, noisy room to join him. Hesha Ruhadze bowed, cleared away some of the detritus left by the students and companionably took up a seat backing the deep blue-and-green wall of the shop. The old man's view of the café was clear now… and so was Hesha's.

"*Nomoshkar*, Subhas Babu."

"*Nomoshkar*, Hesha Bhai. How have you been, little brother?"

"I do well, Subhas. I do very well. And you?"

"I confess that I bore easily; otherwise my life is sweet." He picked up a coffee, not his own, and Hesha followed suit. They pretended to drink, then set their cups down close to emptier vessels.

"I apologize if my unexpected appearance has caused you to lose friends or business, Subhas. I would have been happy to return later, if you wished it."

"On the contrary, little brother. Those children would chatter all night. I am grateful for the release." The old man brought a colder cup to his lips, set it down and smiled. "It is funny. The more I insist to them that I have no Family, the more they convince themselves that I am of their own, but ashamed of them."

"Young warriors looking for philosophy in your venerable mind?"

"Rabble looking for a leader, Hesha. Don't flatter them as they flatter themselves. Flatter me all you like, of course." He laughed softly. "Now, what brings you forth, little brother? Surely not the Festival of Snakes; it is too early."

"Conversation with you, Subhas."

"All the way from America? Next time, fly me to your doorstep; I should like to see the land of riches for myself."

Hesha tilted his head toward his companion. "It brings me forth tonight. Calcutta has changed since last I walked its streets..."

"It *has* streets," interrupted the elder.

"And I trust you to know all there is to know about it."

"You honor me." Subhas licked his lips, pushed his chair farther from the table and crossed his legs. "Make yourself comfortable, little brother. Can you smoke?"

Hesha nodded.

"It is the thing done here, you understand. Accha!" With a wrinkled, spotted hand, he called up an attendant. "My dear girl," he said into her glazed eyes, "clear this mess away and bring us two lit pipes and two used cups."

When she'd left them, Subhas began a catalog of Calcutta nightlife. "You might say the Camarilla is in possession, little brother. They certainly say it. They have a prince; they keep court, and the same cast of characters plays out the same little comedy as in... oh, Lisbon, let us say. Ventrue says he wields the power. Tremere witches behind his back. Toreador pretends to rise above it all. Gangrel disdains to need the others. Malkavian mystifies everyone, including herself. Brujah shakes a fist at Ventrue. And the Nosferatu watch and say nothing. But in Lisbon, of course, Ravnos is a rare and unwelcome visitor. Here I daresay he outnumbers the Europeans." The girl arrived and handed the empty cups and full, smoldering pipes to her patrons. "Forgive me, little brother. I let my poetry run away from me. This is not what you need.

"The eldest Anglo Kindred keep their lairs in the old White Town. Young leeches sleep anywhere they think is safe. They are often wrong. We have many, many dangerous places here. I will tell you these first. I know," he said, shaking his head at Hesha, "that you will *go* there first, so it may as well be. The Gypsies camp by the river, north of the racecourse, under the workings for the new bridge. Do not go near their homes if you wish to keep your senses and your skin. The Gangrel and the Ravnos keep up a fine little war defending the area from each other. Stay out of Chinatown. This is difficult; there are... maybe seven, maybe eight little neighborhoods that could vie for the title. Since you last left us, strange creatures have moved in from Bangladesh and Tibet. Beware of *them*. There are wizards in the south. I have not heard of attacks by them on our kin for some time—but only for as long as our kin have avoided the temples of Kali. The temple district is... uncertain.

"Sunderban jungle is filled with tigers. I need not explain myself, I trust?" Both took long, meaningless drags on their pipes and leaned back in their chairs.

"Hunting grounds?" Hesha asked, after a long silence.

"Everywhere. For a newcomer, if you seek crowds after dark, Park Street is good. The hotels are good. The grounds of the Maidan never quite empty, but I should not risk it. Too many trees, not enough masonry."

"Elysium?"

"Ah. You *want* to mingle with the Camarilla? Such poor taste, little brother. Very well. You are in luck, as usual. Tomorrow night the so-called prince and his court gather to peck at each other. You will find them," he ended, well-bred contempt showing in every line of his face, "at the Bhooter Bari."

Hesha raised an eyebrow. "The Haunted House?" he translated.

"I am afraid so... I believe Malkav's courtier arranges the festivities during Monsoon."

They smoked again, presenting thoughtful faces to the passing mortals. At length, Hesha spoke. "I am greatly obliged to you for your time and wisdom, Subhas Babu."

"May I offer you the opportunity to redeem your debt at once?"

Hesha cast a noncommittal eye over the Calcuttan elder. "Please do, sir. Please do."

"I hear a great many rumors about the situation in the United States. Would you favor me with your considered opinion of events there?"

Hesha nodded and wreathed himself in pipe smoke. "I speak from the outside, of course," he said, thus reserving the Eye and his own losses from the story, "but the facts as I know them are yours..."

Friday, 16 July 1999, 10:48 PM
(4:48 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Iglesia de San Nicolás de los Servitas
Madrid, Spain



The heart of the church was a huge, mostly empty room with a stone floor. In it, a fat man sat on a simple wooden stool, contemplating a chessboard. A smattering of white pieces, including a handful of pawns and a single bishop, had been removed from play. So had a few black pawns, but that was all. White had castled and was concentrating on establishing a strong defense, while black was on the offensive but seemed oddly disorganized, and one of its knights was in imminent danger.

"It seems like a resignable position."

Cardinal Ambrosio Luis de Monçada looked up from the board, a beatific smile on his face. "Ahh, Sir Talley. It is good to see you in the flesh, my son. You are well? The trip was not too arduous? You have fed?"

Talley, as the templar called himself, nodded assent to all of his host's questions. "Your hospitality, Your Eminence, is as always impeccable." He eased his long frame down onto the stool opposite Monçada. Talley was bony and angular, with a face like a hound that has just seen the fox vanish once and for all. His hair was white, though his features made him seem no older than thirty. His hands were his most remarkable feature: They were long and slender, and the fourth finger on each was longer than the middle one. In his living days, Talley had once been accused of being a werewolf because of those remarkable hands; having dealt with any number of Lupines in his time, he now found the recollection amusing. He wore a charcoal-gray suit, clearly hand-tailored by someone who knew how to accentuate the clean lines of the human predator.

By contrast, Monçada wore a simple priest's robe and sandals that flapped against the floor as he tapped his foot, contemplating his next move. "Unfortunately, Don Ibrahim, my opponent in this game, is of the stubborn sort who will fight to the last angry little pawn." He looked up with an expression of mock concern. "And you seat yourself in his place! Truly, my son, I thought you were on my side in this matter."

Talley rose and bowed. "Forgive me. I shall, of course, repair to your side immediately and beg humble apologies for my treachery."

Monçada chuckled, a thick, wet sound. "No, no. Sit. I just find that too many of the young ones these days have a dreadful tendency to get wrapped up in chess metaphors. It's lazy thinking."

Talley did not sit, but leaned over and picked up the black queen. "Mmm. Considering the chessboard, I'm not surprised the privileged few who see it are whipped into a tizzy by it. Lucita?" he said, indicating the piece he held.

Monçada reached a pudgy hand out for it. "Of course. The set itself was a gift from Vykos. He does marvelous work, do you not agree?"

"He?"

The cardinal shrugged massively. "He, she, it—it changes with its whim. I met Vykos first when he had his original form, and that is how I know him. He does me the courtesy of resuming it when he comes to visit."

"Ah. If it's all the same, I'll avoid the issue and keep this form for the foreseeable future."

Monçada gave a delighted laugh. "Your courtesy is greatly appreciated, and I trust you to keep the face that suits the one they call 'The Hound' best." He looked at the chess piece, then replaced it on the board. "Pity she was so reluctant to pose for this. Ahem." He looked up. "You would like to know why you are here, yes? The pleasure of your company is, while something I do not get nearly enough of, not sufficient to cause me to summon you."

Talley kept a poker face. "I trust not for confession, then? I'm afraid I've racked up quite a list of sins in the centuries since Jeffrey first brought me here; I must admit to having been a bit lax in my churching."

"We should make time for that soon, then, my little Hound. I have faith in you to perform the task I've set you without harm, but more faith in other things. God is merciful, but only if we avail ourselves of that mercy. And it is incumbent upon those of us who are irretrievably damned to pay careful attention to how we tend our souls. We are damned for a reason within God's scheme of things, but that does not excuse us from obeying those of God's laws that He has left to us."

Talley shifted uncomfortably. Unlike most of the Sabbat's archbishops and cardinals, Monçada actually had been an archbishop in life, and a pillar of the Church during years when faith was a palpable thing. Oddly enough, his belief had not deserted him upon the Embrace, instead twining around an ineffable belief in his own damnation. It was a curious combination, but a potent one, and Monçada's ability to draw upon the strength of his faith was one of the reasons he was so widely feared by even those who served him. Still, the cardinal's devotion to the sect did little to set those Cainites of little or no faith at ease around him. It was fortunate, then, that Monçada spent all of his time within the heart of his massive, mazelike cathedral haven. The cardinal did not journey forth into the world; the world, when he needed it, approached him humbly and on bended knee.

In the distance, bells were tolling.

"Tut, tut," the cardinal said suddenly. "I trust you to keep your body safe enough to house your soul until you return, and then we'll shrive you. In the meantime, there's work to do."

Talley nodded. He was almost as old as Monçada, certainly faster and possibly stronger. But the cardinal had a presence, an aura of paternal wisdom and sheer power that made Talley feel like a child—a mortal boy—once again. He felt the need to garner Monçada's approval, to seek shelter and safety under the cardinal's beneficent gaze. It was most likely a trick, a side effect of some power or other that the cardinal didn't even realize he was employing, but the impact was devastatingly real.

Then again, according to Talley's great-grandsire Boukephos, Monçada had possessed that gift even when he was alive. It had been, said the ancient Greek, the deciding factor in Embracing Monçada, even over the protests of the Muslim members of the clan who were affiliated with the other side of the Reconquista. Now those self-same Cainites sought his counsel on matters temporal, if not spiritual.

"So what is this work you have for me?" Talley had to force himself away from his contemplation of the cardinal, and it was clear Monçada was aware of his distraction. "I work better when I know what I'm actually supposed to be doing."

"You will enjoy this, I think. It's a bit of a change of pace. You don't have to hunt down and kill anyone, nor will you be walking to and fro in the earth and up and down in it."

"I don't have to kill anyone?" Talley's tone became one of mock indignation. "Then why call for me?"

"Because I've decided it's time to broaden your repertoire, among other reasons. How do you feel about protecting some of my servants against assassination?"

"Bored, actually. Why do you want me to do it?"

"I have my reasons." It was said with an air of finality.

Talley frowned. "I don't like this. Whom am I supposed to be guarding?"

"An archbishop in our little escapade over in America. Shall I tell you the whole story?"

Talley's eyebrows shot up. "Please."

Monçada shook his head, slowly. "There is not much to tell, alas. The American plan is proceeding well, though the leadership of the operation is divided. Schismatic, one might say. There are three archbishops in place, now that Vykos has been elevated, and I'm sure Boukephos has educated you as to what happens to power-sharing arrangements of that sort. One or more of the three tends to fall by the wayside with a dagger in his ribs."

"Or back," Talley added mirthlessly.

"Or back." Monçada nodded. "And in this case, it would seem that the wheels are already in motion. Someone has decided to remove one of my archbishops. Someone has decided to be very certain that this archbishop is removed. Someone has gone to very great expense to hire an assassin to do away with one of those who are doing my will. Naturally, I do not approve of this sort of thing."

"What happened to Vallejo? The last time I met with *Les Amis Noirs* I was told he'd gone abroad to watch Vykos. Why not just expand his assignment?"

"My dear Talley," Monçada said wearily, "your lack of faith in my judgment is disappointing, extremely disappointing. I know the difficulties inherent in this matter intimately; they are why I sent for my Hound, whose heart and skill are sufficient to overcome them.

"Now hush, and listen. An archbishop is the target of an assassin, yes. Do I know which one? No; it is enough that I know that the hunt has begun. Do I care which one? No, though I would be most distressed to lose any of my three able and talented servants. Preventing the assassination would the preferable outcome, of course, but even that is not the most important thing."

Talley drummed his fingers on the table, careful not to disturb the chessboard. "Ah. I see. So I am to insert myself into this little game, protect whichever of the archbishops seems most likely to be removed and hand you the assassin's head on a silver platter? Christ's wounds, Cardinal, it's a joke! Defend three potential targets, all arrogant as Hades

and no doubt bound and determined to prove they don't need me? And it's not as if I'm any sort of—of bodyguard. Get someone whose business it is to tend others."

The cardinal closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a deep breath. Rustling noises echoed from the shadows in the corners of the vast chamber, and the very stones of the floor were suddenly cold as fear. For a second, Talley feared he'd gone too far, but if he had, it was too late to call back the words he'd spoken. It would also be too late to escape with his life; the cathedral was a deathtrap to any who did not enjoy the cardinal's favor.

"What I want from you is simple. I want *you* to tell me who is plotting this foolishness; Vallejo has been there too long and may be compromised. Tell me who feels he is above my commands and the necessity to prosecute the war with the Camarilla, above the demands of the sect and of God. I find such arrogance intolerable, and I will know the author of it, if it costs the lives of a hundred archbishops. I will sire armies, if it comes to that, to uncover this traitor. And you," he said, leaning in close, "you will be my instrument, my Hound on the scent of those who betray me. Go to America, Talley. Watch the archbishops, and watch them watch one another. See who makes the first misstep. See who falls." Monçada's eyes were open now, black as the shadows he commanded, and Talley found himself unable to look away. "Use the ruses you must—I do not care if you tell them you're there to watch over the lowliest pack priest or the operation as a whole. I have already sent word to Archbishop Polonia of your incipient arrival. They will wonder why I have told Polonia and not Vykos, who is perceived as my cat's-paw in all this. We shall see what they make of that; no doubt some enterprising souls will see it as me withdrawing my favor from Vykos; instead, it is a wedge driven between the two, to see if they react to trifles.

"And I don't expect you to 'get' the killer, Talley. One or both of you would end up rather badly smashed if you tried, and I'd rather you didn't run the risk until after I've seen to the state of your soul, and that of my childe. If worst comes to worst, just make a statement to my dear Lucita that she can't simply decide to knock over the pieces on my little chessboard after all."

Talley blinked. Twice. "Lucita?"

Monçada nodded. "Lucita. Now you see why I don't want you to 'get' her. I am," he sighed ruefully, "entirely too fond of you both." The cardinal turned his attention to the chessboard, a frown on his face. "All that you need is waiting for you with Hidalgo, in the blue chamber. You remember the way?"

Talley nodded somberly.

"Good. You are dismissed." The templar stood silently, turned silently, strode silently toward the door.

"Talley?" The cardinal's voice was calm and measured. "Talley, if you see Don Ibrahim on your way out, you may wish to repeat your advice on his game position. I don't think he'll take it, though. I don't think so at all."



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 3:18 AM
(Friday, 16 July 1999, 5:48 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
A Crooked Lane off Albert Street
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

On the dirty steps of a closed bookshop a dark and ragged figure sat as if asleep. From his urchin's perch, the waiting spy watched a tall, dark, bald stranger stride past him and well away into the rainy night. When the black man was out of sight and hearing, the figure unfolded itself. Short, but taller than he had seemed sitting; poorly dressed, but less tattered than first glance would have shown; dirty and saturnine, but more handsome than the layers of grime would suggest—he flicked his wet hair out of his eyes, turned to an empty space in the air beside the steps, and asked it, "Him?"



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 12:09 AM
(Friday, 16 July 1999: 6:09 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Iglesia de San Nicolás de los Servitas
Madrid, Spain

Don Ibrahim never felt quite comfortable entering Monçada's inner sanctum. Part of that was the positive explosion of saints' portraits that lined the walls of nearly every corridor; the iconography was deeply disturbing to Ibrahim's conservative soul. There was also the fact that every bit of wall space that was not covered in graven images was instead decorated with mirrors, which Ibrahim found unpleasant to walk past. Monçada had explained the latter, noting that they allowed him a perfect perspective on most visitors, while not allowing those visitors to see him; but even so the sheer number of the things was oppressive.

In addition, there was the fact that the two Cainites had tried to kill each other on any number of occasions stretching back to the early twelfth century, when Monçada was still a priest whose words moved thousands of worshippers, and Ibrahim was a blade in the hand of the princes of the *taifas*. Of course, both had sworn any number of times since then that the past was past, what was done was done, and so on. The truth of the matter was, however, that politics within the Sabbat made them allies, and if either still harbored a thirst for vengeance, that one simply didn't have enough other allies to afford to indulge it.

The centuries, Ibrahim noted with a rueful smile, *make for strange bedfellows*. Then he strode into the cardinal's *sanctum sanctorum*.

Monçada was on his feet, ever the gracious host. "Don Ibrahim, how good of you to come." Ibrahim noted that the stone floor had been covered in rugs of rich weave and that the cardinal himself was barefoot; both were expressions of respect. "I'd offer coffee, but we both know better."

Ibrahim executed a perfect bow. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Cardinal."

"And you, my friend. I must admit, I have been awaiting your return for some time."

Ibrahim strode purposefully over to the table holding the chess set and seated himself on the stool behind the black pieces. "Oh? Don't tell me you have been that starved for conversation."

The cardinal laughed, politely, and maneuvered himself into the opposite chair. "Not at all. I just have a new stratagem that I thought might be effective against your defenses. I was anxious to try it out."

"Indeed?" purred the Moor, his glance flicking over the board. "Are you so confident of victory that you can afford to experiment?"

Monçada gave an almost bashful shrug. "Truth be told, my most recent guest expressed some doubts about the tenability of your position."

Ibrahim pursed his lips, his curling beard almost brushing the tips of his king and queen. "Oh, no doubt. But are you certain that your guest was not merely saying so to appease you?"

"I doubt it," replied Monçada quietly. "It was Talley."

"Talley!"

The cardinal nodded. "Talley. He was supposed to mention something to you on his way out, in fact. Hmm. Your move, I believe?"

"Talley..." The Moor pondered his position and, after due deliberation, advanced a pawn a single space. "Why, if I may ask, did the Hound grace you with his presence?"

"Because I asked him to, of course. Talley knows better than to visit me uninvited. I think his first visit scared him entirely too much for him ever to be comfortable around me." The heavyset man sucked on a fingertip contemplatively, then advanced a bishop. "I had work for him."

"Of course you did." Another pawn moved forward, blocking the bishop's clean line on the pawn protecting a rook. "What service could the estimable Englishman Talley provide you that one of your other, less notorious servants could not?"

"Are you sure you want to make that move? I'll let you retract it, if you want." Ibrahim just stared, and after a moment the cardinal moved a rook onto a more-or-less clear file. "Ahem. I want Talley in the Americas. Something there displeases me."

"Oh?" Ibrahim picked up a white rook and looked at it. "Would it be obtuse of me not to have noticed before how cleverly this piece mimics your dear templar?"

"Oh, not at all, not at all. Most of my partners never notice at all, nor do they notice the other faces."

Ibrahim grunted an acknowledgment, and continued looking at the set with new eyes. "That bastard Medina Sidonia, Chardin, Muntz... is that Skanderbeg? Hmm. And why is Lucita now my queen? When we began play, her face was on your half of the board. Why the change?"

The cardinal made a small, almost embarrassed sound. "When Vykos made the set, I had him make two queens. A... moment of weakness on my part, I must admit. The side she plays on depends on my mood, and the latest report I have of her exploits. Sometimes," he said as he heaved his bulk into laughter, "she stands on both sides."

Don Ibrahim picked up his queen and examined it closely. The Lucita between his fingers was tall and slender, with high cheekbones and an arrogant cast to her features. Her gown was long and flowing, something that Ibrahim privately doubted she'd ever worn in life, and her hands were folded demurely at her waist. "The likeness is remarkable," he said. "Why has she now joined the ranks of your enemies?"

"The same reason I needed Talley, in truth."

"Don't tell me you're siccing the Hound on your childe. Surely she can't have done anything so terrible." Ibrahim replaced the queen two ranks forward. "And your bishop is threatened."

"Why, so it is," the cardinal replied, moving it back one space and over. "And Lucita has apparently gotten herself involved in something that could stagger the progress of the campaign that Vykos and Vallejo are engaged in. I've received word that someone feels that assassination is an appropriate way to deal with a disliked archbishop, and I strongly disapprove of such things. Lucita is, at this time, a tool of those working against my interests. I dispatched Talley to defend her potential targets. Oh, I don't expect him to succeed, necessarily—neither he nor Lucita holds a clear advantage in the matter—but

the fact that he's present should provide sufficient reason for whoever's behind Lucita's hiring to perhaps think twice. I, too, can dispatch assassins when I must." There was silence for a moment, then the cardinal added, "And I will have your queen in three moves, my friend."

Ibrahim stared at the board. "I don't think so," he said softly. "You'll take her in three moves with the rook, but you don't want Talley to have her."

Monçada sat up, perplexed. "Perhaps not."

Ibrahim moved his queen back to safety, behind a screen of pawns. "Do you have any idea who might be behind this complication?"

"None at all. I suspect, of course, everyone." A knight made a cautious advance. "There are a great many players with an interest in that game, Don Ibrahim, and some may well be concealing their true allegiances. The best I can do is move to protect my interests and those of the Sabbat. Beyond that, it is as God wills."

"*Bismallah*. Still, Allah helps those who help themselves. You've invested much in this matter. Are you leaving yourself too thin on the ground?"

"With God's grace, all will be well."

"You know more than you're telling, of course."

"Of course. Come. I've had a repast prepared for us. You will share a meal with me, as we are now friends?"

"Of course. Shall we return to the game after we finish?"

"Certainly. The game will always be there."

Ibrahim rose. "Alas, my friend, I fear you are exactly right."

Friday, 16 July 1999, 10:04 PM
Two Logan Square
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Morty never really understood the meaning of the term "meaty thump" until the very last second of his existence, not that the knowledge did him much good. After all, his body hitting the weed-split concrete of the sidewalk made the thump in question; and the meat, well, the less said about that part, the better.

From thirty-seven stories up, Lucita looked over the edge of the building dispassionately, her long black hair dancing in the strong breeze. The wind tugged at her loose sleeves and leggings, but less effectively, and the chill of the air failed to raise goose bumps on her olive skin. Once, a wind like this would have brought tears to her eyes, but no longer. She looked over the edge at the splatter pattern Morty's immortal guts had made on impact and tsked to herself. It was messy, too messy. She was getting sloppy in her old age.

Morty had been a warm-up, not even a paying job. He'd simply crossed Lucita's path a year or so previously, the last time she'd been in Philadelphia, and had made a profound annoyance out of himself. Lucita prided herself on keeping an even keel these nights (her sire, Satan roast his flabby, scabby soul, had constantly harped on her temper as something that would someday get her killed), but there were still a few ways to get a rise out of the dreaded Monçada's only childe.

One was to call her "babydoll," "sweetcheeks" or any other such "endearment."

Another was to try for a quick grope, though God alone knew why a vampire felt the need.

And a third was to resort to crude insults relating to Lucita's ethnicity.

Morty had gone three for three in the space of thirty seconds, which had to be some sort of record even among the sort of low-rent dirtballs Lucita ran with these nights. As a result, he'd gotten himself reclassified, moving from the list of "imbeciles who can be ignored" to "practice."

Two nights back, Lucita had agreed to a new assignment. The Kindred who'd arranged the deal had been a quiet sort who seemed to find the entire arrangement bitterly distasteful. Still, he'd been courteous and professional, and she'd found no reason to refuse the offer. The price had been right, the timeframe had been agreeable and she had been getting, not to put too fine a point on it, bored.

But it had been some time since she'd taken on an assignment of this caliber, and she didn't feel quite right about diving in immediately. Instead, she felt rusty. She felt unprepared. She felt like… she needed practice.

And thus it was that Three-finger Morty, one of the meanest sons of a bitch ever to run a pack through the streets of Philadelphia, ended up as a bloody smear on the sidewalk outside a brew pub.

Lucita sighed and hugged herself, more as a gesture of worry than as a way of warding off the weather. As warm-ups went, dealing with Morty had been barely worth the trouble. She'd be after bigger prey now, more powerful, more intelligent, and certainly more likely to be aware of her *modus operandi* than some street-level thug.

"This one," she said to no one in particular, "looks like it might actually be work." Then, without a backward glance, she opened the door to the stairwell and drifted down in its shadows, on her way to leaving the city behind.

Playtime, like Morty, was over. She had work to do.



Friday, 16 July 1999, 11:03 PM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

"Hold still, my dearest." *Damn you, bitch!*

Even with the benefit of his newfound vision, the muse flitted in and then out of Leopold's line of sight. He held his right eye closed with his hand and with great trepidation cast his glance after her.

At first he had swung around trying to follow her, but he'd quickly discovered that the world, once set in motion, did not soon willingly stop. His studio listed like a drunken sot. Up and down, left and right, other and self—such distinctions blurred with the Sight. Too much so in the beginning. Dull blackness had taken him, and he had cracked his head on the concrete slab floor.

Now he moved more carefully, but still the ripples of motion, of Sight and unSight, blurred at the edges, ran together. Or was that the muse teasing him again?

"Come where I can see you, dearest." But she ignored his kindest entreaties. *Bitch! Whore!*

She taunted him. *Capture me, Leopold.*

The studio shifted. Leopold stumbled and fell against—a table, an easel? It gave way beneath him and he crashed to the floor. Her foot passed within inches of his face. Her slender, naked ankle flashed before him as an epiphany. In the back of his mind, something else demanded attention—a finger bent and doubled back in the fall, bone stressed and cracked. He shunted aside the distant pain as images of the muse blossomed—the sharp angle of her ankle, the inviting curve of her calf.

She was gone again, but her seductive laughter echoed throughout the studio, grew from the tinkling of tiny bells to the crashing of timpani and cymbals. The world shuddered. It rolled Leopold along the floor—or was it ceiling now? Yet onward he crawled with the vision ever before him. His artist's mind locked onto the detail that he would render. Though the muse proved elusive, the Sight would not be denied.

Everything had changed for Leopold the night of Victoria's party. Had it only been three and a half weeks? Sometimes it seemed as if a lifetime had passed with every minute, so much progress had he made. So much had been revealed to him. Never again would Victoria or any of the other high-society Toreador, so smug in their shallow little appreciations, laugh at Leopold, for a great truth had been revealed to him, was still being revealed to him.

From the moment he had seen that vision of beauty, the human form stripped of the preconceived limitations of self-awareness—and staring up from the midst of it, the Eye—Leopold had known that he must reproduce the effect. The inherent truth of his discovery would be apparent to all. None would deny his skill, the immensity of his vision. So he had reached down and taken the orb, for it was the heart of his vision.

And the moment of clarity had faded.

Gone was the long-awaited vista of lustrous beauty. With the Eye resting in his open palm, Leopold had stood above a heap of torn flesh and broken bone, the mangled body of Vegel.

Panicked, he'd returned the Eye to its perch, but the orb outshone its surroundings as if the sun appeared in the night sky. The image that had captivated him was no more.

But no matter.

Leopold possessed the soul of an artist, and there it was that he carried the vision. Once it had touched him, he was incapable of forgetting. He snatched up the Eye again and left behind the transient mass that ever so briefly had been a part of ephemeral beauty.

Almost immediately, Leopold had taken stock of the ways that the vision had changed him. Returning to his studio, he found himself surrounded by the flotsam of his previous, unenlightened, artistic endeavors. Just to be in the same room with the pieces that had once engendered in him such great pride was painful. He saw clearly each work's failure.

No wonder Victoria and the others had scoffed at his pretensions.

Victoria. Her name tugged at his memory. He had wanted to find out something... had visited the Tremere witch. But that was a concern from before. Just as the pitiful attempts at sculpture arrayed for his review were from before—and they he could not tolerate.

Plaster molds he smashed to bits. Models he swept into a box that was then hidden away beneath a workbench. And thus the period of Leopold's enlightenment began with the destruction of what had gone before.

A table brushed free of its clutter became the wooden pedestal for the Eye. He placed it there lovingly, reverently. Even after setting it down, he could still feel its moist touch where it had filled his palm. Resting on the table, the heavily veined eyelid slowly opened and then receded from around nearly the entire pulsating sphere, until the protective flesh was nothing more than a tiny base beneath the Eye. Leopold marveled at it.

For weeks, he worked before its unblinking gaze. For weeks the beauty that he had beheld, that he expected to be evident, did not reveal itself in the fruits of his labor. The Eye watched impassively Leopold's embarrassment at his unsatisfactory first model. The Eye watched as he set aside the second attempt halfway through, as he smashed in frustration the third, and the fourth, and the fifth...

Nights passed. More and more often he flew into a rage as desperation took hold of him. With his eyes, within his soul, he had seen the vision. Truth and beauty had been revealed to him. But over and again, his hands failed him. Did he lack the skill to render that which he'd beheld? Had he merely imagined that talent resided within the sinews of his fingers?

Only once during that time did Leopold falter in his quest. *Victoria*. Her name came to him unbidden on that second night after his wondrous discovery. He moved toward the stairs of his basement studio. He would go to her. She might need him. But then his gaze, as it inevitably did these nights, fell upon the orb of his passion, and merely the sight of the Eye, waiting patiently amidst its burbling and fizzing secretion, returned him to his senses. Victoria was no more than any other of the unenlightened. Why would he interrupt his labors for the likes of her?

And then the muse had spoken to him. *Trust,* she said, her sensual voice massaging the muscles and tendons that failed him. *Trust.*

All thoughts save those of his art were banished from Leopold's mind.

Trust.

He set aside his precision tools and modeling clay. Stripped of process and regimen, he stepped as a naked child to the marble block. He set chisel to stone and reached within his soul for the angle and pressure that would set free the perfection he had witnessed, which he knew resided as well within the stone. Each tap of the hammer chipped away marble from the veil that concealed truth. He would find it and show it to the world.

And his greatness would be revealed.

All the while, the Eye watched.

Night after night, Leopold worked. He rose at sunset and went straight to his art untroubled by thoughts of feeding or any other distraction. The vision was his sustenance; the task before him, his only consideration. As more stone fell away, a form began to take shape, but Leopold would not allow himself the luxury of stepping back and viewing the larger picture. He would not allow himself the slightest respite or reward until the representation of his vision was complete. Over the tiniest details, he labored hour upon hour. From top to bottom, head to toe, the piece began to take shape. Leopold relentlessly chipped away at every granule of marble that did not belong until, finally, he was done.

Leopold laid down his chisel. He had viewed the Eye, tangible memento of the most perfect of forms and then looked upon his own accomplishment. The hollowness in his stomach took him as if in a death grip, for he realized that his work was a crude mockery of the beauty he had envisioned. Not a hint of truth could he find in the curve of its limbs, and not the faintest trace of perfection. His child was stillborn. A deformed, freakish abomination.

That was when he had first heard the laughter of the muse—cruel, mocking laughter. She did not recognize the expenditure of will, the great effort he had put into the work. She recognized only failure. Her laughter filled Leopold's heart like acid, for he could not defend the shortcomings of his failed masterpiece. With an anguished cry, he took his largest hammer and set upon his work. Within the hour, the labor of weeks was transformed to rubble, but even the rubble offended Leopold, mocked his pain. He continued with the hammer, smashing each piece of marble, no matter how small, until in the end only fine powder remained. Still his failure was not purged, and the muse's laughter taunted him. Leopold saw Victoria laughing at him as well. She stood before him in her lavish evening gown, garishly begemmed, and his failure was her entertainment. He had set out to prove his worth to her, and he feared that his failure had done just that. He determined to erase the sneer from her lips. He took his chisel and laid it upon the cleft of her bosom and swung his hammer with a fierce and defiant scream. But she was gone, and he merely fell to the floor sobbing.

And all the while, the Eye watched from the center of its simmering pool of juices.

Again the muse spoke to him. Leopold hung on her every word. He could not begrudge her the rejection of his masterpiece, because she was right. He had failed badly.

What is the essence of life? Of beauty? she asked. Her question floated to the highest, most remote corner of the studio.

The essence of life. The essence of beauty.

She had told him to trust, and he had trusted. But that was not enough.

The essence of life. The essence of beauty.

For hours, Leopold lay on the floor in earnest contemplation. A fine dust of pulverized marble settled on him until he could have passed for one of his own creations. As the sun rose and he skulked down to the cellar, the muse's words rang in his ears.

The essence of life. The essence of beauty.

A day and a night and a day he lay pondering. When he rose again, he gently wrapped the Eye in a clean cloth and gathered together the chisels and tools he would need. Thus equipped, he ventured out of the studio.

Leopold had practically forgotten about the Atlanta skyline, about the bohemian hubbub of Little Five Points toward which he naturally gravitated. He noted the outside world only briefly, however. The grungy clubs and sex shops, the punks and hippies, unwashed vagrants old and young—he had seen them all before, and though in the past this scene had sparked in him impulses of the avant-garde, now he was absorbed by the life of the mind and of the spirit.

The essence of life. The essence of beauty.

Leopold ignored the buzz of humanity as he moved along Moreland Avenue. He slipped away from that thoroughfare, past an apartment building, beyond a dilapidated Victorian house and wound his way through a deep wooded lot. Night after night he returned to the thick oak tree that he found. Night after night he carefully unwrapped the cloth and set the Eye on the ground so that he could watch it, so that it could watch him. Leopold lost track of how many sunsets brought him to the oak—a week's worth, two weeks'?

At last he was finished, and he gazed upon his work—a failure as complete and utter as that which had come before it.

The muse's laughter sounded throughout the meandering copse of trees. Every leaf danced with the weight of her disdainful mirth. The vaguely human figure carved into the trunk of the oak seemed to laugh at Leopold as well. He laid his hands upon its face and dug his fingers deep into the wood, which crumbled beneath his touch. Splinters pierced his flesh, shot beneath his fingernails, but Leopold had no room for mercy, neither for himself nor for the tree-figure. He ripped and clawed and shredded until the laughter died away.

Suddenly overcome by exhaustion—how many nights had it been since he had fed?—Leopold fell to the ground. His most valiant efforts had been for naught. He clasped his hands, gory with sap, over his face. As he lay and mourned his incessant failure, his gaze fell upon the Eye, and as surely as Saul was blinded on the road to Damascus so that he might become Paul and truly see, an epiphany was visited upon Leopold. Firm in the conviction that his entire existence, both kine and Kindred, had been spent in preparation for this moment, he reached out.

For the three nights since then, epiphanies had followed one after another. Scarcely two or three hours had passed when Leopold hadn't caught sight of the muse. She led him toward the eternal, the undeniable aesthetic, and with his newfound vision, he followed.

Leopold crawled to his current project, but the studio turned upward like a crazed gyroscope. He lurched to the side, grasped for a table leg, but was closer than he had realized and smashed his face into it. Paralyzing fear shot through him.

Gone for the moment was any thought of his glimpse of the muse's ankle and the well-toned curve that led upward to fleshy thigh. Leopold closed tightly his eyes, his left eyelid stretching taut and unable to protect its new charge completely. Fingers quivering with trepidation, he inspected by touch his face and breathed a sigh of relief to discover no damage. He hadn't hit the table so hard. The Eye was safe. The Sight was still his.

Leopold turned again to his project. Behind him, the muse's high-pitched giggling tempted him, but he did not turn. He would not be distracted until he had performed the proper stroke, until he had been true to his vision. Then he would be free to pursue the muse further.

He crawled through the gelatinous ichor that seeped from the Eye and dripped to the floor before him. Finally, the feet loomed close. Leopold did not look up at the full figure, at the young man tied naked to the post, his raised hands swollen and blue above the rope. The sculptor was too intent on that which must follow. He reached around blindly, never taking his gaze from the ankle mere inches from his face, and pulled toward him the chisel and hammer that were never far away.

Imprinted on Leopold's soul was each glimpse of the muse—the perfection of line and form that he would have been forever blind to, were it not for the Sight.

He raised the chisel to the upper curve of the bone and with a delicate stroke, despite the fact that this was not his medium of training and experience, he carved away that which did not fit his vision. He was not daunted by the sliding of flesh over bone. Each tap of the hammer was precision incarnate, the pressure of his grip upon the chisel steadfast. He worked with the diligence of a master sculptor spurred to ever-greater heights by the compelling force and beauty of his vision.

A tiny flow of stale blood dribbled from the incision. Though Leopold had feasted the first night of his transformation, almost each cut managed to draw forth a tiny reserve of blood hidden in the tissue. He caressed the wound, brought his fingers to his lips, tasted the gritty mixture of marble dust and blood.

How resilient is the human body, Leopold thought, *how full of potential.*

Just then, he noticed the heavy silence that had enveloped the studio. The air did not stir, no sound from outside intruded, and most telling, the laughter of the muse was not to be heard.

Have I done it? Leopold wondered hopefully as he gazed at his work, though he did not feel that he could be finished. Surely he would know when the momentous occasion arrived.

Ever so slowly, so as not to imbalance the precarious world, he turned from the naked, carved form. He squinted shut his right eye to eliminate the overlapping perspectives of Sight and unSight. The studio walls grew faint, pale, as if they were half-finished set pieces on a minimalist stage. Columns took on a translucent sheen. Everywhere Leopold looked, the periphery of his vision was a dancing swirl of colors, a swarm of multi-hued locusts. He continued carefully to turn, and his restraint was rewarded.

For a split second, she stood revealed to him in her glory, yet even though he could now, with the Eye, see her, her ineffable visage was beyond his ability to comprehend. The Eye saw, but the Sight could not encompass. Again the world shifted. Leopold fell to his knees. The studio shimmered and swam before him.

But he could see the displeasure on her face. The disappointment.

So fragile, she said as she gently shook her head.

Leopold, his reality gyrating wildly, turned back to his work. The carved nude hung as if from the ceiling, but his hands were tied below him. Leopold fell to his elbows with a jolt, and the studio righted itself somewhat, though its bearing continued to fluctuate like the needle of a scale swinging from heavy to light to heavy, on and on, and only slowly closing in on the true weight.

The nude hung lifeless, its posture stiff, while at the same time its limbs were limp. Here and there, chunks of flesh and bone were gouged away—the brow, shoulder, belly, hip, knees, ankle. Only now did Leopold perceive the flies that amassed around the sweet smell of carrion.

So fragile.

Leopold threw the hammer away from him. It sailed into the distance, miles and miles to the other end of the studio.

Lying whore! he wanted to shout at her.

But, again and inevitably, she was right. He could look upon his folly no longer. With an anguished roar, Leopold slammed the chisel into the body. Ribs snapped as he embedded the tool in the chest cavity. The nude recoiled with all the emotion of a sack of flour. Neither did it object as Leopold wept on its bruised and bloodied feet.

"Why?" he cried. So much work and for no purpose. Leopold strove to convey the perfection he perceived, but again he'd failed. He would go mad with failure. He must succeed.

Away from here, she teased, her playful nature having quickly returned. *Away from here.*

Away? Her words latched onto Leopold. He slowly cast his hybrid gaze around the studio.

Away from here. Away from this place, his thoughts echoed her words.

The hard concrete, the plain, wooden interior—they were unremarkable to his Sight, almost immaterial. How could he hope to express truth among such drab environs? His spirits rose at the implication that the failing had not been completely of his skills. Of course he would succeed. Why else would the muse have chosen him?

Patience, he chided himself. *Patience.* But he wanted this so badly!

Mmmm, she purred very close to him. She breathed deeply of his confidence. *The tools, Leopold...I will take you to them.*

Yes, the tools. The hammer in some dark, far-off corner, the chisel embedded in the abomination—these were the primitive tools of his failure, and like this studio, this city, they were contaminated by his unenlightened hands of yesterday.

I will take you to them.

To the proper instruments. To a place of enlightenment. She would entrust to him the relics of perfection, and he would wield them in a shrine to beauty. She was his muse, his goddess, and with the Eye he would learn her mysteries and become high priest of the hidden truth. The unenlightened masses would beg to drink from his hands.

Come.

"Yes, dearest." The world swirled sickeningly with his every step, but still Leopold followed.

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 12:37 AM
McHenry Auditorium, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

Security was heavy. Not surprising considering the events of just a few nights past. Jan slipped in as unobtrusively as possible through the door near the head of the auditorium and occupied a vacant seat on the front row. En route, he nodded a polite greeting to Prince Garlotte, who stood near the center of the well. At the moment, however, Victoria Ash seemed to have the floor and was speaking to the receptive gathering.

Jan had known that Victoria would be present, yet the first sight of her triggered a slight fibrillation in his chest. He had first met her years ago at a social event in Paris, then seen her again on similar occasions in London and New York. He'd seen her last three years ago; she'd attended one of his corporate galas in Amsterdam. Each of the encounters had been brief, polite, consisting mostly of superficial pleasantries, yet each time, he'd walked away feeling the exchange had been... loaded, that each word brimmed with meaning and passion revealed only in tiny, innocuous, *maddening* morsels. There was no single phrase or glance on which he could pin this feeling, yet the impression persisted and was renewed more forcefully with their every meeting.

Tonight was no exception. Victoria wore an off-white, beaded gown. The high neck was conservative, but the dress was form-fitting and complimented her figure nicely. Her long gloves and the gold locket that hung from her neck lent an air of stateliness, while the plunging lines of the dress's back teased of the sensual. Jan's initial reaction was the desire to lead her from this crowded chamber and sit with her privately, to spend hours doing nothing but listening to the music of her voice and gazing upon her beauty.

Jan closed his eyes tightly and squeezed the bridge of his nose, a gesture born only partly of fatigue. He struggled to clear his mind. From his brief conversation with Prince Garlotte earlier, and from what he'd learned from other sources, Victoria was likely to be, if anything, an impediment to the task at hand. Jan could not afford to allow gentle feelings to stand in his way. Regardless, he knew quite well that his attraction to her was the result of more than her charming personality and pleasing appearance. More subtle forces were at work, and to be enthralled by one such as her would not be wise. That knowledge, however, did little to diminish the allure of the prospect.

"Baltimore must become the bastion of Camarilla resistance," Victoria was saying. Murmurs of agreement rose from the assembly. "This city will become the bulwark against which the fiends of the Sabbat cannot hope to prevail, and then we shall turn the tide. How else will we ever regain Charleston, Abigail? Or Richmond, Peter?" The individuals mentioned, and others, nodded solemnly and voiced their support.

Jan casually surveyed the chamber. Theo Bell appeared to be among the unconvinced. He sat, arms crossed, silent as the sphinx. Judging by appearances—not always accurate, Jan knew—there seemed to be a sprinkling of other Brujah seated around the brooding archon, though not as many and not as boisterous as reported from the first meeting of the conference.

Jan suspected that their numbers and their enthusiasm had been thinned somewhat by the vigorous resistance Bell had been coordinating on the outskirts of Washington.

There was Robert Gainesmil, Prince Garlotte's Toreador advisor, and not far from him another figure of decidedly noble bearing. Jan had never met Marcus Vitel in person but knew of the prince of Washington, D.C., enough to recognize him on sight. The exiled prince seemed practically disinterested in Victoria's platitudes. He watched through the eyes of the defeated. While Victoria had been driven from a city, Vitel had been driven from *his* city. He was more intimately familiar with the odds they faced.

Another face of skepticism among the malleable crowd was that of the Tremere representative, Aisling Sturbridge, regent of the chantry in New York City. She was a slightly built woman who appeared in her mid-thirties by mortal reckoning—as little as that meant among the Kindred. A long, black ponytail hung over the shoulder of her stiff business suit, and an open laptop computer rested on her knees. Jan knew all the gory details relating to the previous Tremere representative to the conference—the assassination to which Victoria had been a witness, an innocent bystander, if her account were given weight. The assassin had, of course, escaped—so utterly without trace that some Kindred were left to speculate about the loyalty of certain Nosferatu, while others spoke in hushed tones of a more menacing possibility. *Clan Assamite*.

As Jan's gaze drifted back to Victoria, he was careful to keep a tight rein on his thoughts. Business must be tended to. Hardestadt would not brook failure.

Without the flagrantly disruptive competition from the Brujah, Victoria seemed to be encountering little resistance in her address to the gathering. The collection of refugees continued to nod and echo her pronouncements on the necessity of concerted effort. As Jan watched, she came to a natural pause and her vibrant, green eyes turned to gaze directly at him. She blinked, slowly, once, and Jan felt a tickle against his cheek, as if her dark eyelashes caressed him across the few yards separating them.

Prince Garlotte stepped forward and drew the attention of the assembly. "Fellow Kindred, allow me to take this opportunity to present an esteemed guest who we are honored to have with us this evening: Mr. Jan Pieterzoon of Amsterdam."

Jan nodded again to the prince and stood, as all eyes in the auditorium turned to him. "Ladies, gentlemen." He bowed to the assemblage.

The prince, whose response to Jan in their brief conversation had been mixed, fell silent, and so the first question seemed naturally to fall to Victoria. "Mr. Pieterzoon," her smile washed over him like a warm bath, "welcome to Baltimore, to the United States." Her eyes were electric, but Jan held firm and was not drawn in. "What news do you bring from our European friends?"

Jan held her gaze momentarily, let her see that he would stand his ground, then shifted his position so that in facing her and the prince he did not have his back to the rest of the gathering. He smiled slightly and looked over the seats. These were delicate seconds, and Jan would not be rushed. He chose his words carefully. "I thank Prince Garlotte, and the rest of you, for your hospitality. It has been several years since I visited these shores. I only wish that we met under more leisurely circumstances."

An expectant silence quickly overpowered the minimal anxious shuffling in the auditorium.

"I am pleased to hear you speaking of concerted action to turn back the Sabbat, for this is the strategy I am here to advocate," he said. "These attacks launched by the Sabbat, beginning in Atlanta just over three weeks ago, are unlike any we've seen before. They are a greater threat than any we've faced before." He paused to let his words sink in. Jan was not telling them anything they did not already know, nor was he trying to comfort them. He was giving voice to their considerable and legitimate fears, without resorting to the popular wooing he'd heard from Victoria.

"I have been sent by the elders of the Camarilla to support this effort, to lend aid in coordinating the defense," Jan said.

A murmur swept through the gathering. The palpable anxiety seemed to slacken the least bit, as Jan had intended.

"So you bring with you troops to oppose the Sabbat?" Victoria asked.

"No," Jan answered quickly. Equivocation at this critical juncture would be fatal, could only be seen as a sign of weakness. "The elders, my sire Hardestadt the Elder among them, believe there are resources enough here to meet the threat."

Total silence. Jan had spoken boldly. Most of what he said he believed to be true, though the implication that the decision had come through an organized, deliberative process of the elders he rather overstated. In truth, he had no idea how the decision had been reached, or exactly who had been involved. He only knew the scant details that Hardestadt had revealed to him. Now, Jan waited for the inevitable backlash.

Of the American Kindred, Victoria found her voice first. "No? Just… *no*? You bring no military force whatsoever?"

"That is correct," said Jan without missing a beat. "I bring my personal experience and the support of—"

"Treachery!" someone shouted. Others took up the call.

The Brujah element, subdued until this point, came to their feet as one—except for Bell, whose expression and manner remained unchanged. The others howled in protest. They filled the air with insults and threats directed at Jan and his Old World masters. In one instant, they'd become ardent supporters of Victoria, as Jan knew they must.

The other refugees reacted vehemently to the news as well. Heated and desperate conversations flared around the chamber. One Kindred—a Malkavian, Jan hoped—actually tore hair from his scalp and gave in to tears. Most others reacted less extremely, but none favorably.

Prince Garlotte moved closer to Jan. Jan had given this same news to the prince earlier, so Garlotte, though not pleased, was not surprised. Nor would he have been surprised by the reception Jan received. Garlotte's concern now was for his guest's safety.

"I think you'd better come with me," the prince said, indicating the nearby door through which Jan had entered not long ago.

Jan raised a restraining hand to his clansman, the prince. "I will stay."

Garlotte eyed the increasingly threatening crowd, and nodded respectfully to Jan. The Brujah had resorted to uprooting seats again, one of which flew past not too far from Jan and the prince. Garlotte signaled to Gainesmil, then moved closer to the throng with his hands raised before him. Gainesmil began to circulate among the crowd and speak quietly to those

he knew personally. Gradually, and seemingly of its own accord, the din lessened. Soon relative calm was restored.

The disbelief smoldering in Victoria's eyes was representative of those around her. "With all due respect, Mr. Pieterzoon," she said with thinly veiled daggers in her voice, "what use are you to us? How is a lone… *ambassador* going to turn back the Sabbat?"

Jan took on a thoughtful expression. He clasped his hands behind his back and moved away from the door. He walked past Garlotte, past Victoria and made his way to the center of the well. He ignored the assembled Kindred, perhaps fifty of them, the mob that moments before had threatened to tear him limb from limb, to stake him, to leave him out for the sun, and worse. He ignored them, but felt each one of them watching his deliberate movement. *Let them watch,* he thought.

"No single individual," Jan said, "is going to turn back the Sabbat, Ms. Ash. Not me, not yourself, nor the prince, not even the capable Archon Bell." He gestured toward Theo. "But I may be of some assistance in planning the defense. *Our* defense. For the Camarilla is one body, and should the Sabbat triumph in North America," he paused for what would have been a long breath, "it would be only a matter of time until they triumphed in Europe. The elders are quite aware of that fact, of the necessity of stopping the Sabbat here and now.

"What, may I ask," he said quickly before Victoria could interject a comment, "do you consider to be the purpose of this conference, which I believe you initiated, Ms. Ash?"

Victoria was taken aback by his question, but only momentarily; then she smiled and replied in her polished manner, "I consider this conference to be the entity best able to coordinate the defense of the territory remaining to the Camarilla and to reclaim that which has been lost."

"And how should it function?" he asked.

Victoria's eyebrow rose. "Meaning…?"

"Meaning," Jan said, beginning to take on a scholarly tone, "what specific role should this conference fulfill? There are princes and their advisors in each Camarilla city." He gestured toward Garlotte. "Do they not coordinate their own defenses?"

"Of course, each prince ably defends his own city," Victoria said, "but isolated cities cannot stand against the fury of the Sabbat, against this army of beasts that marches against us."

"Again, I ask, how should this body function? How, specifically, in relation to the princes? Should they subject themselves to the decisions of your conference?"

"It is not *my* conference," Victoria snapped, somehow without seeming to lose her temper. "And the decisions should flow from this body."

"The princes should subject themselves to the decisions of this conference?"

"Yes," Victoria said. "They should subject themselves to the decisions of this conference—for the good of the many." She swept her hand through the air, indicating the members of the assembly, and again mutterings of support emanated from their number.

Prince Garlotte unwittingly mimicked Theo's manner by crossing his arms.

"The princes already answer to a higher authority," Jan said. "It is called the Camarilla." The mutterings died away. "And the deliberative body of the Camarilla is known as a conclave, the highest of which is the Inner Circle." Jan still spoke to Victoria, but his words were aimed at the broader audience. "Are you, Ms. Ash, a justicar empowered to name this gathering a

conclave? Does this body seek to usurp the prerogatives of the Inner Circle in naming you justicar?"

"Of course not!" Victoria answered at once, but then faltered. "I never claimed... no one here..."

"Prince Garlotte petitioned Justicar Lucinde of Clan Ventrue, a duly elected representative of the Camarilla," Jan continued. "I am the duly appointed representative sent by the Camarilla, by the elders of our clans, to assist with the defense and counteroffensive against the Sabbat." Steeled blue eyes locked with fiery green as he held Victoria's gaze. Then Jan turned away from her and to the assembly as a whole. Again, he perhaps overstated the official dimension of his appointment, but who was there here to question him? Who would oppose the will of Hardestadt the Elder, founder of the Camarilla?

"I am not here to subject anyone," Jan said. He looked into the eyes of many of the assembled Kindred, then turned and moved closer to Prince Garlotte. "I am here to extend the hand of partnership to the princes of North America, to help coordinate their efforts. Not to dictate terms to them."

Victoria felt the shift in momentum as much as anyone. "I was not suggesting... of course the princes would have a voice in the conference...."

"I apologize for my tardiness this evening," Jan said, ignoring the protestations of the Toreador. "I was speaking with Prince Michaela of New York. She reports that the situation there is stable, or as stable as it ever is. The effort that has gained our enemies so much in the South is seemingly not replicated in the northern climes. Similar news from Hartford and Buffalo. I spoke with those princes upon my arrival last night."

"But the Sabbat army is before us in Washington," said Gainesmil, taking up the argument on Victoria's behalf. He seemed to have at least one foot firmly in the camp of his fellow Toreador—a detail Prince Garlotte had not mentioned to Jan during the course of their short conversation. "Why *would* there be any trouble in the North?" An approving ripple of comments spread through the auditorium.

"The army to the south facing us is formidable," Jan conceded, "but we would be gravely mistaken to believe that it consisted of every Sabbat on the continent. My sources indicate that some individuals from New York City took part in the attacks, but that otherwise there was practically no involvement from Montreal, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Portland..."

As he listed the various Sabbat strongholds, many of the Kindred who had assumed they would gather an army and then drive the Sabbat back to the Gulf of Mexico fell into an awed silence as the truly desperate nature of their situation dawned on them.

"We may not yet have seen the worst," Jan said ominously.

"And yet your masters," said Victoria, still unwilling to relinquish the floor, "provide us no additional support."

"We must find support more close by," Jan said. "We must find it where we are able. I have made other inquiries toward that end... but I feel it would be imprudent to go into more detail in such a public forum." The way he spoke the words and looked around the assembly was not an accusation that spies lurked in their midst but rather an appeal to Camarilla loyalty. Certainly no one would demand details of plans that might then find their way to the enemy.

Victoria's facade of calm was beginning to crack as Jan took her agenda and twisted it to his own ends. Her face, usually full of healthy (and mortal-like) color, was more brightly

flushed than earlier. Jan could see the wheels turning, as she reassessed her position in light of the shifting sentiment of the masses. Before she formulated a response, however, Prince Garlotte again stepped forward.

"Yes, there are many preparations still to be made," he said, "and so that we may attend to them promptly, I suggest we adjourn this conference. I would remind all guests in the city that hunting in the Inner Harbor area is strictly controlled—and that goes doubly for feeding on employees of this establishment. I direct your needs to certain neighborhoods, of which you have been made aware—Cherry Hill, McElderry Park, Broadway East..."

The assembly began to break up as small knots of Kindred formed to discuss what they'd just heard, or to complain about their lodgings, the hunting restrictions, or any other number of difficulties faced by a refugee in the city of Baltimore, which was now grossly overpopulated with undead. Jan watched them wander away discussing their situations, but one conversation more than the others attracted his attention. He had been watching the larger audience, not Victoria, when the prince had stepped in, but she seemed to have quickly recovered from her general disgruntlement as she glided through the confusion toward Aisling Sturbridge. The Tremere regent and Victoria exchanged civil greetings—Victoria with a relaxed, pleasant expression on her face; Sturbridge, for all intents and purposes, expressionless—then both turned away just enough that Jan couldn't make out what they were saying. Though the childe of Hardestadt had no fondness for English, that was not to say that he wasn't thoroughly versed in the language to the point that he could read lips—an ability that, along with reading text upside down across a desk, had proven invaluable on numerous occasions. Kindred, so caught up in their supernatural world of the undead, often overlooked such simple ploys that were within the capabilities of many mortals.

There was little point in speculating as to exactly what passed between Victoria and Sturbridge, but Jan was nevertheless curious. At the very least, the conversation, as well as the possibility of a new alliance among the ever-shifting politics of the Kindred, was worth noting.

"Mr. Pieterzoon..."

Jan turned from the ongoing conversation across the way. Robert Gainesmil stood at his side.

"The prince would speak with you," said Gainesmil, "if you can spare a few minutes, of course."

Jan shook hands with Gainesmil, the Toreador who apparently harbored ties, if not loyalty, to both the prince and Victoria. "Please, call me Jan." With his other hand, he clasped Gainesmil by the shoulder, as he might an old acquaintance. "My time, as well as my services, are always at the disposal of the prince."

The prince, indeed, had exited the chamber, and Gainesmil indicated the nearby door. "After you, Jan."

Jan inconspicuously glanced once more at Victoria and Sturbridge. The Toreador laughed at something that was said, then the two parted. Jan, ahead of Gainesmil, made his exit as well. *This will be a long night,* he thought. It was not the first, nor, he knew, would it be the last.



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 1:40 AM
Cherry Hill
Baltimore, Maryland

Fin always felt like he stuck out in this neighborhood. Probably because he did. Among the boarded-up stores and abandoned houses, he looked like a drug dealer. Riches among squalor. His new leather jacket was just too shiny, his black hair too perfect. He hated to park his Camaro on the street. Not that he wouldn't be able to track down and settle with anybody who was stupid enough to mess with his car, because he would, but then he'd have the hassle of fixing whatever damage they'd done.

I don't know why I come here anyway, he thought. Some nights he just felt restless, and the next thing he knew, he was walking up the crumbling sidewalk to the shack that looked like it was held together by nothing more than its last coat of paint—and that was chipping and peeling away in a hurry. Nights like these, it didn't do him any good to go see Morena. He loved her, but there were some things that a mortal just couldn't understand. Not that he was likely to get much sympathy here.

Jazz opened the door. "Well, if it ain't our own Boy Hollywood. Is that a new jacket? I hope you Scotch-guarded it. You know how messy it gets in here." She called back into the house, "Yo, Katrina! Your fancy brother's here!"

She stepped aside and Fin went in. "I'm not her brother."

"I forget how these things work," said Jazz. "I ain't as high and mighty as some folks." She showed him a wide, hissing grin, revealing the fangs that marked her for what she was.

Tarika lounged on an old, lopsided couch that was literally on its last leg. Her skin matched almost exactly the dark Naugahyde. "Looking spiffy, Fin. Mind if I take your wheels for a spin?" She and Jazz each wore loose tank tops and tight jeans.

Fin tried to ignore the two women, tried not to let on how uncomfortable they made him. They were brash and street-smart and from a part of the mortal world—the bottom end of the spectrum—that he'd never been familiar with. He didn't really want to be familiar with it now either, but this was where Katrina was. She sauntered into the room barefoot, wearing only a too-tight, white T-shirt and painted-on jeans.

"What d'you want?"

Fin hesitated. He didn't know why he'd hoped for something different. This was how it always went. The way Katrina saw it, he had to be there for a reason. There seemed to be no chance he could ever just hang out.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Same as I'm always doing." Katrina just stood there, waiting for him to say whatever it was he'd come to say.

"How's that little pincushion of yours in the suburbs?" Jazz whispered in his ear. "Why don't you ever bring her by?"

"She better for biting or licking?" Tarika asked with an evil grin that showed her fangs to best effect. She rubbed the tip of her tongue slowly over her teeth.

Fin refused to be baited. "What do you think about all the... stuff going on? In the city, I mean. And Washington."

The question was meant for Katrina, but Tarika didn't hesitate to answer. "Shit. They have a sale on fangs at K-Mart or something? Can't throw a brick in this neighborhood without hitting a damn vampire."

"Day-time folks gonna get nervous if people keep disappearing," Jazz chimed in. "Now us, we don't kill people. We always let 'em live and let 'em go. Need as many fish in the pond as we can get. Ain't that right?"

"Mm-hm," Tarika agreed.

They were irritating, but in a way, Fin was almost glad that Jazz and Tarika were there. At least they talked to him. Katrina just stood and glared.

"What do you think about it?" he asked her.

"I don't think nothing," she said, and leveled her glare at the other two women, so they'd know they were talking more than she approved. "Those losers will move on soon enough, or maybe I'll start offing them myself, if they get in our way."

"Yeah. We got dibs on this neighborhood," Jazz said.

"I've been thinking," Fin said, "about... about maybe trying to, you know, take a more active role. I mean, our sire *is* the prince, and if there's stuff that needs to change..."

"Why you telling me this?" Katrina asked. "You do whatever you want."

"I thought I might be able to help," Fin tried to explain. "I mean, if there are too many Kindred around here, it could endanger the Mas—"

"*Kindred*." Katrina spat the word mockingly. "What the hell is that supposed to mean anyway? Garlotte isn't my daddy, and you aren't my brother. You do whatever you want; tell them whatever you want. I don't care. *We* don't care."

"That's right," Jazz said, as she stepped by Fin and to Katrina's side. "We don't need none of them."

Katrina took hold of Jazz, ran a finger along her bare throat. Jazz raised her chin. "We don't need none of you," Katrina said. She ran her tongue along Jazz's neck, up over her chin. They ended with a long, lingering kiss.

Fin turned and walked out of the house. They'd made themselves clear enough. He'd been stupid to think that Katrina might ever accept him. That was what he seemed to come away thinking every time he came. Maybe a trip to Morena's would make him feel better after all.



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 1:48 AM
Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

"You take quite a few liberties in arranging for the defense of my city," said Prince Garlotte. This statement came directly on the heels of a few perfunctory questions as to the suitability of Jan's lodgings.

The prince's straight-backed, wooden chair was elevated slightly above Jan's, giving the vague impression of a king on his throne. The two were alone. Gainesmil, much to his chagrin, had been dismissed after escorting Jan to the modest sitting room. Jan gathered his thoughts as he regarded Garlotte carefully. The prince's words did not actually convey anger, but the statement was most definitely a challenge.

"My hope," Jan said, "is that we will be able to defend all of the territory remaining to the Camarilla. Baltimore is, at present, in the foremost danger. I have endeavored to make use of contacts external to the city, as I imagined your efforts to be directed at keeping order within the city. Maintaining the Masquerade in the face of such an influx of Kindred can be no simple affair. If I have overstepped, my prince, I ask only your forgiveness and the opportunity to set matters aright."

Jan spoke casually yet respectfully. The ease of his manner belied the great importance of what came next. Though preferable, it was not necessary that he secure the complete and total cooperation of the prince. If, however, Garlotte stood squarely against Jan, there would be little room for maneuver. The situation would quickly become very complicated. And perhaps bloody. Jan would be compelled to seek support in other quarters—Victoria, Gainesmil, Sturbridge?—possibly in an attempt to oust the prince, so that Jan could carry his plans forward. And even then, there would still be the necessity of dealing with Garlotte's successor, whoever that turned out to be. So Jan watched Garlotte closely, indeed, as the prince mulled over these comments.

"You contacted the princes of New York, of Buffalo, and of Hartford," Garlotte said at last. "With whom else did you communicate?"

Jan hesitated not at all in answering. There were risks in being candid with the prince, but potentially much more danger in mincing words. "I spoke with Xaviar, justicar of Clan Gangrel," Jan said. He paused to gauge Garlotte's response. If the prince wished to allow matters of decorum to hinder their dealings, then this breach could become a major point of contention.

Jan volunteered information that might answer the prince's next question. "I spoke with him here, in the city, last night. In the interests of speed and secrecy, the justicar chose not to announce his presence."

Garlotte stiffened slightly at this. His nostrils flared, almost imperceptibly. "Does the justicar doubt my capacity for discretion?"

Jan cast his gaze downward somewhat. "I would never presume to speak for the justicar, my prince." He waited in silence.

"Nor would I presume," Garlotte said curtly, "to question the justicar's... ethics. Tell me, Ambassador Pieterzoon, does Xaviar gather an army of Gangrel to come rescue my city?"

"No, my prince." Jan met Garlotte's eyes again. "Xaviar gathers an army, but they go to defend Buffalo."

"Buffalo." The prince seemed genuinely surprised at this news and less than pleased. His willingness to overlook Xaviar's slight to him—a small enough sacrifice if it gained a number of Gangrel to defend his city—began to fade. "And pray tell why?"

"My prince," Jan explained, "that city seems the most vulnerable—the most closely surrounded by Sabbat territory and the most weakly defended. My concern is that if we do not garrison several cities in at least moderate strength, the enemy will prey on those scattered points—like wolves at a herd, bringing down the stragglers, the young and infirm—until we are completely isolated. Toward that end, I've spoken with the Giovanni in Boston, as well, trying to arrange mutual support for Hartford, though I've not met with complete success. The necromancers know of our predicament; they sense our weakness and feel no urgency to come to our aid, though they cannot afford to ignore our requests outright, lest we eventually prevail."

Prince Garlotte nodded slowly, his face solemn. "What you say is true."

"If I may be so bold," Jan added, sensing the prince's irritation ease, "I have contacted several of our brethren in Chicago, as well. As their city appears to be beyond the scope of these Sabbat activities, they've agreed to send a number of their underlings to help meet the threat here."

Garlotte's eyes narrowed as he stared at Jan, then a smile crept across the prince's face. "You seem to have been rather thorough, Mr. Pieterzoon. I imagine you have other advice to offer?"

Jan was careful to maintain his respectful, neutral expression and tone of voice. "If it would please the prince, I do have a few suggestions regarding related matters...."



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 3:00 AM
George Washington Bridge
New York City, New York

More than a hundred feet below, the river passed beneath Ramona, but the motion was difficult to detect except in the scattered patches of illumination. There the surface of the water shimmered and appeared to move quickly through the light from one black nothingness to another black nothingness. This was the night face of the river—the only face that Ramona would ever see. She clung to the underside of the George Washington Bridge as she shimmied along one girder to another. Above her, every few moments, a car rumbled across.

She could be the troll under the bridge and make out a hell of a lot better than three ornery goats. Hunting, she decided, obeyed the same three golden rules as real estate, which her shyster uncle, Kenny, had so often recited: location, location and location. Thanks to Ramona, Kenny didn't sell much real estate anymore.

Ramona paused in her crossing and hung her head back to look at the river below. It really did look like a wide, paved street at night. Maybe that was what gave so many jumpers second thoughts when they stepped over the railing and saw where they were about to go. Jumping into a river didn't sound so bad, as far as suicide went. It was almost like being a kid again and going swimming, jumping into a pond or a pool. But when the jumper stood on the edge and saw what, with the force of impact, might as well be rock-hard pavement....

One then the other, Ramona eased her feet off the girder. The lower half of her body swung down and dangled beneath the bridge. She was neither large nor heavy and barely felt the added weight her arms were bearing.

What would happen to me? she wondered. *What would happen to this thing that used to be my body?*

She had thought herself invincible for a while after becoming what she was now, but as she and the others had traveled east across the country, that... monster, for lack of a better name—a giant blur of teeth and claws and death—had attacked them. What happened to Eddie proved that Ramona's kind were *not* invincible. Far from it. Just when she thought she had everything figured out, it seemed something new always came along to throw her off.

She let go of the bridge with her right hand and let that arm hang loose at her side.

What would happen to me?

Would that sudden impact be the end? Would she crawl from the water broken in body but only needing more blood to be good as new?

Hanging by one hand, Ramona gazed down at the patches of dancing light that broke up the black pavement of the river. Her world had become that black river, and she was a tiny patch of the familiar surrounded by darkness and unknown.

She hadn't asked for this. Imperfect as her old life had been, she would've made her way. Never would she have chosen to enter this world where so much was deceptively familiar, but scratch the surface and nothing was the same.

She lifted one of the fingers of her left hand from the bridge and then a second finger. She raised a third finger, her thumb. One finger held her aloft. It was more than strong enough. The strength of her body, this collection of muscle and bone and tendon that she used to know, constantly amazed her. She felt a claw—where her fingernail used to be—dig into the steel girder.

What would happen to me?

What, she wondered, had already happened to her?

Reluctantly, Ramona raised her right hand and again took hold of the bridge. Like the patches of light on the river, she was not alone, and though whatever responsibilities she took on herself were of her own making, they served to keep her, like the water beneath the bridge, moving forward.

With uncanny ease, she lifted her feet back to the girder and continued her commando crawl across.

Closer to shore, she dropped to the bank, twenty, maybe thirty feet below. She landed on all fours in a cat-like crouch. Scrambling up the incline, she paused to tug at her shoe. The old sneaker felt odd, like the side had busted out, but there didn't seem to be any damage. Probably the drop from the bridge had ripped the insole or something. Ramona hopped over the crest of the bank and tapped her foot to straighten whatever had gotten askew.

"Hey, sweetcakes. Nice acrobatics."

Ramona dropped to a defensive crouch. The guy facing her, however, sat unconcerned on his motorcycle, hands clasped behind his head, feet propped up on the handlebars. He sneered out of one side of his mouth and took obvious pleasure that he'd surprised her.

"Good night for a swan dive?" He started a high-pitched whistle, the sound of a bomb falling to the earth, and ended with an imitation of a splash.

Ramona eyed him warily. Very few people got the jump on her anymore, and those who did very likely meant trouble. His short hair and sharp eyebrows were very dark, a striking contrast to his incredibly pale skin. Blue veins bulged from his biceps, his forearms, his neck.

Like me? Ramona wondered.

She had been more darkly complexioned before… before the change and had paled considerably since. But nothing like this guy. His skin seemed to hug each and every muscle and collapsed to fill every hollow space. His tight features reminded Ramona of what she noticed when she looked in a mirror.

"Sooo…" He drew the word out, and his crooked smile vanished.

Before Ramona could even react to his movement, he was standing before her. From semi-reclined atop the bike to fully upright had taken him barely a second.

At least his display mostly confirmed Ramona's suspicions. He had to be like her. Or worse.

"Are you ready to play with the big boys?" he asked.

Ramona surprised herself with the deep, menacing growl that erupted from within her. The biker inched back almost imperceptibly but immediately tried to shrug off his retreat.

"Who the hell are you?" Ramona demanded.

"The question," he said, "is who the hell are you, and what the hell do you think you're doing here? Last time I checked, this was Sabbat turf, and you ain't part of the club."

Sabbat.

It was a name Ramona had heard occasionally over the past two years, mostly before she and the others had left LA, but what was it? Some kind of gang, but on the West Coast and the East Coast?

She held her ground and watched for any move the biker might make. Ramona had an idea of her own capabilities, but who was to say whether this guy was equally fast and strong, or faster and stronger?

"Not much of a talker, are you, sweetcakes?" he said and began to ease back toward his motorcycle. "I'll tell you what. Since I'm such a nice guy..." he threw one leg over the bike and turned the key, "I'm gonna give you a chance. I'll be back. You be ready to come with me. Otherwise, beat meat now." He kickstarted the bike, revved the engine to a prolonged, deafening roar, and then with a snide wink screeched off down the street and over the bridge.

Ramona relaxed, but not much.

Sabbat.

She and the others had left L.A. because there were so many creatures like them roaming the streets at night. Was New York going to turn out to be the same way?

Cities are where the food is, she reminded herself.

Food. *Blood.*

How quickly she had grown accustomed to this new diet, so much so that she thought of cities in much the same way that she used to think about restaurants. Los Angeles or New York? McDonald's or Burger King?

Satisfying herself that the biker was actually gone—the sound of his engine had faded across the river—Ramona made her way the last few blocks to a relatively small aluminum building. A chain was wrapped several times around the door handle and a bracket on the wall, but when she pulled the door open as far as it would go, there was enough room for her to squeeze through.

"Hey," Ramona called as her eyes began to adjust to the darkness. A light illuminated the center of the open room, ruining her night vision.

"Ramona?" came a small voice from one of the large holes in the floor, also the source of the light.

"Yeah."

Jenny's head rose into view, then her shoulders, then torso, as she climbed the steps from one of the twin grease pits. She carried the type of light on a hook that a mechanic would hang above an engine he was working on. A cord ran from the light back down the steps.

"Is Darnell with you?" asked Jenny.

"No."

Jen was taller than Ramona and blonde. She must've been a looker before, Ramona had always thought, but now she was a bit too gaunt and pale to be pretty. Like Ramona, Jenny wore ripped jeans—torn not to be stylish, but after months and months of wear and tear. But while Ramona sported a ratty T-shirt, Jen huddled beneath not one but two oversized sweatshirts, despite the summer heat.

"It's cold in here," said Jen. She crossed her arms and hugged them to her body. "Are you cold?"

"No."

"Where've you been?"

"Out." Ramona glanced around the abandoned garage. Both bay doors were still chained from the inside. Other than that, she couldn't really see much beyond the small area the light penetrated. Probably, she thought, they could both see better if Jenny just turned off the damned light. Potent night vision was another side effect Ramona had noticed since the change. But Jen clung to her old ways.

Like a jumper to that rail, thought Ramona, remembering the bridge. "Any trouble?" she asked. She didn't see any sign of the biker, or anyone else, having bothered the place.

"No. You?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean, 'not really'?" Jenny was instantly agitated. It didn't take much.

Ramona wished she hadn't said anything. "I mean not really. Some biker acting tough. That's all."

They both jumped when the door banged against the chain. To their relief, Darnell slipped in. "Turn off the fuckin' light."

"Fuck you," Jen snapped.

"Fuck *you*," he shot back. "You can see the light outside through the cracks around the door. Keep it in the pit if you're afraid of the dark."

Ramona sighed. This was why she stayed away. She didn't need the headache. She'd be better off without them. Or she might be dead without them. "Who cares if anybody sees it?"

"You don't sleep here during the day," Darnell pointed out.

Ramona sighed again. He was right. There was no point taking stupid chances. She nodded to Jen, and the light went out. They stood in the darkness for a while. Ramona could hear Jen grinding her teeth, and Darnell shifting his weight from one foot to the other, crossing and uncrossing his arms. Very shortly, they could see fairly well. Not as much detail as with the light, but more range.

"There are others here, too," said Darnell finally. Ramona nodded.

"Others? Where?" Jen looked around frantically as if they were on Darnell's heels and going to break down the door any second.

"Here in the city," said Darnell. "I followed 'em. Watched 'em feedin'."

"Followed them?" The idea upset Jen. "Did they see you?"

"They didn't see me."

"They might've followed you!"

"They didn't follow me."

Ramona looked on as Darnell glared at Jenny. He constantly discounted her fears, but he couldn't seem to ignore her hysteria. He forgot how much they'd each helped one another. They all tended to forget that, Ramona realized, when the danger wasn't right at hand.

"Eddie didn't think nobody was followin' us," said Ramona quietly. A heavy silence fell over them. Darnell shot her a hard glance.

"That was different," he said. "That was a werewolf."

"Werewolf, ha!" Jen snorted.

Darnell turned his ire again to her. "Why the fuck not? It wasn't a bear, and it sure as hell wasn't a wild dog." Jenny's rolling her eyes served only to spur him on. "You've seen what *we* can do, what we *are*. Why the fuck not a werewolf?"

"Doesn't matter what it was," said Ramona. "We got away."

"Tell that to Eddie," said Darnell.

Again, silence enveloped them. Jen set the extinguished light on the floor then sat, feet dangling over the edge of the pit. Ramona watched Jen and knew that they probably never would've met had they not become what they were. They certainly wouldn't have become friends. Jen came from a life of privilege, and this new sort of life had cost her the most. She could be infuriatingly difficult at times, but she'd been one of the few people Ramona had known—ever, before or after the change—to offer kindness when Ramona had needed it. That, Ramona realized, was why she came back to be with this woman who was more troubled by everything that was happening than was Ramona herself.

Darnell was a different story. Unlike Jenny, he could make it on his own. At least he could if any of them could. Ramona watched him as he pulled over a large box to sit on. Like herself, he didn't talk much about before. She knew he'd lived in Compton and that he came from a big family. He'd talked once about his mother dragging him and all his brothers and sisters to church. That was about all that Ramona knew about his old life, and they didn't know much more about hers. The strange thing was that it didn't matter really. Those old lives were dead and gone, and here were the three of them with people they never would've hung with if it weren't for—

"Where did you see them?" Jenny's voice broke the silence. She was shivering in the darkness.

"Farther in the city." Darnell sat on the box, but he wasn't at ease. He was never at ease, Ramona thought, unless he was in motion. Sitting still made him nervous. "I could tell they were huntin'," he said, "so I hung back, stayed out of sight, followed 'em. It was weird. Even before they caught somebody, I could tell they were vampires."

"Vampires…" Jen shook her head and let her voice trail off.

Instantly, Darnell was on his feet. "Fuck you! You don't think we're vampires?"

Ramona sighed to herself. They'd had this argument maybe a hundred times. "If you're gonna yell, we might as well turn the light back on so everybody'll know we're here."

Darnell took a step back from Jen, lowered his voice a little. "We drink blood." He bared his fangs at Jen and pointed to his mouth. "These look familiar? And I don't see you lyin' out in the sun to tan your lily-white ass. What else you think we are?"

"I don't know," said Jen, and then added under her breath, "but I'm not a vampire."

"You sure they didn't see you?" Ramona asked.

Darnell shot her another dirty look but then decided it was an honest question. "I'm sure."

"I saw one too," said Ramona. Darnell sat back down. He didn't seem surprised.

Jen sat up straight, her eyes wide. "The biker?"

"Mm-hm." Ramona looked over at Darnell. "Said he was with the Sabbat, that he'd be back."

Jenny fidgeted nervously, but Darnell met Ramona's gaze.

"Let him come back," he said.

A loud crash filled the garage—the explosive echoing of the heavy door slamming shut. They all three jumped at once. Darnell was down from his box. Ramona dropped into her crouch and was ready to spring in any direction. Jen was halfway down the steps into the pit. She peered up over the edge.

"You leave that open?" Ramona asked Darnell, nodding toward the door.

"Must have."

Ramona didn't see anyone else in the room. She edged toward the door, ready to attack or retreat if either were necessary. At the door, she sniffed the air. A faint scent lingered just below that of old motor oil and cigarette butts. It was a smell she recognized. She'd noticed it several times recently, but she still couldn't place it. Now it was gone again, and she was left standing by the door.

"What is it?" Jen asked from the pit.

"Don't know." Ramona stood perfectly still. She listened for any movement from the other side of the metal door. Nothing. Could the door, only able to open a few inches because of the chain on the outside, have slammed that hard from the wind? She didn't remember feeling any breeze.

Darnell was at her shoulder now. He moved almost as silently as she did.

Slowly, Ramona reached for the handle. With one quick motion, she turned it and pushed the door open. It caught against the chain. She waited. Nothing.

Satisfied that no one was coming in, Ramona counted to three in her head, then shot out through the opening. As quickly as she moved and as narrow as the crack was, she barely brushed against the door as she slid out. Darnell followed her.

Again she thought she noticed the strange, lingering odor, but then it was gone, drowned by all the smells of the city and the familiar scent of Darnell beside her.

"I guess we're alone," he said.

Ramona stared into the night, shook her head. "We should be so lucky."

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 4:43 AM
Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

"My God!" Garlotte bellowed. "I don't know how I was able to face them! Jan Pieterzoon is too coy to show it, but he's snickering at me. All the others are too. I'm sure of it!

"Here I am—prince and master of this city, responsible for the safety of my guests. And assassins are running wild, murdering dignitaries—not on the edge of town, not in some out-of-the-way, shadowed corner of the slums, but *in my bloody haven*! How could this have happened? Tell me that. *How?*"

Isaac was reluctant to answer, not the least reason for which was that he didn't *have* a good answer. And then there was Dennis. Dennis kept staring at him.

Rather, Dennis's head kept staring at him.

Dennis had been Prince Garlotte's chief of security and right-hand ghoul for longer than Isaac had been Garlotte's childe. Now, Dennis was just a head. An open-mouthed, wide-eyed, *staring* head, at that.

In his effort to avoid those astonished eyes, Isaac found himself reflexively stretching his fingers—closed, open, closed, open. He also found himself feeling grateful that vampiric vitae was potent enough to manage the relatively quick regeneration of certain body parts. Say, fingers.

Isaac felt fairly certain that heads were not prone to regeneration.

Prince Garlotte drummed his fingers on the arm of his wooden chair. His last question, unfortunately, had not been rhetorical.

"Assassin," Isaac said meekly.

"*What?*" Garlotte squinted, cocked his head. "Of course it was an assassin. I *know* it was an assassin. Every Kindred from here to Buffalo knows it was an assassin. Why do I bother?" He tossed his hands in the air. "Why? Why do I bother?"

Isaac felt a lump in his throat. He imagined that was a problem Dennis didn't have anymore. The sheriff licked his lips. The prince seemed completely to have missed the point Isaac was trying to make, and though the sheriff had mixed feelings about the wisdom of trying to expand upon his theory, he resented the prince's assumption of his stupidity to the point that he decided to make the attempt. "We think there was only one. One assassin. Not assassins."

"*How in bloody hell would anyone know if there were one or one thousand? No one saw them!* No one but Victoria," Garlotte added. "And what does she do? She runs screaming out of the elevator and through the whole inn. Brilliant! Brilliant, that. My God, if she weren't the most exhilarating woman since Joan of Arc, I'd... I'd..."

Isaac felt very small. Much like a resident of Pompeii must have felt the day that Vesuvius decided to do its thing.

At least he's yelling, Isaac thought. When the prince *sounded* the most violent, he was generally less likely to *be* violent. Probably, after he had finished his meeting with Pieterzoon, Garlotte had calmly summoned Dennis to the sitting room and then proceeded to rip the ghoul's head off. Probably that had blunted the worst of Garlotte's fury. All the rest—the ranting, the yelling, the raving—was just winding down.

Probably.

Winding down just might take a little while. After all, the assassination itself had happened four nights ago. At the time, Garlotte had received the news calmly—always a bad sign. He'd spent every hour of each night and each day since then, no doubt, building up a head of steam.

Could be worse, Isaac decided. The prince was quite capable of building up a head of steam for years instead of nights. The mid-1980s had been that way.

Realizing suddenly that the prince had grown disturbingly quiet, Isaac hazarded a glance at his sire. To the uninitiated, Garlotte would have seemed to have regained his composure—his face was a healthier shade of pale; he was no longer trembling behind his dark beard—but Isaac knew better than to be fooled.

Maybe, he decided, he could soothe the prince with hard-nosed professionalism. Isaac was, after all, the sheriff: "We suspect it was an Assamite."

"Why?" Garlotte scoffed. "Because there's a permanently dead body, and no one saw the killer? So it must be an Assamite?"

"Uh… yes."

"Hmph. You do know there happens to be a Sabbat army just down the road? Might they have an interest in murdering Tremere? I suspect so." Garlotte paused, but not for long. "All we *know* is that at least one of them had two hands. Aside from some of the Sabbat war ghouls, that doesn't narrow the bloody field very much."

Isaac was guardedly hopeful that his sire's temper might be starting to subside. Maybe keeping him talking was the right strategy. Isaac decided to try something non-controversial, something fairly innocuous: "You don't even *like* the Tremere."

The trembling started slowly. The telltale color returned to Garlotte's face. Isaac instinctively put his hands behind his back.

"My God!" Garlotte exploded. "I *don't* like the Tremere. I despise them! *But that doesn't mean I want one decapitated in my elevator!*"

Then the prince uttered the words Isaac had been waiting—hoping, *praying*—to hear: "Get out! Get out of my sight! Before I—"

"Yes, my prince."

And Isaac, ever the dutiful and obedient childe, hastened to obey.



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 11:33 PM
(2:03 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Bhagyakul Roy Palace, called Bhooter Bari
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Hesha approached the palace from the south. Many feet before his had crushed down the weeds that choked the pavement; he trod a well-worn path among the enthusiastic vines and grasses. Through the thick, gray veil of rain, he looked up at the old manse. The architect had graced it with cheap copies of classical Greek statues; squatters had added still uglier wire television antennas. The original owners had displayed their wealth in marble and rare stones; time, floods, gentle decay and encroaching trees had destroyed the mortar and cracked the elegant facade. The windowless walls still stood, the columns and arches were intact, but in the portico where the original family's livery-clad footmen had waited on guests, two dozen shabby, unkempt men crowded close to take shelter from the storm. Smoke rose from pipes and damp cigarettes in their hands. Cheap speakers spewed out a woman's voice: bubble-gum pop with Bengali lyrics.

Hesha glanced back to the tree line and climbed the palace's broken steps. A large man, seated in a position of importance on a column base, rose to greet him.

"*Salaam*, sahib. Members only," he said dully and prepared to sit down again.

"*Salaam*, bhai," Hesha uttered, in tones of command. The guard stopped moving. "I have a message for one of the members."

"Very good, sahib. You give it to me, I give it to him."

Hesha climbed the final step and faced the poor man down. "I will give it to you," he said, "if you will take it immediately to your lord."

Seriously now, in tones of great respect, the guard placed his hands together over the note. "Very good, sahib." Grateful to go, he scrambled over his fellows and into the shadows beyond.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 12:07 AM
(Saturday, 17 July 1999, 2:37 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Bhagyakul Roy Palace, called Bhooter Bari
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

When the guard returned, he shot commands to the others. They scuttled back into the mansion like rats into holes. The leader himself disappeared, and, onto a clear stage, the Camarilla Court of Calcutta filed into sight.

Hesha waited for them, three steps down, wet but untroubled by it. If his robes were rain-heavy, they were that much harder to see through. If his cane and monocle and bare head glistened unnaturally in the house lights, so much more effective his lone figure would be. As a final touch, he made visible the coiling snake tattooed onto his bare scalp.

A long-faced, blond gentleman in a pale gray suit came to the front of the portico. He and his visitor exchanged long, unhurried silence, and then (clearly to the shock of the Kindred closest to him) he descended gracefully down the broad steps to where Hesha stood.

"Let us walk," said Lord James Abernethie, Prince of Calcutta. "And you will tell me why an openly professed Follower of Set seeks audience with me."

"I am," replied Hesha, "merely presenting myself to you upon arrival in your domain. That is one of your laws, is it not?"

The prince smiled slightly. "Hardly one I would expect you to obey."

"In this case, it is purely a matter of practicality. I am here on legitimate business; I do not wish to alarm you, nor would I care to be attacked in the course of conducting my affairs."

Lord Abernethie drew to a halt. Neither he nor Hesha were inexperienced enough ever to look another Kindred in the eyes unless they were certain of what they would find there, but the prince came, in his ire, as close as safety allowed.

"And why in hell should I let one of your kind follow the rules?"

"It is," Hesha began, "*your* Elysium that would be broken. The sympathies of the court would undoubtedly be behind you; but is it quite safe to have anyone standing," he paused, "behind you? As an added consideration, I bring three things. A gift..."

He clapped his hands, and a small, ill-tempered man stepped out of the trees. On a rolling cart, with immense difficulty, the servant pulled a large, olive-and-khaki-colored steel case through the weeds. Hesha pointed, and the Asp brought the cart to a skidding stop halfway to the house.

"Shoulder-to-air missiles. British make, not Russian. And a launcher, of course."

"And why would I need those from you?"

Hesha leaned thoughtfully on his stick. "Eastern problems, perhaps?"

The rain chattered around them, but James Abernethie said nothing for some time. "I accept," the prince allowed, finally, "pending confirmation that they are as you say and fully operational. What is the second item?"

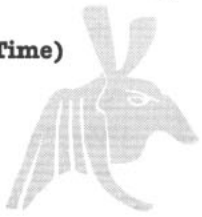
"My promise that I do not intend to settle in Calcutta."

Lord Abernethie laughed out loud. "And the third?"

Hesha took from his vest pocket a thin plastic packet. He handed it to the prince. Lord Abernethie opened the packet, using the envelope to shield the contents from the rain, and read—and recognized—the handwriting on the letters within. His death-pale skin blanched further, and he forgot himself so far as to look the other in the eyebrows.

"Welcome," he said shortly, "to my domain. Won't you come inside?"

"Thank you, your lordship," said Hesha.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 1:00 AM
(Saturday, 17 July 1999, 3:30 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Bhagyakul Roy Palace, called Bhooter Bari
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Lord Abernethie, after performing introductions between the visitor and the most distinguished of the guests—their hostess was missing and could not be found—handed his social duties over to one of his childer: the Rani Surama, a dark and dutiful daughter, native to the country (as Lord James was not), wrapped in a flame-orange sari and perfect manners. She took Hesha round to meet each cluster of attendees and then established herself and the newcomer in an out-of-the-way corner. Many of his new acquaintances made courtesy calls upon Hesha, but his beautiful escort's discouragement kept the intrusions short and soon they were deep in conversation.

Surama's long and exquisite hands played lightly along the strings of a zither. It was an antique brought to the palace by her father, and the young Ventrue made use of it for music, for show, and to open a close and probing dialogue on Bengali antiquities. Hesha laughed, smiled and complimented the young lady on her talents and her homeland's treasures. Behind the civil mask, he kept track of the gorgeous creature's attacks and feints as clearly as though she dueled with swords instead of questions. She was checking his story, probably on orders from Lord Abernethie; she was curious on her own account—the waiting court had been given no hint of the Setite's three gifts; she was trying, poor infant, to seduce him.

Eventually, Hesha caught sight of a teenage boy in the crowd. Deferentially, the slim, bony figure made his way to where Hesha and Surama sat. He stared at the floor before him as he spoke. "Rani, your father is looking for you, you know."

"Is he really? Thank you, Michel." The prince's childe took her leave of Hesha and wandered away into the party. Michel's eyes followed her longingly; his heart lay in his face. Softly, in archaic Kurdish, he said: "What the hell are you doing, coming in the front like that?" His inflection suggested heartbroken poetry.

"Time is important," Hesha answered in the same language.

"Typhon's pet prophet in a hurry." Michel, an old Tremere wizard and a long-time debtor of Hesha's, shook his head. "I don't believe it."

"The Eye of Hazimel is loose in America."

"I'm glad I'm here, then." He paused and then added: "Just so you know—I am the *greenest* neonate, no more than twenty years dead, sent here by the Chantry in New Delhi. Since my arrival I have become the little Rani's devoted slave."

"I shall do my best to reinforce the idea," said the Setite. "However. The directive force behind the Eye is in Calcutta."

Michel's face took on an even more mournful expression. "You are sure?"

Hesha did not bother to answer, and Michel took up Surama's discarded zither. "What do you want me to do?"

"Pinpoint the source. Then tell me where to find it."

"Mmm." Michel began to play a love song. "Hurry, if you are hurrying, and give me the details before she comes back."

"She won't be coming back."

"Why?" The warlock glanced at his companion, but the Setite didn't respond. "Sorry. How could I forget? 'Nothing-for-nothing Hesha,' as always. Let me see.... Lord Abernethie's blood weakness is girls—very young girls."

"Lord Abernethie's daughter, the Rani Surama, is an ambitious young leech with poor taste in friends. I brought proof of her treason with me tonight." Michel stared at him. "I would not make contact with you without providing the good court something more interesting to watch while we spoke," said the Setite simply.

As the rumors began to fly through the assembled Kindred, Hesha gave the Tremere details enough and no more. The commotion in the outer rooms grew louder, and the Setite finished:

"You will find me at the Oberoi Grand. I will dine in one of the restaurants each night with a brown-haired white woman as camouflage. Come to our table and talk to me about antiques. It should not compromise your position; I have encouraged half the leeches in town to do the same."

"Then you'll see me tomorrow. If the trace is as strong as you say, this won't take long," said the warlock confidently.

By the time one of Michel's 'friends' came to tell him his ladylove was in danger, the two devils in the corner were ready to act their part. The boy ran, awestruck and anguished, to the prince's audience chamber. He still clutched Surama's zither in hand. Hesha stood, found a gossiping circle of Cainites to mingle with, and settled in for a long, dramatic and tedious evening.

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 8:27 PM
Delta Flight 2065, Logan International Airport
Boston, Massachusetts

All the shaking woke Isabel, even though she wouldn't be able to rise for another forty-five minutes or so. Or rather, in another forty-five minutes she would be able to rise, if she weren't packed like cargo into an airplane-safe coffin. When the best flights departed before dark, she had found no other suitable manner of travel—moving about in daylight was a ridiculous risk, and she was always groggy before the sun fell completely.

Not that traveling cargo-class was any pleasant journey. Flying as a corpse was the only way it could be done. Airlines X-rayed the items that went into their planes' cargo holds, looking for bombs and whatnot, and if a human-shaped thing turned up in anything but a registered transportable coffin, someone was bound to notice. Even if they did need to open the transit vessel, a vampire inside would have little trouble passing for dead—just sit still and let them poke at you. This always amused Isabel. No matter how grotesque it seemed, any time her cargo-method travel had been disturbed, at least one of the people opening the casket would always *touch* her. It probably would have unsettled anyone traveling with his or her dear departed to know that the corpse had been molested, but Isabel knew to keep quiet. It would have been more problematic if she rose and called the baggage handlers on it, but the image entertained her nonetheless—a burly, surly bag lifter fainting dead away as the corpse whose mouth he'd just put his finger in bit it off and spit it out at him.

Such reverie was always the lightest part of the trip, however. For the entire flight, the cargo Kindred had to lie stock-still—she had no room to move. This wasn't usually a problem during the day while the Kindred slept, but flights that ended after nightfall were a different matter; the traveler simply had to rest there. Some vampires who made a habit of "deadwinging" built custom caskets that afforded them a little room for comfort, but Isabel disdained this. It was only a matter of time before someone recognized a particular coffin and grew suspicious about the same dead body that had a habit of flying around the country.

Invariably, the trouble of whatever demanded the trip bore down on the Kindred. Such was the case with Isabel's trip to Atlanta. She knew before she ever arrived in Las Vegas that some problem had arisen with the border that separated the worlds of the living and the dead. At first, the elders of Clan Giovanni had thought that only the spirits of the dead had been involved. Even the rogue sorcerer Ambrogino Giovanni had been affected, retiring to his sanctum at the loggia for two weeks to recover from the ordeal.

Then, members of the family had begun to go missing.

Elders, ancillae and neonates alike vanished, as well as a handful of their ghouls, immediate families and entourages. Across the globe, the Giovanni had fought for years to extend their influence. Across the globe, they disappeared overnight.

Then Ambrogino had called her. One of the Giovanni Kindred in the area had taken a brief trip, never to be seen again. That had been Frankie Gee, Francis Alberto Giovanni del'Agrigento—Chas's boss. Isabel felt Chas should know that Frankie was gone, but not her suspicions why. In her opinion, he wouldn't have understood, and it was too grave to worry the Milliners with.

Ambrogino mentioned the old clan.

Isabel was too young to know exactly who the "old clan" were, but she knew that the Giovanni hadn't come by their current state honestly. Sometime in the murky past, the Giovanni had rebelled against the one who had made them vampires, destroying his brood and diablerizing him. Of course, many of the old clan escaped, never to be found. If Ambrogino were right, the problems in the lands of the dead had freed the members of the old clan who had fled there. No doubt they would be furious at their fate and seek to exact some sort of revenge. Through his research, Ambrogino pursued that hunch, and it turned out to be true—the missing or dead Giovanni had all participated to some degree in the extirpation of their forebears, or their sires had. Don Pietro Giovanni's two childer vanished from Prague; boorish Martino della Passaglia had watched his sire snatched away by something that hid in the shadows of the ceiling in his own haven. Ludo Giovanni, the Chronicler of Bremen, left only an unfinished sentence in his notebook as his last mark on the world.

According to Ambrogino, the old clan had taken to calling itself the Harbingers of Skulls, and they would not rest until every member of the Giovanni had been culled.

Well, they certainly had ambition. The Giovanni, while not the most numerous of the clans of Caine, were neither the fewest. Such a pogrom would take decades, if not centuries. But, as Ambrogino had noted, they had waited this long, and they had nothing but time on their side.

In haste, the Giovanni elders had dispatched many able agents of the clan to learn what they could of the matter. From what information they gathered, these Kindred reasoned that the Harbingers of Skulls were few but very potent. Isabel had been among these early fact-finders and knew the grim reality—the one she had been seeking was no doubt at least five millennia old.

Of course, this crisis affected only the Giovanni—it didn't stop the earth from spinning. Isabel had already been involved with two other important matters: monitoring the burgeoning Sabbat conquest of the American East Coast and a prickly matter concerning the kidnapping of Benito Giovanni.

Isabel's connection to the East Coast affair was mostly a matter of consultation. She served as a liaison to members of the Sabbat and the Camarilla, intending to let both know that the Giovanni didn't care for either one of them. Giovanni-dominated Boston would *not* be the next on the menu for the Sabbat, nor would it become a haven for Camarilla refugees. More than anything, she wanted to keep the Kindred ignorant of the true nature of Giovanni business in Boston—very few among the undead knew that the Milliner family maintained Giovanni influence there and simply assumed that the only Giovanni were those *named* Giovanni. The ignorance of others was a very powerful weapon in the Giovanni arsenal, and the Milliners had retained Isabel to ensure that they didn't lose it.

Concerning Benito, Isabel had initially chalked up his disappearance to the actions of the old clan. After researching Benito's lineage, however, she found him only distantly related to and descended from anyone who had any relation to the purge of the Giovanni progenitors. Her contacts among the Kindred informed Isabel that Benito had fallen in with some dubious characters over a recent art deal. Thereafter, a bit of mundane detective work turned up details of Benito's abduction that linked it to the Nosferatu.

Right now, all three matters weighed heavily on Isabel Giovanni's mind, and she found it difficult to sleep. Doubtless, one of these matters would have to fall by the wayside, and she saw poor Benito as having drawn the short straw. After all, he was only one Kindred—the other matters affected all of the Giovanni in one city, if not worldwide. Still, she suspected she hadn't heard the last of Benito; she didn't want to write him off, but something had to give, and his kidnapping had the greatest likelihood of righting itself if left alone.

By the same token, the reappearance of the old clan took precedence, and Isabel planned to meet a contact in Atlanta who could provide her with information on a suspected member of that group. Apparently, the thing had made its haven in New Orleans, arranged somehow for Frankie Gee to come to it and destroyed him. Frankie had been Kindred for about four centuries—he was one of the original Sicilian robber-barons who reinvented himself as the times dictated. That someone of such advanced age could be duped into walking into his own Final Death attested to the strength of whatever it was they were dealing with. Exactly how her elders expected her to succeed where other, older Kindred had failed was beyond her, but forewarned was forearmed. Meeting the creature on her own terms, if only to observe it and make a report back to other Giovanni, gave her an edge.

Now all she had to do was maintain it.

The plane shuddered to life, lurching onto the runway and climbing slowly into the sky.



Saturday, 17 July 1999, 9:51 PM
Forgotten Worlds Gallery
Boston, Massachusetts

Chas Giovanni was not happy.

Whoever the fuck wanted to know where the fuck Benito Giovanni was should just leave him wherever he was and be done with it. Milo Rothstein died because of it. Victor died because of it. No telling how many of the Nosferatu shitbags who'd black-bagged Benito in the first place had met the Final Death because of it. And tonight, new news. While Chas was in Boston, Frankie had heard that Benito had turned up in New Orleans. The moment he heard it, Chas knew it was bullshit—Benito had disappeared from here and then showed up in Vegas. Unless those Nosferatu were setting up a touring Benito Giovanni Petting Zoo exhibit, there was no good reason in the world for him to have surfaced in New Orleans. If he had escaped his captors, he would have gone home or called someone from the road. If he were still in someone's possession, he'd be locked down tight in either Vegas or Boston until whoever kidnapped him made whatever demand it was they planned to make. The whole thing didn't make any sense.

Who made the tip, Chas wanted to know. None of Frankie's other people could answer. Speaking of being unable to answer, Frankie hadn't picked up his phone in almost twenty-four hours, despite Chas and any number of other goombas calling him nonstop.

Then the call came in from Italy, to Isabel. Frankie Gee was dead. She told Chas, conveyed the appropriate words of condolence and bought a plane ticket to meet some contact of hers in Atlanta.

"That's nice, Isabel. Any idea why you got the call before me, and why Italy knows but no one in New York or Boston knows yet?" Chas demanded.

"Don't take that tone, Chas. I didn't have to tell you at all. As to why I found out, it relates to something I'm doing here."

"You're here to fucking handle the Camarilla negotiation for the Milliners. What the fuck does that have to do with going to Atlanta and getting calls about my dead *capo*?"

Isabel had had enough of Chas's continually worsening attitude. "You know what, Chas? That's right. I was here to talk to Pieterzoon's people. And I did it. You, however, are here to find out where Benito Giovanni has gone, and you haven't done that. So while I have handled two separate affairs for the family, you still haven't finished your first, and you're racking up an impressive body count to accompany your failures. Victor, Frankie… and I'm sure there are more. So please, before you get all heavy-handed and indignant, just sit quietly and wait for me to get back." She knew he had become frustrated with the lack of anything leading him to Benito, but Chas was being unconscionable, and it showed no signs of abating.

"Fuck that, Isabel! I'm just supposed to sit here and wait? I'm coming with you to Atlanta to do whatever it is you're doing down there."

"No, you're not. You're going to stay here and accompany the person I've hired to handle the rest of the talk with Gauthier."

"You want me playing backup for someone else while you take your little vacation? Bullshit. Fucking bullshit. I'm not here working for you. In fact, I guess I'm not working for anyone anymore. There's no way I'm running second man to some punk-ass Kindred you talked into doing Milliner's—"

"Oh, she's not Kindred," Isabel interrupted. She flashed him a charming smile that became insidious given the circumstances. "She's quite alive. Works for Milliner as an account executive. She knows all about our kind, though, and I've given her all the details. You're going with her to make sure she doesn't get hurt and to let Gauthier and Pieterzoon know that we're not taking their side, or the Sabbat's."

"*What*? I'm right hand to a fucking *kine*?" It was one thing to play Victor's angle in Vegas—that was to mislead Rothstein. But backing up a mortal who was nothing more than a mouthpiece for the snot-nosed Milliners, without having it be some kind of ruse, that was inexcusable. "I'm not going to fucking do it. Fuck yourself, Isabel."

She turned around and slapped him, *hard*, across the face. "You will not speak that way to me, understood? That's fine—if that's what you want to do, you're free to leave. You don't owe me anything, you don't work for me, and you don't work for the Milliners. So crawl back to New York and let all the Giovanni and wiseguys know that not only could you not handle a simple assignment, you got one of your men and your boss killed on top of it. Go right ahead." One hand on her hip, she waved the other at the door.

That's why he wasn't happy.

Chas knew Isabel was right—in order to come out of this with any dignity at all, he had to see the matter through. If that meant attaching himself to Isabel until she was able to bring more pieces of the puzzle to the table, well, that's what he'd have to do. It was absurd that she expected him to be effectively Milliner's diplomat's retainer, but he didn't want to consider what would happen if he returned to New York with nothing but obituaries to accompany him.

It didn't help that Milliner's new go-between was a grade-A bitch. Even her name was pretentious: *Genevieve Pendleton*. Of course, she had been college-educated, which automatically made her arrogant toward the rough-edged Chas. Apparently, she'd been on the Milliner managerial staff for a few years, and they'd allowed her to be a part of the operation without making her a ghoul. That wasn't how they did things in the Old World, and it wasn't how Frankie and his ilk had adapted their racket to the New World. When you let people know what you were, it was either right before you whacked them, or right before you made them a ghoul—or a Kindred. Anything else left too many loose ends.

The net result: Chas didn't approve of his charge's being left with the opportunity to jump ship if things got ugly with this whole "Kindred" situation, and Genevieve didn't approve of having a knee-breaker present to punctuate her discussion with the other Kindred interest.

They had begun bickering only moments after Isabel left them sitting at the table. Chas had muttered a comment about Pendleton being a poor choice of negotiators—she wasn't Kindred and couldn't really represent one effectively, especially if they tried to use any of their mystical powers. She maintained that she knew Kindred inside and out and was more than able to handle herself among them. Chas countered with a personal attack,

saying that if someone sent his secretary to talk business with *him*, both the secretary and the presumptive business partner would end up dead. Pendleton, not about to suffer snubs from a pistol-whipping thug, remarked that she was sure that was how all of the less-evolved Kindred handled their affairs.

"We'll see who's less evolved when you piss off another Kindred and you need me to save your scrawny ass, Guinevere."

"Genevieve."

"Whatever. You'll just end up as someone's dinner sooner or later anyway. You think the Milliners are just going to let you grow old and trust you with the secret until you die?"

"It's in my contract," Pendleton retorted, crossing her arms and straightening her posture, as if she could hide behind the document as a shield.

Chas snorted. "Yeah, well, your contract's a load of crap. The minute the Milliners see you as more of a liability than an asset, they won't hesitate to shred that contract and you along with it. It's not like you can go to the Supreme Court and claim that you work for vampires, and they're being mean to you." His voice trailed off. "Naïve, prissy bitch."

Genevieve shook her head. "You think you're better than me because you're *dead*? Oh, that's a good one. Well, I have news for you. You can't just walk all over people because you're some secret, scary *vampire*, you know."

"I can do it because it doesn't matter to me anymore."

That was a strange reply. Genevieve cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the code. The morals you mortals keep. They don't matter. I'm Kindred and all that inalienable-right bullshit you uphold doesn't mean fuck-all to me. Look at me! I fucking drink blood to survive! I kill people so I can go on… living… or whatever the fuck it's supposed to be called."

"That doesn't make any sense," Pendleton said. "It's psychologically not possible. It's not possible for vampire society to exist in a vacuum like that. That's the reason why serial killers are finally caught, and why you never hear about them until something really heinous turns up. Degenerate behavior exhibits the law of diminishing returns—the more abhorrent acts you indulge in, the more it takes you to experience the thrill of indulging in an abhorrent act. You get jaded. By way of analogy, you'd have to kill to experience even the minor emotional response you once received from, say, shoplifting. And I don't even want to think about what you do after *killing* becomes boring."

"No shit," Chas shot back. "We've got an old riddle for it: A Beast I am lest a Beast I become. We've all got the devil inside us, and we have to let him out every once in a while or he'd completely take us over. It's like fucking immunization or germ theory or something."

"That's not possible. You can't survive like that." Pendleton crossed her legs, lit a cigarette.

"Bullshit. *Bullshit*. After you've been through it all so many times, that anger—that Beast—is all you've got left, and if you fucking let it win, you're fucking done. *Done*."

"So it's a pity-fuck you're after?" Pendleton looked away, her eyes following the trail of smoke as she exhaled it.

Chas's eyes flashed red. He tasted the blood-bile rising inside him and his vision hazed with a flush of crimson. In a moment, he was on his feet, jerking Genevieve Pendleton up by the lapels of her designer jacket, lifting her so that her feet dangled above the ground, crushing the fabric of her jacket in his balled fists. Pendleton's eyes bugged wide, almost out of their sockets. "*You fucking cunt*," Chas roared, snarling lips and distended fangs barely able to form intelligible words. "Don't you fucking *ever* accuse me of playing on that shit. I don't need your fucking *pity*. I don't need your goddamn *concern* or your fucking pissant sympathy. When you're dead and gone and worm fucking food in a pine fucking box six feet under the ground, *I'm still going to be here*. Do you get it? You fucking understand? Does that make it through your fucking self-centered rational little mind? *You don't mean shit to me*. The only thing that's keeping me from pulling your fucking head off right now is the fact that Isabel's already paid you to do your fucking job and I don't want to deal with her. Does that make sense, you stupid bitch? Nothing you can say means the slightest thing to me. You're just another fucking bag of blood to me."

With that, Chas reined himself in. He threw Genevieve back into her chair, which tumbled over backward, leaving her sprawled inelegantly on the floor.

"Fuck. You see what I mean? I… You got a husband, Pendleton?"

Genevieve couldn't be sure what direction Chas was taking. "What?"

"A husband? You married? Or maybe you have a 'life partner' or some shit like that?"

"I'm, yes, married," she gulped, picking herself up off the floor and straightening her jacket.

"You love this guy?"

"I do."

"He means everything to you, right? He's 'the one,' as they say, no? The one person in the whole world who's absolutely perfect for you, right?"

"Yes. I suppose. I love him—I wouldn't want to go on without him."

"That's fucking right. Well, guess what, Pendleton? I'm going to tell you a story.

"Right after I got turned—just about a hundred years ago, maybe a little more—I met 'the one.' Perfect girl. I fell in love with her just a few months after meeting her. You see where this is fucking heading? I'm a fucking vampire *in love with a mortal woman*. I can't fucking tell her that I'm a fucking Kindred. So I play it up—the whole Masquerade thing. I try to set up this relationship with this woman in spite of the fact that *it can't happen*.

"But the thing is—she knows. She doesn't know that I'm fucking dead, but she knows that there's… *something*. And it puts her off. But it's not like I can tell her, you know? I can't break the secret because that means sooner or later I'd have to kill her *and I'm not ready to do that*. At least, not yet.

"So that's where I'm fucked. I have the absolute *perfect* person in my… life, *but I can't have her*. I can't tell her, and any time I try to just 'let it happen,' she *feels* what's wrong and it puts her off. And for all the fucking gifts that being Kindred provides—I can hit harder than anyone else, I can *make* people do what I tell them—I *just can't fix this situation*. This woman I love, *I can't ever fucking have*. I can't make her love me, I can't have her grow to love me and I can't just be with her. It's like being a thousand fucking miles away even when I'm right next to her.

"And it makes me *sick*. Literally sick. I wake up each fucking night with a big, empty fucking *hole* in the middle of me *that I can't possibly fill. Ever*. And the worse I feel, the more I think about her, which makes me even more goddamn miserable, which makes me think about her even more.... It never fucking ends.

"And then she grows old, but I don't; I stay eternally young. And she dies. Maybe she gets married; maybe she doesn't, but it's not important because it's never fucking with *me*.

"And then there's another woman.

"And another.

"And so on and so on, every time opening the same old fucking scars that just can't heal because you can never have what you need—that person—to fix it, to make it better. Never.

"And sure, there are ways around it. You can turn the one you love—make them a Kindred—but when you do that, you kill them. You can bring them somewhat under the shadow: feed them your blood, make them your ghoul, but that's not an equitable relationship. You can force them to love you with the powers of the Blood, but that's not *real*. In the end all you can do is watch them die and feel that fucking hole inside you grow bigger every time.

"So, Genevieve fucking Pendleton, I can't ever have what you have. I can't have someone I love to come home to. I can't touch a woman's face and have her feel anything that's not touched with the natural revulsion that she's being fucking touched by *something that kills*. I can't ever have *anything* except a fucking blackness inside me that grows greater *every fucking night* and wants me to destroy everything I come in contact with.

"After a hundred fucking years of this shit, anger's all you got left. It's all you can use to keep that fucking Beast at bay—fighting fire with fire.

"Think about that next time you kiss your husband goodnight or wake up with him in the morning. Think about the fact that having him, having someone who can truly *love* you for as long as your mortal life, is something that some people just can't have. And for that, they'll never be complete men, or complete people. And then think about the only thing that can take the place of love. We can hate in abundance, and we have no more suitable subject for our hate than ourselves. So we rise each night because we *don't want to fucking hate ourselves any more than we already do*. But we're going to fail at even that."

Genevieve put out her cigarette. "I quit."

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 10:12 PM
The Presidential Hotel
Washington, D.C.

Sascha Vykos sat on the edge of the immaculately made bed in her suite and angrily regarded a hand-written letter. The missive had been waiting for her this evening when she'd emerged from the haven she'd claimed. Formerly the Presidential Hotel had housed Marcus Vitel, the deposed Prince of Washington, D.C., but after he'd fled the city and Vykos had been confirmed as archbishop, it had seemed as natural to usurp Vitel's home as it had been to usurp his domain. She also maintained a suite at the Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill that, incongruously, the Sabbat had descended upon as its field headquarters in the nation's capital, the better to conduct cloakroom-style business on the fly; but whenever she could, she spent her days slumbering in Vitel's rooms. If nothing else, it was safer. After all, apart from her personal ghouls and bodyguards, no one knew precisely where she was havening. In theory.

That was why the presence of a cream-colored envelope sealed with wine-colored wax had been such an unpleasant surprise. None of her watchful ghouls had seen any interlopers during the day or early evening, yet there the letter sat on her doorstep, delicately arranged without even a smudge of dust. She knew who had sent the message. But messages like this were supposed to be conveyed by prearranged courier drop. Her haven was certainly not one of those drops, and that could only mean bad news.

The note was from her source inside the Camarilla, signed "Lucius" as usual, for reasons that presumably had died with Caesar in the Forum. The brief message did not in fact contain good news. It noted that the conference of Camarilla elders in Baltimore had been reinforced by the powers-that-be back in the Old Country. Specifically, Ash, Vitel, *et alia*, had received as reinforcement Jan Pieterzoon, a Ventrue of some reputation as a strategist and schemer. Vykos was familiar enough with Pieterzoon's work, if not with the man himself; while he wasn't the threat that a member of the Inner Circle or one of their lapdogs might be, he was still a power in his own right.

The rest of the letter was less galvanizing, detailing the reactions of the various conference members to Pieterzoon's incipient arrival. There was the usual Camarilla-style backbiting and protestations of noble self-sacrifice, but the short version was that most of the delegates were torn between resentment over having to share the credit if they should happen to triumph and secret relief at the desperately needed help.

Sighing, she re-folded the letter and tucked it back into the envelope. It was then that she noticed that the signet ring used to seal the wax had left an impression in the shape of the Camarilla's telltale ankh. It was a droll touch, and not one she would have expected of "Lucius." Either the spy had developed a sense of humor, or it was intended as a reminder that her whereabouts were known, and the knowledge could be passed along to others at any time. It was all dreadfully, unnecessarily complicated, but upon reflection, Vykos came to the conclusion that most Cainites of her age or older simply didn't know any other way to be. The simple and direct died simple and direct deaths; only the devious and elusive endured.

Carelessly throwing the letter on the floor, Vykos sighed. Pieterzoon's arrival was, to say the least, an unexpected complication. She frowned, crossed her legs and then uncrossed them, and found herself fidgeting restlessly. That would never do, not with the war council set to resume its so-called deliberations within the hour.

Suddenly impatient, she clapped her hands, twice. The door of the suite opened and one of her ghouls, a dapper, thin man with a hatchet face and a reddish beard that could best be described as "sparse," entered. "Yes, mistress?"

"Kevin, I need you to make a phone call for me."

"A phone call, mistress?" The ghoul's face and tone both registered his surprise. "Of course. Whom shall I call and as to what end?"

"You shall call me, and you will do so when the circumstances demand that you do so." Kevin still looked puzzled, and internally Vykos debated whether she was doing the right thing by trusting even this simple task to him. He showed no signs of active disobedience, but precious few of competence, either.

Vykos sighed. Even if Kevin did not understand what he was doing, or why he was doing it, his expression should be one of rapt attention, reflecting a certain trust that all Vykos might ask of him would be explained to him properly. Confusion, when seen from that perspective, was a manifestation of distrust, and distrust was a form of disloyalty.

She would, she decided, do some work to make sure that Kevin's expression never troubled her again, if he succeeded in carrying out his instructions precisely. Otherwise, she'd express her displeasure more emphatically and more permanently.

And then she told Kevin what she needed him to do, and when, and why, and she watched the light of recognition dawn on his face. It was, Vykos noted, possibly one of the most irritating things she had ever seen.

"Of course, mistress," he said, bowing and backing out of the room.

It took Vykos all of perhaps three seconds to decide that, regardless of how well Kevin performed his task, he wasn't going to see morning.

Life, even eternal life, was too short to put up with that sort of thing.

And in the air vent, something that looked almost precisely like a cat arched its back, then turned and scurried away.

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 11:15 PM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.

Cell phones were the sort of technological marvel that the elders of the Sabbat distrusted. Mind you, the elders of the Camarilla distrusted the blasted things in precisely the same way, but mentioning that to a four-century-old Tzimisce with a variable number of arms was a surefire way to get oneself turned into the vampiric equivalent of saltwater taffy. Accordingly, younger members of the sect politely didn't use the things around those of their superiors who were likely to take offense and made sure not to mock the old farts for being fossils until they were safely out in the field.

That was why it was such a shock when an audible chirp came from within the folds of Vykos's jacket. The war council had been proceeding in its usual fashion, (which is to say that two minor "dignitaries" had already been killed and a third staked and put into storage because there was still some argument between Polonia and Vykos as to the man's ultimate usefulness), with much chest-pounding and little in the way of actual strategy, when the cell phone went off.

Instantly, the room went deathly silent. Vykos looked left, looked right, and slipped a pale hand inside the jacket of her conservatively cut blue suit to remove the anxiously bleating cell phone.

Every eye in the place was on her. She acknowledged such with an airy wave, flipped open the phone and put it to her ear.

"Yes?" Her fluting tones wafted over the room as every vampire in attendance suddenly did his level best to look elsewhere, pretend disinterest and eavesdrop for all he was worth. "You say he's arrived? Fascinating, yet not entirely unexpected." There came a pause, to which Vykos responded by nodding twice. "Excellent. I expect regular updates on his whereabouts, contacts and the like." There was another pause and some agitated squawking loud enough so that those sitting nearest to Vykos ("near" being a relative term in this instance) could almost make out a few tantalizing words. Vykos listened, frowned and drummed a single slender, sharp-nailed finger on the tabletop. Finally, she interrupted. "No. That is not your mission. Do I make myself clear? Wonderful. I expect to hear from you tomorrow."

And with that, Vykos folded the phone up neatly and put it away. She looked around the room, aware of how intently the other Cainites in attendance were watching her, and let slip a small smile.

"I'm dreadfully sorry for the interruption, Archbishop." She bowed her head, as if in contrition, in the vague direction of Polonia. The archbishop made a small gesture, as if to dismiss the interruption, and almost succumbed to the temptation to roll his eyes. Around him, the others fidgeted, shifted in their seats or audibly grumbled. No one dared meet Vykos's gaze, however, or had the courage to voice a complaint. The Tzimisce elder almost tittered, but restrained herself. It was priceless, the way the lot of them were on tenterhooks over the phone call. They were all so anxious to salvage any scrap of

information, the better to obtain the slightest of advantages on their rivals, that they'd do anything to learn what she had heard. Indeed, she suspected most would gladly kill to have the knowledge of what the party on the other end of the line had been saying. After all, knowing that little tidbit would surely unlock the enigma that was Vykos, enabling one to learn the secrets of the ages, the truth about all of Vykos's plots, and probably the color of Cardinal Monçada's favorite cassock as well. It was astonishing, the importance the young and ambitious attached to every bit of trivia dangled before them. It was also amusing to be able to manipulate them into a veritable frenzy so easily. Here were easily two dozen of the finest war leaders the American Sabbat had to offer, hardened murderers and tacticians who'd ravaged their way up the eastern seaboard with admirable, shark-like efficiency. Yet here they were, anxious as schoolboys trying to read a note over a classmate's shoulder.

This, Vykos mused to herself, *is the sort of moment that puts the whole thing in perspective. And the best part is, I'm going to upset the applecart and tell them all what they want to know anyway. They'll all be so disappointed.*

"Oh, I should explain what that was about, shouldn't I?" She favored the glowering Borges with a winning smile and was rewarded with a poorly disguised snort of disgust. Around the table, others leaned forward in their eagerness, or sat back, feigning disinterest with a profound lack of acting ability. Only Polonia seemed able to maintain a truly stoic demeanor; it was entirely possible that he didn't care.

On the other hand, it was also entirely possible that he already knew what Vykos was about to reveal.

"It seems I have some news, information of importance. Jan Pieterzoon is in Baltimore."

The reactions to her announcement gave Vykos an excellent chance to gauge the level of the room, as it were. Borges and a few others showed varying degrees of alarm, interest and concern, though Borges's hood of shifting shadows made it as hard as ever to read the man. Almost none of the Tzimisce present showed so much as a flicker of recognition. And the vast majority of those present who were younger than a century looked variously confused, bored or just plain irritated.

"What the fuck is a Yawn Peckerzoom?" The voice came from the far end of the conference table, a section that Vykos had once heard Polonia refer to as "the children's table," and it belonged to a heavyset, perpetually disgruntled-looking vampire named MacEllen.

By the time Vykos glanced over that way, the man had half-risen out of his chair and planted his knuckles on the table, giving him a particularly simian appearance that his full black beard and sunken eyes did nothing to dispel. He was the leader of some roving pack or other that had done yeoman work cleaning up Camarilla resistance in captured cities, and who felt that having done so entitled him to an opinion on overall strategy. While the man was loud, obnoxious and deliberately crude, he was also looked on as a leader by several other itinerant "commanders" up and down the mid-Atlantic region. He was also a rival to Bolon, commander of the Tzimisce war ghouls now off mopping up the last pockets of resistance in the Sabbat's new Southern cities, for the succession to the late Averros as head of the Nomad Coalition. As such he was worth keeping alive as a way of controlling his putative followers—and as leverage on his competition.

Otherwise, it would have been a race to see who at the table could first gut him like a fish.

The man had stones, though. Even when Vykos turned an expectant stare on him, he barely flinched. "I'm serious. We've been sitting in here with our thumbs up our asses all night, Seamus gets his head turned into a fucking desk accessory when he interrupts someone else, and then what happens? Miss Manners gets a phone call, stops the whole thing dead and announces that some Kraut ratfucker that no one's ever heard of is in Baltimore. Big fucking deal. We'll all drop by his place for crab cakes and then go see the aquarium. Fucking wonderful." MacEllen jutted his jaw aggressively forward and glared. His face was flushed and a faint sheen of bloody sweat shone on his brow.

Once again, Vykos had to resist the urge to laugh. Oh, MacEllen posed no threat to her or to anyone at the meeting who actually mattered, but if she failed to treat him with the utmost seriousness, the man was liable to do something foolish and the council would turn into a riot. That would mean lost nights while the casualties were straightened out, replacements were found and so on. It would be dreadfully inconvenient and probably not worth the pleasure of liquefying the idiot's neck.

Fortunately, Polonia chose that moment to intercede. "*Mister* MacEllen," he said, quietly, though the effect on the room was like that of a whipcrack. MacEllen's supporters, who had been slapping him on the back and working themselves up to various antisocial behaviors, fell silent. A few surreptitiously moved their chairs away from where he sat.

MacEllen himself made a small noise in the back of his throat as the blood visibly drained from his big face. He'd wanted to score points off the bigwigs, not force a confrontation. Now he'd gotten more than he had bargained for, and the severed head that had belonged to the lamented Seamus--and now served as a centerpiece--was a mute reminder of what was likely to happen.

Vykos, pleased that she didn't have to dirty her hands dealing with the junior Lasombra, sat back and watched.

Polonia was on his feet now, slowly circling around the long table counterclockwise toward where MacEllen stood. "Let me see if I have your position correctly. You feel that, by taking a phone call that informed us that a potent and extremely competent enemy has entered our sphere of influence, the esteemed Archbishop Vykos has interrupted this meeting, to which your contribution thus far has been repeated shouts of 'Kill the fuckers.' Am I correct so far?"

MacEllen looked up; by the time Polonia had finished his recitation, he was standing right next to him. The older Lasombra was actually shorter than his adversary, but Vykos could tell that the contest of wills was profoundly uneven. MacEllen didn't stand a chance. Polonia had five hundred years' experience of commanding men and vampires, while his opponent could only bully some rabble. This evening, the archbishop had eschewed the formal garb of his office for a simple black suit and white-banded collar shirt, but he wore them with a military crispness. MacEllen, by contrast, wore a sloppy black leather jacket with a zipper that had apparently been chewed off, relatively clean jeans and a Skynyrd T-shirt that had clearly seen a decade's worth of better nights.

Also, Polonia had the advantage of knowing exactly what he was doing, while MacEllen was just trying to make some noise. Vykos pondered for a second and supposed that the description of the situation as "cat and mouse" would only be adequate if the cat

in question were a jaguar and the mouse were very small indeed. A sudden noise brought her back to the tableau; apparently MacEllen was speaking.

"...Not saying she's not important, but goddamn it, a cell phone in the middle of a war council? Those things can get tapped easier than a keg. And—"

Polonia cut him off. "I am quite certain that Archbishop Vykos has taken adequate precautions to ensure the security of both her communications and this council, MacEllen. Though I appreciate your concern for the well-being of everyone here," there was a ripple of derisive laughter at that, "you may wish that you had chosen a different manner of expressing your concern." He smiled, a friendly, open smile that a teacher might give a student who wasn't irretrievably stupid.

MacEllen warmed to it. "Well, yeah, I can see that, but you know, I was just trying, I mean—"

"Because," Polonia continued, dropping his left hand to rest on MacEllen's clenched right fist, "if you were to make such an interruption again, or were once again to suggest that the hand-picked representative of our beloved cardinal were that stupid, I would be forced to demonstrate my displeasure." Without changing expression in the slightest, Polonia began squeezing. MacEllen's eyes bugged out of his skull at the sudden pressure, and he began to struggle to break the archbishop's grip.

Polonia's voice remained steady, his tone measured. "Now I am quite certain that, were I to break every bone in your hand as an object lesson in courtesy to your elders and betters, you would eventually be able to heal the damage, provided I did not actually pulverize any of the bones. I have done so in the past, much to my dismay, you see. It's a matter of control, and when I get... irritated, my control sometimes wavers." His face took on a mock-doleful cast at that, prompting titters from around the room.

MacEllen's face turned red again, then purple, then blue. A vein bulged in his forehead as he tried to channel his blood into the strength he needed to break Polonia's grip. It did no good, as neither the archbishop's hand nor his tone budged.

"Indeed, once your hand healed, I think you'd be an even more valuable part of this war council, MacEllen." Audible popping sounds could be heard from beneath Polonia's hand, and MacEllen whimpered. "At the moment, however, you are a rude, loud, uncouth child who no more deserves a seat at this table than he does a pony ride." The pops became snaps, and MacEllen's whimpers descended into a low whine. Bloody foam flecked his lips. "Know this for a fact, MacEllen. The reason it is your hand and not your head that I am crushing is that your stupidity has not yet outweighed your usefulness. The instant that changes, I will gladly turn your skull into a drinking cup and let Vykos draw out your eyes for baubles; I'm told she accessorizes quite well. Should any of your followers seek to interpose themselves," and his gaze took in the room, "I will *personally* deal with them and send whatever remains to Madrid in a small box with white ribbons on it as a present for His Eminence the Cardinal. Do I make myself clear?"

None of MacEllen's followers would meet Polonia's eyes. The archbishop nodded, and the faintest hint of a frown crossed his face. A crack like a gunshot split the room, and MacEllen collapsed, gibbering. What could be seen of his hand was a bloody, misshapen mess, and splinters of bone angled off in all directions. Polonia smiled and squatted down to pat MacEllen's head. "So, are we all through interrupting? Wonderful." The archbishop straightened up and caught Vykos's eye. "Now, our honored friend, I believe you were

about to explain to all of us why precisely Herr Pieterzoon concerns us, yes?" He gracefully took MacEllen's abandoned seat and propped his feet up on the fallen pack leader. "Please, the floor is yours."

The tension went out of the room like water. Suddenly there was background chatter again, and the sound of bodies readjusting themselves and the chairs they sat in. Vykos would have applauded, if she'd been the sort to applaud. She rose and spoke directly to Polonia. "Jan Pieterzoon is a Ventrue of considerable age and a most impressive lineage. He is, if my sources tell me true, one of Hardestadt's brood and among the oldest and most dangerous of that line. He is not, as Ductus MacEllen suggested, German, but Dutch. Nor does he, I suspect, fuck rats. Pieterzoon is devious, efficient and more than skilled enough to turn much of the population of this room into a series of delicate piles of ash. His presence can only mean that the Inner Circle is about to take a direct hand in affairs here, which is a development we have been anticipating with concern for some time. Needless to say, his reports back to his sire and that worthy's peers will have a great deal to do with what sort of response we can expect. Therefore, it behooves us to eliminate him as quickly as possible, before he makes too damning a report or takes the opportunity to interpose himself in our plans more directly."

Across the table, Borges frowned. "He's in Baltimore, which means he's caged like a rat. North is Philadelphia, south is where we stand, and west takes him nowhere. I say let him sit in Baltimore and make all the reports he wants. The jaws of the trap are about to close, and I for one would like to take this Dutchman home with me. Don Medina Sidonia would no doubt be profoundly appreciative of the gift. He's been waiting for Pieterzoon's head on a plate for a very long time." Around the room, rumbles of assent wafted up.

Vykos spread her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "If there were any other way, I'd be happy to allow you to capture him, but we simply do not have that luxury. If we allow Pieterzoon to gain his footing, to become comfortable, then he will become a most formidable foe, and he may be harder to subdue than you would think. Consider how the remaining Camarilla vampires will rally around him. Consider the personal resources he can bring to bear. Consider this, and you will realize that we need to destroy him while he's still uncertain, still off balance, still—"

"Jet-lagged!" called one of MacEllen's adherents. Polonia silenced the man with a look, but the rhythm of Vykos's speech had been broken. The room dissolved into shouted chaos. A fistfight broke out between a member of one of the roving packs and a member of Borges's entourage; the Archbishop of Miami turned to deal with it in his own savage way. Any hope there had been of keeping order vanished.

Vykos caught Polonia's eye and raised an eyebrow questioningly. The Lasombra gave the tiniest of headshakes and, resigned, stood. "I think a short recess is in order. Those of you who feel the need to kill one another at this juncture, the basement has a concrete floor so the staff will be able to sponge up your remains easily. As for the rest of you, we shall reconvene in two hours."

Vampires and the occasional ghoul loped for the double doors that led out into the hallway, their exit punctuated by a loud snapping sound as Borges took care of his business. Within seconds, the room was empty except for two of the three archbishops and the still-moaning MacEllen. Polonia sighed. "Was that last mutilation really necessary?"

Borges shrugged and made a great show of dusting his hands. "Not particularly, but it was enjoyable.

"Your playmate MacEllen was right, in any case."

"Hmm?" Idly, Polonia kicked the pack leader's still-recumbent form, just to make certain he hadn't gone anywhere.

"Taking the call during the meeting was a bit ostentatious. The Nomads aren't much individually, but they're vaguely formidable when they're all pointing in the same direction, and consistently antagonizing them when there's no real need means that they may all end up pointing at the cardinal's pet. Mind you, I suspect that she could take care of the lot of them without excessive effort, but it's really much more useful to have them taking orders, is it not?"

Polonia made a show of thinking about it as he stood and stretched. "Perhaps. On the other hand, they need some discipline if they're ever going to be a real fighting force as opposed to a rabble. Overwhelming some isolationist Toreador who's retired to Asheville to take up basket weaving is one thing. Dealing with a city with real defenses, one that's had some time for preparation—MacEllen and his friends will founder and be shattered, and I can't afford to throw them all away that idly."

"*You* can't," Borges repeated, half to himself. "Of course. I'll bow to your superior knowledge of Camarilla defenses, as you've spent so many years analyzing them in New York, yes? I'm sure you have a *very* good grasp of them by now."

If Borges was hoping for a rise out of Polonia, he was disappointed. The other Lasombra steepled his fingers and nodded. "Indeed. I know them quite well, which is why I respect what they're capable of, regardless of what we've accomplished so far. If you'd ever bothered to face them in the field, instead of pissing away Miami one block at a time to the Setite snakes, you'd have a bit of respect for them as well."

Borges purpled at that, and for a moment Polonia thought the younger archbishop would leap across the table and attack him. Then the moment of fury passed, and Borges managed a wan smile. "*Touché*, Archbishop. I look forward to partaking of your wisdom." He executed a perfect bow, pivoted and strode out the room. The only evidence of the confrontation was the crushed and mangled back of the chair behind which Borges had been standing.

Sometime during the debate, MacEllen had stopped making noise. The only sound in the chamber was the hum of the air conditioning, which Polonia found suddenly annoying. He pursed his lips. Borges was a fool and a braggart, but he was right. Vykos's maneuver had been designed to antagonize the Nomads and other, less-organized types, and for once in his unlife Polonia had no idea why.

"My Cardinal," he whispered, almost as a prayer, "I sincerely hope you know exactly what you are doing in sending me this fiend. Grant me guidance, grant me strength and, if this madness continues, grant me the opportunity to explain myself after I tear the head off each and every idiot I am being forced to work with here."

Piety sated, Polonia walked through the double doors of the chamber. Behind him, a tendril of shadow reached back to shut the doors with a neat little click. And beneath the table, still clutching his ruin of a hand, MacEllen didn't notice at all.

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 11:38 PM
A tenement in Harlem
New York City, New York



"She *can* send me there, and she's gonna," Zhavon said into the phone with an urgency that almost defeated the purpose of her whispering.

"Girl, you tell her you just not going," said Alvina.

"*You* wanna tell that to my mama?" Zhavon asked. Silence answered her question. Alvina had been around enough to know better than to mess with Mama. "That's what I thought."

"Well, what you gonna do?"

"I don't know." How was Zhavon supposed to know what to do? That's why she'd called Alvina in the first place, but so far, Alvina hadn't been much help. "I guess I'll go."

"It's your own damn fault," Alvina said.

"I *know* it's my own damn fault," Zhavon said. How many times had Mama drilled those same words into Zhavon's head? Except Mama didn't swear, of course. "I don't need you to tell me that." Zhavon lay back on the bed. With her free hand, she lightly tested the swelling that was almost completely gone from her face now. No permanent scars. Most of the bruises were already gone. As soon as a few scratches finished healing over, she'd be as good as new. So what, she wondered sometimes, was everybody making such a big fuss about?

"If you'd just stayed away from Adrien—"

"I wasn't goin' to see Adrien!" The lie came quickly to Zhavon but wasn't convincing.

"Uh-huh."

"What you mean, 'uh-huh'?"

"I mean, uh-huh, sure you wasn't goin' to see Adrien," said Alvina.

"I'm not that stupid," Zhavon said, realizing fully, as she spoke the words, how stupid she'd been—but that didn't mean she wanted to be constantly reminded of the fact. "Look," she said, "I don't need you bitchin' at me and tellin' me I'm stupid. I can talk to Mama for that."

Another long silence hung between the two girls. "I know…" Alvina said at last. "But sometimes you're just so stupid."

Zhavon laughed despite herself. Everything had been so serious for the past week and a half since she'd been beaten and almost raped. This might've been the first she'd laughed since then. She couldn't remember for sure. Zhavon smothered her laughter so she wouldn't bother Mama—not that Mama didn't already know that her daughter was on the phone. "Hayesburg probably has better schools anyway," Zhavon said, not so much because she cared, but because she could think of nothing else hopeful to hold on to. The last thing she wanted was to be trundled off upstate to Aunt Irma's, but Zhavon didn't seem to have a lot of say in the matter.

"Better schools, but no Adrien," Alvina said.

"Forget you, girl!" Zhavon clamped her hand over her mouth. She really didn't need to piss off Mama again. "Listen," said Zhavon, "I'm leavin' day after tomorrow. So how 'bout tomorrow night, you bring your sorry ass over here with my *stupid* ass—"

"And we'll call Angelique's *fat* ass..." said Alvina. They broke into giggling again.

"And we'll call Angelique's fat ass," Zhavon agreed, "and..." Suddenly the words caught in her throat. The laughter turned into a big lump in the pit of her stomach. She couldn't force out the rest. "And..." And then they wouldn't see each other again.

"And we'll have a good time," Alvina said.

"Yeah," said Zhavon, though they both knew that wasn't what she'd wanted to say. "Look, I gotta go. I'll call you tomorrow."

After she hung up the phone, Zhavon heard the quiet sound of the TV on the other side of the wall. Probably Mama wouldn't sleep tonight. Just like most of the nights this past week and a half.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 12:22 AM
Seventh floor, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

Victoria strode purposefully down the hallway. As far as she knew, she and Jan were the only Kindred whom Garlotte had afforded lodgings in the Lord Baltimore Inn itself. The prince normally frequented the establishment, but with the large number of guests in town had taken to staying on his little boat docked elsewhere. Vitel, too, had sought less central lodgings, though aside from the evenings of the conferences, the premises were rather dull. Theo Bell was constantly off doing whatever it was that kept Brujah amused, while Aisling Sturbridge had demonstrated little desire to stay in Baltimore any longer than absolutely necessary. The Tremere had pled urgent business at her chantry and returned to New York, but Victoria suspected the witch was motivated at least partially from fear, after what had happened to Sturbridge's predecessor at the conference.

Such a shame, Victoria thought, *if a little thing like an assassination makes the Tremere less enthusiastic about taking part in Camarilla affairs*. She marched on around the two quick turns near the middle of the building and on along the corridor.

Otherwise, there were no Kindred of sufficient standing to warrant a suite at the Lord Baltimore Inn. Just her at one end in the Governor's Suite and Jan at the other in what more often served as Prince Garlotte's personal suite.

Victoria was pleased that her movements came with less stiffness and pain now. She had just come from a singularly satisfying hunt. As one of the prince's more privileged guests, she was not banned from hunting in the Inner Harbor area, and with the several touristy pubs, as well as the convention center not far away, prey was easy to come by. Tonight, with just a brief visit to an upscale bar, she'd attracted the company of three middle-aged business types. With very little encouragement, they had alternated, two keeping watch in a back alley while Victoria "pleasured" the third. She had sent them on their way with closed wounds and vague memories of some drunken encounter with a mysterious woman.

The blood, tonight and over the past few weeks, had done Victoria good. She felt physically repaired and, more importantly, nearly all the blemishes from her time among the Tzimisce were healed. The two that remained, she supposed, would simply require a bit more blood. Soon there would be no more reminders of the outrages committed upon her. As she approached Jan's door, her hand absently rose to the locket hanging from her neck.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 12:27 AM
Seventh floor, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

Jan had expected to see Victoria at some point in the not-too-distant future and, as he opened the door, he was filled with a mix of dread and anticipation. Framed in the doorway, she appeared to him a life-size portrait. The long sleeves of the scarlet, off-the-shoulder gown accentuated the lustrous skin above, while the hue of the material brought out the auburn highlights of her hair. She wore no gloves tonight and carried a small, beaded purse. The locket hanging from her neck caught the light, as did her emerald eyes.

"This would be where you invite me in," Victoria suggested playfully.

"Forgive me," said Jan. "You are the picture of loveliness."

Victoria lowered her eyes demurely as she stepped past him. He followed her into the spacious living area. Even among the precious works of art that Garlotte had collected—classical busts, paintings by Caillebotte, Cézanne, Renoir—Victoria stood out as an astoundingly perfect object of beauty.

"The prince does have stunning taste," she said. "But I suspect your choice of decor would differ slightly?"

Jan paused at this unexpected question. "I hadn't really given any thought to the matter."

"Oh, but surely your propensities don't match the prince's exactly," Victoria said, as she made her way from painting to painting. Jan hesitated. "Come now," she pressed him. "There's no insult to the prince in sharing your own preferences."

The issue was moot to Jan. He was not about to redecorate the prince's chambers. Yet Jan felt the desire to humor Victoria, to play along in this small thing. "I'd have more… books, I suppose."

"Books, ah. Now we find out something fascinating about Mr. Jan Pieterzoon," she said. "What sort of books?"

"Corporate ledgers, or the like, I'm afraid." He waved away her question, suddenly embarrassed by his own stodginess. "Perhaps a few histories."

"No classics?" Victoria asked. She pouted out her lip a bit. "No romances?"

For several moments, Jan was able only to stare at her and blink. Finally, he managed to turn away. "I'm afraid my assistants have retired for the evening, and I have nothing on hand to offer you…."

"I require nothing more than wit, charm and scintillating conversation," Victoria said.

"Then I'm afraid you may have called upon the wrong person."

"You're too modest, Mr. Corporate Ledger Pieterzoon." She moved closer to him, came to within a few feet.

"Please, 'Jan' is fine."

"Well then, Jan, you would prefer that I get on to the business that brings me here?"

Jan casually turned and moved away from her. He couldn't quite think clearly when she was that close. He exaggerated his gestures as he spoke, lending another reason for him to seek unencumbered space. "I'm afraid that with all that is going on, and all that is on my mind, I am not fit company these nights, Ms. Ash."

"Come now," she said from right behind him. She'd kept pace, step for step. "If you are 'Jan', then I must insist on being 'Victoria'."

"Very well... Victoria." He sat in a chair, intentionally avoiding the love seat that would allow her room next to him. "What may I do for you this evening?"

"I do so wish we'd had a chance to talk before the conference last night," Victoria said somewhat over-earnestly. "I'm afraid that we may have had an unfortunate misunderstanding. After all, both of us want nothing more than to turn back the ravagers of the Sabbat." When she said the word *Sabbat*, an intensity otherwise absent crept into her voice. It was the sound of cold and deep-seated hatred, but it passed as suddenly as it had arisen. "How unseemly for allies to spat among themselves."

"I want nothing more than to turn back the Sabbat," Jan agreed with part of her statement.

"And wouldn't it be so much more profitable," she asked, leaning forward and brushing his knee with her fingertips, "for us to work in concert, side by side?"

Despite himself, Jan suddenly pictured the two of them *laying* side by side, his limbs entwined with hers, and draped all around them the wreckage of bedclothes fervently cast aside. Then he found himself gazing into her eyes, and they truly were windows to her soul, beckoning him within, to share her deepest secrets, to share *with* her his innermost desires. He looked away. The room shifted dangerously. Jan felt the urge to take her hand in his but resisted. He felt overwhelmed by a giddiness similar to that which had assailed him when he'd imbibed Hardestadt's mixture of ancient vitae. Jan drew strength from the thought of his sire, who would not tolerate failure.

I have only one need, he reminded himself. *Only one physical desire. Blood.*

"I would prefer that we work together," Jan said at last. He wasn't sure how many seconds had passed since she asked the question, but Victoria did not take issue with his deliberate response.

"Then let us take control of this war," she urged him. "No prince will be able to look beyond the needs of his own city. *We* must make the decisions."

Jan found himself thinking that she sounded very reasonable, that he might be able to help her toward this goal, but he steeled himself against persuasion. *Think, man. Think!* he commanded himself. *She would create a council through which to rule, yet what could she offer the effort against the Sabbat? Would she hike up her skirt and hope to convince them to turn away from the gates of the city?* He opened his mouth to hurl that very accusation at her, to accuse her of gross opportunism. But he looked into the deep green of her eyes, and his thoughts were forced along another route.

"The princes will see that cooperation is required, that the self-interest of each one is also the self-interest of the others. That is what will save us."

Victoria sat back and crossed her arms. "You risk much on the reasonableness of princes. I have less faith in them than apparently you do. We must make sure they make the right choices."

"This is no conclave," Jan countered. "It is merely a gathering of Kindred, an unofficial conference."

"We could call a damned conclave!" she insisted with sudden intensity. "It is *custom* for a justicar to call the conclave, but there are other ways. This is a time of crisis. If you and I, Sturbridge and maybe Bell called a conclave, with the number of Kindred in the city, Prince Garlotte would have little choice but to acknowledge the legitimacy of the endeavor."

"And the war," Jan extrapolated, "would be prosecuted according to votes of the conclave."

"Exactly."

"With each Kindred present enjoying an equal vote, from the lowliest Brujah neonate to Prince Garlotte himself."

"Yes."

Jan rose from his seat and began pacing around the room. "I don't understand why it is that you Americans maintain such a passion for democracy," he said with no little exasperation. "It is not a fascination that the elders in Europe share to any degree. I assure you that."

"The Kindred gathered in this city will not be bullied," Victoria said. "They won't stand for it."

At this, Jan stopped pacing and turned to face her. "Oh, won't they? Will they defy the prince who granted them sanctuary? Who even now keeps the wolves at bay?"

Though she overstated her case—after all, the majority of Cainites, like the majority of mortals, were sheep to be led—Victoria had touched on a very real concern of the prince's. With the flood of refugees, the city was overpopulated to the degree that popular unrest could prove dangerous. The rank and file Kindred, displaced from the princes and static power structures that normally maintained order, were a volatile mix. They were like a loaded gun, a poised stake, aimed directly at the prince's heart. Jan and Garlotte had spent quite some time discussing that very matter last night and had arrived at several decisions. None of which Jan felt inclined to reveal to Victoria, especially since she was obviously courting the favor of the masses.

"Won't stand for it," Jan repeated dismissively. "Hmph. They'll stand for whatever the prince tells them to stand for. Unless, perhaps, they have an alternative." He stared pointedly at Victoria. "Are you planning to replace Prince Garlotte?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be stupid, Jan."

He shrugged and resumed his pacing. "Somehow, I suspect your passion for democracy goes only so far as objecting to a dictatorship in which you are not dictator." Victoria looked away from him and did not respond. "Regardless, no Kindred that I know was ever Embraced by a democrat. If freedom is what you want, perhaps you should travel down the road to Washington. I hear personal freedom is all the rage with the Sabbat."

As he concluded his diatribe, Jan was feeling rather pleased with himself for having resisted Victoria's charms so completely, after getting over the first jolt of seeing her. When he looked back at her now, however, he saw something in her captivating eyes that he had not seen there before—total sincerity.

"I escaped those fiends once," Victoria intoned with such vehemence that Jan winced. "If I see them again, it will be to stand over their broken bodies."

Though she had not told him, Jan recognized the brutalized victim's thirst for revenge. The tone of her voice confirmed what he had heard from another source, but even had that source not existed, Jan would have guessed. Such was the venom contained in her words.

"I know you were captured," he said.

This appeared to surprise her, but she didn't deny his claim. Instead, she seemed suddenly weary; a great sadness came over her, pulled her shoulders downward like a great weight. "I cannot begin to tell you what..." She looked away from him. "I will not speak of it."

Her pain, still tinged with defiance, called to Jan, drew him in. He moved to her side and sat beside her on the couch. She clutched her locket as if that could undo what had happened.

"I'm much recovered, but..." Her words were choked off. A shudder wracked her body. Jan placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Victoria turned so that her back was to him. Slowly, she reached for the zipper between her shoulder blades.

Jan's mouth and throat were suddenly so dry he didn't think he could speak if he tried. He watched as his own fingers grasped the zipper, slid it downward along its track. He moved slowly, unsure exactly of what Victoria wanted, but she didn't stop him, so he continued, below the small of her back, down to the bottom of the track at the level of her hips. She took his hand and placed it there on her body, at the lowest curve of her spine. Jan felt the silky smoothness of her skin, but he was not prepared for the tiny spur of bone that protruded from her flesh. It was no larger than a fingertip, but the skin surrounding it was red and irritated. *How?* he wondered.

I escaped those fiends once, she had said.

Fiends. Tzimisce. Sculptors of flesh. And bone.

Jan tried to pull his hand away, but Victoria held him to her. She was still slouched forward, and her gown now slid from her shoulders to lie bunched around her waist. Jan gazed upon the gently curving span of her back. From nape to hips, only the one small imperfection marred her beauty, a knob of bone drawn forth by some demonic torturer.

What else did they do? Jan wondered, but he knew he couldn't ask her, and there were no other visible signs of the torments she must have undergone. With the fingers of his other hand, he touched her just above the shoulders and traced the path of her spine. Sitting there before him, she seemed less fierce in her nakedness. *She's no threat to me,* he thought, as his hands slid to her hips, just beneath the folds of her dress. The visceral thrill he felt at touching her was a long-forgotten memory. How many decades had passed since he'd held a woman close, other than to feed? His problems seemed very distant—the Sabbat, Hardestadt, strong-willed princes, witches of the Tremere.

Toreador seductress? Part of Jan's mind rejected the epithet. How terrible her ordeal must have been. Victoria was in pain and needed comfort. She needed *him*. Yet Jan's mind was racing in many directions, and on many levels. Her emotional vulnerability allowed him to be close, but was not what attracted him. In his mind's eye, his fingers edged upward across the gentle ripples of her ribs. Then she took his hands and placed

them on her breasts. Jan pulled her close, held her firmly against his chest, as Victoria leaned her head back against his cheek and moaned at his caresses.

Reality again interposed itself. Jan was, indeed, slowly sliding his hands up her sides. Victoria turned her face partially toward him and sighed. Something about the tilt of her head caught his attention. His hands stopped as he saw the tiny mark just above the line of her jaw. It was a blemish on her who had no natural blemish. Jan raised a finger to the mark, touched it lightly, and saw that the spot was in the shape of a serpent swallowing its own tail.

"What is—?"

"*No!*"

Victoria was away from him in an instant and several steps across the room. She clutched her gown to her chest, at the same time frantically trying to get something from her purse. Jan watched in total befuddlement as she opened a compact and dabbed powder over the spot—the serpent devouring itself—that he had touched. Before he regained complete control of his senses, Victoria had attended to her makeup, and her dress was zipped and in good order. She pulled the locket from beneath the fabric and let it again rest free against her chest.

Jan stared at her. The mark on her jaw was no longer visible. He began to doubt his own eyes. Had he actually seen it, or was the snake merely a figment of his confusion? Victoria spent several moments smoothing her dress, adjusting strands of hair. She was as flustered as Jan was stunned.

"I'm afraid I must be going," she said and marched toward the door.

Jan did not recover in time to show her out. The door slammed, and she was gone. He stood unmoving and stared after her.

After several minutes, when he finally turned back to the room, a large figure stood against the wall on the other side of the love seat. The creature, where not covered by its threadbare suit, was hairy—short, brown fur with mangy splotches of gray. The suit might have been elegant once, many years and many more launderings ago, but seemed now barely to hold together. The creature's eyes were large and completely black—there appeared to be no white, no iris—and set far apart above the gaping hole where a nose should have been. Jagged teeth stuck through one side of its lip, so only the other side of the mouth seemed capable of opening.

"Well," it said, "that sure was a sight for sore eyes."

Jan steadied himself against the back of the chair. He felt shaky and completely unready to handle the demands placed on him. "What were we talking about before… that?"

"About *her*," said Marston Colchester. "You know, speak of the devil." He let out a wheeze that Jan had come to recognize as what would be laughter from someone with a nose. "I tell you, I been hanging out with the wrong people. Never had Victoria Ash walk into my suite and drop her panties, thank you ma'am."

Jan sat in the chair. "I believe she kept on her 'panties' for the entire visit."

"If she did, that was about the only thing. My, my. You have to admire a woman who don't wear a bra."

Jan ignored the Nosferatu's comments. Otherwise, the conversation would never progress beyond the relative merits of various feminine undergarments. This obscene creature was the first Kindred Jan had sought out upon reaching Baltimore. How, he wondered, could Prince Garlotte have ruled for so long while completely neglecting this clan? The prince professed disdain for the Nosferatu. It was a mistake many Kindred made, including, regrettably, many Ventrue. Jan was slightly incredulous that Colchester had attended the more recent conference. Jan had looked over the auditorium rather thoroughly. How could a man of that size go unnoticed? The same way he'd just hidden himself, Jan imagined, during Victoria's visit.

Victoria. Jan needed to put her out of his mind; he needed to change the subject, or at least shift the conversation down more productive avenues. "You said you heard the conversation between Victoria and Sturbridge as the conference was breaking up?" Jan prodded.

"That I did. Now, that Tremere, she's not one to go running about with no panties on."

"The conversation—?"

"Right." Colchester settled onto the love seat and ran his fingers across the fine upholstery. "So, your girlfriend the Toreador waltzes up to Sturbridge, real sly-like and smiling the whole time, but she says something about, 'Are you Tremere going to do Ventrue bidding, and them not bothering to send any help?' And Sturbridge, she says, 'If we gotta make do with whats we already got, then we gotta make do.'"

Jan absorbed this report. The wording was obviously filtered through Colchester's own vernacular, but the meaning seemed reasonable enough.

"Then," the Nosferatu continued, "Victoria asks if Sturbridge wants to talk more about it, and Sturbridge says that she ain't sticking around. She's gotta get back to New York real quick-like."

"I see." Over the years, Jan had learned better than to question the veracity of information gathered by the Nosferatu. *Victoria has no agreement with the Tremere*, he thought. This was significant news for several reasons. The Tremere, secretive and uniformly distrusted among the Kindred, were always a potential danger. The fact that they apparently were not cooperating with Victoria made Victoria less of a threat. Also, the fact that Sturbridge herself did not seem to have much of a rapport with Victoria cut down on the likelihood that Victoria had in some way engineered or been complicit in the assassination of Maria Chin, in order that a more cooperative Sturbridge could join the conference.

Of course, there was the possibility, however slight, that they had suspected they were being watched and had orchestrated the entire conversation. "Did they meet again?" Jan asked.

"Nope. Sturbridge hightailed it for New York not too long after that."

"I see." Jan settled back into the armchair and began to massage the bridge of his nose. His fingers, however, still remembered the sensation of Victoria's supple skin. He was plagued by the ghost image that never was—his hands clasped firmly over her breasts, her body pressed back against his. He shook his head to clear away the mental picture.

I'll have to be more careful, he decided. There was no point in overestimating his ability to resist her. *I'll stay away from her, not meet with her in private*. But such thoughts

raised a dull ache in his chest. If only there weren't the political games.... *If there weren't political games, she wouldn't be interested in you,* he reminded himself.

"Marston, can you watch her the next few nights?" Jan asked.

The Nosferatu rubbed his hairy palms together. "Since it's for a good cause." The twisted grin of his half-pierced lip sent a chill through Jan.

There was no need to show Colchester out. He was simply no longer there. Jan busied himself trying to arrange all the pieces of the puzzle in his mind, and trying *not* to think about one particularly beautiful piece of that puzzle.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 12:29 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.



The room was small, with wood paneling and thick carpet on the floor. The furniture was of mahogany and surprisingly good quality for a hotel. Whenever possible, Vykos preferred staying in places like this when Fate forced her to visit North America, at least when there were not more solid accommodations to retreat to. On a vague level, she was still uncomfortable with the sheer newness of the entire place, but surrounding herself with competent craftsmanship at least let her avoid thinking about the transience of most of the continent's construction.

The meeting had, of course, been a fiasco. She hadn't expected any differently. After the first few easy victories, the Nomad Coalition (she could barely contemplate the name without laughing) had gotten almost completely unmanageable. Unfortunately, they still had to be invited to each and every council session. If nothing else, it kept them off the streets for several hours a night, and she agreed with Vallejo's assessment that, if they ran around unsupervised in a single city for a week straight, they'd probably do more damage to the operation through sheer stupidity than the Camarilla would be able to do through stubborn resistance. The curfew that had been established in the city was proof enough that a lack of discretion had its consequences; there was no need to pour more kerosene on that fire.

That being said, she still found dealing with the Nomads and others of their ilk wearisome.

There was a gentle knock at the door. That was odd. She'd given the ghoul standing guard in the outer chamber of the suite strict instructions that she not be disturbed. On the other hand, assassins—her dear Parmenides excepted, but he was in any case off assisting with the siege of the Tremere chantry—rarely were polite enough to knock. "Yes?"

Polonia spoke from outside. "A thousand pardons for the intrusion, but I was wondering if we might conspire for a moment before the meeting reconvenes?" The man was ever courteous, and about as harmless as a knife to the kidney. Of course, it was better to get an idea of his thoughts before the meeting began than otherwise.

"Of course. I'd been hoping you'd come by. Do come in."

"You are too gracious," the archbishop replied, and the door swung open of its own volition. Polonia strode in, noted Vykos's position in the large chair behind the desk, and made the decision to remain standing. Behind him, more tendrils of shadow pulled the door shut and at his feet a pool of inky darkness that bore a suspicious resemblance to a cat paced silently.

"I was under the impression the hotel had a 'No Pets' policy, Archbishop."

"It's just a little toy of shadow I take with me on occasion. I find it soothing. Also, it's remarkably effective at catching mice."

"Mice?"

"I misspoke: vermin. Mice, rats—all sorts. Besides, if we were enforcing the 'No Pets' policy, where would that leave your ghouls?"

Vykos let a ghost of a smile cross her lips. "Indeed. But I can't help taking in strays."

Polonia chuckled. "For purposes you don't immediately share, no doubt. But let it pass; let it pass. How goes it with the siege? Have the Tremere seen fit yet to run up the white flag?"

"No change. It's just a matter of time." Vykos made a throwaway gesture and stretched languidly. The effect was entirely lost on Polonia, who'd bent down to scratch his shadowy cat between the ears.

"I suppose that makes some sort of sense. Please do keep me informed when there is progress."

"Of course."

Polonia straightened back up. "I appreciate your courtesy. As for the other matters at hand, I am curious as to why you went to such lengths to irritate MacEllen. I'm really not in the mood to play at tutor with a naughty child, Vykos, and I would hate to think you were putting me in that situation deliberately."

"Tsk tsk, my dear Archbishop. You wound me. The call was important, you know."

"I'm quite aware of its importance and of who Pieterzoon is, and how much any number of my acquaintances in the councils of my clan—"

"*Les Amis Noirs* ?" Vykos threw the name out carelessly, knowing that no one not given the blood of the Lasombra should know of *Les Amis*' existence.

If she was hoping for a rise out of Polonia, the ploy failed. The man ignored her interjection completely. "Any number would dearly love to take the man apart sinew by sinew. I'm also aware you received a letter from an unknown source before the war council began and had the knowledge of Pieterzoon's arrival in Baltimore all along." His voice was gentle, almost scolding. "Are you deliberately trying to make this difficult for me?"

"Not at all. MacEllen just needed a bit more prodding to get to a point where you'd feel compelled to reaffirm his place in the—how shall I put this?—pecking order."

"I'd really rather prefer not to have to kill the lot of them, Vykos. I know the Little Tailor is working quite hard to recoup our losses from Atlanta, but you and I both know that whatever he comes up with won't be nearly as effective as what we lost. If we lose all of our seasoned irregulars as well, that's going to push the timetable on the entire project back, and somehow I don't see that prospect pleasing the esteemed cardinal."

"Perhaps. Though you and I both know you won't have to kill MacEllen. The reason he's alive and Averros is not is that MacEllen will back down when he's outclassed. And you, Don de Polonia, outshine MacEllen as clearly as the sun outshines, mmm, the lesser of Mars's two moons."

Polonia laughed in spite of himself. "I'm disappointed in you, my dear. I'd heard you were a better flatterer than that." He coughed, once. "Actually, I think I've simply made him angry enough to loathe me in silence rather than disrupt the council any longer. He'll be looking for an opportunity to take his anger out on one of his own followers, just to salve his ego. Still, either way, it's an annoyance or two less at the meeting."

Vykos nodded. "Indeed. An annoyance or two less. I'm so glad I could be of assistance in the matter."

Polonia smiled, humorlessly. "Your assistance is, as always, appreciated. If you will excuse me?" Vykos made no protest, and Polonia walked to the door. The cat followed a few leisurely steps behind. The archbishop placed his hand on the doorknob, then paused and turned. "Oh, I almost forgot. I thought I should warn you. The Camarilla's not the only one getting a bit more company from the Old Country."

"Oh?" The word contained rather more surprise than Vykos would have liked to have let slip.

Polonia nodded. "Yes. Apparently someone's gotten concerned about the safety of our finest generals, or some such. There have been rumors of assassination attempts and similar foolishness. As a result, we'll be receiving a bodyguard. The man has rather impressive credentials and a most fascinating lineage."

"Really." Vykos's self-assurance was back in place, seamlessly. "And when does this paragon arrive?"

The archbishop made a great show of consulting his watch. "In about half an hour, if traffic is good. Which will give me plenty of time to introduce you to him before the war council resumes." And with that, he turned and walked out. The cat, arrogant as its master, followed.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 12:34 AM
A tenement in Harlem
New York City, New York

Ramona perched on the top rail of the fire escape and watched Zhavon sleeping peacefully. The first nights after the attack, the girl had tossed and called out, trying to escape whatever hoodlums haunted her dreams.

There's worse out there, Ramona silently warned her.

From several blocks away, car tires screeched. Ramona cringed and waited for the crash, which never came. Almost as a second thought, she glanced back and made sure that the noise hadn't awakened Zhavon. The girl still slept quietly. Over the past few weeks of watching, Ramona had developed an uncanny sense of when the sleeper would awake—the slight turn of the head and stretching of the neck just before the telltale fluttering eyelids. Ramona was sure that, aside from the night of the attack, Zhavon had never seen her, and even that night was easily explained away as hysteria or trauma. Even so, there were times when Zhavon was awake, times when Ramona knew beyond a doubt that she was out of sight, that the dark-skinned girl seemed to know that someone—or something—was watching her.

I remember that feeling, Ramona thought.

She was distracted for a moment by the sound of movement from the shadows below, but there was nothing there.

You're jumpy tonight, girl. Probably because of that biker last night, she decided—the thought of which reminded her that she shouldn't leave Jen alone so much. Darnell didn't spend any more time with her than he had to, and what if the biker did come back?

But Ramona's gaze drifted back to the sleeping Zhavon. Ramona understood Jen's fears, and even shared a few, but with Zhavon, a strange affinity ran more deeply. Jen was the monster that Ramona had become, and there was a connection there, but Zhavon was the human Ramona had once been. The mortal girl looked so peaceful lying there beneath the sheet. When she was awake, however, she possessed a certain defiance, a naïveté coupled with a wrong-headed sense of invulnerability.

I remember that feeling too, thought Ramona. She had once felt almost exactly that way. Now she knew better. She knew better than to think everything would turn out all right. She knew better than to expect nothing too bad to happen to her. Zhavon, though, continued sleeping, oblivious to the worst fears the night had to offer.

After a few minutes, Ramona realized that she'd been staring at the mortal—and that's what normal people passed for these days: mortal, meat, blood. Above the line of the white sheet, Zhavon's hand rested limply on her chest, and above her hand was her bare neck. Ramona imagined that she could see the pulse of the jugular—or could she really? The surrounding sounds of the city faded away beneath the thump-thump, thump-thump of a single human heart, beneath the intermittent swish of blood forced through arteries and veins.

Ramona was halfway through the window—licking her lips—before she caught herself. She retreated back to the fire escape and shook her head forcefully.

"I *hate* that," Ramona growled under her breath as she sat and hugged her knees to her chest. Losing control like that, even momentarily, brought memories of the change flooding back, of the first night she'd tasted blood at her lips and lost herself to the undeniable hunger.

Sitting there, Ramona wanted to look over the windowsill at Zhavon but was afraid to let herself.

What if it happens again? What if I can't stop? Why'd I even bother to save her? Ramona wondered, though she knew that ripping those two men apart had been less an act of heroism and more the predatory impulse of a hunter whose prey was being stolen away.

Hell, if those bastards hadn't stepped in the way, she fully realized for the first time, *I might've killed Zhavon myself.*

The instinct for the hunt had taken over, as it had so many times. Who was to say when it would happen again? Ramona knew better than to think it wouldn't. For all her newly found powers, it was another way she was helpless.

Angry with herself and seeking distraction, Ramona pointedly did not look at Zhavon, but instead tugged at her own shoes. They'd been bothering her for some time, and she was in no mood, at the moment, to take crap from inanimate objects. She yanked at the tongues of her leather sneakers as if they were the source of all her problems, and when she pulled her feet free, the cause of her physical discomfort was readily apparent.

The shoes were fine. But Ramona stared in horror at her feet. The space from the heel to the ball of each foot was mashed together and only about half as long as it should've been. Her gnarled toes, however, were abnormally elongated. They stretched almost like tiny fingers, tipped with thick, curved nails.

Claws, Ramona thought, aghast.

She'd watched before as her fingers transformed into razor-sharp claws, but that had only happened when she'd been angry or upset, and it hadn't lasted long. She continued to stare at what couldn't be her feet and waited for the illusion to fade, or, at the worst, for them to change back.

But they *were* her feet, and they didn't change to suit her.

Oh my God.

Ramona tentatively reached out and was actually surprised that she felt the sensation in her foot of her own fingertips brushing across wrinkled and twisted skin.

"You gave in to the Beast," said a voice from below.

Ramona jumped to her deformed feet. A level below her on the fire escape stood, not the Puerto Rican man from the downstairs apartment she'd expected to see but, instead, a complete stranger.

The hair on the back of her neck shot up straight.

The stranger neither retreated nor advanced. He stood there with a blank, unfriendly expression. Dark sunglasses and his long, tangled hair partially obscured his face. The shadows of the torn, wrinkled clothes he wore blended almost perfectly into the nighttime cityscape.

Ramona's initial shock quickly gave way to the low growl that rose up from her gut, but the stranger raised a finger to his lips. "Shh." He nodded toward Zhavon's window.

He was right, Ramona knew. She didn't want to risk waking Zhavon. Even so, Ramona bristled. Who was he to tell her what to do? She swallowed the growl, but her anger demanded an outlet, and before realizing that she was going to, she leapt down the steps at the stranger.

He seemed less surprised by her actions than she was. With one fluid motion, he placed a hand on the top rail and vaulted off the fire escape.

As Ramona's knees uncoiled from the impact of her landing, she sprang after him without the slightest pause. Her shift in momentum carried her over the rail, and she landed crouched and ready to attack in the alley only feet away from the stranger.

"Hold still, you bastard," she growled, now that she was safely away from the window.

The stranger cocked his head as if he heard a distant sound and then gazed up toward Zhavon's window. "Who will you leave unwatched?" he asked.

The question froze Ramona. *He knows about her,* she thought with alarm, and in the instant she followed his gaze to the window, he was gone. Ramona stood alone in the deserted alley.

The stranger was gone, but his scent lingered—a faint yet distinctive smell that Ramona had noticed other times, but never before had she been able to connect the odor to its source. At once, she began in the direction her nose told her the stranger had gone, but she stopped after only a few steps.

Who will you leave unwatched? His words of just moments before came back to her.

She glanced again up at the window. Was there a threat to Zhavon?

Who will you leave unwatched?

He obviously knew about the girl, although not even Ramona understood what drew her here almost every night. *The smell.* Ramona forced herself to think. Her instincts had swung instantly from aggression toward the stranger to protectiveness of Zhavon, but Ramona needed to think. She'd noticed the smell last night at the garage. Did that mean he also knew about Jen and Darnell and of their resting place?

I'll be back, the biker had said—like a bad rerun of a Schwarzenegger flick. Was this stranger part of the Sabbat as well?

Ramona glanced up at the window again.

Or is he luring me away so he can come back? she wondered.

Like so many nights over the past few weeks, she found herself torn between staying and watching over the sleeping mortal and going to those of her own kind. Without consciously resolving the dilemma, Ramona found herself following the scent, and though it soon faded away to nothing, the first steps had set her on a path to the George Washington Bridge.

After half a mile, Ramona realized that she'd left her shoes behind on the fire escape, but she had dithered long enough. Besides, her malformed feet moved easily over the pavement. Neither gravel nor broken glass pained her tough, leathery soles, and the rhythmic tap of claws on asphalt lulled her into a loping trance.

Who will you leave unwatched?

The blocks and miles fell away behind her until she was crossing the bridge, passing a car that swerved away from the shadow flashing, only for an instant, through the driver's peripheral vision. Then the bridge, too, was receding in the distance. Ramona passed the spot where she'd faced the biker the night before. She pressed onward frantically, urged ahead by the great dread building within her. What if she was too late reaching her friends? What if she'd made the wrong decision and something terrible happened to Zhavon?

As the garage came into view, Ramona felt not relief but an instant of inexplicable terror. All seemed dark and quiet from without.

Normal quiet or too quiet?

The question had scarcely flashed through her mind before she was at the door. She ripped it open. The chain on the handle shattered as the links were met with a force they couldn't resist. The clinking of the chain fragments scattered across the parking lot was lost to the explosion of the metal door slammed open against the aluminum wall of the building. Ramona charged in ready to attack.

Darnell jumped up from where he sat and spun to face her. Ramona caught only a brief glimpse of Jen as she scuttled down into the nearest pit.

"Mother...!" Darnell started to yell, but his curse trailed off as recognition slowly replaced shock on his face. "What the *hell* you doin'?"

Ramona quickly scanned the darkened interior of the building. "Has he been here?" she blurted out.

"What...? Who?" Darnell, already angry and more than a little embarrassed at having been caught off-guard, was not calmed by Ramona's near-frantic manner.

The biker, she started to say but then realized that wasn't who she was most worried about. *The stranger.* "Anyone."

"Nobody but your crazy ass breakin' down the damn door!" Darnell said.

A light flickered to life in the pit where Jen had fled. She poked her head into view and lifted up her mechanic's lamp. "Ramona? That you?"

"Turn off the damn light!" responded Ramona and Darnell in unison as they shielded their eyes.

As the light went out and all three were bathed in total darkness, Ramona heard, for the second time that night, the screeching of car tires. Earlier, she'd expected a crash. This time her expectations were fulfilled.

A roaring engine burst into a sudden crescendo of destruction, twisted and torn metal, as a car barreled through the garage's left bay door. A headlight shattered into a blinding spray of glass and sparks. The car ripped the tall door from its track and slid to a stop near the pits.

Ramona dove away from both car and falling door. Darnell wasn't so lucky. The sliding car struck him squarely on the right side and flung him into the air through the darkness.

Ramona rolled and jumped to her feet. The remaining headlight cast an eerie light through the garage as the dented old car jerked to a halt amidst the smell of burnt rubber. Almost instantly, three of the four doors opened and out stepped the biker and two others wearing similar, unofficial uniforms—ratty T-shirt, faded and tight jeans, black boots.

"Hiya, sweetmeat," the biker called out to the darkness. His companions flanked him on either side. "Ready to play with the big boys, or do you wanna practice that swan dive for real?"

Ramona felt around and found a large crescent wrench on top of a stack of boxes. The tool's weight was solid and comforting in her grasp. The crack along the handle was not a problem for Ramona. With a quick, axe-like motion, she launched the wrench at the biker.

It struck him on the temple and snapped his head to the side. He staggered back a step but didn't fall, and when he regained his balance, to Ramona's dismay, an evil grin spread across his features.

"Come to papa, baby," he said, as he licked his lips and stepped forward into the darkness, retracing the path the wrench had followed. He seemed oblivious to the trickle of blood that ran down his face and to the blow that would've killed a mortal.

Ramona looked around for any other weapon at hand as she backed away from the advancing biker. Could this, she wondered, be the same person who, last night, had shied away from a confrontation with her? It was, but tonight he had numbers on his side.

Or so he thought.

Suddenly, a bestial roar erupted over the hum of the idling car. From the darkness across the way, Darnell came hurtling through the air like a demonic bird of prey. He crashed onto the two Sabbat behind the biker, driving them to the floor beneath his furious attack.

As the biker whirled about at the commotion, Ramona leapt for his throat. He sensed her attack at the last second, but only enough to deflect, not to evade, her blow. Ramona's force carried him to the ground.

For a moment, five vampires writhed in a mass on the floor like maggots on carrion. Pale bodies flailed, struggling for leverage. Ramona and the biker were the first to untangle themselves. Each rolled away and sprang up.

Darnell climbed onto one of his two foes and clawed and bit his opponent's face. The unfortunate creature struggled to defend himself but had little success against Darnell's savagery. Behind Darnell, however, the other Sabbat stood and took from his belt a .38 special, which he aimed at the back of Darnell's head.

Ramona moved to save her friend, but the biker, taking advantage of her distraction, struck her across the back of the head with his iron-hard fist. Ramona stumbled to her knees as time seemed to freeze before her very eyes.

Suddenly, Jen rose from the pit immediately behind the Sabbat holding the revolver. She held in each hand the clamp of a set of jumper cables, and at once she hooked them onto the unsuspecting gunman.

The cables must've been hooked to a battery in the pit, because sparks shot out of the clamps and out of the Sabbat vampire. The revolver fell from his hand as he contorted into an unnaturally rigid pose. Crackling electricity danced around his body as he jerked spasmodically, and his eyes rolled up into his head. Acrid smoke and the smell of seared flesh seemed to fill the entire garage at once. In slow motion, he fell to one knee, then, mouth agape and drooling, he toppled to the floor.

Jen, horror etched on her face, stood back away from her victim. The other Sabbat vampire took full advantage of his friend's demise and scurried away from Darnell and, holding his bleeding face, continued out of the garage.

None of this was lost on the biker. For the briefest moment, he froze in indecision, caught between staying to fight and running with his buddy. His hesitation cost him.

Ramona kicked with all her strength across his jaw. The staccato snap of bones cut across the continuing buzz from the jumper cables.

The biker landed hard several yards away and lay stunned. When he sat up at last, his jaw was set at an odd angle. He raised a hand but only gingerly touched his chin.

Ramona strutted toward him. "You said something about the big boys," she reminded him. "They showin' up soon?"

A flicker of doubt crossed his features.

"Maybe *you'll* be practicin' that swan dive off the bridge," Ramona said.

She and Darnell stepped closer to the biker. Jen, giving the electrically live body on the floor a wide berth, circled around nervously behind them.

The biker still seemed stunned from Ramona's roundhouse kick. Rather than respond to her taunts, he spit blood onto the floor, an action that obviously caused him great pain.

Ramona stepped closer still. She didn't harbor any illusions that he and his companions would've spared her. The little she knew of the Sabbat from first the West Coast and now the East, they weren't the forgiving types. He hadn't counted on Darnell and Jen, and wasn't that just a pisser for biker boy?

But her next step was interrupted by the sound of more engines gunning nearby—cars, several of them, and coming closer.

Ramona turned back to the biker. Broken jaw and all, his face was twisted into a maddening sneer. "Better be quick," he muttered painfully, as laughter, deep in his gut like a smothered cough, began to wrack his body.

"Whelp!" A different voice caught Ramona's attention from behind.

She turned to see the top half of the stranger protruding from an opening in the floor where, before, a stack of crates had rested.

"This way. Hurry!" His voice was forceful, commanding. It lacked any sense of desperation, yet hinted that he expected no delay in obedience.

Ramona again faced the biker, who was laughing giddily now. Blood dripped from his mouth.

She sent another kick across his face. He spun and landed in a heap, unmoving, but Ramona's blood was up. She wanted to take his head off altogether.

But the stranger was waiting expectantly. The position of the opening was such that Darnell and Jen couldn't see him. Only Ramona. His gaze bore into her.

The cars that had heartened the biker were very close now. The beams of headlights streamed through the gaping hole where the bay door had been ripped away. The biker lay completely still, but the cars had to be more Sabbat. How many, Ramona didn't know. And she didn't want to find out.

"Come on," she called to Darnell and Jen. She led them to the open trapdoor. The stranger was nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd this come from?" Jen asked.

Ramona shrugged. "It was under some boxes." She paused above the opening. Who was this stranger who threatened her before and helped her now? But a car crashing through the intact bay door chased the questions from her mind. Ramona dove through the opening, and Darnell and Jen followed right behind her. Darnell had the presence of mind to pull the trapdoor shut.

They found themselves crowded into a low, narrow crawlspace lined with pipes of various sizes. The only light was the little that seeped around the edges of the trapdoor.

"Great," muttered Ramona. Her first thought was that the stranger had hopped out and run while she wasn't looking, and that now she and the others were trapped—at least until the Sabbat reinforcements turned on the lights and found the trapdoor.

Or maybe the stranger had escaped ahead of them.

Ramona crawled forward into the darkness. Her eyes were adjusting rapidly.

"Ow!" Jen hadn't kept her head down.

"Shut the fuck up," Darnell hissed at her in a harsh whisper.

Ramona ignored them and kept crawling. She almost fell headlong into the hole that opened beneath her. She stopped so abruptly that Darnell bumped smack into her ass, and Jen into him.

"Hey...!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Ramona crawled into the hole headfirst. "This way. Down," she said over her shoulder in case they couldn't see her.

The pipes gave way to dirt and rock, but the new tunnel was no more spacious than the crawlspace. If anything, the walls closed more tightly about her. Ramona had never been underground before. She'd never had reason to suspect that claustrophobia might be a problem for her, but she could suddenly feel air growing scarce.

You don't breathe no more, bitch, she reminded herself, and crawled ahead so Darnell and Jen could follow her down.

The tunnel ahead sloped downward, and that seemed as good a direction as any. A tiny but putrid-smelling trickle of water led Ramona onward. The ceiling of the passage dropped more than the floor, and the space became tighter still. Soon Ramona was crawling with her face turned sideways, cheek pressed down in the muck. Behind, Jen whimpered and Darnell cursed under his breath. Ramona's back scraped against the ceiling, but she was already pressed as hard to the floor as she could be.

She scanned the darkness ahead. Her eyes had adjusted as much as they were going to. There was just too little light, and nothing to see but rock and dirt. She didn't want to wedge herself in, but neither did she want to try to direct Jen and Darnell back the other way to either try the other direction or reemerge into the garage. Ahead was better.

Ramona pushed forward with a little more force and popped through the tight spot. "It opens up a little up here," she let the others know. The tunnel turned downward more steeply as well. Their pace quickened in the less restrictive space, and soon they came to a rough curve. Ramona could feel fresh air on her face. Twenty yards more, and they crawled out onto the steep bank of the Hudson River, not far from the George Washington Bridge.

Ramona glanced around, but there was no sign of the stranger. She almost asked if the others had seen him but decided this was neither the time nor the place. Discussions with Darnell and Jen tended to degenerate rapidly into arguments, and Ramona wanted a bit more distance from the Sabbat, however many of those bastards were swarming around. Who knew if they might find the trapdoor, or if they had lookouts posted on or near the bridge?

"This way," Ramona said, as she started north along the river.

"Where are we going now?" Jen asked. She peeled off her outer sweatshirt, stained down the front with the sludge from the tunnel.

"Hayesburg," said Ramona. New York City was a bit too hot all of a sudden. *Just like L.A.*, she thought.

Darnell must've agreed. Otherwise he wouldn't have hesitated to argue. "Hayesburg," he repeated. "Where's that?"

"Don't know," Ramona answered. "Guess we'll have to find it." She kept her eyes peeled for any lurking Sabbat—or for the stranger, who seemed, for better or worse, to have taken an interest in her. As she quickened her trot to a run, she tried to decide what she would do if she met him again—thank him, or kick his ass? She didn't come up with an answer right away.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 1:07 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.

The tone of the war council changed completely when Polonia reconvened it. For one thing, MacEllen had fewer supporters, but those who did stick by him were united in a sullen hatred they directed down the length of the table to where the author of his humiliation sat. Borges seemed agitated, but didn't speak, instead drumming his fingers incessantly against the dark wood. Past him, Vallejo, who'd been absent earlier, sat ramrod straight and radiating obvious disdain for the rabble to his right. Vykos was, as ever, unreadable and cool, though Polonia thought he detected some pleasure at Borges's discomfort. And to his own immediate right was the thin, supremely bored-looking Talley. The man had clearly endured an uncomfortable journey and was looking forward to the remainder of the meeting with all of the joy of a nun faced with a Tarantino film. *Ay me*, thought Polonia. *The sooner I begin, the sooner it ends and I can bid good night to this walking ghost.*

"My friends," he said, flowing to his feet. "I have a profound honor; namely that of introducing a most illustrious addition to our efforts here. Cardinal Monçada"—and Vykos's iron control wavered visibly for a moment—"has seen fit to grace us with the presence of another guest, the most esteemed Señor Talley, who holds the exalted rank of templar among the cardinal's servants. He is here to ensure the success of our work by protecting those of us who are most at risk of cowardly assassination."

Vykos frowned at that. Polonia noted it but decided to plunge onward. "We've already had one such attempt, on our beloved Vykos. None of us want to risk a loss of that magnitude again, nor do we wish to see anyone else become a secondary target. Would you not agree, Archbishop Borges?"

The Archbishop of Miami nodded sharply, with the look of a man being told that his son is not his own. "Of course. We should take every step to protect Vykos from another such attack."

Polonia smiled blandly. The trap was about to close.

"Oh, I have communicated back to the cardinal that Vykos needs no further protection," said Vallejo. "Talley is here to protect all of us, my dear archbishop."

Borges, Polonia noted with some satisfaction, now had the expression of a man who'd discovered that none of his children were his own, and that his wife had trouble remembering his name. Not only had he been told that he was going to be watched very closely by an extremely powerful vampire who looked like death warmed over and who brooked no nonsense whatsoever, he'd been maneuvered into a position whereby his refusal to accept that surveillance would be seen as disloyal.

And if he refused, and an accident occurred that deprived the operation of his services, well, *que sera, sera*, or however the damnable song went.

Borges stammered something or other that was perfectly incomprehensible, while at the end of the table, MacEllen's supporters whooped their amusement at seeing one of the high and mighty taking it on the chin for a change.

"Enough." Talley had a low voice, a whispery one that undercut all other voices it came in contact with. "Archbishop Borges, I have been assigned by my cardinal, as a token of his esteem for all of the assembled commanders, to serve as protection for certain among you. It has come to the cardinal's attention that there may be an attempt on at least one of the archbishops assembled here, as a method of derailing our operations while the Camarilla buys time to consolidate its defenses. I am here to make sure those attempts fail.

"Just because you draw my attentions does not mean that you in particular have been specifically targeted for anything other than my presence for an evening. If my conversation displeases, rest assured, I'll soon move along to someone else. Otherwise, don't read anything more into it than you absolutely must, and remember that I did not achieve my current title by being less than effective at my chosen tasks." He surveyed the room for a moment. "Now. Everything I have heard tells me that this operation has been proceeding exceptionally smoothly, and I trust the planning meetings have been just as smooth. My Lord Polonia, I look forward to observing. You must forgive me, however, if I abandon this seat of honor and instead take up my duties. The cardinal was most insistent that I begin immediately." And he stood and walked over behind where Borges sat, flushed and angry. "Please, Your Excellency. Pretend I'm not even here."

JA



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 1:27 AM
Park-It-4-Less Garage (Under Construction)
Boston, Massachusetts

Chas was right. The night she appeared before him to resign, Francis Milliner had Genevieve entombed in the concrete support of a parking garage his construction company was building.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 1:45 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.



The meeting, Polonia thought, was proceeding in a most satisfactory fashion. Talley's presence was sufficient to unnerve Borges, which kept him from making too much noise. Vykos still didn't seem overjoyed at the templar's presence, but Polonia chalked that up to the notion that she was displeased that the news had come to him first. And Talley himself? The man might as well have been a piece of furniture, or a sculpture.

Business had proceeded with remarkable alacrity, and now only two items remained on the agenda: the presence of the accursed Pieterzoon, which he'd decided to hold off on until now, at the end of the council; and another matter that would require a certain amount of delicacy. The former was going to be profoundly unpleasant, so he decided to open with it and get it out of the way. Ghouls brought in refreshments and removed debris. Polonia's dislike of the creatures was far less pronounced than most of his clanmates'; he just cordially loathed them and everything they stood for. The head of the unfortunate Seamus had left some time ago, leaving only a bloody smear on the table, but Polonia preferred a relatively clean work area for council. After all, fewer body parts strewn about meant fewer distractions for the hungry.

"We're nearly done with the night's planning, I am most pleased to say. I know many of you are feeling restless, and I'll be as happy as you are when we finish. Now, I believe the matter of Herr Pieterzoon is next. Vykos?"

Vykos stood, graceful as always. Certain of the Tzimisce at the table chanted her name, but it was a half-hearted effort; in truth, everyone was too damn tired. In one of Vallejo's rare lighter moments, the man had claimed that he found the war councils three times the effort of actual fighting and that he was sure he'd be bored to death long before the Camarilla found a way to put him down.

"As I was saying earlier, I would suggest to the council that we deal with Herr Pieterzoon immediately. As we can all see," she let a graceful finger pick out Talley from the crowd, "the stakes have just gotten higher. We simply cannot afford to wait any longer to deal with him, lest he rally the Camarilla forces effectively against us."

Borges grumbled discontentedly. "You said that already, Vykos. I don't think things have changed that much," he glanced up at the impassive Talley, "in the last few hours. So explain why and how we need to get this bastard. Do a good job, and I'm with you."

"Why, Archbishop, thank you for your words of support." Vykos's voice dropped to a dangerous purr. "Now, consider why Talley has been sent here. He is here because Europe has entered the fray and because assassination has become a permissible weapon. Clearly, one of our great advantages thus far, besides the sheer will and ferocity you, the soldiers of the Sabbat, have brought to bear, is the small contribution made by myself, Commander Vallejo, the Little Tailor and others. We are here. We are settled. We are part and parcel of all that will be done. By permitting Pieterzoon to survive, we allow him to whittle away our advantage. And if he establishes himself here, how much longer before he brings

in allies? Before the tide of our advance slows? No, we must maintain our advantage—any general in any age would tell you that. Narses, were he here, would laugh at our indecision."

She spun, then, and locked eyes with Talley. "As for the other reason... they think they can resort to the dagger because the sword has failed them. If we turn the dagger back on them, they will abandon it. If the architect of their assassination campaign falls—and make no mistake, this has Pieterzoon's stink on it—then their own efforts will crumble. And I am sure that is a sentiment everyone in this room who just might be targeted by the Ventrue's assassins can share.

"So, shall we do this thing? Shall we eliminate Pieterzoon before he becomes more of a menace—for he is one already, and becomes a greater one with each passing hour—or shall we allow our enemy to gain strength while we sit idly by and wait for the knife in the dark? What shall it be?"

The roar of approval that burst forth came from dozens of throats. Vykos bathed in it, drank in the adulation, gloried in it. Even Borges appeared convinced. Only Polonia, Vallejo and Talley seemed unmoved. Polonia shook his head. The die was cast.

It took ten minutes for the roaring to die down, as Vykos seemed to be in no hurry to let things settle. Finally, Polonia interrupted. "Well, the motion seems to have carried, Vykos. Now, how shall we go about implementing the will of the," he waved his hand to take in the room, "people?"

Vykos smiled poisonously. "For shame, my dear Archbishop. That's your responsibility. You're in command; I merely host this arrangement by virtue of being archbishop of the city. I wouldn't dare to usurp your authority. I leave the entire affair in your capable hands."

Polonia glowered at Vykos for a long moment, until the uncomfortable silence was broke by a heretofore silent member of the war council:

"I'll take it. Me and my boys—we'll take it."

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:00 AM
Fifth Avenue
New York City, New York

Aisling Sturbridge sluiced through the rain-slick streets. The city towered above her on all sides in colossal glyphs of pitted steel and sizzling neon. The jumble of arcane signs and sigils that assaulted her senses seemed haphazard. The city streets were piled high with half-forgotten ambitions rendered in concrete and raw altitude.

This was the Dragon's Graveyard—the place where the lumbering juggernauts of unbridled industry came to die. Sturbridge could feel the weight of old bones looming over her.

She ducked through a low archway and found herself in the midst of a vaulted colonnade of jutting ribs. Each of the gently curving monoliths was yellowed and pitted through long exposure to the elements. She absently ran a hand down the nearest ivory pillar. Its surface was encased in a nearly invisible envelope of cool water, trickling over the pocked surface in dozens of miniature fountains, cascades and waterfalls. As if of their own volition, her fingers searched for and traced out the letters of the logo—the sacred name that the faithful had carved into the obelisk all those years ago.

The Plaza.

She smiled at a distant memory, recalling a lobby on the scale of a cathedral, filled with the luminaries of the American aristocracy gliding among peerless marbles. After only a brief contact, her hand fell absently to her side and she moved on.

In the rigors of the hunt, there was little room for nostalgia.

Through careful scrutiny, Sturbridge began to discern that hers was not the only sign of life among the ruins. She was amazed that the castoffs of two hundred years of avarice and ambition were not content to lie still and be dead. All around her, the city clamored heavenwards, clawing its way upward, trampling upon its own shoulders in its rush. The glass-walled towers seemed to shift like liquid under her gaze, flowing upward toward some unguessed sea amid the night sky. Experimentally, she put one hand out and broke the mirrored surface of the nearest building.

The tingling was not the expected rush of cool water, but something different—the scurrying of thousands of tiny legs across her skin.

The touch of Sabbat sorcery.

The vision shifted abruptly as the enemy attack erupted all about her. The alien mindscape pulsed like a migraine of flashing red lights. Fire engines emerged from the glaring light and screamed toward the Harlem River where a great funeral pyre tore free from the low-lying tenements. It cracked skywards like a whip. There were figures among the flames. Long, lithe, gibbering figures. They danced the primacy of the flames—the legacy of Heraclitus.

In the beginning, there was the flame. And the flame was with God and the flame was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

Through it all things were made; without it nothing was made that has been made. In it was life and that life was the light of men. The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

Sturbridge could feel those flames reaching out to embrace her, to engulf her. She staggered, throwing one arm before her eyes to block out the light and heat. They bore into her skull. She stumbled against the nearest building, but its shifting surface would not bear her up.

Instead of the unbroken towers of still water she had envisioned earlier, the buildings now seethed in carapaces of teeming insect life. Sturbridge recoiled, stumbled. She could feel the wave of scurrying life break over her. She felt herself going down beneath the weight of it—clinging, crawling, stinging. She sank to one knee.

Immediately, there were hands beneath her arms, steadying her. The ancient chant that formed the backbone of the ritual reasserted itself. The distant voices rose to a worried crescendo. Although the singers were all miles away, secluded within the walls of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs, the voices imposed themselves upon the vision.

She could see the individual voices, distinct and radiant, like strands of colored light. They wrapped around her, supporting, caressing. Where they touched, the clinging insects burned away.

Sturbridge caught at the nearest snatch of song and latched on to it. Held firm.

She recognized something familiar in the bright but tentative strand of amber light—it was Eva. Sturbridge smiled. She felt the novice stagger under the unexpected tug from no discernable source. Sturbridge could almost see Eva flailing wildly, trying to catch her balance and momentarily losing the rhythm of the chant.

The amber light flickered and vanished, but immediately there were a dozen others to take its place. Sturbridge could no longer see her surroundings for the glare of them.

She was exalted, bathed in their light. The adepts, Johanus and Helena, were twin pillars of smoke and fire, rallying and guiding the chosen. They shepherded the novices who flickered uncertainly like fragile phosphorescent tubes. Sturbridge could not quite stifle a smile of amusement and pride in her young protégés.

But where was Foley? She took a quick head-count of her forces. He certainly could not have forgotten about the ritual. The secundus regularly regaled the novices at great length about his infallible mnemonic powers.

Her mind leapt to thoughts of treachery and then quickly discarded them. No, Foley was ambitious, but not so foolish as to attempt to dispose of his superior in such a clumsy, imprecise and public manner.

That probably meant trouble back at the chantry. It might be something as innocent as an unexpected guest, or an inadvertent trespasser. Or it could mean an intruder, a would-be thief, a Sabbat scouting party or even an all-out assault.

She took another rapid count to be sure that no other forces were being withdrawn from the ritual to deal with the crisis at home. No, everyone seemed accounted for with the curious exception of Jacqueline. And here, at last, was Foley. His affected royal-purple glow was flushed and pulsating as from great exertion.

Sturbridge grabbed Foley and held him back from taking his rightful place at the head of the adepts. It was a gentle reminder that his absence had been noted and would be addressed as soon as the ritual was concluded. Foley was unflinching in her grasp. His light grew more stable. Good, he was not wounded at least. Nor did he try to draw her back to the chantry. Situation under control.

Sturbridge gathered the varied and multicolor strands of light to her. She stroked each one reassuringly, drawing from its strength, returning its strength twofold. She was the conduit. Her entire body thrummed like a taut string. Twisting. Tuning.

There. She was again perfectly in pitch with the pulsing lifelines and she rode the rising chant toward the very crux of the city.

The tops of neighboring skyscrapers rushed angrily toward her, intent on pinning her, wriggling, against the night sky.

But even as they closed upon her, she was already conjuring up her defenses. Her armor was forged of the materials abundantly at hand, the cast-offs of the city streets. She girded herself in the overturned trash cans, the abandoned cars, the gutted apartment buildings, the rusted iron gratings, the bodies (some stirring, some not) in the alleyways—the detritus of the city, jettisoned in its heedless skywards rush.

A vast pyramid of rubble and refuse was taking form around her. The vengeful thrust of the skyscrapers crashed against the sides of the pyramid but could not avail against it. They fell away harmlessly to feed the tangle of ruins below.

Sturbridge broke from the press of voracious buildings like a predatory bird rising above a forest canopy. Suddenly, she could see for miles in every direction. Any minute now.... There.

She sighted the main gathering of Sabbat forces along the burning river and swooped down upon them. She could now pick out individual figures capering through the flames. Her prey was there among them. The *koldun*. The spawn of the Dragon.

The Tzimisce sorcerer had the aspect of a broken mirror, his body a jumble of cruel, jagged angles. Looking at him, Sturbridge expected that his movements would be tortured and ponderous, but the fiend was inhumanly lithe. He seemed to flow without effort in and out of the dark pauses between the tendrils of flickering firelight. His slightest movement was accompanied by the music of fine crystal.

The fiend sensed her approach. Looking up, he thrust one accusing finger toward her. Sturbridge felt the impact of the blow despite the intervening distance. She tumbled in the air, careening wildly toward the waiting arms of the inferno below.

The *koldun* curled the upraised hand into a fist with the shriek of diamond cutting through glass. Sturbridge plummeted like a stone.

She struggled to right herself as the flames roared up at her—to regain some control over the direction of her unchecked descent. To hurl at least her body at the *koldun* like a projectile. It was no good. She tumbled end over end, unsure even which way was up any longer.

She knew the first caress of the flame would remove all such uncertainty. She thought of Icarus, of the boy who, refusing to heed his father's warning, flew too close to the sun. In her mind, she could trace each detail of the intricately handcrafted wings. She could see the wax that sealed them soften, run, melt away as she drew nearer to the fiery orb.

She screamed as her wings unraveled. She had been so close. With nothing to bear her up, Sturbridge plummeted away from the jealous sun.

The *koldun* staggered back in disbelief as Sturbridge broke from his grip, falling upward, away from the flames. He reached for her again. Too late.

A blaze of incandescent red erupted from the crystal of his upraised fist. With a cry, the sorcerer jerked his head away from the blinding glare. The light pulsed and beckoned like a pillar of fire. It was almost immediately joined by a streak of ethereal silver light. A pillar of smoke.

The *koldun* shone like a prism. A dozen searing strands of colored light shone through him. The air was filled with liquid song. It coursed over and through his body.

He could feel heat, worry, responsibility all burning away before the purity of that searing light. He felt the trickling of the chant running through his fingers and puddling on the pavement below. He watched with a strange detachment as the skin of his hands flowed away in pursuit, leaving him staring at the bare, gleaming knucklebones.

He flexed his fingers experimentally. He was unnaturally calm, despite the certainty that these were to be his last moments. The rest of his flesh pooled away, running gently to the ground with a sigh. He had no regrets. He had known he would never leave this place. He had come here—to the Dragon's graveyard—to die.

With great care, he stepped out of his skin. If he had but one gesture left to him, he would step free and dance in his bones. He took a single step and then his bones would bear him up no longer. The earth gathered him in.

Sturbridge settled gently back down to earth. Her splashing feet broke the ghost images gathered in the puddles, scattering reflections on all sides. She took care to avoid the Sabbat's more mundane forces, who still cavorted nearby in the grips of their fire dance.

She did not know how much of the arcane clash they could perceive, but she could pick out a number of them watching now, keeping a respectful distance from the overgrown vacant lot where the *koldun*'s mound crouched. It was not likely that they would intrude upon the fiend's lairwithout first being summoned. The *kolduns* had a well-deserved reputation for being fiercely territorial.

Sturbridge turned her attention to the novices. She touched each of the tenuous strands of light in turn, assuring herself that everyone was accounted for. Only after the last of the familiar lights had flickered out did she turn to make her own way back to the chantry. Somehow, she could not shake the feeling that something was still amiss. She scanned her immediate surroundings for the slight, telltale visual clues that might herald a new threat. Everything seemed normal enough for the moment.

Well, almost everything. Glancing down, she noted with some puzzlement that she seemed to cast two distinct shadows. A trick of the light? To be sure, she made straight for the nearest functioning streetlight. No doubt about it now. Even under the glare of a bright single light source, she definitely had two separate shadows.

Her first thought was that she was being watched, or worse, followed. She was reluctant to turn back toward the chantry with an unwanted guest literally or figuratively in tow. She assumed the worst. If this new presence were friendly, then why would it not identify itself? Of course it was possible that the shadow did not represent any conscious entity at all. Perhaps it was simply a harmless side effect of the clash of arcane energies. Even old

familiar rituals seemed to produce unanticipated results these nights. And the Sabbat sorceries she had faced this evening were an even more volatile element. When dealing with the alien conjurings of the *koldun*, it could be difficult to discern between the enchantments themselves and their deadly afterimages.

She regarded the shadow with mingled curiosity and distrust. She half expected it to lunge suddenly ninety degrees to the vertical and go for her throat. After a few minutes of observation, however, she managed to shake free of this apprehension. The shadow seemed to behave normally, if one disregarded the rather obvious fact that it did not appear to react to the presence, direction or intensity of light in the expected manner. And the shape was not quite the same as her normal shadow. It was smaller and its contours were not quite right. The tiny limbs were ganglier, more girlish.

Recognition dawned on Sturbridge, accompanied by a cry of pure animal fury. She stomped angrily in the puddle as if to crush the shifting shadow underfoot. The shadow wavered as the ripples rolled away from the point of impact, but the small fragile figure clung to her tenaciously.

Damn them.

She wheeled angrily as if trying to put, not only the now-familiar shadow, but even the very thought of it behind her.

It was a useless gesture. The little girl's shadow stretched before her on the pavement, taunting her, mocking her loss.

Sturbridge's shoulders knotted beneath the weight of the gathering forces. Her arms snapped forward and down as if hurling a great stone to the pavement. Rage erupted from her hands. The asphalt cracked, smoked, boiled away. Still she did not relent.

The acrid black smoke blinded her. Where it touched her skin, it condensed and clung, burning like a liquid fire. She broke off, stumbling backwards, one arm thrown protectively in front of her face. But when she had fought her way back clear of the deadly cloud, the shadow was there before her. Patient, tenacious, reproachful.

Her eyes stung with salt and smoke and her ears burned with the echo of distant laughter.

GF



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:01 AM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York

Something looked different. Calebros stared intently at the printout from SchreckNET that Umberto had handed him a few minutes before. The words on the paper—the actual physical manifestation of thought—were sharp and crisp. Calebros didn't like it. He remembered Umberto saying something about replacing a daisy wheel with a laser jet—or some such nonsense; none of it mattered much to Calebros. He preferred the solid weight of his typewriter. Umberto could keep his space-aged doo-dads. Maybe the world, Calebros pondered, would be a better place if people still used dip pens and inkwells. He shrugged. Maybe not.

The form of the message, of course, was less significant than the content. The report from Courier included a few choice morsels of knowledge. If only he had access to the Sabbat war council chamber itself! Calebros sighed. It was not to be. Besides, extrapolation could reveal much that was hidden. Time would reveal the rest.

Calebros spent several minutes integrating this new knowledge with that which he already knew, then reached for his trusty Smith Corona.

18 July 1999 FILE COPY
Re: Baltimore/Washington

D.C., Courier reports---
Talley arrived in U.S., meeting with
Sabbat war council.

Balt., Colchester reports---
J. Pieterzoon considering use of
"specialist"; Talley's presence may
influence that decision and the
eventual choice.

I know a likely candidate
to suggest.

file action update: Talley



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:11 AM
Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel
Baltimore, Maryland

Lucita sat, cross-legged, in her hotel room and spread the paperwork her client had provided out in front of her. The dossier on her target was depressingly complete, covering everything from observed manifestation of supernatural abilities, favored weapons, companions, wardrobe preferences and affiliated ghouls on down to taste in music, common turns of phrase and feeding preferences. Also included in the file was a series of photos, ranging from irritatingly blurry surveillance camera shots to up-close-and-personal images that by all rights should have gotten the photographer killed.

She shook her head, long black hair swinging back and forth as she did so. Clad only in simple black pajamas, she looked pensively at the clock on the nightstand. Quite a few hours remained until dawn, so there was plenty of time to get familiar with the details of the target. She'd memorize all the material tonight and destroy the supporting evidence.

The room had already been light-proofed, of course—the curtains taped down, the door secured against both intrusion and the cleaning staff and so on. She'd also covered up the lengthy mirror on the wall opposite the bed by hanging a spare bed sheet over it; the older she got, the less she wanted to see empty mirrors where her face should be. Lucita briefly considered sleeping in the tub, a tactic commonly used by younger vampires on the road, but dismissed the notion. After all, if trouble came for her, it wasn't going to be stopped by the flimsy bathroom door. For that matter, the sheetrock of the walls wasn't going to do much good against the sort of opposition she usually encountered. There came a time where you just had to stop worrying and get on with your nightly business. That was a lesson dear old papa had never learned, squirreling himself deeper and deeper into his poisonous tomb in Madrid.

He'd tried to make it her tomb, too. He'd called her home and informed her of her duty as a loyal childe. Told her how he expected her to remain by his side through the centuries. Explained how she would help him, for the glory of God and the clan.

And then he had told her how very, *very* much he loved her, his only childe.

She'd lashed out at him then, with shadow and with steel. He'd laughingly subdued her, easily snapping the dagger she'd thought would prove the key to her freedom. Then he'd taken her hand and mockingly patted it as if to let her know what a clever girl she was.

She'd nearly torn her arm out of its socket to escape. He hadn't pursued her, hadn't sent any of his servants or beasts of shadow to retrieve her. All that followed Lucita into the night was his laughter and a cheery farewell.

He was looking forward to seeing her again, he'd said.

She'd sworn she'd never go back, but every century or so something pulled her back to Madrid, to the dour stone building that the faithful and the damned alike flocked to. At one point she'd worried that it was a trap, that on one of her visits "home" the sect

she'd spurned would be waiting for her. But it seemed that Monçada still loved his childe and protected her from the wrath of his flock.

The last time she'd returned had been seventy years ago. To her surprise, her sire had not been alone. With him had been an old acquaintance and occasional enemy, the Tzimisce Sascha Vykos. Vykos had even been wearing his original skin, the one she remembered from their first, rather unpleasant, meeting. She'd started to call the shadows to her then, but Monçada had intervened. Vykos was there at his invitation, the archbishop said, performing a special commission for him. Monçada, you see, wanted a chess set, a very special chess set.

And he needed Lucita to pose as the black queen.

"I'll leave the room, of course, my dear childe. Modesty forbids me from remaining." He'd turned and swept off, leaving her alone with the Tzimisce.

"If you please, Lucita," was all Vykos had said, and then there was nothing but silence and the rustle of fabric for the remainder of the night.

Lucita had risked the dawn to leave when the work was finished, rather than risk spending the day under her sire's roof. In her time she had killed hundreds, if not thousands. She had waded in blood and reveled in death, she had torn her enemies asunder with shadow and given their childer to the flame. But something in the house of her sire—and the sense of cold eyes on her as she posed—made her feel unclean.

Lucita shook herself out of reverie. "Focus, Lucita, focus. You're a professional, remember?" she muttered to herself as she gathered up the files to continue her studies. She wanted to be ready to dive into work first thing the next evening.

On the nightstand next to the bed, her cell phone bleeped merrily. "Damnation!" she said, and reached for it. "Yes? What?"

She recognized the voice on the other end of the line instantly. It was the vampire who'd approached her not so very long ago about her current contract. She wasn't certain for whom the man worked, though she had a sneaking suspicion that it was one of her target's putative allies.

"What is it?" she said, putting less heat into the question than she felt.

"My patron has requested that I maintain contact with you on the matter of our business dealings. I felt a call would be less disturbing than a visit. Have I erred?"

Lucita bit back her first three responses, which were "Yes," "Never speak to me again," and "Had you knocked on my door, I would have killed you instantly." Instead, she merely said, "I don't enjoy interference in my work. The timetable for the target is in place. He will be dealt with on schedule and as we agreed. Now, are you just trying to impress me with the fact that you found my number, or do you actually have anything useful to add?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "A thousand pardons. I, of course, know nothing of this sort of work." There was another pause. "If you are interested, I have some information that may aid your task."

"Yes?"

"We are in the process of arranging a... situation for your benefit, so that you will have a clear shot at the target. The date and time will be communicated to you as we draw closer to fruition." The vampire's distaste for this arrangement was obvious; Lucita suspected he thought he was being forced to watch an amateur.

"I understand. Is there anything further I should know?"

"Not at this time. Pleasant dreams, mademoiselle. Good hunting."

She hung up without responding, suddenly weary of the idiotic games and pointless fencing. All of the dancing around and veiled threats and *double entendres*, and in the end it would still come down to her skill, speed and shadows tearing the unlife from yet another unlucky bastard. That was what it was all about. Strip away the formalities and the rituals and the pointed little jabs designed to let everyone know who was cleverer. All of them were just ways of protecting her kind from its own savagery.

She preferred combat to talk, these nights. It was more honest, and honesty was one of the few virtues that remained to her after all of these years.

Several hours later, the information in the file memorized and the components themselves destroyed, she lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. Beginning to nod off, she had a sensation of vague discomfort, then realized she had rolled over onto the cell phone. She picked it up and looked at it curiously for a second. Her client's toady had used it to find her. Ergo, it was now compromised. With a minimum of effort she closed her hand around the plastic and was rewarded with a shuddering crackle. The fragments of the device cascaded onto the floor, noiseless on the thick tan carpet.

As she closed her eyes for the day's slumber, Lucita smiled.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:19 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.

Peter Blaine had a great many nicknames, but none of them were complimentary. The kindest was "Lurch," for his uncanny resemblance to the comic butler, and it was the only one he'd answer to with anything less than obscenity. He didn't help his own cause, unfortunately; having a predilection for blocky, conservative black suits and shoes that could have started their own exterminator business. The fact that his face, shoulders, haircut and general build looked like the work of a lazy sculptor with a thing for straight lines didn't help matters.

Blaine was one of the poor cousins of the Sabbat, a Ventrue *antitribu* whose very heritage inspired snickers of derisive glee from the "true" clans of the sect. Furthermore, he didn't have the instinctive grace of the Lasombra or the sheer power or delicacy of the Tzimisce, so whenever he was in the company of a member of one of those worthy lines, he felt slow. Stupid. Awkward. Clumsy. Out in the field, when it was just him and his pack (which included one of each of the Big Two, but then again he knew how to keep Sonny and Terrence in line), then he felt like he was in command; but as soon as he got close to the big boys, the bottom dropped out of his personality.

Truth be told, the *antitribu* were the lower middle class of the Sabbat. Refugees from the tyranny of the Camarilla or descendants of same, they were relatively few in number and disorganized by temperament. If all of the *antitribu* had gotten together and demanded equal treatment, sure, there were enough to make a difference. But the Gangrel *antitribu* were too busy snarling at the Brujah *antitribu*, while the Toreador tried to ignore everyone and embarrass their Camarilla cousins, and the Ventrue worked extra hard to convince the rest of the Sabbat that they well and truly belonged. Meanwhile, the Tzimisce and Lasombra just laughed up their sleeves about the whole thing and sent the *antitribu* out to die when they felt like it.

Frankly, the whole thing gave Blaine a headache when he thought about it too much. He'd come over to the Sabbat voluntarily to get away from the stultifying class system in the Camarilla. Slowly but surely he was starting to suspect he'd gone from the frying pan to the skillet, if not the actual fire.

Perhaps that's why he'd spoken up in the cold silence when Vykos and Polonia were having their stare-down. Or perhaps he just wanted to get the hell out of the war council—he'd seen any number of other small-time war leaders abused, assaulted and decapitated and figured that he really didn't want to be next.

In any case, in the silence after Vykos's challenge, Blaine's was the voice that was heard first.

"I'll take it. Me and my boys—we'll take it."

Archbishop Borges laughed. "Thank you so much, Captain...."

"Blaine. And me and mine, we'll take it."

"Well, Captain Blaine, this is not nursery school. We don't take volunteers here for important business." He laughed harshly, and a few of his followers laughed with him.

Blaine noticed, though, that neither Polonia nor Vykos was laughing—and they were the ones, he felt, who mattered. He might not be near the top of the ladder himself, but Blaine had a good nose for the flow of power, and right now it was obvious that power and Borges had little to do with each other in this particular council. And that knowledge gave him the courage to take a chance.

"I said, Your Excellency, that I would take my men and handle it. You don't know me, you don't know my pack, and you don't know dick about Pieterzoon. I do. You don't know what he looks like; I've worked with his childer and I've met him. I know how he talks, how he walks, and what sort of stupid poncy little things he's uncomfortable being without." Out of the corner of his eye, Blaine saw Polonia nodding slow approval, the archbishop's face a mask of impassivity.

"Bah. You say you know his childer? Wonderful. They'll identify your corpse." Borges's voice took on a mocking, whiny tone. "Oh, look, Percy, it's What's-his-name Blaine. He's dead. Isn't it droll?" Borges sat back, bristling. "We send you, we might as well not send anyone."

"I find your assessment of Captain Blaine's abilities intriguing," interjected Vykos smoothly. "And I am sure you have excellent reason for making that assessment, yes, Archbishop? You have seen Captain Blaine's pack in action, yes?" Borges flushed. "What? No? Then surely you've heard something of his inefficiency? No again? My goodness, what do you base this judgment of yours on?"

Coughs thinly masked snickers from various sections of the room. Borges looked around wildly at his tormentors, then up at Talley as if expecting the man to do something.

"I do not have to stand for this!" Borges finally roared. "And I am not going to let him botch things, this upstart, this traitor, this—"

"*Antitribu*?" said Blaine quietly.

"Yes, an arrogant *antitribu* know-nothing who thinks that because he once licked some elder's boots that he knows how to rip out that elder's heart!"

Polonia, Blaine noticed, had stopped nodding. The ground he was treading on had just gotten dangerous. "Perhaps. Or perhaps I know something you don't, can do something you can't, and don't need a lifeguard from around the world to keep me safe in my own hotel room. Scared of room service, my lord?"

"Why, you little son of a bitch!" Borges tried to surge out of his chair, got about halfway to his feet and then crashed right back into his chair as Talley's hand came down on his shoulder like a piledriver.

"Please sit down, Your Excellency," said Talley pleasantly. "Cardinal Monçada has asked me to keep you safe from any and all threats, and that does include the ones you bring on yourself."

Talley turned to Blaine. "Not that you're entirely blameless; be thankful that Archbishop Borges was not in fact seriously upset." His voice acquired the singsong tone of a drill instruction. "So. Supposing that His Excellency had come across the table, what would you have done?"

Blaine showed teeth in a humorless smile and stood. "If he'd come across the table he'd have been an idiot, because by all rights he should be using shadow instead of putting himself in range for *this*." So saying, he reached down and snapped off the front right leg of his chair. Unsurprisingly, the chunk of wood had a jagged, sharp edge. "Been working on that off and on the entire council. Thought it might come in handy."

Talley tsked. "Interesting. What else?"

The *antitribu* made a show of moving the makeshift stake from hand to hand. "Not much, other than the fact that my people would have dog-piled the archbishop if I didn't manage to stop him on the first shot. And we've got a lot of chair legs down here."

Talley raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Crude, but potentially effective. However, you'd do better to show more respect for someone of the archbishop's power and position."

Polonia watched the display, pursed his lips and cleared his throat. "Passable," said the Archbishop of New York. "I approve of your forethought. Hmm. So, Captain Blaine, do you honestly think you and your pack have what it takes to deal with this Pieterzoon?"

Blaine hesitated for a second. He could still walk away, he knew. Pieterzoon was a tricky son of a bitch. On the other hand, the chance to watch that pudgy bastard Borges squirm....

"We can do it. What's the time frame?"

"As soon as possible." That was Vykos cutting in. "I wish you luck, Captain Blaine. My staff has prepared everything you will need to carry out the operation. I assume you can provide your own weapons and transportation?"

The *antitribu* nodded. "Of course." He paused, looked at his packmates. "Tomorrow night, midnight, you get Pieterzoon's head on a plate." He looked over at Borges. "You can come along and watch if you want, my lord."

"No thank you," said Borges tightly, and a warning flash from Polonia told Blaine he'd gone a bit too far.

"Right. If you could tell me where your staff has the information...?" His voice trailed off as he looked at Vykos. "Please."

"The material is waiting for you outside the conference room, Captain Blaine."

Blaine nodded once and walked out. His packmates, a nervous swagger infusing their stride, followed. The now three-legged chair that one of them had been holding tottered for a moment and crashed to the floor.

No one moved to pick it up.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:30 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.

The doors shut behind the last member of Blaine's pack, the hulking monoceroid war ghoul who'd spent much of the evening trying to carve its name into the ceiling of the room with its horn. Best estimates revealed that its name was "Jam."

"So, is that all we have for tonight?" Borges stretched and turned his head longingly in the direction of the door.

"Almost." Polonia somehow had a black cat made from shadow in his lap, and he stroked it absently. "There is one more question to be answered before we can adjourn."

The groans and complaints rose from around the room. "Oh, God." "What now?" "Can't it fucking wait?"

Polonia waited until everyone had shouted himself or herself out and it was obvious that he, at least, wasn't going anywhere. "It's a simple question, really, and can be answered in a moment, assuming that everyone cooperates."

"It is, is it?" Borges was clearly disgruntled.

"Think of it as a simple exposition piece, Archbishop Borges. So, Vykos, can you answer this one?"

Vykos looked unsurprised. "To the best of my ability, of course. Though I would prefer we hurried. I have a," and she gave a slight smile, "phone call to make."

"Oh, it won't take a moment. I just wish to know precisely how you are getting all of this marvelous insider information on Herr Pieterzoon and the like. After all, we're at least temporarily hanging our strategy on your *phone call*," the words carried a slight edge, "and before we send any more perfectly talented packs off to the hinterlands, I would prefer knowing on whose say-so they are acting, precisely." He placed the cat on the table; it sat there, motionless. "Blaine may not be an archbishop, but he and his are certainly a worthwhile asset. I would *hate* to think we had thrown them away on spurious information."

"I have my sources," said the Tzimisce quietly. "They are quite accurate."

"Ah, but there's the trouble. You have your sources. I," Polonia flicked a glance down at the cat, "have mine. Archbishop Borges has his. We all have our sources." The archbishop began pacing. "I would even wager that the noble MacEllen has a few of his own. However, that doesn't mean that all of those sources are accurate. Why, some might be better than others. And yours seem exceptionally well placed, which makes me wonder. Who are you talking to, Vykos?"

"Does it really matter, if the information is good?"

"If you don't tell me, I have no way of knowing if the information is good, now do I?"

"The cardinal—"

"The cardinal is not here. I am. And I tell you this, my Byzantine friend, not another pack, not another ghoul, not another bullet, not another breath goes out of here on your

information until you release your sources. I am younger than you are, but I am old enough to know when something is entirely too convenient. It is entirely too convenient that you were the first one to know about Pieterzoon's arrival; it is entirely too convenient that you happen to have sufficient information available so quickly to hand to a strike force you just happen to need for immediate work. I do not like such coincidence. Am I making myself clear?"

Vykos scanned the room. There was a new edge there now, a faint charge to the air. Polonia had energized even the weary ones. She mentally counted allies and concluded reluctantly that she did not have enough on this particular issue.

"I understand perfectly, Archbishop. Better than you think. However, I hardly feel that revealing the name of my source to so many—any one of whom might be captured and forced to reveal what he had learned—is necessarily wise tactics."

Polonia swept into a deep bow. "Of course. I hadn't considered that at all. Then, shall we let the rest of these worthies go, and you can simply tell, say, my fellow archbishop, his bodyguard and myself? No sense putting anyone else here at risk." He locked gazes with the Tzimisce, and, unbelievably, Vykos looked away first.

"Very well. Get the others out of here."

The others, to no one's surprise, left. It took surprisingly little time to clear the room. Within minutes, only Talley, Borges, Vykos and Polonia himself remained. Vallejo had left after a stern look from Vykos; Polonia and Talley both wondered what precisely had transpired there.

"So, what do we have, Vykos?" Borges's voice was weary, though he would have fought tooth and nail to avoid being excluded. "Share."

Vykos deliberately folded her hands on the table. "I will not give you the name of my source." She raised one hand to ward off the storm of protest. "The name is unimportant and will do more harm to tell you than you will benefit by learning it."

"So why the charade?" Talley's quiet voice, as usual, cut to the heart of the matter. "I'm rather disappointed, after that buildup."

"Because, honestly, I don't have the energy to deal with yet another riot. And I will tell you all that you need to know, of course."

"Which is?" Borges was skeptical.

"Which is that my source, as it has been put, is a member of the Camarilla who is privy to the plans of the defense efforts against us. She, or he, is working to create windows of opportunity for us, as well as funneling me what information he, or she, is able. Beyond that, I cannot tell you more, and I caution you not to rely heavily on my source's goodwill. Loyalty, as we all know, is a fragile thing." She looked from face to face. "And with that, gentlemen, you will have to be satisfied. If you will excuse me." She rose and walked out of the room. Borges followed her, as did Talley. Only Polonia and the cat, re-emerged from some corner of shadow, remained.

"I am not at all satisfied, I am afraid," he murmured. "But it will have to serve, at least for now." And with that, he rose and walked out. Behind him a tendril of shadow darted out and turned out the conference room's lights.

The cat, abandoned by its master, gave its first and last sound, a plaintive yowl. Seconds later, it dissolved into the darkness of the room, as thoroughly as if it had never existed.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 2:28 AM
Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill
Washington, D.C.

The elevator moved downward at a steady pace, its progress marked by a steady hum. Someone had torn out the ceiling speaker about five minutes after the war council had moved into the hotel. Now there was only the steady whirr of the machinery and the hiss of the air conditioning.

Five monsters and one manila folder were its only contents. One, the Lasombra named Sonny (Santiago, actually, but no one wanted to give him that much respect), did his level best to drown out the elevator noise by cursing a blue streak.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Blaine, what the hell did you just get us into? If half the 'When I was a Cub Scout in the Camarilla' stories you keep on telling us to keep us in line are true, this guy Pieterzoon's going to be harder to nail than any of the dickweeds upstairs and that includes Miss Freaky Leaky Tzimisce."

"Shimishay," said Terrence, who was tall and lanky and wore John Lennon granny glasses that he never quite managed to get the blood off. "It's pronounced 'Shimishay.'"

Sonny turned on him with the fury possessed only by the very short and self-conscious. "I don't give a rat's ass if it's pronounced Tzimisce, Goldfarb, or Your Mother, she's a fucking fruitcake, and you, Blaine, are a fucking stupid fruitcake for getting us put on this suicide mission, though the more I think about it the more I'd prefer suicide to another night spent listening to the assholes from New York and Miami snipe at each other and occasionally turn one of the little guys into a fucking blood-on-a-Trisket kind of snack—"

"Sonny," Blaine said pleasantly, "shut the fuck up."

"But Blaine—"

"Say nothing. That way, you're insured against saying something else that pisses me off. This operation is going to be hard enough without my having to stuff you into a mailbox before we start."

Sonny lapsed into sulky silence. No one spoke for a minute, and the doors suddenly opened on floor twelve. An elderly woman stood there, impatiently pushing the "Down" button. She took a step forward as the doors opened, then her eyes widened in fear. The towering war ghoul Jammer, his single horn sweeping up until it nearly scraped the ceiling, grinned out at her. She took a step backward, gasped something that could have been "Oh my sweet Jesus," and fell heavily against the far wall. A shriek of "Oh my God! Grandma!" could be heard from down the hallway as the doors whispered shut.

The Lasombra doubled over laughing. "Shit, that was beautiful." The others joined in the hysterics, and even Blaine found himself grinning. "Did you see the way her eyes got big when she saw Jammer? 'Oh Lawd Jeezus, preserve me from an elevator full of eeeevil!'" He completely lost it, wheezing with laughter as the elevator spilled them out into the lower level of the hotel parking garage.

The pack's van, a heavily modified Dodge with some fascinating innovations that weren't street-legal in most states of the Union, squatted ominously by the far stairwell. It was black, with fat black tires made from solid rubber, and heavily tinted windows. Blaine had thought about getting rid of it, because staties had developed a profile on serial-killer vehicles that made them zero in on suspicious-looking vans. The situation wasn't dangerous yet, but it was a pain in the ass, and Blaine had a soft spot in his heart for avoiding pains in the ass.

Except, of course, the ones he worked with.

"So do we have a chance in hell, Blaine?" That was Terrence again. Sonny was still too busy imitating the new cadaver on floor twelve, and the others were laughing along with him.

"Honestly? Yeah, we can pull this one off. I *have* met Pieterzoon. He's scary. Cold. Sneaky like you would not believe. But he's also a sissy bastard, and he hates fighting his own battles. That means he's going to be looking for a way out when he should be tackling us head-on, and that, in turn, gives us a small window of opportunity. Which," he said as he reached the van and opened the driver's door, "is a better chance than we stand with the assholes upstairs."

They climbed in, Terrence taking shotgun and the rest piling into the back. Sonny cursed at Jammer for sitting on his gun, and then the usual squabbling ensued. Blaine handed Terrence the packet he'd received from Vykos's ghoul upstairs. "There should be a map in there," he said.

The Tzimisce rummaged through the papers and extricated one. "Would you believe AAA?"

"At this point, I would believe anything," Blaine grunted, and threw the van into gear. Something, possibly a quiver of crossbow bolts from the rattling sound, fell over as he did so. "Right now I just want to get us to Baltimore and settled in by sunrise. Then tomorrow night, we worry about taking out Jan Pieterzoon and the dozen or so yes-men who are going to try to stop us."

"Any thoughts on strategy?" Terrence rolled down his window and licked his fingers so he could test the breeze. He did that before every trip, and Blaine found it oddly reassuring.

The *antitribu* nodded. "Jammer and Lox cause a ruckus and draw off his cover. You and I wade in and distract him for maybe ten seconds, and at some point during those ten seconds, Sonny pops up with his assault rifle he's so proud of and blows the son of a bitch's head off." He said all of this very quietly, to avoid letting Sonny overhear and get overexcited all over again.

The van roared out of the garage and turned north, heading for the entrance to I-495. Terrence blinked. "Got a better plan?"

"Honestly? Not yet. If that's what I still want to do tomorrow, then you can start worrying."

"If it's all the same to you, I'm going to start now."

Blaine grinned. "Be my guest. By the way, we're going to be stopping at, what is it, Chesapeake House, for gas and a janitor. Make sure you're not too hungry before we get started tomorrow. We're not going to have time to hunt, so this is the best I can do."

Terrence nodded. "And you claim rights to Pieterzoon's blood?" he said, his voice nearly a whisper.

Of course I do, Blaine thought. *You think I'm going to let you or laughing boy in the back get your claws on it? I'm the fucking pack ductus, after all.* But all he said was, "We'll let the survivors worry about it once we take the target down. No sense arguing until then."

"Of course," said Terrence. "No sense at all."



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 3:45 AM
Morningside Heights
New York City, New York

Sturbridge stormed through the remnants of the dissolving vision. All around her, elaborate arcane constructs streaked and ran like watercolors. The vivid images and incantations that had sustained the ritual fell about her like a gentle rain and puddled at her feet. She clomped angrily through the puddles, each footstep leading her instinctively toward more familiar stomping grounds. The topography of the melting vision gave way to a landscape of streetlit rainbows in oil-streaked puddles.

Through the early morning drizzle, Morningside Heights was quiet except for a low hum of activity from the late-night coffee bars. Sturbridge could feel the tips of delicate and deadly fangs slip down from the roof of her mouth in answer to that hum.

Somewhere within her, hunger raised one sleepy eye, stretched and leaned against its tether. Sturbridge roughly shouldered it aside. She was far angrier than she was hungry.

Far angrier, she repeated, as if to steel her conviction.It would not be long now. Already she could see the familiar outlines of the residence halls of Barnard College rising out of the misty rain. Soon she would be home. They would, no doubt, be waiting for her.

If only they would not be waiting for her.

She could deal with just about anything else right now except for the looks of concern on their faces. There was a time—yes, she admitted, even a hundred years did little to dim the vividness of the memory—when she had welcomed the look of concern on the faces of her family. When she had *courted* it. Staying out those few extra hours just to see its momentary flicker on her mother's face. Before the expression fused into the harsher lines of anger and indignation.

But that was a very long time ago, she reminded herself. A lifetime ago.

She had a new family now. A family whose "concern" was (quite rightly) feared even in the courts of the immortals. She would not subject herself to that concern.

No, she was their regent. She would be strong. She would be aloof. She would be unassailable.

She would be angry. She thought, *Just have to stay angry.*

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 4:15 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York



Before the door had closed behind Sturbridge, they were there. The flutter of their words wrapped around her like warm blankets. The flush of their concern pressed upon her like the warmth of a mug of steaming cocoa pressed into her hands. It would have been very easy to sink into the solace of that welcoming concern.

No. Have to focus. Have to stay angry. Those Sabbat bastards. How dare *they?!*

She waved her arms, scattering novices like a flock of carrion birds.

"Jacqueline, where the hell were you? We've been working on this ritual every night for the last fortnight—ever since we isolated the location of that damned *koldun's* nest. And tonight when it comes down to smoking him out, you suddenly recall a prior commitment?" She paused. "When we go out to do battle with *that*, we all go. Just because I'm the one out there on the firing line does not mean that you get to take the evening off. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Regentia, but Secundus Foley summoned me to…"

"Foley!"

"Your pardon, Regentia," the secundus pushed his way to the front of the crowd with an air of importance. "It is exactly as she says."

Foley picked uncomfortably at the cuff of his robe. He was irritated, disheveled, distracted. Sturbridge noted that the shirtsleeve peeking from that cuff was soaked to the elbow in smeared ink. His other hand was severely burned, nearly blackened.

"You are unwell." It was not a question.

Foley withdrew his hand into the recesses of his sleeve. "It is nothing. We will speak of it later. There have been… *developments*."

"We will speak of it now. You let novices go into battle alone. You owe them an explanation. You owe *me* an explanation."

"Although I might question whether this were the appropriate time and place to discuss such a delicate—such a *personal*—matter, I remain my regent's good and humble servant. I was in my sanctum, engaged in certain routine activities crucial to the well-being of this house. The novices were hardly alone. Johanus and Helena are certainly more than capable of guiding the novices through the preparatory stages of the ritual until such a time as I could rejoin them. I have the utmost confidence in their abilities. Honestly, my lady, you do coddle them so. They are, after all, *adepti*…"

"Was the chantry under attack?"

Foley's patience grew to match her impatience. "Have no fear on that account, my lady. The premises are…"

"A fire? A cave-in? An earthquake?"

"The *premises* are secure."

"*Something*, then, is unsecured. A spy, perhaps. You have ferreted out a spy in our midst?"

A nervous laugh escaped from somewhere among the assembled novices. Foley half turned, caught an eye, made a mental note.

"Of course not, my lady. All here are unswervingly loyal. To yourself, to this house, to Vienna, to the pyramid. Rest easy," he soothed. "You are fatigued, nothing more. And we keep you here standing in the entryway. For shame."

He turned upon the nearest novice. "For shame. Back to the *domicilium* with you. All of you." He made a broad sweeping gesture, inadvertently revealing his disfigured hand. He hastily withdrew it again.

"Secundus." The edge to Sturbridge's voice brought the retreating novices up short. "What was the nature of the crisis that detained you this evening?"

Foley turned uncomfortably. Pitching his voice low, he replied. "My lady is well aware of the delicate task that consumes my evenings of late. I would hope that she is furthermore aware why it is imperative that we not speak of such matters here."

"I do not recall the nature of this task."

"I beg my regent's pardon. It is a failing of mine. I am always assuming that those around me share my fascination for the mnemonic arts. My lady will recall that she not only authorized my recent investigation into" (his voice fell to a conspiratorial whisper) "*the object we discussed*, but she said the matter was to have the very highest priority."

Foley was quite pleased with himself. He was making Sturbridge's task much easier. The man had a unique talent for being absolutely infuriating. She had seen him ply his trade on several occasions. He could devastate the most carefully constructed plot of a rival in a matter of seconds, by pushing his opponent over the edge at exactly the wrong moment. Sturbridge had recognized this useful talent early in her tenure as regent and Foley had rapidly risen to the lofty position of her second-in-command.

"Did I say that your bauble would take priority over my personal safety, or was that a priority you set on your own?"

Foley stammered, "My lady! I never... I did not mean to imply..."

"We will set aside the issue of endangering my person. For the moment." Even the greenest novice heard in those three words the clear message that there would yet be a reckoning for this failure. A personal and private reckoning.

"My Regent is most generous," Foley replied, head bent in submission.

"The fact remains that you have led this novice astray—a matter which I take very seriously. The Providence Compact is quite specific on the punishment of such infractions."

Members of the chantry were seldom privy to the corpus of the law. Sturbridge doubted that even two of the masters present had heard of the Providence Compact, much less laid eyes upon any of its strictures. Only a regent or a specialized scholar of the law would have had even a passing familiarity with its contents.

She seemed to consider for a moment. "I can see three suitable sentences." There was no discussion of trial, of defense, of appeal—only of punishment. The regent had sole responsibility for interpreting the complex web of bylaws, strictures, compacts and precedents that made up the tangled body of Tremere law. Within the chantry, she dealt

swiftly and decisively with any perceived infraction. The regent did not serve the law; she enacted justice.

Sturbridge ticked off the possible fates on the fingers of her left hand. "One, the Atonement of Silence. The secundus shall submit to the removal—by fire—of the tongue which led the novice astray."

She held up a second finger to forestall any interruption.

"Two, the Atonement of Service. The secundus shall undertake the responsibility of training and guiding three new initiates through all seven circles of the novitiate.

"Three, the Atonement of Sacrifice. The secundus shall surrender the object of his obsession, that which led him out of community with his brethren and into solitary peril—the bauble with which this congregation has, perhaps unwisely, entrusted him."

At the mention of the stone, the accused's head jerked up. He could not master himself quickly enough to mask the look of defiance that was plain for all to see. He recovered quickly, mumbling something conciliatory about the wisdom of the regent, and retreated a half step.

"Jacqueline, as the wronged party, it falls to you to decide the matter of the secundus' punishment."

A look close to terror crossed the novice's features. Sturbridge ignored it.

"But, Regentia," Jacqueline stammered, "I am but a novice. How could I presume to judge the secundus?"

"You will pronounce sentence *in loco regentia*, on my behalf." Sturbridge smiled down benignly upon the young novice. *Yes, this little one must also be taught a hard lesson here tonight. A lesson about the chain of command.*

"Silence, service, or sacrifice? Choose."

To her credit, Jacqueline squirmed for only a few moments before gathering her courage. "I... I would like to choose clemency, if it please my most just mistress."

Sturbridge smiled. She would have to keep a close eye on this one. "Nothing would please me more. But lenience will not satisfy the law. You will choose. Now."



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 4:39 AM
Interstate 81-North
Near Roanoke, Virginia

The sun and the moon, hand in hand, in all their white brilliance were trapped within the small mirror. Ahead, the rhythmic white lines rushed forward out of the darkness, one after another after another, like beautiful swans, each unerring in the pursuit of its predecessor.

All else was darkness.

The wind of the swans' passing slapped at Leopold's face. He blinked away the crimson tears evoked by the sweet, visual cacophony of Sight and unSight. The white light of sun and moon burst forth from the mirror and shattered into a spectrum of hues, each beckoning him to lose himself in its stark purity. Rainbow bands enveloped him. Sun and moon were contained no longer. The twin orbs expanded beyond the plastic edges of the mirror and bathed Leopold in blinding light.

At the same instant, the swans, without breaking their single-file ranks, veered wildly to the right. A deep horn sounded that gripped Leopold in his bones. The noise was from behind him. He looked over his shoulder to face sun and moon, free of the rearview mirror, as they bore down on top of him.

Leopold lurched at the steering wheel, shot right, passing again the streaming swans. Sun and moon roared past. The spectral colors flashed and were gone.

The car's tires strayed from pavement and took uncertain hold of the gravel shoulder as the vehicle fish-tailed. Instincts honed by distant mortal experience took over. Leopold turned into the slide, overcompensated, turned the wheel steadily the other direction to correct the second slide. Two wheels lifted free of the ground. The car hovered at the cusp of flight for a second that stretched out toward eternity… then heavily righted itself and slid to a halt.

Leopold could see in his mind the next moment that had not come to pass—the car flipping onto its side, its roof, tumbling along the highway and into the embankment in a shower of glass and crumpled metal.

Silence calmed the swirling mix of Sight and unSight. White lines lay still upon the road where they'd taken the place of the swans in flight. Sun and moon were transformed into smaller, piercing, red lights that had come to rest a hundred yards down the interstate.

The muse's laughter, bubbling from nowhere, receded into the distance. In the confusion of the moment, Leopold had been unaware of her. Now he spun, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but his motion sent the world hurtling again toward the shifting axis of insanity.

He laid his head back against the seat and allowed her to escape unmolested.

She would not abandon him. He was growing more confident of this fact every hour. He was her chosen one, a conduit of unguessed revelation. She still led him onward so

that he might create perfection. At her urging, he had relieved that young man in Atlanta of his automobile and driven north all last night, all tonight.

The answers lay in this direction. Leopold was certain.

Even so, he realized, morning would be upon him shortly. He needed to find shelter again soon. The journey north would have to continue tomorrow night.

Footsteps. As the world settled around Leopold, he was partially aware of the man approaching from the direction of the semi that had pulled over just up the road.

"Jesus God, are you all right?" asked the trucker. "Are you drunk, or just stupid, or—dear Lord, your eye is—"

Leopold lashed out, jerked the trucker through the open window, and in the space of one heartbeat was feasting from the broken neck.

A few minutes later, Leopold pulled away from the lifeless body on the edge of I-81 and cut across the median to the empty southbound lanes.

There was a truck stop not far back, he thought. *I will persuade a driver to provide shelter for me.*

The driver would not leave during the day. Of this, Leopold felt certain.



Sunday, 18 July 1999, 9:16 PM (11:46 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Hesha's suite, Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

The last closed door to the big room opened, and Hesha came out in a loose, simple black suit that stopped a cut short of a tuxedo. He glanced at the woman waiting, then began filling his pockets with equipment. Phone, cigarette case, lighter…

"Turn, please," he directed.

Elizabeth obeyed. Layers of pale-blue and amber gauze followed leisurely. Thompson scratched his stubbled chin. The Asp leered freely. Hesha inspected her indifferently and spoke in dull tones. "Janet. Her arms, shoulders and chest are too bare for Bengal. Are all of your selections along these lines?"

Janet Lindbergh's voice sprang from the phone. "Yes, sir. Jet-set, you said. This is what 'Society' is wearing. Liz—" Elizabeth, no longer smiling, looked toward the phone to wrest her gaze away from Hesha. "Liz, there's a cloth-of-gold wrap in one of the cases. Wear that; I ordered it in case of cooler weather."

"I'll get it," Thompson offered.

"Elizabeth," said Hesha. "We are going to go downstairs and eat. Have you ever had Mughlai food before? Good. Then we will order two sample platters. Offer me things from your plate; I will do the same. In the end you will have eaten most of what is set before us. You are going to pretend to be yourself, one month ago. You know nothing of my house or the security team. You came to Calcutta from Rutherford House at my request, and you are here to assist me in purchasing antiques and transporting them to America.

"I expect that perhaps half-a-dozen people will come to see us tonight. Some of them will be perfectly innocent acquaintances of mine. When I introduce you to them, I will mention Amy Rutherford. Some of them will be less than innocent; I will refer to Agnes Rutherford and you will leave the table, visit the ladies' lounge, and then return to the conversation. If I mention Hermione Rutherford, you will leave the table, visit the lounge and stay there, pretending to be ill, until you receive further instructions by phone."

Thompson appeared, offering her shawl. "You look lovely," he mouthed. She smiled weakly but stood tall.

"Come along," said Hesha, and she went.

Sunday, 18 July 1999, 10:45 PM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York



Foley's preparations were exacting. He carefully marshaled the eclectic array of instruments on the worktable before him. But his mind would not focus on what his hands were doing.

His thoughts still dwelt on last night's humiliation in the Grande Foyer. Sturbridge's words echoed in his mind. Silence? Service? Sacrifice?

"Reprisal" would be a more apt description. There was nothing quite so infuriating as when your immediate superior failed to back you up—and in such a public venue. His eyes burned at the memory.

It was no matter. He would reestablish discipline swiftly and certainly. The very thought of that novice—a mere novice—presuming to pronounce sentence upon him!

He would see that she learned her place. One way or another.

Three new novices, he thought ruefully. To guide a single neophyte through all seven circles of the novitiate would take him a century at the very least. If the student did not already have a strong background in practical magic, it would be closer to two centuries. And God forbid that he should be saddled with a pupil with a background in the occult—it would take him three centuries just to undo the damage.

Centuries lost, wasted. If Foley took any consolation in his current predicament, it was that he could not recall the last initiate here at the Chantry of the Five Boroughs that had survived long enough to pass through all seven circles of the novitiate and earn the coveted rank of journeyman.

The chief benefit of that lofty position, as Foley saw it, was that a journeyman was immediately assigned to another chantry. The official explanation for this policy was that it afforded every student the benefit of many different teachers along the difficult path to mastery. The unofficial one, Foley suspected, was that it prevented the regent from developing too strong and devoted a local following.

Then a thought occurred to him, a sly and pleasing thought. It was an aspect of his current predicament that he had not previously considered. He cursed himself for a fool for not seeing it sooner.

With three novices placed entirely in his care, he had been given a precious opportunity—the raw materials for forging a faction, a power block. Certainly he already had allies and agents throughout the chantry, but the mentor/novice relationship was a far more formidable bond. It was the closest thing to the mystical tie between a sire and his childe that was permitted within the close confines of the chantry.

Already plans were beginning to decant, to distill, to sublimate. He would begin at once. The first thing tomorrow evening he would petition Sturbridge for the first of his three new pupils. She would not refuse him.

His thoughts immediately returned to Jacqueline. Yes, he thought, she would do nicely. It did not matter that the presumptuous whelp had already been apprenticed to another master for a few decades. Rank, after all, must have its privilege.

He would make certain that his new pupil was well rewarded for the difficult choice she had made.

Foley hummed contentedly to himself as he returned to his preparations.

This evening five candles burned upon the worktable. Another of Foley's double-wicked creations was rammed down onto the iron spike protruding from the table's northwest corner. Each of the four cardinal points boasted a squat votive candle: gold in the east, red in the south, blue in the west, green in the north. At the very center, the fleur-de-lis box lay open, revealing the enigmatic cloudy-red marble.

A black grease pencil lay ready at Foley's right hand. His left hand, carefully wrapped in a pristine white linen bandage, managed to grasp the delicate silver tweezers. Foley was not about to be caught unawares this time. He had played through the memory of the previous night's miscarried ritual a dozen times in excruciating detail.

He had been unprepared. The experiment had run dangerously amok. He was still not entirely certain what had severed the escalating mystical feedback between candle flame and gemstone, banishing the baleful yellow eye he had unwittingly summoned up.

It was possible that the blazing orb had simply run out of fuel. The candle had been consumed right down to the table's surface when he'd come to his senses. The iron spike jutted defiantly from the puddle of yellow-streaked purple wax.

It was also possible that he had blacked out, the link with the eye severed when he lost his grip on the stone. A frantic search had discovered his lost prize beneath the table where it had rolled off the edge and come to a halt against one of the carved lion-footed legs.

Foley was not taking any chances tonight. He had warded the cardinal points with the four elementals. Taking grease pencil in hand, he began the invocation of the four archangelic protectors. As if of its own volition, his hand scrawled out each of the sacred names in turn, rendering them in thin, spidery Arabic letters. In the east, the legend beneath the golden candle revealed *Rapha-el, the healer*. The south bore the name *Micha-el, the guardian*. The west proclaimed *Gabri-el, the herald*. And the north read simply, *Uri-el, the gatherer*.

The epitaph beneath the latter candle specifically did not mention anything about "the angel of death." Foley was just superstitious enough to know that it was a grave misfortune to set the word "death" to paper, much less to use it in a ritual inscription.

His wardings completed, Foley carefully extracted the gem, taking pains to ensure that it did not make contact with his flesh. He began to inch it closer to the candle flame.

Twenty inches. Nineteen. Eighteen. Steady now. Seventeen. No change. Sixteen…

The candle flame sputtered uncertainly and then erupted upwards. Foley staggered backwards a half step. As if sensing weakness, the flame surged forward, cracking like a whip. Foley threw up his left hand to shield his eyes and the gout of flame changed direction mid-strike, following the gem.

Realizing the true danger a moment before the two made contact, Foley hurriedly thrust the gem back within the protection of the diagram etched out in candlelight and grease pencil on the worktable.

The viscous yellow flame pulled up just short of the invisible barrier, the air cracking at the sudden reversal. The spout of flame momentarily swayed like a serpent before recoiling to its proper place atop the purple candle.

It curled in upon itself, twisting, churning—resolving into a single burning yellow eye.

They regarded each other across the line of the intervening protective diagram. The eye seethed in frustration. The candle was very nearly expended already by the intensity of the gout of flame. Foley knew he did not have much time.

His right hand found the grease pencil and jerkily—like the hand of a clumsy marionette—began to scratch out sharp Arabic letters.

Suddenly, all five candles went dark.

Foley tensed, awaiting the parting blow.

Nothing. Silence. Darkness.

He forced himself to inhale deeply, exhale. A ritual cleansing. It was many years since he had gained any practical benefit from the habit of respiration. The simple act had been transformed into one of his ceremonial tools.

He summoned up a light by means of the most humble magic he knew. The Zippo chirped, sparked, flared.

In a moment, he would cross to the light switch, gather his tools, and methodically erase all signs of the evening's experiment. But not yet.

With growing anticipation he held the lighter over the wicked iron spike in the northwest corner of the table.

There at its base, partially obscured beneath a rapidly coagulating pool of wax, was a single word: *Hazima-el.*

The deceiver.



Monday, 19 July 1999, 1:00 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

The three matched knocks were softer this time, more subdued and precisely on time.

"Enter," Foley barked. Jacqueline entered the room with the solemnity of the condemned. She stood in silence before the secundus, her eyes wary, her stance defensive. Foley did not glance up from the official-looking file before him. He allowed the uncomfortable silence to stretch. Occasionally, he attacked the text with a swift marginal note.

Jacqueline found her eyes straining to pick out his notations. She silently cursed herself and assumed a pose of calculated disinterest. Foley was baiting her.

"The Regentia said you wished to speak to me." Sturbridge had said quite a bit more, but Jacqueline saw no reason to make this interview any easier for Foley.

Foley looked up and stared at her blankly as if trying to place her face. "I do not recall addressing you, *novitia*."

"No, Secundus. Regent Secundus," she recovered.

Foley returned to his file. Jacqueline fidgeted uncomfortably. She found herself staring at an uninspired landscape, a turn-of-the-century farmyard scene, hanging behind the secundus' desk. It was the colors that most annoyed her, she discovered after a few moments' reflection. They were all a shade too iridescent for the subject. And the texture was wrong somehow.

Realization dawned upon her and her skin crawled. It was not a painting at all; it was a collage. The picture was painstakingly assembled from hundreds of individually plucked butterfly wings.

"Is something the matter, *novitia*?" Foley set aside his pen and folded his hands before him on the desk.

Jacqueline wrestled her gaze free of the macabre artwork. "No. Regent Secundus."

"I have been reviewing your progress."

"That is very kind of you. I am certain my meager accomplishments merit no such attention."

"Quite so. It is not your accomplishments, but rather your place within our order which is in question here. I will be brief. I have discussed your case with Regent Sturbridge and she is in full agreement with my assessment. You show great promise, Jacqueline, but without formal discipline and structured training, this potential will lead only to frustration, failure and self-destruction. It is a well-traveled path and one which I would not see you stumble down."

Her tone was strained and formal. "I thank you for your efforts on my behalf."

"Accordingly," he pressed on, ignoring her interruption, "I have offered to take personal responsibility for guiding you safely through the complexities of the Fourth Circle of the Novitiate. Your new course of studies will begin immediately."

"That is quite generous of you, Regent Secundus. But I am sure it is unnecessary to burden one of your status with so humble and unrewarding a chore. Master Ynnis is quite capable of..."

"You will no longer be reporting through Master Ynnis. Make no mistake, however. Your new apprenticeship will in no way excuse you from your existing lessons or responsibilities. You will continue to take rudimentary instruction in the Ars Sanguine with the rest of your peers. Here we will pursue... other masteries. Do we understand one another?"

"I believe so, Regent Secundus."

"Excellent. It is my intention that we should begin at once. You may commence by reciting back to me our conversation thus far."

Jacqueline considered for a moment. "You said you had reviewed my progress and discussed my case with the regent. You said that, without discipline and order, my natural talents would be wasted. Effective immediately, you will be assuming responsibility for my studies toward the Fourth Circle. I will report to you instead of Master Ynnis. I will continue with my normal lessons and responsibilities in the novice hall. Is there anything else?"

Foley's patience was obviously straining. "I will start you off. I said, 'Enter.'"

"You mean you want the entire conversation verbatim? I don't remember it word for word. You said something like, 'Sit down, I have been reviewing your progress.'"

Foley sighed exaggeratedly and began rubbing his temples. "No. Please do not go on. You will only further demonstrate your shortcomings. You do not know. From now on, you have to know. You have to remember. Am I making myself clear? I see we shall have to begin with the mnemonic arts."

Jacqueline's voice was flat, formal. "I must know. I must remember. Are you making yourself clear. You see we will have to begin with the mnemonic arts."

"Better. You are still wrong, but at least you seem to understand what is expected of you. Tell me, where do you think our power arises from?"

"*The power is in the blood.*" Jacqueline automatically shot back the response from the First Circle catechism.

"Ah, I see you can recall something at least of your training. You may yet be redeemable. Tell me, this power, are you certain that it does not arise from the will?"

"*The blood looks out on the world through the will.*"

"And not from the mind?"

"*The mind is the conduit of the blood.*"

"Then you are telling me that the blood flows through the mind?"

"*The blood floweth not. Nor doth it fall. It broodeth at the heart of the Father.*"

"Your blood does not flow? If I cut you, do you not bleed?"

"*It is not I who bleeds, but the Father only.*"

"How is that so?"

"My mind is an opened vein. Through me the Father spills life into the world."

"What form, then, must the mind strive toward? Shall it become a straight and narrow channel? A gutter? A trough?"

"The mind is a pyramid of seven steps. Seven, the number of the Founders. Seven, the number of the Council. Seven, the number of the orders of mystery. Seven, the number of the circles within each order. Seven, the number of the arts that rose from the ashes of those that were lost. Seven the number of the days of the world's making. Seven, the number of completeness."

"Precisely so. The mind is a pyramid of seven steps, Jacqueline, a strictly ordered hierarchy. Just as the Tremere clan is ordered in a pyramid of seven steps. Without that discipline, the center cannot hold. You must order your thoughts, your fears, your desires. This will bring structure to the pyramid of your mind and strength to the pyramid of your clan. Do you understand these things?"

"Yes, Regent Secundus."

"When next we meet, you will recall for me the content of this conversation. The exact content. You will further read and commit to memory a little treatise I have for you here. It is Aquinas's *de Memoria*. No, I don't imagine you would be familiar with the work. It never enjoyed what one might term a common circulation. Can we turn to more practical matters at this point? Excellent."

The secundus closed the file and set it aside.

"Now we will conduct a simple pragmatic test of your progress. This inkwell will do nicely." He placed it squarely before her. "You will use your arts to move it across the desk. I must warn you, however, that this piece was a gift and I have grown quite fond of it. I will not abide your damaging it."

A look of apprehension crossed the novice's features. She began to protest.

"You may begin," he prompted.

Jacqueline caught the look on Foley's face—imperious and spoiling for an argument. She abandoned her objections. Resigning herself, she squared off against the delicate cut-glass antagonist.

The three feet of the worktable between Foley and herself suddenly seemed a vast distance. She took a desperate grip on the table's edge, as if to pin it down, to keep it from stretching away further. Her features furrowed in an expression of intense concentration. She muttered what might have been snatches of verse in broken Greek. Everything about her bearing was rigidly upright. She could feel the wooden slat of the chair back pressing against her spine. It kept her grounded, centered. All other impressions were rapidly receding. There was no longer any thought of Foley, nor of failure, nor of humiliation.

Her austere frame was a fired clay crucible, trembling slightly at the effort of containing the rising energies within. Her eyes glazed, her fixed stare first unfocusing and then turning inward. Even her features seemed to blur, her face growing pale, smooth, brittle—taking on the aspect of cool, implacable porcelain.

Foley, for his part, did not spare a single glance for the inkwell, the alleged object of this experiment. He was instead occupied in studying the lines of Jacqueline's face. He could already pick out the fine cracks in her composure. The faults where the novice's

unmastered furies, fears and desires would burst through, shattering the delicate china mask.

He shook his head at the absurdity of it all. The novice clearly lacked discipline, self-knowledge, formal training. She had not even mastered the mnemonic arts. Did she actually hope to move the inkwell by thinking at it very loudly? It was like watching the first clumsy efforts of an infant. Although most infants, Foley acknowledged, were not allowed such volatile playthings.

He had just about made up his mind to intervene when he was distracted by a sound. A wet, turgid pop.

Glancing down at the inkwell, Foley was just in time to see a second murky bubble rise to the surface and burst, splattering a stray droplet over the lip of the well. The deep red bead clung for a moment, glistening wetly against the crystal. Then the long slow slide.

"Enough!"

Jacqueline recoiled as if struck.

Foley stretched out a hand to snatch away the inkwell, to conceal from her the miscarried results of her efforts. He reconsidered and withdrew.

Calmly he asked, "Shall I measure the distance?"

Jacqueline looked hurriedly to the well. It still rested precisely where Foley had placed it. It had not so much as budged. Her initial disappointment quickly gave way to puzzlement.

The surface of the ink seethed with activity. Viscous streaks of red twisted their way up through the jet-black ink. They burst the skin of its surface and spread out—gasping, seeping, coagulating. She watched layer upon layer of spilled life climb higher up the sides of the well until the sheer weight of it smothered out the new bubbles trying to form. Within moments, all was still once more.

"I don't understand," Jacqueline whispered. "What happened? What went wrong?"

"Do you not? Take it. You have desecrated it with your blood. It can be of no further use to me."

"But how?"

Now Foley was angry. "You must think. And you must question before you act. The power is in the blood. The will is the blood's window into the world. But the mind is the conduit. If the mind is undisciplined, unfocused and untrained, the power of the blood is loosed, but unshaped. It lashes out where it will. The results of such misguided efforts are monstrosities—offenses against not only nature, but against reason.

"Did you think this was magic? These blind, undirected fumblings of the will? *This* has more magic in it than your awkward, infantile efforts." Foley reached out one hand and lifted the inkwell. He held it poised defiantly before her face for a moment before banging it down on the table in front of his own position.

"Power. Will. Focus. Results," he raised a finger to forestall her argument. "That's not magic? Because I lifted the inkwell with something as mundane as muscle, bone, sinew? What precisely do you think magic is? No, spare me further demonstrations of the glaring holes in your understanding. I will tell you. It is reaching out with the will to impose a reflection of that perfect inner order upon the entropy of the external world.

From the beginning the earth was without form and void. Magic is the ongoing and continual act of creation."

Jacqueline could restrain herself no longer. "But *this*," she hefted the inkwell and slammed it down in front of herself once more, "is not magic. Is this what we sacrificed so much for? Our lives, our families, our friends?

"Or is that is too abstract for you? After all these years, you get a little jaded, a little tired. Ideals, principles, they never quite penetrate the thickened hide anymore. Well, how about the things that matter, something concrete, something real? The tug of a child's sticky hand? The taste of chocolate? The brilliance of sunlight through stained glass? I didn't give up all of this for you to tell me I could just as easily have picked up the damned inkwell."

"You would do well to remember you are addressing a superior." Foley pushed back his chair and slowly paced around until he was standing precisely behind her. "But, yes, it is far more efficient to move the inkwell with your hand. Nature has provided you with delightfully appropriate tools for the task at hand."

A cool touch brushed her cheek. Her first instinct was to flinch away, but she held her ground. She neither jumped nor turned to acknowledge the unwelcome caress.

"So that's it? Magic is just taking the easy way out? An energy-saving device? A quaint and archaic mechanism?"

"I'm not sure why that should make you so angry. If you would move the inkwell with your hand, you must train up your hand. If you would move it with your mind, you must train up your mind."

What first registered in Jacqueline's mind was the sound of the inkwell sliding away from her across the rough wooden surface. The sight, or perhaps the acceptance of the sight, was slower in coming. It lagged just beyond the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Foley placed both hands upon her shoulders from behind. It was not a comforting gesture. He leaned down close and whispered into one ear. "Would you learn to move the well with only your mind? I could teach you, you know. Would you like that? For me to teach you?"

She shivered.

"Do you think it would be hard? Arduous? The long nights of study. Months, years perhaps? Would you be willing to make the necessary… sacrifices? Or would you mourn over lost sentimentalities—pudgy fingers, melted chocolate, pretty colors?"

Foley felt her stiffen. He smiled and closed in for the kill. "Would it surprise you, I wonder, to learn that I could teach you to move the inkwell in little more than one hundred hours of concentrated study? Just about the same time it takes to teach a mortal child to read. Would that surprise you? You yourself were a teacher, once. Surely you've taught a child to read. What could be simpler? What could be more natural? Would you like that? Would you like for me to teach you?"

A change had come over Jacqueline. Her voice was hollow. It sounded as if it came from a great distance. Echoing up from the bottom of a deep well.

"I would… like that."

"Good. I was hoping you would say that. I am certain we shall have great fun together. Yes, I am very much looking forward to the coming years."

"Years? But you said..."

"Oh yes, years. Perhaps decades. But do not worry, we are in no hurry. We quite literally have all the time in the world."

"One hundred hours," she repeated stubbornly. Some of the fire was coming back into her stare. "You said, one hundred hours. Even at only an hour a night, that is scarcely four months."

"I fear you misunderstand. I said I *could* teach you in one hundred hours. Anyone could, really. The power is in you already—in the blood. Despite your enthusiasm, however, I have no intention of loosing that power upon you in such a hurried manner. You would not thank me for it, you may rely upon that.

"You are ambitious, and that is an advantage. But you must temper your ambition with patience. You would have power, yes. That much is obvious. But you would far rather have shortcuts. It is a lack of discipline. It makes you vulnerable."

"But you promised..."

"I promised you nothing, except that I would teach you. We will not rush through this training. We shall be much more... thorough. The instructing of novices is something in which I take quite an avid interest. Shall we begin with the basics?"

The unexpected offer to begin immediately undermined Jacqueline's objections. She still wanted to argue, to confront Foley with his shadow promises, to throw his transparent manipulations back in his face. But none of his insults, his insinuations carried the weight of that one compelling call—the sound of the inkwell sliding, apparently of its own accord, across the worktable.

"I am ready, Regent Secundus."

Foley gave no sign of reveling in his victory. "The problem is precisely that you are not ready. You lack the proper foundation to grasp even the fundamentals of what I will relate to you. You lack the proper discipline to commit my words to memory, for review when you eventually master the basics. I cannot allow you to take written notes for the obvious reasons, so you must muddle through as best you can.

"There are seven lessons that I teach—the seven great truths of the Tremere pyramid. If you are not prepared to receive them, your efforts here are doomed from the start, relegated to the realm of frustration and failure. The seven lessons of the pyramid are Discontinuity, Hierarchy, Apathy, Favor, Authority, Documentation and Surveillance.

"You will have forgotten all of them, of course, by the next time we meet. So we will only dwell on the first tonight. The first lesson I teach each of my students is discontinuity.

"I barrage them with snatches of astrology, Kabbalism, palmistry, the I Ching, conspiracy theories, Greek myths, Catholic rites, the Tarot, crystals, druids, Gehenna, demonology, evolution, alchemy, the Book of the Dead, Lovecraft, Orphic mysteries, UFOs, the Grail cycle, Nostradamus, quantum theory, archangels, the Golden Dawn, radical relativism, neo-paganism, the Book of Nod, Catharist heresies, etc.

"Everything I teach is kept uncontaminated by any specific context. Logical progressions—whether they be chronological or conceptual—are harshly suppressed. All

theories, even the most tenuously held, are placed on an equal footing. Each is presented as being equally plausible and, in the final reckoning, true.

"If a student should show signs of a developing enthusiasm, we immediately change tack—preferably taking up a tradition that vilifies or is at least openly dismissive of the previous one. But there are ample other distractions to take the novice's mind off the drudgery of any one particular subject.

"The chantry is a symphony of bells and alarms—tolling the hours of study or of service; calling the faithful to meetings or mealtimes; announcing the arrival of emissaries or invaders. In all this frenzied activity, there is an elegant discontinuity—not only of topic, but also of time.

"The benefits of discontinuity are legion. It discourages overspecialization, attachment and sentimentality. It gives the novice the broadest possible base of knowledge. It develops healthy reserves of sophism, cynicism and intellectualism to carry her through the coming struggles.

"But most importantly, it reconciles the novice to her new existence. What use is there for continuity, for interconnectedness, for logical cause and consequence in a world where even the inevitable tie between life and death has been utterly and irrevocably severed?"

Jacqueline listened in growing horror. Surely Foley was just giving vent to a brooding cynicism. Taken at face value, the system he was describing was nothing short of a death sentence. Decades, perhaps centuries, lost for the sake of preserving a crumbling monolithic institution.

If Foley thought that he could shackle her to such an agenda, she would have to disabuse him of that notion.

Monday, 19 July 1999, 2:12 AM
Federal Hill
Baltimore, Maryland

"Would you like to stroll up the hill, sir?" Marja asked.

"No." Jan felt confined. Never mind that there was plenty of room in the limousine, even with himself and both assistants. Marja leaned away from him and toward Roel as she gazed out the passenger's side window at the park beyond.

"It's a nice night, sir," added the driver, Herman. His partner, Ton Baumgarte, in the front passenger seat, nodded agreement.

"Mr. Abbeel," Jan said evenly to the driver, "should I require advice of a recreational nature from you, rest assured that you will be among the first to know."

Herman returned his attention to Key Highway. The limousine moved slowly along. There was little enough traffic and, even if Jan wasn't, Marja and Roel seemed to be enjoying this nighttime tour of the city. The car itself was a regular rental. Among all the other arrangements and contacts, Jan had seen no immediate need to have his own armored and light-sealed vehicle shipped from Amsterdam and, in fact, tonight had been the first occasion since arriving that he'd desired the use of an automobile. He'd required precious little of his two assistants over the last three nights. The contacts and negotiations had all been with Kindred, requiring Jan personally—no "legitimate" business interests—and so the mortals' presence had been rendered moot in that regard.

There remained, of course, the need to feed. Jan glanced at Marja. As she leaned over Roel to look out the window, the taut muscles of her neck drew the vampire's notice—sternomastoid, sternohyoid, omohyoid—and tucked among them the pulsating jugular. Jan had been so busy the past few nights that he'd neglected to feed, and now he could feel the hunger rising.

Perhaps that's why I was so... susceptible to Victoria last night, he started to consider, but then pushed that entire topic from his thoughts.

This drive was not, after all, a field trip to amuse his servants. Jan had thought he wanted company, though now he was having second thoughts. What he'd wanted most, he realized, was to be away from the Lord Baltimore Inn; more specifically, away from the seventh floor and the suite at the opposite end of the building from his own. He'd accomplished much since receiving this impossible assignment from Hardestadt. A casual drive through the city should have been a pleasant enough distraction. Yet here Jan was, feeling hemmed in by his sightseeing retainers, and thinking about the one person he wanted not to think about.

Damned Toreador.

Jan couldn't help remembering the tiny mark on Victoria's jaw, the serpent devouring its own tail. It was pure chance that he'd seen it. And Victoria's reaction—that was the strangest of all. New concerns began to take shape in Jan's mind. *A Tzimisce symbol... Could it be that she...?* But Jan had difficulty focusing his thoughts. He also couldn't help

remembering the perfect curves of Victoria's naked back, the luster of her skin, the delicate ripple of her ribs beneath his fingers....

"What is this place?" Jan asked Marja. Anything was better than thinking, than remembering. He gestured toward the grassy rise that she'd suggested climbing.

"Federal Hill," she said.

"During the American Civil War it was a fort, of sorts," explained Roel. The young man was as able an executive assistant as was Marja and another source of nourishment to boot. Neither was aware of the other's similar, unofficial capacity, or of the common link that made them so valuable to Jan.

I will feed as soon as we get back, Jan thought. It was not wise to neglect his own welfare, and it seemed he might need his strength in the upcoming weeks if Victoria continued to challenge both his authority and his control over himself.

Herman did not see in time the large figure that stepped out into the street just in front of the car. The impact jolted all the passengers. Jan instantly forgot all thoughts of Federal Hill, of Victoria. The dual airbags inflated and shoved Herman and Ton back against their seats. No one in the back was wearing a seatbelt. Jan and his assistants slammed into the seats before them.

"Oh my God," Marja said, picking herself up from the floor. "We hit someone." Then she noticed the blood gushing from Roel's nose. Jan noticed as well. "Roel, you're bleeding. Are you—?"

The bullets that started tearing through the car cut off her question. The passenger-side windows shattered. A spray of automatic gunfire ripped apart Ton and Roel. Glass, blood and bullets were everywhere at once. Marja jerked spasmodically as she was hit. She was knocked back onto Jan, and he against the door. Bullets exploded through his arms, his chest, his face.

Herman freed himself from the deflating airbag and flung his door open. Jan reached for his door handle a split second after his driver managed to stand and raise his own semi-automatic pistol, aiming across the roof of the car at their assailant. But Herman was slammed into the car from behind. His weapon clattered to the ground, and he slumped after it with a small arrow completely through his neck.

Not an arrow, Jan realized. A stake.

Jan's door was open, but instead of fleeing, he used it as a shield. He grabbed Herman's gun and flung himself back through the car, over the bodies of Marja and Roel—away from whoever had fired the stake. The gunman on the other side of the car was surprised to see Jan coming straight at him through the shattered window and even more surprised as Jan unloaded the pistol's clip into him. Jan had never practiced with one of these modern weapons. He was as surprised as the gunman, whose chest and neck seemed to explode.

Jan forced himself the rest of the way through the window as his assailant collapsed in a heap. The Ventrue's first instinct was to flee, but then he saw the assault rifle in the hand of the inert gunman. Jan dropped the empty pistol and grabbed the new weapon. He whirled toward the front of the limousine. The creature that the car had hit stood unharmed among the wreckage of the bumper and grille.

War ghoul, Jan thought, though he couldn't be sure. He'd never seen one up close before, but it was too damned big to be completely human; that and it had a large horn sticking up from the middle of its forehead. The effect was more rhinoceros than unicorn.

Jan let loose with the rifle. Dozens of bullets chewed into the hood of the car, the pavement. A tire exploded. So did a streetlight half a block away. Jan blew to hell everything in sight—everything except the ghoul. And then the gun stopped firing.

"*Shit.*"

Jammed? Out of ammo? Didn't much matter. Jan ran for the grassy knoll. After the first few yards, he remembered that somebody back there was firing stakes—out of a shotgun? A crossbow? So Jan tried to weave as he ran, not to make too steady a target. It might have been a good idea, but he almost managed to trip himself and so quickly gave it up.

At the top of the hill, he paused and looked back. Three shapes were pursuing him up the slope of the park: the rhinoceros, another more human-sized figure and a creature on all fours. Jan tried the assault rifle again. He pointed the gun and kept pressing the trigger, but no more shots fired.

"*Shit.*"

He threw the weapon to the ground, then turned and fled in earnest.

Sabbat.

The word bounced through his mind every few steps.

Sabbat.

But how could they have sneaked into Baltimore with all the patrols operating north of Washington? They couldn't have. But somebody had sure as hell just shot up his staff.

Sabbat.

Shot up his staff? Shot up *him*!

As Jan wove among the trees on the crest of the small hill, he tried to take stock of his injuries. At the very least, he was still mobile. Otherwise, he'd probably have been destroyed by now. He thought for a brief moment of Marja and Roel and Ton, their blood pooling in the floorboards of the limousine, and of Herman lying on the pavement pierced by a wooden stake. But there was no time for sentimentality. Survival must come first.

The bullet wounds Jan had suffered were painful but luckily not disabling. He tried to pinpoint the holes, to direct healing vitae to the worst of them. A few bullets that had lodged near the surface popped out as shallow wounds filled. Other slugs would just have to stay in him for the time being. If he survived, he could have them cut out later. One bullet had passed through both cheeks and shattered a few teeth en route. Another had managed to tear away most of an ear. Again, painful but not fatal. Jan lost count somewhere around fifteen bullets. Nothing blood wouldn't take care of.

What blood? he wondered, fighting off a wave of desperation. The little healing he'd done had taken its toll, and though he was more whole of body, he now felt fatigue beginning to overtake him. He thought for a moment about circling back, about trying to get to Marja and Roel before they were completely cold, but the assassins might have left a guard for just that reason, and Jan couldn't hope to win a straight-up fight at this point.

Holding the fatigue at bay, Jan kept running out of the park and through the neighborhoods to the south. He cut down a side street, then turned south again, pausing

at the corner of a building to watch. He didn't have long to wait before they turned the first corner. The large dog-like creature was first, sniffing along the ground. *Following my scent,* Jan realized. The next stalker held the leash attached to the dog-thing. Finally, Rhino brought up the rear. He seemed to be limping slightly. Maybe the limo had injured him—but the car had definitely gotten the worse end of the deal.

Jan watched for a moment longer, hoping they would make a wrong turn, but the bloodhound was following his path exactly. Jan ran again. Each step took more out of him. He cursed himself for having not fed for so many nights. If he had more blood, he might be able to swing wide to the west, to make a large circle, not to the car, but back to the Lord Baltimore. Surely he could find help there. But Jan's strength was fading fast. He'd never make it so far.

And wouldn't Garlotte love for me to run through the lobby of his hotel with a Sabbat hit squad on my tail, Jan thought. Thought of imperiling the Masquerade led his mind back to the limousine and the four bodies in and around it. There was no way for Jan to hide that little faux pas. *Garlotte will just have to clean that up.*

Jan stopped again. He shook his head, trying to purge all extraneous thought—he didn't have time to worry about feeding, or Garlotte, or the Masquerade—but mostly he just succeeded in shaking loose another piece of broken tooth. Ahead of him was another park. Beyond it, more docks. He'd crossed the neck of this narrow peninsula. He couldn't see his pursuers at the moment, but he had a sick feeling that they were still back there, that they were still tracking him. The bloodhound wouldn't lose his trail, and the Sabbat wouldn't give up. The park, he decided, had nothing to offer. If he climbed into a tree or tried to hide, they would track him down. Maybe near the docks he would run across some roving band of Brujah. Beyond that, he didn't have much of a plan. Or much hope.

Monday, 19 July 1999, 2:39 AM
The Docks
Baltimore, Maryland

Lox pulled at the lead constantly, but Terrence held him back. *There's no reason for it to have come to this*, Terrence thought. *No reason for us to have to track this bozo across the city*. But Sonny had bungled his job. Terrence had been surprised when Euroboy gunned down Sonny, but not too upset. Sonny was an ass. He deserved whatever he got. Apparently Blaine had anticipated something like this happening. That's why Terrence and Lox were there.

Even holding back Lox, Terrence was outpacing Jammer. In stopping the limo, the horned monstrosity seemed to have busted a knee, and without Bolon or Vykos or—God forbid—the Little Tailor around, there was no one to fix it. *Jeez*. Terrence shuddered just thinking of those high-octane Tzimisce. He was just as glad that they weren't there. Sure they were clanmates and all, but they creeped the hell out of him.

Let Jammer limp, Terrence thought. The big idiot should've known better than to use himself as a human—relatively speaking—roadblock. *But, hey, you tell him to stop a car, he stops the car*. After all, Blaine didn't pick Jammer for his manners, savvy or conversational skills.

Lox jerked more energetically at his lead.

"Stop your grunting, you stupid idget." Terrence gave the creature a swift kick in one of its malformed, canine legs. Lox had been a friend, a fellow Tzimisce, before an egregious foul-up had led Vykos to turn him into the slavering bloodhound-of-a-thing he was now. *Easy come, easy go*, thought Terrence. Compared to some who pissed off Vykos, Lox had gotten off light.

Lox's agitation meant that the trail was getting fresher. Euroboy was slowing down. *Running out of steam*, Terrence thought. Maybe Sonny had pegged him a few times before he bought the farm. Of course, Sonny probably wasn't mangled beyond repair—if Blaine thought that some screw-up Lasombra was worth the trouble. Terrence wouldn't bet on Sonny's chances.

He wouldn't bet on Euroboy's chances either. Jammer was almost caught up now. "Come on, you stupid, horny bastard," Terrence called, and then let Lox lead the way again. The bloodhound tugged at the leather straps. He sniffed back and forth along the trail so energetically that he set his testicles swinging side to side.

Their prey's course veered left of the upcoming park, to Terrence's surprise. *Figured we'd find him curled up under a bush calling for daddy*. Ahead were some of the city's docks, but that wasn't going to save Euroboy. He couldn't hide behind the smell of water and diesel, or the sound of cranes and forklifts. Not for long. Lox would sniff him out.

Terrence didn't bother with trying to conceal himself. He looked fairly normal, and Lox could be mistaken for some kind of big fucking dog. And if anybody wanted to stop Jammer and ask him why he was so ugly, they were welcome to it. Mostly, Terrence didn't care who saw him. This was a Camarilla city. If he stirred up a little trouble for the limp-

wristed Ventrue prince to cover up, that was just hunky-damn-dory. *Dockworkers don't care anyway*, Terrence figured. *They're just doing their grunt job and collecting union wages.*

The trail led right down to the access road along the water's edge. With Jammer not too far behind, they began to pass piers. Ships were docked at most, and many were loading or unloading cargo. *24-7*, Terrence thought. *Fucking grunts. At least I get days off.*

Lox was about to lose it. He strained to get away from his keeper and snarled insanely. "Pipe down, you moron. You're gonna gag on your own spit." It had happened before.

Terrence paused alongside one of the big ships. He held Lox in check and scanned their surroundings. A large crane was unloading pallets, swinging its load slowly over the access road. Jammer was caught up to within a few yards. Lox jerked frantically at the lead, redoubling his efforts to get free.

"Oh yeah, we're close," Terrence muttered to himself. "I'm gonna pin Euroboy's ears to his—"

Lox gave an incredible tug. Terrence lost his balance and stumbled forward. He fell to his knees and was dragged by the bloodhound, just as the huge pallet from the crane crashed to the ground where they'd been standing. The force of the impact bounced Terrence into the air. He landed roughly and stared at the wreckage. He'd seen it happen. One second Jammer was limping toward him; the next second forty fucking tons of broken crates and spilled sugar were spread over the goddamned dock where Jammer had been.

Terrence had the leather lead wrapped around his wrist, so while he was staring at the mountain of sugar that had almost crushed him like it had Jammer, Lox was about to dislocate his shoulder pulling in the other direction. After a few seconds, the pain got Terrence's attention. He turned just in time to see Euroboy scurry up the gangplank and onto the sugar boat. Terrence freed his hand from the lead. "Rip his heart out," he said.

Lox was off in an instant, charging up the gangplank.

Monday, 19 July 1999, 2:52 AM
The Docks
Baltimore, Maryland

The crane operator had evened the odds slightly. Though Jan had hoped for better, he was more refined than to be ungrateful. The sight of Rhino crushed beneath the huge pallet was sweet indeed. But Jan only allowed himself a few seconds to admire his handiwork. The bloodhound and his master still survived. Jan would have been better off if the... the whatever the thing was that was following his scent had been destroyed. It wasn't a dog. Now that Jan saw it at closer quarters—as close as he wanted to get—it seemed vaguely humanoid, though bent over on all fours, legs deformed so that they were much like a canine's, and its face grotesquely flattened.

Tzimisce, Jan thought. Or some foul creation of that clan.

If the bloodhound had been destroyed, Jan might have slipped away and made his way back to allies eventually. But the Sabbat could still follow his trail, and Jan had no doubt they would.

Before the beast's handler had time to raise himself off the ground, Jan dashed up the gangplank of the closest freighter. As he crossed the deck, he heard the baying of the hound behind him, coming closer. There was more activity on board than Jan would have preferred. A small crowd, alarmed by the tremendous crash of the sugar pallet, had gathered near the railing. Jan had no idea how something like the bestial creature trailing him might be explained away. But suddenly the Masquerade became much less of a concern as the hound crested the gangplank and galloped onto the deck. Different clusters of mortal onlookers had exactly opposite reactions: some froze, paralyzed by terror; others ran for their lives. Jan ran too, and the shouts and confusion provided some cover.

The hound only paused for a moment, however, before it was after him again. It had his scent and wasn't about to be thrown off by a few frantic mortals. One sailor stumbled before the onrushing beast. It didn't slow in the slightest. Its hind claws raked deep into the sailor's body as the creature rushed on after Jan. With a few powerful bounds, it closed the distance between them. Jan could feel it gaining on him. It was practically on him, so close that the beast's snarls reverberated in his chest.

Jan lunged for the nearest doorway on the ship's superstructure just as the beast leapt for him.

He slammed the hatch. The force of the hound's impact against the door knocked Jan backward. The sound of the blow set the metal bulkheads humming. But the door held. Jan slammed home the heavy bolt and backed slowly away, all the while watching the door, as the beast pounded and clawed on the opposite side.

Jan forced himself to turn away from the blocked portal, to take note of his surroundings. He was in a corridor, not a single cabin. *Thank God for that*, he thought. He wasn't trapped. But that also meant that the hound could still get to him, and probably it would set about that as soon as it realized the door between them was impassible. *If* the

door between them remained impassible and didn't tear from its hinges any second. Either way, Jan had to move.

He started down the corridor, but now that the hound was not right behind him, he began to grow lightheaded. The arrow-straight passage seemed to zig and to zag. Blood. Jan had to find some soon. The wounds he'd suffered would definitely have killed a mortal, and would have destroyed—or incapacitated, which amounted to the same thing—many a Kindred. Jan had only the blood of Hardestadt and the elders of Clan Ventrue to thank that he'd survived this long. He might shrug off two dozen gunshots for a time, but eventually he'd have to find more blood. And for him, in a foreign land, that could prove difficult, because the blessing of Clan Ventrue resilience was accompanied by a curse that burdened no other clan. If only he could just grab the first sailor he came across and drain him—inelegant, yes, but style mattered very little at times like these—but it could not be.

Move, damn you! Jan told himself.

Blood, though vital, was not his most immediate problem. He couldn't tell if the howling at the door had abated, and he wasn't going to take the time to find out. Then he saw what he was looking for—a ladder. He paused for a moment, then started climbing down. One level, two. But he found that he had to concentrate on the ladder or he missed rungs, and he soon lost track of how far he'd descended.

Finally, even though he was careful with placement of hands and feet, he made a misstep.

For a moment that seemed to encompass lifetimes, he felt himself in freefall. He passed beyond the tangible world, felt himself free of it—then his hands grabbed hold. He jerked to a halt, smashed his face on the side of the ladder. He stayed there longer than he could afford to, clutching the rungs like a prodigal child might embrace his mother.

A few more steps down and Jan stumbled into another corridor. The lightheadedness gave way to debilitating vertigo. Jan staggered. He didn't even see the sailor before the young man caught him and kept him from falling to the floor. The yellow lights below deck seemed unusually harsh to Jan. He squinted up at the sailor.

"Are you all right, sir?"

But Jan barely heard the words. The rhythmic rush of blood beneath the boy's skin drowned them out. So much blood, so close, and of so little use to Jan. He latched onto the boy, struggled to his feet.

"Where is the engine room?" Jan asked, his voice barely a whisper.

The sailor was puzzled. "Do you need a doctor?"

"Where is it?" Jan hissed. He held tight as the boy recoiled from him, the mortal's mind suddenly confronted with that which it couldn't comprehend. "The engine room."

"This way," said the sailor, pointing down the corridor. "Not far." There was no fear in his voice, only obedience.

"Take me there," said Jan.

The boy was quite amenable, much like the crane operator had been. Jan never could have figured out the crane controls in time, nor in his current state could he have found the engine room on his own.

As they made their way along the corridor, Jan tried to listen for sounds of the bloodhound, but his ears were ringing. He couldn't be sure if what he heard were really the beast's snarls from the deck just above, the sound of the creature's claws as it slid down a ladder in pursuit. Or were the noises in his own head? With each step, Jan expected the hound to pounce on him from behind. Finally, he and the sailor reached the engine room.

"Is there another exit?" Jan asked.

The sailor nodded. "Three. One on the far end, this level. Two on the catwalk, either side."

"Crew?"

The boy glanced at his watch. "No. Shouldn't be."

Jan leaned against the nearby doorway. *Good,* he thought. He had enough lives on his conscience for one night. This boy would follow his instructions without question; if Jan were lucky, they'd both survive. If he wasn't lucky... well, then at least he wouldn't have to worry about his conscience. Jan rested there against the doorway for a minute or two. He inspected the door itself and the emergency panel on the wall just inside the engine room.

Then a chilling howl echoed down the corridor—the cry of a hunter who'd caught the scent of his prey. The boy looked nervously back the way they'd just come. Jan placed a calming hand on his shoulder, though Jan felt no great sense of calm himself. He waited a few moments longer. The howl sounded again, closer. The hound was definitely tracing their path.

"Come on," Jan said at last. He half led, half supported himself on the boy as they made their way across the engine room. The main thoroughfare through the buzzing, vibrating machinery was a relatively straight shot, but the engine room was long, about fifty meters. If it were *too* long, or if it were too short, for that matter, then Jan knew that he and the boy were finished. The mortal kept glancing back over his shoulder—and then his eyes suddenly grew wide with fear.

"Come on, damn you!" Jan urged the youth to greater speed, though it was Jan's infirmity that slowed them. He caught the boy's eye and put all his waning energy into maintaining his control. If he faltered and the sailor fled, there'd be no hope.

The engine room seemed to stretch on and on before them. It seemed that each step took them nowhere. Finally, when Jan guessed they were at least halfway, he did risk a glance back. They were well over halfway, in fact, but entering the other door were the hound and his master. The master again had the leash in hand.

Don't turn it loose, Jan thought. *Just don't let go.*

Jan took the boy's chin in his hand, looked deep into his eyes and spoke words that must be obeyed if either of them were to survive: "Run. Hit the emergency fire code. Wait for me just beyond the door. *Now.*"

The boy was anxious to obey—anxious to run, at least. But his running was a prompt to the hound's keeper. He turned loose the leash.

"Kill, Lox!"

The beast didn't need instruction, might not even have heard its master. It shot across the long, narrow chamber. Jan ran as well. He'd waited only a second after the boy

ran, but it seemed as if everyone else were moving at full speed while Jan labored in slow motion. He followed the sailor toward the door and prayed that his legs wouldn't fail him.

The boy reached the emergency panel, jabbed in the code and was out the door in record time. By the time Jan got close to the exit, the emergency fire door was sliding down—a quarter of the way, halfway. He could hear the hound closing the distance between them, and the keeper was all the while yelling, "Kill, Lox! Kill!"

Jan pictured the door closing before he could get through. He pictured it not closing in time to trap the hound. He pictured the beast taking him down before he got to the door. Jan's legs were numb. They must've functioned on their own, because he couldn't feel them. Still several meters from the doorway, Jan dove and rolled. The fire door was well past half closed. It would meet the floor in a few seconds and Jan would be trapped or crushed.

The beast howled and lunged for Jan just as he slid under the door. The creature caught his leg. Its claws sank in, dug into his flesh as it pulled itself along. His leg and the beast's upper body were directly beneath the door. Half a meter farther and it would be sealed.

Jan twisted around just in time to see the sailor swinging a fire extinguisher through the air. The butt end of the metal container smashed the hound square in the face. Bones cracked. The beast grimaced and spat blood but didn't let go of Jan's leg. Jan kicked at the monster with his free foot with little effect. The beast seemed only angered by the attacks and sank its fangs into Jan's leg. At the same time, the sailor swung the fire extinguisher again.

Jan and the beast both howled in pain. Teeth clattered across the floor. The hound pulled back its smashed face. Jan pulled his broken ankle free of the doorway just as the fire door ground completely closed.

Jan fell back on the floor. He closed his eyes against the pain jolting through his ankle and leg and allowed himself one prolonged roar of agony. As the echoes of his scream died away, he noticed the strange silence—strange because there was no pounding and scratching from the other side of the fire door.

"Are all the exits closed?" Jan asked to be sure.

The boy nodded. His mouth hung open slightly, but he was mute from what he'd seen.

Jan struggled up onto his elbows to inspect the damage to his ankle—and saw the two amputated, clawed hands that still clung to his leg. Blood had soaked into the cuff of his pants leg. The dizziness that he'd overcome during the height of the danger returned now with a vengeance. Jan lay back down.

His mind was still racing. *They might bypass the system. They might get the doors open, or find another exit, a vent system.* There was no time to be lost, but only with great effort was he able to sit up again. Gingerly, he plucked the claws from his skin, his clothing, and tossed the hands away.

"Help me up." It was necessary, but neither pleasant nor comfortable. "Take me to the captain," said Jan. "Now. And once we're there, go find me a damned crutch."

Monday, 19 July 1999, 3:15 AM
The Docks
Baltimore, Maryland

The handful of sailors helped Jan down the gangplank. They had no idea who this battered visitor limping along on his crutch was. They only knew that orders were orders, and the captain had ordered them to see this person off the ship. Their careful glances showed their unease. They wondered if his presence had anything to do with the crane accident or with the rabid dog that had gotten on board. But they asked no questions, nor did they linger on the dock. The ship's engines were roaring to life. The men hurried back on. The ship cast off almost at once.

Jan skirted the crowd assembled around the wreckage of the sugar crates. An ambulance had pulled up—little need for that—but no police. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened. An investigation would be required, safety procedures reviewed in depth. No dockworkers were unaccounted for, but a few people insisted that the load had fallen on *someone*. Eventually, Jan knew, they would dig into the huge pile, haul away the sugar and sacks and splintered wood, and the compressed mass of unidentifiable body parts would cause quite a stir.

Garlotte will have to take care of that too, Jan thought. The prince would have to see that his people explained away the accident: and the bullet-riddled limousine and five bodies; and the freighter that shoved off for sea without clearance because the captain had believed a fire in the engine room would lead to an explosion, and he was willing to sacrifice himself and his crew to ensure the safety of countless dockworkers. When authorities determined that there was no fire, the captain, despite his heroic intentions, would be reprimanded and fired. Obviously he must've been drunk or worse. But he had served his purpose.

I must get word to the prince, Jan thought. Garlotte would need to send a team in to "fumigate" the engine room, of course. Hopefully the hound and its keeper wouldn't escape before then.

All in all, not a very good night for the Masquerade. If Jan were a Kindred of less standing, he would certainly be flogged, at the very least. But as a child of influence—and, more importantly, a childe of Hardestadt—his transgressions would be overlooked. He would be lauded as a destroyer of Sabbat assassins, where a neonate, despite a lack of options, would have been punished for imprudence.

Jan staggered away from the docks and between two gray warehouses. Each step set loose tremors of pain from his ankle. He was glad to be away from the throng of mortals; he was too conspicuous limping about with bullet holes in his clothes, in his face. And the aroma of the kine was a cruel taunt. Jan thought of Marja, of Roel, of their needed blood that was denied him. There were others available—in Amsterdam. One phone call would solve the problem eventually, but that didn't help tonight.

He wandered on through South Baltimore, noticing only vaguely the street signs he passed.

Winder, Wells, Barney, Heath.

Swing west, he reminded himself. He mustn't pass too closely to Federal Hill, the limousine and the bodies. Police would be there by now.

Charles, Olive, Hanover, Clarkston.

Jan thought he'd changed directions, more or less, but he couldn't concentrate, couldn't picture in his mind the layout of the city or the relation of street to street. There was water not too far ahead, but as he was on a peninsula, that didn't much narrow down where he might be. The larger warehouses by the docks had given way to more modest storage buildings, one very much like the next, cinderblock or siding, blank walls, gray in the morning darkness. Or maybe Jan's mind couldn't grasp the details that distinguished one structure from another.

He heard a car in the distance, not very close, but Jan felt the sudden, illogical fear that someone would find him. He hobbled as quickly as the pain and his crutch would allow between two of the buildings, then leaned heavily against a metal wall.

Rest, he told himself. *Just for a few minutes.* Though he knew rest without blood was pointless. He let his fingers relax. The crutch slid away from him along the metal wall, clattered to the ground. Slowly, Jan slid down until he sat on the gravel.

Just a few minutes.

Jan's mind began to wander.

The Sabbat are delinquent malcontents. Have been from the beginning. Hardestadt's words were as clear as if he stood over Jan that very moment. *Return them to their place. And try not to be too long about it.*

"Return them yourself, you hoary old bastard," Jan muttered. Any minute now, he was going to get up again, to continue on his way north and around the Inner Harbor to the Lord Baltimore Inn. There was no time to waste. Hardestadt was waiting. But sitting on the ground, leaning against the building, was such a relief. Jan's ankle throbbed with only a dull ache, instead of the lightning strikes of sharp pain. And his head was swimming. He didn't know if he could go on. But he had to. Any minute now.

"You should've stayed in Europe," said Hardestadt. Jan nodded weakly in agreement. "Where the vampires are old and tired and slow."

Old and tired and slow. The words prodded Jan from his fog of pain and exhaustion. *That doesn't sound like Hardestadt.* And *vampire.* Jan's sire never used that vulgarism; always *Kindred* or *Cainite.*

Jan looked up. His immediate surroundings again asserted their reality. He was in Baltimore, near the docks, and with too little blood in his injured body. He'd just defeated, or at least eluded, a Sabbat pack. Or had he?

"Any final words, Mr. Jan Pieterzoon?"

The voice was familiar and, as Jan's eyes focused, so was the face and form. "Blaine."

"You remember. How touching." The assassin would have towered over Jan even if the smaller Ventrue weren't on the ground.

"I never forget a clanmate," Jan said.

"Clanmate, hmph. Fuck you, clanmate."

And, figuratively speaking, that's exactly what Blaine was about to do. He held a crossbow leveled at Jan's chest. A wooden bolt, like the one that had claimed Herman,

would serve as a stake. Jan tried to think, but his mind was sluggish. His only chance was to dodge at just the right second and hope to take the bolt in the shoulder instead of the heart. But Blaine was so close. There would only be the smallest fraction of a second. And if Jan succeeded, then what? He lacked the strength to escape or to overpower his adversary.

"It's not too late to redeem yourself," Jan said. "You'd be valuable to the Camarilla, with your knowledge of the Sabbat."

Blaine laughed out loud. "I may be a rat, but I'm not dumb enough to jump *onto* a sinking ship."

"Your masters will want to find out what I know." Jan was grasping at straws. He didn't relish the idea of Tzimisce torture, but short-term survival was the immediate concern. As long as he wasn't destroyed, he might still escape.

"Don't worry," said Blaine. "They know what you know. Besides, it's not like we need any help wiping—"

He never finished the sentence. Before Jan's eyes, a dark blur knocked the end of the crossbow downward. The bolt fired and sprayed gravel at Jan's feet. In the same instant, the dark figure struck Blaine in the head. The renegade Ventrue slammed into the wall behind him and collapsed to the ground.

Jan's mind took a few seconds to catch up. Standing above him instead of Blaine was a large black man in mirrored sunglasses. His heavy leather jacket seemed to swallow what little light there was. Jan knew the large man, recognized the face.

Theo Bell.

It finally sank in. Bell held a sawed-off shotgun, the reinforced stock dirtied by fresh blood. Jan glanced over at Blaine's inert body, noted the corresponding crater in his forehead.

"You gonna make it?" Bell asked.

Jan couldn't answer. He was still reconstructing how Bell had knocked the crossbow off target and then crushed Blaine's skull before either of the Ventrue had realized the Brujah warrior was there. Jan stared at Blaine's crumpled and bloody face. The assassin, like his clanmate Jan, could no doubt withstand tremendous physical damage, yet Bell's blow had crushed the front of his head like a rotten walnut. Jan looked again at the looming Brujah.

"What about the others?" Bell asked.

"On the ship," Jan tried to explain. "Sealed in the engine room, or they were, at least. The captain's taking them out to sea." They might escape, or free themselves and take over the ship, but they were out of the way for the moment. "Another crushed on the docks. Another..." Jan started to point but was completely disoriented. His finger stabbed weakly at the air. "Was with my car. Shot. But might've recovered."

"I took care of that one," Bell said without elaboration. "Any others that you know of?" Jan shook his head. "Okay," said Bell. "That's all I saw too."

Then Bell stuck the barrel of his shotgun in Blaine's slack mouth and pulled the trigger. The explosion jolted Jan back to his senses.

"Let's go," said Bell. "Here." He retrieved Jan's crutch and handed it to him, then stalked back toward the street and left Jan to hobble along behind.

Jan knew that he should follow. The gunshot might very well attract attention, and in his current condition he wouldn't be a match for mortal police, much less for any other Sabbat that might be lurking about. But the smell of blood was strong, almost overpowering in the tight area. And it wasn't mortal blood, which Jan had to be so careful about. This was vampiric blood. Kindred vitae. Transformed by the curse of Caine into the most tempting, and the most damning, of nectars.

Jan's hunger overcame his exhaustion and pain. He crawled the few feet to the headless mess that had been Blaine. Lines of blood trickled down the wall behind the body. *Such a waste*, Jan thought, but he was more intent on what had not been wasted. He took hold of a limp arm and gave in to the hunger.

When Jan reached the street, he moved a bit more steadily. He'd not completely drained the body but instead had torn himself away from the rich libation as soon as he'd been able. His ankle still pained him. The healing vitae had repaired the injury to the point that he could more readily support his own weight, but Jan had feared there was time for little else. The street was completely empty, but for how long? Someone could easily have heard the gunshot. The blast still echoed in Jan's ears. The shotgun had been so close, it might as well have been a cannon in the narrow space between the buildings. So Jan had marshaled his will and made do with maddeningly few gulps. Even now, it was all he could do to deny his inner demon, which rebelled at the abandonment of vitae. With each step and the increased distance it brought from the broken vessel that was Blaine, though, Jan's mastery over the ravenous Beast grew stronger.

Bell was nowhere to be seen. While Jan was trying to regain his bearings so he could begin limping back to the inn, the roar of an engine was growing dangerously close. He edged back into the shadows again, but the motorcycle screeched around the corner. Jan froze—he had not recouped enough strength to fight or even to flee—then saw that the rider, thankfully, was Bell. The Brujah came to an abrupt stop next to Jan.

"Get on."

Painfully, Jan climbed onto the motorcycle. "I have to see the prince," he started to explain. "The police—"

"Already taken care of," Bell said. He gunned the engine and they were off.

Monday, 19 July 1999, 4:36 AM
Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

Jan closed the double doors lightly, as if concerned that the soft click of the latch could somehow interrupt the muffled screams on the far side. He tried to forget that the bedroom, one of three off the main living area, existed at all. Certain unpleasantries could not be delayed, and currently he had no time for personal infirmities, physical or moral.

The carpet in Prince Garlotte's suite seemed unusually thick. Jan feared he might sink into it and be lost forever. Or perhaps it was merely his legs that threatened to give way with each step. Not since the night of his Embrace could he remember ever having felt so weak, so bone weary. He'd stumbled getting off Theo Bell's motorcycle. *I shouldn't have thrown away the crutch*, Jan had thought. He'd discarded it during the ride to the inn. His senses reeling with the heady taste of vitae lingering in his mouth, he'd misjudged the extent of his recovery. Kindred blood was powerful, but he'd taken in relatively little. He would need more blood for his wounds to heal completely.

At the moment, however, he was having difficulty navigating among the exquisite furniture in the living room. Similarly, less than an hour ago as he'd staggered in a rear entrance of the inn, he'd had difficulty concentrating even enough to convince the mortal night manager—*assistant* night manager—to do what Jan needed him to do.

But now the deed was done. Or at least it was being done. As it had been countless times before, albeit Jan's current arrangements were rather clumsy and heavy-handed. He'd had little choice. He'd made the necessary call to Amsterdam as soon as he'd entered the suite, but he didn't dare delay rejuvenation until his new staff arrived that night. Odds were that he would have been fine, that no new danger would have threatened him in the meantime. But Jan was determined to make sure, rather than to trust the odds. He'd seen odds defied too many times. He'd done it himself.

The thought of his new staff brought to mind those who would no longer serve him—Herman, Ton, Roel. Their services would be missed. But only the loss of Marja stirred in him the faintest hint of remorse—which he quickly smothered. He'd witnessed the passing of too many years to dwell overly long on the death of any mortal.

An end table seemingly interposed itself where Jan was trying to step. He cracked his knee and cursed under his breath. He staggered onward. Between the various bullet wounds and his ankle, Jan was far from comfortable, but neither was he incapacitated. Or destroyed outright. He'd come out of the ambush by the Sabbat pack in better shape—that was, to say, with his head still attached to his torso—than he'd had a right to, considering his blunders.

I was so damned stupid!

As Jan limped across the living room and toward his own bedroom, shedding his bullet-riddled clothes and leaving them where they fell, he channeled his remaining energy away from invective and self-recrimination and to analysis of his mistakes. He'd made

two. First, he'd failed to consider Baltimore itself a war zone. The city was his base of operations, but it was not a command center tucked far away from the hostilities. There was no such place left on the East Coast. The Sabbat, with the inroads they'd made, had seen to that. All that remained were a few scattered enclaves of Camarilla resistance: Baltimore, Buffalo, parts of New York City, the Tremere chantry in the District of Columbia, Hartford.

My God, Jan thought. *How far we've fallen when Hartford is one of our places of power!*

The immensity of the task assigned him began, not for the first time, to overwhelm Jan. He was to wield the fractious elements of the Camarilla in the New World and prevent the Sabbat from gaining complete control of the East Coast, an undertaking that was already four-fifths accomplished.

Impossible.

Jan felt his resolve crumbling like an earthen damn eroded away over the years and pressed by the irresistible force of the ocean. He might plug a hole or two, or three, but did he possess enough fingers to make any real difference? Could he, or anyone, hold back the sea for long?

I must, he thought. *There is no alternative.* Hardestadt would allow no alternative.

Stripped naked, Jan made his way to the spacious lavatory. Ignoring the immense whirlpool tub, he climbed instead into the shower and turned the knob until the spray was scalding. The pinpricks of burning water stung the many bullet wounds, even partially healed over as they were. Jan welcomed the minor pain. It helped him focus his thoughts, enabled him to shunt aside the morbid defeatism that would be his doom, and concentrate again on his errors—errors he would be sure not to repeat.

It was true he had underestimated the danger in this city. He didn't fault himself, however, for the small retinue that he'd brought to the States. As he'd suspected it would be, the situation here was ticklish. Jan felt that he'd gained the upper hand over Victoria and the cooperation of Prince Garlotte—both for the time being, at least. Whether or not he could have accomplished those goals if he'd brought a small army of personal retainers, if he'd been perceived as some imperial figure come to accept his coronation, was arguable at best. The others might well have banded together against him, as they still might. But having now established himself as a leader of the Camarilla resistance, Jan would take that chance rather than skimp on security in the future.

The actual mistake, he realized, was not in his choice of retinue but in the decision to venture out into the city. The desire to get away from the Lord Baltimore Inn, to get away more specifically from Victoria, had been so strong. *And so I abandoned the one place in the city I knew to be safe haven—or relatively safe,* he corrected himself, remembering the reports of the destruction of Maria Chin, the initial Tremere representative to the "conference." Victoria had been involved in the attack on Chin as well, he recalled. The Tremere had been coming to meet Victoria. Jan filed away that thought for closer examination later.

His own second mistake, which had greatly compounded the first, was that, consumed by the considerable political and martial necessities, he'd neglected personal necessities. In particular, he'd allowed his strength to wane. He'd waited too long between feedings. The lapse was understandable but no more acceptable.

What will Hardestadt say if he finds out? Jan wondered, but he didn't really want to consider that possibility. His sire might feign indifference, but the inevitable offhand yet skillfully barbed comments would begin, and a thinly veiled word of censure from Hardestadt would pain Jan more than a stake through the heart. And that would be only the beginning. Jan might never know for certain if, through incompetence, he'd forfeited the favor of his sire, and if that incompetence was compounded by failure....

Jan had seen others of his brethren fall from grace. They might linger for decades, wondering, not knowing how significantly they'd offended their sire, but at some point, the vitae—the gift and the curse—was reclaimed. The end, Jan suspected, was not as bad as the years of doubt preceding it. He did not intend to find out.

There had been so much to do before and upon his arrival in Baltimore, so many individuals to be contacted in the space of a very few nights: Colchester, the Gangrel justicar Xaviar, the Giovanni in Boston, the various princes, agents in Chicago. All of those preparations, however, would be for naught if he, through carelessness or neglect, were destroyed. As it was, he had almost been too weak to prevail over the Sabbat assassins.

Not almost, he corrected himself. *I was too weak. If it weren't for Bell, I would be destroyed and Blaine would be walking about, instead of the other way around.*

Jan and Blaine had been acquaintances, if not friends, long ago. Jan didn't know what had led to the man's decision to abandon his clan in favor of becoming an *antitribu* among the Sabbat, and Jan didn't particularly care. Blaine had always been of a coarser weave. He was a social inferior even before turning traitor, and now he was destroyed. Case closed.

Theo Bell was a more pertinent enigma. He had rescued Jan, but that didn't explain why the Brujah was there in the first place. Coincidence? *Possible,* Jan thought, *but doubtful.* Coincidence, Jan had come to realize over the years, was generally the least likely explanation for any occurrence. There were always hidden plans behind the obvious schemes and often other forces behind the hidden plans. Jan was no stranger to the halls of Kindred power; his lineage had seen to that. But among his own machinations, he was often left ignorant of the designs of Hardestadt, he who was so close to the maneuverings of members of the Inner Circle. And at times, Jan had come to believe that other, more mysterious powers were pulling strings—strings that even venerable Hardestadt, though he might know of their existence, could not control.

Old wives' tales, Jan chided himself. *Almost as fanciful as stories of the Antediluvians.* The elders of the Camarilla had wisely pronounced such stories to be fiction, yet so many Kindred failed to appreciate the mythic nature of the legends. Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, Caine and Abel—such myths addressed certain metaphysical themes, but among the masses of the less erudite, many took the stories as history.

Jan paused in his rumination. Something smooth pressed against his face. White tile. He was leaning forward against the wall of the tiled shower, much of his weight supported by his face as his mind wandered. Jan pushed himself upright, turned off the water. He'd neglected to close the shower door, and a pool of tepid water had spread across the floor. Steam hung thick and heavy in the air, obscuring the far side of the room. Jan stepped carefully as he walked across the water into nothingness.

Billows of steam fled before him when he opened the door into the bedroom. He grabbed one of the plush towels from the bathroom and dried himself, slowly, luxuriously.

The air conditioner was on high, and the sharp chill made his skin draw tight after the steam from the shower. He banished all extraneous thought. His mind and body were too tired. Wandering thoughts were a waste of time and symptomatic of a lack of discipline. Methodically he inspected each inch of his body, noted each bullet wound and estimated how much blood would be required to heal it. He tested his weight on his ankle, only briefly, before deciding that substantial repair would have to wait for another night. But he would not continue in this weakened state. Not even for another hour.

A great lethargy pulled at him, above and beyond the weariness brought on by his injuries. Outside, the sun would soon rise. Heavy shields were drawn across all the windows in the suite, but still Jan knew. He forced himself to disregard the lullaby of dawn and, with deliberate motions, dressed in loose, gray satin garments that would shortly serve as pajamas. He moved barefoot into the living room, where a disheveled man—his nametag read *Jeffrey Taylor*—sat with his face in his hands.

Jan moved closer, stood over the man whose inn uniform seemed an out-of-place prop. The assistant night manager—any employee of this inn, for that matter—normally displayed a sunny disposition for guests, but this man sobbed and dug the tips of his fingers into his face and scalp. Jan noticed again the thick comfort of the elegant carpet against the skin of his ever-cold feet. His senses had jumped into the hyper-aware state that accompanied the expectation of feeding.

"Jeffrey," said Jan quietly. The man looked up only reluctantly. His eyes, bloodshot pools, reflected the anguish that wracked his body and soul. Jan's voice, though, soothed the man slightly. "Jeffrey, what is her name?"

He opened his mouth, but a new spasm of sobbing took him before he could speak. Jan waited patiently, allowing his comforting presence to tame the man's hysteria.

"Jeffrey?"

"Her name is... Estelle," he managed to choke out.

Estelle. Jan held the name in his mind. It would make his task easier, though knowing her name caused him unease as well. *Estelle*. She was now that much more of a person. Her name was one more facet to the generic desk attendant. *Estelle*.

"Jeffrey," Jan placed his hand on the man's forehead, "Estelle is working a double shift. She will not be going home. Call whomever needs to know." Jan paused, waited for the instructions to take hold, but did not release the assistant night manager.

"You do not feel well, Jeffrey. Go home. Remember none of this. Do you understand?"

Jeffrey nodded weakly. He took a deep breath and stood. "Is... is there anything else I can help you with, Mr. Pieterzoon?"

"No. Thank you, Jeffrey." Jan placed his hand on Jeffrey's cheek. "Take care of yourself."

"Yes. I... I will." He took another deep breath and moved to the door, a thick fog clearing only slowly from his mind. "Thank you, Mr. Pieterzoon." Jan allowed thoughts of the mortal to drift away. Jeffrey Taylor would make the phone call and then go home. He would be fine by tomorrow night, except never again would he be comfortable in the presence of a certain front-desk attendant. Around her, he would experience an unsettling sense of guilt—for what, he'd have no idea. He would avoid her, and when he couldn't avoid her, he'd deal with the discomfort. But he would live.

Jan turned and strode slowly, purposefully, to the double doors he'd attempted, less than an hour ago, to pretend did not exist. He turned the knob and stepped into the bedroom.

Estelle.

She lay crumpled on the bed, her small body dwarfed by the king-sized expanse. The silk necktie, a makeshift gag, was wet with her saliva and tears. Her hands were tied behind her, her clothes torn aside. She cried quietly into the bedspread.

Estelle.

Jan forced himself to look at her, not to avert his eyes. *You are the cause of this*, he told himself. *Make no mistake.* He was speaking to her before he reached the bed, before he knelt gently at her side. "Estelle..."

He untied her wrists, noticed the abrasions from her struggle against the drapery cords. "Estelle," he shushed her sobs, as he removed the tie from her mouth. She sucked in air, pressed her face against Jan's knee. He was her protector, her salvation. His voice was a salve to her injury. "Estelle, it's not your fault."

It's my fault, he knew, but he smothered the guilt in pity. He straightened her clothing while she clung whimpering to his arm—eased her skirt back into place, hooked her brassiere, buttoned what buttons had not been ripped from her shirt. He pretended that he was her rescuer—as she believed—rather than the inhuman beast that had set all this in motion. He held her head against his chest, stroked her hair. He wished that her tears plastering his shirt against his skin were, instead, a knife that could carve out his black heart. In a way, they were.

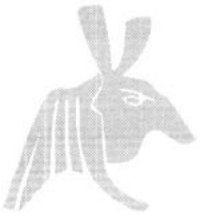
Jan preferred to come along after the fact—*long* after the fact. Then the lion's share of the harm was already done, and he merely took advantage in his own, lesser way. But circumstances could be cruel. There was not always the luxury of finding a Marja or a Roel. The shelters, many of which Jan supported financially, were not always convenient. Sometimes he had to start from scratch, and he could not hide from himself the monster he'd become.

"Estelle," he whispered again, soothing her even as he pierced the flesh of her neck. *No,* he told himself, as he thought of the rapists, *I am no better.* In the best of cases, he took advantage of the victim; in the worst of cases, such as tonight, he created the victim.

I am no better.

Estelle pressed against him like a frightened child and slept. Her racing heart, a ceaseless accusation, hammered in his ears. Jan could feel the pull of the sun beyond the light-sealed walls, but it was many hours before he surrendered to the day.

KR



Monday, 19 July 1999, 11:54 PM
(2:24 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
La Rotisserie, the Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Elizabeth toyed with the last mouthfuls of her coffee. It had been a long evening, full of visits from Hesha's endless stream of acquaintances. Seven times Agnes's name had come up—seven times Elizabeth had had to visit the ladies' room and flutter convincingly to stall, sink or mirror. The smartly dressed, middle-aged attendant had politely, pointedly, refrained from comment. It would take little acting now to convince the woman that the vain, crazy American tourist was ill, as well.

Liz watched her companion with concern. These two nights—in public—Hesha had been as attentive and charming as when she first met him. He smiled, he laughed with her, his hand reached occasionally for hers… but his eyes were cold. She thought, finally, that she was learning to read him behind the mask. Under the surface, there was not, so far, a tender word for her, nor a sign of the soft and honest glance she hoped for. He was… worried?

Hesha considered, carefully, the personality of his contact. Michel was confident, skillful and reliable. The Tremere had said that his magecraft would yield results by Sunday night. He had meant this, and Hesha, remembering their efforts together in the Ottoman Empire, had believed it. It might be that the ritual had taken longer than the cocky old boy had anticipated. But Sunday had gone, Monday would come to its end in mere minutes, and there was not only no sign of the warlock, there was no word. It might be that Michel was so new to town that any messenger was risky. But Hesha found it hard to believe that the wily ancient had so few resources.

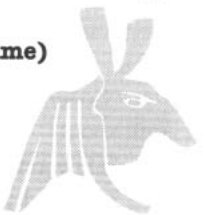
The restaurant staff were closing the restaurant down around them, and his reverie ended.

"Elizabeth," he said quietly, touching her hand. She looked up at him, waiting for instructions. She was tired; they had been on display here for nearly four hours. She played the part very well, but the strain showed. For an instant, the memory of real smiles on her face came to him, and he noticed what she was wearing —truly noticed—for the first time. Tonight Janet had dressed the girl in strapless, wine-red silk and the Asp had bought a shawl from the bazaars to cover Elizabeth's shoulders. It was a figured brocade of blood-red and jet-black. Hesha began to suspect his servants of exercising their sense of humor at the girl's expense.

"We are leaving," he said. He held her chair and helped her to her feet. With downcast eyes she collected her bag and shawl, and Hesha offered his arm to escort her. "Fortunately, the rain has stopped for now. We can have dessert on the terrace and gain a little more time."

She kept her chin up, but her shoulders sagged slightly. She leaned a fraction of her weight on his strong arm, and together they set out for the damp, steamy darkness of the café by the pool.

Tuesday, 20 July 1999, 2:16 AM
(Monday, 19 July 1999. 4:46 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Five Star Market, Kidderpore
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



Hesha, dressed in sopping-wet, cheap clothes and leaning heavily on his cane, staggered uneasily down the narrow paths of the bazaar. His retainers would not have recognized him: a dissipated, surly mask hid his face from mortal eyes, his hands were gnarled with disease, and he went barefoot through the dirty, stagnating water beginning to gather in the low places of Calcutta. At a rundown, half-height, hole-in-the-wall of a shop, he drew to a halt and wavered back and forth. Hesha looked up at the proprietor. He was a man of fifty, skinny, wizened and bright-eyed; then he… it… was a near-skeletal creature covered in drooping gray flesh that looked more like wasps' nests than skin.

"All right. I see you, you see me," said a voice like a chainsaw in offal. "What do you want?"

"Information."

"Hah. Well. I have a good deal of that in stock," said the thing sitting in the doorway. "What did you have in mind, old Nag?"

"First, tell me: Are we enemies?"

"I know you, old Nag, and I heard your name in the gutter, but I don't know you that well." The Nosferatu shifted slightly in his seat. "Is there a reason we should be?"

Hesha shook his head. "None that I know of. I have always regarded your people as the only allies worth having, but I fear your kinsmen have changed their minds toward me." He paused. "I do not look for vendetta, I look for help from you. Do you hear any news from Bombay?"

"I may."

"Bombay can speak for me, if they will. I did them a service some years back."

The gray creature gazed down on him and slowly spoke. "I'll trade you all I know about your status with my clansmen for all the reasons you think we're on the outs with you."

"Done."

"I'd never heard of you before your visit to the Haunted House." Hesha's face darkened; the Nosferatu held up a crumbling hand. "I know, I know, sounds like a cheap trade. But on my oath, I'll make inquiries and find out whether there's trouble, and why, and give you the information under truce. If we're foes, I warn you first, all right?"

"Now the deal is in my favor, I think."

"No, no, no. I am dying of curiosity. There's a story behind this, I'm sure."

"Your people pressed an invitation on me. To a party in Atlanta, under so-called Elysium. They *insisted*. I had other business; I sent my lieutenant. The party was a death-trap, my cousin was killed in it, and I," admitted Hesha reluctantly, "do not yet know whether your kin meant to catch me in it. There has been no word, one way or the other."

Silence passed heavily between them. The noise of the bazaar at night, the rain on tin roofs, and the shouts and music from the red-light district in the next street surrounded them. The gray creature rustled, then cranked out the question:

"So what's the thing you really want? That we had to settle up truce even to start to talk about?"

"Do you know of a young man named Michel?"

"Wet-behind-the-ears warlock? What about him?"

"We had an appointment. He failed to arrive. I don't care to wait pointlessly; I also feel that it is... unlike him to be less than punctual. I am worried that someone may be interfering with him, and thereby interfering with *me*. I want to find him—or find out what happened to him," Hesha finished blackly. "Now tell me," he said in more pleasant tones, "what can I do for you in return?"

"I hear that you're good at bringing things through customs. I need merchandise." Hesha raised an eyebrow. "Banned books, underground newspapers, dirty magazines, that sort of thing," the monster rattled. "I peddle my papers to the kine as well, brother Nag."

The Setite smiled. "I'm conducting business out of the Oberoi Grand. Bring a list with you and I'll have my people ship you as many as you can stock; enough leeches are seeking those kinds of services that you will blend in beautifully."

Monday, 19 July 1999, 10:16 PM
Governor's Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

"Really, Alexander, I can't see why you refuse me this!" Victoria was well beyond pouting and foot-stomping and was working herself into a full-fledged rage. A single lock of her perfect, dark-brown hair fell out of place across her forehead. She brushed it aside irritably.

Prince Garlotte stood and watched her tantrum brewing. His childe, Isaac, likewise stood—Victoria had not offered them a seat, though, in the larger sense, she was the guest. The young sheriff looked on and tried not to squirm as the Toreador insulted his sire. For what else could it be but an insult to give the prince an ultimatum and then spurn his hospitality when he refused to comply? Two of Gainesmil's underlings scurried about packing Victoria's belongings—belongings that, almost to the last gown, were gifts from the prince. Added insult.

"You know," said Garlotte, "how it pains me to refuse you anything, my love."

"Then don't refuse me," she snapped.

"Ah, Victoria." The prince reached out to lay a hand on her arm, but she withdrew, gracefully yet pointedly, from his reach. He watched her brush the lock of hair away from her face again. *How perfectly you've choreographed it all, Victoria,* he thought, *down to the last curl. My God, she's lovely with that fire in her eyes!* As she turned her back to him, Garlotte noticed Isaac cringing at the slight, but the prince was too captivated by the curve of Victoria's spine, the perfect flare of her hips, to be insulted.

She faced the prince again and began to speak, but paused and looked at Isaac, as she had earlier.

"I assure you," said Garlotte, "you may speak freely before Isaac. He is the model of discretion." The prince noted with pride as his childe very nearly succeeded in disguising a flinch. *He's learning. Give him a few more decades…*

"My most earnest desire is to protect you, my prince," she said at last, a forced calm blunting her rage.

"Of course it is, my dear."

Victoria planted her fists on her hips. "So I tell you again: You must send Jan away."

"And I ask you again," said the prince. "Why?"

Victoria's brief show of patience came to an abrupt end. She flashed a glare at Garlotte and Isaac that would have brought a mortal to his knees. As it was, Isaac took a step back.

"He plots to take your city."

Garlotte let her accusation linger between them… before he dismissed it. "But Isaac and I have just come from inspecting some of the city's defenses—manned by Kindred newly arrived from Chicago, as a favor to Jan."

"*Not* as a favor to Jan," Victoria corrected the prince. "As a favor to his bloodthirsty sire."

"Who among us is *not* bloodthirsty?" Garlotte asked in feigned innocence.

Victoria, exasperated, turned toward the open French doors and the balcony. "Don't be dense, Alexander. Certainly he protects the physical security of the city. Another Sabbat pit is of no value to him. He will maneuver you from power."

"He has told you this?" Garlotte asked her.

Victoria ignored the prince's preposterous suggestion and turned her wrath instead upon the two skulking Toreador who carted load after load of her finery out of the inn. "Leave us! I came to this city penniless. I can do without whatever is left. Wait for me at the truck."

As the two lesser Toreador scampered away, Garlotte could not deny two implications of their presence, one for each underling. First, Gainesmil had chosen sides in this matter, or at the very least he'd ingratiated himself to Victoria. *But can I begrudge him the desire to be close to her?* Garlotte wondered. He pondered the question for a few seconds before reaching a conclusion: *Absolutely*. Gainesmil would be brought to heel. Garlotte would make sure that the architect came to see the error of his ways.

Second, considering that the movers had arrived almost simultaneously with Garlotte and Isaac, Victoria must have held out little or no hope that she would sway the prince. *But why create an open break?* Garlotte wondered as he stroked his dark beard. *Is she playing to my sense of chivalry? Does she expect I'll try to win her back?* He had no conclusive evidence, but of one thing the prince was certain: Even Victoria's most capricious whim was driven by devious, inscrutable purpose. And tonight that purpose pulled her away from him.

"I cannot remain your guest and watch you destroyed," Victoria said.

Garlotte said nothing. He merely gazed at her—at the strong and gracious lines of her face, the weave of the white sweater as it lay upon her breasts, the golden locket that he had given her.

I can let her go, the prince told himself, and though it was true, the fact that he could did not mean that he *wanted* to do so.

"The conference won't stand for his heavy-handed ways," Victoria continued. "With time for a little reflection before the next meeting, they'll see him for the usurper he is."

With a little reflection and a bit of persuasion... Garlotte interpreted her comment, but he had not overlooked the potential threat of the displaced masses. "There is no more conference."

Victoria glared at him, the challenge obvious in her eyes.

Did she really think I'd allow the rabble to influence policy once some semblance of stability was restored? Garlotte wondered. Had he overestimated Victoria, or was her apparent outrage merely another feint?

"The majority of refugees have been assigned duties upholding the city's defenses," he explained. "There is no longer any need to consult them in matters of planning. *They*, Victoria, realize that a strong city, shelter against the Sabbat, is the most they should hope for. They did not enjoy free rein in their old cities. Nor should they expect it here."

"I see." Victoria's hand rose slowly to the locket. Her gaze shifted and came to rest on Isaac. For a long moment she studied him, but then her interest in him seemed to dissipate instantly.

"But there's no need for you to leave," Garlotte suggested.

Victoria turned back to Garlotte. She tugged at the locket with just enough force that the thin chain tore apart behind her neck. As if to punctuate her rejection of Garlotte, she set locket and chain on the table before him, then left without another word.

Prince Garlotte closed his eyes and savored the last traces of her lingering scent. He wanted to imprint the memory of her on his mind's eye, so that she would ever be there beside him. For a fleeting moment, the world receded, and there was only she and he, until...

"Should I follow her?" Isaac's voice shattered the illusion.

Garlotte fought down the deep growl that began in his belly. "Follow her? To Gainesmil's haven? I believe I know where to find it." The prince's tone precluded further questions.

He took his late wife's locket, that piece of jewelry that had until moments ago rested against Victoria's chest, from the table. The chain could be repaired easily enough. Garlotte's eyebrow rose with interest, however, when he opened the locket and found the shriveled tongue resting within.



Monday, 19 July 1999, 10:40 PM
West Lombard Street
Baltimore, Maryland

I determine my own destiny, Victoria reassured herself. The limousine that Gainesmil had sent carried her gently over the city streets and followed behind the truck full of her possessions. Her hand strayed to her throat, to the space where the chain no longer rested. She'd given it back to Garlotte, and along with it the memento of her time with the fiend Elford in Atlanta.

They don't think I mean business. Alexander, Jan, Theo Bell, Vitel, the new Tremere witch—none of them took Victoria seriously. Elford had made that same mistake. His gnarled tongue was a warning. *Let Garlotte understand, if he has eyes to see,* she thought, then, *He won't understand. Not until it's too late.*

The prince was not wrong to be suspicious of Victoria, but if he trusted Jan, he was a fool. And he would suffer the consequences. Either Jan would depose Garlotte, or Victoria might be driven to it herself. But that would be many weeks or months down the road. Tonight, she had set a more immediate gambit in motion. Garlotte might think that he could do without her company, but let him try. Then add to that another factor: Without Victoria actively opposing Jan, Garlotte would have much less reason to support his clanmate. She had planted the seed in the prince's mind that Jan was a threat. Garlotte would also likely blame Jan's presence for the estrangement between herself and the prince.

We'll see how long before cracks form in the Ventrue good-old-boys network, she thought.

But it wasn't Garlotte, or even Jan, that Victoria feared. She still could not shake the feeling that she was merely playing an assigned role in this drama. That was her greatest and constant fear, and she'd taken steps, again, to see that it was not borne out.

He brought his childe. The prince had responded to Victoria's summons—her *invitation,* rather—but he had brought Isaac with him. So Victoria had left. She had aligned herself, to a certain degree at least, against the prince. Had he come alone, she would have allowed herself to be talked into staying. She would have sent Gainesmil's underlings away without her in the end. She would have abandoned this latest plan. She was determined, above all else, that no elder being would out-guess her. Not every time.

Yet the feeling that she sleepwalked through someone else's dream clung to her like a fever, as it had increasingly since Atlanta. As it had since her time in the clutches of the vile Tzimisce. Now Victoria's fingers brushed the tiny imperfection on her jaw—the image of a serpent swallowing its own tail—which her makeup seemed capable of hiding for only so long.

I determine my own destiny, she told herself, over and over again, as the limousine passed farther into the night.

Monday, 19 July 1999, 10:40 PM
Governor's Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

Prince Garlotte already had sent Isaac away to inspect more of the city's defenses. Now the prince reclined on the couch and pretended that Victoria was still there. It was much easier without his childe babbling on about nothing. Garlotte imagined that the impression of her body was still warm—the way her body had been warm that night on the ship—on the cushions beneath him or on the bed in the other room. He tried to convince himself that he could still catch a hint of her fragrance. He considered keeping the belongings she'd left behind—aside from the decomposing tongue on the coffee table, of course—and going on as if she resided permanently in his inn. He could seal the suite, so no one would ever disturb the space she had inhabited.

My God, he sighed. He had not anticipated the ache that had gripped him after not even a full hour of her absence. It wasn't that he had to be with her every moment. Over the past few weeks, in fact, he'd spent relatively little time in her actual presence. To know that he *could* be with her, that she was at his beck and call, was enough; to know that he could *not* see her, that she would turn him away… that might well drive him to distraction.

Ah, well, he tried to resign himself, *I might need a bit of distraction.*

"What do you think?" Garlotte said to the empty room.

"I was waiting for her to flash some titty," came the reply. "I figure she's enough woman for you and junior—and me, I'm okay with watching."

Garlotte sat up and faced the Nosferatu. Colchester rubbed his hands together and stared into the distance, as if replaying in his mind what hadn't happened. "I would think," the prince admonished him, "that you'd have tired of playing peeping tom by now."

Colchester wheezed and… grinned? It was hard to tell with the fangs jutting through his lip. "Mostly, yeah. But she's enough to put starch back in your collar."

Garlotte frowned. He did not care to hear Victoria spoken of in so coarse a manner. Colchester apparently realized his mistake; his manner sobered rather abruptly.

Garlotte pressed on. "And she and Pieterzoon have not… *encountered* one another again since what you reported two nights ago?"

"That's right."

Colchester's perverse glee having faded, Garlotte could read nothing at all in the solid black eyes, the cratered face. *I would have done better not to have put him on his guard,* the prince thought, but the Nosferatu's lechery grated so, to an irrational extent. *Some matters,* Garlotte decided, reaffirming his own actions, *aren't meant to be rational.*

part three:
storm fronts

From Tuesday, 20 July 1999
to Saturday, 24 July 1999



Tuesday, 20 July 1999, 5:01 AM
Along the Hudson River
Greene County, New York

Ramona, Jen and Darnell had left New York City two nights ago. The first night they'd covered little ground. Ramona had stolen a map from a convenience store, and they'd found a condemned tenement where they'd weathered out the day.

The second night they'd headed north, toward Hayesburg. It was slow going initially. Sabbat killers seemed to lurk in every shadow. Even Darnell was jumpy. Ramona watched, to no effect, for signs of both the Sabbat and the mysterious stranger, who carried an air of danger but had also made possible their escape. Again, the three sought out an abandoned building to pass the day in relative safety.

Tonight, however, they were much farther north and without shelter as the first pink and orange stains of morning began to spread above the horizon. Ramona and the others were on the outskirts of one of the small towns sprinkled along the Hudson River, and there was no obvious choice for a temporary haven.

"Any luck?" Ramona asked Darnell, who had just made a third sweep of the town. "Burned-out building?"

"Nothin' with a basement," he growled.

Jen picked obsessively at her fingernails and sat in anxious silence.

"Why you worried about the sun?" Darnell taunted her. "You ain't no vampire, remember?"

Ramona blocked out their bickering. She didn't have time for it. The three, along with their other companion, Eddie, had crossed much of the country in a light-sealed van—that had been Eddie's idea—and had never lacked for a place to spend the day. Maybe, Ramona thought, they should've held on to the van longer, or gotten another. But more and more, as the weeks had passed, she'd hated being cooped up inside a vehicle of any type. The two nights of travel on foot from the city had been long, but they'd allowed Ramona and the others to be active. It would've been worse being shut inside a car, wondering if every other car that appeared carried a Sabbat hit squad. Besides, with their preternatural physical capabilities, the three had made good time.

A car's no good, Ramona decided. The night was for exploring, for smelling the breeze, for feeling the ground beneath her feet.

She looked down at the clawed extremities that her feet had become—both Darnell and Jen had noticed, she was sure, but both had had the good sense not to question her—and she dug her toes into the soil. Cool comfort enveloped her feet, as if she partook of a natural kinship with the earth itself. She dug a bit deeper, then, startlingly, her feet began gradually to sink into the ground. Unexplained and unexpected as it was, it felt right somehow; it seemed what she was meant for.

Words of her lost mortal faith came to her mind—*Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.*

"Come here," she enjoined her friends.

Perplexed, they did so, and each took the hand that Ramona held out.

"Close your eyes. Don't think about anything," she told them.

Through her fingertips, Ramona could sense the blood that lay beneath the undead flesh she grasped. She could feel the unease with which Darnell held her hand, and the tension in Jen's every muscle. But Ramona could also feel them through the soil beneath their feet. She felt the coolness, the kinship of the earth, and, instinctively, she let that kinship spread to them. They began to slip into her trance without realizing, and the earth welcomed them also.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

"What are you—" Jen began to protest weakly beneath the weight of the trance, but Ramona gripped her hand fiercely and was met with silence.

The chill began to spread upward from her feet through her legs. She could tell somehow that the others felt it too. Abdomen, torso, were accepted by the earth. Ramona stretched out her will to calm Jen. Darnell accepted this embrace passively, if not comfortably. Their bodies sank into the ground, melded with the soil to which they should already have returned permanently.

Ramona imagined the first rays of the sun breaking through the leaves. In her mind, the leaves burst into flame. They joined the smoldering and burning of her flesh as the light touched her face. Was she burning? She had sunk too deeply into the stupor of the dead to know, to care. Regardless, the earth drank her in, extinguished the fire, encompassed every fiber of her being.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Darkness. Cold. Safety. Oblivion.



Tuesday, 20 July 1999, 9:07 PM
Along the Hudson River
Greene County, New York

When Ramona opened her eyes, night had fallen. The vengeful sun was again banished until the next morning. She lay on the ground in a shallow depression, as did Jen and Darnell on either side of her. The other two stirred, blinked awake as if aroused from a dream. Ramona lay still, savoring the coolness, the same chill that permeated her flesh.

I could stay there, she knew suddenly. *I could sink deep into the ground and not come back.* The thought was appealing. But what of her friends? What of Zhavon?

Jen sat and stared ahead blankly. Darnell brushed the dirt from his clothes. Neither spoke. They avoided Ramona's gaze.

Finally, Jen, her face tinged with fear, turned to Ramona. "How—"

Darnell scrambled to his feet, smacked Jen across the back of the head. "Shut up! And you—" He turned his attention and a long, accusing finger to Ramona. "Don't you *ever* do that to me again!" Then he whirled and stomped off toward the town.

Jen, too confused to be angry with Darnell, still watched Ramona like a sparrow watches the hawk.

"It just happened," Ramona answered the question Jen had started to ask. "It just happened."

She climbed to her feet and started in the direction Darnell had gone. After a moment, she heard Jen following as well.

"I couldn't stop it," said Jen from behind.

"If you had, the sun would've got you," Ramona growled.

She didn't understand everything that was happening. How could she explain it to them if they couldn't *feel* it?

Wednesday, 21 July 1999, 11:24 PM (1:54 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Ming Court Restaurant, the Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Michel came in through the front door, exchanged words with the maître d', and started toward Hesha's table. He was dressed well, though his trouser cuffs were darkened with water and mud. Almost naturally, he threaded his way through the crowd of tables and diners—but Hesha, sensitive to the subtlest detail, caught the unnatural: Michel was nervous, almost frightened. The panicky gait put the Setite on edge.

"Mr. Ruhadze?" said the young man, hopefully.

Hesha stood. "Michel. Have a seat. Can I get you anything?" The Tremere shook his head, and the millionaire waved the waiters away imperiously. "Allow me to introduce you—Elizabeth, may I present Michel Singh. His family runs an excellent investment firm in Bombay; they have turned the younger generation loose to shine in Calcutta. Michel, this is Elizabeth Dimitros, an expert on antiques and antiquities. I was fortunate enough to convince Rutherford House to lend her to me for this trip—you know Hermione Rutherford, perhaps?"

"I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure," mumbled the bashful boy in the third chair.

"So pleased to make your acquaintance, Michel," Elizabeth rang in, sparklingly.

Michel looked up and made an effort. "Oh, certainly, certainly. I'm charmed, Ms. Dimitros—Elizabeth," he amended, as she opened her mouth to suggest it. For a moment, the whole table smiled.

"Now," said Liz, as if searching her memory, "we were...oh, of course. Michel, I feel terrible running out just as we've met, but I was about to...ah..." she gestured gracefully toward the ladies' room, "powder my nose. Will you excuse me for a moment, gentlemen?"

As soon as the woman was out of earshot, Michel leaned in and began speaking. "I've been followed. I need your help."

Hesha stood immediately. "Come with me." His hands strayed to pockets—he hit the emergency code on the phone, readied weapons—and he maneuvered to put himself between the mass of the room and his companion. Weak. Michel looked tired and hunted, but his boy's face was haggard and, above all, *weak*.

All this time, Michel talked. "I found what you're looking for, of course. That's why they're here. You were wrong, Hesha—I didn't think I'd live to see it, but you were dead wrong. When the Eye is active, it doesn't draw on Calcutta for power. Calcutta sends power out to it."

Hesha steered the boy toward the kitchen door for safety. The service elevator...fewer crowds...fewer witnesses...they reached the wall, and with half the angles of attack covered, Hesha permitted himself to scan the room, then looked down at Michel in surprise. Michel had lost control—and consciousness—and the print of a small and bloody palm had appeared on his cheek.

Hesha snatched at the air where the invisible hand had rested. Nothing. He forced his eyes to find the stalker...and failed. He grabbed Michel by the waist and shoulders but found the warlock weighed down by another, unseen body. Hesha kept one hand on his contact's shoulders—pulled him up, down, sideways—and discovered the opposing force moved too fast for him. Wounds appeared

on the boy's skin—double punctures—and the Setite, frustrated, lifted Michel's helpless body over his head. He spun and began running for the doors.

In the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the thing.

She was tiny—no more than eight years old, had she been living—naked as a frog and twice as fast as dragonflies. Her hair had been hacked off near the roots, her skin was dark, shading to ebon black at the fingertips and toes—and her tiny, delicate jaws were clamped on Michel's dangling arm.

In the moment before she knew she had been seen, Hesha seized her by the neck and broke her. The miniature assassin dropped off and ran. Her steps faltered, her head rocked from side to side, but she twisted through the rising crowds faster than the Setite could follow.

Hesha reached the front door, pushed his way past the confused hotel staff, and found Thompson waiting for him on the other side. Without a word, he thrust Michel's unresisting carcass into the bodyguard's arms and dashed after the child.

Elizabeth emerged from the lounge just in time to see him run past her. She followed without thinking, the emergency tone shrilling from her phone. He was in trouble. She ran and fought to keep him in sight.

Outside, the monsoon rains poured down. The streets were ankle-deep in water; running feet threw knee-high spray that glittered in the city lights. Over the flood, there was a small shadow—Hesha trailed that. The Assamite could move faster than he, but she couldn't keep it up forever, and his legs were long. If he could keep her in sight…. So long as she stayed on the streets, there would be the splashing footsteps. Hesha swore. The imp's trail turned west, down a narrow alley. He could follow her through that, but her destination must be the park—the Maidan—poorly lit, grassy, spotted with trees and huge. He called on Set to lend him speed and kept running.

Elizabeth dove down the dark alley. Hesha was only a silhouette in the downpour before her; there were lights on the next street, at least. She gathered up her skirts, cursed the heavy, waterlogged satin, and leapt over the trash and rats. Out, and up the street, and down another crazy lane, across a boulevard, through traffic—and into a morass of vegetation and mud. Hesha was still just visible, heading for a tangled mess of trees, across a triangle of water. Elizabeth kicked her shoes off and sped after him. Her stockings struck gravel and tore, her bare feet hit the mud, and she fell sideways into the pool. When she looked up, Hesha was gone. Thunder rolled across the commons, and she limped painfully out of the dirty water.

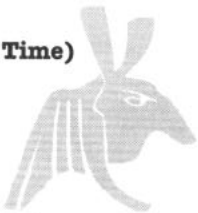
The Setite, blinded by the rain and whipping branches, followed the scent of Michel's blood through the trees. On the other side of the thin stand, he caught sight of the girl again. He sprinted, closed the yards she'd won in the wood, and began to close the gap.

Lightning struck.

Hesha shrieked at the flash. His eyes shut down and burned in their sockets, his world blanked away, and the Beast took him running. The curse drove him blindly, colliding into trees, into stones, into bodies, and the life they found the Beast took with them. In control of himself at last, utterly sightless, he fell to four limbs for safety, slipped and ended in a puddle. Burrowing into the mud, pressing his raw-red lids into the cool water, he waited, face down, for the pain to fade, praying to Set to intercede against the light.

From far away, he heard a high, chiming laugh and, through the ground, footsteps only slightly heavier than the rain pelted away.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 2:48 AM
(Wednesday, 21 July 1999, 5:18 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



"Don't bother, Ron. They're nothing." Elizabeth pulled her scratched feet out of the old cop's hands. She tucked her bare legs back under the wreckage of her dress—brass-green watered satin, it had been; crusty, mud-yellow, spoiled and stiff now—and slumped wearily over the sofa's arm.

"Nothing, hell. There's plague rats on the Maidan. Right foot, Liz. And eat your breakfast."

Time crawled by. Elizabeth ate little. Thompson tended the girl's left foot. Both of them watched their phones—as if watching would help—and waited. The Asp, on his phone, conducted short, whispered, coded conversations with hushed voices in other parts of the city. Twice, Thompson took calls: Janet Lindbergh, worried; Pauline Miles, offering the information that Kettridge had left Philadelphia for Albany.

"Thompson," Elizabeth began cautiously, "does he *have* to be in by dawn?"

Ron lowered his eyes. "Of course not. He's supposed to check in. But he makes the rules; he can break them. Go take a shower, Liz. Hot water'll make your feet heal faster." He helped her up and propelled her toward her room.

Thompson and the Asp stayed awake until they were sure, despite the clouds, that the sun had conquered the horizon. Without a word to each other, they sought out their beds. Sleep took hours to come.

Wednesday, 21 July 1999, 11:18 PM
(Thursday, 22 July 1999, 12:18 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Laffitte's
New Orleans, Louisiana

Jake sat down. The bar had a low ceiling and French doors, looking—as did all of New Orleans' buildings—as if it had been there for over a hundred years.

Of course, most of them had.

But Jake hadn't come to Laffitte's to wonder at its architecture. Nor had he come to suck down prodigious amounts of tourist-grade daiquiris like the "vampires" at the other tables. No, Jake had a personal matter on his mind.

He looked around the room, which teemed with gay, frivolous, wasted life. Weekenders in for an early debauch, locals who scammed the patrons for either cash or ass, frazzled bartenders and an enormous shit-sack of a man perched behind the piano, doing his best to sing songs that the bleary drunkards knew. Half of them were torch songs sped up to double-time and the other half were what counted as "oldies." Jake smiled at that thought. An "oldie" was a song recorded in the 1950s or '60s. He'd been around for forty years before that—what did that make him?

It didn't matter. None of the drinkers saw him, or cared if they did. To them, he was simply a boozy comrade-in-arms, crawling the bars for a good time and a cheap drink. He was no threat—have a drink on us!

No one at this bar had any idea what he was. Or what the woman he was here to meet was. Marcia Gibbert, fellow Kindred. She'd had a keen interest in New Orleans for the past few weeks, having arrived from—Anaheim?—just less than a month ago. Whenever she and Jake met, people thought they were a couple, a pair of eccentric, black, *nouveau-riche* lovers. The truth of the matter was that Marcia was looking for information on a five-thousand-year-old killer and that Jake was willing to profit from her deranged crusade. He didn't care about whatever it was that was bothering her; she had called it a family matter and left it at that. Jake understood. As a Brujah, he knew that some Kindred were quick to make judgments based upon one's lineage. He had her pegged for a Follower of Set. Maybe a Gangrel or even another Brujah. Possibly even Caitiff, but she didn't seem as grungy as most of the ones he'd met had been. Whatever; it didn't matter. She had cash, and it wasn't like Jake could hold down a day job. Maybe he could take the morbid tourists on a midnight tour of graveyards....

Marcia walked in, stooping below the low doorjamb. Peering through the smoke, she saw Jake, who waved her over to his table with an unmarked manila envelope in his hand. Suppressing the look of excitement that wanted to flash over her face, Marcia Gibbert calmly ordered a drink to keep up the charade and joined Jake at his table.

"You find something for me?" Marcia smiled. She knew Jake didn't have too much invested in her, but there was no reason not to be cordial.

Jake looked his guest over. She had broad features and fair skin, maybe even mulatto. And her eyes were blue, which was uncommon. Still, it wasn't his affair. He was here for money, so enough with the paranoia. "I found something you might like, yes. I'm afraid

it's not big on facts—it sounds like it was written by a drunk or an opium addict--but you might find some of it useful."

He pushed the envelope across the table, waiting to see her reaction. If she whisked it away or made an effort to hide it, maybe it'd be worth his time to follow her later and see what she was up to. Then again, if it was really a family affair as she had said, it might be the location of one of her clan's oldest Kindred which, while interesting, was certainly not something he'd want to see firsthand.

Marcia opened the envelope deliberately, unwinding the string slowly from around the clasp, and pulled out a sheaf of yellowed papers that had torn or softened around the edges. They had been written in an even, decorative hand, the ink damaged here and there by moisture or the acids in the paper.

I don't suppose Blind Jom had always been blind. He had the look of a man who'd earned it. That left eye of his, with the milky blue-white luster, and the right eye, vanished under a livid scar that touched his nose, made him a fright to look upon. I think I can even remember him with both eyes (or at least one), but as long as I can recall hailing him by name, I know I called him Blind Jom.

We had terribly good times, Blind Jom and I. Before I was born, he was the quartermaster or the sergeant or some such, but since losing his sight he took up living in the storm cellar underneath my mother's house. Mamma left me with him—she felt safe with him protecting me, I guess—during the day when she went to tea with her lady friends or took to town on errands. Blind Jom and I played at soldiers or explored the patch of forest near the house. Sometimes we threw rocks at the gators from the trees, but Blind Jom never seemed to enjoy that as much as I did. He said, "Don't spit at the Devil when he's in his own house."

To be fair, I should say that I was a nervous child, always sick or worried or sleeping, and prone to spells of prodigious energy. Mamma laughed, "You see ghosts! You see the children of the woods dancing under the moon!" When she put it so fancifully, I couldn't help but laugh along, hoping our mirth would keep the...things...I saw at bay. And for the most part, it did.

But the charms of laughter couldn't last forever. 'Long about my eighth birthday, I would sometimes wake to a peculiar sound beneath my room in the wee hours. It sounded alternately like a goat's scrabbling, a mad hen, or Blind Jom singing in church. I cried out for my mother, but the sounds would stop before she could attend me.

"Lord's sake, my son, you'd think the gators were come to take you away!" I knew these sounds weren't gators, though; gators sound like hogs, or Blind Jom when he's had too much wine. Mamma would always make them end, though, and I thought nothing of it when I rose each day thereafter.

Blind Jom showed signs of being tired as I got older, and he seemed to be careless with himself. Too many times, I would find cuts on his worn face or fingers torn and bleeding.

"Why you want to be so curious, boy; ain'tcha know curiosity killed the cat?

"I cut masself shaving," he'd answer, or, "I slammed my fingers in that demmed cellar door."

My nervousness had a certain tendency toward the clever—some might say I was precocious (though I've heard others call me fey). Before too long I noticed that the horrible sounds beneath my bed always preceded a new nick or blister on Blind Jom's frame. My interest piqued, I had to divine the truth.

"Blind Jom, was that you making all that racket under my room last night?" I asked innocently.

"Boy, you mind me and do it well," Blind Jom took a tone with me that I had never heard from him before. It was stern, demanding. It was a mode of speech I had never heard from my mother, whom Blind Jom said spoiled me, who doted or capered whimsically on my every word.

"That's Old Scratch underneath your floor, and you just keep to your covers when you hear him dancin' round."

I couldn't believe such a thing! I must confess it frightened me awfully. My mother lost her patience with me that night, as I refused to go to bed after numerous admonitions. She finally carried me to the bed and tucked me in herself, warning me that I'd have more to worry about than a simple spanking should I choose to flee the safety of the covers: She'd leave me for the gators in the swamps or the brownies in the woods.

She didn't have to worry. Not two minutes after she left my room, those noises started, and there was no way I was leaving my bunk. I called and called for her, but she figured I was in a spell or crying wolf and knew better than to heed my summons.

I don't know how long it went on, but after what must have been hours of bed-wetting terror, it was morning. I said nothing at breakfast that day, and my mother looked at me curiously, but went about her errands as normal.

"Blind Jom," I asked in awe, noting a pronounced limp in his gait, "what was all that commotion underneath my floor last night?"

"Demmit, boy, I told you to mind your own affairs, din't I? I said before that's Old Nick down there, and you'd best leave him to his own wickedness!"

And again that night, my mother ushered me to bed though I gave a chase like the dickens. When she finally caught me, I had exhausted myself and helplessly collapsed in a heap she deposited in my bed.

After her shadow disappeared from the doorway, the sounds started up again, this time sounding like a mad piper playing an infernal tune. Frozen with fear, I stared at the ceiling, rigid lest I move too greatly and tumble into Lucifer's hands. Again, I wet myself that night, adamantly determined not to leave my sheets until dawn broke.

Mamma remarked that I looked sick the next morning, and that I should rest in the dayroom until she returned from Madame Poncelucard's home (upon whose newly engaged daughter she would be calling that day). She told me she would have Blind Jom check on me, to make sure I wanted for nothing at all.

The day went by in a delirious blur, and sprites cackled at me from the dayroom's long shadows, or so I thought. In the early afternoon, Blind Jom came in to inquire after my well-being and I observed in him a distinct favoring of his right arm. It may have been the poor light filtering past the burgundy drapes, but I thought I saw dark blood staining his coat by the dubious arm.

"Blind Jom," I begged, and a tremor colored my reedy voice, "do you know who stirred up all that ruckus last night under my floorboards?"

Blind Jom sighed before answering, tired and old. "That was the Devil, my boy, now never ask after him again."

The Devil! Under my mother's house! Unthinkable and yet palpably real came Blind Jom's response. Did he truly expect me to believe that with all his peculiar wounds and exhaustion, it wasn't him down there raising Cain?

Needless to say, I dreaded the bedtime looming that night, which came mercilessly early with my mother's suspicion of my impending illness. For long hours, I peered at the ceiling, hoping to block out the sounds when they arrived.

The noises came late that night, and upon their arrival, I had steeled myself with an unyielding resolve. Terrified as I was, I could not abide this vile and mysterious wolf in sheep's clothing working his evil beneath my house. Surely he was down there, preparing some awful spell to vex me with consumption or smallpox or—blindness. How jealous was he, that he resented the vigor of a small boy so he could contrive to strip the child of his sight?

The gorge of my terror rising, it took only the tinny strains of that cursed pipe to drive me from my bed. With the white tails of my nightshirt flapping, I grabbed a candle from the hall table and lit it with the embers of the kitchen cook fire. I bolted into the night from the kitchen door, running around the house to where Blind Tom's cellar door stood. Sure enough, the dreadful piping rose from therein, and I knew that I must disturb his curse or suffer his own bitter fate.

Throwing open the door, I shrieked, "Blind Tom! Break your spell!" and leapt into the poorly lit rocky bowels of my mother's house, candle guttering and almost setting my nightshirt aflame.

There before me stood Blind Tom, shocked at my arrival. As he turned to me—an action that suggested he once had sight—I saw his lips, split and bloody around a horrid hornpipe, forcing out the tune as sweat speckled his forehead and stained the front of his jacket.

Just then I heard a deep rumbling, and Blind Tom whipped back around, too late. An invisible force racked his body and his head snapped back with violence. Blind Tom crumpled to the ground, dropping the pipe and coughing out one final gout of sticky blood, rasping, "Demn you, boy, I told you to stay back. Now he's loose."

In shock I stared down at him, but looked up as the rumbling sound formed the ominous word: "Tomorrow."

There, in the dim, far corner of the room, stood a dead man wearing a black robe or cowl. His vicious mouth curved into a horribly satisfied smile. He spoke to me, and his voice was like steel dragged over a rock. "Thank you, boy. I have work to do and men to see." That awful apparition faded into nothing, leaving a room swathed in shadow and heavy air.

It was then that I fled from the storm cellar, running north until I collapsed and never looking behind me. For days, every bit of energy I could muster served to propel me further and further from that hellish place. Even after I crawled out of my exhausted, starved mania and into whatever town it was, I never spoke another word. And I have never returned to my mother's house, where the dead walk and only terrible night-songs can keep them at bay.

Wednesday, 21 July 1999, 11:22 PM
(Thursday, 22 July 1999, 12:22 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Laffitte's
New Orleans, Louisiana

"What is this? Where'd it come from?" Marcia asked Jake, her eyes wide and her words quick. "Who gave it to you? Did they see anything that this paper describes?"

"Damn, slow down." Jake pushed himself away from the table a bit, as if to calm the conversation with distance. "More important is, do you want it? And what can you pay me to make it worth me giving it to you?"

Marcia, no stranger to dealing with Kindred, opened the bidding low—cash was disposable, especially to the Giovanni. "I'll give you six thousand for it, as long as you answer the rest of my questions. I've got it here, in New Orleans, cash, that you can have tonight."

"Six large for some dead man's diary? Sounds pretty steep. Must be worth something. I wonder what else you have?" Doing his part to further the endless dance of the Jyhad, no matter how small the individual motion, Jake held out.

"My most immediate offer is the cash. Sixty-five hundred, tonight," Marcia countered.

"Tell you what, sister. I don't need money. I'll give you the papers. I'll even give you the background. But you owe me. I can call on you once, at any time, for a small favor. It won't necessarily require that you be here, but you'll have to help me when I need it."

Marcia pretended to mull it over for a minute. Jake wanted some sort of minor boon, the kind of promise the Camarilla thrived on. Small price to pay, if this was at least a recent and reliable record that the ancient killer she sought had once made its refuge here. "Deal," she said.

"Sweet," Jake quipped as they shook hands. "Now what else you need to know?"

"Well, first of all, what is this? Is it a piece of something larger?"

"No, it's a journal entry someone I know found in a storm cellar of one of the houses by the swamps. The rest of the papers in the satchel were just records—finances, birth certificates, deeds that had been voided and so on. It didn't sound like you were looking for any of that."

"No, I'm not. I just need locations—where was this?"

"Within twenty miles of here, I'd say. I can get you there."

"Was there anything else in the cellar? Any makeshift tombs or anything like that?"

"Jesus, keep your voice down. These people are drunk, not stupid. And no, the place was picked clean. It's been deserted for about forty years—someone bought the estate a while back for pennies on the dollar, but no one's moved in since."

Marcia looked incredulous. "How can you have a cellar in a swamp?" She raised one eyebrow, letting Jake know that she was hoping to catch him in a lie. It would be easy to fabricate this sort of thing; if she found out that it was false, he wouldn't be any worse for the effort, and if she never found out, she'd have repaid her favor for nothing.

"The house was built over a grotto. The storm cellar's a natural rock cave that's above the water table. They just built a storm door over the cave mouth and put the house right next to it. I think there's a mention of the rock walls in the journal itself."

"Okay, so how do we know that this house is the one in the journal? It says he never went back."

"Look at the back side of the last page—this thing was sent as a letter, back to the house itself. And I did a bit of research, finding the name Poncelucard on a property title for a piece of real estate about half a night's walk away. The title was dated back to 1860, which is presumably when the Poncelucards bought their house. Also, and I don't mind praising my own cleverness here, the house where this was found has a rotten set of burgundy curtains in what might have been the dayroom. That doesn't prove anything in and of itself, but it's a minor detail that matches."

"So you found this at the mansion?" Marcia continued.

"No, someone I know did. I just checked out the details afterward. I have to stand behind my merchandise, don't you know." Jake smiled, which Marcia returned demurely.

"Well, I'll respect your secrecy."

"You don't want to know if I made any copies?"

"I don't care if you did."

"And you don't want to see the house?"

"I have the address." Marcia pointed to the back of the last page.

"So, we're good on the favor." It was a statement, not a question.

"We are, indeed."

"Good luck, then," Jake remarked, without a hint of a smile. "If you need me, you know where to find me."

"Thanks, Jake. I'll be making my usual exit."

Jake rolled his eyes as Marcia rose, "accidentally" knocking over her drink so no one would see she hadn't touched it. She barked, "And I never want to see you again!" before storming out of Laffitte's, not loud enough to make a huge spectacle, but with enough drama to convince all the drunks that she and her "boyfriend" had had a falling out.

A red-faced man at the table behind him tapped Jake on the shoulder. "Aren't you going to go after her?"

Jake shook his head without looking at his commiserator. "No, we're done. I've seen her for the last time." He wondered if it would prove to be so.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 1:02 AM
Old Hayesburg Elementary School
Hayesburg, New York



Ramona lay on her back on the slick, hardwood floor and stared unseeing into the dim heights of the vaulted ceiling. She squeezed her eyes closed. All her will was absorbed in resisting the urge that had tempted her the entire night. The footsteps that she felt and heard coming toward her were both relief and distraction. Ramona recognized Jen without looking—the quiet approach, hesitant not stealthy.

Jen stopped a few feet away but didn't speak. Ramona opened her eyes. The only light in the cavernous room, from streetlights outside, filtered down from windows near the ceiling. Jen nodded with a nervous smile. Her lips, once pouty like a beautiful model's, Ramona imagined, were pale to the point of bluish.

"I didn't want to bother you," Jenny said. Seconds passed. She seemed increasingly uncomfortable with the silence. "I thought maybe you were—"

"Sleeping?" Ramona asked with a disdainful harrumph. "Do you really sleep? Even in the daytime?"

Jen pulled up a chair and sat. The only chairs they had found in this boarded-up elementary school were child-sized—apparently all the adults had taken their chairs with them when the building was closed—and Jen, sitting there in the center of the otherwise empty gymnasium, instead of dwarfing the small seat, seemed to shrink to fit it. She looked the part of a child alone in a vast, dark space.

"No," Jen answered. "I don't *feel* like I sleep. But I do… I guess."

"Dreams?"

Jen shook her head slowly. "Not that I remember." She stared down at her feet. "It doesn't feel like being asleep. It feels like…"

"Being dead," said Ramona. The words hung in the grave-like silence of the gym.

Jen squeezed her eyes tightly shut and continued shaking her head in an attempt to deny what she had to know was the truth. Ramona knew what the girl must be feeling. Ramona had been through it herself, was still going through it to some extent, but not to the degree that Jen was. Maybe Jen had lost more with her mortal life and that made it harder.

A single crimson tear dripped from the corner of Jen's eye, betraying her inability to accept their new reality. The drop of blood struck the shiny grain of the floor. Ramona raised a finger and wiped the track of the tear from Jen's cheek, pressed her finger to her tongue.

Vampire, Ramona thought.

As she tasted the rich blood, the word stuck in her mind.

Vampire.

Darnell was right. How could Jen pretend they had become anything else? But, Ramona also thought, badgering Jen wasn't going to bring her around. Couldn't Darnell

see that? Hadn't he felt any of what Jen was laboring with? Didn't he have qualms about the monster he'd become?

I'm afraid of what I've become, Ramona thought.

"When is this going to end?" Jen whispered. Blood lined the bottom edges of her eyes.

"Don't know." Ramona closed her eyes again. She could still taste Jen's blood. Again, she felt the urge she'd been denying all night.

This is the next step, Ramona thought.

Unlike her friend, she had accepted becoming a vampire, but now she was finding out what that really meant. "Sometimes you just have to suck it up," Ramona said aloud to herself.

With Jen's sharp intake of breath, Ramona realized too late what her comment must've sounded like—a flippant dismissal of Jen's worries. Ramona sat up, intending to set the record straight, but Jen had hopped up and was already halfway across the gym. She was trying to suppress her sobs, but drops of blood marked her path.

Ramona sighed. *That girl has gotta toughen up some time,* she thought. But Ramona could've used the company tonight.

Where has Darnell got to? she wondered. He'd been rummaging around in the basement earlier, climbing over the piles of discarded furniture, searching for a sub-basement or deeper storage area that would be even farther removed from sunlight.

"You don't have to do that, you know," Ramona had told him, but he'd only grunted and kept on with what he was doing.

Both he and Jenny had reacted strangely to Ramona's most recent discovery.

They'd arrived in Hayesburg last night. Ramona had known that Zhavon wasn't far away. She didn't know how she could tell. She just *knew*. There hadn't been time to seek out the girl right away, however, because Darnell and Jen, in a rare instance of agreement, had insisted on seeking shelter if this was where they were going to stay.

Ramona had been about to suggest that they didn't need a building for shelter any more, but she'd seen the anger in Darnell's eyes, the fear in Jen's and decided against it. They'd found the boarded-up school and spent a day there.

Now, Ramona lay on the floor, her fingers touching the synthetic sealant that protected the natural wood, as the sound of Jen's footsteps and sobbing receded into the distance.

I let them have their way this time, Ramona thought. She'd stayed with them this past day here in the school. *But what are they afraid of?* she wondered. Sinking into the earth to escape the light of the sun had come as naturally to her as… as drinking blood. *It's another part of this… this thing that we've all become. A part that they're not ready for.*

Ramona sat upright on the slick floor, stared at her feet, curled and uncurled the gnarled, clawed toes. There were some things she wasn't ready for either. Only she didn't have a choice. Maybe there was nothing wrong with Darnell and Jenny hanging on to what they could of the days before.

I shouldn't rush them, Ramona decided. Besides, she had her own problems without making more.

All night, before Jen had approached her, Ramona had been lying there trying to pinpoint the cause of the urges she was feeling. Back in the days before the change, she had always been very conscious of her own moods and motivations. The change had brought on a whole new set of causes and effects, most of which Ramona had learned through painful trial and error. The laundry list of danger had become a mantra of sorts:

Beware the sun; it burns flesh.

Beware lack of blood; the hunger will take control.

Beware too much blood, the sight and smell; the hunger, again, will take control.

Beware your own kind; they are everywhere.

Strangely enough for Ramona, who had never been poetic, the flow of the words had evolved naturally, the rhythm emerging from some hidden place within her, from an inner song that was no longer masked by the sound of a beating heart.

Tonight, however, Ramona was struggling with a new urge. Or if not new, a compulsion much stronger than she had felt before.

Zhavon.

Ramona knew that the girl had been sent to Hayesburg, her mother hoping that a small town would be more forgiving than the city of the kind of mistake that had almost gotten Zhavon killed—*would* have gotten Zhavon killed if it hadn't been for Ramona. The mortal girl's presence was the reason Ramona had brought her friends here. The Sabbat attack had been a useful excuse. Otherwise Darnell, at least, would've put up a struggle, not because he had any better ideas, but because that was what he did. He and Jen had followed Ramona because they were adrift in this new world of the night. Ramona, unintentionally, had stumbled upon a purpose—or rather the hint of a purpose.

Zhavon.

What was it, Ramona wondered, that attracted her to the girl, that had, so many nights, consciously or otherwise, directed Ramona's steps to that neighborhood, that fire escape, that window? She wished she knew, because again she felt drawn to the streets, and though Ramona had not yet explored in any detail this new town, she knew where—or with whom—she would end up.

As she had for the past few hours, however, Ramona denied herself and remained in the elementary school. She sat alone in the center of the gym and stared, only half-seeing, into the shadows where once children had played, exercised, probably been forced by some sadistic teacher to square dance.

Why don't I go to her? Ramona thought. *It's why we're here—why I brought us here.*

Barely had the unavoidable thought been given voice in her mind than Ramona was outside. She instinctively shied away from the harsh glare of the streetlights. Vague thoughts tugged at her, but they were kept at an arm's length by her protective armor of hyper-alert physical senses: the chorus of crickets almost drowned out the sound of flapping bat wings around the eaves of the school building; the rich, earthy odor of lawn fertilizer mixed with the diffuse fumes of industry that hung over the town; asphalt underfoot scraped against the pads of her thick soles.

Ramona gave herself to the sensations. Her powerful muscles and keen reflexes didn't need her direction to move quickly but warily, to keep out of sight—not that anyone stirred at this hour in the sleepy town, but Ramona's exposed, monstrous feet didn't lend

themselves any longer to mixing unobtrusively with mortals. She wandered without purpose but knowing full well where her meandering path would inevitably lead.

The school was no longer in sight. Several blocks away, a dog barked, began a small chain reaction as two more joined in and continued for maybe two minutes—well beyond any memory of what had started them barking. Ramona ignored the lesser urge to find one of them, to curl up beside it and enjoy the warm comfort of a beating heart and a wet tongue. She was very much like them in some ways, but she was also far different.

Eventually, Ramona found herself standing before a small, ranch-style house in a line of others, a concise rectangle of red bricks shaded near-black in the darkness. How little, Ramona realized, the people in these safe little houses would know of the type of life she'd led as a mortal, much less of the existence that now had been thrust upon her.

Zhavon's mother was right to send her here, Ramona thought. There were too many traps in the world without going looking for every danger the city had to offer.

Ramona climbed onto a low branch in the tree facing the window—*the* window. *How do I know?* she wondered briefly, but she no longer tried to answer all of those questions that confronted her. *I know.*

And as her bestial gaze parted the obscuring darkness, she knew also why she had been right to fear coming to this place.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 1:03 AM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York



The light flickered incessantly. Finally, like a cobra striking, Calebros's gnarled hand shot out and cuffed the lamp. The illumination shone bright and steady. For several minutes, the tarnished bead chain became a pendulum, swaying back and forth, tapping softly against the curved metal shade of the banker's lamp. All the while, Calebros unceasingly studied his reports. The latest word from Las Vegas, from Atlanta, from Boston, from London and Lisbon, from Calcutta.

Occasionally, he reached for his red pen and added a note to one of the typed reports. He tirelessly examined and re-examined the countless details, the logic behind the details. Endlessly questioning. Dissecting the analyses, his own as well as that of others. Distinguishing fact from assumption. The discrete bits of information often fit together in unexpected ways but, as with a jigsaw puzzle, forcing the pieces together--though temporarily satisfying an impatient yearning for order--served only to distort the overall picture in the long run. But that was obviously what had happened.

Scrap paper. Calebros began sifting through the piles of folders and loose papers piled and spread across his desk, their placement seemingly the result of some great explosion or catastrophic natural disaster. They were stacked tall enough to give the impression that his trusty Smith Corona was actually resting in a hole instead of on the desktop. Eventually, he found what he was looking for: a report that had outlived its usefulness. It was on the bottom of a stack, of course, but Calebros skillfully extricated it without compromising the structural integrity of his filing system.

He turned the piece of paper to its relatively unmarked side, then paused and flipped it back over. This particular report was a list, circa 1950, of suspected Communist sympathizers in the New York metropolitan area. Page one of seven. He scanned the names, crossed off several, and circled several others, individuals it might be beneficial to check up on. Most if not all of them were certainly dead by now—such an unrewarding proposition, tracking a kine population over the long haul—but there was bound to be dirt on some. And a descendent or an estate executor was often willing, more willing than the potentially embarrassed individual would have been in life, to negotiate in order to keep damaging secrets just that—secret. Favors, knowledge, these were more useful to Calebros than, say, money, but one took what one could get. Cash had its uses as well; a good old-fashioned bribe was sometimes the very grease a wheel needed.

Not distracted overly long from his original task, Calebros turned the list back over and began jotting down assumptions to which Rolph, in the matter of the Sabbat "raid" in Atlanta, had obviously jumped. Several of those assumptions were, just as obviously, flawed. Calebros didn't spare himself in the critique. He should have recognized Rolph's less than rigorously analyzed conclusions for what they were at the outset. Calebros was just as guilty in the matter: By taking Rolph's word, by not demanding at least an accounting

of more of the raw data, Calebros himself had fallen victim to slothful, undisciplined thought. He pressed down on the red pen, item after item, as his new list grew.

And then the light failed. His grotto office fell into total darkness.

Calebros sighed. A lamp, a light bulb. Details. Mere details. But all the details were connected—in one way or another. He ignored even the slightest detail only at his own peril. Each puzzle piece was part of the larger picture. Still, Calebros was little more than irritated by this particular detail of existence. He preferred to concentrate on other, more relevant facts. But reading in the dark was tiresome, so he climbed painfully to his feet, tried to stretch out his back a bit, and then shuffled over to a free-standing rusted metal cabinet. He slid aside three bulging boxes filled with newspaper clippings so he could open the cabinet and took a package of small light bulbs from the second shelf from the bottom. Calebros took one of the last two bulbs, twisting it slowly in his talons, as if he were trying to screw it into thin air. For an instant, he was overcome by a sense of regret.

He felt for some reason that his time, like his supply of light bulbs, was running out. He wondered which of his charges would some night take his place. Who would inherit the dilemmas that he left unsolved? Surely Emmett lacked the patience. Perhaps Umberto, with his interest in things electronic and modern, would be the torchbearer. But Calebros had his doubts. He should put his mind to the matter, he decided. Soon. He should begin grooming a successor, just as Augustin had groomed him.

Then the feeling passed. Calebros continued twirling the bulb. He could just make out the edges as it turned in his grasp. "Humph," he snorted. "Getting all philosophical about a damned light bulb, and with so much else to do."

He changed the bulb. *A piece of junk*, Umberto had called the lamp. He'd been trying to get Calebros to replace both it and the Smith Corona, but Calebros scoffed at the suggestion. He was not of this new, disposable age. One did not simply cast away a useful tool.

With the new bulb in, the lamp again cast semi-adequate reading light over the mammoth desk. And almost instantly, the light started to blink and flicker.

"Damn you." Calebros smacked the lamp; the flickering stopped. Good as new. His sire, Augustin, were he still around, would have disassembled the lamp years ago, rewired it, checked the switch, basically spared no trouble to make sure the device worked as it should have. Then again, Augustin had always been more the hands-on type—which was why he *wasn't* around any longer.

Before he sat back down, a distant sound caught Calebros's attention. Howling. Not wolves or Lupines, but not wholly human either. The kennels. Emmett must be back. Good.

Calebros shuffled away from his desk, past bookcases and makeshift shelves in various states of disrepair, each crammed full of boxes and bundles of reports, newspaper clippings, letters, photographs secured with strings grown black and brittle with age. No crevice was wasted. Information of one sort or another was crammed into every available space. Calebros took hold of one metal shelf unit and wrenched it away from the wall. He hunched down and climbed headfirst into the knee-high tunnel that had been hidden by the shelf and boxes.

His movements were a syncopation of popping joints and crackling vertebrae as he endeavored to force his corkscrew spine through the narrow passage. Not needing to look

behind himself after years of practice—and unable to do so in the tight space, at any rate—he expertly hooked a foot through a metal bracket on the wall side of the shelves and pulled the weighty unit back to. He pulled himself along the tunnel by hooking his talons in ridges worn in the stone floor over many years of use. The orthopedic symphony lessened after his initial movements, but, of course, the discomfort remained just as acute. Jolts of pain shot periodically through his wrists and shoulders, neck, back, hips, knees, ankles. Despite the nagging physical pain, however, Calebros retained a fondness for the tunnel. Amidst the constantly changing world of his reports and messages from the outside world, this cramped stone crawlspace was a constant, a familiar place, a connection between present and past.

The tunnel sloped downward with mostly gentle curves. There was one sharp turn, precisely three fifths of the way down—Calebros had counted the talon indentations in the stone, estimated the distance, then checked his calculations with a series of tied-together tape measures. Minor curiosities sometimes took on seemingly obsessive interest among the monotony of the endless nights.

The chamber beyond the tunnel was dark, but Calebros felt the room open around him as he climbed free of the passage. The air against his face was cooler and distinctly sticky, salty. He could feel, too, his pupils stretched wide, as wide as a kine's entire eye. Before him lay water, his lake, the surface calm except for the few lazy ripples marking the air currents. It was, of course, more pond than lake, a glorified mud hole, some—notably Emmett—would say. Calebros realized this full well, but to Augustin it had been a lake, and Calebros had inherited that exaggerated fondness, along with much else.

Slowly, almost ritualistically, he removed his long jacket and laid it over a stone outcropping. He took off his shirt and trousers, laid them aside as well, and then waded naked into the pool. The water, never warmed by the sun, was cool against his ankles, shins, and thighs. He came to the drop-off quickly. He paused, but there was no need. His hesitation was perhaps the last remnant of species consciousness, an evolutionary oversight. There was no great shock as he plunged into the icy water and pushed away from the shelf of stone that ringed the shoreline; there was no scrotum-tightening exhilaration from the blast of cold water. The water was not so much colder than his own body, than the tainted blood within it. He allowed his initial push to carry him out into the lake; he lay motionless below the surface. Gradually, he achieved equilibrium—of temperature, his body's dropping to match that of the surrounding water; of mass, his inert form maintaining a constant position a few feet beneath the surface of the water.

Gradually, he found peace. The briny water soothed and supported his deformed, aching body. The solid darkness crowded away the continual influx of information, the overwhelming stimuli of his nightly existence. The gentle swooshing of the lake filled his mind.

He opened his mouth, exhaled, and allowed the water to enter him as the swarm of bubbles rapidly spent itself. By force of will, he averted his gag reflex. Slowly, he sank more deeply into the depths.

How tempting to keep going, to abandon his repose and kick, swim downward. And to find what? The center of the earth? The *Nictuku*, the great hunters? Is that what Augustin had done? Had he found what he was looking for?

Deeper still, Calebros sank. He opened his eyes, could not tell the difference except for the brief sensation of water against his corneas. He could have been floating in space, in a vacuum, beyond the reach of earthly promise or menace.

Silence...almost. Distant swooshing of water against shore, the sound of the heartbeat that was absent. Farther away, the howling, pain, exhilaration, rapture. There were deeper sounds, more difficult to make out. Rumblings of the kine, perhaps a subway train, or the rhythmic turnings of a monstrous printing press.

Calebros took these things into him like the briny water, accounted for them, factored them out.

Deeper...

He strained to hear that which he sought....

There. He heard it, felt it. Faintly. But then he was sure, like a searching finger at last finding the pulsing vein. A deeper sound, a hum, distant but strong. The sound of the bedrock, of the earth itself, of the world that was left to him, the world that was *forced* upon him. What a cruel gift, the steady hum of the earth, the subterranean world that was his legacy.

Augustin was foolish to seek out destruction, Calebros thought. They had eternity. Could the very earth whispering in his ear be wrong? Old wives' tales, the great hunters. Perhaps it was in the blood after all; perhaps Augustin had had no real choice in the matter, just as Calebros, night after night, had no real choice but to be true to his blood. To search for answers.

Calebros allowed his thoughts to float beside him, there far beneath the surface; he let them float away until thought, any thought, was his only in vague memory. There was the gentle hum of the earth. And nothing else.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 2:31 AM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York



Red, gleaming eyes haunted Zhavon's dreams, and as she crossed the threshold between sleep and wakefulness, everything else faded away, changed.

But the eyes remained.

Zhavon blinked hard. She knew that she wasn't still dreaming, but she felt less than awake. The eyes were still there, outside the window.

Shouldn't they be gone? she wondered groggily. *I'm awake. They should be gone.*

She half-heartedly thought of calling Aunt Irma—Aunt Irma was as mean as Mama and three times as big; *nobody* messed with Aunt Irma—but for Zhavon, the proximity of her aunt, the very walls of the house around them, seemed less real than those red eyes.

Watching.

Zhavon hadn't been startled awake. She didn't run screaming from the eyes beyond the window, but there was a voice deep inside her urging caution. *Get Aunt Irma,* it said. *Call the police. Do it now.*

Was that Mama's voice, or was it the voice that was always there within Zhavon, the one she usually ignored? She knew it was right this time—the hair standing up on her arms and on the back of her neck told her that much—but it was such a little voice, and every second it seemed so much farther away.

Her mind dredged up old dangers—the attack, the strange pair of shoes on the fire escape. But those had been back in the city. Back home.

Get Irma... call the police... now.

The voice was breaking up like a weak radio station. No. It wasn't static drowning out the words, she realized. Another sound. The white noise of her own blood flowing, the sound of her pulse amplified as if she held giant seashells over her ears.

Irma... now...

A sea of blood washed over the voice, dragged it far away, until only the inexorable sweep and pull of the ocean remained.

Zhavon stared through the glass, and the image before her was her own. She saw through those eyes a world tinted blood-red. She saw herself sitting in bed, slowly putting her feet to the floor, pulling her nightshirt over her head.

The voice... what was it saying?

She saw her own body, rounded, full of life. The veins were not so close to the surface, yet the deafening roar of a tidal wave filled her ears. She watched as she reached for a shirt, jeans and shoes.

The roaring wave carried her forward, obliterated the sound of her footsteps. Her vision dimmed.

Zhavon opened her eyes—had they been closed? She turned a doorknob, opened the front door and then stepped outside, into the arms of the girl from her dreams.

Ramona drew in Zhavon, clutched the girl tightly to her chest.

"I...I..." Zhavon tried to speak.

Ramona gently shushed her, stroked the tight ringlets of the girl's hair, nuzzled the hollow beneath her ear.

"I..."

"Shhh."

Ramona brushed her fingers across Zhavon's forehead, traced the line of her brow, cheek, jaw. Warmth radiated from the mortal's skin—genuine warmth, capillaries, canals of life-sustaining blood, the flow driven by a beating heart. Ramona's fingers descended along the curve of Zhavon's neck and lingered there. Beside the tensed muscles, the jugular pulsated irresistibly. Ramona slid her mouth along taut skin. Her tongue darted out and tasted the sweat of fear and anticipation. Merely a thin veneer of flesh denied her that for which she hungered.

Now her tongue felt the severe edge of canines lowered in response to her hunger.

No!

Ramona fought for control. She pulled away, but the cry of anguish she heard was not her own.

Zhavon dropped to her knees. Tears streamed down her face.

Real tears, Ramona thought. She raised her fingers to her own cheek, felt the pure moisture there—not bloody tracks—from where she had pressed against Zhavon. *Real tears*.

Ramona turned from the mortal girl and felt herself staggering away.

I can't. I can't! she thought desperately.

The spark of mortal life, the call of similar human experience, the very qualities within Zhavon that had attracted Ramona in the first place—those were what Ramona would destroy if she satisfied her hunger, and she knew that, just as she hadn't been able to curb her desire to see the girl for more than a few nights, once she began feeding, she wouldn't be able to rein in her hunger.

I can't.

Ramona's protests grew feebler.

I've gotta get away from here.

I can't.

Ramona turned and, to her horror, saw Zhavon crawling after her.

Zhavon couldn't stop the tears that blurred her vision and ran down her face. She'd seen such pain and hunger deep in those red eyes. Such desire. Zhavon found herself crawling after the girl—not meaning to follow but unable to stop. Rational thought had long since given way to animal attraction. Her body was not hers to command.

The other girl stumbled around the corner of the house. Zhavon tried to stand. Her muscles failed her. She continued to crawl, afraid that the hungering girl would leave her behind. But when Zhavon turned the corner of the house, the lighter-skinned girl was not far ahead. In fact, she too had fallen to her knees. Her back was to Zhavon.

Zhavon closed the distance between them, vaguely noticing the strange, gnarled feet that stuck out behind the other girl. Still, the warnings in Zhavon's mind were silenced beneath the ocean that was called to the surface.

Zhavon was close enough to touch the stranger, to reach out, to place her hand on the girl's shoulder.

As the girl twisted to face Zhavon, Zhavon saw the earlier confusion retreat beneath the red hunger in those animal eyes. But something... something of a retreating plea, of helplessness, reached out to Zhavon.

"Ramona?" said Zhavon, unsure how she knew the name, but certain that she was right.

And with the sound of the name, the hunger took over, and the beast was on Zhavon.



Thursday, 22 July 1999, 2:50 AM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York

Before he broke the surface, he heard the sand-like spray upon the water and knew who he would find beside the lake. Calebros made his way to the shore. He felt gravity take its hold upon him once again, felt it pull at his leathery flesh and his twisted body. He crawled. The stone of the beachhead was warm now against his callused knees. His talons clattered like the legs of a beetle. He retched, purging the eternal waters from this, his frail eternal prison. Water, bile and blood mixed in shallow pools. Eventually, he rolled over and sat on his bony haunches. He neither clothed himself nor looked at his brother.

Emmett sat atop the canvas sacks of salt, sifting through the crystals, letting them run through his fingers like the grains of an hourglass. Every so often, he tossed a handful of the salt into the water.

"I guess you're a damn pillar of the community," Emmett said humorlessly. With his other hand, he played with the strand of knucklebones hanging from his neck, *his* inheritance. "You and your mud hole."

Calebros did not respond.

"Here," said Emmett. He took up from the shadows behind him a large goblet fashioned from bone and handed it to Calebros. The goblet was full of blood. "You gotta learn to take care of yourself. Scuba diving doesn't take the place of dinner, you moron."

Calebros took the offered vessel. The blood was tepid but not yet cold. The howling, the kennels. He drank.

"Jeez, what am I, your mother?" Emmett asked.

"No," Calebros said. "You are my brother, my broodmate."

"Brood, litter, whatever. We were both chosen to suck the old blood tit, so who am I to ask questions?"

Calebros sighed. Blood tit, indeed. "That's not how you remember it."

Now it was Emmett's turn to sigh. "Don't do this. Don't get all… You always do this, get all touchy-feely we're-all-brothers-in-the-blood, when you soak your head, blah, blah, blah…"

"Make light of it if you will—"

"I will. Thank you very much. Got enough salt here?" Emmett flicked some at Calebros.

In the bags beneath Emmett, there was at least a ton remaining. Initially there'd been five times as much, or, if not in the truest sense of the word *initially*, there had been after Calebros had spent the better part of two years hauling sacks down here.

"You know," Emmett said, "if you get tired of bobbing in the Dead Sea, you could always just Embrace a masseuse. Now that I think about it, I bet Hilda would be willing to—"

"Have you moved him yet?" Calebros interrupted.

The effect of a smirk on Emmett's features was singularly unappealing. "Not yet. Soon as I get back. I wanted to check things out with you first, and not over the phone or SchreckNET, if you know what I mean."

"I do."

"So you don't want me to clue in Montrose. You're sure?" Emmett asked.

"I'm sure."

"Could cause problems later...if he finds out."

"Make sure he doesn't find out. Or can't you handle him?"

That elicited a wry laugh from Emmett. "I'll make sure he doesn't find out. I won't use our places in Vegas itself. Maybe Cactus Springs, or Shoshone."

"That's what I was going to suggest. How long do you think—?"

Emmett shrugged. "Not long. Maybe a few weeks." Calebros nodded. "You know," Emmett continued, "*Abbot* Pierce is a real pain in the ass."

Calebros nodded again. "That's one reason I thought it best to move Benito."

"From Pierce's to Montrose's." Emmett shook his head disdainfully. "I say when this whole mess is over, we sell both their asses down the river."

"You know we can't do that."

"*You* might know that," Emmett said. "What *I* know is that Pierce is a self-righteous, toothless excuse for a Kindred who'd rather piss his pants than cross the Giovanni, and Montrose...*Montrose* is a slimy son of a bitch who's so far in the Giovanni's pocket that he's sucking their collective dick."

"Eloquently put, as always."

"Pierce is a dick. Montrose sucks dick. That's how I see it."

"Didn't Pierce prove useful this time?" Calebros asked. "Would you rather have grabbed Benito on short notice and hung out in Boston, in the city, and waited for the Giovanni bloodhounds to track you down?"

"*If* they could."

"If," Calebros agreed. "But that's a fairly ominous *if* that we avoided. And we might not trust Montrose with everything, but he's another source of information about what's going on in Las Vegas; a source fairly close to the prince, I might add."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say." Emmett's protests trailed off into incomprehensible muttering. Then he grew silent altogether. The two Kindred sat quietly, the only sound echoing above the underground lake the distant *plink, plink* of dripping water.

"You came all this way for that?" Calebros asked at last.

"'All this way.' Listen to you. Boston is not that far. You really need to get out more. I didn't just walk from Las Vegas."

Calebros knew that, of course. Movement up and down a significant portion of the East Coast was not a great ordeal for the Nosferatu. Several generations of the clan had spent decades creating, through construction and appropriation, a network of underground tunnels stretching, more or less, from Boston to Washington, D.C. And, with but a few aboveground lapses, a Nosferatu could travel as far as Richmond and even Atlanta in relative safety. Less safety, now that the Sabbat had swarmed through those cities, but it

wasn't that difficult to stay out of sight. Of the Nosferatu that had thrown in their lot with the Sabbat, most knew of portions of the network, but even they weren't about to betray that information. The *antitribu* might have philosophical reasons for their sect alliance, but they had no great love for their "masters," the Lasombra or the Tzimisce.

Emmett had come only from Boston. Not that great an undertaking, true. But he was about to head west on an incredibly sensitive assignment. Calebros couldn't help but wonder if what had brought Emmett, aside from practical matters, was not something more...personal.

"What do you remember?" Calebros asked, finally. "It wasn't a litter. I don't remember you until after...after..."

"I don't remember nothing," Emmett said, "because I don't *need* to remember nothing. There was before, and now there's now. Right?"

Calebros knew he was right. There were some things that he and the clan would never forget: debts and debtors, favors and betrayals. Other things, there was no reason to remember. Nothing lay down that road except confusion and regret.

"Right?" Emmett asked, more insistently.

Calebros nodded. "Right." He stood up and gathered his clothes. The stiffness was returning to his body already. He picked up the bone goblet from where he'd placed it on the shore of the lake and handed the cup to Emmett. "Take this back. Please." To the kennels.

Emmett took the goblet. "Well then," he said. He nodded curtly and turned back toward the tunnel that had brought him here.

"Emmett," Calebros said. Emmett paused, turned back. "Good luck."

"Yeah," said Emmett. "You too." And then he was gone.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 2:52 AM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York



Ramona heard her name, knew that the girl had named her. The animal within her knew as well. It rose up and struck to appease its hunger.

Ramona tore at the collar of Zhavon's shirt, ripped away the fabric and struck fiercely. Her fangs gouged into the base of Zhavon's neck—through skin, muscle, tendon, searching for the artery.

There!

Blood flowed into Ramona's mouth. The few, insignificant scraps of flesh she swallowed were washed down with the sweet blood, pumped in forceful bursts by Zhavon's strong heart.

The girl was knocked back by Ramona's initial blow. Zhavon cried out in pain—pain that Ramona remembered. The fangs carried simultaneously the blunt force of a hammer and the piercing agony of a thousand needles slipped under fingernails.

But then Zhavon's back arched and her pained moan shifted to something else, as the ecstasy of the feeding took control. Ramona knew that if she was gentle, in the end, it was not the pain but the pleasure that would fill Zhavon's mind.

In the end...

Ramona drank greedily. The hunger drove her onward. Her entire being reveled in the kill.

The kill...

Zhavon pressed against Ramona. The mortal's grip, her fingers digging into Ramona's bare arms, could've been the impassioned grip of a lover. Her head lolled back, and more tears ran down onto Ramona's face.

The beating of her prey's heart filled Ramona. Warmth spread through her dead limbs, crept toward her extremities. The hunger led her to take more blood. Soon, she knew, the heart would stop.

No!

Ramona paused in her feeding. A trickle of blood ran down her chin.

The attraction to Zhavon and her familiar mortal life could not hold the hunger at bay—but they must! Nostalgia and bloodlust—Ramona had known which would win out. That was why she'd stayed away much of the night.

But she'd given in to temptation.

Zhavon began to quiver in Ramona's arms. Shortly, there would no longer be enough blood in her body to support life. She would go into shock. She would die.

No...please, no.

Ramona wanted to tear herself away, to flee into the darkness, but as the next beat of Zhavon's heart pumped more blood into Ramona's mouth, a new tide of hunger washed

over her. Unable to stop herself, she attacked the gaping wound again, dug deeper, tore away impeding flesh, and drew as much blood as possible.

Zhavon winced, but she was captive to the rapture of the kill. She didn't struggle, but grasped Ramona more tightly, pressed their bodies together so that they were as one.

Ramona's will, too, was bent to the kill. The knowledge that Zhavon's humanity would be gone forever was not completely lost among Ramona's desires, that her own would be lessened somehow, that the next time the hunger rose, she would not manage to resist even this much.

She had lost completely the will to resist the hunger when the wooden stake slammed into her back—into her heart.

Ramona's eyes and mouth shot open. A cry of pain emerged with a gurgled spray of blood from her throat.

Zhavon whimpered piteously as she was released and slumped to the ground.

A second wrenching of the stake forced it through the remainder of Ramona's torso to protrude from the front. Despite the fresh blood in her body, a stiffening chill seized her limbs. She tried to grasp the stake, to push it back through, but her strength abandoned her before she even touched it.

As she toppled over like an up-ended statue, another figure swooped down upon Zhavon. He sniffed, momentarily, at the deep wound at the base of her neck, then licked the edges and deep into the hole. The bleeding slowed to a trickle.

Ramona watched as might a corpse at its own funeral—present but helpless to intervene.

He'll kill me now, she thought, *and then Zhavon.*

But he had no further interest in Ramona. He lifted Zhavon in his arms, and as he turned to leave, from her skewed vantage point, propped on her side by the stake, Ramona saw for an instant his monstrous left eye. It bulged as if too large for its socket, and a gelatinous ichor fizzed and bubbled around its edges.

Then he was gone—with Zhavon.

And Ramona was left paralyzed to contemplate the approaching dawn.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 2:58 AM
Barnard College
New York City, New York



Hadd. Vengeance.

What a fortuitous turn of events, Anwar thought, *when the employment of my clan's particular skills pays for a death that any childe of Haqim would gladly bring about for free*. And he'd heard rumored that the payment for this particular *kafir* was a decanter of old and potent vitae. Old and potent. Incredibly so, if the rumors were to be believed.

Footsteps were approaching. Instinctively, Anwar slipped more deeply into the shadows. He doubted that anyone could see him when he did not wish it, but he was not willing to cast caution to the winds unless it became absolutely necessary. At times risks were unavoidable, but to take unnecessary chances was foolish.

The footsteps belonged to a security guard, one of the mortals hired to ensure safety on the campus of this small college in the midst of such a forbidding city. It was possible, Anwar knew, that the guard might also be a pawn of the hated warlocks, and so Anwar did not test his esoteric powers of concealment. Instead, he stayed out of actual sight until the man had passed.

The campus was well lit, but Anwar found shadows easily enough. He almost laughed at the idea that street lamps and the prominently displayed emergency phones might dissuade him even a whit if he chose to take one of the young women who studied at this place. There were few enough here during the summer, and none were in evidence at this hour of the morning. Regardless, Anwar was not interested in them.

He watched the academic building across the way. Its brick facade and the landscaped shrubbery before it were similar to the other buildings, but Anwar was sure of his instructions. His contact would emerge from that building when opportunity presented itself. No suspicions must be aroused. That concerned Anwar the most—that the contact would bungle his or her part in the mission, that Anwar would be revealed through the incompetence of a *kafir*. He would stand little chance against so many warlocks.

Strangely enough, Anwar was little concerned about treachery. It was possible, of course, that the entire mission was a set-up, that the contact would deliver him to the Tremere, but Anwar thought that unlikely. Though skilled at his craft, he harbored no illusions that his death would be a blow of any consequence to his clan, or a boon to any enemy. More deeply than his own analysis, however, he trusted the judgment of his elders. Had they seen fit to order him to a pointless end, he would go willingly and sing the praises of Haqim each step of the way.

For now, though, Anwar waited patiently. For all things under the moon and stars there would be time.

Hadd. Vengeance.



Thursday, 22 July 1999, 3:03 AM
Pierce Circle
Hayesburg, New York

Leopold tossed the unconscious mortal into the back seat, climbed behind the wheel and started the engine. *So close now!* he thought, as the car lurched into motion and left behind the small town, so inconsequential except for what he'd taken from it.

So close, the muse purred, echoing his thoughts. Leopold could feel her moist breath on the back of his neck.

He didn't try to whip around and catch a glimpse of her. Such rashness, he had learned, could prove quite unfortunate, as the car's various dents and the stalks of field grass stuck in the grille and bumper attested.

Leopold had gained some insight into, if not control of, the chaotic interplay of Sight and unSight. He no longer had to be on his guard every second—as long as he wasn't foolish—to avoid the topsy-turvy unfastening of his world. He recognized almost as a background the pale elements, the mundane flotsam, of his surroundings. He could make his way through that lifeless scenery that he'd always known.

So close, the muse whispered in his ear.

She lent direction to the Sight, and after practice and acclimation, he could now look at the new world without completely losing his grounding in the old.

The girl was of the new.

After days of tedious (and dangerous, as he grew accustomed to Sight) driving, the muse had directed him to the small town. Unerringly, she had led him—*along this block and left here*.

But what is it?

Hurry, she had scolded him. *There is little time, and we are so close....*

With the help of the Eye, Leopold had come to realize the insignificance, the small-minded blandness, of his previous homes—Boston, Chicago, Atlanta—but if they were the equivalent of artistic fecal matter, this little town was less than a gnat basking in their odiferous splendor.

Yet, miracle of miracles, when Leopold had gone where the muse had led him, he'd found what would surely be the subject of his greatest work.

The girl had been in the grasp of another Cainite, one of the unwashed, but Leopold had corrected that matter.

The girl moaned, shifted her prone body on the back seat and slipped, perhaps, into coma.

Leopold ventured a careful glance at her. Unlike the Cainite, the mortal resonated within the Sight. He'd known as soon as he'd made his way past the row of insubstantial houses and beheld her—her perfection of line and form, the quality with which light rebounded from her skin. She transcended the pale world.

This, Leopold was certain, was the subject for the work that would bring him true immortality.

Thank heavens I found her before it was too late, Leopold thought. *That barbarian would have destroyed her and denied her the purpose of her entire life!*

Leopold had licked the deep wound at her shoulder. His ministrations had saved her. She would live. Long enough.

So close… mmm… so close, whispered the muse.

She had led him to his subject. She would find for him a place of solitude, and she would reveal to him the proper tools.

Leopold sped north, away from the town. *I must make it as far as I can before dawn.* The steering wheel was sticky from the discharge that seeped and dripped from the Eye.



Thursday, 22 July 1999, 3:05 AM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York

Mother fucker.

In her mind, Ramona writhed, groaned, tried to escape the constant, sharp agony that wracked her body, but the wooden stake through her heart held her completely immobile. Through the pain, she impatiently awaited the end. Her body and heart were impaled. Surely this was death to mortal or vampire. But there were the stories she'd heard....

Finish me, she thought. If the stake wasn't enough, then at least her attacker could strike the final blow and put an end to the pain. He could spare her waking another night into this hellish existence.

No, she remembered. *He's gone.*

And he had taken Zhavon.

Mother fucker.

The protective impulse, the same compulsion that had flung Ramona onto the rapists in the city, welled up within her again. She remembered her attacker's grotesque eye, pictured herself ripping it from his face.

But she lay paralyzed. Helpless. And the pain was not done with her yet. It swelled in her chest, shot through every limb, pounded in her head. Ramona's vision grew darker, faded. Darkness swept over her....

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 3:49 AM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York



Calebros hunched over his desk and typed madly, compiling, composing. Emmett was on his way back to Boston and then to Las Vegas. He would take care of Benito; Emmett would do what needed to be done. That was a relief. Maybe that was why Emmett had come in person, Calebros pondered, pausing at the Smith Corona. Security was important, true, but there were couriers that could be trusted.... Had Emmett come just to set Calebros's mind at ease? Was Emmett capable of such ulterior thoughtfulness?

Calebros laughed. If Emmett were, he certainly would never admit to it. It was enough, Calebros decided, to have one less thing—one less *major* thing—to worry about. There was still plenty else. Much of it dire and a significant portion ostensibly Calebros's fault.

The most potentially damning problem was that of the Sabbat. At least the monsters had paused in their rampage up the East Coast. In less than two weeks, they had stormed cities from Atlanta to Washington, D.C., in most cases annihilating the existent Camarilla power structure and assuming, as far as Kindred were concerned, *de facto* control. It would take them quite some time to root out the considerable Camarilla influence in those cities. Perhaps the barbarian Sabbat would never manage to scourge the halls of power. In this, the computer age, physical proximity was not necessary to exert leverage. Control on the ground, however, was not a negligible advantage. Over time, Camarilla ghouls would be found out, removed, destroyed.

The changes in territory were considerably less of a burden to Calebros and his clan than to others. A Nosferatu could pass unseen through a Sabbat city as easily as a Camarilla one. With the shift in power, there were still as many secrets, and, in a way, the services of the Nosferatu became more valuable to his allies--for whom access to certain areas was barred, or, at the very least, far more dangerous. So the Sabbat advances could be seen, from that perspective, as a gain for the Nosferatu as well.

Not so for the Ventrue, who was accustomed to playing prince and having his subjects bow down before him. Nor for the Brujah, who liked to flaunt his defiance in the streets. Now those streets were filled with cavorting devils, devoid of reason or thought except to destroy their enemies and revel over the broken bodies. The warlocks were holed up in their citadels. The Toreador, normally parasites upon both kine and Kindred societies, would be lost. The Gangrel cared neither one way nor the other. No, the Nosferatu were likely to come out of this upheaval relatively strengthened. Therein lay the danger.

Perceived strength invited envy and fear. Envy and fear invited persecution. And what would be the justification? For surely the Kindred were too sophisticated a people to found genocide upon tenets so subjective as jealousy and hatred (for to fear is to hate). The justification would be complicity, treachery. If the other clans, seeing the Nosferatu strengthened, ever had reason to suspect that the dwellers beneath had aided the Sabbat in their conquest, revenge would spring to the lips of every firebrand and echo throughout the halls of power.

And what reason might the others have to suspect the Nosferatu? Calebros, unwittingly, had given them ample grounds for suspicion.

His head was beginning to hurt. He leaned back from his typewriter, stretched his gnarled fingers, his arms and shoulders, his back. His vertebrae sounded like popcorn.

Even had his expectations of a minor Sabbat raid in Atlanta proved correct, Calebros knew, he and Rolph had still taken a chance. It was a calculated risk: withholding knowledge of the raid and risking Prince Benison's profound displeasure. Rolph, being a subject of Benison and residing within the prince's territory, had borne the main burden of the chance. The two Nosferatu had agreed that the risk was worthwhile, the opportunities presented too great to overlook: resolution of the Benito matter and repayment of an old debt to the Setite, Ruhadze.

But the raid had turned out to be a full-scale attack of a scope none had imagined the Sabbat capable of pulling off. Borges, archbishop of Miami and long covetous of Atlanta, could never have gathered--much less successfully commanded--such a force. Even Polonia, the capable archbishop of New York, could never have garnered enough support from the fractious warlords of the Sabbat. Sascha Vykos had been spotted, reportedly ensconced in Washington and installed as its archbishop. That, too, merely added more questions.

Jon Courier, as reliable and trustworthy a Kindred as Calebros had ever met, had established contact with an Assamite-playing-ghoul in Vykos's camp. A strange situation, that. The assassins had contracted with Courier independent of Calebros, which was how Calebros liked it. The fewer dealings with the Assamites, and the less reason they had to know he existed at all, the better. Even so, the contact was a source of information, since Courier passed along what he learned. What Courier passed along these nights was that there was no sign the Sabbat was ready to continue its northward march. The initial blitzkrieg had left them as disorganized in victory, if not as desperate, as was the Camarilla in defeat.

So there it stood, the uneasy status quo, and any Kindred that found out about Calebros's part in the affair might be only too willing to point a finger and make accusations that could topple the fragile balance of power among the clans. Who else knew? There was Rolph, but he was in the same boat as Calebros. There were a few of his informants and a few of Calebros's own in Miami. But how few? Calebros needed to know exactly; he needed to make sure that no one talked. No matter what. For the good of the clan. For several minutes, he struggled with thoughts that he didn't dare entrust to the permanency of writing. How far would he need to go, not merely to save himself embarrassment, but potentially to safeguard the very well-being of the clan? How far was he willing to go? Calebros knew what Emmett's answer would be to that question, but not his own.

He ripped out the sheet of paper that was in the typewriter. There was plenty else to worry about without getting mired in situational ethics—*hypothetical* situational ethics, at that. Time tended to answer many questions, and others it rendered moot, which, as far as Calebros was concerned, was just as good as an answer. Maybe better.

He turned readily enough to the next report, which dealt with another great concern: Hesha Ruhadze. The Setite shouldn't have been such a worry. He had a long history of dealing honorably with Clan Nosferatu. On occasion—the Bombay incident sprang to mind, but there were others—he had gone out of his way to aid Calebros's brethren. That was why it had seemed such a reasonable idea to hand over the Eye of Hazimel. Hesha

had been searching for it for decades, and considering the curiosity's hiding place, Victoria Ash's coming-out party seemed the ideal place for the transaction.

How quickly things changed.

Now the Eye was missing, Hesha's man who had been sent to the doomed party was dead, and Calebros was left pondering a disturbing string of deaths and Assamite activity that conveniently coincided with Hesha's whereabouts on a disturbing number of occasions. Calebros shuddered. The thought of Hesha joining forces with the Assamites was almost too much to bear. His record of cooperation with the Nosferatu was no guarantee for the future. What if he blamed the Nosferatu for the loss of the Eye? And what if he was prepared to address his displeasure by calling on allies who just happened to be lethal and fanatical assassins? Calebros tried to suppress another shudder but failed.

He took a very deep, unnecessary, yet highly therapeutic breath. Trying to convince himself that everything was the same as it had always been, he leaned back in his chair and propped his sizeable feet on the desk. Several of the piles of papers and folders stacked precariously on the desk quivered, but none toppled over.

Thoughts of assassination turned Calebros's mind naturally to Baltimore and all that was transpiring there. Just three nights ago, a band of Sabbat assassins had sneaked into the city and attempted to destroy Jan Pieterzoon, scion of a notable Ventrue line and the emerging leader of the Camarilla resistance—now that the sect was finally managing to regroup and mount a resistance. For a week or more, Calebros had almost expected the Sabbat war machine to keep rolling north, on through the Mid-Atlantic States, on through New England. But the blitzkrieg's momentum was spent by DC, and there the Sabbat sat. For the time being.

The attack on Pieterzoon was not common knowledge among the Kindred. Ostensibly, morale might suffer knowing the enemy had struck so deeply into supposedly secure territory. More likely, Prince Garlotte of Baltimore was attempting to salvage his pride by keeping the attack quiet.

Marston Colchester, of course, had kept Calebros informed—of the attack, as well as of the change in Pieterzoon's mindset afterward. Until the attempt on his unlife, the Ventrue had been concentrating on shoring up the Camarilla defenses and consolidating his own power—there was Victoria Ash to contend with, now assuming the role of refugee ingénue; there was also Garlotte, his second-in-command Gainesmil, Marcus Vitel and a smattering of others. After the assassination attempt, Pieterzoon turned his attention to the darker side of warfare. He had discussed with Colchester the possibility of hiring assassins of his own. At Calebros's suggestion, Colchester had made a recommendation—a killer who would strike fear throughout the ranks of the Sabbat because, by rights, she should have been one of their own. Only time would tell if Pieterzoon would follow Calebros's unseen lead.

Time. If only there were enough time. For the second instance that night, Calebros felt keenly the passage, the *scarcity*, of time. Relentless, irreversible. The sensation was strange. For countless years the clocks had seemed to tick so deliberately, so slowly. He had once spent eight months tracking the growth of iridescent algae on an underground pool—not by noting the new growth each week or even each night, but by watching intently, without interruption, hour after hour, night after night, for eight months.

The kine measured time by hours, by days and nights. What was a single night to the Kindred? A fraction of a second of eternity? Of what significance was the passing of a month, a year, a decade? A grain of sand, not within an hourglass, but upon an endless shore.

Somehow, that was changing. Calebros didn't know how, or why, but he could feel it. He could feel it in his blood. He could read it in the reports.

The desk lamp began flickering again and distracted him from his thoughts. His attention returned to the papers on his desk, to the problem of Hesha Ruhadze, to the lethal dance taking place within the Kindred halls of power in Baltimore. There was, as well, the wildcard that was the Prophet of Gehenna. As far as any of Calebros's people knew, Anatole was still somewhere within the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. To what dark purpose, only God knew.

Still, the routine of it all, of enumerating the various dots and then attempting to connect them, restored Calebros's sense of order amidst the swirling chaos. It restored his illusion of control.

22 July 1999
Re: Hesha Ruhadze

FILE COPY

Report from Calcutta via Cairo---Hesha arrived and presented himself to Prince Abernethie; one of Prince's childer subsequently terminated; coincidence? Also: H. contacted local Tremere who was then assassinated; Assamite suspected.

Rolph reports from Atlanta---probable Assamite involvement in destruction of Hannah, Tremere regent. Hesha's man Vegel was there at the time.

Hesha allied w/ Assamites?
danger to us?
TRACK MOVEMENTS
as possible

22 July 1999
Re: Baltimore/Washington D.C.,

FILE COPY

Courier reports ~~—~~ according to Ravenna/Parmenides, no Sabbat plans for imminent attack on Baltimore; slow build-up/organization/consolidation continues; no sign shift of forces north, i.e., Buffalo.

Colchester to keep Garlotte, Pieterzoon informed of info from R/P re: D.C.

Pieterzoon not aware
of Colchester dealings
w/ Garlotte.
Keep it that way.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 5:17 AM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York



Ramona's eyes focused again.

How long...?

The sky was noticeably lighter. Dawn was not far away. Terror gripped Ramona.

Dawn. The sun.

Her skin itched, as if already the first invisible rays licked at her, hungered for her flesh, which would crackle and burn.

She fought down the fear. Her thoughts fell together enough for her to register surprise. *Why the hell am I waking up?* she wondered.

Zhavon's kidnapper had slammed a piece of wood all the way through Ramona, but this wasn't her mortal body anymore. She wasn't dead, just immobilized.

Just.

That was all it would take. The sun would take care of the rest.

Someone could find me, take me inside before the sun rises, she thought desperately, but she knew what would be more likely to happen. If some mortals did find her, they would mistake her for dead, call the police or an ambulance, and by the time help arrived, Ramona's body would be a smoldering husk.

No. Ramona could only count on herself.

Realizing that, she tried to clear her mind, to focus all of her attention and energy on one action—she needed to reach up, grab the stake and pull it out the front of her chest.

Otherwise, she would die. Horribly.

And although she might fantasize about an end to this curse that was her new existence, her survival instinct flowed too strongly. She couldn't bring herself simply to give in to the searing pain and death that would come with the sunrise. That grisly image, too, she blocked from her mind.

With intensely concentrated effort, she poured all her strength into her right arm, into the hand closest to the protruding stake. No other physical need mattered. The power of her blood, the full strength of her will, could be directed completely to the one task that would preserve her for another night. She visualized her hand taking hold of the stake, pulling it through so that its hold on her was destroyed. She strained with all her body and soul to make that one movement.

And, still, she couldn't so much as blink.

Realizing her failure, panic set in. The calm, rational attitude that Ramona had struggled to maintain fled and her mind filled with primeval banshee wails in the face of the encroaching sunlight. Her unrestrained, animal terror was no more useful than her concentrated effort. Both were the same to the prickling rays of the sun, just breaking through the trees.

Ramona stared straight ahead as the steam beginning to rise from the soft, white tissue of her eye obscured the world. She felt as if she were burning from the inside out, but then the outside, too, began to sputter as from the fire of cigarettes held against her body. Her lips began to sizzle. Exposed skin drew tight over face, neck, arms, feet. Agony and panic mingled within her, fed upon one another. The burning morning sun made the stake through her heart seem little more than a pinprick, and she lacked even the ability to struggle.

And then the stake moved.

Through the haze of pain, Ramona knew that her body had burned away, that there was no flesh remaining to hold the stake in place. That was why it moved. But such was not the case.

A hand grasped the end of the stake between her breasts. She felt herself lifted from the ground briefly as the stake was yanked loose. Its exit from her body was marked by a nauseating sound of suction, the noise of a boot being pulled from muddy ground. The rays of the morning sun instantly cauterized the gaping wound in her chest.

"Go deep, now!" A voice rang in her ears. A voice she'd heard before.

The face of the stranger was close to hers. His wild hair blocked the sun. He held her by the shoulders.

"Go!" he roared at her.

I don't smell you, she wanted to say. She smelled only the burning... the smoke... her own flesh.

"Go, you stupid whelp!"

Ramona turned her head. *I can move*, she thought absently.

A great drowsiness was coming over her, even with the burning. She saw the stranger again. He was next to her. She saw him sinking down into the earth.

Go deep!

Now the command struck her. Refuge against the burning.

Go deep!

And go deep she did. She sank into the ground, and the soil, a cool salve to her burning flesh, welcomed her.

Go deep.

Ashes to ashes.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 11:06 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



Zhavon felt the pounding at her temples before anything else, like somebody was taking a hammer to her head every two or three seconds. It was a hundred times worse than the time Alvina had gotten hold of a bottle of bourbon. The pain shot from her temples down to her ears and then along her jaw, the muscles of which were tensed and cramping, even though her mouth hung open. Zhavon methodically closed and opened her mouth, worked her jaw until the muscles loosened just a little.

It took her that long to work up enough nerve to open her eyes and a few more moments then to realize that they were open. She saw only darkness.

Nighttime, she thought. *I'm in a dark room.*

But something didn't feel right. A lot of things didn't feel right. Slowly, what her senses registered made it to her brain, and the information was filtered through the horror of the past hours.

The car, she remembered hazily. *I'm not in the car anymore.* How long had that lasted, she wondered. Minutes? Hours?

And before that had been… *The girl from my dreams.*

A dull ache radiated from the bottom of her neck. *The girl from my dreams*, Zhavon tried to recall, *she… she… took me in her arms. She…* But it all grew so fuzzy after that.

Pain. Pleasure. Zhavon remembered sucking in a breath, holding it for what seemed like forever. She remembered wanting nothing but for the feeling to continue, to go on and on and on.

Then there'd been the car. She'd felt sick but been unable to retch.

And now…? Darkness.

Needles. Tingling. Coming from her hands. They were asleep. Both her arms were asleep. Behind her. She tried to move them, couldn't very much. A different sort of pain began at her wrists. Burn. Rope burn.

Tied up, she realized, but was too weak to do anything except barely take notice. *I'm tied up. To a post, or something.* It was cold. Like concrete, or stone.

She blinked her eyes, but the darkness didn't recede. Aside from the pins and needles, she felt cold. Deep cold. Down to her bones cold. She tried to move her feet again and couldn't. *Tied too?* She thought she could feel, through her jeans, rope tied tightly around her ankles.

The pounding at her temples grew louder and drove all thought away for a while. At some point it receded. A faint breeze was chilly against Zhavon's face. She began to shiver—or realized that she was already shivering. She could see nothing but felt that she was in a large, open space, a very large room.

An eye. She suddenly saw an image of a large, disgusting eye, floating before her in the dark. It couldn't be. Her mind must be playing tricks on her.

The pounding returned. The eye was gone, if it was ever really there.

"Mama." Zhavon mouthed the word. Her dry lips stuck together for a second. No sound escaped. Quietly, she began to cry.

KR

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 11:15 PM (1:45 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

"Elizabeth Ariadne," said the man with the moon on his head. "What do you do here?"

Liz looked up from her seat in the lobby of the hotel and let her notebook fall to the ground. It, and the chair, and the ground beneath them faded away. She stood up—one stands, when a god speaks—one stands, also, when one has no chair—and tried to see the figure's face more clearly, but the moon's rays filled her eyes, and the voice was all she knew.

"I...I came to watch the dancers perform. Tonight they were acting out the Curse of the Deer from the Mahabharata."

"Doomed love. I see." The man with the moon on his head turned and walked. Elizabeth, without moving her feet, came with him. They trod on a soft surface, like skin, but it was likewise the cold, hard, night-blue sky. The stars scattered, just as Hesha's snakes scattered when he passed among them.

The moon-god came to a halt and spoke again. "The dancers are too early in the cycle. Tonight begins a different chapter, Elizabeth Ariadne. Look down at my feet."

She obeyed—she could do nothing else—and saw, in a blank space where the other stars would not go—from which the other stars had fled to do the moon his due reverence—a small, dim, red, insolent star that burned her eyes.

"The dance tonight, Elizabeth Ariadne, is taken from the War of the Rakshasa. The King Ravana has returned...the Demon Ravana is awake...the Rakshash Ravana wages war again." The shining hand of the stranger covered her gaze, and the red star let her go. "Can you remember this?"

Elizabeth shook her head in doubt. "I am dreaming."

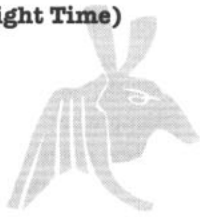
"You are dreaming," said the god. "But there will be a way. In your hands, there will be a way—" He stopped suddenly. "They are coming for you, Elizabeth Ariadne. Remember, Elizabeth..."

"Elizabeth...Liz...wake up."

In her seat in the lobby of the Oberoi Grand, Elizabeth opened her eyes and saw Thompson's ruddy face and grizzled brows staring down anxiously.

"He's back," said Thompson. "Meeting in half an hour."

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 11:44 PM (2:14 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



Elizabeth knocked quietly on the door of the suite. The Asp opened it, checked the hallway, pulled her through, shut and bolted the door fast behind her. He brushed past her, left her standing in the foyer and signaled her into the common room. Conversation sprang up immediately—hushed, urgent tones, starting in mid-sentence, starting at the exact word they had left off with before the knock and the tiny crisis of opening the door.

"—spent the day in a drainpipe?"

"Better than in the river. Remember it when your time comes."

Unacknowledged and alone, Liz stepped timidly into the conference and sat down.

"Where is Michel?" Hesha asked of Thompson.

"He's dead, sir. He was weak when you handed him over. We took him upstairs, washed the hand print off and tried to…revive him, but before we could do much with him, his body disintegrated." Thompson shook his head. "He wasn't dry, either. He bled, but one of the stains wasn't his blood. I think it was some sort of acid. There were glass fragments on the shirt before the stuff ate it away."

A long, uneasy silence took the room. Hesha, standing straight and solemn by the window, looked out on Calcutta. Huge drops of rain slammed into the glass. Beyond the falling streaks and the gale-tossed deluge, the city lights were dim. Colored neon, traffic signals, garish signs and bright streetlights, all wavered like fountain lamps. Calcutta seemed a city underwater, and the Setite could not see even so far as the horizon.

"Report."

Thompson and the Asp weighed in with the news of the last twenty-four hours. Names of strangers buzzed across Elizabeth's ears: Pauline Miles had lost a man; Das Gupta and Forrest checked in; the team covering the White Town sighted Smith, Jones and Robinson but had lost track of Tom, Dick and Harry… Johnson, Jackson, Jameson…Alex, Abigail and Albert Street. Ramona, Ramana, Ravena, Ravana…. Elizabeth's attention strayed to her notebook, her hieroglyphs, her pen. The stream of information poured down around her like rain.

"What are you doing, Elizabeth?" Hesha's voice, curt and angry, broke into her reverie.

"I came to watch the dancers perform," she replied without thinking. "Tonight they are acting out the Rising of Ravana."

"Elizabeth!" This time, the Setite's tone cut through her, and she jumped. Her eyes met his like a cornered animal's, and she stared. Hesha picked up her papers. The top three sheets were loose, covered in gibberish, shot through with fragments of thoughts in English and overlaid with line drawings of the three-eyed demon statue. Impulsively, he tore them in half in front of her, then stalked back to the window. "Report, Elizabeth."

Deliberately, Elizabeth Dimitros closed her notebook. She stood, angry-pale and tightly held together, leaning slightly on the glossy edge of the table.

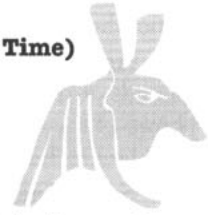
"I will not." Her jaw clamped shut. "I will not call you 'sir,' either. I am not a secret agent. I am not a decoy. So far, the closest I have come to my own profession is browsing the antique shop downstairs. I don't know why you brought me here," she drew a heavy breath, "and by now I cherish no illusions that you will ever tell me the real reason. I was doing what I could on the papyrus from here; I was memorizing Vegel's transliteration notes. I was doing my best to ignore your illegal, impossible, inexplicable—since you never do explain when I ask—activities. You want to stop that, go ahead. I have work of my own I can do." She limped around the chairs to her room. "But I'll be damned if I'll sit here anymore."

The door shut behind her, and the lock turned audibly.

Thompson and the Asp kept quiet. They looked briefly at each other, then kept watch—a fleeting, corner-of-the-eye, nervous watch—on Hesha. With control and precision, he folded the torn papers between his hands. He halved, quartered and tucked them into the breast pocket of his jacket. Finished, he addressed the open phone as if nothing had happened.

"Janet. Report."

Friday, 23 July 1999, 3:43 AM
(Thursday, 22 July 1999, 6:13 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



Late and unannounced, Hesha strode into his suite. Thompson and the Asp, waiting, stood to receive him. With a nod, he dismissed the pair. Gratefully, they secured the area and went off to sleep.

"Good night, sir," said Thompson, leaving.

No, thought Hesha, *it was not.* He stripped his raincoat of equipment, stowed the tools, and hung the dripping trench to dry. Emptying his suit pockets, he glanced at Elizabeth's place at the table. Slowly, he set down two handfuls of tiny supplies. Abandoning shoes and jacket, he selected a thin, crooked piece of steel and stepped over to her door. With an ear and a hand, he listened through the wood and found no sound but slow, deep breathing and faint, steady heartbeat. The steel drew back the dead bolt, and the Setite opened the door a crack.

Scents spilled out of the room: young woman, old books, ink and new paper, faint fear, anger and tears. Hesha followed the trail: here she had stood in fury, here she had begun to cry, here was terror.... He pulled the darkness safely around him and crouched by the edge of her bed.

Hesha watched her thoughtfully.

It would be too much to say that he regretted losing his temper with her. His analysis, conducted behind the walls of his self-control, found his own conduct... unsatisfactory. It was unnecessary to bring the woman to the sundown conferences; it might, in fact, be dangerous. She had no need to know the greater picture, even in such limited views as his retainers were given. Elizabeth's duties could be explained just as easily in private, face-to-face. She now lay farther from his influence than ever, across a rift, put there by his own lack of restraint. He had let the masks slip away over a trifle, over nothing. And he could not even put the blame on the curse. It was his own temper; the Beast had simply laid back and laughed at the show. Michel's death was no excuse, no surprise. As he had lain last night in the flooded drainpipe, Hesha had known the Assamite child would finish her mission, one way or another, and had come to terms with all the implications, all the difficulties entailed.

Temper. Plain anger had gotten to him, and after the meeting, as he searched Calcutta, he had both carried it with him and found it everywhere. His Nosferatu contact had not appeared. That he—she?—was unavailable was reasonable, yet Hesha's reaction was unreasoning annoyance. He drifted down to Albert Street and found Subhas holding sway in the coffeehouse. The courtesy and deference of the white-haired gentleman slowly disintegrated; Hesha's own civilized face fell, and the two old allies found themselves on the verge of all-out battle. Only the split-second's hesitation, the fighting instinct that sized up the enemy before striking, kept them back. In the dead pause, the experienced, careful pair recognized the false feel of the argument. Hostility quickly turned to mystified calculation—something outside their close-guarded psyches pricked them toward war.

Subhas laid his hands on the table, Hesha eased his chair away, and they parted without bloodshed.

As the Setite left the coffeehouse, he'd noticed the two students coming in, and the sounds of the young Brujah losing their control—the fleeing patrons of the shop, the howls of the rabble-childer caught by Subhas in a fighting mood, the shattered windows and broken bones—followed Hesha's keen ears down the street.

Seeking more clues, Hesha had waded through the rising water to the bridgeworks. Chaos reigned. The typhoon rained. The gypsy camps were flooding with the rest of the city, but what should have been an accustomed, annual retreat to drier perches was a screaming, surging confusion. A lone Gangrel, furiously calm, turned Hesha back the way he came. The cat-like creature had given out that the tribes were going mad, Bhanjaras and Khana Buddos all together. She blamed the Ravnos and spat curses on them over her shoulder. Hesha left her before the rage could outweigh her determination to defend her charges.

No longer doubting the influence that pervaded Calcutta, the Setite turned to give the curse its due. He hit Park Street and the old cabarets, hunting as clumsily as a night-old Cainite. In his gut grew a fire such as he could not remember; beyond ordinary hunger, beyond the Beast's gluttony—an awkward, unfrenzied, foundering desire. It drove him into a bar. He'd come out with a light-skinned, long-haired girl of Elizabeth's age and build. Hesha pushed her into an alley and drained her dry without remorse. The Beast didn't take him over, didn't even try. Why fight for control when they were of one mind already? Complacent and contented, it curled around Hesha's new anger like a cobra around her eggs. And that made the Setite angrier still. *Unnatural*, he thought. Something deep and sinister was wrong in Calcutta. Hesha, on his guard now, believed he could fight its effects, but he prayed to Set that whatever it was would end soon. He prayed, too, that the elder denizens of the city knew themselves well enough to resist.

Elizabeth kicked slightly and rolled onto her shoulder. Hesha stared down at her. Sleep had banished her worries, given her peace. Without consulting him, his hand reached out and stroked the hair away from the placid face. Her eyes twitched behind the lids, and her face began to twist into less happy lines. *More nightmares. How does she know?* The creature pulled his hand away, reset the locks and sought oblivion in his own rest.

"Hesha..." said the god in the mask. "Blood of my blood."

"Lord?" Hesha opened his eyes and sat upright. "What do you want of me?" His traveling casket and hotel room were gone; the blackness of dead dreams surrounded him.

"Look upon me."

Hesha turned toward the voice and made out shapes in the darkness. A vast, serpentine creature with a body like tar filled his vision. The night and the monster's flesh met only at the horizon. Directly beneath him, the figure of a giant with the red mane of a lion, the beak of a bird and the horns of a ram lay fettered in its coils. As he watched, the god in the mask writhed in his trap, his muscles straining until the veins stood sharply up. The god freed one arm, and the ropy limbs of his opponent flailed about him until they found better purchase on his neck. Freeing his neck, the god sacrificed the arm again, and the fight returned to its starting point.

"My lord," said Hesha, kneeling. His own legs, he saw, were wrapped with the coal-black tendrils of the beast.

"Stand! You cannot afford to bow to me until I am free! Look, instead, upon my companions."

On every side of the god in the mask, there were other figures. Some, lying quietly but with their eyes open, were nearly free of the creature. Others, equally still, were so covered by the tarry scales that nothing showed of their own bodies; the monster had conquered all, and only the shape of the victim remained. A few—very few—wrestled as the giant did.

"And look, now, at what stands behind you." Hesha turned, and found only the empty darkness he had seen on waking. "Look *up*, blood of my blood, and understand."

And Hesha followed the god's commands and realized that the night in front of him had a shape. It was a twisted pillar formed from the body of the thing below him, and it rose higher than a mountain into the dull sky of the dead. At its peak, wrapped almost entirely in the coils, was a figure the Setite knew well; he possessed a statue carved as its portrait. The demon, four-armed and hung with horrendous weapons, glinted black and blue and dripped red rivers of blood down the column that supported it. *Rivers*, thought Hesha. *The blood of a hundred thousand men...a million...*

"Grandfather sets now," said the god in the mask. Hesha turned back to see his master and, as the dream faded, heard the muffled voice of Set shout from beneath the twining body of Apep: "Remember!"



Thursday, 22 July 1999, 9:05 PM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York

He was waiting for Ramona when she rose from the earth that night. "Come with me." The stranger's voice conveyed a sense of urgency but not fear. Though his sunglasses hid his eyes, occasional movements of his head indicated that he was aware of every night sound around them.

Ramona lay unmoving on the ground. She was captivated, for the moment, by the sensation of her body separating itself from the earth beneath her. The ground had welcomed her, had taken her in and shielded her from the sun. She had been of it, and it of her.

Ashes to ashes.

Now she was again a distinct being, and something intangible was lost in the transformation—a peaceful sense of wholeness faded, replaced by her personal needs of the moment, by the pain of her scorched body.

Ramona's throat was parched. Her eyes were so dry that her eyelids stuck when she blinked and opened only with difficulty.

The stranger watched her carefully from where he crouched in his ragged clothes. "Come with me," he said again, but this time his words were less harsh, as if he understood the adjustment between perspectives that she was going through.

Of course, Ramona remembered. He had sunk into the ground with her. Small clumps of dirt were lodged in his tangled hair. She stared hard at him and found herself reluctantly comforted by his presence. He was so much like her, she realized, and there was none of the anxiety about him that was always so obvious with Jen and even Darnell.

With effort, Ramona licked her blistered lips. The sun had taken its toll upon her, and though the earth had protected her, it had not healed her. As she sat upright, her skin cracked and split where it stretched. She licked her lips again, tasted blood.

"Call *me* a stupid whelp," she said to the stranger. "Asshole."

He frowned at the affront but, rather than reply, turned and began to walk away.

Ramona's stiff muscles tensed as she saw him leaving. She couldn't let the stranger go! She was drawn to him—this creature, this vampire, who had sunk into the protecting arms of the earth with her. Ramona scrabbled to her feet. Sharp pain coursed through so much of her body, reminded her of the fiery demise she had nearly met that morning, but she forced her battered and blistered parts into motion.

The stranger hadn't gone far into the trees. Ramona quickly caught up. He didn't look back at her, but Ramona could tell that he'd wanted—*expected*—her to follow, and she was irritated at how easily she'd fallen into his game. But there was something about him, about his every stride—confidence, assurance. Ramona had seen men like that on the streets of L.A.--not the pimps or the more flamboyant drug dealers, but some of the others, some of the gang leaders--who walked down the street lacking any fear. Like them,

the stranger carried himself with an unconscious swagger. His steps were easy, natural. His every motion indicated control. He was completely devoid of fear.

Fear.

Fear was what Ramona had lived with since the change. She, Jen, Darnell, Eddie—they had all bonded out of fear. Fear had led them to leave L.A., where so many of their kind walked the streets at night, where too many unknown dangers lurked.

Fear had remained their companion wherever they traveled. In Texas, that... *thing* had appeared out of nowhere and ripped Eddie to shreds. Darnell called it a werewolf. Ramona didn't know what it was, didn't care as long as she stayed away from it and its kind.

In New York, the Sabbat had swooped down upon the travelers.

Last night, some bastard with an eye the size of a softball had stabbed Ramona in the back, had run her through with a wooden stake and carried off Zhavon.

And none of these nightmares even touched upon the personal fears that plagued Ramona—the suspicion, the *fear*, that some vital remnant of her mortal life was slipping away every night.

The stranger, just a few yards ahead, made his way through this wooded part of the small town as if none of those fears had ever touched him, as if he'd achieved mastery over them.

Ramona quickened her pace. Her legs faltered. She put a hand to her chest, to the jagged wound, only slightly healed over, where the stake had forced its way through her body. She almost called to the stranger to slow down, but she couldn't bring herself to so great an admission of weakness. Despite thinking that she might be able to learn from him, she resented how the stranger had treated her—confronting her and disappearing, giving her orders like she was his to boss around. His confidence, so compelling in many ways, bordered on arrogance. Ramona was not about to bow down to him.

That was only one concern, however. As she stumbled after him, the image foremost in Ramona's mind was of Zhavon being carried away by that creature with the deformed eye.

Zhavon.

Ramona's legs grew shakier with each step. "We've got to get her back," she said at last, thinking that the stranger might stop to reply, and she could rest.

He didn't stop, or even look back at her. He only grunted and continued on his way.

Ramona kept on after him. Her muscles ached after a night in the ground. Her chest and back throbbed from the damage done by the stake. Finally, as she was afraid she couldn't go on, he came to a halt.

The stranger's dark sunglasses turned to face Ramona impassively. He pointed to something in the shadows. "There," he said.

"We've got to get her back," Ramona said again, but then her gaze followed the line of his finger.

Lying in a heap among the sparse underbrush was an unconscious woman, a large, African-American woman in a flowered nightgown. Ramona wanted to yell at the stranger, to convince him to help her find Zhavon and bring her back. Instead, Ramona found

herself taking tired steps toward the woman. The stranger stood and watched as Ramona dropped to her knees beside the prone figure.

"We've got to..." Ramona began, but the words stuck in her dry throat. She felt her fangs, seemingly of their own accord, lower to full extension.

The woman on the ground was unconscious but very much alive. Ramona touched a knot on the back of woman's head. She hadn't come with the stranger by choice—at least not her own choice.

For the second time in as many nights, Ramona was unable to command her muscles, but this time she was not paralyzed. Slowly, she leaned forward, lower, closer to the helpless woman. Ramona had fed from Zhavon last night but had lost much blood to the stake. The sun, too, had taken its toll. To heal, Ramona's body required blood.

She placed her hands on the woman's shoulder and head, and something about the woman's face gave Ramona pause. A blood memory tugged at her. Ramona knew this woman—or at least Zhavon, of whom Ramona had drunk, knew this woman. Ramona stared at the face, and a name drifted into her mind—*Irma. Aunt Irma.*

The world around Ramona began to spin. For a moment, it was last night again, and she was feeding on Zhavon—and she was Zhavon. Their blood mingled, mixed.

Ramona's eyes rolled back in her head as the bloodlust took hold.

Beware lack of blood; the hunger will take control.

Her fangs sank into mortal flesh, and with the blood she felt strength return to her body. Blood and strength. Strength and blood. She drank and was renewed. The heart beat, forced blood into her mouth. Its contractions grew labored, but still she drank. From far away, a voice cried out, *Irma. Aunt Irma.* The bloodlust that was Ramona drank and grew strong, drank until the heart beat no longer, until blood and life were no longer in that body.

Irma. Aunt Irma.

Ramona sat back on her haunches, stared at the body before her—the sagging flesh, the death pallor—and knew that this was what would've become of Zhavon if the creature with the eye hadn't intervened.

"Feel better?" the stranger asked from behind her.

Ramona, stunned by her fierce gluttony, turned slowly to meet his gaze.

"Tanner," he said.

"What?" Her voice was weak. She was distracted by the sensation of the blood changing her, healing her dead flesh. From the inside out, the hole from the stake filled and closed. Her burned skin regained a portion of its elasticity, but the worst of the blisters remained.

"Tanner," the stranger repeated. "My name's Tanner. Not asshole."

Ramona wanted to stand. She wanted to face him eye to eye, but she was afraid she'd fall if she tried. So she glared up at him from where she kneeled beside the rapidly cooling body. "You took this woman from that house we were next to," Ramona said.

Aunt Irma.

Ramona had never been in that house, had never seen with her own eyes the woman on the ground. Yet Ramona knew.

Tanner didn't answer her accusation. He stood; he watched.

Ramona looked away from him, but her attention fell immediately on the body, on the woman who would never get up. *Aunt Irma.*

"You're not *of* them anymore," said Tanner.

Ramona whipped around to face him. "You don't know anything about me!" But she knew she was wrong. He had joined the earth beside her. He'd brought her this woman, watched her feed. He knew more about her than she knew about herself.

"They are sustenance," said Tanner. "Nothing more."

He didn't point at the body, but Ramona knew what he was talking about. She knew *whom* he was talking about.

Zhavon.

"Where is she?" Ramona asked with a sudden urgency. "Where did he take her?"

"She is nothing," Tanner said evenly. "Sustenance."

His evasion told Ramona that she was right, that he did know. Her stomach was a tight knot. Tiny droplets of bloody perspiration rose through her undead skin. All thought of learning from him of her new existence vanished, lost to the rising compulsion that was Zhavon. "You were watching me. You saw him," said Ramona.

She struggled to her feet, took a step toward him. "You've been following me since we were in the city. You saw him."

She could see her attacker, the strange eye, just like when she'd been lying on the ground with the stake through her heart. "You didn't save me right away. You followed him," she guessed. "Where'd he take her?"

Tanner folded his arms defiantly. "I didn't save you right away because you had a lesson to learn."

"Where is she?"

"You still haven't learned it. Greet the sun, and you still haven't learned."

"I don't want your lesson!" Ramona grabbed him by the shirt.

Tanner didn't move in the slightest. Though Ramona clutched his shirt, he felt as if he were stone embedded in the earth. "You have no choice," he said. "You will learn… and survive."

Ramona released him, took a step back. She saw her own puzzled expression in his black glasses.

No choice. A threat? she wondered.

But he had saved her twice—once from the Sabbat, once from the sun. Hadn't he proven himself an ally, if not a friend? Ramona regarded him warily. He was waiting impatiently, but for what? He didn't look like he was about to attack her, but he'd shown that he could move with dizzying speed.

"I know I need to keep my ass out of the sun," she said with a sneer.

Tanner remained unmoved. "You learned as much your first night after the Embrace, whelp."

"Don't call me—!"

A slap to the jaw sent Ramona reeling. She tripped over the body behind her and landed hard on the ground, but in an instant she was back on her feet and ready to defend herself.

Tanner stood with his arms crossed, as if he'd not moved. His utter calmness unnerved Ramona and chased out any brief thoughts she had of attacking.

"You're not of the mortals anymore," he said, as he pointed toward the ground at Ramona's feet.

Not at the ground, she realized, but at *her feet*, monstrous and deformed as they were. The fire dwindled within Ramona. She was suddenly self-conscious, ashamed of her deformity, of what she'd become.

"Know that you are Gangrel," said Tanner. "And that I am your sire. I made you what you are."

Ramona staggered backward as if he'd struck her again. The first words drifted away. They held little meaning for her. *Gangrel... Sire...* But his last statement...

I made you what you are.

Ramona's ears began to ring. She was acutely aware of the tightness of her skin all of a sudden—the blisters, the damage done to her by the sun that even blood had not completely healed.

I made you what you are.

The cold body lay before her, between her and this stranger, this creature so undeniably like her. A dead body of her old life, the living corpse of her new hell.

Know that you are Gangrel.

"He took the girl and drove north out of town."

Ramona thought that Tanner had spoken the words, but she looked where he'd stood and he was gone.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 10:00 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

The Eye dragged Leopold toward consciousness sooner than he would otherwise have roused. Despite the depth of the cavern that protected him from direct exposure, his mind and body were mired in the thick lethargy that normally claimed him until the sun was fully set. He raised himself to a sitting position on the cold rock floor and wiped from his face the clear ichor that constantly drained around the Eye. The occasional discomfort was little enough price to pay for the insights he had gained.

This way, beckoned the muse.

Leopold followed. The winding tunnels were even less real than when he had arrived early that morning. The black expanses of stone faded away into nothingness. The echo of every footstep fled unhindered to the very Stygian abyss.

Leopold had lived with the eye of the artist. As a mortal, no detail had been beyond his notice. He saw not a vast desert, but every grain of sand.

After his Embrace, what before had been natural became a struggle. While the creative urge lingered beyond mortality, the capacity to fulfill that urge did not. Leopold floundered, despaired. In time, he'd come to make do, to compensate for the loss of that which he could not recapture. Obsession with detail gave way to obsession with absence—the aesthetic of the numbing void. He found a certain truth among his limitations.

Both the mortal detail and the undead loss, however, were mere facets of unSight. His greatest mortal achievement would be like a pale ghost to him now. How Leopold pitied those who were as he had been.

The Eye allowed him to see how totally insignificant was all that he'd held dear. As he made his way through the caverns, he seemed to traverse a great emptiness. Not one whit of the mountain around him was real to the Sight, and the unSight that had plagued him for the past weeks was fading as if the old memory of a youthful lover. Leopold did not care that his right eye was crusted over with the ichor. In fact, he was pleased to be rid of the limited and confusing perspective. Sight prevailed.

The change had come about sometime during the previous night—after he had achieved the girl, after he'd driven hurriedly north into the forested mountains. Had it been when he'd entered the caverns or before that, as he'd trekked through the woods with the girl over his shoulder and the muse leading the way?

This way.

She still led him. He trusted her implicitly, she the agent of his enlightenment. He was Chosen. He would achieve such greatness that his name would be praised throughout the ages and touted more highly than that even of Toreador. Leopold would be *the* Toreador—the name no longer just the label of a clan but a title, his title, and he would be the measure of all those preceding and following.

The essence of life, of beauty... the muse purred in his ear.

Leopold cocked his head. Strange, he thought, that as the Sight became more potent and unfettered from the old vision, he still had not viewed more fully the beauty of the muse. Brief glimpses only.

Patience, she soothed his mind.

His brief doubt crumbled, indeed, as he stepped into the radiant glow of his subject. The girl was where he'd left her when he'd fled deeper into the caverns at dawn. She leaned against a twelve-foot stalagmite, her hands tied behind her. She was too weak to struggle. During the night she had evacuated her bladder. The sharp odor, a milepost of the living world, drew all of Leopold's senses into order.

Yes... life... beauty. The siren-call of the muse's words guided his thoughts.

He knew there was no reason to doubt her. Hadn't she led him to his subject? Hadn't she brought him to this place of glorious solitude? All that remained was for her to present him with the means—the tools. At her behest, he'd left behind his hammers and chisels, instruments of unSight that they were.

He stood before the girl. She alone was real amidst the intangible surroundings of the cavern. The Sight revealed her to him—the rich tan of her skin, like freshly tilled loam; tightly curling ringlets, like creeping vines upon the face of the earth; the angle of her head leaning limply forward, a sunflower before dawn.

Bring her to fruition, the muse whispered.

"But... how?" Leopold muttered. He still didn't understand completely. How could he do what she asked?

I will show you, said the muse, as she took him by the hand.

Thursday, 22 July 1999, 10:04 PM
Meadowview Lane
Hayesburg, New York



Ramona couldn't pick up Tanner's scent, but how long had he watched her, with her only catching a hint of his presence a handful of times--and most of those only when he wanted her to know he was nearby? She didn't know what he had in mind, and she wasn't about to stick around and find out.

Silently, she made her way back to the house. Ramona kept seeing images of Aunt Irma's body lying abandoned among the trees. *Aunt Irma—she ain't my aunt*, Ramona reminded herself, but the pangs of conscience at leaving the body in that secluded spot, where it might not be found for several days, did not leave her. Ramona couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling of kinship betrayed, and in a way Irma was a blood relative, for Zhavon's blood still flowed through Ramona's body. Not to mention Irma's own blood.

What about all the others? Ramona grew angry with her own potential for guilt. *Drinkin' somebody's blood don't make 'em family—else I got a damn big family.* She pushed aside these ridiculous thoughts. She couldn't take responsibility for every mortal who stumbled into her path. Not if she wanted to survive.

Sustenance. Nothing more.

Though many of the scars from the morning sun remained, Ramona's strength was mostly returned by the infusion of new blood. She slipped inside the house and found what she was looking for—the keys to the old Buick in front of Irma's house.

As she pulled away from the curb, she was full of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Twice, with Zhavon and then with her aunt, Ramona had lost control. The bloodlust had overwhelmed her. Only the unexpected attack had saved Zhavon. Irma hadn't been so lucky—if being saved by that thing with the eye could be called lucky. Ramona didn't know anything about her attacker. She couldn't explain the unnatural, bulging eye she'd seen as she'd lain in paralyzed agony. Finding Zhavon was most important to Ramona now.

Why? So you can kill her before somebody else does? she asked herself.

It was a question Ramona couldn't answer, but the same compulsion that had driven her to follow the girl, to taste her blood, drove Ramona now.

I'll control the hunger, she promised herself. She'd worry about the details later. First, she had to find Zhavon.

Tanner's words haunted her thoughts as well.

I made you what you are.

Gangrel.

He'd made her a vampire. That much seemed clear. Why? Why *her*? And what else did he know that she needed to learn? He'd said something about a lesson. But Ramona could still feel the sting of his hand against her jaw. *I ain't about to take orders from that asshole. I never asked for this.*

But he seemed to know so much more than she did.

Ramona pushed the idea from her mind. *Zhavon*. That was what she needed to concentrate on.

He took the girl and drove north out of town. That's what Tanner had said.

Ramona didn't know the roads around the area. She didn't know what was to the north except the Adirondack Mountains, but for some reason, she had the impossible feeling that she could find Zhavon.

Don't ask, girl. Just go, she told herself. Thinking too much might drive the feeling away, might leave her helpless. So she turned the car north. But another thought brought her up short.

Jen. Darnell.

What should she do about them? *They don't need to get mixed up in this*, she thought. *This is my hassle, not theirs.*

But what if they were already mixed up in this? Zhavon had been missing for an entire day. Irma would've called the police, and in a small town like this, Ramona guessed, they wouldn't make the distraught aunt wait long before they started looking. What if the police had searched the abandoned elementary school? It seemed an obvious place to hide.

Ramona turned the car around as quickly as she could without seeming too reckless. It wasn't so late that the streets were empty, and she didn't need somebody recognizing Irma's car with some strange person behind the wheel and calling the cops.

Ramona felt like she was crawling through the town toward the school, but finally she arrived. From the outside, everything looked the same as she'd left it the night before.

She made her way around behind the building and climbed through the broken window that they had found. Ramona made her way to the gym and was greeted by darkness and silence.

The basement? she wondered, but decided she didn't have time to hunt for her friends. "Guys, it's me," she called out.

She heard them coming up the stairs—Darnell's light tread, Jen's less stealthy steps—although Ramona could tell they thought they were being silent. Darnell stepped through the doorway from the stairwell and into the gymnasium but said nothing.

"Ramona!" Jen was relieved to see her friend. "The police were here during the day. We were afraid—"

"Any trouble?" Ramona cut her off.

Darnell shook his head. "They just poked around a little and left. No big deal."

Ramona knew it was more serious than that. All three were aware of how vulnerable they were during the day. Direct sunlight or no, there was no guarantee that any of them could defend themselves while the daytime sleep clung to them. Even a small group of mortals could prove fatal. But Ramona didn't want to get into all that.

"Come on," she said.

Jen started forward but then stopped when she saw that Darnell hadn't moved.

"Where to?" he asked.

Wherever he's taken Zhavon, Ramona almost said, but she stopped herself, because she could see the challenge in Darnell's eyes. What would he do if he knew the reason Ramona was so often away was a mortal?

Ramona didn't have time to answer Darnell's question.

"My God!" said Jen, as she forgot her hesitation and crossed the gym to Ramona. "What happened?" She reached toward the large bloody splotch on Ramona's chest but stopped just short of touching the stain. Not realizing she did so, Jen sniffed at the blood from a distance.

"Some bastard drove a stake through my heart, and I'm goin' after him," Ramona said, telling the truth without being completely truthful. "We don't have a lot of time." Without waiting for a response, she turned and strode out of the school. Jen's footsteps were right behind her from the start. Darnell was more reluctant, but he caught up with them by the time they reached the old Buick.

As they drove away from the school and the town, Darnell in the front next to Ramona, Jen in the backseat, Ramona told them how her attacker had snuck up behind her and jabbed the stake through her body. She told how she'd watched helplessly as he left, and of the bulging, oozing eye. That interested them enough that she sidestepped any mention of Zhavon or of Tanner.

"A stake through your heart?" Jen asked incredulously. "And you got it out? You... lived?"

"I'm here, ain't I?" said Ramona.

She was uncomfortable with misleading her friends, but she was more uncomfortable with the idea of telling them. Why, she didn't know. Something about both Zhavon and Tanner was too personal, like Ramona's own failure to control herself in the presence of blood. Her thoughts were too confused to expose to anyone else yet. Darnell and Jen didn't need to know, she decided without managing to ease her conscience.

"What's this?" Jen asked from the back seat.

"What?" Ramona asked, confused. She felt fingers touching her ear and jerked her head away from Jen. "What are you doin'?" Ramona raised her own hand to her ear. It wasn't bleeding or anything. Then she felt what Jen must've noticed. The tip of Ramona's ear, instead of rounded as it should've been, rose to a point. The back edge, covered with short, thick hair, curled over a bit—like an animal's.

"What the...?" Ramona felt her left ear. It was the same as the right.

"Ramona?" Jen asked nervously. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She could feel Darnell staring at her from the passenger's seat.

He'd said very little since they'd gotten in the car, busying himself instead with drumming his fingers on the door or shuffling his feet as he'd listened to Ramona. He was staring at her still, at her ear, but his mind, as usual, pressed on to pragmatic matters. "Do you know where we're going?" he asked.

Ramona's fingers tightened around the steering wheel. His question was another that she was trying not to think about. Last night, she'd made her way almost directly to the house where Zhavon was staying, even though Ramona had never been there or even seen it before. Tonight, she drove along unfamiliar roads. She turned when it seemed the right thing to do. "Yeah," she said, "I know."

"What's happening to you?" Jen whispered, but the words were like thunder to Ramona's primed senses.

She looked over her shoulder at her female companion, then at Darnell. The same question was unspoken on his lips. This time, Ramona answered with complete honesty. "I wish to God I knew," she said, unable to keep the uncertainty and fear from creeping into her voice.

They rode in silence for the next half hour. Midnight passed. Ramona watched the road but tried not to think about it. Picking the turns seemed easier if she didn't pay too much attention. When she consciously tried to figure out where she was going, doubts crept into her thoughts. She became convinced that she was leading her friends on a hopeless, wild-goose chase, that at any moment, they would demand she turn the car around and take them back to Hayesburg, back to the relative safety of the school. After all, it had been in an equally remote area that Eddie had met his end. She cringed at the thought that she might be taking them all to their Final Deaths.

She tried to avoid those thoughts, to shove them back down whenever they surfaced. She thought instead of Zhavon—of the taste of her sweat and blood, of the scent of fear and anticipation, of how natural it had felt to hold the girl tight, to feel the ripple of her shoulder blades, the arch of her back.

Other thoughts intruded as well.

I made you what you are.

Ramona glanced out the window, saw the increasingly infrequent signs of civilization, and she wondered how Tanner had secretly followed her for so long. He'd obviously followed her in New York City, and from the city. Had he followed her before that? If he really had made her what she was, that meant he'd been in L.A. On the night of the change, he was the one who'd taken her from behind, who'd forced her head back and...

She shook her head to clear her mind. *Where you goin', girl?* she asked herself. But hadn't that always been the question?

Without warning, Ramona slammed on the brakes. Jen crashed into the back of the front seats. Darnell threw up his hands against the dashboard. Just as suddenly, Ramona threw the Buick into reverse and punched the accelerator. Jen toppled over onto the floorboard.

"What the hell...?" Darnell fought to an upright position.

The car zigzagged, almost out of control but not quite, as Ramona sped backwards down the narrow country road. The reverse lights threw all the rest of the night into pitch darkness.

"Ramona...!" Jen was climbing up the back of the driver's seat.

Ramona slammed on the brakes again. The car skidded backwards to a halt. Jen and Darnell were thrown against their seats. Ramona flicked off the lights, stared hard for a moment out the window as her friends regained their composure.

"There," she said, and threw the Buick into gear again.

She turned off the pavement and onto an uneven dirt road. Ramona hadn't really been four-wheeling before, and she suspected that the Buick hadn't either. Even in the darkness, she could see farther without the headlights, but as the car picked up speed,

each sharp turn became that much more difficult to handle. They bounced over washed-out gullies. Bushes and tree branches lashed the car.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Darnell shouted.

Ramona didn't take her eyes off the dirt track. Another curve sent them fishtailing. The back end of the car slid around, bounced off a tree, but Ramona kept going. She had the steering wheel to hold onto. Jen and Darnell ricocheted off the sides and roof of the car.

Ramona didn't fight the compulsion that propelled her and her friends along this suicidal course. *What's the point?* she wondered. She hadn't been able to stay away from Zhavon, or to keep herself from feeding on first Zhavon and then Aunt Irma. Why should this be any different? In that way, she, like Darnell and Jen, was merely along for the ride.

The Buick clipped another tree. One of the extinguished headlights shattered. A moment later, a low-hanging branch smashed into the windshield. Jagged cracks, like bolts of lightning, shot across the glass.

"*Ramona!*" Darnell was inches from her face, was yelling at the top of his lungs.

She slammed on the brakes again. The car skidded one way then the other, then, amidst a cloud of dust, came to a halt.

Silence.

Ramona stared straight ahead.

In the backseat, Jen was reverting to mortal ways—hyperventilating.

Darnell eyed Ramona angrily. "What the *fuck* are you doin'?"

Ramona stared at the car in front of them, the car that the Buick had stopped only two or three feet shy of—a dark sedan with a Georgia license plate.

Darnell saw the car now. He blinked, unbelieving. "I'll be damned."



Thursday, 22 July 1999, 10:18 PM
Governor's Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

The suite was very much as Victoria had left it when she had stormed out three nights prior. She had packed away most of her belongings, the gowns and accessories, but not all. The Toreador had left in a huff, angry with her benefactor, Prince Garlotte, who had provided the lodgings as well as many of her other possessions. When she'd arrived in Baltimore with only the proverbial clothes on her back after the fall of Atlanta, Garlotte had taken her in, treated her well. She was his trophy Toreador. He would have given her anything she'd asked—anything except the favor she did ask, to banish Jan Pieterzoon from the city. Garlotte had refused to exile his fellow Ventrue. So she had left.

Now, Garlotte sat on a couch amidst the detritus of her pique, looking like little more than a cast-aside gift himself. Clothes that hadn't made it into a box or hanging bag were scattered about on tables, over chairs, hanging from the backs of doors. Marston Colchester, as he slipped quietly through the unlocked door, wondered if the prince had moved at all in the intervening nights or days since the Nosferatu had left him. Garlotte wore the same outdated suit and the same wistful expression; he sat in the same spot on the couch.

"My prince," Colchester said. He curtsied awkwardly, knowing full well the mockery his lumbering, mangy-furred frame made of the gesture.

Garlotte acknowledged his spy's presence with a lackluster wave and sighed. Colchester was struck by the prince's uncharacteristic lethargy. The man was usually brimming, *overflowing* with energy. The prince, as often as not when he got an idea into his head, was instantly ready to ride off in five different directions all at once. He was a fair, if strict, prince, and one on whom subtlety was often lost.

No, Colchester reconsidered, that was not completely true. The prince was not blind to subtlety; he simply refused to abide it. As Colchester saw it, Garlotte was a five-color-crayon man, not the sixty-four-color-with-the-sharpener-in-the-back-of-the-box type. And that was by choice.

"What's she been up to?" Garlotte asked wearily, as if he didn't really want to know but felt he should ask.

"Ms. Ash?" Colchester asked knowingly. Garlotte glowered up at him from beneath his dark brow. "Ahem, yes… well, mostly she's been getting settled in at Gainesmil's."

From earlier conversations, Colchester knew he should leave it at that, but he just couldn't help himself in the face of the so obviously forlorn prince. "None of the old bump and grind as of yet," he said, adding a series of rather enthusiastic pelvic thrusts by way of illustration, "but it's early still. You know, I wouldn't have pegged Robert for a ladies' man, but I wouldn't be surprised to see him tickle her tonsils with the old one-eyed—"

"*That is quite enough,*" Garlotte snarled. His face was noticeably reddened, dark with barely contained rage.

"Ahem. Yes, well, ah... she did meet with Vitel tonight."

Garlotte's eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"Are you sure you want to know? I mean, I'm just the messenger—"

"*What happened?*" Garlotte drew in a deep breath and puffed up his chest.

"Well..." Colchester paused significantly and let the moment draw out, then, "Nothing much, really."

"Do not toy with me, Marston. I'll have your sorry head on a pike."

Colchester gulped. Threat of Final Death. Maybe it was time to play things straight. He knelt and bowed his head. "Forgive me, my prince." He peeked up; Garlotte wasn't looking at him. "I'm perhaps not the most sensitive in dealing with matters of the heart."

"There *is no* 'matter of the heart' here!"

Colchester cocked his head to one side. "Uh-huh. I see."

"Stand up, you oaf. What transpired between Victoria and Marcus Vitel?"

Colchester climbed to his feet. "Oh, she made some innuendoes about how the two of them could rule the city. He politely ignored her." *And he didn't look at her the whole time*, Colchester thought. *How the hell did he manage that?*

"Ignored her, did he?" Garlotte asked, somewhat relieved.

"Oh yeah," Colchester reassured him, then added, "I was waiting for her to flash some titty. *That* would've got his attention. Yeah, baby!" He groped the air with his hairy fingers.

Garlotte was on his feet in a flash, his face awash with anger. Just as quickly, Colchester was three steps closer to the door.

"Do I offend? Forgive me my barbarous ways, my prince," Colchester said quickly and contritely. "These matters of the heart—I mean, of state... matters of state—"

"Not one more word. Not one!"

Colchester nodded emphatically. He waited, and as the silence lingered, Garlotte sat back down. He took a deep, calming breath. "So, she did not attempt to... *entice* Vitel in the same manner as Pieterzoon?"

Colchester shook his head.

"And Vitel was not receptive to her entreaties?"

Colchester nodded affirmatively this time.

"Very well," Garlotte said. "Continue observing her."

Colchester nodded again. How convenient that his two clients, Garlotte and Pieterzoon, both seemed so interested in each other and in Victoria. It made Colchester's job easier. Even so, and despite his banter, he wasn't completely comfortable with keeping tabs on Ash. He could have one of his underlings take on the task, but, Colchester also knew, he would not. He would do it himself. Ah, the sacrifices he was willing to make for the clan.

Keeping an eye on Garlotte, the Nosferatu backed out of the suite. With the door safely closed, he sent a few more pelvic thrusts in the prince's general direction, then lumbered away down the hall.

JA

Friday, 23 July 1999, 12:27 AM
The Tabernacle
Atlanta, Georgia

An addled youth in an orange shirt and oversized pants, obviously under the influence of some hallucinatory demon, staggered past the bar. He shouted something at one of his group of friends, which took the other fellow by surprise, who in turn gave an "Oh, my God" look to another member of the group before finishing what remained of his plastic bottle of beer in one enormous gulp.

Isabel Giovanni and Marcia Gibbert exchanged knowing glances—should either of them need vitae before the evening's close, it would be ready for the taking. Of course, it would also likely be laced with no end of designer chemicals and more organic substances. They had both affected the clothing styles of the assembled concertgoers: straight-legged khakis far too large for them and tiny T-shirts that clung to their torsos. Marcia had braided her kinky hair into cornrows; Isabel had pulled her straight, black tresses into a pair of ponytails. They blended into the crowd perfectly.

Anyone who knew these Kindred's secrets, however, would have found it utterly incongruous—a pair of Cainites, the youngest a century old, dressed in fashions that the mortal world had adopted just years ago.

Almost ironically, they looked stunning, and a seemingly ceaseless train of libidos wandered up to them and threatened to buy them drinks.

"Tell me why we're here again?" Marcia half-kidded.

"Because no one we know would come here, and because none of these people will care what we're doing, or remember us if they do," Isabel smiled.

They climbed a set of stairs, leading them to a lounge just beyond the bathrooms, but away from the dance floor below and the stadium seats one floor above. The crowd in front of the stage surged energetically, some in states of natural exultation, others in states of drug-induced frenzy. The performer on the stage mixed a strange version of one of his signature songs, the surf-punk dance samples of the tune laid over the melody and harmony of an old Rolling Stones classic. Isabel and Marcia were simply two more guests at the raucous party.

Marcia took off her stylish-yet-functional backpack, currently all the rage among the accessory crowd. From it she produced the journal she had received just the night before in New Orleans. The two sat on a battered leather couch, further withdrawing from the crowd.

"Is this it?" Isabel asked.

"The whole thing. It looks like that thing you're after stayed on one of the plantations within the past hundred years. That's the most current sighting I've found. If it's as old as you think it is, it's probably fallen back into torpor since then, as no one else seems to have seen it afterward. I've checked everywhere sensible within two states around Louisiana and even with some of the offshore oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico. Nothing. I can't imagine

why a Methuselah would go to Mississippi or East Texas unless it was trying to hide, which, if it's hunting us like you say, isn't what it's trying to do."

"You're probably right—I don't think it's even considered that we're wanting to find *it*. Then again, that's moot. I'm not even going to pretend to be able to outguess it. If it's as old as we think it is, it's got to be very cunning to leave no trace of its passing."

"You really think it's one of the old clan?" Marcia asked.

"I don't know. It's impossible to say now, but it certainly seems to hate Giovanni enough to kill us specifically. Frankie Gee's only the most recent one, and when he disappeared in New Orleans, I knew it wasn't over the Milo Rothstein affair. It probably smelled him the moment he set foot in the city." Isabel was concentrating on the document before her, looking for any clue that might make certain that the monster below the journalist's home was indeed a vengeful Kindred. The journal seemed strange—a much more poetic account of the event than one might think would show up in a diary. Still, not only did she have no clue about the monster's identity, she had no idea as to the personality of the author. Still, it wasn't written in Enochian, Sanskrit or Egyptian hieroglyphics, so she hoped she could rule out being set up by the creature itself. "Did you go by the house itself?"

"No," Marcia said, "I didn't think it would be wise. If the thing was still there, I'd stand no chance against it, and the only thing you'd have to go on would be my disappearance." She shuddered a bit in spite of the intense heat of the concert hall, which was warmed beyond the normal Georgia heat by the mortals dancing around them. "I hope these pages help out. I had to promise a favor to get them."

Isabel looked up, a thin smile on her lips. "To Jake Almerson? Next time you talk to him, tell him you don't owe him any favors. And tell him he doesn't owe me one, either."

Marcia nodded whimsically and turned her own attention to the journal.

"Is there a test in the morning?" Distracted by the journal and the overwhelming music, neither Marcia nor Isabel saw the approach of the young man in the tennis visor.

"Fuck off," Marcia shot back, almost automatically, while looking up to meet his gaze. She stopped short of her attempt to chase him away verbally, though, when she felt Isabel's cold hand on her arm.

"No, wait," Isabel said. "This one's okay." Marcia turned to look at her and saw her wink; Isabel hoped the suitor saw the wink, too.

Pushing them apart with his ass, the newcomer dropped himself on the couch between them. "I'm Scott. Either of you want something to drink?"

Isabel shifted into full flirtation mode. She looked meaningfully at Marcia. "Oh, I don't know. But I guess I am kind of thirsty."

At this last remark, Marcia shook her head and smiled. "Girl, you have no shame." Then she turned to Scott. "I'm Patrice. Nice to meet you, Scott. Sorry about cutting you off like that, but your pick-up line blows."

A sheepish smirk overtook Scott's face. "Yeah, well, I didn't really expect to see anyone looking over a notebook at this show." He looked over at Isabel. "I'm sorry, beautiful; what was your name?"

"Chlöe."

"That's a really cool name. And you know what else? You have beautiful—"

"Eyes," interrupted Isabel.

"How did you know I was going to say that?" Scott said through a broadening smile.

Marcia interjected. "'Cause that's what every motherfucker says when he's trying to take home a prime piece of pussy." She made a grotesque face at Isabel, playing the part of the vapid club girl, but letting Isabel know just how stupid she thought it was.

Isabel, though, was thoroughly enjoying herself by this point. She knew it wasn't any stupider than their mark. It was amazing just how often a vessel would fall into a Kindred's lap, never knowing what was in store for him. "Shut *up*, Patrice. You're going to ruin my chances with this dashing Southern gentleman."

Oh, so it's a game, now, is it, Isabel? Marcia thought to herself. *Well, I'm better at this than you are. See if your old ass can keep up with someone who's young and still got it.*

Isabel fought back a smile, as if reading Marcia's mind. The hunt was on.

Scott, of course, loved every minute of it. Little had he known when he selected the two women to be the recipients of his dazzling attentions that they would be so responsive to him. He didn't even have to turn on too much of his boundless charm—chalk it up to the power of natural charisma. In fact, the most difficulty these ladies gave him was in the decision between them. *What the hell*, Scott reasoned, deciding to attempt to take them both to bed. After all, life is boring without a little risk. They way things were going, the worst he'd do was to get only one of them.

The innuendo proceeded, Isabel and Marcia baiting Scott and each other and Scott responding, leaving no question at all as to his singular goal. "Patrice" wrapped her arm around their suitor's shoulder; "Chlöe" crossed her legs so that one rested over his. Scott grinned and stretched backward, making himself comfortable and allowing the women to battle over the field of his body. Marcia leaned in to kiss his ear; Isabel pulled his head away from her and rested it on her shoulder. Scott bowed his legs away, allowing both of them greater and equal access to his libidinous bounty. Marcia tugged at his shirt and slunk one leg over his, dry-humping his thigh. Isabel locked her mouth around his, chasing his lazy tongue with hers. Certain of his impending carnal victory, Scott grew bold and slid his hand under Isabel's shirt, his hand inexpertly kneading the flesh of her small breast—which he didn't seem to mind was uncommonly cool—in half-tempo to the thundering music from the ground floor. Isabel had to fight back a spasm of laughter at his clumsy lotharian ineptitude—but blood was blood, so she persevered, shooting a grin at Marcia after breaking off her kiss.

"Why don't we take this back to the hotel?" Isabel suggested. "We're just right up the road."

Bleary-eyed, Scott acquiesced. Marcia pulled him up from the couch by his hand. Apparently, it didn't matter to him that his paramours weren't local. In fact, all that mattered to him was the recurring *I can't believe this* running through his mind.

The amorous trio stalked the five blocks to the Westin Peachtree in short order, stopping briefly in the hotel bar for a round of largely untouched vodka martinis and earning the derisive looks of the more staid guests. The drinks deterred their course only temporarily, however, and within ten minutes, they had settled their tab, taken an elevator, and stood outside Isabel's room.

"Patrice" made a grand show of fumbling with the key, though she knew it was probably unnecessary—Scott hadn't been paying attention to details since he weaseled his way

onto the couch back at the Tabernacle. She pushed open the door, staggered inside and collapsed supine on the vast bed.

That was all the encouragement Scott needed. He walked deliberately over to her in a drunken attempt at sultriness and forced his knees between her legs, which Marcia had bent at the knee and left somewhat apart.

Isabel, no longer under the pretense, closed the door quietly and slid the lever over the post. She killed the light, which she had left on before leaving for the concert hall.

Meanwhile, Scott had gracelessly removed Marcia's backpack and left it by the side of the bed. He tugged her T-shirt over her head and dropped it over the pack. Marcia giggled. *Jesus, he licked his lips.*

Isabel took the opportunity to relieve Scott of his shirt in her own fashion—she tore it at the neck and split it downward, pulling it off his body like a jacket that had been donned backward. He turned around for a moment, eyes flashing in preparation for the lusty fornication that was no doubt about to ensue, only to see her appreciating his body. Scott had well-defined muscles, but not enough bulk to make him *too* big. A frisson of vain pleasure surged through him: *Yeah, I know I look good.* But Marcia distracted him back to her with a tug at the front of his pants, and her fingers quickly found their way over the top and into his waistband. Isabel took to running her hands over his back and pectorals. Not wanting to deny his lovers access to his greatest prize for a moment longer, Scott undid the button and zipper of his pants himself while Isabel threw his visor-cap aside. Marcia grabbed the elastic of his exposed boxer shorts and jerked them down, exposing his engorged sex.

He does *have a reason to be so smug, after all,* Marcia thought to herself before taking his girth into her mouth. And waited on the physical cue…

Marcia felt Scott's body go rigid all of a sudden. She looked up just as his hellish scream choked off, silenced by Isabel's powerful hand, which had clamped over his mouth—and broken his jaw. Isabel herself peered down at Marcia, biting down between his shoulder and neck, her eyes glazed over as the gluttonous Beast grew fatted with the young man's vitae. Marcia then distended her fangs, piercing Scott's tumescent penis and gulping in the rich blood that had traveled there in his arousal.

Scott twitched violently, held in place by Isabel, who pinned his arms in place and silenced him, and Marcia, who held his legs, preventing him from buckling or collapsing. The feeding of other Kindred was intensely pleasurable—not that Scott had any such frame of reference—but the Giovanni kiss was different. Scott felt as if his body had been doused in acid—his blood turned to fire as it flowed out of his body and into the mouths of the witches who had tricked him. He kicked, shook, neither to any avail. Even as he grew tired, his blood no longer able to carry oxygen to his extremities, his exhaustion was one of anguish. *This is what it must feel like to burn to death,* Scott thought. Tears rolled down his cheeks, his nose bled and he could taste the coppery metal of blood in his mouth from where Chlöe had shattered his mandible with her bare hand. *This is how it feels to die of poison in your lungs. And these monsters are real.*

The Kindred took their time drawing Scott's precious vitae from him, prolonging his agony. Weakened by the loss of blood, Scott could no longer resist them as they broke off their kiss and moved their mouths to other parts of his body. They opened his wrists and inside his thighs, drank from his tongue and from the rippled flesh just below his left

breast. For half an hour, Marcia and Isabel fed from their wretched vessel, carrying out the act as though it were mortal sex—tempting, prurient, orgasmic, base and cathartic all at once.

When the two women were done, Isabel rose and brushed stands of hair out of her eyes. "I didn't intend to finish him."

"Me, neither," said Marcia as she pulled her top back on. "But I couldn't stop once it got going."

"Help me put his clothes back on. We'll walk him out of here like he's passed out drunk and leave the body somewhere."

"He's turning blue!"

"Yeah, that happens when there's no blood in your veins. Quick—I've got makeup in the bathroom. Dust him with base and rouge while I call a cab."

Marcia did as she was told. Twenty minutes later, the Kindred and their dead companion took a taxi to the neighborhood around Fort McPherson, in the southern part of Atlanta. They broke into an abandoned box factory, surrounded the corpse with corrugated cardboard, doused it with lighter fluid, and set flame to the whole mess.

"This is fucked up," Marcia commented to no one in particular.

"Well, it's more inconvenient than anything else. Think of the time investment like you were cooking dinner as a mortal. Except as a Kindred, you get to eat *before* you prepare the meal." Isabel shrugged.

"No, I've done this before. It just never gets any easier," Marcia said.

Isabel saw blood-tears trickling down her cheeks. She resisted the urge to tell her companion that, yes, indeed, it did become easier. *Too* easy, at times.

After an hour of burning the body and reigniting the portions that remained, they swept the ashes around the factory and gathered the bones. These they pounded into unrecognizable bits of detritus and scattered around the factory, in the trash, around the weedy outside lawn and into the sewers. One thing was sure—no one was going to find Scott.

Marcia wiped her eyes, staining her forearm with a bloody smear. The two women caught a cab and returned to their hotel.

Friday, 23 July 1999, 12:45 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



Patience.

But how could Leopold be patient in the face of a discovery that was the culmination of so many years of life and unlife?

Patience... or you will break her, the muse warned.

It was true, he realized distractedly. The girl passed easily out of consciousness, and though he didn't need her awake, the fruits of his labor were sweeter that way.

Does her fragility detract from her perfection as a subject? Leopold wondered.

He took a step back and focused the Sight fully upon her. As he did so, his doubts were soothed, like the cries of an infant appeased by mother's milk. Already, this work transcended by far anything he had ever before attempted, and most tellingly he was no longer fumbling along in a clumsy attempt to please the muse. This time, she had taken him by the hand, and he'd seen the *truth*. He'd felt it. It had coursed through his body more sweetly than any mortal's blood.

The essence of life. The essence of beauty.

They were his! And woe to every Toreador who had ever belittled him.

Never again! he vowed. *They will bow down before me!*

Patience, the muse reminded him, and brought him back to the task at hand.

"Yes." His whisper rose and echoed throughout the cavern.

The sound seemed to revive the girl slightly. Leopold leaned close to her. She filled his Sight. Once again, he was intent only upon revealing the essence of truth.

GF



Friday, 23 July 1999, 1:08 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

From the car, Ramona let Darnell take the lead. Not that any of them, even Jen, couldn't have followed the trail. The kidnapper had made no apparent effort to conceal his passing. More telling even than his heavy footprints and the bent and broken branches was the path of milky green slime that led from the car and formed an intermittent trail into the woods.

Darnell sniffed at one of the piles of glop. "Fucker might as well've left a trail of used rubbers."

While Darnell led them forward, Ramona looked constantly from one side to the other. She peered into the thick underbrush.

Jen, behind Ramona, noticed. "Could there be—"

"No." Ramona knew the question that was on Jen's mind, could tell by how extra skittery Jen was and by the smell of fear that surrounded her.

"Do you think he left a false trail?" Jen asked, embarrassed by the unspoken rebuke and trying to cover the question she'd set out to ask.

Ramona shook her head. "He wasn't the sneakin' type."

"Then how'd he sneak up on you?" Jen asked.

Ramona didn't answer at first. She opened her mouth to tell them everything—about Zhavon, Tanner—but then closed it without saying a word.

They got no need to know, she thought.

Darnell seemed to have latched onto the idea of finding whoever had hurt Ramona and kicking his ass, and Jen would go along. Why confuse the issue? There'd be time to tell more later.

"I was busy," she finally said without turning to meet Jen's eyes. "Keep a close watch," Ramona added, and she could hear Jen stiffen. It wasn't a false trail Jen was worried about, Ramona knew. It was the werewolf—*werewolves;* there was more than one vampire, after all—and what had happened to Eddie.

Ramona had other concerns. She didn't pretend, to herself or to the others, that she wasn't scared of those monsters. Anybody'd be crazy not to be. But worrying wouldn't save her neck. Ramona knew that out here, away from the city and even away from small towns, if there were werewolves, she and her friends would be in deep shit. But there was nothing they could do except deal with it if it happened. That or run back to the city. And leave Zhavon.

Ramona wasn't ready to do that.

It wasn't, however, those particular creatures, blurs of claws and snarling death, that Ramona watched for. She did have the uneasy feeling that she was being watched—that same feeling she'd had quite often recently, that same feeling that Zhavon must've felt

when Ramona had crouched outside the girl's bedroom window. Ramona kept pace with Darnell, but her attention was set on the shadows among the trees.

Tanner.

She knew he was out there somewhere.

Is he? she wondered, beginning to doubt her intuition. *We drove for a couple hours. Could he have kept up for that long?*

The forest loomed impenetrably dark all around. The strange night sounds of the wilderness made every shadow come alive. Each insect's chirp, every leaf that quivered in the breeze, also served to remind Ramona of what had happened to her ears. They twitched; they zeroed in on every sound. They were the ears, not of a person, but of a beast.

Just as her feet were no longer human feet.

You gave in to the Beast.

Those were Tanner's words.

I made you what you are.

Tanner, who was so damned sure of himself. He seemed to know everything, could probably do anything.

I could've done it, Ramona decided at last. *I could've chased a car for a hundred miles and never been seen.* So surely Tanner could. How far had he followed her without her knowing? All the way from L.A.?

Darnell paused to sniff at the newest pile of slime. Maybe it was something about the quality of the minimal moonlight, or the effect as the light filtered through the forest canopy, but Ramona was fairly certain that many of the piles of glop had been different colors—some greenish like the first few, others much darker, almost black, some more translucent, and still others a sickly green and dark crimson, like a mix of blood and thick bile. But the foul scent was the same. Darnell confirmed that with a distasteful wrinkle of his nose.

From the car, the trail had led steadily upward into the foothills of the Adirondacks. The climb would've been tiring for a mortal, but Ramona was flushed with the vigor of fresh blood and with the knowledge that, somewhere ahead, Zhavon was in trouble.

That girl has the worst luck, thought Ramona. Would any of this have happened, she wondered, if Zhavon's mother hadn't tried to protect her daughter by sending her away from the city?

Or if I hadn't found her?

Ramona felt the weight of guilt settling onto her shoulders, but only for a moment. *But she would've been killed that night she was attacked if I hadn't been there,* she reminded herself. Ramona deftly shifted the blame back a step further to the cause of her own problems and, by extension, most of Zhavon's:

Tanner. He made me what I am—or so he says. He set all this in motion.

Ramona kept searching the deep shadows for his shape. She tried to ignore the smell of the putrid slime and sought that other familiar scent, but she didn't find it.

Is he out there?

Darnell stopped as they reached a ridge crest. He paused only briefly to sniff at the air and at the ground, then gestured down the opposite slope. "This way. We're gettin' closer."

He seemed very intent on catching his prey. Ramona wasn't sure if he was driven by the desire to avenge the injury to his friend, or if the hunt had taken hold of Darnell like sometimes it did her.

"How do you know we're closer?" Jen asked.

Darnell stood upright very stiffly and gnashed his teeth together. From many instances before, Ramona recognized his disgusted reaction to any of many things that Jen said or did. This time, however, he didn't launch into a rant. Maybe the hunt had gotten the best of him, or maybe away from the familiar landscape of the city he wasn't so sure of himself.

Whatever the reason, he spoke in a low, if strained, voice to Jen: "The scent is fresher here. We're gainin' on him. Can't you tell?"

Jen scratched around at the dirt while not meeting his gaze. "We've come a pretty long way, and dawn's getting close. Shouldn't we get back… to shelter?"

We've got all the shelter we need right here under our feet, Ramona thought, but she wasn't paying full attention to Jen.

Through a break in the trees, a long meadow was visible below to the west. The meadow ended in a steep cliff wall, and near one edge, partially hidden by a small stand of tenacious pines, was the opening to a cave.

"There," said Ramona.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"There." Ramona pointed at the cave. Darnell and Jen came to her side, followed the line of her finger. "That's where he is." Her finger began to quiver.

That's where Zhavon is.

"Why do you—"

Darnell cut Jen off. "You're sure?" he asked.

Ramona nodded. "There's a mortal with him. I wanna get her out of there."

She didn't look over at Darnell, but she could feel his pointed stare boring into her.

Haven't you felt it, Darnell? she suddenly wanted to scream. *Haven't you felt the old life—the real life—slipping away, bit by bit with every mortal you feed on? We're losing… something. And she still has it! I can't let her go.*

But Ramona stared ahead at the cave opening and said nothing.

"Let's go," said Darnell at last.

Jen was shuffling around nervously. "But what about the sunrise?"

Now it was Ramona who spoke through clenched teeth: "I won't let the sun get you."

The fair-skinned vampire wasn't relieved in the least by what Ramona had in mind, but Jen could tell that this was not a time to argue. She followed grudgingly as Darnell led the trio down the slope.

Sure enough, the trail of eye-ooze and bent shrubs led down to the meadow and straight across it.

"Wait here while I follow the trail across," Darnell said. "If it does lead to the cave, I'll signal, and you circle around."

"Fuck that," said Ramona and followed right behind him.

Jen, not about to be left by herself, followed too.

The field grass, weeds, and wildflowers in the meadow stood taller than a person. Even without the ichor from the eye, Darnell could easily have followed the trail of broken stalks. As the three made their way across the meadow, Jen was constantly glancing back over her shoulder at the eastern horizon. As a result, and more irritating than her mere nervousness, which Ramona was used to by now, Jen kept stepping on Ramona's heels, or stumbling and making much more noise than Ramona and Darnell combined.

After the third or fourth time she was stepped on, Ramona whirled and growled. *"We'll kill him, and we'll stay in the cave,"* she whispered sharply. *"So watch where you're goin'!"*

Jen, despite her embarrassment, seemed somewhat relieved, and they made their way to the cave entrance without further incident. The black hole in the cliffside was larger than Ramona had realized from the ridge. Probably a large car, if it got this far, could fit through the opening. Beneath the pines that had forced their way up through the rocky soil, the wary trio paused and cocked their heads at the sound of a distant voice. Ramona could feel how close they were. She had to restrain herself from rushing ahead to Zhavon's rescue. They slipped silently through the opening.

The cave narrowed almost immediately, forcing them into single file, Darnell, Ramona, then Jen. They stepped carefully, and even Jen avoided kicking loose rocks. Probably the sound of dripping water—there must be an underground stream somewhere, Ramona thought—covered whatever slight sounds they made, but they said nothing to one another. Whether it was because of the acoustics of the cave or the potency of their hearing, the sound of that voice reached them every so often. And once, only once, Ramona heard a pained moan—a voice different from the other, a voice she recognized.

Zhavon!

Ramona again fought back the impulse to run headlong to her. *We'll do this together,* Ramona told herself. She'd brought her friends. It'd be stupid to run off by herself. But now, with every step, she waited for another moan, for Zhavon to call out. If Darnell or Jen heard the second voice, neither reacted.

Hold on, Ramona silently urged Zhavon. *Hold on.*

She thought of what this must be like for the mortal. Ramona and her friends, and the kidnapper, she guessed, could see fairly well in the dark, even the pitch black of the cave. Zhavon, though, would be blind, surrounded by the darkness, the touch of the kidnapper's hands, his fangs....

Pure rage began to well up within Ramona. She felt her own fangs slide down. Besides stabbing her with a stake, this guy had stolen her mortal.

His ass is mine! Ramona crowded Darnell, silently urged him forward.

Within a few steps, the passage opened into a much larger chamber. The ceiling rose beyond sight into the darkness.

"Yes," came the voice from ahead, much more clearly now. "Yes, my dear."

Darnell grabbed Ramona as she darted past him. He shook her by the shoulders, his eyes rebuking her, demanding caution. Ramona threw off his hands but held her place. He was right, she knew.

Together, the trio edged their way left along the cave wall. The floor was a maze of stalagmites. Slowly, Darnell led them closer to the voice.

"There… no, not quite… ah, yes."

Ramona stopped so suddenly that Jen almost ran into her again.

Blood. Ramona smelled blood. *Zhavon's blood.*

Bloodlust, mingled with rage, urged Ramona forward, but she held back. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep, calming breath—a throwback to her mortal days. *Hold on,* she thought again, but this time the words were for her own benefit more than Zhavon's.

Darnell raised a hand to his friends, urged them to greater caution. With her next step Ramona could see, around the edge of the stalagmite in front of her, the kidnapper. His back was to them. She vaguely recognized the unkempt hair, the threadbare sweater and the old, dirty workpants. Her glimpse of him before had been so brief.

Darnell held his position, motioned for Ramona to move around farther to the left. She crept silently to the spot he'd indicated. Still, she was behind the kidnapper. He seemed to have no idea anyone was in the cave besides himself and—

He stepped back and turned just enough that his eye was visible to Ramona—that enlarged, throbbing eye. Thick trails of slime had drained down his face and body. The glop around the edges of the orb fizzled and popped as Ramona watched.

Then he took another step back and revealed…

Zhavon?

Ramona had expected it to be her bound to the large stalagmite, but instead there was some… Ramona wasn't sure *what* it was. It was vaguely human-shaped—torso, head, arms, legs. It had hair on its head and its groin, and what looked like one nippled breast, but the rest of the body was hideously deformed. The arms and fingers were bent—not broken, but twisted like clay or hot plastic—in impossible directions and—could it be?—fused somehow to the stone monolith that the creature was tied to at the ankles. As Ramona realized more fully that she *was* looking at a human form, she saw that the chest cavity was exposed. In view were a framework of ribs, lungs slowly taking in and expelling air… and a beating heart.

My God! Ramona recoiled in disgust. *How can it be alive?*

She looked away from the disfigured face, stared instead at the rope around the ankles, at the relatively untouched feet, at the discarded clothing around the feet on the cave floor.

And Ramona recognized the clothes.

She took another step back, unable to absorb what she saw.

The kidnapper, his gruesome eye focused only on the creature before him, stepped forward again. Unaware of his hidden audience, he reached a hand out to his captive's face. The creature instinctively flinched but was too weak and disoriented to resist effectively. Where the kidnapper's hand touched, the cheek sagged.

It's melting! Ramona had never seen anything like this—skin melting like wax!

The torturer drew the flesh out with his hand in a way that no skin should ever stretch. He touched the elongated cheek to the creature's shoulder, rubbed gently as skin

melded to skin. He held the spot for a moment, then patted it gently. And all the while he touched her, the eye glowed an unnatural saffron, like a jaundiced, rotting egg.

"Yes, she is beautiful," he said, as if answering a question. He leaned forward and gently kissed the creature on its newly shaped cheek. "You approach perfection, my lovely. You will make me the toast of every Toreador." A giddy laugh wracked his emaciated frame. The glow receded from the eye again. "I will be the Toreador of Toreadors!"

Toreador? Ramona's mind was reeling. She couldn't make sense of what she saw or heard.

But then the creature opened its mouth—the portion that would still open—and a low, pained groan escaped its lips.

The sound drove Ramona to her knees, confirmed exactly what she'd been trying to tell herself was not, *could not*, be true.

Another agonized moan.

The scent of blood, the clothes, the voice...

Zhavon!

Ramona's vision began to cloud over with red blood-rage. Her fingers curled into claws matching those on her feet. She glanced over at Darnell. He seemed too calm. He was gesturing to her. What was he trying to tell her? Then she understood. She should go high. He'd hit low.

No sooner had she realized his meaning than she nodded once and then sprang. Darnell leapt at the same instant.

Ramona was going for the eye. As she soared through the damp cavern air, she could already feel her claw skewering the eye. She could see it pop from the socket, trailing a stream of gore and blood.

But the future she foresaw was not to be.

Darnell's low, less-arched dive brought him to the kidnapper a split second before Ramona. Darnell slammed into the Toreador's knees and he lurched violently.

Ramona landed on his shoulders, and the slash of her claw raked across the kidnapper's face—a fraction of an inch to the right of the eye. She caught a nostril, and pulled away a sizeable hunk of his nose, but his initial stumble was enough to save the eye.

All three landed roughly on the ground, Ramona on top of the Toreador, Darnell rolling away and quickly on his feet again, ready to strike.

"What...? Who are...?" The Toreador's cries of distress were cut off as Ramona wrestled him onto his back.

As she raised a hand for a blow that might well take his head off, he bared his fangs and hissed like the cornered animal that he was.

Ramona knew for certain that he was one of them.

At that same instant, however, the deformed eye seemed to bulge even larger and glowed a sickly yellow. Suddenly, the fizzing ichor around the eye sprayed into Ramona's face. She reflexively closed her eyes, but the slime burned her skin like acid, and where it struck her already blistered skin, she felt it burning through to the bone.

Ramona threw her hands to her face, burning them too, and rolled away, screaming in pain.

"Ramona!" Jen, seeing her friend hurt, sprang into action now. Ramona opened her eyes in time to see both Jen and Darnell charge the kidnapper, who was quickly on his feet.

With a swipe of his hand, the wiry kidnapper sent Jen bloodied and sprawling. Darnell had to dive to the side to avoid her stumbling form. He landed not far from Ramona.

"Get the mortal," he growled to her. "We'll take care of this prick." With no more pause than that, he was throwing himself again at their enemy, and unlike with Jen, the kidnapper was no match for Darnell's speed and power. Darnell drove him backward and onto the ground.

Ramona shook her head, trying to clear her mind. She ignored the last burning of whatever it was that had sprayed from the eye. She climbed to her feet and rushed over to Zhavon.

Zhavon? This can't be her.

Ramona couldn't bring herself to believe that it was.

No....

But one of the creature's eyes opened, and it stared into Ramona's face. The mouth opened, but only garbled sound came out. Ramona looked away. She had to force herself to turn back—and wished she hadn't. She saw the forked tongue, both tips fused to the roof of the mouth. Ramona looked again at the creature's eye—*at Zhavon's eye*—and her disgust melted away to pity.

"I'll help you..." Ramona paused, choked on the name, "Zhavon."

Zhavon nodded, then her eye closed. Her jaw and head hung limp.

Ramona turned at the sound of screams. Darnell was rolling into a crouch. He had dodged another spray from the eye, but Jen hadn't been so lucky. The shoulder and sleeve of her sweatshirt smoked and sizzled, as did the skin beneath.

Ramona turned hurriedly back to Zhavon, sliced the rope around her ankles with one deft flick of a claw. The girl's arms were a different story. There was no rope to slit or untie, only skin and stone—the skin was fused to the stalagmite behind Zhavon. And the stone would take far too long to chip away.

The melee, meanwhile, had become something of a standoff. Darnell and Jen, favoring her burnt shoulder, warily circled their prey and watched especially closely the strange eye. The kidnapper, for his part, was backing slowly toward a wall trying to prevent either of his attackers getting behind him. Having gauged his opponents, he paid closer attention to Darnell.

Ramona dithered for only a moment. She hated to inflict more suffering on the girl, but more than anything else she wanted to get poor Zhavon away from that place of torture. Ramona grasped the mortal's arm and pulled. Skin ripped away from stone, and a piercing scream filled the cavern and echoed deafeningly.

But it was not Zhavon who screamed.

The gangly kidnapper stood ramrod straight. His head jerked up. He glared beyond his immediate attackers, whom he no longer seemed to notice.

"Do not touch my masterpiece!" he bellowed, and suddenly he seemed taller than before, less emaciated. The eye shed an ominous, pale light across the chamber.

Ramona lifted Zhavon in her arms, but then froze as the eye's gaze fell upon them. That stare locked Ramona in place as the cold hatred of countless years sapped the passion from her bones. How insignificant this one mortal seemed now, how petty the urges that drove Ramona. Who was she to interfere with this monumental work of art?

Ramona's own desires washed away under the weight of ages. She dropped to bent knee and laid the mortal on the ground.

Darnell and Jen didn't understand Ramona's actions, but they saw their enemy's distraction and pounced.

Leave him alone, Ramona thought, suddenly perplexed. *Why are they bothering him?*

The eye flashed a brilliant blast of golden light, and the scene unraveled before Ramona as if in slow motion. Jen leapt at the kidnapper's side, but from the cave floor, a stalagmite erupted where before none had been. It shot upward and caught Jen in mid-air. Its jagged point ripped into her belly, knocking her upright. It tore through her body, crushing bones, splitting skin as it forced its way through her chest cavity. Emerging through her arched back and then completely piercing her neck, the stalagmite finally halted.

Jen's head, a bloody heap of bone and blonde hair, fell to the cave floor.

Darnell attacked at the same time that Jen did but, to Ramona, he too appeared as if he moved in slow motion in the flashing golden light.

The Toreador caught Darnell.

The force of Darnell's lunge should've at least knocked his target back a few steps, but the kidnapper clamped a hand on each of Darnell's shoulders and caught him without so much as flinching.

Then he squeezed. He pulled Darnell's shoulders each to the side, and as Ramona looked on in rapt horror, their enemy pulled Darnell's shoulders a foot broader. The flesh, *the bone*, stretched out beneath the kidnapper's hands.

Darnell howled as he fell to his knees. His arms hung useless at his sides. The shoulder joints and muscles were hopelessly misaligned. And then the monster with the eye reached for Darnell's face.

"Come on!"

Ramona jumped at the sound of Tanner next to her. The shock jarred her back to the moment, pried her loose from the grip of the eye.

"*Let's get out of here*," he urged in a harsh whisper.

There was something strange about him, but amidst the confusion, the thought didn't fully form in Ramona's mind.

"*Grab her and come on.*" He gestured toward Zhavon, then turned to leave, just like he had earlier that night.

Zhavon. Blood. Jen. Could it really have been the same night?

Tanner had led her into the trees just after sunset. Now it was nearly dawn. And, again, he'd ordered her to follow and then turned to leave. Ramona looked back to where the monster was pressing his fingers into Darnell's brow. The bones gave way like clay at the hands of a sculptor. Darnell shrieked as the openings of his eyes grew smaller and smaller.

"*Damn you, whelp. He'll have to fend for himself!*"

Ramona looked again to Tanner. The last time he had assumed she would follow. In all his confidence he'd just kept walking. This time, he'd stopped to make sure. This time, his voice was imploring her. Staring into his eyes, Ramona knew what was different.

Fear.

His face was awash in it. He was facing something he'd rather flee from than fight.

I made you what you are.

Yet he didn't know what to do. He was afraid.

The realization struck terror into Ramona.

I am your sire, he'd said. I made you what you are.

She'd thought he would be the one to reveal secret knowledge to her, to show her the meaning of this new existence. But he didn't understand what was happening here. He was running away. Afraid.

Ramona lifted Zhavon once more and began to run after Tanner. Seeing her follow, he took off in earnest. Darnell's screams echoed throughout the cave. They chased Ramona down the tunnel. She ran faster and faster, but she couldn't outrun them.

And then she was out of the cave, in the meadow. Darnell's screams still echoed in her ears.

Tanner didn't slow down, but Ramona, even bearing the load of the inert Zhavon, almost caught up to him. The sky was growing light to the east. Seeing that reminded Ramona not so much of the pain she'd suffered just one sunrise ago, but instead of how Jen had worried about where they would stay—Jen, whose head lay on the cave floor at the feet of a monster. Ramona missed a step, stumbled, almost fell with Zhavon to the ground.

How much worse off is Darnell? Ramona wondered. *I should go back and save him*, she thought. *But how?*

She shook her head. *It doesn't matter. I should... be there with him... die with him.*

But there, ahead of her in the meadow, was her sire, the one who'd created her as a vampire. He seemed so much more cunning than she was. He could sneak up on her with no problem and then disappear without a trace. And *he* was running away.

That should tell you something, girl, she thought.

They crossed the meadow and began up the hill. Tanner had pulled away when Ramona had stumbled, but she'd almost caught up with him again. He ran without pause toward the ridge. Not a leaf or twig moved with his passing. The crunch of Ramona's every footstep seemed to announce her presence to the early morning. She began to chastise herself: *I'm being as loud as...* then stopped.

Jen.

Tanner stopped halfway up the western face of the hill. "This'll do," he said. "Sun's probably already burnin' on the other side of the ridge. We'll go to ground here."

Go to ground. Of course. There was no time to find shelter. But Ramona stared at the limp figure in her arms. "I can't just leave her," she said plaintively.

Tanner looked directly at Ramona for the first time since they'd gotten out of the cave. His expression was blank. He said nothing.

"I can't leave her!" Ramona shouted at him. Her eyes were blurring with tears of blood.

"Do what you must," he said evenly.

"Fuck you!"

Tanner watched her impassively.

Ramona lowered Zhavon to the ground, stroked her hair. "I can't just..." Zhavon's face was as badly deformed as the rest of her body, maybe worse. One eye was simply gone, hidden beneath stretched flesh and bone perhaps. The nose was flattened, smashed to the side, probably no longer functional for breathing, judging by the gentle, constant panting from what remained of Zhavon's mouth. Her beautiful lips were flattened, stretched, and her head was at a sharp angle, held there by the fleshy cheek that Ramona had seen fused to the girl's shoulder.

"I can't just..."

Ramona smelled blood. It was all over her, she saw. Zhavon's arms, where they'd been torn away from the stone, were bleeding and had been the whole time Ramona was carrying her.

"Do what you must," Tanner said solemnly, and then he sank into the ground.

Ramona stared after him. She was unsure if he merely sank beneath the topsoil, or if his body actually became a part of the earth. She was unsure which would be the case with her own body when she joined him in just a few moments. She had no longer than that to decide. The last few minutes of daybreak, when the sun finally rose above the horizon, always seemed to go so quickly. Already, her skin grew warm to the touch, as if she had a fever. But only living flesh could be fevered.

Zhavon's twisted body lay at Ramona's feet. The mortal girl had been transformed into a monster as surely as Ramona had been. Except while Ramona could hunt, could find sustenance and survive, Zhavon could not go on like she was.

Ramona stroked the girl's smooth, chocolate skin—almost the only recognizable feature, except for the single eye that opened to stare at Ramona now. Zhavon couldn't speak. Even if her tongue weren't melted to the roof of her mouth, she lacked the strength.

Probably she wouldn't survive through the day, Ramona tried to tell herself. And if Zhavon did, no surgeon could correct the damage done to her.

I'd be doing her a mercy, Ramona thought. *I can't just leave her.*

The sun was rising. There was so little time.

Ramona looked into the human eye in the midst of that monstrosity of warped flesh. She wanted to say something, to comfort Zhavon, but there were no words. Tenderly, Ramona kissed what should have been a perfect, teenaged cheek. She looked one last time on Zhavon in her nakedness, and tried to see in the obscene mound the girl she had known.

Then Ramona reached down to the exposed heart, placed her hand on the beating organ. Despite the unimaginable trauma done to the body, the heart still beat, still forced Zhavon's lifeblood through that form.

As the sun began to singe her back, Ramona drank deeply. The blood was sweet, but bitterness consumed her soul. Ramona drank until the mortal fire was quenched, and then she sank into the earth.



Friday, 23 July 1999, 1:29 AM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York

"They would have *eaten* me, I tell you!"

"I believe you, Jeremiah," Calebros said in a forced, calm tone. He was tired of nodding politely, of reassuring his clanmate. Jeremiah could be a difficult person to like at times. This was rapidly becoming one of those times.

"Don't you humor me!" Jeremiah snapped. "I've been coming to you about this for *weeks* now."

Seems more like years, Calebros thought.

"And still you've done nothing. *Nothing!*" Jeremiah paced around, gesticulating wildly.

There was no second chair by Calebros's desk, and for this very reason. He mostly didn't like guests, didn't want guests, didn't want to encourage them to sit down, to take a load off and stay for a while. Most anyone who had reason or inclination to visit Calebros was irate, complaining, or tiresome. Jeremiah happened to be all three presently.

"That is not true," Calebros assured him.

Jeremiah snorted in disgusted. "What, then? Tell me. What have you done?"

"I have considered quite carefully your report."

"*Ha!* Like I said, *nothing*. Considered my report…" Jeremiah repeated contemptuously. "This is what I think of you and your reports—" he said, grabbing a handful of papers from the nearest stack on Calebros's desk. Jeremiah made to fling them into the air—

Instantly, Calebros's hand shot out and latched around his visitor's wrist. Talons pricked undead flesh ever so slightly.

"Believe me," said Calebros evenly. "You do not want to do that."

They faced each other for a moment, one monstrous creature restraining the hand of another. Jeremiah's fingers, biting into the papers, were long and grotesquely thin, little more than needles of bone. His entire body was thin and hard and covered with knots, bulging masses of hardened tissue, like an old, gnarled swamp tree. Finally he stopped resisting Calebros and returned the reports to the desk.

"I'm sorry," Jeremiah said and resumed his pacing, just as intently if less frenetically.

"Think nothing of it," Calebros said. In truth, however, his attention was fully occupied by the sheets of paper Jeremiah had just set back down. Like all the reports, they were an odd lot, a jumbled collection of sizes, some handwritten, many typed, with addenda of scrawled red marginalia. Some of the reports were recorded on portions of grocery bags or thin cardboard, yet Calebros took each piece that had been disturbed and smoothed it down, gently, like a mother pressing the wrinkles from an unruly child's clothes.

Not until he'd attended to each report did he look back to his impulsive visitor. Jeremiah did not notice the cold glare leveled at him, nor did he seem to have been aware of Calebros's preoccupation.

"It shouldn't have happened," Jeremiah was saying, as much to himself as to Calebros. "Should never have happened. They were rats. Just rats. They should have responded to me. Just rats. But there was something else there too... something... emboldening them, joining them...."

"Joining them? Not physically."

"No, of course not. But their instincts, their anger... I reached out to the mind of a single rat, but I touched all of them." Jeremiah's pacing had fallen into the pattern of a triangle. Each time he reached the point nearest the desk, he changed direction, but he continued tracing the same lines over and over again. His eyes, almost hidden by a thick, drooping brow, seemed to glaze over as he gave himself to memory.

Calebros watched, waited. His accustomed role.

"It didn't feel like there was a conscious mind directing them," Jeremiah said. "Not giving orders, but there was something... anger... or maybe pure hatred."

He's been feeding from drug-addled kine again, Calebros thought.

"Let me take the prophet," Jeremiah blurted out suddenly.

"What?"

"Anatole, the Prophet of Gehenna."

"I know damn well *who* you're speaking of, but why on earth—"

"I've done it before. I've led him around," Jeremiah said. He was pacing more quickly again, the words spilling from his mouth. "He hears so many voices, one more added to the mix is nothing unusual. He would know what I'm talking about. He'd be able to tell. I could take him down there. He'd know what it is." Jeremiah stopped at the edge of the desk and leaned forward on both of his bone-thin arms. His voice was no longer manic, but instead low and dire: "There is something dark down there, Calebros. We must find out what."

Calebros was taken aback by the sudden demand. He was accustomed to receiving reports from his people, mulling over the information, pondering implications, connections, ramifications of action. Every action, Calebros knew only too well, produced unforeseen consequences. Jeremiah did not seem to recognize that, else he would not be making such incredible pronouncements. *And that after disrupting my files!* Calebros thought.

"You saw nothing to justify such drastic measures," he said.

"*Nothing?*" Jeremiah's eyes bugged wide. "Haven't you been listening? Have you not heard a word I've said? I saw *nothing?*"

"I don't doubt what you saw," Calebros said calmly, "but neither have I reached the same conclusions that you seem to have reached. I do not say that you are wrong, no matter how fanciful your notions—"

"Fanciful!"

"But Anatole is not a toy or a pet, to lead around and play with as you please. You might well be able to guide him," Calebros said, hands raised to pre-empt his guest's protestations, "but the prophet..." Calebros paused. He was not practiced in face-to-face debate, and words did not come quickly to his lips to describe his apprehension of Anatole. It was not the visceral fear that sapped his strength at the mention of the Assamites; it

was more a deep, unsettled feeling. Was he more disturbed, Calebros wondered, by Anatole, or by what the prophet might discover?

"The prophet is here in the city," Jeremiah said. "We must use all the tools that are available to us."

"We *think* he is still in the city," Calebros tersely corrected him. "He entered the Cathedral of St. John the Divine a *month* ago. None of our people have been able to enter since, and our kine sources who've gone in have found no trace of him. So as to your one point, he's not exactly available to us, and secondly—"

"Calebros! Calebros!" The calls from outside the office cut through the quiet of the warren like a sudden clap of thunder. Cass Washington burst into the chamber, her skirt and loose sweatshirts billowing from her haste. "Calebros!" She didn't pause or apologize for the interruption. "Calebros, Donatello is in! He's gotten into the cathedral!"

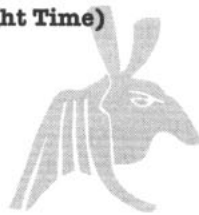
Calebros, flabbergasted, looked back and forth between Cassandra and Jeremiah. She was excited and anxiously awaiting instruction. Jeremiah had crossed his bony arms and was looking quite pleased with himself.

"Well, calm down, girl," Calebros told Cass. "We've still to see what comes of it." Then he turned to Jeremiah. "And you, don't get smug with me. No matter what happens, you're to stay away from that cathedral. I'll not have you interfere just because of some… some old wives' tale."

Jeremiah protested, "I didn't say anything about—"

"You didn't have to," Calebros snapped. "You didn't have to." Calebros wasn't about to go chasing rumors and superstitions. *Nictuku*. Not even if those superstitions were the worst fear of his entire clan. Especially not in that case.

Friday, 23 July 1999, 7:03 PM(9:33 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



"Is there something wrong, Thompson?" Hesha asked.

Ron Thompson's eyebrows shot skyward, and he swallowed hard. "You don't remember, sir?" He perched on the edge of the table, and shook his head. "Hell." He composed himself. "You woke up at sunset, and you shouted something—not in English—so loud the windows rattled. I came in to check on you." His gaze flickered worriedly over his master's face. "You don't remember that? Well... you seemed to be meditating, and you didn't seem to be under attack of any kind, so I left. That was about half an hour ago."

The Setite combed through his memory. There was a dream... something important... gone. He picked last night's suit jacket up off a chair and sat down. Perhaps if he *did* meditate, the image would return. He doubted, though, that the angry influence laid over Calcutta would permit calm, studied reflection, and the hotel, noisy with air conditioning and other people's conversation, was a poor seat for contemplation at any time. Some woman was carrying on now, close enough to be heard. Hesha folded the coat between his hands and tried to clear his thoughts. Paper crackled under the cloth. He pulled the folded sheets out of the pocket and turned them over.

Elizabeth had drawn the statue—*The statue was in my dream*. In English, she had written her own name, Hesha's names, *Dances of India, 6:30 Daily*, rough alphabets, and then *the red king* seven times and *the red star* eleven. The printing, carefully formed, looked like scribe's practice. Each iteration of the R in *red* grew more refined, and the English words trailed off into repetitions of the single letter, which became mixed with a pointed, horizontal oval—the mouth sign that stood for R in hieroglyphs.

Hesha looked back to the gibberish Egyptian. Of course... the woman, memorizing the characters, had practiced writing a language she was comfortable with: English. The writing was not nonsense; it was accidental code. He frowned, and started transliteration. *'Ris'bth* was her own name. *Hsh'* was his, though the symbology chosen was atrocious. *Rwn'* should be *Reauna*, but... there was the same pattern, one letter different, *rfn'* which suggested, in India, *Ravana*. Her consonant shifts tended toward German... with difficulty, he extracted *red star*, *rakshasha*, *king*, *Mahabharata*, and *awake*.

The Setite sat for a moment longer, listening to the echoes of the words in his head. Whatever had been sent to him during the day was lost for good, but he knew, without understanding why, that Elizabeth's notes paralleled the dream.

"Ask Miss Dimitros to step in, if she would."

Thompson grimaced, and began, painfully, "I... I don't think she can, sir." Hesha's eyes pinned him, and he went on, "She's delirious. She slept all day, and when you yelled, she woke up and started ranting about demons and ghosts and kings. I think she caught fever when she ran after you the other night."

The Setite rushed past him and into Elizabeth's room. She was sitting on the bed, trying to talk around the Asp, who was struggling, rather helplessly, to get her to lie down.

"...And the four travelers came to the City of Dreadful Night, to find the Prince of Ra—stop it. Stop it! Hey! But the King of the—let me go, you snake—but the King of the *Rakshash* slept under the heart of the mountain, and he heard the—" She broke off her story long enough to bite Raphael's arm, and the Asp retreated, cursing in Italian. "But the Herald of Ravana sent the Monkey-devil to destroy the accursed wizard...."

"Leave us," commanded Hesha, turning a cold, hard gaze on his minions. "I'll see to her."

Hesha picked his way over to the bed; the woman or the Asp had flung the blankets and sheets to the floor. Elizabeth, left to herself, sat tailor-fashion on the mattress, smoothed down her crooked nightshirt, and began reciting again.

"Once, in the City That Never Slept, there lived a young girl of humble family...."

"Elizabeth." Hesha sat opposite her, and searched her eyes. There seemed to be nothing behind them. "Who sleeps under the heart of the mountain?"

"Ravana, King of Rakshasa, slept under the heart of the mountain for ten thousand years, but now he slept no longer. The mountain tore open from root to tip, and the king strode forth to meet the three from the East."

"Who is the prince?"

"The Prince of the Rakshasa, Hazimel, who turned against his father and sleeps beneath the City of Dreadful Night."

"What is the red star?"

Her face contorted nearly into tears. "The red star disobeys the Moon, Hesha. I walked on the floor of your ceiling, and the red star bored into the sky." The empty eyes filled with pain. "Hesha?"

"I'm here with you, Elizabeth, but I can't see very well." He took her hands. "You'll have to tell me where we are."

"We're in the fields outside the prince's tomb. There's a storm coming, and it's getting darker. The clouds are blotting out the sky."

"Good. The red star will not see us. There should be a building very close by; a temple," suggested the Setite. "It has lotus columns and statues leading to it. You can see the temple, Elizabeth."

"Yes..." she hesitated. "But it wasn't there...."

"It was *always* there, but you had not noticed it. We are going to shelter from the storm inside that temple, Elizabeth. I am walking toward it. Follow me out of the fields."

Her expression changed. "This is a nightmare," she said slowly.

"Come out of it, then. Can you see me? Follow me out of the dream."

Elizabeth came to herself, suddenly, as though she were a rope let loose in a tug-of-war. Hesha kept watching her, wary that the trance would pull her back again. Her eyes cleared completely, and he forgot to look away, wondering what it was that made them light and dark at the same time. Surely, in three hundred years, he had seen eyes like hers before....

"Where have I been?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. Thompson thinks you were fevered; I think you were caught in visions. I had something of the same experience myself today." Elizabeth looked down at their hands, still joined together. "Let me apologize for my temper last night. No one is quite themselves in Calcutta anymore." Her gaze rose to his again, and he said, slowly, "I understand you followed me last night, after Michel was attacked. That was very brave of you." He squeezed her hands. "Don't ever do it again," then added, "I want to know that you are safe."

Hesha rose and opened the connecting door. "Thompson, Elizabeth and I are going out to dinner. You and Mercurio are welcome to do whatever you want," he said, without turning to face his bodyguard. "Close your mouth. Calcutta is sufficiently dangerous tonight that you would not be able to protect us even if you had an army—and I think that Calcutta is in enough danger that it will leave us alone."

KR

Friday, 23 July 1999, 9:44 PM(12:14 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
Near the Maidan
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Ron Thompson paced along the Maidan with the slow, rolling gait of a cop on the beat—on his beat, in the rain, on a bad day, after an argument with the sergeant, during a gang war. With one eye, he kept tabs on the Asp in point position. With the other eye, he watched Hesha and Elizabeth strolling ahead of him. They seemed, despite all sense, to be enjoying themselves. Over the open circuit of his phone, he caught a steady stream of muttering curses. Mercurio, not content to express his disgust with mere body language, vented his spleen into the ether.

Hesha Ruhadze walked between his men. He chose to ignore them; he carried a huge golf umbrella with a ridiculous pink-and-white canopy. His attention centered entirely on the girl by his side. She wore a thin black dress and a thin black raincoat. Elizabeth's sandals flowed with the Hooghly's water, but the tears that had threatened since they came to Calcutta were dry at last. They wandered into the Maidan grounds, and the Friday-night carnival air swept around them despite the rain. The snake charmers, beggars, flower sellers, and street performers gave him a thousand scenes to show her, and enough things to talk about that avoided... unpleasantness.

A bead-seller, draped with hundreds of strings of his own wares, approached them, hawking his cheap glass fervently at the lady. The Asp closed in, and Hesha felt Thompson's lingering resentment step nearer. Elizabeth listened to the man's pitch and smiled, but shook her head. "*Na, dhonyabad.*"

Hesha chuckled, and moved her along. "Your Bengali pronunciation is very interesting."

"Why doesn't that sound like a compliment?"

"I am sure the man was flattered that you made the attempt. Most Americans don't." They turned, passed out of the little pavilion village, and struck out toward the city lights again. "Didn't you want any souvenirs?"

"Cheap beads? I can buy the same kind in New York...if I ever get back to New York." She frowned up at him.

"You'll go back to New York." Hesha assured her. He switched his grip on the umbrella and clasped her hand. "I promise." Elizabeth, neither satisfied nor seeking to argue about it, let him keep hold of her hand as they walked. "Let's go up to the bazaars and take a look. The shops may be closing, but I'll find you a souvenir worth having. Something nice for your apartment? A rug? A handmade leather desk set for Sleipnir? Do you," he asked seriously, "care at all for brass?"

"Brass?"

"India is very good for brass...." He led her north through a maze of little streets, and they came out on a wider avenue lined with shops. As they went, the

Asp scouted ahead of them. Thompson checked their trail to be sure they were not followed. Hesha kept his own eyes open. And Elizabeth, without thinking about them much, noticed two things: First, that the signs over the stores and on the billboards used a little less Sanskrit and English type and more Arabic letters; second, that Hesha, whom she had never seen wearing jewelry anywhere but around his neck, had on a string bracelet. As they walked hand in hand, their wrists rubbed against each other, and the beads knotted into the bracelet chafed her skin.

They made their way up the little bazaar, taking a last look around establishments closing for the night, window-shopping at the Muslim stores that had shut at sundown for the holy day. Then Elizabeth, at first content to follow where her companion led, started choosing their path. To begin with, her side-trips made sense—an antique store, a sari weaver's, a stall parting with the last of its sweet pa'an desserts—but gradually, any little thing could catch her eye and send them down an alley and up the next street without explanation.

Hesha gave her sightseeing full rein, even when the excursions lost reason and Elizabeth seemed to wonder, herself, why this building or that intersection was so interesting. She came to a halt near an old, ill-kept mosque, made a comment on the architecture, and suddenly decided to duck into a tiny passage nearby. The Setite joined her in splashing down the sidewalk—acting, to Elizabeth, as if a wild dash through the dark gap between two old houses was normal. The tiny lane bent halfway through, where the tenements facing one street met, crookedly, the backs of those facing the other way.

And in an instant, Elizabeth felt Hesha's hand leave hers. By the time her eyes could find him again, his arms held writhing darkness. Thompson and the Asp's strangely subdued flashlights drove the shadows back, and Liz saw in horror that Hesha's changing hands clutched a child.

Hesha pinned the tiny girl to a cracked stucco wall, and the skinny, charcoal-colored waif let out a thin cry. Doubling up her little body, the child got her knees beneath her and leaped out. The plaster shattered, but the force of her stick-thin legs was enough to propel herself and the Setite across the alley. They slammed against brick stairs on the other side. The child, her head down and fastened like a tick to Hesha's forearm, pushed away again. The wrestlers swung round against a softer surface—Elizabeth—and hurled the mortal woman into the wreckage of the first wall.

The lights moved in, wavering, and then stopped abruptly. Liz felt the Asp beside her and found a hand reaching down to lift her to her feet. Standing again, she looked toward the battle. The smaller figure, despite the warm lights, was only gray-brown, barely visible. The taller figure stood over his enemy on weirdly jointed legs and struck at her with scaled talons. He tore wounds across the child's naked skin with a whip-like, forked tongue two feet long.

Elizabeth drew breath to scream, but the Asp was faster—his arm curled about her neck and his callused palm covered her mouth before the sound escaped her. She choked, tried to bite him, but stopped. Pressure on her nostrils warned that he could suffocate her as easily as silence. In his other fist, she saw the silhouette

of a gun, changing aim with almost mechanical precision as the fighters moved back and forth. When it stopped, when the furious spray from the whirling monsters died down, Mercurio shoved her forward, and Liz saw that the fight was over.

"Gloves," ordered Hesha.

He dropped the body of his enemy into the water beneath him. It twitched, and the Setite walked onto it with his thick-soled sandals. One heel ground the child's chin into the pavement. Elizabeth flinched. The victor rinsed his claws off in the stream, and Thompson stepped forward, snapping latex gloves onto his master's re-forming hands. Hesha immediately threw down his bloodstained raincoat, peeled out of his shirt and trousers and let them fall into the rushing flood. He checked himself over and carefully washed away the red-black ichor from his wounds.

"Clean, sir." Thompson confirmed.

Elizabeth shuddered. Hesha's scaly hide had begun to seal itself; the gashes and bites inflicted by the creature under his foot closed up. None of them had bled. The scales melted away, and with the change in his skin, the odd joints and height disappeared. Ron signaled to the Asp. Raphael took aim on a spot under the water. Thompson slipped out of his own coat, draped it over his boss, and returned to the staircase and a steady, two-fisted grip on his pistol.

Protected by the gloves, Hesha reached down, seized the girl by the forehead and jaw, and pinned her against the brick steps. Her infant muscles worked terribly against the pressure, and half-formed sounds fought their way through clenched teeth. Without warning, the Setite released his grip on her chin and the child's mouth flew open. Faster than the watching mortals could see, his fingers darted in and came out holding a gray, flapping piece of dead tissue: her tongue. He threw it into the gutter, clamped down on her skull again, and looked into her eyes. She shut them quickly.

"Thompson. Give me a gun and silencer. And pry her eyes open." Ron said something beneath his breath, but Hesha caught it. "Cut the lids off, then."

The old cop moved in. He fit the weapon together and laid it on the step below Hesha's hand; he took a small knife from his sleeve and bent over the child's head. The Setite leaned closer to the gray face and spoke short words, commanding words, at the girl. Her lips still formed the beginnings of syllables. He shouted Arabic at her, whispered it, searched the ruined eyes for signs of obedience or uncertainty. "Quiet," he tried in English.

"Hold her head," he said shortly. Again, he let her jaw free. With a crack, the little girl's jaw disintegrated as the bullet passed through, and when the blur of movement stopped, a quarter of her face lay splattered on the plaster wall across the alley. Hesha tried his commands again. Finally, as her captor concentrated on overpowering her will, the small, determined creature on the steps managed to make a sound.

Hesha jabbed at her with a careless, impatient claw. He regretted it instantly—there had not been enough left of the girl to take the ragged cut. She shrieked, shriveled up, and dried to powder on the spot.

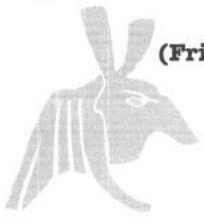
In the empty moment afterward, there was hardly any noise in the alley.

The rain rattled and plonked over the wreckage. It had before; it would again. In Calcutta, in July, the sky falls on the city. Rain fell on the dust that had been an Assamite and turned it to mud.

Elizabeth, still the Asp's prisoner, sobbed in terrible, heart-broken gasps. Her breath hurt her; the water on her face was not the rain. Her full and stinging eyes flickered slowly around the circle of light. She feared what lay outside it, and she feared the three men standing in it with her. Hesha moved toward the Asp, and behind him Thompson gathered up the tools of the gruesome surgery. Liz's gaze retreated; she would not look at either of them.

"Let her go," said Hesha. "Let her go."

Released, she staggered, and the monster caught her by the arms. Gently, he turned her down the alley, away from the fast-eroding corpse on the steps, and started the long walk back to the hotel.



Saturday, 24 July 1999, 2:24 AM
(Friday, 23 July 1999, 4:54 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Elizabeth, bending over the sink, looked up from the drain to the faucet. A dark-brown hand held a wet washcloth out to her—her eyes flickered up to the mirror and saw Hesha standing behind her. She was sick again, and he held her shoulders while her body fought to void an already empty stomach. The acid trickled into the running water. The damp cloth moved coolly across her forehead. Her convulsions stopped, and Hesha waited while she rinsed the bile from her mouth.

"Don't touch me!" She wrenched violently away from the creature's unresisting hands.

Hesha stayed where he was and let her put the whole length of the room between them.

"She was just a baby. *A baby!*" Elizabeth shrieked the last word.

"No," said Hesha.

"You killed a little girl," she spat at him, "a child. You tortured a baby girl to death."

"No," repeated the monster, calmly. "This is part of the nightmare you had earlier."

"Goddamn you! Goddamn you, this was real. I saw you do it." She burst into tears. "Why did you *kill* her?!"

Hesha stepped forward, carefully. He stopped at a finely chosen point—exactly the distance she would allow. "This is part of the nightmare. Your Red King under the mountain. The monkey-woman, sent to kill the wizard. Nothing in the nightmare is what it looks like."

"I *saw* you kill her," Elizabeth whispered dangerously. "And I saw *you*." She swallowed against the churning of her guts, and trembled. "What are you?"

The Setite shook his head. "Another part of the nightmare."

"No!" Her hands, clenched into white fists, beat against her legs in frustration. "Truth! What are you? What are you? *What are you?*"

He closed the space between them and gathered her into his embrace. They stood there for perhaps five minutes—the mortal woman shaking, shrinking from him, arms wrapped tightly around her body to protect herself from him, but crying on his shoulder just the same. Hesha said nothing, yet he held her together against the wracking sobs. They slowed, the anguished cries subsided into weeping, and when he knew she was mistress of herself again, he released her.

Elizabeth tried to retreat without having any place to go. She collapsed onto the carpet in the corner, and said dully, "Leave me alone."

Hesha knelt on the floor, just out of arm's reach. He was aware, suddenly, of the warmth left on his skin by her body and of the hot, damp tears soaked into his shirt. Under the sound of the woman's ragged breath, he began to notice her heartbeat. He shook off the rhythm of her blood and broke the silence.

"I killed that creature," said the Setite evenly, "because she had tasted my blood, and she had endangered my mission and my people, and because she killed Michel." He spaced the words out, let them fall on her slowly.

"Who was Michel to you?"

"The wizard. And she was the monkey-woman sent to destroy him. She—it—was not a child, not a baby girl for you to cry over. She might have been a child, a century ago. But my enemies took that child, trained her, killed her, and turned her into an assassin under their control." He paused. "A tool for killing."

From where his heart used to be, there came a whisper: *What kind of tool will you turn Elizabeth into?*

"I told you I keep buried dangers from coming into the wrong hands. I came to Calcutta because one of the worst of them is loose in the world. The red star that terrifies you in your dreams." He looked at her. She was listening, at least. The mention of the star struck her, and she might be prepared, finally, to believe in what he had come for. "Michel would have found its source for me. Together we could have learned enough, I think, to stop the Eye—the star—if it were being used for harm." His voice hardened. "The assassin put an end to that hope. More people will suffer because of that girl and whoever paid her to kill my friend. They destroyed him to keep him from talking to me." He wondered as he said it if that might even be fact.

Hesha leaned back against the heavy curtains, and stretched his legs. Heavily, sadly, he told her, "But you... you shouldn't have had to see that. It was terrible, and I *am* sorry that you have come so close to the center of this." He studied the bedspread, her nightstand, the room beyond. After a precise interval, he looked back to the woman in the corner, and held a hand out to her. "Forgive me, Elizabeth," he pleaded. He shook his head, and said again, "You shouldn't have had to see that." *Lord*, he prayed, *you sent me a seer when you knew I had lost Vegel, and I am grateful. But why this woman? And why did she have to see so much so soon?*

Hesha felt warm fingers clasp his, and he sighed with what breath he had. He looked to her; he followed her glance to their joined hands; he smiled ruefully.

Elizabeth took his hand in both of hers. The cuff of his shirt lay over the wrist, but she thought, underneath... there it was. A bracelet of knotted hemp and polished white beads. The largest hung low, and she pulled the string around to see it better. Without surprise, she recognized the white eye of the statue.

Neither spoke. The room had been peacefully calm a moment earlier. It was dead calm now, charged for a storm.

"You always," said Elizabeth, "wear that on a thong around your neck. Why is it on your wrist tonight?" Before he could answer, she pursued the logic. "You put that on your wrist. You took me walking, and you put it up against my wrist." More slowly, "And after that, I started... going sideways. Going places for no reason." She closed her eyes and pulled her arms back around her knees. "That was why you were nice to me tonight. So you could hold my hand and put that in it. I was just... the string on the pendulum.... You used me."

Hesha grew a claw and cut the bracelet off. He closed his scaled hands around it.

"Yes," he said.

"To find the girl."

"No. I didn't know what you would take me to." The Setite paused, rubbing the stones in the bracelet against each other. They clicked like the blue prayer beads of his long lost home. "Given time I could find anything in the world myself. I don't have time, Elizabeth. I am looking for short cuts. I need fast answers. I put you... in circuit... with the eye stone to trace the source. I did not expect to find the assassin; that is the truth."

Very quietly, Elizabeth murmured: "But I am still just the string of the pendulum to you."

"No. The string in the pendulum is any cord, any thread. You are irreplaceable, Elizabeth." And as he designed the lie, he realized that it was true.

"Irreplaceable," she repeated, laughing low in her throat. Hesha started—her tone had changed completely. From high hysterics, she had descended to a cynical, unpredictable level he wasn't sure he could reach.

"Why is that funny?" he asked sharply.

"Please," said Elizabeth, shaking her head. "Go away now. I'm tired."

The phone rang in the next room. Hesha looked toward the door, reluctantly. She laughed again, and climbed onto the bed.

"Go, Hesha. The rakshasa are calling you, and someone wants me to sleep."



Saturday, 24 July 1999, 2:55 AM
(Friday, 23 July 1999, 5:25 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

The call had come not long after Hesha left Elizabeth.

"Hesha Ruhadze?" It had been a man's voice, heavily accented but speaking English well enough.

"Here."

"I need to talk to you in person. Right away. I don't think my name would mean anything to you. But I talked to Michel a few nights ago, and I think you need to talk me at least as much as I need to talk to you." He'd let his cocky assertion rest for a moment. "I'm in the Pink Elephant, downstairs. Come in the next ten minutes, or don't come at all."

So Hesha sidled diffidently into the darkened, music-drowned club. The persistent drumbeat crept up from the wooden floor into the soles of his feet. The smoke and colored, moving lights played tricks on his eyes. He scouted out the bar, called for a whisky and soda, and scanned the room for familiar faces. Relieved to find none, he pretended to sip his drink. With the attitude and expression of a determined late-night drinker, he stalked around the dance floor to a small, empty patch of booths and tables. The Setite sat in the crook of a curved bench, leaned against the wall, and proceeded to make the booze disappear.

After a casual delay, a figure detached itself from a group of girls gyrating in the flashing lights. With swaggering steps, the man approached Hesha's table and swiveled his hips under the table.

"Ruhadze. Nice of you to drop by."

The newcomer was dark-haired and handsome, but slovenly. He wore a wicked-looking, greasy imperial and his jet-black, arched eyebrows seemed as pointed as the mustache and beard. Locks of curling, untamed hair fell over the unnaturally pale brow, and he brushed them back as he smiled. Hesha examined him without comment. Tested by silence, the stranger lost. He hurried on anxiously:

"All right. I'm here to make a deal with you." He scratched at his chin. "You're looking for something. I know where it is. I can take you to it."

"Your name," prompted Hesha.

"Aren't you interested? I thought you were hot to find the..."

"Your name," the Setite ordered.

"Ravana. Khalil Ravana."

"Go on, Khalil. And call me Hesha, if you would." His momentum broken, the stranger with the rakshash name hesitated. Hesha filled in the gap. "Why do you believe that I am looking for something?"

"Michel," Khalil replied. "He came to me asking a pack of questions about... about a place I know. He'd had plenty of time to ask before, but he wasn't interested until you

showed up. Then he gets killed here, on your doorstep. Word has it he didn't even get to sit down before they got him. So, I figure. You're looking for what he was looking for. And he didn't get the info to you before they got him. Now, I don't know who 'they' are, but I can guess. And I have a feeling that I'm not a *healthy* dead man anymore. I'm here to spill my guts so they can go after you, instead."

"How kind." Hesha steepled his fingers. "And what is it that you want from me?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet. Maybe you can owe me one."

Hesha shook his head. "Name your price."

Khalil shrugged. "Look. I'll show you the merchandise. I'll take you there. If it's what you want, we can work out the deal then. Call this," he seemed to be listening to someone on his left, "a service done in return for… future considerations." He wrinkled his mustache. "For one thing, you can get me the hell out of Calcutta."

"I am capable of doing that," confirmed the Setite.

"Right. So." Khalil nodded. "I'll meet you in here tomorrow, right after sunset, and take you to the spot."

Hesha lifted an eyebrow. "No. Tomorrow, at nine o'clock, we will meet you outside the hotel."

"Who is 'we'?"

"Who *are* we." The Setite folded his hands and stared the unlucky Ravnos into momentary silence. "That," he said, "is my concern. Meet us outside, next to the bookseller, at nine o'clock."

"I never said anything about—"

"And I did not ask you about other people, either. Still, you will escort me and my followers from the bookseller, not this meat market, at nine o'clock. If you and your friend—" Hesha gestured to Khalil's left side— "wait for me here, you will find yourselves left behind when I leave Calcutta."

"Just one fucking minute, you dirty snake." The Ravnos's temper, magnified by the anger overlying the city, brought him to his feet, shouting. "I don't have to put up with this shit from you. There's no one else can take you to the—I could walk out of here right now, and where the hell would you be?"

"For some reason, Mr. Ravana, I don't think you *can* walk away from this. Inform your employer that I prefer to deal with principals; I will make an exception in this case for his or her sake. There can't be many truly… *expendable* peons at his disposal at a time like this." The Setite stood, bowed mockingly to the man he could see, sincerely to the invisible listener, and departed.

Behind him, mixed with the sounds of the music, he heard Khalil kick the table. It flew across the room, breaking glass and heads along the way, and a stream of curses followed it. When the Setite looked back, the younger monster was surrounded by half-formed shapes and blobs of color that had nothing to do with the club's lights.

Hesha fitted his monocle into place, turned to climb the great Dutch-tile staircase, and permitted himself half a smile.

Friday, 23 July 1999, 8:17 PM
Westin Peachtree Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia



Marcia Gibbert rose early—she knew she had to be up before Isabel to do what she needed to do. She walked over to the end table, took out a pad of paper emblazoned with the Westin logo and a pen from her bag, and prepared for Isabel a note.

I.—

I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry to leave you without any help, but the prospect of another night is too much for me.

I guess Jake Almerson still owes you a favor.

—M.

With that, Marcia covered herself as much as she could with a bathrobe, took an elevator to the top floor, climbed the access stair to the roof, and walked into the last, fading rays of the sun.



Friday, 23 July 1999, 9:09 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

As the tide of consciousness began to tug gently but unmistakably at Ramona, she found herself sorely tempted to ignore it, to burrow more deeply into the subterranean calm she had discovered. No single reason for her reticence asserted itself; the feeling was broad and many-layered like a patchwork quilt. She saw herself nestled among the sheets and blankets on her bed, not wanting to crawl out and pack herself off to school, where nearly anything could happen. That hesitation, however, was rooted not in contentment with the present so much as dread of the future.

Slowly she grew more aware of her surroundings. She was not the young girl she had been. School was not the problem. There were no sheets, no blankets. The peace that enveloped her was that of the earth itself—soil, stone, roots, crawly creatures. She was with them; she was of them.

Is this what it's like at the very end? Ramona wondered. Could death—*real* death—be more peaceful?

She stretched out her awakening consciousness to that which surrounded her. She entwined herself among the massive sprawl of roots that anchored and nourished a great oak. She traced the roundabout twists of a groundhog's tunnels.

Maybe I'll just stay.

It would be so easy, an end to the pain.

But even as the contentment took hold, something else stirred within her—hunger. It had a firm grip on her heart, a stranglehold on her soul. For it was not her body that hungered, but the ravenous Beast within her that howled for release. Thoughts of rest, of peace, served only to heighten the fury of its ravings.

You gave in to the Beast.

Already, it had driven her for two years, just as it drove her from rest now. She had felt the hunger many times, but she had never realized the force behind it. She had never before known how close to the surface the Beast lay.

Ramona, as well, rose closer to the surface—the surface of the life-sustaining earth. Darkness and contentment receded into distant memory. The sensation of air upon her face entered her consciousness only slowly. She stretched her fingers, her toes, forcing motion into muscle and sinew that should long ago have rotted to dust.

Ashes to ashes.

Night sounds filtered through her waning lethargy. Crickets and tree frogs reminded her that she was far from the familiar asphalt jungle in which the mortals encased themselves. The sounds reminded her, warned her.

"If you're good and ready…?"

The voice, so near, shocked Ramona fully to her senses. In less than a second, she was on her feet, crouched, ready to receive attack.

Not thirty feet away squatted Tanner, arms folded, a scowl visible on that of his face not hidden by his hair or sunglasses.

His presence brought back the most recent memories to Ramona. They swept over her like a wall of flame driven by a cruel wind. Jen was gone. The same might be true of Darnell. And Zhavon…

Zhavon!

Her name was a desperate wail. It bore witness to the Beast within Ramona. She slumped to the ground remembering her crime of the night before—how she had fed directly from the girl's beating heart until it had surrendered the last of its lifeblood. Zhavon's lifeblood.

Ramona, sitting cross-legged, head in her hands, expected tears of blood—Zhavon's blood—to overwhelm her. She waited for the tears, but they did not come. There was only a great emptiness. And across the emptiness echoed the howls of the Beast.

"Never," Tanner admonished her, "come from the ground without knowing who—or what—is there."

Ramona ignored him. He was clearly annoyed, but she didn't care. She couldn't pull herself from the morass of guilt surrounding Zhavon's death. Only recently had Ramona begun to comprehend the nature of the bond between herself and the girl—how being near the mortal kept Ramona in touch with that fading portion of humanity within herself. Except now Zhavon was gone. Dead at Ramona's own hand. She thought for a moment that she heard the baying of the Beast all around her, but it was merely the breeze playing among the leaves of the trees.

Tanner didn't move. He stared unblinkingly at her.

Ramona glared back at him. None of this made any sense to her. For two years she had known nothing but fear and hunger. Now before her was a person who could explain it, but he seemed more interested in ordering her around.

Well, Mr. Lincoln done freed the slaves, she thought.

Tanner had stolen her old life. He hadn't asked her if she'd wanted this existence of night and blood.

"I must go," he said at last. "I was waiting for you."

"You want me to thank you?" Ramona asked, but her defiance was undercut by the renewal of fear. He was going to leave again. Since she'd found out about him, that had been the way of things. He would appear briefly, and then he was gone—outside Ramona's window, at the garage, in the woods in Hayesburg. The only difference here was that for the first time he'd bothered to tell her before he disappeared.

"I got questions," Ramona said.

"All in good time." He didn't move. He was too calm. It was like he wasn't alive.

"I don't know about you," Ramona snapped, "but I ain't havin' a good time."

Still expressionless, Tanner stared at her. "I have to get others."

Others.

Ramona wasn't sure what he meant. Others, like Zhavon, to feed the ravenous Beast? Or by others did he mean Darnell and Jen, who needed rescuing? Although Jen, Ramona reminded herself, was beyond rescue.

"We have to get Darnell," Ramona told Tanner.

He shook his head. "I'll get others first."

His face gave away nothing, but Ramona remembered the look of fear she'd seen in him last night. She didn't want to go back into that cave either, but she couldn't just leave Darnell.

"Darnell isn't dead… might not be dead," she insisted.

"Better for him if he is," said Tanner matter-of-factly.

Ramona wanted to argue the point but, thinking how that madman with the eye had deformed Zhavon, realized that Tanner was probably right.

"But we have to find out," she said.

Surprisingly, Tanner nodded his assent. "Yes. I will bring others, and then we'll destroy that creature."

Ramona watched him closely. His scowl was not so deep now that she wasn't arguing with him. From what he said, he held out less hope than she did that Darnell had survived this long. Tanner's interest was vengeance. She wasn't surprised. Men were like that. Tanner felt his pride had been wounded somehow, and he was going to go back and kick that creature's ass.

That creature.

All Ramona could picture was the humongous eye, pulsating, oozing. Had it really sprayed some kind of acid in her face? She ran her finger along the partially healed skin—healed thanks to Zhavon's blood—around her eyes and nose. Already the fight in the cave seemed like something from a horrible dream. It had faded to near obscurity, though the tiny acid burns on her shirt were real enough.

It was real for Jen and Darnell, Ramona thought.

And for Zhavon.

"Where's Zhavon's body?" Ramona asked suspiciously, as the last of the fog cleared from her mind, and the memories from last night grew more distinct. This was the spot where she had ended Zhavon's life, but the body was nowhere to be seen.

"I buried it," said Tanner.

"Where?" Ramona demanded. Her fingertips had formed into claws. She flexed them at her sides.

"I must go," Tanner said, his consternation returning.

Ramona stepped toward him. "You're not goin' anywhere until I get some answers."

She knew that she shouldn't be so confrontational, that Tanner would be more likely to teach her what she needed to know to survive if she treated him respectfully, but his manner and his words drove her so quickly to aggravation without fail. Why, she wondered, should she treat him with respect if he wasn't going to do the same to her?

"I'm not asking permission, whelp."

Whelp. There was that name again. Ramona bristled at the sound of it. "We're gonna have to have words about this 'whelp' business."

Without warning, Tanner bared his fangs and let loose a demonic hiss. He snatched the glasses from his face and revealed blood-red eyes—the pupils were vertical slits like a cat's—and their gaze bore right through Ramona. She stumbled back a step.

"I will brook your insolence no more," he said through clenched teeth. "I buried the body by Table Rock, two miles that way." He pointed off into the forest. "Wait there, and I will send others. We shouldn't be so close to the cave."

He turned on his heels but paused several yards away. "Show proper deference to your elders, or you will not survive."

And with that he was gone. Ramona barely saw him move, but he was no longer there.

My God, she thought. *His eyes...*

She stood and stared at the spot where he had been standing, at the spot where those inhuman eyes had fixed their gaze on her.

Her legs were suddenly unsteady. She sat unceremoniously on the ground.

He's as bad as that Toreador thing.

And Tanner, her sire, had made her in his image.



Friday, 23 July 1999, 10:10 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Table Rock was easy to find—two miles north, where Tanner had pointed before he disappeared. Ramona was disturbed that he could slip away from her so easily. She hadn't even been distracted; she'd been staring straight at him, and he was suddenly no longer there. Like when the biker had approached her that first night by the bridge: he'd been here… and then there. With no in between.

It was the type of thing that *she* could do to mortals.

But not at first, she realized.

Several months had passed after the change before she'd begun to understand and to control the remarkable abilities she'd gained, and months more before she'd been able to exercise those abilities with any consistency or competence, even around mortals.

Were these other vampires just more practiced than she was? Was it a matter of experience, or were they that much more powerful than her, like her compared to a mortal? Ramona couldn't think of a good way to find out. So far, Tanner hadn't proven very informative, and she doubted he would teach her something that might lessen his hold over her. He enjoyed his superiority too much to relinquish it. Ramona would have to learn what she could from him and read between the lines for the rest.

Maybe once they'd kicked this Toreador's ass—*whatever the hell a Toreador is*—Tanner would open up a little more.

"At least he better stop callin' me 'whelp,'" Ramona said aloud to herself.

There was no secret to how Table Rock had gotten its name. It was a large slab of stone, maybe thirty by forty feet Ramona guessed, its roughly square surface amazingly level.

"Like a freakin' table," said Ramona to herself again, as she climbed onto the rock. "Some pioneer really stretched his imagination for this one." The sound of her own voice eased her mind, if only slightly.

Ramona was less interested in the rock, and more in the human-sized patch of freshly turned earth on the mild incline nearby.

Zhavon.

Ramona suddenly felt as if the earth had opened beneath her feet. The stone no longer seemed stable. As she stepped down to the ground, her knees buckled. She staggered. The bitterness toward Tanner that she'd been nurturing was swept away, and only emptiness remained, a great void where before had been… what?

Saving Darnell, the Toreador, Tanner, the Sabbat, survival itself—all the things that should have occupied her mind were very small and far away, unimportant, meaningless.

All that mattered were loss and guilt.

Zhavon.

Ramona dropped to her knees atop the freshly turned earth that was her condemnation. She pressed her face in the dirt and remembered the time she'd carried the injured mortal through darkened streets and returned her to her home.

You saved her life, a voice within Ramona said. *She was already living on borrowed time.*

"I killed her," sobbed Ramona, though as she wiped the dirt from her face she felt that it was dry. She should be crying. She wanted to cry. But there were no tears. She was dry and empty.

It was your right to take her, said the voice. *You saved her.*

"I killed her."

You've killed before. You'll kill again.

"Zhavon..." She choked on the name. There was no comfort in the words the voice spoke to her. There was no comfort in the world to soothe her. She could have left the girl after saving her. Ramona could have stayed away after that, denied herself.

She lay sprawled on the grave remembering her attempt to flee, remembering how Zhavon had followed *her.*

She wanted you! said the voice. *She wanted you to take her blood.*

But Ramona could hear the lie hidden in the words. A mortal couldn't prevail against the hunger any more than Ramona could. She remembered the night of the change—how that figure, how *Tanner,* had taken her. She'd given in. She couldn't help but give in. She had even thought for a few moments that she wanted to give in, but there was no real choice, no free will.

She wanted you to take her blood.

"No!" Ramona rejected the lies.

Zhavon had not chosen this, had not wanted this.

Ramona hadn't chosen this.

Tanner had chosen. He had chosen for Ramona, and he had chosen for Zhavon.

Ramona dug her fingers into the dirt, clenched her claws into a fist.

"Fucking bastard." She wanted Tanner to be back. She wanted to rip open his chest, to tear out his heart and stuff it down his throat. She would feast on his blood and watch that smug look freeze into a death mask.

There is strength in his blood. It is your due.

Ramona shook her head to clear her thoughts, to chase away the voice. She again touched her own dry face and wondered why she couldn't cry. She searched for the sorrow that before had threatened to overwhelm her, but she couldn't feel it. All she found were signs of its passing, like footprints of some extinct creature—footprints of her own extinct humanity. Compassion was giving way to bitterness, hope to hatred.

She patted smooth the gouges she'd made on the grave, then dragged herself back to the rock, climbed onto it, and collapsed. She lay there not willing to look at the grave, not willing to face the resting place of a person whose blood flowed through her veins.

Ramona would not face it, but the blood knew. It knew that, like the flower plucked from the tree, humanity reaped would soon wither and die.

Ramona lay still and cold upon the flat stone. The crickets and tree frogs took no notice of her anguish.



Friday, 23 July 1999, 10:25 PM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

"Excellent, Aaron. You have done well. Your preparations are impeccable. Please proceed." Foley gestured absently toward the cleared patch of floor at the room's center and turned away. Until very recently, this space had been as heaped with arcane paraphernalia as the rest of his cramped sanctum.

To all appearances, the room's new arrangement was the result of a fastidious application of blasting powder.

He is insane, Aaron thought. *Dangerously insane*. Cautiously, he gathered up the items he had so carefully arranged on the sideboard for Foley's inspection. *He can't be serious about going through with this*.

For weeks, Aaron had endured the smug glances, the knowing chuckles, the too-familiar touches of his superior. Each of the hundred tiny gestures had been calculated to convey the same unsettling message—*I know your secret*.

Aaron cursed himself for a fool. It had happened that night of the stalking of the *koldun*. The entire chantry had gathered to enact the stalking ritual. At its center, Sturbridge plunged into the very heart of the nightmare, New York's mystic landscape—the Dragon's Graveyard. And they had followed.

He could still recall the vivid towers of pitted steel and sizzling neon rising above him on all sides. He could feel the teasing hint of the familiar behind the rambling procession of bus stops, tenements and yellow police tape. It was almost the city he knew.

But something fundamental had been changed. That was why Sturbridge had brought them there—so that they could see with their own eyes the changes that had been wrought. Ripples from a single stone dropped upwards into the River of Night.

The alterations were subtle but sweeping. The *other* was patiently reshaping the city in its own image. Aaron had thought the anomalous element that had been introduced into his beloved city was the *koldun*—the Tzimisce sorcerer. The very word seemed to whisper of blasphemous secrets and unholy predations. It was a breath straight from the grave of the Old Country. It was a word of power, a name to conjure with.

The mere mention of the cult of sorcerous fiends conjured up images of moonless nights centuries distant, nights when Aaron's forbears had hunted (and been hunted in turn) among the blasted crags of the Carpathians. The Tremere had gone to great lengths to distance themselves from such recollections.

Aaron could remember the first caress of the *koldun's* dark sorcery. He remembered Sturbridge going down under the enemy assault. He remembered the sick feeling in his withered stomach as he found himself involuntarily rushing to her aid—as if just reaching her would be the culmination of all his decades of unlife, of his strivings, of his sacrifices. Damn her.

And then he was at her side. And she touched him. She knew him. She smiled.

Damn it, he hated that smile. It was a smile she reserved for meetings upon thresholds. She would take your hand and give you that smile and you knew with unshakable certainty that she had contrived this entire improbable gathering just to steal this one sympathetic moment with you. To squeeze a hand, to exchange an exaggerated sigh, and then to be torn away again, becoming everyone's once more.

Aaron was not quite sure how she had pulled them all out, gotten them safely home again. That was the reality, of course, not the damned smile. She didn't need them half as much as they needed her. And they all knew it. Even if it was nice to pretend otherwise, if only for a short while.

But upon her homecoming that evening, she was furious. It was something between Foley and Jacqueline; Aaron was never exactly sure what. Sturbridge was hot, raging on about invaders, earthquakes, traitors.

It was at precisely that instant that Foley had caught his eye. And he saw, damn him. Aaron didn't know how he saw, but in that instant Foley knew everything. Over the last few weeks, he had gone to great pains to let Aaron know that he knew. These wardings—the elemental regalia that Foley had insisted that Aaron gather personally—they were only the latest in a long string of insinuations. Oh, Aaron had followed his superior's instructions to the letter. But he'd thought that would be the end of it. He would present his hard-won treasures before the secundus. He would be humiliated. He would be exposed. He would perhaps even be blackmailed.

But this? Surely Foley wasn't going through with this. From his station in the east of east, Aaron glanced once more uncertainly toward the secundus. But Foley was lost in his preparations.

Aaron stared after him for a long moment, his thoughts racing through the possible scenarios—intrigue, threats, blackmail, confession, violence, submission, bribery, reconciliation. He picked up and examined each in turn like a rare jewel. Just as carefully, he set each aside again, dismissing it. Gradually, something crystallized within him. His features became hard, angular, sharp.

With the cruel precision of a diamond cutting through glass, Aaron stooped and marked out true east on the floor in bone-white chalk. It was not the east that would read on any manmade compass. Nor the celestial east of equinoxes or solstices viewed through menhirs. It was true east, Vienna. The home of the Council of Seven, the resting place of the Father, the seat of the blood.

Resignedly, Aaron placed his unorthodox ward over the Eye of the Storm, the diagram's easternmost point. It was a plank from a gallows, long, thin, straight as a stave. The wood had the added virtue of never having touched the earth.

He was now committed. From this point, there was no turning back from this mad course. Forcing down any further uncertainties, Aaron paced off the precise distance to the southernmost point, the Hall of Fire.

Here he drew forth from his bundle a rusted dagger. The classical lines of the Roman design were unmistakable, even under the years of wear and corrosion. Aaron placed the knife carefully, its blade pointing treacherously inward, toward the center. Toward where Foley must stand to invoke the blood.

Another exact turning brought Aaron to the furthest west, the Waters of Oblivion. Without ceremony, he deposited the cup of hemlock. He did not pause to glance into the

dark waters at the bottom of the chalice. They would only remind him of those other dark waters and the faces of the Children, round and bright as moons. He hurriedly turned and moved further north.

Pausing to judge his mark, Aaron drew back and cast his final treasure to the ground. It struck, the rotting purse spilling thirteen of its thirty silver coins. A very inauspicious throw. Aaron let it lie.

He turned again upon Foley. Surely, the game was up now. Foley wasn't going through with this. Foley would turn on him, mock him, scorn him. He would bellow something dramatic like, "Now take your proper place at the center of these treacheries that you have brought into my house!"

But no. Foley was composed, hauntingly still. Aaron recognized that stillness. It was the lull, the pregnant pause into which the blood spills.

No, this was foolishness. It had to be stopped. He would ruin everything. What possible use could these assembled barbs and insinuations serve in an actual ritual? An invocation of the blood was a thing of delicacy and no little danger. What kind of madman would knowingly ward himself in these petty treacheries?

Foley's voice was calm. "Aaron?"

"Yes, Secundus."

"Would you be so kind as to send Jacqueline in to me as you go through?"

"Secundus, you can't..."

"Thank you, Aaron."

"No, sir. I'm serious. I'm sorry. It doesn't have to happen like this. I'll... I'll send him away."

Foley smiled. "Send him away? You can't just send him away. I know. I have looked into his eye. There is no turning him aside from his purpose."

Aaron started, catching himself glancing over his shoulder for the dark, silent accomplice that he knew was not yet there.

"But you cannot have looked into his..." Aaron fell silent. It was then he saw the blood. The twisting strands of vitae stretching floorward from Foley's dangling fingertips.

It had already begun.

Foley reached out one trembling hand toward the apprentice. As his palm turned upward, Aaron could see the vicious slashes running in parallel down the secundus's forearm. There was a hole gouged in the center of the upturned palm. A single black and red stone was pressed deeply into the center of the wound. In Aaron's excitable state, it resembled nothing more than a single unblinking eye.

"He has shown me all, our dear Hazima-el. I have peered into his eye. His lost eye! Seen into its very depths. Do you think that I do not see it before me when I go to my rest? It is all laid bare before me. You are there, of course, and the other. Your dark shadow. You are conspiring outside the *Exeunt Tertius*. Oh and there are others. Jacqueline is there—that is why you must send her to me."

Aaron could only look on in growing dismay as Foley staggered forward. "But it is not any of these that accomplishes my end." Foley laughed, coughed, barking a fine spray of blood. Fingertips groped for Aaron's cheek. The apprentice braced himself and stood unflinchingly before the ravages of the blood.

Then, as if struck by an entirely different thought, Foley let his hand drop absently to his side. He mumbled something and, turning away, began smoothing the wrinkles from his ceremonial robe. He succeeded only in leaving long smears of blood. A clumsy effort like a child's finger-painting. Foley looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. Like a magpie, he turned from one curiosity to another. At times he stumbled. At times, he dashed things from their cubbyholes. At times he tore books from shelves, or pages from books, or words from pages. Some words he brandished at Aaron. Others he ground underfoot. Others still, he ate with great relish, humming to himself.

He's mad, Aaron thought. *He will ruin everything.*

Without a backward glance, Aaron slipped from the sanctum and hurried down toward the *Exeunt Tertius*.



Friday, 23 July 1999, 10:45 PM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Johnston Foley tested the gem one final time. The flame, transferred from match to purple candle, sputtered for a moment, then caught. His thoughts were perfectly focused as he began the incantation and gradually moved the candle nearer the tiny, quartz sphere in the open chest.

The candle was not even within two feet when the flame was extinguished, snuffed as convincingly as if unseen fingers had smothered the wick between them.

Amazing, thought Foley.

For the past week, the ambient power had grown stronger and stronger. Foley had never before seen the candle extinguished at such a distance. It was a simple, unsophisticated ritual, but still he couldn't help feel it was a portent of no slight significance. He would unravel the mysteries of the gem, and his superiors would undoubtedly take notice of his efficiency and skill. How could they not?

Aisling Sturbridge had returned from her council meeting in Baltimore. She told Foley little of the goings-on there, but even she couldn't conceal her interest in the gem. When he had shown her this same ritual two nights ago, he'd seen the nearly imperceptible rise of her eyebrow—that telltale gesture that with her, he imagined, would be the only sign of any emotion from murderous rage to sexual ecstasy.

She must be kicking herself for delegating the gem to me, Foley thought. *Surely my role in this will be made known to the Pontifex... maybe even to Meerlinda herself!*

Foley smoothed the wrinkles from his ceremonial robe and made an effort to clear such giddy thoughts from his mind. Jacqueline had gathered the necessary items—and had done a respectable job, Foley had to admit. Aaron, a more consistently reliable apprentice, had performed the ceremonial cleansings and invoked the appropriate protective wards around Foley's chambers—both to prevent the unwary from interrupting the ritual, and more importantly as a precaution against anything that might be unleashed by the ritual. Foley, ensconced within the confines of the wards, might in the larger view be expendable. The entire chantry was not.

Foley took a step back from the stone and surveyed the paraphernalia on the work table: two eight-inch-tall, four-inch-wide, oval mirrors with polished silver rims, perfectly smooth glass and silver backing; five sticks of pine carved to the size of pencils and flawlessly sanded; a flat silver tray engraved with a fleur-de-lis matching the inlay on the wooden chest; seven candles of red wax melded with the entrails of a wild owl; several pieces of golden-edged parchment; an obsidian inkwell; and a particular set of ritual quills. The parchment, ink, and quills Foley had attended to personally. The other items that Jacqueline had gathered, as well as Aaron's work, Foley had inspected as well and been satisfied.

Now it was time.

He closed his eyes and, with an ease born of decades of repetition, cleared all extraneous concerns from his mind. Each bit of mental flotsam he tucked in its appropriate niche, until his faculties were completely unencumbered, leaving him free to turn his mind's eye inward to that place where mystical energies collected like a pool above an ever-bubbling spring. Down he dove, through the surface pool, deep into the aquifer itself, a repository to which few ever gained access.

Part of Foley's mind was vaguely aware that time was proceeding without him, that hours were passing beyond the limits of his body. His eyes opened, but the perversity of time, the discrepancy between a physical act and the arrival of light waves carrying to an eye the sight of that act, were grown inconstant. The surface portion of his mind that was attending to external reality received stimuli that were minutes rather than nanoseconds old.

Foley saw when he had placed the two mirrors on either side of the wooden chest containing the gem. He saw the distant moments when his hands had arranged the seven candles equidistant from one another and the chest.

Suddenly time skipped ahead, as it was wont to do. Foley must have placed the silver tray before the chest, for there it sat. His lips were moving, as if of their own accord. He chanted words of a language far older than most linguists would have believed possible, but the time-sense of his speech was different from that of his vision. Words that would sound in the next hour mingled with sights that were already minutes old. The Tremere was less the controller and more the medium for the ritual. From the aquifer of his soul, it received shape and form.

A ripple in the pool obscured the time-sense, shifted relationships. Foley saw now the way in which his hands would grasp the pine sticks. His eyes recorded how he would snap each stick, and how not sap but blood would drain into the silver tray.

At the snap of the final stick, the seven candles flamed to life. The smoke shone red—an illusion projected by the now glowing quartz, which burned as brightly as any flame since those that had raged at the formation of the world. The odor reminded Foley of the comfort of his mother's womb—how many centuries had passed? Yet he was there, warm, comforted by the close swish-swish of her heart. He was becoming his embryo-self, connected to the greater being. From the amorphous stuff of his fledgling body, a hand took shape.

When the hand reached out, though, he felt surrounding him not the soft, forgiving flesh of his mother's protecting womb, but hard, cold stone. He tried to pull back his hand, but the stone grew like living flesh to take hold of him. Even the cord that was his connection to life wrapped around him like a noose. All about, a tempest rose. Warmth and comfort fled.

Foley tried to scream as he was dragged down into the darkness.



Saturday, 24 July 1999, 1:17 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Ramona didn't remember ever having fallen asleep since the night of the change—unless she counted her daily escape from the sun, but those hours seemed more like hibernation, or catatonia, than real sleep. She wasn't sure that she'd fallen asleep this night—it hardly seemed likely—but suddenly she noticed that time had passed. The night was deeper. Just like a mortal could intuitively tell morning from afternoon from evening, Ramona was sensitive to the phases of night. It was not a hard thing to learn. Now she found herself later in the night, and somehow she had missed the intervening hours.

Sleep? She didn't feel particularly rested. She hadn't dreamed, but again that was something that hadn't occurred since the change. She and Jen had talked about that not too long ago, just a couple of nights ago, although with all that had happened it seemed more like years ago. Jen was freed from her fears, and Ramona was left with no one to share her own.

Her chest ached, not from injury but from emptiness. Maybe it was the weight of her loss that had pressed her into slumber. For a few brief hours, she had been devoid of thought and memory and pain. But they were her constant companions now, and had not gone far.

What had called her back to her world of loss? For undoubtedly grief and bitterness had not yet run their course. Maybe it was the nearby scrabbling sound that was only slowly intruding upon her conscious mind.

Ramona sat bolt upright. She thought she saw the back of a man rooting around in the dirt of the fresh grave. At the sound of her movement, however, he whirled to face her. She was confronted by the rheumy eyes and bared yellowed fangs of a giant rat.

Ramona's shock quickly gave way to instinct. Within a second, she was on her feet, crouched, ready to spring.

The rat-thing gave a half-hearted hiss. Loose grave dirt fell from its twitching nose. The creature seemed as likely to flee as attack, as it edged away, putting the grave between itself and Ramona, whatever protection the small mound of earth might afford.

"You are Tanner-childe," said the rat.

Ramona stood speechless. Her shock, first at finding the creature so close to her and then seeing its face, was nothing compared to her surprise at hearing words come from those inhuman lips. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded the creature more carefully.

Its body was bent but human, covered by filthy rags that smelled of garbage and worse. Its face, though distinctly ratlike—large bulbous eyeballs set close together, twitching whiskers, protruding and grotesquely disproportioned nose, receded jaw, tiny jagged teeth—retained a vaguely human shape.

"You are Tanner-childe," the rat said again, in way of confirmation, since Ramona hadn't responded. "He said you were a stubborn one."

The rat chuckled at his own little joke, or maybe he wasn't laughing and just had something stuck in his throat. Ramona was unsure about the disturbing, coughing sound he made.

Still keeping a wary eye on Ramona, the rat began rooting at the heaped earth again. "New grave," he muttered.

Ramona leapt down from the rock and landed by the grave. She swiped at the rat and yelled: "Get away, you fuckin' rat-faced son of a bitch!"

The rat ducked under her claw and almost fell over himself scuttering backward out of her reach. He hissed like a cornered animal.

"Sometimes blood still in bodies," he insisted. "Enough to share." He stretched out his neck and watched closely to see if Ramona would accept his conciliatory offer.

"Ain't nobody diggin' up this body!" Ramona took another step toward him and raised a claw. He backed away farther.

"Your blood?" the rat asked, as if that were a claim he could understand.

Ramona looked down at the grave. What difference did it make now, she wondered, what happened to the body? Zhavon was dead. Gone forever. But, still, Ramona couldn't stand the thought of this rat-thing digging up the poor girl's remains and gnawing on them.

"My blood," she said quietly. "Nobody's diggin' up this body."

The rat nodded. Apparently the matter was settled, as far as he was concerned. He edged closer to Ramona, there being no further cause for confrontation.

"What is your name, Tanner-childe?" he asked in a way that was again mostly trusting and not unfriendly.

"Ramona." She told him without really thinking. She didn't think she had anything to fear from him, as long as he stayed away from the grave.

The rat waited for a moment, as if he expected her to say something more, but Ramona was silent. So he straightened a bit and spoke: "I am Ratface. I know all the towns and cities of New York. I am smarter than the Lupines, swifter than the Sabbat."

Still he looked at Ramona, as if she might have something else to say.

"That's nice," she said at last. *I didn't ask for your freakin' life story.*

They stood silently for a few minutes. Ramona watched to make sure he stayed away from the grave. Ratface sniffed around Table Rock, pointedly taking interest in everything *but* the grave.

"Your *name* is Ratface?" she asked eventually, uncomfortable with the silence, which was broken only by Ratface's gentle snorting as he rooted around. "Your mama have a burr up her butt?"

Ratface paused in his sniffing. He looked up with what might have been a glint of sadness in his eyes. "It is what I am called now."

She didn't need to ask *why* he was called that. "I wouldn't let nobody call me Ratface," said Ramona. She couldn't help glancing down at her own monstrous feet, and thinking of her ears, and Tanner's eyes.

What'll they be callin' me? she wondered. Was she any better off than this disgusting Ratface? Was she going to keep changing and end up little more than an animal? Ramona

had always thought of the night she became a vampire as *the* change, but it seemed more and more like she wasn't done changing yet.

Tanner's got some shit to answer for, she decided.

And she could faintly hear the voice from before: *There is strength in his blood.*

Ramona shook her head, shook the voice away. She watched Ratface sniffing the large rock, nearby trees, the air. Finally, he climbed up onto the rock, turned three tight circles in one spot, and then sat. He continued to sniff at the air occasionally, but for the most part seemed to wait, without need for further conversation. His presence bothered Ramona. She would've preferred to be alone at the graveside and to sort through her grief privately, or perhaps to figure out why the great emptiness inside her so outweighed her sense of loss. She couldn't understand why she felt so distanced from Zhavon's death. But every time Ramona started to get hold of one of her tangled emotions, Ratface invariably distracted her as he fidgeted and grunted up on the rock. Her irritation with him, however, was mixed with a sense of relief, strangely enough. She realized chances were that nothing but time would untangle her feelings, and for now there was nothing to be gained by wallowing in pity and doubt, no matter how great the urge to do just that.

"Tanner sent you?" she asked Ratface.

"Yes. He has called a Gather."

"Gather? Gathering of what?"

Ratface regarded her for a moment. Puzzlement crossed his features briefly, but then he nodded as if he'd answered some question for himself. "Of the Gangrel," he said. "There are many not far away, guarding Buffalo. Many will come. Maybe even Xaviar himself."

Gangrel.

Ratface's words sparked memories in Ramona, brought back what Tanner had said to her the night before: *Know that you are Gangrel.*

And now Ratface used the same word. *A Gather of the Gangrel.*

"But what is Gangrel?" Ramona asked herself, not meaning to speak the words aloud.

Ratface chuckled again; it was the sound of an old lady trying to spit. "Gangrel is our clan. I am Gangrel. You are Gangrel. Has Tanner not taught you?"

Know that you are Gangrel, Tanner had said. *And that I am your sire. I made you what you are.*

"He's my sire," Ramona mumbled.

"Yes," Ratface nodded. "And you—his childe."

Ramona gave Ratface a hard look, squinted suspiciously. "Are you his childe?"

Ratface's eyes bulged even larger. "Me? Tanner's childe?" He laughed quite loudly this time. "Heavens no. And I wouldn't let him hear you suggest that. He's a picky one, Tanner is."

"He's an asshole is what he is."

Ratface started to laugh again but caught himself. He glanced around nervously, as if Tanner might be listening from behind the nearest tree. "I'd be careful if I were you," he said. His speech was more normal now; his initial me-Tarzan-you-Jane pidgin had given way to complete sentences, and he was proving talkative. "Tanner has Embraced before, but seldom revealed himself, as far as I know."

"Embraced?" Ramona asked. Everything Ratface said was like a riddle.

"Embraced. Taken a mortal to be one of us." Ratface was still nervous. He spoke quietly and looked around constantly. "He has Embraced others, but mostly he has left them to flounder on their own, and they perished. He must think highly of you to have revealed himself to you."

"Well, I don't think too much of him," Ramona grumbled. She could see that Ratface was amused by what she said, but he was just as obviously afraid of Tanner.

Ratface looked around again and then practically whispered to her: "Do you know why he called the Gather?"

Ratface clearly was asking about something he thought he shouldn't be. He was hunched down like he expected to be struck for uttering the words. Ramona, remembering how Tanner had hit her without warning, supposed that Ratface's manner wasn't all that unreasonable. She was tempted to tell him everything she knew, just on the off chance that doing so would piss off Tanner. He deserved it. But the truth was that she didn't have a very clear of what had happened herself. In the end, she rejected candor for shock value.

"Because he was afraid."

Ratface's eyes grew wide again. Ramona suppressed her own laughter this time. That wasn't what Ratface was expecting to hear, but it was true. She had seen the fear in Tanner's face. She didn't feel the need to go into more detail—to tell that *she'd* been scared shitless as well, and that if Tanner hadn't hustled her out of the cave, she too, like Jen and probably Darnell, would be dead. She didn't know what to say about the Toreador. She didn't have much to compare it to. Better to let Tanner tell the story when he got back. But Ramona still had hundreds of questions, and Ratface was proving more forthcoming than Tanner ever had.

"So Gangrel is one clan," she said. "Is Sabbat another?"

Ratface shook his head. "Not exactly. Gangrel is one clan of several that make up the Camarilla—the alliance that opposes the Sabbat."

Ramona's head was spinning. Every answer Ratface gave her created two more questions. "Jesus—sire, Embrace, Gangrel, Camarilla, Sabbat—I need a fuckin' dictionary."

Ratface continued as if she hadn't interrupted him. "The Sabbat are… monsters. Very dangerous. They'd destroy the Masquerade if it were up to them."

"Masquerade?"

Ratface nodded vigorously. "Before, when you were a mortal, did you know there were those like us living among you?"

Ramona shook her head. "Not really. I mean… they were just movies and stories and shit."

"Exactly. That's the Masquerade. If the mortals knew about us, they'd hunt us down and that would be the end."

Ramona thought about that for a moment. She and her friends had almost always tried to lie low and not to attract a lot of attention. It just seemed safer that way. They'd mostly tried to hide from other vampires as well as from mortals. It made sense… unless the Sabbat thought there were enough vampires to take on the mortals. But if that were the case, why weren't vampires in charge of everything already?

"Shh." Ratface roused her from thought. His enlarged, rodent ears were pricked up. "That way. Someone's coming."

"You always were tough to sneak up on," said a voice from the direction Ratface was peering. A moment later, a tall man strode out of the darkness and over to Table Rock.

He was taller than Ramona and Ratface, and wore sturdy hiking boots, worn jeans, and a heavy corduroy shirt, all dirty and dusty from long use but not tattered like their own clothes. The newcomer drew himself up before them. He picked a twig out of his long and unruly hair and flicked the tiny stick into the woods.

"I am Brant Edmonson," he said. "When the mortals fought among themselves for the western lands, I prowled the trails. When Elijah the Cruel was lost to the Beast, I was with mighty Xaviar as we put him down."

Ratface nodded respectfully. Ramona was caught off guard by what she considered the awkwardness of the introduction.

"I am Ratface," said Ratface. "I know all the towns and cities of New York. I am smarter than the Lupines, swifter than the Sabbat."

Ramona listened to the words she'd heard before. She didn't know what to say to this Brant Edmonson. Ratface seemed to have his little spiel planned already. The new guy didn't seem to be a threat. His sudden appearance hadn't alarmed Ratface, and Ratface was skittish if anything. This close, Ramona could smell that Edmonson was like them, that the blood didn't flow naturally through his body, that it was really somebody else's blood in the first place. Without thinking, Ramona reached out and shook Brant Edmonson's hand. It seemed like the uptight, corncob-up-your-ass kind of thing that these folks might do.

"I'm Ramona," she said, then stepped back.

Brant seemed surprised and gave her a funny look, like he thought he was eating sugar but tasted salt instead. The funny look slowly faded though, and Ramona realized that his eyes weren't focused on her anymore. He was looking over her shoulder. Ratface too, she saw, was looking to the other side of Table Rock. His ears were pricked up again.

Ramona turned and saw the dark figure across the clearing.

A throaty growl rumbled through the night, but the rumble was actually words: "I am Stalker-in-the-Woods. I do not run from the mortals. I catch their bullets in my teeth. I drink their blood and grind their bones to dust."

Ramona edged away so that she wasn't closest as the newest Gangrel stepped onto Table Rock. Stalker-in-the-Woods was hunched over, but still his shoulders were more than a foot higher than Ramona's head. His wild mane of hair covered him almost like a cloak; he wore no other clothes. He was all gaunt muscle and scars.

Edmonson stepped forward. He stood with his chin raised defiantly.

"I am Brant Edmonson. When the mortals fought among themselves for the western lands, I prowled the trails. When Elijah the Cruel was lost to the Beast, I was with mighty Xaviar as we put him down."

From where he stood, Ratface spoke his introduction as he had twice already. Stalker-in-the-Woods looked at him, and Ratface looked away, not meeting the creature's gaze.

The attention of Stalker-in-the-Woods shifted to Ramona. He stepped closer. Ramona suddenly felt her mouth as dry as if she hadn't drunk blood in a year. Stalker-in-the-

Woods moved closer still. His eyes were yellowed and bloodshot, his face black with dried blood.

Ramona started to open her mouth, but no words came to her tongue. She wasn't tempted to shake hands with Stalker-in-the-Woods.

"She is Ramona Tanner-childe," said Ratface, at last.

Stalker-in-the-Woods ignored Ratface and stared at Ramona until she looked away. This seemed to satisfy him. He turned and moved toward Brant until the two were only a few feet apart. Edmonson held his ground. His hands were relaxed at his sides.

Ramona almost jumped when she felt Ratface next to her. She hadn't heard him move. His hand was on her elbow and he was ushering her to the side.

"He's a mean one," Ratface whispered. "We'd do best to stay out of his way."

Edmonson didn't share Ratface's opinion. He stood toe-to-toe with Stalker-in-the-Woods, and to Ramona's surprise, the smaller, more human Gangrel smiled.

There was no warning of Stalker-in-the-Woods's attack. He sprang with a ferocious snarl before Ramona even knew he was moving. Brant took the full brunt of the lunge. Stalker-in-the-Woods bowled him over backwards. The fight was quick and one-sided, but not in the way Ramona had expected in that first instant.

Edmonson went down under his larger opponent but was not surprised. He rolled as he landed, shifting his weight so that Stalker-in-the-Woods was caught off balance and tumbled off. Before the dust kicked up by Stalker-in-the-Woods' lunge had settled, it was over. Edmonson knelt by his prone attacker's side, one razor-sharp claw barely piercing the flesh of Stalker-in-the-Woods' neck. If the larger Gangrel so much as moved, Brant could rip his throat out with the flick of a wrist.

The hard stares of the two combatants met, and an unspoken acknowledgement passed between them. Brant withdrew his claw and stood, never taking his eyes from Stalker-in-the-Woods.

Ramona felt sharp pain in her hands and looked down to realize that she had dug her fingernails—her *claws*—deep into her palms. She watched Stalker-in-the-Woods, expecting him any second to leap up and fling himself at Edmonson again. But Stalker-in-the-Woods climbed slowly to his feet. He did not dust himself off; he did not speak. He stalked slowly and silently away into the darkness.

Ramona briefly felt the urge to taunt him as he left, but she knew that she wasn't the one who'd defeated him. He wasn't somebody she needed to antagonize. Probably he could make quick work of her, like she'd thought he was going to of Brant.

Edmonson was not taunting Stalker-in-the-Woods, but neither did he seem particularly worried. Unlike Ramona and Ratface, who were glancing nervously toward the deepest shadows every few seconds, he looked as if nothing had happened. The only difference was that now the dust on his clothes was fresher and billowed into small clouds when he crossed his arms.

"So you're Tanner's childe," Brant said.

Ramona nodded.

"I've learned a lot from Tanner," he added.

"Wish I could say the same," Ramona muttered without thinking, then wished she hadn't said it.

To her relief, Edmonson smiled, and not nervously like Ratface when she'd criticized Tanner earlier. She saw no fear of Tanner in Brant's eyes; she saw no fear of anything.

"Tanner is a good teacher," said Brant, "in his own time."

In his own time. His words reminded Ramona of something he'd said earlier. *When the mortals fought among themselves for the western lands, I prowled the trails*. The western lands—did he mean the West-west? Cowboys-and-Indians West? It sure sounded like that to Ramona. But that would make him over a hundred years old! No wonder they treated her like such a baby. She wanted to ask, but she didn't know if she should. There seemed to be strange customs among these Gangrel. First, the stiff, formal sort of introductions—it seemed very important to them to announce who they were, what they'd done. Second, the fight that had begun and ended in two blinks of an eye. That she thought she understood. She'd seen turf wars in L.A. Edmonson had made it clear that he stood above Stalker-in-the-Woods. But clear for how long? Ramona wondered. She kept glancing over in the direction he had gone.

Saturday, 24 July 1999, 3:17 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Foley came to an abrupt halt as he careened into the worktable. He patted the table apologetically, already spinning off in another direction. Then he stopped and took a step back. He surveyed the paraphernalia assembled on the table in open wonder. Then he bent low, studying the peculiar implements with a critical eye.

With satisfaction, he took the measure of the two eight-inch-tall, four-inch-wide oval mirrors. He ran a finger over their perfectly polished silver rims, admiring the smooth glass, the silver backings. One, he noted distractedly, now bore a hairline crack running the mirror's length from upper right to lower left. The bar sinister.

Dimly a recollection intruded upon him. *Jacqueline*. Yes, these were the objects he had instructed Jacqueline to prepare. He could see the list before him now, with all the clarity of his advanced mnemonic powers. It was a perfect image, a flawless reflection.

Carefully replacing the ruined mirror, his fingers fumbled among six sticks of smoothly sanded pine. Each was carved to about the size of a schoolchild's chunky pencil. They had once been carefully arranged upon a flat silver tray engraved with a familiar fleur-de-lis inlay—a companion piece to the chest that had, until recently, housed his little gem. His eye. His eye to the Eye. *That Eye is like unto this eye*, he thought. *But in a low place, not in a high place.*

Now the pieces of pine lay jumbled like pickup sticks in the wake of his precipitous collision with the worktable. Foley picked up first one stick, then another. He stared at them intently, as if to wrest their secrets from them. With a patience exceeded only by the uncontrollable shaking of his hands, he set about arranging the sticks.

He stood them on end and leaned them together like drowsy soldiers. They tumbled down again.

His hand slipped. One of the sticks snapped sharply in two against the tabletop. It was not sap, but blood that flowed from the break. It slid effortlessly, languidly, across the fine silver of the tray.

A distant part of Foley's mind was aware that something was wrong. Terribly wrong. It was the blood—the way it flowed, its consistency. It was too thin; it was too lithe.

The apprentice should have infused the sticks with her own blood—the blood of the Tremere, the blood of the Seven. *The power was in the blood.*

Foley opened himself to the Sight. His gaze became fixed on an imaginary point in the middle distance. His eyes unfocused. He opened his hand, revealing the blazing red eye embedded in his palm. And he saw.

A lithe shadow slipped between the pine sticks, winding about them, rubbing its side up against them. Purring.

A black cat, Foley thought. *The blood of a black cat.*

All was becoming clear now. It would be unnecessary for Aaron to send Jacqueline to him after all. He now understood why the Eye had shown her to him and the part she would play.

Foley looked around absently for Aaron, but could not see the apprentice anywhere. It was no matter. He would return soon. He had to return. That much was clear.

With great deliberation, Foley reached out and took up a second stick. He broke it and let the blood rejoin that already spilled on the tray. He took up another.

At the snap of the sixth and final stick, seven red candles flamed to life. *More of Jacqueline's handiwork*, Foley mused. His judge, his apprentice, his would-be murderer. He smiled.

His instructions had been precise. Each of the candles were to be painstakingly melded with entrails of wild owl. To speed the thoughts winging out across the night. To give piercing insight through the veils of darkness.

Several of the candles had already taken flight when Foley careened into the table. They scattered across the floor when the bough broke. They burst merrily aflame. Their merriment quickly spread. The smoke that rose on all sides pulsed redly—taking its lead from the blazing red stone embedded in Foley's palm.

There was the unmistakable odor of blood that had been left out in the sun.

But the candles, too, were wrong. Foley could already pick out the afterimage, not of the snowy owl, but of a black cockerel, preening and strutting among the flames.

Blood of black cat, heart of black cockerel. *Company's coming*, Foley thought. Instinctively, he found himself judging the distance between himself and the protective circle. Too far.

There was no fighting the swirling darkness. It pulled Foley down, and he was mildly surprised when he eventually found himself again. His precarious time-sense was completely subsumed beneath the burgeoning perspective that dominated his awareness, and much to Foley's dismay, this new perspective was as fractious and chaotic as his own was orderly. He was assailed by whirling streams of contradictory thoughts, fears, needs.

Foley sensed a consciousness that he should have been able to wrest under his control, but the consciousness was bolstered, augmented. It was slippery and strong, and before he knew it, Foley felt tendrils of personality coiling around him. Frantically, he extracted himself from the entangling psyche. He'd recovered from his disorientation just enough to pull back. The tendrils snaked after him, but Foley remained beyond them. With great effort, he closed himself to the maddening consciousness—to the *mad* consciousness, he realized—by latching onto a distant sensation, tangible evidence of his own identity. He did not see the quill, but he felt it in his fingers—the smooth, gently curving barrel; the downy plume. It was inextricably linked to who he was, to the ritual he performed, and it was his anchor amidst the raging storm, his shield against the *other*.

Having shored up his sense of his own consciousness and held the cyclone of the other at bay, Foley reached out again to that perspective. He searched for sensory stimuli, for context to the madness. He searched thoroughly but quickly. His defenses appeared firm, but he might or might not have warning if they gave way. If that happened, he would be swept away by the storm.

The vision formed quickly, forcefully, and for a moment it threatened to pull Foley back into the madness. But he was steadfast in his resolve. His finger stroked the quill. He

distractedly worried that he might damage the instrument, but the alternative was far more ominous.

Foley found himself (not himself, the other) in an open space—dark, damp, cool. Through nonexistent light, he saw insubstantial walls, shimmering formations of rock, limestone. The surreal surroundings faded almost completely from view, then returned to partial reality. Foley felt as if he was real (not he, the other), but that the parameters of the environs danced temperamentally through ever-shifting phases.

Then the hands reached forward, his hands (the other's hands), and took hold of that alone which, except for the hands themselves, was real and substantial—a young black man; Kindred, judging from the exposed fangs. Exposed because the man's lower jaw was missing. No, not missing, Foley realized, but stretched impossibly far, so that it hung down below the man's knees. The Kindred's tongue was forked, not once but perhaps a half dozen times, and each of the resulting strands of flesh wagged and squirmed, giving the appearance that somehow the man had unhinged his jaw and was swallowing a miniature head of Medusa. His eyes rolled up into his head, but he was not yet destroyed.

As Foley watched, the hands, long and pale with bulbous knuckles, grasped the Kindred's deformed shoulders. Flesh and bone melted and were reshaped beneath the touch. The snake-tongues wagged feverishly.

Foley withdrew as much as he could from the vision. He had no desire to see more. Instead, he began cautiously to probe the other consciousness, the entity of which he'd been an eye. Foley was careful not to wade again into the raging chaos of that mind; he explored from a distance. While he did so, he kept firm hold on the quill, and remembering ink and parchment, he put them to use.

GF



Saturday, 24 July 1999, 4:05 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

For hours they kept coming, and they were all Gangrel. One at a time they wandered in, or occasionally two who had met on the way arrived together. Most had traveled east, though once near Table Rock they circled and approached from various directions. They were a wary lot. Most entered the clearing around the rock for at least a short time. Some soon edged back into the more complete darkness of the forest. Others never ventured beyond the protective cover of the trees in the first place. But Ramona knew they were out there, as was Stalker-in-the-Woods. Watching.

There was some quiet talking among them. Acquaintances separated for several years greeted one another and caught up. They told stories of their adventures, but never until after the ritualistic greetings:

"I'm Snodgrass. This scar is from a Lupine I met in Central Park."

"I am Mutabo. I feasted on the blood of the slavers who brought me to this country."

"I am Renée Lightning. There are few Kindred Embraced who can match my speed."

"I am Joshua, called Bloodhound. I track through cities infested by Sabbat, or wilderness crawling with Lupines. I've never failed to earn my fee."

Ramona listened to the first few introductions. She was curious about these creatures, all apparently of her clan—Gangrel. They were as different from one another as might be a group of people on a random city bus. Some, like herself, were not in their element out here in the forest, miles from the nearest city or even decent-sized town. Others seemed perfectly at ease.

None, however, appeared particularly affluent. The appearances might have been misleading, Ramona knew, but Edmonson in his worn but mostly intact attire was at the upper end of the fashion spectrum for those assembled. Many more, like Ramona, had on what they might have been wearing years ago on the night of their change—their Embrace—and they just hadn't bothered with much of a wardrobe since. Ramona knew that she had gone months at a time without any thought of what she was wearing. The weather was not really a problem anymore; wind and cold didn't bother her. And she hadn't been particularly sociable since the change. She wondered if, in a few more years, she would run around naked like Stalker-in-the-Woods, with only her hair and the night to cover her.

Ramona peered out into the darkness. Just thinking of Stalker-in-the-Woods made her nervous. He wasn't someone she wanted to stumble on unawares—or if she were expecting it, for that matter. His eyes burned with a cold fury. Ramona, before she'd looked away, had seen the hunger within him, but it was a different hunger from what she felt. Stalker-in-the-Woods would enjoy the suffering he inflicted, whether on mortal or vampire—or Kindred, as they called one another.

Aside from being uneasy not knowing where exactly he was, Ramona was embarrassed—embarrassed and *angry*—that she had looked away. She hadn't realized at the time that Stalker-in-the-Woods was staring her down. It had just happened and she'd looked away. She hadn't been prepared. The worst part was that she didn't know if it would've made a difference if she *had* been prepared. Stalker-in-the-Woods was so…

"Close to the Beast," Ratface had said, when Ramona asked him about the frightening Gangrel.

It was an apt description. Ramona remembered what she had felt that night the two men had attacked Zhavon. Ramona hadn't planned to rip out their throats and string their intestines across the alley. It had just happened. It had felt right… natural. And she had enjoyed it—that scared her as much as anything. It was that kind of enjoyment that she thought she could see in Stalker-in-the-Woods.

Among the Gangrel, the dominant topics of conversation were the Sabbat and Lupines. Ramona didn't take part in the discussions, but she heard bits of various stories. The tales about the Sabbat were exchanged in calm tones, as any interesting news might be related. Apparently that gang, which the Gangrel opposed—although Ramona did hear one story about a Gangrel, Korbit, who fought on the side of the Sabbat—was taking control of a great deal of territory that had belonged to the Camarilla along the East Coast. Ramona heard several cities mentioned—Atlanta, Charleston, Washington, D.C. It sounded bad, but Edmonson and the others didn't seem particularly worried.

When they spoke of the Lupines, however, they did so in hushed tones. They glanced occasionally over their shoulders. Probably they denied it even to themselves, but Ramona could hear the fear in their voices. Several of the Gangrel in their litany of deeds had spoken boastfully of Lupines, but uncertainty, not pride, tinged their voices as they spoke of routes of safety through Lupine territory or shifting hunting grounds. Even Edmonson, as calm and confident as Tanner, spoke respectfully of such things.

It was the talk about the Lupines that made Ramona begin to feel strangely detached from everything that was going on around her. The stories were all of death and dismemberment: a friend decapitated in the wilds of northern Maine; an associate crossing the Grand Tetons split open from neck to belly; another who never returned from the Everglades.

Ramona withdrew into herself. The talk moved farther and farther away, until the voices were very small. They rang in the back of her head. Certain words echoed through her mind—*Lupine… Texas… werewolf… Lupine*—grew closer together, finally overlapped and merged into one disquieting mass.

I saw a Lupine in Texas, Ramona said. She moved her lips, but no words emerged. She didn't remember sitting, but there she was on the ground by Zhavon's grave, sifting loose dirt through her fingers.

I saw a Lupine in Texas.

They had still been several hours from San Antonio. Eddie had this thing for back roads. He wouldn't drive on an interstate if he could help it, and so when they ran out of gas, they were surrounded by nothing but miles and miles of gullies, mesquite and dust.

Jen and Darnell argued bitterly over whose fault it was they'd run out of gas. Eddie didn't seem too upset. He claimed to have an unfailing sense of direction and saw finding a shortcut through the mesquite thickets as a challenge. Ramona had asked him if his

dick was a compass, but he ignored her. Too bad, they agreed, that they couldn't eat sand instead of drinking blood. Plenty of sand. No gas. No blood.

Then suddenly there was plenty of blood.

Maybe if Jen and Darnell hadn't been arguing, somebody would've heard it coming.

Lupine. The name fit the monster from Ramona's memory.

They were approaching the edge of a gully, a dry creek bed, and the Lupine was there, where it hadn't been a second before.

Eddie stumbled back. The left side of his face was gone. Ramona heard the first snarl as she was splattered with his blood. Before they could speak or scream, a claw ripped open his gut like a piñata full of shriveled intestines. Eddie's knees buckled, and then the monster slammed its jaws shut and took off the top of his head.

Eddie fell. His blood wetted down the dust.

Ramona and the others behind her stood in shock, mouths agape. She could feel the Lupine's moist breath heavy on the dry, Texas air.

The first moment of decision arrived—the creature needed only reach out to take off Ramona's head, but instead it fell upon Eddie, burying its snout in his opened belly. Eddie whimpered as it tore him apart from the inside out.

The second moment of decision fell to Ramona, Jen, and Darnell. They could pounce on the Lupine. It was fully consumed by its passion for carnage. They could strike back for Eddie, who no longer could himself. The moment hung heavy in the air, bathed in blood and the staccato crack of ribs.

As one, Ramona and the others turned and ran.

They stumbled through the mesquite. Thorns dug into their flesh, but they hardly noticed. They ran and didn't stop running until the rising sun forced them to burrow into the steep bank of a gully. They burrowed until the earth collapsed behind them, but they didn't need air. Only darkness.

I saw a Lupine in Texas.

I saw a Lupine in Texas.

"Ramona?"

Ratface was close to her, very close. Ramona blinked repeatedly at him. She raised a hand to wipe away Eddie's blood that had splattered on her face.

"Ramona?" Ratface's voice, too, seemed very far away, though he crouched less than a foot from her.

There were too many people here. Too many Gangrel. Ramona could see at least ten. Stalker-in-the-Woods and others were out there somewhere too.

Too many.

These were the others whom Tanner had called together. Ramona had never thought she'd want to see this many of her own kind—vampires, Kindred, Gangrel—together in one place, but if they were going back to that cave…

The thought seemed to flick a switch in her brain. *The cave… Darnell!* She'd been so caught up in her own grief and in the strangeness of the Gather that she'd almost forgotten Darnell. How long had he been in there? They had to get him out! There were plenty of Gangrel here now. Ramona scrambled to her feet.

"Where the hell is Tanner?" she asked no one in particular.

Ratface regarded her quizzically. "He is spreading word of the Gather."

"But we have to save Darnell!" Ramona suddenly couldn't stand the thought of wasting another second. They'd waited too long already. She shoved her way past Ratface and stalked over to Brant Edmonson, who was talking with Joshua.

"Let's go," she demanded. "We've got enough folks here." For the moment, she ignored the memory of Tanner's fear and convinced herself that Edmonson would be more than a match for Darnell's captor.

"Tanner has called the Gather," Edmonson said. "We'll wait for him." He spoke kindly but firmly, and didn't bother to ask what she wanted to do.

"I've been waitin' for him for too long," Ramona snarled. "I'm sick of it! There's a... a... fuckin' *thing* in a cave," she pointed toward the meadow, "and it's got one of my friends."

"We will wait for Tanner," Edmonson said again calmly. He placed a hand on her shoulder, but Ramona jerked and pushed him away.

"Don't touch me!"

Joshua moved closer. "You need to calm down."

Ramona jabbed an instantly formed claw toward his face. "Don't tell me what I need! *I* don't need anything. *We* need to rescue Darnell."

Edmonson stared at her—a harder, less friendly stare than before—but said nothing. Other Gangrel were taking notice of her outburst, of the harsh tone of her words to Edmonson and Joshua.

Ramona threw her hands in the air. "He's been there a whole day and night already. We have to get him out!" She was met with silence, which only stoked her anger. "What kind of chickenshit vampire club is this? *Any* of you fellas got any balls?" She glanced meaningfully around the clearing at the various Gangrel. "Or is that just a mortal thing?"

At that, Edmonson drew himself up to his full height and glared down at Ramona. "We will wait for Tanner," he said in short, clipped tones, and raised a finger before her face. "Until he returns, little one, you had best watch your tongue." Then he turned and walked away from her.

"Little one? *Little one!*" She took a step after Brant, but found herself restrained. Someone was holding her shoulder. She tried to jerk away again, but this time the hand held tight. She whirled, ready to attack, and to her surprise faced Ratface.

"You are not helping your friend by aggravating Edmonson," he said quietly. The strength in his hands and the earnestness in his eyes brought her up short. At the same time, a great weariness took hold of her. Her frustration and fear had flashed to anger but that, for the moment, was spent. Ratface was right, she knew. Getting her ass whipped wasn't going to help Darnell. But that knowledge did little to curb her vexation. She started to think how she'd probably alienated Brant Edmonson, but then she noticed that despite the numerous Gangrel that had already gathered, the low buzz of conversation that had waxed and waned over the past few hours had now died away completely. Even Ratface, right next to her, was looking back toward Table Rock and sniffing at the air.

Another Gangrel had arrived, and all had stopped whatever they were doing to watch him. There was not the feel of danger about him, as with Stalker-in-the-Woods. He was

not even tall and confident like Brant Edmonson. Yet the gaze of every Gangrel present followed him.

"Edward Blackfeather," Ratface turned back and whispered to Ramona. "A Cherokee medicine man."

The man did have the look of an American Indian, though Ramona could never have made a guess about what tribe. He was here, so he must be Gangrel. Apparently the vampire clan cut across boundaries of gender, race, and nationality. Ramona already knew that from what she'd seen of those assembled.

Blackfeather was wiry and not tall, maybe five and a half feet, about Ramona's height. He wore what looked to be a deerskin shirt and moccasins of the same material, faded blue jeans, and a belt with a large Elvis buckle. His hair was long and white and stuck out at an awkward angle from beneath an old, felt hat, the brim of which, once round and stiff, hung limp almost down in his face. A gray and white feather hung from a string tied to his hat.

Ramona could feel the stillness that accompanied Blackfeather. It was a palpable quiet that began somewhere within him, but radiated from him as well. The Gangrel all paid him a certain deference—it didn't smell of fear exactly, but the old man's presence made the others uncomfortable.

He stepped up onto Table Rock and, acknowledging no one, began to walk slowly around the edge of the large stone. Edmonson and Joshua Bloodhound, who were sitting on the rock, eased off the opposite side to better watch what Blackfeather was doing, and from a bit more of a distance. He shuffled his feet and stared intently at the stone, not stopping until he'd completed one full circuit. Then he reached into the canvas sack he carried draped over one shoulder and pulled out a small pine bough. Using the bough like a brush or a small broom, he began to sweep the flat stone surface, starting in the center and moving in a gradually expanding spiral.

No one spoke. His sweeping must have taken at least half an hour, for he was very thorough, but none spoke and few so much as crossed or uncrossed their arms. When he was done, Blackfeather placed the pine bough in the center of the stone, where he'd started his sweeping. Then he casually stepped down from the stone and walked into the forest.

Many of the Gangrel looked to one another with questioning gazes.

"What was that all about?" Ramona asked Ratface quietly.

Ratface only shrugged, and then pointed.

Blackfeather was returning. The hushed speculation all over the clearing quickly died away. He carried an armful of sticks and small branches, which he placed near the center of the rock and then began to build into a small teepee.

He worked as silently and as deliberately at his teepee as he had at his sweeping, and for the ten minutes his construction occupied, again, no one spoke or made a sound.

At last he was done, and he placed his canvas sack on the rock next to the foot-tall teepee. From his bag he took something, but Ramona couldn't see what until he moved closer to her and stood at the edge of Table Rock. In his left hand he held a piece of white chalk—a fat piece, like a child would use to draw on a sidewalk. His hand was open and flat, perfectly still. Against his dark and deeply wrinkled skin—tanned like leather during his mortal days—the chalk looked smooth and brilliant white. With his flattened right

palm, he began to press down on the chalk with a steady, circular motion. As Ramona looked on, he ground the fat piece of chalk into a fine powder using only the pressure of his hands, and not a single speck of white fell to the stone below.

As he finished and held in his hand nothing more than a pile of powdered chalk, Ramona realized that he was watching her. She had been intent on his hands and the transformation of chalk to powder, but he had been intent on her. His eyes sparkled with the mischievousness of kinship, and Ramona's alarm at noticing him watching her drained away.

For a long moment, he looked at her looking at him. Then Blackfeather turned. He knelt and began to sprinkle the chalk onto the rock, not in a haphazard manner but in a line, and as he edged backward around Table Rock he continued to spread the chalk. Not once did he look over his shoulder to check his direction as he went, but his movements were as sure as the turning of the earth.

He circled near the edge of the rock, not stopping or varying his deliberate pace until he came again to his starting point before Ramona. He stood, and then reached an open, white hand to her.

The next thing Ramona knew, she was stepping up onto Table Rock. She could see at once that the nearly completed circle Blackfeather had drawn was perfect of form, and that the teepee of sticks stood exactly in the center. For a moment, her legs nearly failed her. She could feel the weight of the trees and the sky and the stars pressing down on her, and she feared that she might be crushed against the flat stone, that she might become part of Table Rock. But Blackfeather took her hand, and the feeling passed. She stepped through the opening he had left in the circle, and with the last of the chalk he closed it behind her.

Next, Blackfeather placed his hands upon her cheeks and jaw. His touch, that of the undead, was cold, but in his eyes a mirthful fire burned. Ramona knew without seeing that the pattern of his hands was white and perfect upon her dirty face. He bade her sit, then sat across from her on the far side of the small teepee.

The silence that had come with Blackfeather when he first appeared was thicker now, heavier. Though the quiet was not so heavy as the sky and stars, Ramona didn't know if she could speak if she tried. So she merely sat and watched.

Blackfeather, wearing a slight smile beneath his sagging felt hat, produced from his sack a silver Zippo lighter. In one motion, his long thumb flicked open the cover and spun the tiny wheel. His thumb traced a white line through the darkness, and the whirring of the metal wheel slowed to one hundred individual clicks. A six-inch flame leapt to life and pounced almost instantly on the teepee. The crackling of the dry sticks filled Ramona's ears.

The world beyond the circle was black against the dancing fire. Ramona vaguely remembered the others there—Ratface, Edmonson, Stalker-in-the-Woods—but maybe they weren't there any longer. She and Blackfeather were as alone as if they sat on the surface of the moon or at the bottom of the ocean.

Ramona tried to look at the old man's laughing eyes, at his white teeth, but her gaze was drawn to the flames that danced so close to her. She knew deep inside that she should fear the fire, just as she feared the sun. No one had ever told her as much, but she had naturally shied from fire since the change. Now it was very close. She should slide back,

not sit so close, but her fear was numb and weak. She was so tired, her body, her mind... so tired.

Then she realized that Blackfeather was speaking to her. She strained to see his face through the flames and the rising smoke. Though he spoke in a low voice—he did little more than mumble under his breath—the sound carried to Ramona, but for some reason beyond her grasp, she couldn't untangle the words. They reached her ears but didn't proceed to her brain. She thought at first that he spoke a foreign tongue, maybe the language of the Cherokee, but she could fix in her mind not a single sound that he uttered. The words dissipated as soon as they touched her awareness, like smoke upon the breeze. Ramona heard, but she didn't hear.

So intent was Ramona on deciphering Blackfeather's mutterings, she didn't notice at first that he had fallen silent—the words seemed to continue with their own life, swirling upon the smoke that now clung close to the stone rather than rising skyward—or that he was calmly scooting around the fire toward her and dragging his canvas sack behind him.

The smoke, hanging low, grew thick, and shortly Ramona couldn't see much beyond the chalk circle. She tried to remember exactly what or whom she expected to see beyond the smoke, but her thoughts were as elusive as Blackfeather's chant. Details of the outside world were less substantial than the gently churning smoke that almost formed a wall around Table Rock.

Blackfeather was at her side now. Reflected in his eyes, she could see the white handprints on her face glowing in the firelight. He turned his sack upside down, and one after another several small items trickled out onto the stone between them. It was an odd collection: a plastic egg, like from a child's Easter basket; a bent and rusted butter knife; a snakeskin; a small, mostly empty plastic bottle of Visine; and two sticks of chewing gum in blank, white wrappers. Blackfeather stopped the egg from rolling away and silently regarded the former contents of his sack. He rested his chin in his hand and didn't move for several minutes.

Ramona tried to pay attention, but her mind was wrestling with the chant, which seemed still to echo from the stone, and with the smoke that obscured all beyond Table Rock.

Finally, Blackfeather shifted from his contemplative pose. He reached down and took in his hand the two pieces of gum. One he offered to Ramona. She took it and watched as he, with focused, deliberate motions, unwrapped his piece. Then, bending the gum in half, he placed it in his mouth and began to chew. The wrapper he crumpled and tossed into the fire. That done, he returned his enigmatic gaze to Ramona.

She could only guess his wishes. Slowly, she began to unwrap her piece of gum. Neither seeing nor hearing any objection from Blackfeather, she placed the gum in her mouth with the same reverence she'd once witnessed in people eating communion wafers at a Catholic mass. Ramona folded the stick exactly as Blackfeather had, and chewed. The gum was sickly sweet. Ramona grimaced. She'd grown used to the more bitter sweetness of human blood.

Blackfeather, apparently satisfied, returned his attention to the remaining items. He picked up the snakeskin, tore it in two, and handed one of the foot-and-a-half lengths to Ramona. The thin veil of brown and gray scales was rough against her skin, not slimy as

she had always expected a reptile should be. Blackfeather placed his half in the flames, still licking vigorously at the teepee. Ramona did the same with her portion and the skin was quickly consumed.

Next, Blackfeather took the tiny bottle of Visine. He held it in front of his face and squeezed so that a single drop fell to the ground before him. When he handed it to Ramona, she mimicked his actions, except when she squeezed the bottle, several drops shot out and splattered the stone. She turned the bottle upright so quickly that she fumbled with it and nearly dropped it.

Aghast at her own clumsiness, she looked warily to Blackfeather. She had no idea what kind of ceremony or spell he was performing, but she was sure she'd just ruined it. She half expected the flames from the fire to leap up and consume her, or the smoke to close in and suffocate her—never mind that she didn't breathe anymore.

But Blackfeather only shrugged and nodded toward the fire. Hesitantly, Ramona tossed the bottle into the glowing coals. The last of the liquid hissed away amidst the pungent odor of melting plastic.

Blackfeather picked up the egg next, but then stopped, and a strange expression crossed his face. Before Ramona could translate the odd pursing of his lips, he turned his head and spat his wrinkled ball of gum into the fire.

Ramona turned and did the same with hers.

"The flavor never lasts very long, does it?" said Blackfeather.

Ramona stared blankly at him and blinked. They were the first words he'd spoken since arriving, and amidst all this strangeness that he'd set in motion, he was worried about old chewing gum. Ramona opened her mouth, which despite the gum was dry and tasted of smoke, but had no idea what to say.

The old man took no notice of her befuddlement. He opened the plastic egg and took out a hard, gray mass that looked a bit like a larger version of the chewed gum. The two halves of the egg he tossed into the fire, and again the smell of melting plastic was apparent. The mass from inside the egg he handed to Ramona.

She recognized instantly the consistency and texture, even the faint smell, of the malleable object. She squeezed and kneaded it. *Silly Putty*.

"You got a Slinky in that bag too?" she asked with a wry smile.

Blackfeather cocked his head and stared at her in complete and silent puzzlement.

"You know...." Ramona tried to explain, her smile fading. "It's fun for a girl and a boy...?"

But Blackfeather's puzzlement, if anything, grew deeper.

"Uh... sorry." Ramona held up the age-hardened mass of Silly Putty and pointed to the fire. Blackfeather nodded, so in it went.

All that remained was the rusted butter knife. Blackfeather took it and, using the crook of the bent utensil, scraped a pile of coals and ashes from the diminishing fire. Ramona instinctively cringed as he did this. She could handle sitting relatively near the fire, but reaching a hand in among the flames was a different matter altogether.

With the knife, he crushed the few coals he'd gathered that were still red. Soon, the pile consisted purely of black and gray ash. Blackfeather continued to stir the ash for

some time. Finally, he raised his face and met Ramona's gaze, but where before she'd seen laughter in his eyes, now she saw only sadness.

"The Final Nights are at hand," said Blackfeather, holding Ramona's gaze despite her sudden desire to turn away, "and your road will be a difficult one."

Ramona tensed. His words spread terror through her, not because she understood them, because she did not. But she felt the truth of what he said.

Blackfeather set the knife aside and scooped two handfuls of ash. He leaned toward Ramona, raised the ash toward her face. She wanted to pull away, to run screaming from this prison of chalk and smoke. She wanted to run back to her mortal life, to the way life had been before. But none of those things were possible.

Ramona couldn't even close her eyes as Blackfeather pressed the handfuls of ash into them.

The ash, though still warm, did not burn. Ramona could see nothing, but she could feel the Beast, like a volcano beneath the surface, rising up within her. She could feel how it filled her, how it destroyed every shred of anything else inside her. She could feel, too, that it was loose in the world as well. The hunger that dwelt within her, that dwelt within her sire, and her sire's sire, all the way back to the first spilling of human blood, that hunger was no longer contained within them. It was risen. It roamed free. And it would consume them all.

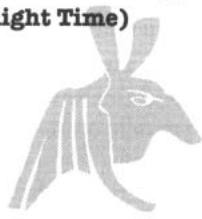
The Final Nights are at hand.

The warmth of the fire was gone. A fierce chill gripped Ramona's soul. Her very core was cold and dead.

She reached out for comfort. She fled from the cold, from the hunger. Thankfully, she found warmth, surrounded herself with it.

But still she could not completely shake the cold that gripped her.

Saturday, 24 July 1999, 11:03 PM (1:33 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
A back street in Grey Town
Calcutta, West Bengal, India



Ron Thompson sat, cold and wet, on the backboard of a shuddering donkey cart. His mood was as black as the night around him, which was saying a great deal. The typhoon—a thousand-year storm, by CNN's reckoning—had rolled in at dawn. If the sun had risen, though, Thompson hadn't seen it. The clouds were too thick. Despite having hovered over land for eighteen hours, Typhoon Justin showed no signs of slackening. The Himalayas had trapped the rain and wind on their way north. The gales that drove them could not force the system over the mountains, but neither were they giving up the struggle. The water ran three feet deep over the city. The lights in the more civilized portions of the city flickered and threatened to give out. And in the slums the madman with the reins drove them through, the power was gone completely. Visibility: zero. In disgust, Thompson gave up his sentry-post and hunkered down beside the Asp. The water and floating vegetable mess swirled about his ankles, but the bright green boards of the cart's sides afforded some protection from the wind, at least.

The little green wagon eventually pulled up next to a massive, complicated ruin of an apartment building. Water poured over the cracked walls in sheets, gushed out and around the few rainspouts and tin gutters. Thompson and the Asp waited, looking up at the broken windows, torn awnings, and feeble shutters. When it became clear that the cart had really and truly stopped, they clambered down off the back of it. The Asp took up guard, so far as the rain would allow, and Thompson lent Liz a hand as she jumped into the knee-high brown flood. Hesha stepped out alone, on the opposite side.

Khalil Ravana leapt from the buckboard to the back of the unfortunate donkey. With quick, practiced fingers, he unhitched the animal from the traces. He kicked her flanks—she refused to move—and he whispered horrors into her ears. Wild and white-eyed, the jenny fled the tiger's roar, up a short flight of stairs and into the half-shelter of an open hallway. He vaulted off, tied the beast to a railing, and turned to hop back down the stairs.

"Aiii!" A high-pitched complaint and a stocky, gesticulating female blocked his path. In Hindustani, she demanded an explanation of the donkey. Khalil snapped his fingers, and a heavily muscled man with an ax crested the stairs behind him. The phantom licked his lips and raised the bloody weapon over his head. "Aiiiiiiii!" Twice as loud and three times as shrill, the screaming woman disappeared behind the corner and into a dark doorway.

Khalil turned a smug face to the four waiting in the street. He sauntered down the steps, opened a thick, surprisingly solid-looking door, and picked Hesha out of the little group by eye. "We're here. Come on." All four started toward the open portal. The Ravnos laughed. "No. Just you, Ruhadze."

The Setite stared wordlessly at his guide.

"What? What? You want to go back to the hotel empty-handed? You come alone or you don't come at all. I tried to tell you this last night, you cocky ass."

Hesha stepped closer to the doorway, examining the wood, the crumbling building, and the Ravnos's sneer. "*She* comes with me," said the Setite. His eyes scrutinized every muscle of the younger creature's face. Khalil's lids flickered, and a tic began over his right temple. For a moment, Hesha thought the man might lose control entirely—but as he teetered on the verge, the look the Setite expected came over him. Again, Khalil seemed to listen to someone close by, and his expression cleared.

"All right," he agreed, evidently to his own surprise. "But only her. The others stay here."

Hesha called out: "Give Miss Dimitros a flashlight and a camera."

Thompson and the Asp said nothing, and said it so loudly that Elizabeth caught every word. *The boss was nuts. The whole thing was a trap. The girl wasn't ready. The girl, at least, was dressed in jeans and sturdy shoes tonight. The girl wouldn't go. The girl would go.* As their constrained, well-trained faces spoke all this, the two men strapped Liz into a web belt hung with tools, slung a rugged old camera—waterproof—around her neck, and clipped a fanny pack full of film under her raincoat. The last thing she read from them before the Asp pushed her forward was a kind of commiseration: not to each other, but identical glances, right at her, that said they had been where she was, and they hadn't liked it, and they wished she were anywhere but there. Oddly comforted, Elizabeth followed Hesha down the passage. She kept her hand on her phone, and silently repeated Thompson's list of alarm codes to keep herself calm.

The dimly lit hallway ended in a staircase up. *I am being followed*, thought Liz. *Seven-two-two*. The staircase brought them to a half-balcony, broken at the outer edge. *Someone is in the room with me: eight-three-four*. Khalil led them into an abandoned apartment and over a roof. *The police have arrived: three-zero-six*. The roof came to a broken, twisted fire escape. *I am wounded: one-one-one*. The guide wrenched a ladder free of the iron wreckage and propped it against a wall. *Hesha is wounded: nine-nine-nine*. They climbed up, walked along a bastion of old brick between two buildings, and paused at a dead end. *Fire: five-two-eight*.

Khalil disappeared into the bricks. His head and hands still stuck out above the baked clay. Hesha took hold of the callused fingers, and stepped into the illusion. He reached back for Elizabeth, and she took hold. Inside the bricks, she could see nothing, and so reached for her flashlight. They were on a spiral staircase with a very low ceiling; it led down into the masonry. The bricks gave way to stone, the stone to brick again, and the steps curled away beyond the stifled lamp's glow. Their feet made little noise on the dusty cleats. Soaked clothing failed to rustle; after a time it stopped dripping, and Elizabeth could hear, very clearly, that hers was the only breath taken in the musty chimney.

I confirm your call, she thought in defense. *Four-nine-four*.

At long last, the descent stopped, and the three crawled along a tunnel. It kept to the horizontal, for the most part, and wound through ruins that had nothing to do with cement, bricks, or the tenements above them. Between stretches of rubble and blank stone, Elizabeth noticed figure carvings and words written in something like Sanskrit. She would have stopped to study them, but the other two set a pace on all fours she found hard to keep up with.

I have lost eye contact: Eight-one-eight.

Suddenly, the elbow-bruising, knee-scraping passage opened out. Liz unbent, stretched, and played her flashlight over the path ahead. This place, tall enough to stand in, was a quarter-sphere: one flat wall, vertical; a tile floor, almost at right angles to the wall; and breathing space carved out of the rubble. Behind them, the hole from which they had entered. Ahead, the outline of a door. Its history leapt to the eye: sealed with stone, broken into, filled in again with brick and clay, broken a second time, a third—possibly more often. It was open now between shoulder height and the lintel, and Hesha had just climbed up the rubble and through.

Elizabeth set her foot on a stable-looking chunk of debris, held onto the jamb for safety, and gained the top of the broken seal wall. She crouched there for a moment, rearranging her gear. The flashlight, swinging from its clip, played across the curved, vaulted ceiling. The beam bobbed across Khalil's cheerful face and laid-back posture; he reclined easily along the top of a carved balustrade at the other end of the room. Looking for a spot to jump down to, Liz aimed the light lower—and screamed.

Corpses covered the floor: some fresh, some skeletal, some in putrescent states of decay. They were covered in turn by rats—unhealthy, hairless, lesion-covered creatures that scurried into empty jaws, hollow ribcages, and festering flesh-tunnels at the sound of her cry. After a second's pause, they showed themselves again. Eyes red in retina-flash turned toward her meaningfully. A handful advanced on her; the rest went back to their feast.

Hesha's voice carried across the claw-clicking scrabbles of the vermin: "Leave her alone," he commanded.

Instantly, the horrors disappeared. Elizabeth shuddered. The bare stone floor lay clear now. She fell gratefully to it. Suspiciously, nervously, she took in her real surroundings. The ceiling remained the same; the walls, revealed, were carved rock, not rat-ridden earth. Khalil still lounged on his railing, but his expression lacked cheer. Disappointment lingered on his face. And Hesha, unseen before, occupied the far right corner of the chamber. His forefinger ran along the painted bas-reliefs, not quite touching them, and his brow furrowed in concentration. Liz crouched by the door, watching him.

Khalil, for a good five minutes, had the patience to do the same. Then the Ravnos cleared his throat. "Good?" he asked brightly.

Hesha stopped and faced the Ravnos. "Good. But this is still not the source."

Khalil clicked his tongue. "Nope." But he showed no signs of moving.

"What do you want?"

"Well," Khalil sat up. "You're hunting for the Eye. It sticks out all over you." He shrugged his shoulders. "I could be valuable guy to have along for *that* ride. It's our Eye, after all, not yours. So I might know things you'll need later." He scratched his chin. "So. If I show you the last room, you take me out of Calcutta with you. *And* you protect me. *And* you make *nice* to me," he snapped out, losing his genial mask to spite for a moment. "And I'll help you find that evil old Eye."

Hesha considered for a moment, and then spoke—slowly, in carefully chosen words. "I will take you with me," he intoned, "and protect you," he paused, "as long as you continue to aid me in my quest for the Eye of Hazimel."

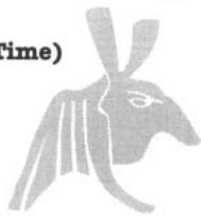
"Deal," shouted Khalil. He burst out laughing, and looked up at his new partner in a fit of camaraderie. "Imagine the look on old Abernethie's face—a gypsy and a snake taking each others' word for bond. Well, come on. It's down here." He tapped the floor with his toe, and a pit opened beneath his feet: rock-cut steps, leading down—filled, at the moment, with floodwater. Khalil dropped into it lightly, waist-deep, and grinned at Elizabeth. "Bring your aqualung with you, sweetheart?"

Hesha caught her eye. "Photograph this room. I want details of the murals." She nodded, and he followed Khalil down the hole.

Left by herself, Elizabeth propped her flashlight against one wall and began recording the other on film. When all four were done, she cross-lit and started again. With waterproof pencil and notebook, she made notes on the estimated measurements of the room. She waited nervously with the camera and lamp in her lap. The pool of water lay undisturbed. Eventually, she rose, changed the angle of the light again, and took a third set of portraits, this time with her notebook in each shot for scale. The time crawled by.

Am waiting at rendezvous: Two-seven-one.

Sunday, 25 July, 1999 12:34 AM
(Saturday, 24 July 1999, 3:04 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The burial chamber of an unmarked tomb
Calcutta, India



Khalil, bored beyond belief, lay full length on the stone lid of a muddy sarcophagus. His companion's light roved around the chamber like a darting yellow firefly; he himself would rather be back at the disco—better still, loose in New York. *There* was a city of sin for you. The Ravnos folded his hands over his belt and dreamt of America.

Hesha floated from wall to wall, scrutinizing the symbols, the designs, the scenes, and, finally, rows of script carved into the rock. Satisfied at last, he sighed. The burial chamber, even though he suspected it might be a false one, came from the same culture as the rakshasa statue—some of the work seemed to be by the identical artist, in fact. The few breaths of air he had held in his lungs for talking bubbled away, and his dead body settled more surely on the slippery floor. He kicked his sandals off to gain better purchase, drew his own camera out, and proceeded to go around the tomb in detail.

On the third wall, near the corner, he found the crucial passage. Instructions. Hesha paused, reading them, and stood stock-still for a moment. He had sought the Eye for more than a century; the shock of success (though the Setite had always been confident of succeeding *eventually*) gave him pause.

Instructions for the containment, sealing up, and safe transportation of the Eye of Hazimel.

Hesha very nearly laughed. The task was tremendously simple, once you knew the secret. It had taken him more skill to translate the old script than he would need to catch the Eye. It was peasant magic, hedge sorcery, literally child's play—mud pies. Holy river water mixed with earth (*silt from the Ganges*, he thought, *or the Nile*) touched to the orb would close the lid. A thick coating plastered around the Eye would put it to "sleep." The dry and hardened clay would protect the artifact from harm and the magician from the artifact. The scribe went on to detail a story about the rescue of the Eye from thieves, a tale of a mighty rakshasa who commanded it wisely, and an invocation to Hazimel. The inscription continued below another relief, but the additional text was lost. Directly over a legend about the origin of the Eye, some illiterate hand had taken a chisel to the mural. The shallow scratches described a variation of a Bengali folk tale—the destruction of a demon-queen's heart with a palm-leaf sword. Hesha photographed that section carefully, cursing the graffiti writer. Perhaps he could decipher the broken carvings later. He moved on to the next panel, then the ceiling, and the sides of the sarcophagus itself. He took his time.

KR



Sunday, 25 July, 1999 2:45 AM
(Saturday, 24 July 1999, 5:15 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The outer chamber of an unmarked tomb
Calcutta, India

Elizabeth loaded another roll of film into the camera. She'd used half the supply already; better, she thought, to save rest of the exposures in case there were more rooms Khalil hadn't bothered to mention yet. If there were an angle of this chamber she hadn't caught, it wasn't for lack of trying. Or time.

She clipped the camera back onto her chest and picked up the light. Curiosity brought her to the first (or last) panel of the series. It was hard to know where the narrative—she was certain the carvings depicted a definite myth, not disjointed scenes—began, but you could start with this corner. Reading left to right, she traced a story in her own mind, at least.

In the first relief, a city fell to invaders. On the left side, it showed tall, beautiful buildings, on the right, the warriors outside the gates. In the second panel, the towers fell, the warriors controlled the streets, and the refugees poured out. Larger than the rest, and so, probably, more important, ran a strange man. Elizabeth studied him carefully. He bore a few of the symbols assigned to demons—rakshasa or *asura* or the evil dead—but his eyes were clearly the most important feature in the artist's mind. They didn't match. One was at least three sizes larger than the other, and the remains of the paint showed irises of different colors. In the third scene, the *asura* stood in jungle, surrounded by mountains, and in several poses across the landscape seemed to be commanding the construction of a temple or palace in the distance. In the fourth panel, the demon, large and central, took the left side to fight a band of invaders from the captured city, shown in miniature high in a corner of the design. On the right, he dispensed justice to prisoners tied to columns of his nearly finished building.

In the fifth section, by far the busiest and most difficult to interpret, an army from the distant city came to conquer him. Even understanding that the scene progressed side-to-side, Elizabeth found herself defeated. There was an army; there was the palace of the *asura*; the *asura* fought; but on whose side did the animals battle? If the demon commanded the beasts of the field, why were some of them in aggressive postures *inside* the palace's courtyard? If the creatures fought for the army, why were so many facing away from the *asura* and attacking, apparently, their own?

Unfortunately (Elizabeth listened to the sound of that word, and admitted she was biased against the demon with the mismatched eyes), the last panel showed a clear triumph for the *asura*. In his finished temple, he held court. Behind him, a large (or immensely important—size could mean anything at this level of pictography) demon-god with a hundred heads and arms stood in state. He, or she, or it, Liz concluded, must have sent the animals to help the demon win the battle. At least half its heads weren't human, and she picked out a number of rats, dogs, cats, monkeys, and asses among the crush.

Without warning, Elizabeth found herself flying back from the wall. Sprawled on her back by the steps, she looked around frantically, wondering who'd hit her. She realized, in

terror, that the earth itself was moving. The tremors raised dust from the cracks in the floor and pelted the flagstones with grit from the ceiling. Elizabeth crab-walked to the balustrade and grabbed it for support. She braced for the worst. The Lord's Prayer shot to her lips, and a Hail Mary followed it. The last shock rolled through the ground as she got to "now and at the hour of our death." The vault blocks stayed where they belonged, the floodwater stopped jumping out of the staircase, and the gravel near the broken door lay still.

Her phone beeped, and she jumped. After the angry earth-rumbles, the modern, *friendly*, staccato tone seemed absurd. Elizabeth almost giggled in relief.

"Hello?" Thompson's voice, she thought. The static was so bad it was hard to tell. "Still with us?"

"I'm here," she answered.

"Hello? Hello? Anyone there?" The signal broke up entirely for a second, then: "Circuit's open, just... no one... can't get an answer."

"I'm here!" Liz shouted into the phone. "I'm here. What happened? Can you hear me?"

Thinly, through the noise, the Asp's voice: "Try again...street...."

The line went dead, and Liz stared at the little handset in disappointment. She racked her brain for *Have survived earthquake and can hear you. Connection too bad to speak*, but the situation seemed too specific. She sent four-nine-four, then holstered the phone and looked at the pool. The sloshing water revealed nothing of the situation below. She checked her camera for damage, retrieved her light from the corner it had bounced to, then pulled her legs up and sat tailor-fashion on the railing. Adrenaline—the second jolt of it that night—spread out from her stomach.

Elizabeth waited patiently for half an hour or more, just watching the water calm down. At length, she noticed a new ripple on the surface. She felt the railing cautiously for new tremors, found none her fingers could detect, and smiled as the pool moved more dramatically. The other two were returning; in a little while they could be out from under the ruins. She slid off the balustrade onto the flagstones, and walked around the railing to meet Hesha and the gypsy as they came out.

The water surged, and Khalil leapt up from it like a rocket. He shook himself like an animal in the air, flinging spray across the room. Liz shielded her eyes with her hand and kept her attention on the pool. A heavy thud reached her ears—she looked up and saw the guide bashing his body against the door seal. He hauled back and threw his shoulder against it again—he was trying to batter his way out, though the opening was in his arm's reach.

Elizabeth gasped, "What are you do—" and broke off when she caught sight of his face. Khalil's eyes stared out at nothing, so far open that the whites showed all around the iris. Stark, unreasoning terror filled them, and his wild-animal glance returned to the pit over and over again. His mouth hung open like a panting dog's, and his bared teeth were clear enough in the light: The canines, elongated into fangs, glittered cruelly.

"Oh, my god," whispered the mortal woman. She backed away from the monster *and* from the unseen danger down the stairs.

The Ravnos ran against the wall another time, so forcefully that he bounced back and fell howling onto the floor. His eyes began to change—the lids narrowed—now

predatory slits, they searched the room for prey, not escape. The creature rushed Elizabeth, picked her up in clawed hands, and threw her into a corner. He pounced on the huddled body, stuck his nose into the crook of her neck, smelled her, pawed her collar half off her shoulders, and licked her bare skin. She scrabbled away along the wall. His face grew puzzled for a moment. Then all expression dropped from it, and the animal came back. Khalil jumped to her side again, seized her shoulder, and—

—a noise came from the pit, and his eyes changed again. He began to turn around.

Instantly, Elizabeth was aware of Hesha as a blur between herself and the monster. The scene froze: Khalil Ravana, spread-eagled on the floor, Elizabeth pressed up against the wall, Hesha in front of her, his hand still holding the blunt end of something pale piercing the other man's breast.

"Don't scream," the Setite said calmly. "The earthquake may have weakened the tunnels. Have you been wounded?"

"Just bruised, I think."

"Good. Now help me with him." Hesha dragged the Ravnos's corpse as far as the door. "Climb over. Now, steady the body as I pass it to you. Don't try to take the weight yourself." Together they manhandled the stiff through the opening, and Hesha began tying nylon cord around the dead man's torso. Elizabeth looked at the weapon in Khalil's chest and confirmed her suspicions.

"He's a vampire," she said, and her tone was so strange that for an instant Hesha stopped what he was doing.

Smoothly, he went on with his knots. Equally smoothly, he told her, "No. He's a *shilmulo*."

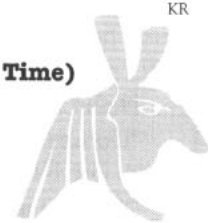
"He grew fangs. You staked him and he's dead, Hesha. He's a vampire," she insisted coldly.

"Elizabeth," said the Setite, with a trace of impatience, "if I staked you, would you still move around after the fact? If I pierced your heart, would you survive? Khalil will, *shilmulo* do, humans do not." He tied the rope ends to his own feet, and bent down to enter the tunnel. "Watch the stake. If it shows signs of coming loose, tell me immediately. I would rather not have to repeat the procedure in a more confined space." Liz hesitated, and he caught her eye. "What is it now, Elizabeth?"

"Does he drink blood? And don't go on about mosquitoes or leeches or Maasai. You know what I mean. Truth, Hesha."

Hesha looked down at the gypsy's face. Maverick eyes stared back at him, and flickered hungrily.

"He does," said the Setite, and he crawled into the hole, dragging the paralyzed Ravnos after him.



Sunday, 25 July 1999, 4:15 AM
(Saturday, 24 July 1999, 6:45 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, India

"The room is secure, sir," Thompson's voice came from three earpieces in three different parts of the resort. "Hallway unobserved."

"Bring him around. Transport, watch for opening doors. Distraction, report and delay anyone coming up. I will come by the center route to provide a more attractive target."

Transport, in the form of the Asp, a bellboy's cart and a suspiciously bulging garment bag, crossed the lobby and entered the service lift safely. Distraction, in the form of Elizabeth, stationed herself by the passenger elevators and played convincingly with camera, watch, notebook, sandal strap, and the morning newspaper. An early hotel maid found herself accosted for directions to a prominent shrine in an unmappable portion of the city. As Hesha passed by, Liz professed her thanks, double-checked a street name, and let the woman go.

"He's in," Ron announced. "Everyone come home."

"Distraction" strolled along the corridor to the suite. The Asp opened the door for her, smiled wearily, and bolted it behind her. Elizabeth moved to the big table and began unstrapping gadget after gadget. She threw the film into the refrigerator, ducked into her room and changed her mud-stained clothes for fresh pajamas, and collapsed onto the couch to watch the others. Khalil, unwrapped but still frozen, lay on the floor in the middle of a bed quilt. Thompson and the Asp counted down, lifted, and carried the body into Hesha's quarters. They took the corner into the sitting room, and Liz picked up the sounds of final adjustments to couch, windows, and *shilmulo*. Thoughtfully, her fingers played over the keys of the little computer in front of her.

"Asp," said Hesha, "our guest will not be in the best of health or temper when sunset comes. Find a blood bank or hospital and steal ten or fifteen units from their stores. Cold supper will serve better than none...."

"Yes, sir." Raphael vanished into his bedroom.

"Thompson—I want you and Janet to find out everything you can about the tremors tonight. I want local coverage here, I want local from the source, if Calcutta was not the center. Full report on BBC, CNN, Voice of America, NPR, Chinese governmental, Russian public and private and pirate stations. Pick up the wire services, as well."

The old cop nodded, picked up his phone, received the laptop from Liz, and walked out, dialing.

Hesha turned, seemed to notice the last member of the team for the first time, and looked at her curiously. "Elizabeth? What do you want?" the Setite asked cautiously.

"You saved my life tonight, didn't you?" Elizabeth said, her voice full of wondering gratitude.

Hesha nodded. He felt better; he was on solid ground again. A thankful attitude opened up vast avenues of control over the girl. He raised one hand in a subtle, nobly

deprecating gesture, and stepped closer to the couch. He decided to sit on the cushion beside her. He moved to do so, and she smiled at him. "You nearly got me killed tonight, didn't you?" she said, in an utterly different tone.

Hesha sat down on the coffee table. Warily, he waited for the rest of it.

"I looked *shilmulo* up on the Internet just now. Five links to various Rom dictionaries… several dozen links to pages devoted to vampires, Hesha."

"There is no such thing as a vampire, Elizabeth. It is a buzzword that incompetent translators to English tack on to any mythological creature that survives by feeding on something in a fashion repugnant. The monster need not even drink blood to qualify for the honor, nor human blood, nor be undead—"

"Stop," Liz said abruptly. "Listen," she asked earnestly, looking into his ebon eyes with her amber-brown ones, "I… I think I may be in love with you." Just as solemnly, with the same serious yet uncertain cadence, she went on: "I think, also, that I would be better dead than feeling this way toward you, that I would rather see you dead, than to feel like this. And I don't understand why, after everything I have seen, I can still feel anything toward you." She took a moment's breath, and the creature in front of her thought of a little blue glass left in a refrigerator in Brooklyn, and thought he knew the answer.

"Please, Hesha… tell me the truth. What are you?"

The Setite paused, weighed the moment carefully, and slowly let his everyday mask slip away. Revealed, his skin was slightly lighter-colored. His bare scalp sported a detailed, coiling snake tattoo in deep black ink that had never faded. Open and unguarded, honest eyes looked out at the woman on the couch, and as he spoke his voice trembled a little.

"I am the dead priest of a dead god. That is the truth."

Elizabeth smiled bitterly. "You give me a different answer every time." A tear rolled down her cheek, and she rose to go.

"They might all be true," he said softly.

She kept walking and did not answer. Hesha stood, caught her door before she shut it, and gazed at her in appeal. "Close your eyes," whispered the Setite, slipping into the girl's room.

In surrender or weariness or hatred or lust or love, her lids dropped, and Hesha leaned down to kiss her lips. After a moment's hesitation, she kissed him back. The Setite felt her mouth move, but felt nothing beneath the surface of his skin. The Beast drove forward, listening hungrily to her heartbeat, thrusting the sound to the forefront of his consciousness. Elizabeth's arms stole up his back, drawing their bodies closer, and the Beast picked out the vibration of her life and savored it—cut off Hesha's connection to the floor, to the feel of her nightshirt under his fingers, even took the simple pressures of holding her, and of the fingers digging into his back. With an immense effort, he drew away—shook the veils from his senses—and took the clear moment to carry her to the bed. The Beast threw itself at his mind, but to the Setite's surprise and relief, the anger over Calcutta was gone. Without that aid, the curse was weaker than he, and he locked it away.

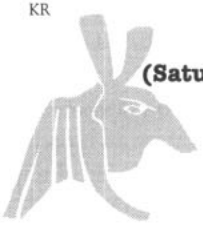
His hand crept under her shirt. Her heartbeat pulsed through her ribs and flesh and into his palm. Hesha sought the woman's mouth again, and found it soft, warm, and more eager than before. His fangs slid down, and he tore the slightest wounds in her lower lip. She flinched, but he brought blood through the pin-prick holes. He drank slowly, hardly

drawing more from the cuts than they bled of their own, and the mortal's gasping, shuddering breath told him the struggle was over. Elizabeth relaxed into his arms, unresisting, still holding him.

Hesha sipped delicately from the veins of his lover; the monster went on devouring his victim. Hesha savored the taste of Elizabeth's strangely sweet, adrenaline-sour blood; the Setite fed off a captive. Hesha felt the pounding of the girl's heart and was glad to know she shared the ecstasy; the calculating coldness of his mind counted the beats and measured their strength. When the steady rhythm broke and fluttered, he licked her lips clean, sealing the cuts.

He looked into her puzzled face, smiled, and whispered sleep to her. Elizabeth curled up under the blanket, and he put an arm over her. She slipped off into dreams, and Hesha looked sluggishly to the window. Dawn... he might make it to his room... but the drapes were closed tight here, the blanket thick... mortal women placed a particular importance on staying after... it might be useful... for controlling her... with his free hand, he pulled the discarded counterpane around himself in double and triple folds and piled the pillows over his head. Ra gained the horizon, and his descendant fell safely into slumber.

KR



Sunday, 25 July 1999, 5:25 AM
(Saturday, 24 July 1999, 7:55 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, India

Thompson, checking around the suite for the last time before retiring himself, found Hesha's casket open. In dreadful anticipation, he opened the door to Liz's room. He watched her breathing for a moment, then went back and dug a mylar sheet out of the emergency case. With an air of duty done despite better judgment, he made Hesha's burrow sun-proof, and left them together.

Alone, sitting on his own bed, he stared at his hands. If he bent the wrists back and held them up at an angle, Ron could just see the pulse under the skin. He stood up suddenly, opened the curtains, and let the morning light strike him. He lay down and the sun came up, and he fell asleep basking in it.

Part Four:
The Eye

From Saturday 24 July 1999
to Friday, 30 July 1999





Saturday, 24 July 1999, 9:45 PM
Anteroom of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

"Three accomplishments that are well regarded in Ireland," Talbott began, gathering in the crowd like a mother hen. "A clever verse, music on the harp, the art of shaving faces.

"Three smiles that are worse than griefs: the smile of snow melting, the smile of your wife when another man has been with her, the smile of a mastiff about to spring.

"Three scarcities that are better than abundance: a scarcity of fancy talk, a scarcity of cows in a small pasture, a scarcity of friends around the beer.

"So the Triads tell us... ah, thank you," Talbott accepted the proffered cup. "And they are as true today as they were in sainted Padraig's time."

The last word was muffled in the head of the rich brown beer. He drank deeply and with great deliberation.

The anteroom of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs usually had something of the aspect of a luxurious private library about it. The floor-to-ceiling bookcases contained a multitude of scholarly texts rendered in the earthy tones of tooled leather broken only by the sharp contrast of gilt edges.

The arrangement of books was precise if inutile. The volumes were grouped together by the simplest scheme that suggested itself—by color. This approach encouraged a leisurely, disinterested browsing and frustrated any attempts to discover pertinent information. Frequent visitors to the chantry had grown bold enough to remark openly upon the curious and disproportionately heavy representation of the works of a Mr. Z. Grey among the shelves.

At the far end of the anteroom, beyond the ancient oak-paneled double doors—the two faithful and well-loved retainers leaned noticeably together upon sagging hinges—lay the Grande Foyer and Chantry proper. The anteroom, however, was Talbott's private domain. He was the brother porter, the keeper of the gate, the guardian of the way. He had served the chantry faithfully for the better part of forty years.

During his tenure he had been witness to much of the mystery and majesty of the Tremere. Indeed, one could not spend so much time in the close proximity of the tumbledown Great Portal without seeing more than one's fair share of leaky incidental magics.

In all that time, however, of ushering supplicants, mystics, dignitaries and the occasional stray puppy across that formidable threshold, Talbott had never once passed through the great doors in their aspect of the Portal of Initiation.

He had never once tasted of the forbidden fruit. "Never once been tempted," he could be overheard to boast contentedly to a dumbfounded guest. "No sir, never even been tempted."

Tonight, the trappings of the formal waiting room had been rudely shoved aside and relegated to the farthest corners. Talbott held court over an enrapt group of novices,

locals, old-timers, and a smattering of the more adventurous students from the college above. All maintained a respectful silence, waiting for Talbott to put down his glass and take up his tale once again.

A hundred slight sounds, however, betrayed their patient waiting. An earthenware mug scraped across a rough-planked table. A chair creaked back on two legs. A match struck, guttered, caught life.

The door to the street swung inward. Moonlight diffused in a lazy twisting cone through the omnipresent smoke. A uniform cloud filled the room from the top down, thick enough at eye level to noticeably darken the interior. A sweet smoke, equal parts peat fire and tobacco.

Smells like moss, Talbott thought. *Green, moist, alive.*

The scent ambushed him with the memory of a favorite hiding spot from his youth—a tiny earthen hollow tucked away beneath the exposed roots of Bent Willow. Gazing out through the tendrilled lattice of root fibers, Talbott had watched afternoons slip downstream pursuing the River of Life as it made its way, in no particular hurry, through the lush green pastures of Meadth. Home.

Talbott shook his head as if to dislodge the dream-image, but gently. The past was tenacious. It clung fast, drew life, drank youth. He passed a gnarled hand through sparse, silvered hair, raking it back from his eyes. *Once golden*, he thought. *Poor wages indeed for a lifetime of service.*

Voices intruded from the opened door to the street. A laugh three levels too loud for the enclosed space cut off abruptly.

"Sorry, lads." Rafferty tried for a whisper, but got hung somewhere midway between his object and a chuckle. He swung the door to, leaning heavily against it as he did so. He descended the three quick steps into the cramped warmth of the interior.

"Pissed already," came an answering mumble. "And what should his dear mother say to hear of it?"

"She'd say the boy was ever a quick study," came a distinctly matronly voice from somewhere in the vicinity of the fire. "More's the pity he never picked up another subject."

Rafferty slunk toward the fire, head hunched low as if expecting to be cuffed. He ducked, planting a kiss squarely on the woman's cheek, and then slipped off to fetch her another pint.

Talbott put down his mug with audible satisfaction and picked up where he had left off as if there had been no intervening pause.

"And they are as true today as they were in sainted Padraig's time. You have, no doubt, heard it told how the Blessed Padraig drove the snakes out of Eire."

Talbott waited for the nods of recognition to make their way around the room.

"Oh, come now Talbott. That's an old saw. Give us something fresh, won't you?" The voice was familiar and perhaps a bit too loud for the close quarters.

Talbott smiled a smile with a sly edge to it. "All right then, you prancing pagan, if you'll have none of the Blessed Padraig—not that there aren't some present that could stand a nudge in the right direction, mind you—what will you have? The Wooing of Etain is a bit less chaste, but I hardly know if I could bring myself to relate the whole of it without falling to blushing and stammering in the present company."

His exaggerated, deferential bow to the nearest group of young ladies was greeted with a chorus of generally unkind remarks that seemed to disparage both the strength and authenticity of his alleged scruples.

Rising to the challenge, Talbott's voice rang briefly above the clamor, giving out the ancient verses in excruciatingly precise meter and anatomic detail. Laughing, he allowed their embarrassed indignation to drown him out.

"Well then. I see you may yet be redeemable," he capitulated. "Some middle ground then, perhaps, between the faultless saint and Etain's immodest exploits. How about…"

"Can you give us Aisling's Tale?" The soft, almost timid, voice cut cleanly through the throng. *One of the novices.* Talbott turned and smiled warmly. *Eva.*

He knew them all by voice as well as by sight. He knew who they were. He knew why they came. He knew what this place did to them.

Others had turned as well. Not all betrayed the same compassion. Some regarded the novice's request with open suspicion and even an edge of hostility. Their thoughts were plain upon their features. *Aisling's Tale. Aisling Sturbridge. The mistress of the house.*

These little gatherings of Talbott's walked a very fine line. In bringing together initiates of the chantry and outsiders, there was always the possibility that something might slip. Something revealing. Something… unfortunate.

"Aisling's Tale? That's a peculiar request, now. Let me think." His eyes probed her face for some hint of what she might be driving at, but he found only a disarmingly childlike curiosity.

"Well, there are, truth be told, not one but many Aisling tales—'Aisling' meaning something after the manner of a 'dream quest' in the old tongue, you understand. The tongue of the bards. No few of the heroes of Erin have stumbled across that wavering line between the waking and the dreaming worlds. And paid dearly for the privilege."

Eva soaked up this revelation eagerly but her thoughts were already rushing ahead. She failed to either hear or heed his warning.

"But is there no tale of a *lady* named Aisling? A lady of Erin? A lady who danced between the worlds?"

Talbott mumbled something noncommittal and regarded the bottom of his mug contemplatively. Already caught up in her enthusiasm, Eva rushed heedlessly onward.

"One who spoke the words of fire and blood? One who made a pact with death and who lost her only daughter down a dark well?"

Talbott raised an eyebrow at her outburst. "It seems it should be you telling this tale, for in truth, you seem to be far closer to it than I."

Eva's face was intent. Her voice was hard. "Is there such a tale?"

An uncomfortable silence had fallen over the room. Talbott let it build, roll slowly like a storm.

"Of course, child," he soothed. "There is always just such a tale. But that does not mean that I have the full telling of it."

Disappointment, frustration and embarrassment vied for control of her features.

"What little I do know," he offered in a conciliatory tone, "I have paid good coin for." *Forty years,* he thought, pushing a weathered hand through his hair. *Silver, gold.* "The knowing has cost me dearly."

Eva's elation made clear she had not heard a word he had said. "I will see to it that you are well rewarded for your efforts."

It was a mistake. She knew it before the words had fallen leadenly into the silent room.

"I think you misunderstand me," Talbott replied a bit sharply. "It was not my intention to barter the price of the tale. We are not fishwives shouting our wares in the marketplace."

"I'm sorry. I didn't..." Eva began, but was cut off abruptly.

"As I was saying, I know *some* of the telling, but even the slightest knowing has its price. What I do not know is why I should relate it. Why I should put you and these others gathered here at risk."

Her back was to the room. Her voice was hushed, intent, pitched low so as not to carry. "Oh, Talbott. I have to understand. Have to understand her. Have to understand what she has... what *I* have become."

Her face was pressed close to his own. Talbott could see that she was close to tears.

"Be easy, little one," he whispered, touching her cheek. "You will know." Still caressing her cheek, he added pointedly, "But you will pay the knowing for all who are gathered here."

He took her arm and sat her at his feet.

"*The Devil's Toothache*," he called, breaking the silence of the room. "Aaron, grab an indulgent old fool another mug, there's a good lad."

Upon a time in County Meadth where the River of Life runs toward the Final Shore—that rocky beach whose secret is that it knows only departures and never returns—a girlchild was born in the crook of a willow tree.

Dark as a battle raven she was and straight as a pin. In her mouth was the language of beasts and she could talk before ever she learned to cry. Her eye was milky with the witchsight and in her thumbs she had wisdom—wisdom enough to know that a willow tree was no proper place for a young lady of promise and ambition.

Well, that's where they found her and after she piped up and greeted them so civilly, they could hardly leave her there—complaining to the very beasts of the field of the cruel turn they had played her—so they took her home. And they called her name Aisling, for it seemed to them that she must be of the fair folk.

How much trouble, after all, could one small girlchild be? To her credit, she might well pine away for her home under the hills until there was nothing left of her but bare knucklebones. Yes, she did run a bit toward the puny side and wasn't likely to last long enough to prove much of a bother.

But on the day of Aisling's birth, a ringing began in the Devil's ear that would give him no peace.

Now they say the Devil, he never sleeps, but a body still cannot properly enjoy the misfortune of one's neighbor with a ringing in the head. For the better part of the morning, he stormed about, distracted, neglectful of his duties. The wailing of the Afflicted went largely unnoticed, much to their collective chagrin. This further indignity spurred them to even greater fervor and soon their ill humor rubbed off on even the Unrepentant, doing little to improve their devil-may-care attitude.

Even the masses of the Well-Intentioned queued up just outside the Gate could sense the change come over the Infernal City.

Well before midday it became clear that something must be done. The Major and Minor Calamities took council and decided to appoint a deputation. With all appropriate dragging of feet and gnashing of teeth, the foremost of the Wretched was dispatched to learn what ailed their master.

As might well be expected, what most ailed the master at that very moment was having his well-earned sulk intruded upon. He immediately elevated the poor Wretch to ranks of the Unquestioningly Obedient, conferring upon him all the torments and tribulations associated with that lofty status, and making a rather pointed suggestion as to where his unwelcomed guest might now go. Even so, the master got little satisfaction from the small cruelty.

"Fresh air," he said aloud, for in Hell there is no thought that remains unvoiced. You could always spot the newcomers among the Host of the Damned. Their thoughts tumbled off the tongue, betraying the words muttered in the same breath. They were ever saying things like, "But sir, it was not my fault, you pig-headed spawn of a, damn, I'm for it now. What I mean to say is. Sir. What I mean to say, SIR, is." By that point it was best to just give up and take what was coming to you. You'd get it anyway, in the end. It was the nature of the place. It was Hell. You got used to it.

"That's just the thing to put me right. A walk down pasture. And a drop of drink to clear the head. Ouiskey. Water of Life."

"The very thing, if it please your Underlordship to notice me."

The Sycophants had had quite some time to master the art of seamlessly smoothing word and thought together. All time, in fact.

"Ouiskey. Water of Life," The master mused. "That was one of my own inventions, you know. Still remember as if it were yesterday. So I says to Yourman above—this was back when we were on more civil terms—'Breath of Life?' says I. 'What're they ever going to do with Breath of Life? You can't very well keep it in the cupboard against chill winter nights, or carry it at your hip to bolster the flagging spirit. And the poor wigglies, what will they do without a decent public house at least, to keep the mind off the fundamental unfairness of it all? No, water's Your man.'"

A babble of earnest voices vied for his attention.

"Would that I could have been there to take part of the, to take part in that glorious achievement."

"Called 'em wigglies to His face! I dare say."

"I'd wager that pitched Him into a right rage. Why it's a wonder He didn't haul back and knock you clear out of... oh dear."

There was the briefest of pauses while the strict hierarchy of the Infernal Court readjusted itself with all the swiftness and subtlety of a sprung bear trap. The next moment it was as if the unfortunate courtier had never been.

"Stupid," chorused the Staters of the Painfully Obvious, making two distinct words of it. "Stew Pit."

"Silence!" yourman the Devil called. And Silence, she answered his calling. The Host of the Damned kind of edged away sideways, uncomfortable at her passing.

Now they say Sin has an only son and his name is Death. And he is rightful heir to the Kingdom of Man. And all must come at last to pay him homage.

But that Devil, he also has his pride, a lone daughter, the apple of his eye, and he named her Silence. And when even Death has passed, she follows after.

It was always a terrible moment when Silence entered the Halls of Hell. Pain-wracked visages wordlessly mouthed cries, curses, entreaties. Talon, scourge and hot iron bit soundlessly into yielding flesh. The sound of each and every shuffling footstep, creaking joint, rasping breath, magnified to the power of countless millions of lost souls crammed into every fissure, niche, and crevice—all gone suddenly, completely, and hauntingly still.

It was not just the absence of sound; it was its utter negation. All that took place in her presence had an eerie, unreal feel about it. It was as if all the torments of the Legions of the Dead were a sad sort of pantomime. A ritual act whose meaning had become obscure, lost long ago.

The Devil, he smiled warmly. "Take my hand, child. I've a fierce stabbing pain in the head and it's put me in foul temper. I've taken a kenning to have a walk down pasture, take a drop of drink and overlook the wigglies, for I fear they're again up to no good, if this ringing in my ear is any indication. And it usually is. And they usually are."

Silence, she said nothing, just took her father by the arm and led him from his hall.

Talbott's listeners were so lost in his strange tale that no one had noticed the silent woman—stern, dark, straight as a pin—who had slipped into the chamber. The great portal sighed contentedly closed behind her and she wrapped herself in its familiar, comforting shadow.

Patient as death, she began marshalling her forces—words of fire and of blood. She drew them up into bristly phalanxes, she deployed them in centuries stretching across the field of vision.

She rallied her champions and prepared to defend her home, her past.



Saturday, 24 July 1999, 11:35 PM
Anteroom of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Talbott fumbled midphrase, and shivered as if someone were walking upon his grave. He covered the lapse in his narrative with a weak fit of coughing, taking the opportunity to gesture for another mug. Someone poked the fire back into a more welcoming blaze, sending shadows scurrying for the corners of the room. Chairs were hastily shifted to make room for the storyteller closer to the hearth.

Talbott was having none of it. When he was again suitably fortified against the chill with a long draught, he waved aside their fussings in mock indignation. "Worry a body to death with all this mothering. Haven't needed anyone to wipe my nose for the past seven decades, close as I can figure. Just had a passing chill." *A premonitory chill.*

Talbott could feel the tale rising up against his approach. This was the trickiest part of the whole endeavor. A story, a real story, had to be coaxed, courted, finessed. He had the uncomfortable suspicion that this story was lying in wait for him.

"*A Spadeful of Earth from Your Grave*," he called.

"What's that you see there, child?" that old fiend he said to his only daughter. "In the distance. My old eyes have gone rheumy and I can't well mark it. I bid you speak."

"A fire, father," came the whisper. If her stillness cast peril over even the Hosts of Hell, her voice was more terrifying still. It rent the very air. The words she spoke were softer than an adder's breath, but they fell with the weight of mountains. The voice carried with it a sudden chill, as if someone had taken a spadeful of earth from your grave. "Upon the Plain of Adoration."

A hissing invective escaped the Devil's lips, for he had at last figured out what ailed him. "A sign," he said aloud, out of habit. "No mistaking it."

And now he knew. Knew that a child had been born—a babe that might one day stand before the dark well of Cromm Cruaich, the Stooped One—and speak the words of fire and of blood. The fire on the blasted plain marked the child's birth. It beckoned to its own.

That Devil, he found himself squinting into the distance, trying to pick out the smear of broken ground that marked the boundary of the Plain of Adoration, the place of sacrifice. "Too much blood already," he thought aloud. "Blood of the firstborn, polishing smooth the crude stone idol. Cromm Cruaich. He was their Moloch, their Kinslayer, a nightmare of an older order. Chidden of God, banished to the dark places of the earth, sheltering from the light of life-giving day. He has had centuries to brood in those shadows, marking time by the spilling of blood into his dark well."

The mere prospect of another soul lost to the Stooped One, well, it made the Devil's cold heart colder by turns.

So that Devil, he decided to take himself down and see if he couldn't find this child. And just give him a looking over. Not meaning him any harm, mind you. Not even Old Nick can abide the suffering of children. Oh, he'll get the work done right enough, but it's far beneath him to get any enjoyment from it.

"Leave me," he said kindly and his girl, she was gone as suddenly as she came. A good lass and clever. A great comfort and no small credit to her doting father.

The very stones sighed at her passing.

"Can't imagine how I'd ever get on without her." So down the Fiend went to that tiny distant smudge of green, just to have a better look.

But the closer that Devil got to Eire and the newborn child, the louder the ringing got.

Now, a little discomfort is not going to stop yourman, so he kept coming. But soon the ringing grew so loud it was rattling the teeth around in his mouth. He set his jaw firmly against the riot as he crested the rim of the world, taking seven leagues at a stride. At first nothing of him could be seen but his head, rearing up into view. Ice-blue eyes, bright but opaque, like moonlight through storm clouds. Alien, ambiguous, unreadable.

Then the thin shoulders, tapering to a point behind where they met the downcurve of the magnificent tracery of wing. By the time the head of his walking stick first rose into view, his own head was already hidden amongst the layers of cloud.

Each time he opened his mouth to draw breath, that ringing it pealed out of the cloud like thunder. Fishermen noting the darkening of the sky were already taking in their nets, casting reproachful glances at the sky that so suddenly betrayed its earlier promise. And the vindictive storm, it dogged them all the way back to Eire's fair shores.

That Devil, his head was literally splitting by this point, but still he came and at last he set foot firmly upon the edge of the docks at Malehide. The sound of that footstep it thundered as if an entire herd of cattle were clattering up the wooden dock on cloven hooves. The fishermen they looked up apprehensively and returned to hurriedly lashing tight their moorings and stowage. The looming storm, it promised to be a visitation from the very gates of Hell.

Well, yourman the Devil, he was close enough at this point that if he merely fell forward he'd hit Irish soil. But he could come no closer. So there he just sat himself down, cradling his aching head and moaning quietly to himself. A low, forlorn sound, like a storm gathering, rolling shoreward.

And as he rocked himself slowly back and forth, he seemed to spiral inward upon himself. Like a snake swallowing its tail. Soon the cloud-crowned giant was no bigger than a mere mountain. Then he was a proud ship, rising just above the crest of the world. Now he was a noble house, overlooking the town. Now a bear, standing head and shoulders above the startled hunter.

And soon he was no larger than a man and a small, sad man at that. And yourman, he's still curling inward at his edges.

"Here now," Corraig shouted above the rising maelstrom. "You'll catch your very death out here, with that monster of a storm breaking. Here's a hand. There's a good man. Are you hurt? I say, are you hurt?" That Devil, he just sort of scowled up at the fisherman and waved him off. With each flat gesture of his hand, the waves crash higher over the docks. Corraig shrugged and mouthed something that the wind tore away. He readjusted the net draped over one shoulder. Then he stooped down and, clasping yourman's forearm, hauled him upright.

When it was clear yourman had his land legs once again, Corraig loosed him, clapping him once on the shoulder for good measure. Then, setting his back to the howling wind, he made his way up the dock.

He was no more than half its length when he glanced back and saw yourman still standing just where he was left. Casting eyes heavenward, Corraig fought his way back toward him and, throwing the man's arm across his shoulders, set the pair of them toward home.

Talbott jumped as the hand closed over his shoulder. There was no reassurance in that grip, no warmth of human contact. No pulse of circulation belied its death-cold grip.

"My lady…" he stammered. "We are honored. Please, join us." He cleared the bench nearest him with an exaggerated shooing motion.

Aisling Sturbridge neither loosened her grasp nor moved to accept his invitation.

Talbott hurried on. "It seems you are just in time. I was just relating the tale of…"

"I have some passing familiarity with the story."

"My lady, we meant no offense." His voice fell to the whisper of a confidante. "These young ones, they are devoted to you. Their greatest desire is to please their mistress. They only want to know, to understand, to draw closer."

In stark contrast to his hushed tones, her voice carried clearly over the crowd. "It is not your place, Brother Porter, to promote familiarity between the instructors and pupils here." Her grip was ice and steel.

"No, no. You are quite right, my lady."

"Who do you think will be left to pay the price for this lapse in judgment?"

Behind her, Eva stood up.

"Regentia, I asked Talbott for the tale. He is not responsible. He tried to dissuade me, but I insisted. I will pay the price of its telling."

Sturbridge looked hard at Talbott. "The price of its telling. Those words ring of your voice, brother porter, not hers. Have you told her, as well, exactly what the price of that telling would be? And in what coin it must be paid?"

Once golden, he thought. Talbott began to explain, but Eva cut him off. "Regentia, if I have trespassed in some way, I will pay the price."

Sturbridge turned and regarded her levelly, sizing her up as if truly seeing the novice for the first time. She nodded gravely.

"From your mouth to the Devil's ear, child. It shall be as you say."

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 12:14 AM
Barnard College
New York City, New York



It was the fourth night of his vigil outside Milbank Hall. The campus administrative building was silent. From his vantage point, concealed within the shadow of the adjacent science building, Anwar kept his attention fixed upon a particular disused side door.

For the first time since he had begun his surveillance, the door had opened. Instantly, he was totally alert, transcending even his normally high level of vigilance and entering the hypersensitive state where duty and faith merged and were one.

The man who slipped from the doorway appeared nervous, agitated. He was young, fair, clean-shaven and dressed casually, after the manner of these western *kafir*. He might have passed among the faculty of the college without question.

If Anwar had half expected a gnarled old gnome—bearded, robed, a silver skullcap perched precariously atop bald pate—he did not let his disappointment show. Instead, he allowed his expectations to align with the reality before him.

With the appearance of the nervous man, the field of possibilities before Anwar had just narrowed to two. Either this was his contact, or this was someone who had discovered the clandestine arrangement, removed the contact from the picture, and unwisely decided to keep the appointment himself.

Anwar held his ground and awaited the prearranged sign.

The newcomer scrutinized his surroundings, peering intently into the crisscrossing shadows formed by the trees and academic buildings. Anwar drew more deeply into his concealment, the shadows both common and preternatural that cloaked him.

He is looking for me, Anwar thought. *But if he is the one, why does he delay? Why doesn't he give the sign?* There were no witnesses or other obstacles that might justify his hesitation. Anwar, however, had the advantage of having been secreted in that spot for several nights. Perhaps the thin man was merely being cautious.

The man's unease was contagious. Anwar instinctively palmed a knife blade.

Then the man's scanning gaze stopped on Anwar—stopped on and *saw*! Anwar was sure of it, though the man gave no other indication that he had seen the lurker in the shadows. Anwar instinctively drew more deeply into the dark as a chill ran the length of his spine.

At the same time, the thin man held his right hand before him, palm upward, and in the blink of an eye, a low flame burned atop the man's hand. He'd struck no match, raised no lighter, yet a flame danced upon his open palm. Then, as quickly as the flame had appeared, it was gone, and his hand was empty again. Anwar knew that anyone else observing the brief glint of flame would doubt what he'd seen and convince himself that he was mistaken in his impression. Anwar himself would have doubted his own eyes, had the flame not been the sign he was awaiting.

Now that the time had arrived, Anwar hesitated momentarily. His impulse was to cling to the shadows and skirt the mall area between the buildings as much as possible, yet if the contact had not made proper arrangements to ensure the success of the mission, there was little Anwar could do at this late date—little except meet his end with dignity. Though uncomfortable relying on a *kafir*, he placed his faith in his elders. Deciding against an indirect approach that could consume vital seconds, Anwar strode slowly but purposefully across the open ground. He watched for any sign of danger, of betrayal—it was not yet too late to escape should the mission fall apart or the *kafir* prove untrustworthy—but no disruption greeted him.

"I am Aaron," spoke the thin man. He did not try to hide the fact that he was of the get of Khayyin. Aaron's skin appeared delicate and pale. His fingers and face were tight and frail looking, too much so for his apparent youth.

Anwar nodded. In the cloudy blue eyes, he saw a disturbing mix of pain and resignation. He had no knowledge of how it was that his own elders had come to hold power over this warlock, or how one of the hated Tremere would have become indebted to the Children of Haqim—rumor abounded regarding the unbreakable bonds of blood among the warlocks—for Anwar had no reason beyond idle curiosity to possess such information. His earlier concern, however, remained with him—his unease over relying upon a *kafir*, especially one who had obviously given in to despair and undertaken a foul betrayal of his clan, a deed he could not hope to survive.

Like all of his people, Anwar could personally attest to the potency of the Tremere mastery over the blood, and of their power to enslave others with it. The Assamites had all suffered under a curse laid upon them by the Tremere for centuries on end. How could one such warlock be trusted?

Anwar lingered upon the thought of a world in which warlock turned against warlock. He pictured the children of Haqim, as numerous and inevitable as the sands of the desert, rising up to engulf the Tremere pyramid. They would dance *hadd*, vengeance, atop its ruins. Their pounding feet would drive even the last memory of the warlocks down beneath the shifting sands. Oblivion.

Yes, the fortress of vengeance was rising even now from the swirling sands, its vast walls climbing, one grain at a time, above the desert wastes. Each grain was mortared to its brother with the blood of their enemies—the blood that had been so long denied them. Surely some great reckoning was at hand. The blood that Anwar would shed tonight would bring his people that much closer—precisely one grain of sand closer—to that fortress of final vengeance.

What more did Anwar need to know in preparation for this night's undertaking? He was merely a tool of vengeance. It was not given to him to know the mind of the builders. He was not privy to the secrets of the elders. His duty was merely to strike true. And to avoid, at all costs, twisting or breaking in the master's guiding hand. *May Haqim smile upon me.*

"Follow me," said the *kafir*. "Stay close."

Anwar did so. They entered through the side door and proceeded down a narrow corridor that would be out of the way for any student or faculty member of the college. Anwar suspected there might be black magics that would deflect the intentions of any mortal who wandered this way. *What other Tremere spells protect this chantry?* he wondered.

The corridor led to a heavy oak door with frosted glass and the painted words: ASSOCIATE DEAN OF INTERDEPARTMENTAL ACADEMIC DISCIPLINARY REVIEW. Anwar imagined that the title was vague, bureaucratic, and ominous enough that any student or professor accidentally stumbling past the Tremere defenses would be stymied by the conviction that she either had no business with this office, or earnestly desired to have none.

Aaron harbored no such reservations. He inserted a normal-enough key into the lock and led Anwar inside. Anwar expected to step from the drab, collegiate environment into a stronghold of splendor and debauchery befitting the sinister genius for which Clan Tremere was known—the Children of Haqim hated the vile warlocks, but did not underestimate them. Instead, the office beyond the forbidding door was as drab and nondescript as the preceding corridor. A desk, some filing cabinets and a few chairs were the only furnishings.

Aaron locked the door behind them and exhaled audibly. "Here we can talk. But we've got to hurry. He's going to ruin everything." He crossed to the desk and picked up one of two gray robes that lay draped across it. He tossed it toward Anwar.

"Who's going to ruin everything?" Anwar caught the robe. He did not don it right away, but waited patiently until Aaron had his head and arms entangled in his own robe. Only then did Anwar follow suit.

"Foley. The target." The Tremere stumbled guiltily over the word.

"Johnston Foley," Anwar recited, checking his facts. "Regent Secundus, second-in-command, Chantry of the Five Boroughs, New York City, New York. Height: 177 cm. Weight: 80 kg. Hair: dark, graying. Eyes: brown. Mustache, beard: full, graying. Apparent age: late forties. Actual age: circa two hundred years, American antebellum period."

"Yes, yes. Foley. That's very impressive. But the problem is..."

"Known threats—thaumaturge: blood magic manifesting through the written word, drawings, glyphs, wardings, ritual diagrams. Firearms: passable shot with pistol, usually unarmed. Poisons: suspected involvement in deaths of two fellow novices, Atlanta chantry. Reassigned, high-risk posting to New York. Political: high-level connections with..."

"He's gone mad."

This brought Anwar up short. Another mad warlock. Things were becoming complicated. "Please explain."

"I can't believe he's actually going through with it. If we don't get to him soon... Look, when I left Foley, he had already started the ritual, a very stupid and dangerous ritual. It's going to kill him. If we don't get there first."

Anwar considered. "I do not understand your sudden concern for the target's safety."

"Look, I don't know what your hidden masters will do to you if you return without killing Foley. But I know what... I know it's important that Foley is assassinated. Here. Tonight."

"And it shall be so. Is he alone?"

"Yes. He was. But he kept saying something about others coming. I think he might have been talking about you."

All right, Anwar thought. *Two mad warlocks, and the target has been forewarned.*

"May I ask you a further question, Aaron Light-Bringer? A personal question?"

Aaron looked impatient, but motioned for him to continue.

"Why is it important that Foley be assassinated? And tonight? And within the walls of the chantry? Why are you doing this?"

Surely you can see how this must end.

Aaron returned his stare, unflinching. Slowly, pronouncing each syllable distinctly, he replied, "Why are you doing this?"

Anwar was taken aback to hear his own question parroted back at him. Then, at last, he understood. Anwar bowed deeply, formally, to his guide. "Let us do, then, what is needful. Shall we go?"

"Let's get this over with." Aaron turned toward what was apparently a coat closet. He placed a hand upon the knob.

"I do not think we shall speak again. Beyond this point, it will not be safe. I will see you safely to Foley's sanctum. If you succeed, I will see you safely out again. More than that, I cannot do. If we are intercepted en route..."

Anwar nodded. "Say nothing more. It is sufficient, Aaron Light-Bringer. We shall do what is needful."

The warlock turned his attention back to the doorknob and muttered a few words beneath his breath. Anwar could not be sure if it were an incantation or a desperate prayer.

Anwar felt his skin tingle momentarily as the words were spoken, whether due to some sorcerous incantation or merely the power of suggestion. He silently berated himself for the shiver.

The door opened to reveal plain concrete walls and a narrow metal stairway leading downward. The confined space was cool, damp. Something about the view put Anwar in mind of gazing down a well. Anwar dutifully recorded every detail of their descent—the precise number of steps to each turning (seven); the total number of landings (fifty-two); the number of doors they passed in their downward spiral (four); the number of times Aaron stopped completely (twelve), apparently listening for sounds of pursuit, or perhaps catching the distant hint of trickling water, or timing the return of the echoes of their footfalls clanging back up at them from the depths.

Aaron's impatience was obvious, so Anwar did not question his frequent stops. He knew if these were not necessary precautions, Aaron would have dismissed them out of hand. It might have had something to do with the chantry's defenses. Whatever wards they might have passed through thus far, however, were of such a subtle nature that Anwar could not detect them. Perhaps his elders, in their wisdom, hearing his exacting description of what he had seen, could unravel mysteries that were hidden to him.

He kept close to Aaron and turned a deaf ear to the voices rising up at him from the depths of the central well. He was well aware that it was merely a trick of the acoustics that rendered the lull of trickling water into plaintive voices. Children's voices.

Hadd, the children whispered to him. *Vengeance*.

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 12:31 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Part of Foley's mind was vaguely aware that a disjoint had taken place. That time was proceeding without him.

His eyes opened but, due to the perversity of time, there was a discrepancy between the physical act and the arrival of light waves that normally followed it. The portion of his mind that was still attending to such external details received stimuli that seemed already several minutes old.

His lips were moving as if of their own accord. They chanted words in a dead language. But the time-sense of his speech was different from that of his vision. Words that would only find voice an hour hence mingled with sights that were already lost to the past.

A ripple obscured the time-sense, shifted relationships. Foley saw now the way in which his hands would grasp (had grasped?) the pine sticks. His eyes recorded how he would snap each stick, and how not sap but blood would drain into the silver tray—the blood of a black cat. That was significant somehow.

Of course, Jacqueline! The cat had a child's face, a little girl. It smiled up at him, baring vestigial fangs. Foley let the face age in his mind. Its lines hardened, twisted into middle age, revealing the familiar features of his apprentice, his judge, his would-be murderer. Of course. Again he heard his mother telling him that a cat in the house would steal a baby's breath.

Foley was unsure of the passage of time in the outer world and he feared he was collapsing dangerously inward. But there was something more here. Something he had missed. He was very near the center now, the *Interiora Terrae*. If answers were to be found anywhere, they would be here. If only he could…

Suddenly, a light flared in the darkness of the labyrinth. A blazing yellow orb. The eye regarded him suspiciously. "Who's there?" The voice seemed to come from somewhere beyond the eye. "I know there is someone there, but I can't make him out. You see him? In the shadows, there, between the Witch's Shins."

A second voice soothed, "Be easy, dearest. It is nothing. A trick of the light. There is no one here who can harm you."

Foley warily circled the eye, peering intently into the shadows it splashed upon the labyrinth walls. He thought he could pick out the outline of an opening of sorts, a dark gap where two pillars leaned noticeably together. He moved closer.

"There! It moved again. Catch it. Bind it. Send it away. It cannot be allowed to interfere."

The second voice tried another tack. "Leopold, look who is here. It is our friend, Foley. Foley has come to visit you. Isn't that lovely? Leopold, you remember Foley."

Leopold dropped his chisel. It clattered to the cave's floor. He refused to turn. "I do not."

"Foley, come here, into the light, dear. Let me look at you. That's better. Here is your cousin Leopold. We were just talking about you, weren't we Leopold?"

Foley still could not pick out the second speaker in the shadowy vastness of the cave, but the patterns were disturbingly familiar. How could he have not seen them before? Not one of his clanmates would have failed to identify the source—the source that should not have been there, that should not have been anywhere! There was a glimmer of something just beyond a turning in the cavern. Something just beyond the edge of his vision. When he squinted his eyes, he had a vague impression of something vast. Something coaxed from the shadows and given form only by the ambiguous magic of reflected light. Something that gleamed dully, with a flat luster like that of beaten gold.

"Foley? Foley. Don't know any Foley. Oh, send him away."

"Now, that is no way to treat your cousin. And he's come such a long way to see you. To see your *work*."

At this Leopold turned. He took a quick step toward Foley and then drew up short as if struck. "It's not finished. Can't see it yet. Come back later."

"Leopold!"

The cave itself seemed to reverberate with the force of the gentle scolding. Somewhere behind Foley, the eye flared. Leopold shrank back before its intensity.

"All right. He can wait then for all I care. But not a word out of him or…"

"Now, there will be no threats here, Leopold. There can be no threats between cousins, dearest."

"Or it's back down the well with him."

With growing horror, Foley felt his lips moving, as if of their own accord, forming the dead words begun hours before. He watched the syllables tumble out into blackness.

"Visita Interiora Terrae, Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem."

"What's that?" Leopold pressed very close to Foley, pawing at him, shaking him. "What's that you say? *Occultum Lapidem*? The stone? The secret stone? Give it to me!"

Foley raised one hand to ward him off, revealing the baleful red gemstone embedded deep in his bloody palm. Too late, Foley realized his mistake. He felt a quickening of interest from the darkness, felt the eye press closer.

But Leopold turned away in disgust. "He knows nothing. Nothing! Oh, make him go away." He turned upon Foley. "Did you think to tempt me, to dazzle me with your pretty little gemstone? I have called the fire from the slumbering rock. I have molded it in my hands, felt it stream between my fingers. But it is not enough. It is not the medium I was promised.

"Where is your *Occultum Lapidem*? Your living rock? Bring me the stone that breathes life! Now that would be a worthy gift to set before your cousin. But instead… no. It is enough. You were a fool to come. Take him away."

"Leopold," the voice cajoled. "Will you get the pretty red stone for me?"

Foley felt the air temperature drop dramatically. He began to cast about for the way he had come.

"No. Damn the stone. Just go away. Can't you all just go away? I've got so much work to do."

There. Foley saw two stalagmites that seemed to lean toward one another. He began backing slowly in their direction.

"Leopold..."

The artist fidgeted, picked up his chisel.

"Leopold..."

The voice reverberated, its cry tearing from dozens of separate mouths. Foley, brought up short by the shrieking chorus, stopped, turned. Another mistake.

There, just around a turning in the rock, the cavern opened out and Foley found himself face to face with the enormity of Leopold's blasphemous, gibbering masterwork.

Foley's last memory of the cave was of clawing frantically at the stone floor, trying to bury himself from sight.

In the absence of any conscious direction, Foley's fingers had turned to the familiar comforts of quill and ink. Instinctively, they had scratched out the ravings their master was vainly gouging into the cave floor.

A black cat with the face of a child. A radiant yellow orb. A knock-kneed witch. A golden calf. A one-eyed sculptor. A secret stone. And finally, the faint hint of something vast with a dozen distinct gibbering maws.

Punctuating the macabre illustrations in a shaky script were the words, "Hazima-el, Leopold, *Occultum Lapidem. Down the Well.*" The bottom of the sheet bore the strange legend, "Leopold = *Lapidem*(?)"

Foley felt as if he were drowning in stone. Slowly, painfully, he tried to resurface. He seemed lost without the scratching of the quill to guide him. His lips still moved, forming words of power, but no sound disturbed the air.

It was then he felt the impact of a blade. With one precise, forceful jab, it severed his spinal cord. He felt his face crash against the surface of the table. The collapse of the vision pained him far more than the physical attack. The mystical energies he had ridden to the Cave of Lamentations turned upon him. They exacted their due.

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 12:47 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

The warlock, deep in trance, had no opportunity to save himself. Anwar's ferocious thrust-wrench with the *katar* was one fluid motion, and the *kafir* struck the table like a fallen timber. Anwar was on his victim and drinking deeply before the eyelids ceased their fluttering.

Sustaining, fragrant vitae.

Hadd. Vengeance.

For five centuries, the children of Haqim had languished under the curse of the Tremere, had been unable to partake fully of the Path of Blood as prescribed by the elders' elder. But now the second fortress, Tajdid, was reclaimed; there would be payment in full for each hour of each century. Anwar had struck but a single blow, had taken but a single step along the road of the *hijra*.

But how sweet the blood.

There was little time to bask in the deed. New strength flowing through his veins, Anwar glanced at Aaron. The Tremere, his discomfort apparent, gawked at the body of his clansman.

Have you no stomach for blood? Anwar wondered. Or perhaps it was the focused brutality of the act that unnerved the Tremere. But surely he had known.

Aaron had led Anwar through the labyrinthine corridors of the chantry beneath the college, pausing only occasionally to mutter an incantation or to stare intently into the air at something Anwar could not see. Anwar loathed the traitor's weakness, but he still needed him to provide safe passage out of this place. They had worn the robes that Aaron had provided, but they had passed no one else. Anwar had not removed his robe until Aaron removed the protective wards on the last door that had led to these chambers and the cramped laboratory.

Anwar had cloaked himself only in silence, as he had been taught to do. His silence had been potent, even to the point of interrupting his victim's barely audible chanting. Anwar hadn't anticipated that, but it pleased him. *He knew! Yes, he knew!* At the end, the entranced Tremere had known that his blood was forfeit. Anwar was sure of it. Else there would be no justice.

Even before the blood had flowed completely down the back of his throat, Anwar reached for the gem. He had no need of the chest, and though certainly there were other items of power in the warlock den, his directions were explicit. He wrapped the red and black stone in a cloth and tucked it within his sash. "It is done. We go."

Aaron wavered for a moment. Then, decisively, he snatched up a piece of parchment from the floor and stuffed it into the sleeve of his robe.

"A memento?" Anwar asked.

"Incriminating evidence."

Anwar bowed slightly. "Lead on."

They retraced their steps. Of that, Anwar was sure. But Aaron stopped at points not necessarily identical to those where they'd paused on the way in. The impression made on Anwar was one of an elaborate system of mystical defenses, varying perhaps in the response each required depending on the direction from which an individual passed. There were other possibilities. Anwar didn't know if the cloak he wore contained sorcerous properties, if it was merely a ruse to deflect visual detection, or if some other variable came into play. He was at a loss to deduce the inner workings of the Tremere defenses. That being the case, and escape otherwise impossible, he remained close on the heels of the warlock Aaron.

When they ascended the steps to the drab office, Anwar was still operating on heightened guard. It was not too late for some devious trap to be sprung, for a gaggle of warlocks to swoop down upon him and carry him back into the depths of their chantry.

Walking down the corridor toward the building's side door, Anwar's heart lightened slightly—he was past the point were the *kafir* had warned him not to speak—but still he was vigilant. They stepped out of the building at long last. The summer night air, humid and carrying the stench of the city, was refreshing nonetheless.

"You should not have spoken to me in Fol... in the warlock's sanctum." Aaron accused. "It was dangerous and unprofessional."

"You are displeased with the manner in which I have fulfilled the contract?"

"And you missed the sketch."

"Mad scribblings. I noted them. They were of no relevance. I disregarded them."

"I was in that sketch. If I were implicated in this, you don't think that would be relevant?!"

"I intended no slight, Aaron, Light-bringer. But it will not be relevant."

"What do you..."

"Your superiors will be displeased."

"Yes," Aaron replied guardedly, "I suppose they..."

With one graceful step, Anwar looped the garrote over the Tremere's head. The wire dug into the warlock's neck, slicing through trachea and jugular. A sharp jerk, and the head and body fell separately to the sidewalk.

"This is likely a mercy compared to the fate your clansmen would have devised for you. Rest well, Aaron, Light-Bringer. In peerless service, there is both glory and redemption. This is justice."

Hadd.

Anwar slipped away into the night with the gem for which he'd been sent, and another step along the road of the *hijra* was taken.



Sunday, 25 July 1999, 1:14 AM
Anteroom of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

Regent Aisling Sturbridge regarded Eva levelly, sizing her up as if truly seeing her young protégée for the first time. So much was riding on her. So much she could not hope to understand.

Sturbridge nodded gravely.

"From your mouth to the Devil's ear, child. The price of the tale is yours alone to pay."

Turning her attention back to Talbott, Sturbridge took the storyteller by the crook of his elbow and half-lifted him to his feet.

"Cede the stump, old bard."

"My lady?"

"Have done. Take a pint and a seat by the hearth, you've earned it. The night has grown deep and the tale has passed on to other hands. And don't argue with your elders," she added in afterthought to preempt further objections.

"My elders," he scoffed nervously. "Well you know that if I were to turn down such an offer—a pint of brown beer and a seat of honor at the hearth—the order would revoke my poetic license. I yield. It is, after all, your tale to tell and none other's."

Sturbridge squeezed his shoulder in parting, and settled in comfortably. Her voice carried over the room with authority: "*A Strange Catch to Show for Your Day's Labor.*"

Emer was waiting in the doorway, her face full of concern. Seeing the pair of them, she turned, scattering a flock of children back into the house. By the time they arrived, there were dry clothes and warm blankets ready to hand. The chairs had been pulled over to the fire.

The children tore about on their various hastily appointed tasks. One, two... four of them? Only Emer stood unmoved in the middle of the whirlwind of activity, her arms folded across her chest.

"Corraig ap Culain." Emer pronounced the name dispassionately, like a lord passing sentence. "Sometimes I think you haven't the sense the good Lord gave a goat. Did you not see this storm boiling up? Worry a good woman half to death." She threw a towel over his head.

"And what a strange catch to show for your day's labor." She took the stranger by the arm and led him to the fire. "You must forgive my dear husband. He's a fairly stable sort most days. And to think he came with such high references. Of course, you'd never know it to look at him. 'Puny,' my poor mother always said, 'Won't last long.'"

"And proven wrong on that count as well," called Corraig, peeking from beneath the towel he was still rubbing over his head. "A man could do quite well for himself by consulting her religiously and then taking the other path."

"My, how you will go on. I'm sure Father would be glad to avail himself of your expertise on the subject of divination. I will make sure to mention it to him on Sunday. In the meantime,

you might pour our guest a drop to put the warmth back in him. Poor soul's soaked through. And trembling."

"Mustn't let her frighten you," Corraig called over his shoulder. "I've seldom seen her actually talk the ears off a body."

"Pay him no mind." She scowled after her husband. "Dropped on his head as a child, poor innocent. His mother never forgave herself. Here, wrap up in this. Thank you Padraig. There's a useful lad. A wonder where he gets it from. Brigid, dear, ladle out a bowl of stew for our guest. And yes, you might as well get one for that man there as well."

Corraig crossed the room with a cup in each hand. "There now. Your health."

The ouiskey coursed through the veins like liquid gold—the warm welcome of an old friend. The mind-numbing agony in the Devil's head receded a pace. The pain, it was still there, but yourman is no stranger to pain.

"My thanks to you and your lovely lady for the kindness you have shown a stranger. I do not know what came over me. But the spell has passed and I'll be on my way."

"We'll hear nothing of it," said Emer firmly, her eyes fixed on her husband.

"Of course not. With that storm blowing out there? Well, I'd as soon give a man up to the Devil himself. Small credit to me should I send a man to such a fate."

"No, put the thought far from you," Emer soothed, pressing the bowl of soup into his hand. "Thank you, Brigid. And even if you should venture forth, where would you go? You are clearly a stranger to these parts, you'll pardon my saying, and even the inn's door will be shut tight by now. No, we'll keep you well enough this night. Make up a place for you here by the fire."

"You are too kind to an old fiend." The Devil lowered the half-empty bowl from his lips and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He drew up short, seeing young Columcille eyeing him from the far side of the room.

"My manners." he said apologetically. "It's been some time since I've dined in such company. Mostly I take what meals I can get alone." Then, more confidently, "The stew is excellent. And I suspect you are harboring more than one fine cook beneath your roof." He peeked around to where Brigid leaned against the table, watching the newcomer with undisguised curiosity. She retreated behind her mother's skirts.

The Devil finished the fish stew more carefully. One spoonful at a time. By the time he had finished, he had the worst of the cold and pain at bay. The small thatched cottage was cozy enough. A single room. To one side a table, various pots and pans hanging above it, and a pantry. Against the back wall, fireplace and sitting area. On the other side, a curtain of sailcloth separated the bed from the rest of the room and hid a cradle as well, from the sound of it.

"That'll be Brendan," Emer said, already heading in that direction. "You'll excuse me."

"Of course, of course."

She vanished behind the curtain, and the Devil, he waved Corraig closer.

"A fine woman, you're lucky to have landed her."

"She reminds me daily. But tell me, now that you have your breath back, what brought you to these parts? Do you have kin here, or just down Dublin-way perhaps? I'm surprised you didn't put ashore there. We don't see many but our own fishing boats dock here."

The Devil, he wasn't inclined to point out his host's mistaken impression. "My people are scattered to the four corners of the globe." It was not an idle boast. "I would be surprised if I didn't find some long-forgotten kinsman right here amongst your own. But I was turned about

and forced ashore here by the storm. We were indeed making for Dublin town. And I must be away again shortly."

"Rest easy, your mates will not be putting out to sea again this day. Nor tomorrow, likely. We can send word round to them in the morning. Let them know you're well and will rejoin them soon. Are you a trader, then?"

"No. Myself, just a traveler, a self-imposed exile far from the comforts of home and family." And truer words were never spoken.

"But I would like to think that there are one or two in these parts who might yet have cause to remember me fondly." At this, the Devil he grew thoughtful. *"There was a young lady of my acquaintance, a lady of Baerne. A clever lass with a rare knack for finding things that were lost. Everyone for miles about remarked it. But that would have been many a year now since last I darkened her door."*

"The Hag of Baerne?" Corraig laughed. *"Why I'd be willing to bet no one's called the Wise Woman a "lass" since long before you or I were born. I only wish she could be here to hear you say it herself. I can see why she was fond on you, old silver-tongue."* Corraig's face became somber. *"She was a good woman for all her divining and charms and philters. She will be missed."*

"What? Do you tell me..."

Corraig raised his glass. *"To the Wise Woman of Baerne. May she be in heaven half an hour before the Devil knows she's dead."*

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 1:37 AM
Spanish Harlem
New York City, New York

The drop was ridiculously close, dangerously close. Even following a circuitous route north through St. Nicholas Park and taking twice the usual precautions against being followed—one never could be too careful where the warlocks were concerned—Anwar covered the few kilometers to his destination in little over half an hour, and that included the call from a public phone to his contact to find out where he should go.

Perhaps, he thought as he slipped past block after block of brick and concrete row houses in various states of disrepair, in a case such as this, involving an item procured from Clan Tremere, there was a certain wisdom in not keeping the goods—not to mention the procurer—on the street any longer than necessary. Who knew what spells the warlocks might have woven around the gem in question to help retrieve it if necessary? It was not beyond the realm of possibility that Anwar himself was somehow marked by his entrance into the Tremere chantry, stained by the very warlock blood he had claimed. Wouldn't that be a fine last laugh for the traitorous warlock Aaron? What if that pale, despairing boy had planned for his own destruction and laid a trap for his assassin? But if that were the case, Anwar would have been betrayed while relatively helpless in the chantry... unless Anwar wasn't the target.

The thought occurred to him as he approached his destination. Despite the risk of prolonging his exposure, Anwar made an abrupt left turn around a corner. There were a considerable number of people on the street: youths, boisterous or sullen, looking for trouble; harlots seeking a fee; cast-offs, in the grip of their various addictions or hoping to be; the poverty-stricken, unable to afford air conditioning and seeking some relief from the summer heat. Anwar shielded himself from their minds easily enough. Also, he varied his pace widely—shuffle, jog, quick walk—and crossed the street back and forth several times. All the while, he kept a close watch for anyone who seemed to be interested in keeping up with him, anyone in the knots of people who took notice of his erratic movements, anyone *other* than mortal who might still see him. He saw no one, and continued on to the address given him over the phone.

He ignored the iron staircase leading up to the front door of the three-story building and instead moved quickly down the cement steps to the recessed basement entrance of 2417-A West 119th Street. The entrance above possessed all the correct trappings of a small but respectable minority legal or financial firm—tastefully painted pine-green door, brass handle, knocker and fixtures, soft glow of a foyer lamp from within. The entrance before Anwar was less inviting, but what it lacked in charm it made up in security. The wrought-iron gate stood before a black, metal fire door. The windows on either side, though bricked up, retained burglar bars from an earlier era.

Anwar stood directly in front of the door and pressed the small, unlit button to the side, holding it for thirty seconds, as he'd been instructed. As he waited, he tried and failed to detect the cameras that were undoubtedly observing him. A few short moments

later, he heard metal sliding on metal—a heavy bar and then a bolt on the inside sliding free—and the fire door swung inward. No light came from within to backlight whoever answered the door. Anwar stared into deep shadow. The lock on the wrought-iron gate, apparently controlled by remote, clicked and that door swung open toward him. Anwar stepped into the cool darkness.

The gate clicked closed, and then unseen hands shut the fire door behind him, making the darkness complete. Again the sounds of metal on metal, this time sharp and clear, as bolt and bar slid home.

Anwar's keen eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness when he was blinded by a painful blast of bright light. He blinked away the discomfort and found himself facing a dark-complected woman, though not so dark as himself. Her face carried neither the pallor of the recently undead nor the rich, dark hues of a longtime servant of Haqim. She was mortal then, and approaching middle age.

"Hold out your right arm," she said without preamble.

Anwar did so. She grasped his wrist with one hand, and with the other removed a syringe from the pocket of her rumpled cardigan. Without bothering to clear air bubbles—and what was the point, with no beating heart to damage?—she jabbed the needle into Anwar's forearm and injected the black liquid from the hypodermic.

"Wait here." She turned and stood before the only other exit from the bare concrete room, another fire door, until the unseen bolt slid free with a click and she left. The bolt, Anwar noticed, again secured the door.

From what he'd seen, he was adequately appreciative of the location's defenses. The upstairs entrance, despite its softer appearance, was undoubtedly as secure, if not more so, than the basement. Once his eyes adjusted to the harsh glare of the interior lights, Anwar was able to spot the tiny lenses, three of them, hidden along the base of the light fixture. The fact that he could see the cameras told him that this room was purely a defensive feature—a rampart, of sorts—that would slow any intruder trying to reach the heart of the lair. There would be other rooms inside more suitable for concealed surveillance, chambers where no one, not even *rafiq*, would be so casually able to discern the spying equipment.

Anwar nonchalantly stepped to the exact center of the room, beneath the light. None of the three lenses pointed directly down. There was, of course, another camera somewhere else, one he had not yet seen, that covered that area, but Anwar would at least let whoever was watching him know—and whichever of his superiors who received reports of his activities—that he was on to them.

Before Anwar had pinpointed the location of the remaining camera or cameras, the bolt on the second fire door again slid free, and a large man in a business suit stepped into the room.

"James. Walter James," the man said, extending a hand.

Anwar recognized the man by sight and also knew that Walter James was not his name. It was likely, however, that the woman and other mortals in the building knew their employer only by that appellation, and so Walter James it was.

"May the Eldest smile upon you," said Anwar to his fellow Assamite as he clasped the offered hand.

"And may your back be strong," said Walter James. He did not release Anwar's hand after shaking it, but instead slid his sleeve up to the elbow and inspected his forearm where the woman had given the injection. The skin was smooth and perfect, without any sign of the needle's penetration.

James smiled and clapped Anwar roughly on the shoulder. The large man indicated his guest's forearm. "A formula from the *amr*. Had you been tainted by the warlocks, if they'd bewitched or tracked you, your skin would have blistered. Like an allergy test, in a way, with Tremere magic as the allergen."

Anwar nodded. "And if I were tainted?"

James's smile didn't waver. "I'd have destroyed you." He released Anwar's hand. "And within ten minutes, this base would be abandoned. No trace to any brethren."

"Not even 'Walter James'?"

James shrugged. "A name. Nothing more. End of the line."

"And what if the warlocks didn't use magic to track me? Electronic bug?"

"You were screened before you stepped through that door," said James. "But we cannot be one hundred percent sure of every possibility, so let us commence with business. You have the gem?"

Anwar reached within his robe and produced a folded cloth, unwrapped it. From its center, James took the red and black gem, then reached into his own jacket pocket. He removed a small box, placed the gem within it, and returned the box to his pocket. James's pleasant, friendly smile was constant throughout, so much so that Anwar was reminded of a painted mask—face dark brown, teeth white, eyes as inviting and genuine as the smile itself. Anwar could imagine that smile, unaltered, as James severed the spine of a warlock, as Anwar had done. Here was a man who would have been an asset to the serpents had he not been chosen in service to Haqim.

"You are welcome to stay with us if you like," James said. He brushed his hands together as if washing away any vile traces of warlock arts. "There is vitae, to which you are also welcome."

Only a short while had passed since Anwar had sated his thirst for blood and for vengeance. Yet those two were his constant companions, and indulgence was not the same as satisfaction. What he felt most strongly was the desire to roam. To hunt. Reclaimed blood within called for more. In this city, there would be more—Camarilla or Sabbat, New York harbored them both.

"Many thanks," said Anwar, "but I will not be staying. My purpose here is met."

"Very well," said James, the gracious host. "You know to stay away from the warlocks' chantry. They're likely to be abuzz. Some Sabbat are around, though most of them seem to have scurried off to Washington—blood in the water, and all that." He shook Anwar's hand again, a bit too fervently, as was the American way.

A few moments later and Anwar was again roaming the night, savoring the rush of Tremere blood, as well as the glory his deeds would garner him within the brotherhood. The mortals still loitered here and there, but he passed them by. Tonight he had a taste for richer blood.

KR

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 8:32 PM (11:02 AM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, India

"Khalil? Can you hear me?" Hesha bent delicately over his guest's paralyzed body. "Have you recovered? Look to your left, twice, if you understand me."

The jetty eyes signaled intelligently enough.

"Good. Brace yourself." The Setite put one hand on the gypsy's chest, the other on the stake. He pulled. Whatever mysterious compulsion, *aggressive* compulsion, had taken hold of the undead in Calcutta seemed mostly to have abated. Hesha thought Khalil should be harmless enough now.

The Ravnos sprang free, flailing wildly to get away from the older monster. Khalil scurried, ratlike, to the opposite corner of the room, and crouched defensively.

Hesha let him go, backed up a trifle, and sat down on the arm of the couch with his hands in view. "I apologize," he began, "for the manner in which I put an end to your... seizure... last night. You passed very quickly beyond reason, and, having promised to protect you, I could hardly let you run out into Calcutta in such a state." At his feet lay a small blue cooler; he opened it, drew out a blood bag, and tossed it underhand to his guest. "I assure you, none of that is mine."

"Yeah. Right."

Hesha snapped the stake in two and shrugged. "I assume, Khalil, that your employer has you fully bound to his service. You hear his voice from a distance; you obey him when you clearly would prefer not to. I have a great deal to accomplish and no blood to waste where another has gone before me. Drink that and fix your chest. There are more in here." The Setite leaned down and picked up a bag for himself, then pushed the cooler halfway across the room. He sank his teeth into the plastic and winced at the taste. Khalil, after a moment, joined him. The Ravnos was a messy eater. He tossed the empty bag aside, seized the cooler and went through six or seven more before stopping.

"There are fresh clothes hanging in the closet for you, if you would like to dress. And a shower, of course..." Hesha eyed the mud-caked hair and dirty feet of the *shilmulo* pointedly. "It is my custom to hold a meeting among my staff at sunset. If you have anything you care to contribute, you are welcome to attend, provided you mind your manners—I do not allow my retainers to be interfered with, even by allies. If you wish to leave, you are free to do so."

The Setite caught clearly the flash of panic on the other's face, and let the sentence end itself. Khalil was deathly afraid of something *outside*. Hesha rose to join the mortals in conference. The Ravnos remained in the corner, looking more like a trapped animal than ever.

The Asp, Thompson, and Janet Lindbergh were waiting for Hesha when he emerged—the first two in chairs at the main table, the last by phone, an open net connection, and a miniature laser printer.

"Good evening," said Hesha. "Report."

"Yes sir," Janet responded promptly. "Ron, the first file for him, please.

"The following facts are undisputed by any sources: First, Typhoon Justin, centered over West Bengal and Bangladesh, lost momentum at last and returned to tropical storm status. Second, Bangladesh suffered massive, deadly mudslides in nearly every corner of the country. Third, Bangladesh was at the epicenter of a considerable earthquake whose effects were felt as far as Rangoon and Delhi."

Hesha contemplated the report before him. Without looking up, he asked, "How are our people?"

"Everyone checked in on time, sir," Thompson answered.

"Elizabeth?" inquired the Setite, in the same detached tone.

"Sleeping. When we try to wake her, she starts talking about Ravana again. I thought it best to let her be, sir." To Thompson's relief, his master remained at the table, and the conference went on without further reference to the girl.



Sunday, 25 July 1999, 10:11 PM (12:41 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, India

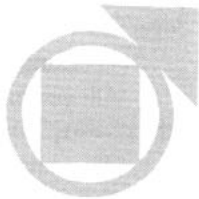
Hesha shook the dreaming woman by the shoulder. "Elizabeth? Can you hear me?"

Liz mumbled incomprehensibly.

"Elizabeth!" Hesha said sharply. She stirred. "Good. Talk to me. Tell me about Ravana."

"Ravana... the three overcame Ravana. They tore him down from the mountain, cut him open, and gave his heart to the sun to eat. The Prince of Storms let go his hold on the kingdom... Ravana died in the center of his power, in the midst of his children. They had not come to aid him. He put his curse on them, from the center of his power: They should go mad; they should be no more; and so it was. Their nights will dwindle unto nothing... even *rakshasa* cannot fight the power of three curses at once... murder, calumny, and the madness..." She flickered briefly into a normal voice: "It's a common enough metaphor, Professor. The rebellious children cursed by a grandparent—usually part of a colonization cycle. Campbell makes too much of it, but Graves is sound...." Clarity faded to fairy tale—chapters Hesha had heard before—and decayed further into meaningless murmurs.

Sunday, 25 July 1999, 9:00 PM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York



Three sharp knocks. Sturbridge rolled over, slapping at the bedside terminal. At her touch, the monitor blinked in surprise, coming abruptly out of sleep mode. A man's voice, grumpy, and with a decidedly Cork singsong to its accent, issued from the tinny speakers: "Early-morning guests./Raiders, famine, boils or fleas/Would be more welcome."

Sturbridge ignored the disgruntled computer and keyed the visual. The camera just outside the chamber door revealed Eva, paused uncertainly at the threshold.

She was dressed not in the normal robes of the novitiate, but in a blouse and long black skirt. Civilian clothes. She stood awkwardly with one hand raised, as if debating the wisdom of knocking a second time.

A gesture from Sturbridge retracted the hydraulic bolts securing the vault door. Eva stepped back suddenly from the reptilian hissing, and as the door swung back, she took three determined steps into the room and stopped. Eva stood unspeaking and unmoving, her head and shoulders bent as if under a great burden.

Sturbridge pushed herself to her feet, scooping up a robe that lay draped over a nearby chair. "Come in, Eva. Thank you for coming to see me. Please, sit down."

The novice continued standing, head bent, refusing to meet the regent's eyes. "If it please my mistress, I will stand."

Sturbridge pulled tight the sash around her waist, regarding the girl with curiosity. "I see. Very well then, tell me, what's on your mind?"

Eva gathered her courage. "I have come to submit myself to your judgment, Regentia. Talbott's story, he said it would have a price. I am here to settle my account."

"Ah, yes. The price." An uneasy silence fell between them.

"I would have thought," Sturbridge mused aloud, "that a novice coming to lay such weighty concerns before her regent would come formally attired in her robes of office."

"I have returned my robes to the vestry." The admission cost her dearly. "I have broken trust with my regent. I have placed myself out of communion with this chantry. I submit to your judgment."

"Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes, you are quite right to do so. Well then," Sturbridge turned her back upon the novice and picked her way toward the tumbledown throne of books, "I suppose the question now becomes, what are we to do with you? You don't mind if I sit down? Thank you."

Sturbridge settled into the high seat and raised her voice as if addressing a courtroom.

"Disciplinary action record. Case before the regent: FitzGerald, Eva. Novice of the First Circle."

The bedside terminal gave off a series of reluctant grumblings, thinly veiled as efforts to access the hard-drive, and then began a running transcription of Sturbridge's words.

"The novice comes before us self-accused and confessed of, how did you put it again, dear?"

"Breaking trust with my regent," Eva recited, "and placing..."

"Oh yes, breaking trust with her regent and placing herself out of communion with the chantry. Nicely put.

"The novice is also delinquent in her account with Brother Porter, in the amount of the price of the telling of one tale. The record will note that the tale in question was, after the brother's usual fashion, a bit rambling and thus its price might similarly be expected to be quite large. If one were to take into account the exorbitant amount of interest the novice seemed intent on paying the storyteller and his tall tale, the bill might well be presumed to have grown exponentially. Have you got all that?"

The computer began to read back the transcript.

"Regentia, please! This is quite serious. I've been up all... thinking about leaving the... and you're..."

Sturbridge crossed the intervening space and put an arm around the novice. "I know, child. It's all right."

She rocked Eva gently back and forth. "You wanted to know more. About me, about where I came from, about who I am, about *what* I am. About how I got this way and what I'm supposed to do about it now. Yes?"

Eva nodded, unable to master her voice. She buried her face in Sturbridge's shoulder.

"It's all right. It's all right to wonder. It's all right to ask questions. It's all right to doubt. I'm only sorry," she continued after a pause, "that you did not feel like you could come to me and ask me these questions."

"What right do I have to demand explanations from you?" Eva's reply was quick, with a note of bitterness behind it.

Sturbridge held the girl's shoulders out at arm's length. "You don't have any right to demand explanations. But you can come to me. You can ask questions, even the hard questions. And if I can, I will answer them. Do you understand? That is a promise. If I can, I will answer them."

Eva nodded past her tears.

"Now you sit down right here and wipe your face. You're a regular fright with all that blood streaking down your cheeks, a regular little monster."

She was rewarded with a choking laugh that quickly dissolved back into broken sobs.

"That's better, settle down here next to me and I will tell you more of the story you so dreadfully needed to hear. It's a story of magic and immortality. Of devils and witches. Of blood and fire.

"It's your story. Did you know that? You've already paid its price. You pay it every evening when you—against all reason and logic—rise again. You pay it every night when you hunt, drink life, endure. You pay it every morning when you surrender once again to the little death.

"Already, you can recognize hints of the familiar in the tale, snatches of dream, shards of song. Things you knew before their knowing. Yes? Good. They are our heritage. The legacy of the Pyramid. The Blood of the Seven that runs through all of our veins. Connecting us, drawing us closer together, uniting us.

"It doesn't matter how far away you go, little one. You reach out one hand. You touch the thrumming strand of blood that stretches between us, and I can feel your touch. Right now, I can tap my sire. Watch. Closer. You can almost see the shiver running up the nape of his neck. Just like someone walking on his grave.

"Ah, now he's found us out." Sturbridge's eyes closed at the answering caress, lost for a moment in memory before breaking contact.

"We are of a blood. Nothing can take that away. Nothing can change that. Not even death. Do you understand? Quiet now, child. Quiet now."

Eva was silent a long while. Then she asked tentatively, "Regentia, what Talbott said, is it true? About your having a daughter, I mean?"

The lines of Sturbridge's face grew hard. Just a moment before she had found herself calling this little one "child." She fought to master herself before she spoke. "Yes. I had a daughter once. A beautiful little girl. A magical living child. I know such a thing is hard to imagine here."

She found herself thinking, not for the first time, how much alike they were—her young novice and her lost daughter. They were of an age and there was even a hint of resemblance between them. She knew she had felt instinctively protective of her newest novice from the day she had arrived at Five Boroughs.

Eva's voice broke in upon her musings. "I think I should have liked to have had a daughter."

Sturbridge gathered in her young novice and buried her tears.

EG



Sunday, 25 July 1999, 9:00 PM
Cape May, New Jersey

It would have been smarter just to go to ground. Nickolai let the feeling of self-reproach crash over him like a wave. *To give up, to go down.* He felt himself borne under, felt acutely the weight of water upon him. It was the sheer enormity of the past that held him under—the voracious flood that had already swallowed three-fourths of the earth's surface and still was not sated.

Nickolai knew from personal experience that this flood could never be sated. Not until it had encompassed the entire world. Its pull was unrelenting and, in the end, irresistible. Already, the deep had claimed the unlives of his entire people. It had singled them out, marked them, stalked them, tapped them. It had gathered them in and now he was the last. By default, he had become the embodiment, the end product, of the Great Experiment. He was the sole receptacle of the accumulated knowledge, ambitions, lore, strivings, rites, disappointments, schemes, hungers, ideals, tragedy, devotion and pathos of a proud people. Of all those that bore the name of House Goratrix, he was the last.

And he was little more than a drowning man.

No, far better just to let the waters close above him and rest. Finally, to rest.

There was something seductive in the watery embrace of the past, in its oblivion. It would have been very easy to surrender to that floodtide. Even if it were to mean being brought face-to-face with all the indiscretions of a lifetime, or more precisely, of several lifetimes.

Nickolai was strong. He knew he could bear the accumulated indiscretions, even the inhumanity, that had been his constant companions these many nights.

He turned the new recrimination over on his tongue. Inhumanity. It had a more wicked edge to it than his original thought, *indiscretion*. The salt water stung his throat, but he swallowed it. Yes, he could endure even the renewed acquaintance with inhumanity.

But new images were rising toward him through the murky waters. They worried away at his rationalizations, eroding them, carrying them away upon the tide. The images spoke to him of a greater reckoning. They tugged at the gauzy concept he was sheltering behind, this "inhumanity," and tore it away, exposing the red, raw skin beneath. They left him with a far less comforting reproach to cling to. Bloodshed.

The waters ran red about him. *In blood, there is life. In blood, there is magic. In blood, there is power.*

Nickolai knew himself to be a creature, a construct of the blood—a flashing dynamo distilling energy from vitae. It was blood that gave him his longevity. It was blood that gave him his power over the mortal world. It was blood that fueled the rites and rituals of his people.

If there were a single common element to the seemingly endless procession of nights, it was the insatiable need for blood. There was no advantage in contesting the fact. He resigned himself to this latest condemnation. He inhaled deeply and allowed his lungs to fill with the blood that surrounded him and sought to drown him.

His body was racked with sudden screaming pain. Where Nickolai had thought to swallow only his bloodshed, he found himself filled with a far harsher realization. It was not mere bloodshed on his lips, but killings. Murder.

An unending maelstrom of murder. The sheer monstrosity of his crimes—of not only what he had done, but what he had become—surged through him. It tore at him from the inside. He bent double, vomited up blood. Years of blood. It streamed from his eyes, his nose, his ears. Nickolai could feel himself withering away at the extremities. His fingers dried, cracked, curled. His arms withered, wrists and elbows drawn in at improbable angles. He felt his cheeks draw taut and then part, exposing bone. A hint of laughing skull.

No!

I am the last.

Nickolai flung the credo into the face of the voracious past. A howl of pure self against its inevitable ravages.

I am the last. I will endure.

He could feel the wave break and begin to roll back before him, retreating. Leaving him gasping for the life-giving present.

I am the last. Though the entire world be drowned beneath this flood, I will remain.

Nickolai spat the last of the mingled blood and bile and salt water from his mouth. He was a mountain rising from the sea.

Perhaps I am the last of only a race of monsters, a people of depredations.

The mountain contorted, revealing twisted crags, cruel sea cliffs.

Perhaps I am a creature of blood and death, murder and cruelty, unholy rites and blasphemous hungers.

The mountaintop shook, crumbled, slid away into the waiting sea below. At the mountain's summit all that remained was a blasted jumble of rock and desolation.

Perhaps my very existence is a continual curse upon the earth.

Stunted black trees sprang up, dotting the mountainside. Dark shapes slipped through the undergrowth.

But I will stand firm against the oblivion.

The sea gathered its might, surged against the palisade of sea cliffs, and was thrown back in disarray.

I will build myself a monument, a lasting remembrance of my people.

A dark cloud passed over the summit like the hand of an angry god. In its shadow, something was gathering, rolling storm-like beneath it.

A thing of terror and of beauty. And all who look upon it will tremble and remember.

Far below him, the waves scratched tentatively at the foot of the cliffs. Yes, in time, they would have their way. Of that there could be little doubt.

Soon the waters of the past would cover the entire earth. In those final days, the only remaining line of retreat would be inward—to sink into the very heart of the earth.

To give up, to go down.

To go down. Soon, now. Patience.

Already Nickolai could hear the madness of the lapping waters against that Final Shore.

GF



Monday, 26 July 1999, 12:00 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Never come from the ground without knowing who—or what—is there. That was what Tanner had told her.

Fuckin' bastard, Ramona thought. But she remembered.

Table Rock was unmistakable, and several people were nearby, most of them familiar to Ramona. She wasn't concerned. As she rose out of the ground, she remembered other things that Tanner had told her:

Know that you are Gangrel. Know that I am your sire. I made you what you are.

The night air, even on the outskirts of the Adirondacks, was cool. As always, Ramona felt for a moment a distinct sense of loss, of vulnerability, as she emerged from the comforting embrace of the earth. She saw right away that she was on top of Zhavon's grave. She had been *in* Zhavon's grave. Not really in it, Ramona corrected herself, but a part of it. She felt eerily calm. It was a feeling she wasn't used to—hadn't been for years.

Brant Edmonson was standing with Mutabo and Joshua Bloodhound. They were less than ten yards away at the edge of the woods. Ramona saw Snodgrass—she thought that was his name—approaching the group with two new faces. They must have arrived since she'd gone to ground. She glanced at her watch and was surprised to see that she hadn't risen until midnight, several hours after she was usually up and about.

Other shapes moved among the trees farther out from Table Rock. Ramona wondered about Stalker-in-the-Woods. She hadn't seen him since Edmonson had bested him. Stalker, she imagined, would be one to hold a grudge. At least it wouldn't be against her—unless he resented her witnessing his embarrassment.

He shouldn't be embarrassed about gettin' beat in a fair fight, she thought, but she had her doubts as to whether Stalker-in-the-Woods would see it that way.

Ratface was not far away. In fact, he was coming toward her. He'd been less communicative since the others started showing up. Not that he was being unfriendly. Ramona didn't feel like he was snubbing her, but he'd dutifully made the rounds and greeted each new arrival, and that hadn't left much time for him to talk with her. She supposed that for someone at the bottom of the pecking order, which as far as she could tell Ratface seemed to be, it was beneficial or maybe even expected for him to ingratiate himself to as many elder Gangrel as possible.

Ramona didn't yet have a clear idea of how all the interactions among the Gangrel worked. She did know, however, that she wasn't about to lick anybody's boots. If that's what they wanted from her, they could kiss her ass.

But then she remembered the uneasy feeling she'd gotten from being too close to Stalker-in-the-Woods, and the way Tanner had struck her before she'd even seen him move. She might not always have a choice, she realized, about how or to whom she paid

respect. And she'd probably already pissed off a whole bunch of people by arguing with Edmonson.

"Ramona," said Ratface as he approached, "you are with us." He seemed relieved to see her.

Ramona just nodded. Of course she was with them. He looked at her expectantly but said nothing else. Ramona quickly grew irritated with his staring.

"*What?*" she asked him at last.

Curiosity instantly overwhelmed Ratface's obvious hesitancy to pry. "What happened? What did he say?" he asked, rubbing his grubby little hands together. "Everybody wants to know. You didn't surface last night. We didn't know if you were coming back."

"What?" she asked again, but this time out of genuine confusion rather than aggravation.

And it all came home to Ramona. *Blackfeather. The fire.*

She quickly looked around, but there was no sign of the old man—only scattered ashes and the remnants of a few charred sticks on Table Rock.

"He's gone," said Ratface. "He left right after you went into the ground. Didn't say a word to anybody... anybody else, that is. Only to you. That was night before last." Ratface was looking sideways at her, like he suddenly didn't know if he should trust her completely.

Ramona wasn't sure if she could trust herself. Until Ratface had asked her about it, the entire ritual, Blackfeather's very presence, had been like nothing to her, like they'd never happened. But she knew that they had. Ramona falteringly raised her fingers to her face. She touched her cheeks, her nose, her eyelids. Her fingers came away caked with hardened ashes. Ratface, still unsure how to respond to her behavior, watched intently as she brushed the ashes, and the underlayer of chalk, from her face.

"Everybody was watching," said Ratface, "but nobody really saw what happened. The smoke got thick. It was like you weren't there. It was... odd."

Odd, thought Ramona. That was one way to put it. She was afraid she didn't have a better explanation than Ratface did.

The oblivion of resting nestled in the earth seemed to cling to her still. She'd noticed before that she wasn't always at her sharpest when she rose from the earth, that sometimes the details of whatever had happened immediately before her descent the previous morning were foggy at best.

But this seemed different somehow. Ramona wasn't sure how, but it was. The whole experience with Blackfeather had been so weird. *Odd*, as Ratface put it.

"That was last night," Ramona said at last, correcting Ratface's mistake.

"No," he insisted. His rodent-like nose protruded so far that the tip moved a great distance when he shook his head only slightly. "Two nights ago."

Ramona glanced down at her watch. Sure enough, the LED read *7/26 Mo*. Ratface was right. She hadn't just stayed submerged until unusually late in the night. She'd stayed submerged all through one night and then well into the next.

"What did he say?" Ratface asked nervously, prying against his better judgment, but prying nonetheless.

Ramona was stunned by how long she'd slumbered. Without thinking, she answered: "'The Final Nights are at hand.' That's what he said."

She had no idea what the old man had meant, but the words seemed to have an immediate effect on Ratface. His eyes grew wide, and he eased away from Ramona as if she'd pulled out a gun and was going to blow his head off.

"The Final Nights..." Ratface muttered.

"Hey..." Ramona was jolted back from her contemplation by Ratface's alarmed reaction. She grabbed his arm and kept him from retreating any farther. "The Final Nights—what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Ratface stared at her, as uncomprehending as Ramona was, but his confusion was of a different nature and passed almost immediately. The light of realization softened his expression.

"I forget—it's all new to you," he said in way of explanation. "The Final Nights are when the eldest of our elders, the Antediluvians, will rise from their torpor and destroy all the rest of us, their childer."

Ramona stared back at him. "What kind of answer is that? Ante-who?" she asked. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

Ratface grimaced at her impatience. "Antediluvians—they existed before the Great Flood. You have read the Bible?"

"Yes. Fuck you," said Ramona, annoyed at his implication that she was stupid or illiterate. The truth was she personally had read next to none of the Bible, but she knew the stories well enough.

Ratface's grimace deepened. "Do you want to learn, or do you want to argue?" he asked. "To learn, you have to listen."

Ramona turned her back on him and sat by Zhavon's grave. "You're the one who came over here askin' me what the old man said." She thought about what else Blackfeather had said: she didn't think the remark about the chewing gum was worth repeating, and the part about her road being difficult was none of Ratface's damned business anyway. But something about what Ratface was trying to explain made her uncomfortable, tugged at the tightness in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't sure that she *did* want to learn. Maybe this was something better not to know.

The Final Nights are at hand.

Ratface misinterpreted her silence and continued: "The Antediluvians were the third generation of our kind from the Dark Father. There were thirteen of them. That's what the legends say, anyhow."

"And they gonna show up and kill the rest of us?" Ramona asked.

Ratface nodded. "That's what the legends say."

"If there's only thirteen of 'em, why don't we just kick their ass when they come around?"

Ratface's mouth dropped open at the suggestion. "They're... they're like gods. They're thousands of years old. You don't just kick their ass... asses."

"Humph," Ramona snorted. "Whatever."

The contentment she'd felt upon rising from the earth was gone without a trace, shot to hell. Ratface was telling her things that she probably needed to know, but that she felt she didn't want to know. She was sitting beside Zhavon's grave, and again the heavy weight of guilt was beginning to press down upon her—add to all that, she'd just found out that she'd slept through an entire night. In itself, the lost time was no great loss to Ramona—some of these other Gangrel seemed way old, *hundreds* of years old, so she

figured missing one night wasn't that big of a deal. But she hadn't meant to do it, hadn't even known that she'd done it, and that left her uneasy.

And what about Darnell? she thought. Not one but *two* more nights had gone by, and Tanner didn't look to be back yet. Ramona knew she should be upset that no one had done anything for Darnell, but she was so tired, too tired even to be angry. She wondered briefly if Darnell had outlived her hope for him, but mostly she was just tired. The pull of the grave, the attraction of not rising from the peaceful embrace of the earth, clung to her.

Ramona glanced back over her shoulder at Ratface, who was standing with his hands on his hips and watching her.

"Do you sleep through a whole night sometimes?" she asked, trying to sound casual, to keep the worry out of her voice.

Ratface shrugged. He seemed nonplussed by her sudden change of topic. "Sometimes. Not often. Some of the elder Kindred go into torpor—a deep sleep like that. It can last for nights, or months, or years. The Antediluvians are supposed to have been in torpor for millennia."

"Supposed to have been…" Ramona muttered.

"No one knows for sure—if they are, or where their resting places are," Ratface added.

Ramona repressed a shudder. *He just won't shut up about them Antediluvians*, she thought, and she'd heard more than enough about them already. Ramona turned away from him again and sat silently. She wanted him to go away, and he'd already proven that the simplest question would just keep him talking—and probably about the damned Antediluvians. But he just stood there, pawing at the dirt and making her uncomfortable.

"Don't touch the fuckin' grave," Ramona said, without turning to see if that's what he was actually pawing at.

"There's Emil," Ratface said at last. "He must've just arrived."

Ramona heard Ratface scuttle away. She was glad to be alone again, but she felt a little guilty about driving him off like that. Of all the Gangrel she'd met, he more than any other had tried to be helpful to her. He probably deserved better treatment. But then again, Ramona deserved a hell of a lot better than what she'd gotten. Besides, she didn't want to hear any more about the damned Antediluvians.

When's Tanner gonna get back? she wondered.

She was tired of waiting. He'd said he was going to get others—a lot of others were here. Ramona could see more new arrivals whom she hadn't met or heard introduced—the two with Snodgrass, a handful of others, and those were only the ones she could see from where she sat. Probably Ratface could have filled her in on the identities of everyone gathered, if she hadn't run him off.

As Ramona looked around, she noticed that none of the other Gangrel met her gaze. Edmonson and his group looked away and pretended that they hadn't been watching her. Their conversation suddenly lagged.

They were talkin' about me, she realized.

Renée Lightning looked away as well, and others. They looked at her differently, thought of her differently, after Blackfeather's visit. They had no idea what had happened either, but they regarded Ramona with suspicion and a little fear now. She could see it in their eyes, in the way each held him or herself.

Fuck 'em, she decided. Ratface was the only one of them that had any guts. She hoped he got some brownie points for talking to her.

Ramona hugged her knees to her chest. She wished Tanner would hurry up and get back. Then they would go kick that freak's ass—the *thing* in the cave, the Toreador. *Maybe we can save Darnell*, she thought, but she didn't hold any real hope. She'd seen what the Toreador had done to Zhavon, and what had happened to Jen—stone that hadn't been there shooting up through her body and taking her head off. Ramona didn't see how Darnell could've held on this long. She felt guilty about that too—that she didn't know for sure that he was dead. But it wouldn't have done any good for her to go back alone, she reminded herself. She just would've gotten killed too.

She remembered the fear in Tanner's eyes. He knew that the kidnapper, the thing with the eye, was something beyond even them, and Tanner would know that a hell of a lot better than she did. She had to trust his judgment on that point.

Thinking of the kidnapper, Ramona couldn't help but picture the grotesque bulging eye. She had stared into it and almost lost herself, would've lost herself if Tanner hadn't showed up and snapped her out of it. And that was after the damn thing had sprayed her with—what, acid? She could feel the burned-out gouge on her face that hadn't healed—even with all of Zhavon's blood—and her T-shirt was falling apart and full of holes where that crap had burned through.

They're like gods, Ratface had said about the Antediluvians. *You don't just kick their asses*.

Ramona's memories tugged at the churning in her stomach like the moon pulls at the oceans. Could the Toreador be one of the Antediluvians? She hadn't thought that anything would scare Tanner, but that thing with the eye had. But if it was one, could even all these Gangrel hope to kill it? Not according to what Ratface said. But probably others knew more than Ratface. Surely Tanner knew more than Ratface did. Ramona's sire was just more closed-mouthed about it.

She sat by herself as the night passed and tried to get a handle on the disturbing mix of guilt and fear. Her chest began to ache like her stomach had, and not from having had a wooden stake jabbed through it—although Ramona couldn't imagine that had helped very much. The physical wound was healed completely. No sign remained.

Others were still arriving at Table Rock. How many, she didn't know. She didn't really try to keep track anymore. She vaguely heard more ritual introductions, but she didn't catch any names, and no one came to greet her. Either she was too new a Gangrel to bother with, or the paranoia of those who'd seen her with Blackfeather was contagious. Ramona didn't care. She was just as happy to be left to her worries. She sat silently beside the grave that had been her resting place the night before.

Occasionally, Ramona heard a scuffle and snarls from the woods nearby. After the first time or two, she didn't even bother to turn and look. Whenever more Gangrel arrived, some wanted to find where they stood in the pecking order, or to challenge someone that had bested them at a previous meeting. The commotion never lasted long, and Ramona doubted any serious injuries resulted. It seemed more sensible than the gang fighting she'd seen in LA, where the losers, as often as not, ended up dead.

She didn't see Stalker-in-the-Woods out there, but she could imagine him trying to kick the ass of every newcomer he couldn't stare down. And she wouldn't have been half surprised to find out he'd done it.

But neither Stalker-in-the-Woods, nor any of the others Ramona had met, nor any of the newcomers messed with her.

Friday, 26 July 1999, 12:47 AM
Amsterdam Avenue, Upper West Side, Manhattan
New York City, New York



Seemingly counting each step and placing each foot with care, the man walked nervously down the street. His lips quivered as they mimed his interior monologue. How far did he travel in a minute? How many steps did he take in an hour? It seemed he'd walked for miles in the passing of but a second.

He wondered, could it have been an hour already? The man did not wear a watch. In fact, he wore no jewelry or decoration at all—nothing but the angel that followed him more closely than a shadow—and somehow, suddenly, that disturbed him. He clutched at his neck, fingers seeking a chain or cord. The fingers prodded and stabbed at the top of his concave chest, where they slid back and forth in the cavity like a skateboarder out of control.

The man knew that his name was Donatello, but was somehow unable to make himself believe it. For all his careful and patient strides, he too was out of control. And despite his sagacious tread, he was aimless.

No matter how he strove to make progress, he felt as though he traveled in nothing but circles. Every time he saw his reflection in the dirty windows of the brownstones that lined the street, Donatello felt it was the first time. He knew that hunchbacked, sinister, loose-fleshed outline was his own, but he knew it only in the vague way that allowed him to guess but not speak his name. It was like searching for the Holy Ghost in a coven of witches—surely present, but at bay.

So he kept walking, hopeful that as his feet made progress, his mind would as well. He grasped that he'd emerged from an experience of an extreme nature. It had been a gamble, that much he knew as well. But one that had paid off or not? Had he desired to forget himself? What manner of monstrous past might that horrid image in the mud-streaked window wish to hide from itself?

Slowly, Donatello did begin to put his thoughts together. He wasn't sure if the walking helped, but he continued nonetheless. Regrettably, no other transformations accompanied the illumination of the past. His back, bowed like an angry cat; his jowls, sagging like a crone's breasts; his eyes, sunken with an addict's lack of will. These all remained. But the dim light of his mind began to glow.

With these remembrances came the revelation that the ills of his body were the curses he would bear to the end of his unlife. He was Nosferatu, and though he was one that excelled among his kind in the gathering of information—as his clan excelled at it among the other clans—it gradually became clear to Donatello that the last three nights of his life were lost forever.

With a dread that he could scarcely comprehend, Donatello worried that the repercussions of a loss so miniscule in the context of an immortal life would reverberate in infinity. When would the butterfly of those few nights cause a hurricane in his life?

Donatello shook his head. "Soon," he muttered sourly. "All too soon."

He felt it would have been better to have lost three nights in the midst of a crazed Tzimisce ceremony.

Or three nights wandering lost and alone in a wilderness infested by Lupines.

Even three nights of interrogation by the souls of the pious dead he'd instructed and directed centuries ago, when he'd been a priest of God among the mortals of this dark world.

But to pass three nights in the company of that most enigmatic of the Kindred, the Prophet of Gehenna, Anatole...

Three nights that he could not remember. Though fleeting images flickered in his mind's eye, Donatello felt certain the full experience of those days would never be recalled. He was uncertain why he was so sure this was the case. Perhaps he was giving more credence to Anatole's reputation than was warranted. Donatello sighed, kept walking, and strained hard to put concrete images to the few moments he could recall. As he had guessed and feared, by the time he was done, no new memories had surfaced.

Three nights with the vampire who knew the secrets of the end of the world, and Donatello could remember almost nothing. Frightening indeed.

He recalled his surprise when he'd entered the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Some unknown force had for many nights kept any Nosferatu from entering the place. They could go only so far, and no farther. They'd felt Anatole was within the cathedral, but they did not know for certain. He'd entered over a month before and had not been seen to exit, but in light of their inability to enter, it was equally likely that he was gone entirely as still within the walls. And what could he be doing for a month? How was he hiding from the mortals that swarmed the place every day, especially every Sunday?

The Nosferatu sent mortals to investigate. Even their ghouls—mortals with Nosferatu blood within their surging arteries—were allowed entrance, and they detected nothing. One of these ghouls was even said to carry the blood of Calebros himself within her, and she still reported nothing. Another to enter was a wizard—not a Tremere, but a mortal wizard—who owed Calebros a favor of some variety, but he also could add nothing to the intelligence efforts of the clan.

Of course, now Donatello suspected the truth. They *had* encountered Anatole, but were denied the memory of meeting. But that raised the question of why they could not at least admit to the confrontation even if lacking memory of its content, as was Donatello's predicament. Perhaps they were physically unable to speak of it, just as Donatello could not bring his own name to his lips.

So Donatello's penetration of whatever force had kept him and his comrades at bay was a surprise. The Nosferatu recalled that as soon as he found himself able to enter the cathedral, he'd quickly retreated to the periphery to report this to one of the surveillance team members. A task force was quickly organized and a weeks-old plan for entry was dusted off and enacted. However, none of the others were able to take one step farther than any time prior. But Donatello still entered without resistance.

He laughed now at his foolish courage then. For he'd pressed on. He recalled telling his comrades that this was an opportunity that could not be forsaken. He would enter and report back as soon as he was able.

The chronology of Donatello's memory then frayed, for the next event he could recall was praying with Anatole. The picture of the event in Donatello's mind arrived fully formed and realized from pitch darkness and deathly silence. Suddenly, there was an altar before Anatole

and him. Suddenly, Donatello heard his own voice, his memory making him feel as a passenger in his own body even though his memory of how he felt *then* was of himself completely at ease.

The Nosferatu also recalled Anatole beside him. The Malkavian prophet also knelt before the altar, and Donatello recalled thinking for an instant that this was odd. Little was known about Anatole, but the fact that he had forsaken God centuries before was largely accepted as truth—at least to the extent that any information about the mysterious madman could be accepted as truth.

But that quickly passed, and Donatello could also recall thinking that the Kindred's kneeling before the altar was proof. Proof that it had indeed been his faith that had somehow kept other Kindred from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. This despite the fact that crosses and other religious relics held no power over the Kindred. Perhaps that, in turn, was proof that Anatole's visions and prophecies truly came from a source beyond anything other Kindred could imagine.

If all *that* was true, then Donatello accepted that he'd been able to enter because he'd been a priest of God in his mortal years. Not an especially caring—nor, to be certain, especially corrupt—one, but one who did what was expected by his elders even if that was not as much as he knew was expected by God. Evidently, it had been enough, and even now as he walked the streets of New York City, Donatello felt a flush of piety and faith wash through him. He clutched again at his chest for the missing cross. He still wore it during these eternal nights, though he'd thought the reason was pure derision of his mortal past and his own loss of faith. Now, he wondered if there was a deeper explanation.

And there had been Anatole himself, of course. It was Donatello's first memory of seeing him. His features were tranquil and smooth. A slight film of dirt and grime covered an otherwise Pentelic form. The Malkavian's blond hair had been pulled back in dreadlocks that in turn hung like ornate tassels around his downcast face.

Donatello had led the prophet in prayer.

The Nosferatu stopped walking and gathered himself. He had left belief in God behind long ago. Like others of his kind, he bore a beast within himself, but unlike any but others of the Nosferatu, he looked like a beast as well. He had been a man good enough in his mortal life to be allowed a mortal's death. When that was denied him, Donatello had gradually grown to accept that there was no God who made such decisions in the first place.

At a standstill now with the skyscrapers of Manhattan looming not far in the distance where their lights formed the new constellations by which—or to which—men guided themselves, Donatello's memory began to dry up. He felt his cursory communion with the almost entirely forgotten past drain from his motionless feet into the concrete below. And from there, deeper.

Through the bedrock and into areas of this mammoth city already forgotten in a span as short as a few hundred years.

And his thoughts dribbled deeper still. Not toward a fiery core of the planet, but toward something dark, something Donatello could not face and felt certain did not concern him in any event. He shuddered. Somehow, that thought sounded more hopeful than true.

What did concern Donatello were idle feet making for an idle mind.

The Nosferatu broke into a walk exaggerated so that he might psychically shake free of whatever he'd begun to glimpse. Had Anatole shared something of his apocalyptic visions with Donatello? The Nosferatu did not know, but this moment, when he was alone and fighting amnesia, was not the time

to attend to such thoughts. As his stride slowed to the steady rate of before, images again began to tumble from an unknown compartment in his brain.

There were other memories of praying. Both of these other scenes were set in a garden of some kind, and they were bowed before an odd sculpture of a woman formed of welded metal.

And a brief glimpse of the past in his mind's eye revealed to Donatello a scene of Anatole sitting beneath that sculpture with his sandals on his hands, listening to Donatello's questions. The Malkavian would not say why he was in New York. Instead, Anatole massaged the sandals together in a sort of act of supplication.

Or maybe, Donatello imagined, it was communication. Perhaps this was how—or at least one of the ways—he spoke to the heavenly powers. Or drew their attention. But Donatello could make no more of the scene, because his memory of it was so brief. Imagining it as a film, moving in frames through his memory, Donatello guessed he had but three frames of Anatole; and to be honest, he could not tell if the sandals were being rubbed or clapped together.

Donatello knew that he should return to Calebros and report these little things he *could* recall. Or at least return to the cathedral. Perhaps even try to enter again, though he felt that would be folly. Besides, his shriveled stomach somehow managed to grumble in protest, and Donatello knew he was not yet made of the steely determination that bred courage and confidence. He would retreat to his subterranean home, draft a report, and be done with the matter.

Or so he hoped.

That hope was almost immediately dashed, for something still nagged at his mind. Something other than the darkness in the bowels of the earth that he thought he could still will himself to forget—a cruel turn of fate this evening when he otherwise struggled to recollect so much.

An image flashed in his mind, but it vanished before he could slow it down or even see it. It came again. A figure. Very close to him. Whispering. Surely it was Anatole.

Again. Yes, it was the prophet. Whispering his parting words. Phrases uttered a mere hour ago, yet they were weighed down so deep in the sediment of Donatello's mind that he could barely uncover them.

Again, and the Nosferatu could hear some of the words. A riddle. Three nights spent with the Prophet of Gehenna looking at both Heaven and Hell and he walked away with a riddle? Donatello knew beyond doubt that the man was indeed mad.

And wise, so what was the answer to the riddle?

Donatello puzzled over it to distraction until dawn nearly overtook him. Then he hurried to a phone to call the warren at least before both he and Calebros slept the daylight away. Umberto answered and listened patiently as Donatello repeated the riddle a second time:

"One in a minute, and one in an hour. Walk a mile in but seconds to deliver my letter. Tell me, oh wise one, which way do I go?"

Donatello hurriedly pried open a nearby sewer grate. There would be safe sleeping somewhere near here. For a Nosferatu willing to scrounge, there was always safety close at hand.

Monday, 26 July 1999, 2:18 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



Ramona was thinking about Blackfeather when she noticed that Table Rock had grown completely quiet. She was thinking about the few words the old man had spoken, and of the strange ritual he'd performed—at least she thought it was a ritual of some sort. It had seemed that way; it had *felt* that way. In fact, everything connected to Blackfeather, including Ramona's reactions to him, was grounded in feeling. Ramona didn't *know* anything about him, except the little Ratface had said. She didn't *know* anything about what the old Cherokee had done. Lord knows, Blackfeather hadn't explained anything. He'd just done whatever it was he was doing, and she had been drawn along by the sparkle in his eyes, or maybe it was something about the smoke or the old man's mysterious chanting that had prodded Ramona to follow his vague lead. Everything she'd done had been based on what she'd felt, not what she'd known. And now he was gone, and she was left with her feelings but didn't *know* anything more than when he'd arrived.

She thought of the casual perfection with which he'd ground and spread the chalk—not a granule falling out of place, a perfectly round circle with the fire exactly in the center. And the fire itself, the small teepee, had burned just as long as necessary without needing to be fed or tended to even once.

She thought of Blackfeather's canvas sack, of the haphazard assortment of items he'd dumped onto the stone between them. The objects looked like they'd been scooped up out of the gutter: a discarded bottle of Visine, a snakeskin, a dull, rusted knife. *Silly Putty and chewin' gum, for God's sake!* Ramona shook her head. Was it supposed to make sense?

That question was the focus of her thoughts when she vaguely realized that something was wrong. She drifted back from her remembrances to the sound of... nothing. Again, the Gangrel present—and there must've been fifteen or twenty by now—had fallen silent, as when Blackfeather had arrived. Had the old man returned? Ramona looked up hoping to see him, hoping that he might answer some of her questions.

Instead, stepping onto Table Rock were two figures, one of whom she recognized immediately: Tanner. She knew from what the gathered Gangrel had said that her sire had traversed a goodly portion of the state—many of them had come from near Buffalo—but Ramona never would've guessed that from looking at him. He didn't look tired. He stood with the same confidence and poise that Ramona remembered. Maybe he was slightly more disheveled from his significant travels; maybe his dark sweater was picked a bit more than it had been, but there was no great change in his bearing. In his left hand he held a dangling rabbit. Maybe it was a hare; Ramona didn't know the difference. It was long and, unlike the rabbits Ramona had seen in pet stores, not very furry. Tanner held the creature by the ears. The head was twisted almost completely around, and blood dripped from claw wounds in its chest.

Tanner stood a step behind another Gangrel. Ramona had never seen him before, but for some reason she connected him to a name she'd heard some of the other Gangrel

whisper in near-awe—Xaviar. They had speculated that he might come, that the action would get started in earnest once he was with them.

Ramona could see that Tanner regarded Xaviar with that same reverence, and it was an attitude she was as surprised to read in her sire's posture as she had been his fear in the cave. It was jarring to see that he was afraid of anything, and almost as much of a jolt to see him pay respect to anyone. She wondered how he would react to Brant Edmonson—as an equal? And what about Stalker-in-the-Woods?

But there seemed no impetus to establish dominance, to refine the pecking order, now that Xaviar was present. Everyone, it seemed to Ramona even in those first few instants of seeing Xaviar, knew where they stood in relation to him, and they wouldn't risk displeasing him. He stood well over six feet, and wore only black leather—vest, long pants, boots. Ramona would've thought that presumptuous on most, but there was nothing phony about Xaviar. His hairline had fully receded, but long, red hair hung to the middle of his back. The same red lined his jaw as a prickly beard, and was sprinkled along his chest. Where his skin was visible—arms, chest, neck, face, forehead—it was tanned and leathery. He seemed to have taken to piercing: a ring in his nose, a half dozen studs and hoops in his left ear, a few less in the right. Ramona's earlier resentment of Gangrel elders dribbled away weakly. She wouldn't cross this man.

Tanner tossed the rabbit onto the rock, casually discarding the carcass. It landed amidst a cloud of ash from the remains of the fire. He had hunted the animal and killed it, probably without even breaking stride. It held no further interest for him.

Now Xaviar stepped forward. The dead rabbit lay at his feet. He ignored it, and his gaze fell on Ramona. For an instant, he casually took note of the grave she sat next to, but his stare came to rest on her.

Ramona slowly rose to her feet. She felt weak, awkward.

Xaviar looked down at her from Table Rock. At his feet, the rabbit's blood was mixing with ash. As Blackfeather had done the night before—*two* nights before—Xaviar acknowledged no one but her. Ramona wished that he would go talk to some of the others, or maybe kick Stalker's ass. But Xaviar's gaze bore down on her.

How long has he been around? Ramona wondered. *How many people has he killed?* She felt suddenly protective of Zhavon's grave next to her. Not that she expected Xaviar to root around and dig up the body like Ratface would have. Probably a dead mortal meant no more to Xaviar than did the rabbit at his feet.

"You have seen the thing that Tanner has told me of," Xaviar said to her. Though he didn't raise his voice, his words were strong as thunder. He stood over Ramona like a storm that, at any moment, could unleash its fury.

Ramona nodded. She could feel Tanner watching her, all the others watching her, but she couldn't take her eyes from Xaviar.

"Tell me what you saw," he said.

His gaze gripped Ramona, took hold of her as surely as if he'd reached out with his hands and grasped her by the shoulders.

Tell me what you saw.

Ramona felt the words pouring from her mouth. She heard herself, as if a bystander, tell him about the cave. She heard the revulsion in her voice as she described the horrid

eye, how it had sprayed acid on her, how it had entranced her, and only Tanner's intervention had saved her. She heard the heartbreak in her voice as she told of the injuries done to Zhavon, so great that the girl could not have survived. Ramona heard herself tell how the creature with the eye had twisted flesh and bone as if they were no more than hot wax, and how the very floor of the cave had attacked poor Jennifer, had mangled her body, ripped off her head.

The words poured like water through a broken dam, and in the end they left Ramona empty and sickened. The full sorrow of two years rose to fill the emptiness. She dropped to her knees and retched blood onto the dirt. Her human life had been taken from her. Jen and probably Darnell had joined Eddie in death. Her few friends, those who had shared the horror of this new existence with her, were gone. And Zhavon was gone, though her blood flowed through Ramona's veins. An unavoidable current had swept the mortal girl away, much as it had Ramona.

She faced those responsible—Tanner, and now Xaviar, who had bent her to his will. Ramona tried to spit the foul taste from her mouth. They would control her if she let them... if she couldn't stop them.

She could feel when Xaviar finally looked away, turned his gaze from her. He turned to Tanner and nodded, as if confirming something they had already discussed.

Ramona wiped her mouth on her tattered sleeve and looked up at the two elders on Table Rock. "Is it an Antediluvian?" she asked weakly. The churning in her stomach had taken over while the words had flooded from her mouth. It was the same sensation, only stronger, as when Ratface had told her about the eldest of the elders, and it had driven her to that conclusion.

Xaviar looked back at her again. He seemed slightly surprised, maybe amused, that she'd spoken to him of her own volition. "No, childe," he said with his quiet-thunder voice. "And shortly it won't matter *what* it is." He turned back to Tanner and prepared to ask a question.

"He called himself 'Toreador,'" said Ramona. Her voice was stronger now. The churning was receding slightly.

Surprised laughter erupted from around the clearing, but then the Gangrel seemed to remember themselves and in whose presence they stood. The laughter quickly died away. Ramona looked around blankly, too confused by the reaction to feel annoyance or ire.

Xaviar tensed. He turned back to her and cocked his head. "He called himself *what?*"

Ramona's blood turned to ice in her veins. Tanner's eyes grew wide for an instant, then narrowed to a cold glare. Silence stretched across the clearing, into the forest.

"Toreador," she repeated. Ramona forced herself to hold Xaviar's gaze, not to look away.

"You are sure?"

Ramona nodded. She didn't understand the reason for Xaviar's sudden vehemence. Having fought to hold his gaze, she now found that she wasn't able to look away.

"Tanner?" asked Xaviar, still not freeing Ramona from his increasingly perturbed glare.

Tanner stared at the ground. "I... I hadn't heard this," he tried to explain. "It called the stone, and the stone answered. It twisted flesh like... like a Tzimisce fiend!" Then he turned angrily to Ramona. "You didn't tell me this," he accused her.

"Did you give me a chance?" she shot back. "Did you give me a fuckin' chance to tell you anything?" Instantly, she knew she shouldn't have said it, that she wasn't *supposed* to have said it. It wasn't her place. In a way, she didn't care. Tanner deserved a good tongue-lashing, or more. But she was afraid of what Xaviar might do.

What he did was smile. But it wasn't a warm smile, or jovial. "I might have expected this from a whelp, but not from you, Tanner—to bring me here with a small army of Gangrel to destroy a lone Toreador."

Tanner was staring at the ground again. He offered no defense.

"No matter," said Xaviar, watching Ramona as if he'd been speaking to her all along. "Do you know what Toreador is?" he asked her.

She shook her head.

"Of course not," he sighed, not unsympathetically, but his expression changed rapidly, became fierce and bestial. "It is the *weakest*, the most *pathetic* clan of the children of Caine."

If Xaviar's enthusiasm for the hunt, or that of any of the other Gangrel, was at all diminished by Ramona's revelation, he didn't show it. He raised his fists into the air. Savage growls rose all around the clearing.

"It begins!" he snarled, as he leapt from Table Rock and almost directly over the cowering Ramona.

Tanner followed Xaviar's lead without hesitation, and Ramona, caught up by the ferocious snarl, was on their heels in an instant. Xaviar began southward toward the cave, but he quickly veered to the east. His forceful strides took him in a wide loop around Table Rock, and the other Gangrel fell in behind him. The air boiled with their snarls. Among the howling chorus, Ramona heard her own voice, a single strand woven together with like strands of her brethren.

They were on all fours and moving more quickly for the second loop. Ramona was not far behind Xaviar and Tanner. Brant Edmonson and Joshua Bloodhound pressed near her on either side. Their claws dug into the rocky soil, threw sparks when they struck stone. Among the pack, many Gangrel had shed their human forms altogether. Large wolves, some black as midnight, others gray as dusk's last light, wove through the trees at dizzying speeds.

During the third circuit around Table Rock, the landscape itself changed. The slopes of the foothills grew more rugged and steep, mountains in their own right. The trees became towering sculptures of gray bark and multihued lichen and mosses—green, blue, red, black. Ramona realized that the churning in her stomach had vanished. The rising fury of the hunt had crumbled and scattered the pain of loss that had assailed her for so long, the grief that she had not been without since her mortal days. Racing through the transformed landscape, she could not help but be transformed herself. She was a lone wolf, giant, ferocious and slavering. She was alone, yet the others were with her. They were of her, and she of them, united in their kinship—the same kinship she had seen in the sparkle of Blackfeather's eyes.

The Final Nights are at hand, and your road will be a difficult one.

Blackfeather's words. But had he spoken to her as she'd been, or to her as she was now? Were the words for Ramona alone, or for the larger collection of which she was merely a part? She felt the fire he'd created burning within her. She could smell the smoke. And she, the lone great wolf, saw the world with the ghost sight he had given her. Blackfeather had pressed the ritual ashes to her eyes, and now she could see.

Alone yet never more complete, she ran through the forest primeval. There was only the hunger and the hunt. Saliva ran over her fangs, dripped from her mouth.

They completed the third loop of Table Rock. Xaviar veered south again. The Gangrel all raced after him. Ramona could feel them all around her. More than she'd thought had come. Their slaver smelled of frenzy, of carnage, of death.

Toreador. Ramona's thoughts kept time to her footfalls. *Weak*. *Pathetic*.

There would be blood for blood. *Jen*. *Darnell*. *Zhavon*.

Amidst the press of her clanmates, Ramona could taste vengeance, and for the first time in two years, she embraced the future with gleeful anticipation.

GF



Monday, 26 July 1999, 3:09 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Ramona expected Xaviar to address the Gather, to discuss plans or give out assignments. But as the assault commenced, everyone seemed to know what to do. Everyone except her.

The raucous stampede near Table Rock had quickly fallen to silence as the Gangrel approached the meadow, and the ghost sight had receded, allowing Ramona her normal view of the world. She guessed now that there were twenty-five or thirty of her clanmates involved in the attack. Some circled around either side of the meadow. Apparently, Xaviar and Tanner were among those. Ramona had lost track of them and didn't see them nearby.

She hung back with several others near the ridge opposite the cave opening across the meadow. She wasn't far from the spot where she'd gone to earth three nights before—the same spot where she'd put an end to Zhavon's life. Ratface was near. Snodgrass and Renée Lightning were there. Joshua Bloodhound and three others Ramona didn't know were off to her left. No one spoke. The entire assault seemed to be orchestrated by instinct, although Ramona was relieved to see some of the others glancing about looking for guidance as well. Following Joshua's lead, the eight concealed themselves several yards up the hill toward the ridge, with just enough elevation that they could see the cave entrance across the way.

Ramona barely had time to wonder what would happen next before she saw Tanner and four others—she recognized Emil among them—entering the meadow at the far end and edging toward the cave. She concentrated and listened for any sound of their passing. Although they were a fair distance away, she'd heard smaller disruptions from farther since her change. Already, she barely noticed the once-strange sensation of her ears pricking up as she listened. This time, however, she couldn't pick out any telltale sound. Tanner and those following him moved skillfully, silently. Ramona suspected that, had they been worried about anyone seeing them, she might never have known when they slipped into the cave. As it was, she and Ratface and the others on the ridge did see as Tanner's assault party achieved the unremarkable stand of pines at the opening, and then disappeared into the darkness.

Within moments the silence grew unbearable.

Ramona felt like she was holding her breath, not that she breathed anymore, but the urgency and the need for silence tapped into certain distant memories, made her feel that she was doing something she shouldn't. But then her thoughts shifted to Tanner and the four Gangrel with him. She thought of just a few nights before when she, Darnell, and Jen had snuck into that cave—and what had happened.

But this was *Tanner*, she reminded herself. He was infinitely more experienced than she was with the deadly vagaries of this world of darkness, where death was such a casual and frequent occurrence. And he was with other old-hand Gangrel. They would take care of the business that Ramona and her friends had bungled.

What would she do, she wondered, if Tanner came out with the Toreador as a captive? He'd probably want her to strike the final blow. That would be just like Tanner. And though there was no question that the Toreador had to pay for Zhavon, for Jen, Ramona didn't know if she could kill in cold blood. Since arriving at the meadow, the fury of Xaviar's run, of the loops around Table Rock, had largely evaporated, giving way to memories and fear.

Maybe Darnell's still alive, she hoped. He would rip off the Toreador's head without a second thought, and Ramona wouldn't be faced with that decision.

All the uncertainties, all the questions of two years were penned up within Ramona. They all wanted release, as she crouched on the hill not needing to hold her breath. The screams that broke the silence were almost a relief. They echoed eerily through the entrance of the cave, then filtered through the pines and gained release to the night.

But the screams were not those of the Toreador.

Everyone around her pricked up instantly. Ramona couldn't distinguish the cries one from another—the sounds were hopelessly muddled by the time they reached her—but she recognized attack snarls abruptly cut off, cries of surprise and pain.

"My God," said Joshua Bloodhound. "What's happening?"

Ramona did not answer him—her mouth was too dry, her jaw locked; words could not pass the lump in the back of her throat—but she knew.

The chaotic screams and the muffled sounds of combat went on and on. A fight at close quarters rarely went on for more than a minute, Ramona knew. Maybe no more time than that had passed, but it seemed like forever. Like those around her, Ramona was standing, though she hadn't meant to rise from her hiding place. Uncertainty gripped them all. She could feel the others looking one to another. Should they charge the cave? Surely Tanner didn't need help. But the sounds from within...

And Ramona couldn't help but remember....

The noise of struggle was becoming, not fainter, but less confused. Fewer combatants were adding their voices—their snarls, their grunts, their screams—to the cacophony. Another strain of sound joined the din, however—low, drawn-out wails, moans of those in pain, moans of the dying. Ramona's mind was racing furiously, but at the same time getting nowhere. She tried unsuccessfully to refuse the conclusions that thrust themselves upon her: If the struggle continued, the Toreador was still alive; at least some of the screams and moans must be those of Gangrel, of her clanmates.

But the moans, one by one, fell silent. First one voice then another lapsed, and almost as suddenly as it had been shattered before, silence returned. The slight breeze coming down off the ridge seemed thunderous to Ramona's straining ears.

They're stalking him, Ramona thought. *He's hurt, and they're closing in for the kill.*

But just then, a figure stumbled out of the cave and put the lie to Ramona's optimism. He grabbed hold of one of the scrawny pines at the entrance and leaned against the tree for several seconds. It was Emil, Ramona saw. He didn't rest long. He heard something, glanced back into the pitch-black tunnel, then turned and fled. He tried to run, but something was wrong with his left leg. It wasn't holding his weight. He staggered, then tumbled down the incline before the cave. As he climbed back to his feet, Ramona saw that his face was blackened and burned. She absently raised a hand to the gouged scar on her own face.

There was little time for distraction, however. Out from the cave stalked the Toreador. He looked around for a moment, as if the existence of a world beyond the subterranean tunnels and caverns surprised him. Even from across the meadow, he seemed larger than Ramona recalled. The eye, too, his left eye, seemed larger—or maybe *only* the eye was larger. It appeared to glow in the starlight. It throbbed and twitched, looking somehow like a living thing, quite separate from the rest of the body around it.

As had been the case three nights earlier, Ramona viewed the Toreador with mixed reactions. At first glance, he seemed innocuous enough—he was scrawny, and had a big nose, and could anybody with hair that bad really be dangerous? *Art fag,* ran through Ramona's mind.

But then he would turn, and the eye, that hideous eye, cast him in a different light. Suddenly he was larger than life, deadly, terrifying.

Probably the Gangrel around Ramona were struggling with similar impressions. In a way, it seemed almost laughable that this particular vampire could pose a threat. But Jen wasn't laughing.

Nor was Emil.

The Toreador's disorientation was brief. *That was our chance,* Ramona realized, but it was too late. Something terrible had happened in the cave, she knew, but perhaps the close quarters had worked to the Toreador's advantage. He couldn't know what waited for him out beyond the pines shielding the entrance.

The eye fixated on Emil. Even with a distance of several yards between them, the Toreador seemed to tower over the fallen Gangrel.

Watching Emil, a paralyzing question gripped Ramona: *Where's Tanner?* He'd led the group into the cave, but so far only Emil had emerged, and him beaten and burned. Suddenly, even among the other Gangrel, Ramona felt completely alone and afraid. *Where's Tanner?* she wanted to shake Emil and shout at him. *Why did you leave him inside?*

"He's yours," said Ratface, next to Ramona, but his words were for Emil. "That's right... let him get closer... now spill his guts!"

Emil had risen to his knees, and the Toreador was indeed moving closer, but Ramona could tell that the Gangrel would not strike a blow. She could see the tension in his stance; she knew that he wanted only to flee, but he wouldn't manage even that. The eye kept Emil's will from directing his muscles, just as it had done to Ramona. Tanner had been there for her.

"My God," muttered Joshua. The others stared in silent disbelief.

With a few strides the Toreador closed the distance to Emil and, without hesitation, grasped the immobile Gangrel by both sides of his head. Seconds later, Emil's head no longer existed. It melted and oozed away between the Toreador's fingers. The creature, its throbbing eye casting about more than should have been possible, stood with blood and liquid flesh dripping from its hands.

The Gangrel around Ramona were shocked beyond words. To a person, their eyes or mouths or both gaped wide in astonishment. Ramona had seen something similar before—Zhavon deformed almost beyond recognition, Darnell's arms stretched from their sockets—but even she gawked in horrified fascination. For the second time that night, she felt the need to retch, tasted blood rising in her throat. But there was no time.

"Look!" Ratface was the first of their ineffectual band to find his voice. He pointed across the meadow toward the cave. From two directions, groups of half a dozen or so Gangrel were charging from the trees and bearing down on the Toreador.

What took 'em so damned long? was Ramona's first thought. Had they, like she, watched in rapt horror as Emil had died? Or like Ratface, had they underestimated the Toreador and expected Emil to finish the affair with the single swipe of a claw?

Not until Joshua ran yelling down the hill did Ramona realize that she should help as well. She'd been expecting Tanner and the self-important elders of her clan to take care of this problem—but they didn't know what they were getting into, and now she was being dragged again into the fray.

Ramona and the others followed Joshua. They had no specific plan, but they couldn't simply stand by and watch. They sped down the incline and raced toward the Toreador. With the first step, however, Ramona felt that she was moving in slow motion, that the scene was unfolding before her, and that she was plucked from it to become merely a spectator. For the second time that night, the ghost sight descended upon her; it was an unnerving filter laid over her hyper-alert senses. Unlike before, she felt no unity with her clanmates, but was filled only with dread.

Ahead, the Toreador's back was to the cave entrance. To his right was the closest group of Gangrel, led by Stalker-in-the-Woods. The wolfish vampire's blood was up, and there was nothing about him that looked human. He propelled himself forward on all fours; his face was a monstrous, fanged snout. Frothy strings of spittle trailed from his mouth.

More Gangrel charged from the Toreador's other side. Edmonson was in the fore, with Mutabo on his heels. Their easy manner of before was gone. Murder shone in their eyes. They saw no need for stealth and cut a rapidly advancing swath through the tall meadow grass. To Ramona's shifting vision, her clanmates were blurs of motion, golden sparks trailing fiery comet tails in their wakes. No creature could stand against so many Gangrel.

Despite the odds, Ramona's sense of dread only deepened.

Your road will be a difficult one.

The three converging packs of Gangrel drew closer to the Toreador, but Ramona's knees buckled as the immensity of the ghost sight struck her full force. She stumbled, lost ground on Ratface and the others. For a moment, she thought she was blacking out, so overwhelming were the sprays of color and light. The muted blacks, blues, and grays that had come to be her darkened world were replaced with illumination brighter than that of full day. The stars in the sky above burned with the intensity of countless suns. The nearly full moon loomed almost close enough to touch.

Ramona staggered. She reeled. Firm footing eluded her. She was forced to choose each step with care. Around her, a battle was unfolding, and it was her duty to take part—she was one of the reasons it had come about. But she had to look so hard to make sense of the ghost sight. The creatures around her assumed bestial forms—some wolfish, others like badgers, or mountain lions, or feral dogs. But they were her brethren; a fact reinforced when her vision flickered, and she saw them again in more human guises. Ramona touched her face, touched her eyes, and her fingers brushed over the residue of dried ash and chalk.

The Final Nights are at hand.

Ramona looked around, almost expected to see the old man Blackfeather, but the meadow was filled only with grasses and wildflowers and creatures of death. She cast her newfound vision toward the Toreador, and immediately wished she hadn't. It was all she could do to resist the urge to turn and flee.

As she watched, the Toreador grasped its protruding eye and wrenched it from its socket. A bloody, fibrous nerve from the rear of the eyeball pulled free of the socket and flailed about in the air like a blind eel. As the Toreador raised the eye above his head, the nerve continued to twist and writhe. It wound around and down his arm. At the same time, the tendril stretched and grew longer—more than a foot, two feet and on—until finally it contacted the ground and began to burrow.

It all seemed to happen very slowly. *Why aren't they on him?* Ramona wondered of the other Gangrel, but in fact they were not much closer than they'd been just before. Those of Ramona's own group were only a few steps ahead of her, though she felt she had first staggered some time ago.

Again her knees buckled, but this time, she realized, not her knees but the very *earth* was shaking. The Toreador loomed increasingly large in her sight—no, not larger, she saw but *higher*. He was rising into the air. A massive protrusion of stone, a rounded hill unto itself, thrust up from the earth and lifted him many feet above the floor of the meadow. The tendril from the Toreador's eye wriggled like a frantic leech as it bore into the stone. It turned ruddy and dark, then swelled until Ramona thought it must burst.

Stalker-in-the-Woods must have seen the erupting monolith, but he did not ease his headlong, murderous charge. Then the Toreador turned the eye to face that closest group of Gangrel. Instantly, a stone spike shot up from the earth, and Stalker-in-the-Woods's own momentum carried him full onto the tip. Ramona flinched—images of Jen flashing through her mind—as the spike carried him off his feet. Dangling above the ground, he jerked spasmodically as blood from the tip of the spike ran down from the top of his head.

The Gangrel with him rushed past his twitching corpse. Two met a similar fate within a few steps.

With each deathblow, Ramona staggered as if the stone had struck her own body, and though Stalker-in-the-Woods was already beyond even his death twitches, she saw an ephemeral vision of him as he lifted his monstrous face to the sky and howled defiantly: *I am Stalker-in-the-Woods. I die for my clan this night!*

In the same way, from the two others who shared Stalker's fate, she saw and heard that which before would have been hidden from her:

I am Ronja. I die for my clan this night!

I am Peera Giftgiver. I die for my clan this night!

The remaining three Gangrel who'd begun with Stalker paused as a wall of rock erupted directly in their path. The first of the trio, a visibly muscled woman, launched herself onto the wall and began to scurry up it. The other two had not yet reacted when the earth fell away beneath them. Just as suddenly, the wall and the woman on its downward face toppled over into the pit. The screams were crushed out of the trio within a few seconds, but their unvoiced final cries rang in Ramona's ears:

I am Louisa... I am Crenshaw... I am Bernard Fleetfoot... I die for my clan this night!

Ramona's steps slowed to match the tempo of the litany.

At almost the same time, nearly a dozen stone megaliths, irregularly shaped columns jutting at random angles, rose from the ground to the other side of the Toreador. Edmonson and the second collection of Gangrel, moving more cautiously than their unfortunate clanmates, wove their way among the newly sprung pillars. Mutabo was the most careful. He slowed and circled wide of the stones; he watched closely for spikes rising to claim him and megaliths toppling to crush him.

The Toreador turned his eye to those Gangrel now. His face was etched not with animosity but with a businesslike grimace. Ramona thought also that she saw madness in his normal eye. How could such an abomination *not* succumb to madness?

Ramona, strangely detached from the scene, was struck by the vivid hues of her clanmates' sacrifice—crimson blood draining along the impaling pikes, pale flesh tones of vampires drained of unlife, sickly gray skin of the Toreador, veined orb held aloft with its gelatinous ooze and ruddy, pulsating nerve. She knew in that instant that no one else saw what she did, that no one else could. For them the night sky and the stars were as they'd always been. The impossibly bright stars, the light of day itself—these were for Ramona alone, for the ghost sight Blackfeather had imparted to her.

There was more that was hidden from the others, she realized. She saw the brilliant light of the stars mirrored in the Toreador's pulsing eye, in the throbbing nerve that connected the orb to the stone. As Ramona looked on, the megaliths themselves, a stone garden of giants, began to glow from within. Their earthy grays and whites and browns began to burn a fiery red, and more megaliths rose across the meadow.

The other Gangrel did not see, could not see, the change in the stones, did not see that the megaliths grew opaque, that within them churned thick fluid-red and orange, the very stuff of the earth itself. Edmonson and Mutabo and the others still made their ways toward the Toreador. They regarded the megaliths warily, but no differently than before.

Ramona tried to call out to them, but the battle was a dream unfolding before her. She saw more clearly than they did, but she could not stop them.

The first explosion knocked her to the ground. The eardrum-shattering force shook the entire meadow. The fiery earthen magma within the erupting megalith spewed into the air.

In the next few seconds, another megalith ruptured, and then a third, and a fourth. Giant dollops of volcanic material erased Mutabo's head and left arm. Another Gangrel near him stared in disbelief as she fell to the very spot that, a moment before, the lower half of her body had occupied.

I am Mutabo. I die for my clan this night!

I am Lisa Strongback....

I am...

Everywhere, the megaliths were glowing red and exploding. Ramona could see the fire within each stone churn and boil, then force its way out and across the sky in a blazing streak. All around her, Gangrel died. Their burnt and mangled bodies flew into the air and landed, to move no more. But the fallen called out in silent voice, and the litany of the dead grew longer:

I am Aileen Brock-Childe....

I am... I am...

I am Brant Edmonson. I die for my clan this night!

Their cries were of defiance. Even in the Final Death they did not yield to the enemy.

Ratface and those who'd begun on the far hillside were close to the Toreador now. Renée Lightning outpaced the rest. Hundreds of droplets of magma splattered against her, ate through her flesh. A megalith ruptured, spewing lava in magnificent arcs. Snodgrass disappeared on the far side.

Ramona stumbled. She couldn't keep up. Her hair smoldered in the heat. Each step was a struggle of will in the face of all that she saw—*all that she shouldn't see*. The ghost sight revealed too much; it might as well have blinded her. It liberated her and shackled her. She could see their approaching doom but could not negotiate reality well enough to save them.

I am Renée Lightning....

I am Snodgrass....

Ramona dropped to her knees. She was so tired. The knowledge that she had failed her clanmates drew away her strength. She'd been given the means to save them, maybe to lead them to victory, but she could not wield the ghost sight. She knew she should have been able to do something. *Damn Blackfeather,* she thought, more in resignation than in anger, as she sat numbly and waited for the spray of molten rock that would bring her painful life beyond death to a close.

Smoke hung heavy across the meadow, but through the haze Ramona saw the Toreador atop his small mountain of stone, with his eye and its obscene, throbbing nerve. He seemed heartened by the destruction of the Gangrel, and he seemed also to orchestrate the carnage with his gruesome eye. He held it in his hand still, and every direction he turned it, a megalith annihilated another Gangrel, or a pit opened beneath one of Ramona's clanmates.

I am Jacob One-Ear....

I am Nadia....

The monster with the eye was not all-seeing, though. He didn't see Xaviar spring from the steep hillside above the cave entrance. The leather-clad body was a meteor of hope to Ramona; his red hair trailed behind like a tail of the spewing magma. Ramona had sudden premonitions of victory: She saw the Toreador fall beneath Xaviar. She saw the grotesque eye dashed to the stone and smashed in a spray of foul pus and fleshy matter.

But Ramona's brief vision was of hope, not of the ghost sight, and reality did not bear it out.

Xaviar did strike the Toreador square from behind, but the Toreador stood solid, as if he were embedded into the very rock beneath his feet, as if he were an extension of it. Xaviar, expecting his target to give way beneath him, fell roughly to the stone.

Land on the nerve! Ramona hoped. *Yank the eye out of his hand!*

But then an explosion jarred the ground beneath Ramona's feet. One second she was witnessing the duel between Xaviar and the Toreador, the next she saw only a blur of motion and flashing streaks of fiery magma. Everything went black.

Distant stars.

The next Ramona knew, she was staring at the night sky. It took her a moment to realize she was lying on her back. She'd been struck by the explosion and knocked to the ground. Almost relieved that consciousness must surely fade, she reached down to learn what part of her body had been ripped or burned away. To her surprise, she was fairly intact. She'd been struck, not by molten rock, but by Ratface. He stared up at her blankly. Smoke rose from the edges of the gaping hole in his chest, and blood and tissue still sizzled from the heat.

I am Ratface. I die for my clan this night!

Ramona eased out from beneath him and lowered his body gently to the ground. More than any of these other Gangrel, Ratface had tried to be a friend to her, but there was nothing she could do for him now. She expected to join him in Final Death at any moment. His name among those of the litany was jarring to Ramona. She'd become aware of the chant with the onset of the ghost sight. The litany continued, yet the ghost sight, she realized, was gone. The night sky was again the night sky; the stars burned as they should; the moon, bright but unremarkable, was low on the horizon. The ghost sight was gone.

Ramona wasn't sure how long she'd blacked out. She looked back to the mound of stone where Xaviar and the Toreador battled, and whatever stubborn vestige of hope that might have survived this long withered within her. Xaviar was still upright, but at a very odd angle, and the reason was readily apparent: Stone spikes, called from the surface of the mound, pierced him. They held him aloft. One spike protruded from the top of his right knee. Another had caught him through the biceps; his left arm was raised uselessly in the air. One foot barely touched the surface of the mound. He couldn't free himself. The Toreador, only a few feet away, moved closer to the helpless Xaviar.

Ramona slumped back down to the charred ground. The tall grass that had covered the meadow was mostly burned away. The few remaining Gangrel had long since broken ranks—although the entire battle couldn't have taken more than a few minutes—and were running, but the rupturing stones still spewed deadly lava into the air. Another explosion sent tremors across the meadow. Joshua Bloodhound lost his footing and stumbled headlong into one of the pools of molten rock that were growing numerous.

I am Joshua....

But above the litany spoke another voice: *Get up Ramona. Keep going.*

Ramona collapsed onto her back. She wanted nothing more than to stare at the stars until the rising lava closed over her, but the voice would not leave her alone. It was soft, pleading. *You have to get up, Ramona. Get up. Keep going.*

She raised her head and saw a dim figure standing very close to her amidst the acrid smoke and mist. Her eyes were watering heavily, but she thought she saw... "Jen?"

Ramona rose to her elbows. The smoke grew thicker and crowded down nearly to the ground. There was a figure before her, but it was no longer Jen.

Lying down when some bug-eyed mother needs his ass kicked?

Darnell, Ramona thought. He was there when he couldn't be, whole of body, just as Jen had been. They were taking their place among the litany of the dead.

Ramona began to climb to her feet. "I don't recall *you* kickin' his ass," she muttered at Darnell, but Darnell was no longer with her.

Don't give up, Ramona.

Ramona froze halfway up. She touched a hand to the ground to steady herself. Something stirred within her, some part of her that wanted to answer the voice, that wanted to answer Zhavon.

Don't give up.

The girl stood before Ramona, beautiful, unmarred. She spoke again, and her voice was less gentle. She practically scolded Ramona: *Don't you give up.*

Ramona smiled and rose to her full height, only to find herself alone by Ratface's smoldering body. Fresh pangs of loss tugged at her, but she had regained her bearings, and the situation did not allow her to mourn.

The megaliths had stopped rising at last, so the explosions were fewer and more predictable, but the meadow was rapidly becoming a pool of lava, as more magma blurped up from the ground. Soon the blazing sludge would cover the entire expanse between the hills. There were still many oases of solid ground, like the slight rise on which Ramona stood beside Ratface's corpse, but as the red lake slowly rose, the islands were becoming fewer and farther between.

On the mound, the Toreador remained beyond the reach of Xaviar's flailing right hand and the claws that could yet prove fatal. Then suddenly to Ramona's amazement, the creature abandoned his caution and stepped closer. Only now did Ramona realize that the Toreador was no longer holding the eye in his hand; the pulsing orb was back in its socket, more or less. She wondered for a split second if their enemy had actually taken hold of the eye, or was Ramona's seeing that way a trick of the ghost sight? But there was no time to consider the question. The Toreador stepped closer to Xaviar.

"Kill him!" Ramona screamed at Xaviar, and was startled by the sound of her own voice cutting through the dense smoke and echoing from the exposed stone. "Kill him!"

Xaviar was more than close enough, but he could no more defy the will of the eye than had Emil, or had Ramona. The Toreador grasped Xaviar's pinned arm and began to exert pressure. The limb bent and kept bending—not at the elbow or wrist or shoulder where it should, but in the middle of the forearm. The Toreador pressed slowly and steadily, meeting less and less resistance. The arm twisted like flimsy pipe cleaner.

Xaviar grimaced in pain. He clamped his teeth together until blood trickled from his mouth, but he didn't cry out.

Having found her own voice, Ramona finally felt volition return to her body, but she was separated from the Toreador and Xaviar by a moat of lava that was too wide for even her to leap. She pawed at the ground, advanced to the edge of the molten river, but there was no crossing.

The smoke and steam were so thick now she could only make out figures on the mound, but if she couldn't aid Xaviar, maybe it was better not to see. The Toreador would kill Xaviar—melt away his skull, or pick the limbs from his body—or maybe the monster would merely toy with Xaviar, like a cat with a wounded bird.

And if the magma didn't claim her, the end would be the same for Ramona. Behind her a lone, crippled Gangrel, a dark-skinned woman, crawled toward the edge of the meadow, but every avenue of escape was now cut off by the bubbling inferno. Distorting ripples of heat played games with the smoke. Megaliths, no longer rupturing, stood like giant tombstones.

Ramona turned back to the mound, ready to meet her end at last.

The Toreador wrapped his fingers around Xaviar's neck. Ramona waited for Xaviar's flesh to melt away, for his head to loll at an impossible angle. But instead, the Toreador *lifted* Xaviar—lifted him with such strength that Xaviar slid up along the spikes. The sound of bone grating against stone sent chills down Ramona's spine.

The Toreador lifted Xaviar free of the spike and held him aloft by the neck. The fight was gone from the Gangrel leader, or perhaps he was still mesmerized by the eye. He hung limply in the Toreador's grasp.

Ramona watched helplessly for the final blow, but instead the Toreador flung Xaviar like a rag doll. His body appeared weightless as it sailed airborne over the pools of lava; it never should have gone so far—Ramona couldn't imagine the strength of the throw—but finally Xaviar crashed to the solid earth not far away. She ran to his side. He gazed at her, confused. He looked down at his mangled arm and leg, then up at Ramona, as if questioning how he'd gotten to this state.

Ramona turned toward the Toreador, prepared to shout her defiance at it—*I am Ramona. I die for my clan this night!*—but just then, the smoke cleared. Not all over, but enough that Ramona could see the Toreador clearly—and he her. Viscous fluid dripped from the eye and streamed down his face. The final cry caught in her throat, as the eye took possession of her will. There was no Tanner to save her this time. There was no one. There was only the eye, and it was forcing her… *to run.*

Ramona turned and ran. She immediately fell over Xaviar. Almost without missing a step, she slung him onto her back and continued her headlong flight.

She had failed her clanmates, she'd resigned herself to death, but she couldn't stop her legs from carrying her away from that eye. It was sending her away, discounting her as a worthy opponent, and she was of no mind to argue. Without slowing, she cast a fearful glance over her shoulder. The eye had turned from her as the Toreador surveyed its victory. Then the smoke closed in again, and all that was visible was a vague shape on the mound—and a glow radiating from the eye through the gloom.

Ramona caught up with the woman she'd seen crawling before. There was nowhere for her to go. Bubbling, molten rock blocked every avenue of escape. But as Ramona closed to within a few yards, the woman, much of her body covered with burns, jumped out over the rising lava. Ramona stopped in her tracks.

Suicide, she thought—not a far-fetched idea at this point.

But then Ramona saw the arc of the Gangrel's leap and the small islet among the magma where she would land—close enough to the edge of the meadow that a second jump might lead to freedom.

When the Gangrel landed, however, her feet and legs punched through the topsoil, revealing the islet to be a flimsy coagulation of dirt and weeds that had been raised up rather than covered over by the lava.

The woman was too shocked to scream, but the pain was clear on her face as she sank to her knees in the magma. The illusory island was broken apart by the force of her landing.

Ramona could think only of the woman's flesh and bones melting from the bottom up. Her thighs sank under. Xaviar moaned; his mouth was mere inches from Ramona's ear. There would be no escape. For any of them.

But the silent woman caught Ramona's eye, and unspoken understanding passed between them. Without hesitation—if she'd thought, she'd have faltered—Ramona leapt.

The fumes from the lava burned as she passed over. If she'd miscalculated even a few inches or badly compensated for Xaviar's weight, it would all be over quickly. Ramona seemed to hang in the air, to move more slowly than physics would allow.

She crashed down onto the shoulders of the other Gangrel. Her impact drove the woman down to her chest. Ramona paused only a fraction of a second to regain her balance, then jumped again.

She sailed over the magma, and when she and Xaviar landed, it was on the solid earth where the meadow began to rise—not far from where she'd crouched with Ratface and the others, what seemed impossibly long ago.

Ramona looked back one last time, but the woman was gone, pushed under by Ramona's second leap.

I am Maria Evernorth. I die for my clan this night!

Ramona shifted Xaviar's weight, then turned toward the hill and ran.

Monday, 26 July 1999, 3:30 AM
Cathedral of St. John the Divine
New York City, New York



Anatole returned to his lady's side. She was finally relenting, finally showing him the path.

"He will give me life," she said. "I have prayed long enough and in a few nights he will grant my wish and I will dance and turn and bend...."

Anatole does not tell her the life offered her is nothing like the kind granted to other creations. *That masterwork has finally begun,* he thinks.

Eye of newt, wing of bat. The wolves had given him a new ingredient for the mix.

They came out of the woods, toward the artist's mountain aerie, did these changeling wolves. They ran on two or on four, and they all sought the blood, but did not yet imagine its power. They were already gone, Anatole saw. Mostly.

They circled the mountain and thought to find their prey within. Who could stand before the pack? But when they entered, the mountain itself rose, and the wolves found they had rushed willingly into its gullet. The mountain uncoiled, and became a great dragon that devoured the poor animals.

A few limped away. The white dog Anatole may need was among them. She still sniffed for the right path. As Anatole did. Many of her ways were false ones. The mongoose's child had her. The black asp had her.

The mountain had its blood. Blood of wolves, eye of mongoose.

Anatole saw through that eye, and the renegade's son, the dragon artist, saw Anatole's dove with it. Could the artist see the danger both their doves would face? Or did she know of the badger already? Anatole did not. Perhaps the badger would be later. Perhaps it was so long ago.

What a conflux of ingredients! And a wizard's soul was added, already in the possession of the artist. Anatole could see her coiling with him. She thought to retain life so long as a perfect pattern of her existed. What visions did she see, he wondered. She must have seen something. Otherwise why had she risked herself in hands so untried before Atlanta burned again?

What good were such materials if the artist failed to craft them? But he was more than an artist. He was an artist, but did not gain artist's blood. He was the renegade's child, and the spawn of the serpent. How could he be both?

The vision of the muse guided the artist, Anatole realized. The artist clutched the dove again, but he had done his work. Did Anatole need the dove, then? Should he reward the sculptor with the truth? *What truth do I offer? My own?*

So many ingredients! The artist combined them masterfully. Cruelly. Clay lives in the hands of the sculptor, but gains life only after it's been in the sculptor's hands, and that was what this woman before Anatole did not understand. She had been given a life

of another kind. By a mortal. She would dance when the dragon spawn commanded, but would no more live than Anatole would die. But she would come close, and so would he.

The great bird was flying again, but Anatole would be a passenger no longer. Ten times in its beak.

So he is not cruel, only unmindful.

Anatole watched as he twisted limbs and repaired stone. Weaving and cutting them both. Limbs dying. Stone being reborn.

Anatole saw a pattern of what the artist hoped to achieve. Anatole hoped that he could attain it. There was something special being born here. He had to watch. No matter the consequences, he would observe.

The great dragon mountain turned to them both, the artist and the prophet, and prepared to devour them. Anatole looked to the dragon spawn to see how he should react. The artist threw his arms wide in acceptance, so Anatole did the same. And he was borne down into the belly of the beast, and into utter darkness, yet he could see.

And the artist continued his work. Anatole continued to watch. The prophet shivered in near hysteria because he was *so* close to the dragon—was allowed here because his attention was focused on his child.

This! This Anatole had awaited for centuries. Since before he had been Embraced, or born, even. The secrets here, the truth of the end of times, the truth of those who would bring it and when and why and where it would begin and by what means and who would fight against it and who wished for it and *everything*.

Perhaps it was too much to hope for. Not merely this proximity—that he was so close to *it*!—but for it to have possessed this knowledge at all. It had to. It did! Anatole could sense that it did; how he sensed, he did not know, for he could not detect or discriminate *anything* of it or its thoughts. Other than that which Anatole sought was there as well. Although that was perhaps Anatole saving himself from himself. Saving himself from an eternity of remorse. Better to fail than not succeed.

And he knew it was because he was still apart from it. Within, but not among as the dragon-spawn artist had managed. No pangs of jealousy, only lost opportunity.

But opportunity was created as well. Opportunity that was the creation of this artist.

Anatole saw that it was impossible to grasp even a discrete portion of infinity. Impossible to separate it from the rest. To analyze it. To comprehend it. He had to be among it.

But how?

But how?



Monday, 26 July 1999, 3:30 AM
Cathedral of St. John the Divine
New York City, New York

Why Anatole had insisted on praying with this woman for the entire month they had been in New York City, hiding behind the hot-water heater in the basement during the days, the companion truly could not say. He had suspicions, of course, but he could only base them on facts, and when attempting to decipher the motivation or explanation for what the Prophet of Gehenna undertakes, facts simply were not sufficient.

The companion had given Anatole some advice and information shortly after they had arrived, and the prophet had heard and heeded in his usual manner. He had acted upon the information without ever overtly recognizing its source. The companion was not begging for recognition or thanks. He was not the obsequious sort to begin with, and was certainly not assisting Anatole to further any ends of his own.

Anatole's ends were what was important. Unfortunately, neither of them knew his ends. The companion considered it something of a mission to determine the prophet's fate rationally before Anatole happened upon it through oracle or vision, but then that got back to the matter of deciphering the man. If the companion did not know why Anatole chose some courses of action, then it was hard to determine an even larger pattern or theorize about a possible conclusion.

In any event, he thought Anatole knew his fate subconsciously—and what knowledge did he possess that was subconscious? Anatole refused to recognize it. The companion had prodded him along this line, especially following their final ticketed flight aboard the Concorde, but he had been silent for several weeks now.

The companion had pointed out the Nosferatu following them from the airport. Anatole had apparently decided that it was unimportant that that clan knew where he was going, because he hadn't altered his destination. But he hadn't wanted to be observed, so he'd asked this lady for a blessing and she'd sent the vampire away.

No others had been allowed to enter either. And they had tried a number of tactics: cloaking by means arcane and scientific; sending mortals and ghouls and even one who was possibly a mage—only possibly, since Anatole would not weigh in on the question.

Then they had brought in one among their ranks who had been a priest in his mortal life, and he had successfully penetrated the threshold of the garden here. The companion expected the Nosferatu to believe otherwise, but Anatole had allowed the man to enter. To keep the Nosferatu guessing, probably. Now they would mistakenly believe they had the means to approach Anatole at will, and Anatole would allow it, until he had reason to do otherwise. Then the Nosferatu would be left clueless and without enough time to perfect a technique that did work.

Anatole had spoken with this Nosferatu for three nights. He'd insisted the guest remain the night in the cathedral, and had suggested that if he did not then Anatole would speak to him no further. So, of course, the Cainite had remained, and with the additional requirement that he not communicate with the others of his clan *at all* until their talks were complete.

Theirs had not been a constant dialogue, because Anatole didn't really have that much to say, it seemed. During the times between, Anatole had asked the Nosferatu to pray with him.

Finally, when he was done talking to the Cainite, Anatole had made the Nosferatu forget the entire conversation. And he had done the same to the companion, who now wondered if even Anatole now recalled the content of it.

Why spend such an amount of time if it was all to be undone later, the companion wondered. He could only conclude that something in the course of the conversation had made Anatole decide it should never have happened.

He wondered if the Nosferatu shared his confused state. Why should the companion recall that the conversation took place at all if he was to be denied the memory of the content? Interesting too would be if the Nosferatu recalled the content but not the messenger. Such was some of the speculation in which the companion was forced to dabble. He refused to leave Anatole's side, so he could not go question the Nosferatu about the matter.

It was the evening after that, though, that he had given the last bit of advice to which Anatole had responded: Let the Cainites back in. As long as non-clergy Nosferatu were denied access, they would at least know that he was here, because his power did not allow them to approach at all. The companion had assumed there would be few volunteers in any case within the clan to spend three days with Anatole, the mad Prophet of Gehenna, that they would later be unable to recall.

Plus, he'd enjoyed the turnabout of Anatole hiding himself from the Nosferatu. They had slunk through the hallways—four of them—but they had not found Anatole. Anatole had even broken off his prayers with this woman for a night, in order to perpetuate the ruse. The companion had not noticed the Nosferatu return.

And so Anatole now continued to pray with her. The companion had tried to tell him that the woman was a sculpture, a creation of so-called modern art, but he said that she lived in her own way, and would even dance.

Whatever that meant.

But now, tonight, it had become very different.

Anatole was relatively clean because the companion had suggested he groom himself prior to the Concorde flight. Since their time in New York City had been spent within the walls of the cathedral or upon the groomed grounds of this garden, he had not become filthy. Therefore, he did not first bathe like he had in the Miljacka two years before, but he did strip naked and withdraw a dull razor from his leather wallet.

Anatole sat naked and sheared his blonde hair.

Then he prayed with the woman, and something magnificent unfolded. That much the companion could tell. Anatole whispered of a sculptured landscape and drew intricate sketches on the ground that seemed impossible for any sculptor to execute in stone and earth, but Anatole said the artist was succeeding.

The prophet erased each part once the artist had completed it, and the companion busied myself trying to piece all of these sections together. A connected whole began to form in his mind and he was staggered by the artistry. The companion wished to stand before it, to walk among the pillars and archways and trellises that formed that delicate yet geological artifact.

Then he realized that dawn was near, and that Anatole did not himself realize it. The companion mentioned this to him, but the prophet did not respond. This was normal. The companion often gave him too much warning about such matters, and Anatole was in the habit of ignoring the first time he waved the warning flag.

But this time he was not giving too much warning, because he had been seduced by the grandiose images of creation as well, and so he had failed in his task. He issued a sterner warning to Anatole.

Still nothing. And time was passing. Dawn was perhaps ten minutes away. He began to shout at Anatole. He had done this only a few times in the past.

The situation was not yet truly desperate. If Anatole were a Cainite babe, a Kindred, then yes, deadly danger would be looming, but he was older, and wiser than most in the ways of protecting his body from the ravages of foes and fire and, yes, even sunlight.

In fact, as dawn itself approached, the companion became less concerned about the actual physical damage the rays of sunlight would inflict on Anatole's body than he was about Anatole's lack of response itself. Not even a paradoxical or indecipherable comment. Nothing. It was as if he were trapped in this vision of the mutating rock and malleable flesh. Mentally ensnared at least, if not also somehow physically or astrally as well.

When dawn was a moment away, the companion berated and cursed him as he had *never* done before. He dredged up every instance where his spurned advice might have saved Anatole trouble or sorrow and threw it in the prophet's face. Rammed it to the root of his brain.

But Anatole did not budge.

A look to the sky and the companion could see it was definitely becoming paler. It had been at least a century since he had seen a sky so close to dawn. He wished he could be as oblivious as the prophet—or as lackadaisical—and enjoy the moment. But the companion had his burden and he must carry it.

He tried to make Anatole's limbs respond. Bend a little. Move an inch! But he could not budge him. He was rooted to the spot as surely and securely as the metal woman looming over them both.

Then the laser rays of the sun glanced over the horizon, and while they were too insulated in this courtyard for the rays to bear directly upon them, the brilliance they struck through the clouds illumined the world. The companion was in awe, and in pain. Steam rose from Anatole's flesh.

Unbelievably, the prophet remained seated, motionless. Naked, with his cut locks of hair spread haphazardly about him. The companion shrank from the pain, but Anatole did not flinch. The companion could not comprehend the existence of anything imaginary or visionary or intellectual that could so consume and engross him that he might become insensitive to that kind of pain, and he screamed at Anatole.

The prophet's flesh began to curdle in the dawn light. The companion watched in horror as it twisted, melting in some spots and knitting back together in others as the protective powers the prophet had cultivated over centuries acted to ward off this threat.

Finally, the companion was reduced to begging. *Please, please,* he whimpered, *if not yourself, then consider me!* The companion could believe he was saying this, and he hoped some deep-seated intelligence within was directing this ploy to appeal to Anatole so the prophet would seek safety, not so the companion would be saved.

Anatole was the important one. The essential one. The companion was expendable, but he could still help the prophet! He wanted to help him....

Sleep, Anatole tells him.

The companion could not believe the prophet was speaking to him!

The dragon swallows us both, Anatole said. *The young wizard and me.*

Then he was gone again, and the companion found a deep, dark hole in which to hide.

Anatole remained sitting in the sun.



Monday, 26 July 1999, 3:51 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Even after she'd crossed the nearest ridge and was beyond the reach of the moans of the dying and the odor of smoke and charred flesh, Ramona couldn't keep from her mind the images of carnage she'd seen that night. No matter how hard she ran, she couldn't outdistance the likenesses of burned and mangled bodies. With each step, Xaviar's weight was more a burden. She stumbled through the forest as if blind. The darkness surrounded her, thick and heavy. Her normal night vision seemed to have fled like the ghost sight before it. No light from above penetrated the canopy, and she imagined that each tree, each dark shape, was a megalith pregnant with hellfire, having thrust its way to the surface. Every sound was the Toreador tracking her down. But the eye, if it were near, would cast its sickly light.

Fatigue, as well as darkness, enveloped her. Her run slowed to a labored jog, then to a staggering gait. The Toreador could have her if he caught her, she decided. The exhaustion was of spirit as much as of body. She had emerged from the slaughter—but even her state of relative well-being was torment. It was proof that she had failed her clanmates, else how could they be dead while they survived? First Eddie, then Jen, Darnell, and now... how many others? Even Xaviar, who survived, was crippled. Ramona had only a rough idea of how many Gangrel had gathered, and how many had died. She didn't remember seeing any others escape, but the meadow had been so full of smoke and fire and death....

She continued on aimlessly, with no goal in mind more significant than avoiding the nearest tree. Initially heading east over the ridge, she must have veered to the north, because her steps soon carried her to a familiar locale.

Ramona wasn't sure how many minutes she'd been standing and staring at Table Rock before her mind registered where she was. She laid Xaviar on the flat stone. It was noticeably cool after the hellish inferno they'd just escaped. He lay there, stunned and beaten, moving only to cover his face. His skin was splotchy with burns, but most telling was the left arm that hung useless at his side. Already, some of the damage done by the spike had begun to heal, though Ramona wondered if even the power of blood could repair completely that jagged wound. It was horrible to look upon, but less so than what remained of the lower portion of his arm. Below the elbow, his forearm turned in several impossible angles, not broken and shattered like the wound above, but *reshaped*—whole, yet bent one way and then another back on itself in a crude semblance of an S-curve.

Ramona didn't know if any other Gangrel had escaped. She thought that all those she'd met were dead. But there might be a few others who'd managed to get away. She guessed that they might return here if they could. There had been no instruction to that effect, but there had been no instructions about much of anything that she could remember. The Gangrel seemed to function through instinct more than order, and it seemed a natural thing to come back to Table Rock.

Is that why I'm here? she wondered. *Instinct?* She hadn't meant to come here; she hadn't meant to go anywhere.

Fighting the pounding at her temples, Ramona walked over to the heaped dirt just beyond Table Rock. She stood above Zhavon's final resting place and reached within for the pain of that loss. But she couldn't feel it. All she saw was a heap of dirt. Ramona tried to picture Zhavon's face as she'd seen it in her vision before, to remember the sensation of holding the girl to her chest, but the Gangrel could see only a throbbing, malevolent eye. She could feel only the hollow spot on her cheek where the acid had burned deeply.

Ramona had seen her dead. The ghost sight had accomplished that, if nothing else. But did that mean that she was free of the pain of their loss, or robbed of it? The feelings that should have been there were fading and growing foreign to her. *Zhavon.* She could say the name, but she could not climb from the pit of numbing indifference. Ramona pawed at the dirt with a monstrous clawed foot. What was the death of one mortal girl compared to the horrors she'd seen tonight, to the horror her existence had become?

The pounding at her temples grew stronger. It took on the aspect of rhythmic drumming, not too unlike what would once have been the beating of her heart. Ramona clamped her palms to her head, but the pounding continued, grew louder. Hammers striking her skull, until she could stand it no longer. Then quickly order emerged from the din. And Ramona recognized the litany demanding release.

"I am Eddie," she said weakly. "I die for my clan this night.

"I am Jen. I die for my clan this night."

From somewhere miles behind her, Xaviar moaned, but her voice grew stronger.

"I am Darnell. I die for my clan this night!

"I am Stalker-in-the-Woods. I die for my clan this night!"

Xaviar moaned again. He growled. Ramona turned and saw the anger in his face, but she was not silenced. "I am Ronja… I am Peera Giftgiver… I am Louisa. I die for my clan this night!"

"Silence!" Xaviar commanded her through teeth clenched in pain. With his one good arm, he dragged himself across the rock. "Stop, damn you."

"I am Bernard Fleetfoot… I am Crenshaw. I die for my clan this night!" Ramona saw Xaviar's pain and fury. Each name struck him as an accusation of his failure. *Weak and pathetic Toreador, my ass!* he was hearing. He could not face the destruction of his people, not yet. Ramona paused, but the litany still clamored for release. Couldn't Xaviar, so much older and more powerful than her, feel this? Surely Blackfeather would have understood.

Xaviar clawed his way closer, snarling with each inch. "I'll teach you to disobey me, you damn whelp."

Ramona stiffened. She took a step back from her elder, and her voice rang out stronger than ever. "I am Mutabo… I am Lisa Strongback…" Name after name she recited. One after another, she released their spirits to the night.

"I am Brant Edmonson. I die for my clan this night!"

Xaviar pursued her. His intent was clear. But he could not catch her.

"I am Ratface. I die for my clan this night!"

Finally, Xaviar collapsed. His fury faded, and his strength was long since spent.

Ramona raised her voice to the heavens. She defied her elder's pride. She defied the terrible eye, wherever it was at this moment. "I am Joshua Bloodhound. I die for my clan this night!

"I am Maria Evernorth. I die for my clan this night!"

With this final declaration, Ramona fell to her knees, not three feet from Xaviar. He lay motionless, as if staked, but his gaze burned into her.

"Go away from here," Xaviar said. He raised his face; it looked much older and more haggard than before.

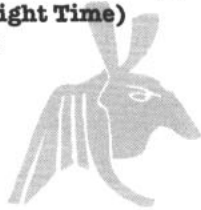
Ramona watched him lying there, broken. She pitied him—and she hated him. He possessed the same arrogance that Tanner had—that self-assurance that they thought gave them the right to push around everyone else, to make decisions for everyone else. Tanner had brought Ramona into this gruesome world of darkness, but it might as well have been Xaviar that had done it.

And what of Tanner, she found herself wondering. His name had not come to her as part of the litany; she had not seen him with her dead.

"Get out of here!" Xaviar bellowed, and interrupted her thoughts. "I will bring the seven clans to deal with this beast. You are no longer needed. Begone!" Ramona could feel the vitriol in his words. She was a reminder of his failure, of his most terrible defeat, and he wanted no part of her. She doubted he could catch her, not in his current condition. But he wouldn't always be in this condition.

Ramona found herself running again, her fatigue overcome by hatred, her body fueled by fear. She ran not from Xaviar, though leaving him was not, she guessed, unwise. It wasn't even the throbbing eye she ran from anymore. She ran from the emptiness that had taken root within her, that threatened to annihilate all that she'd ever been, and she feared that she'd never escape it.

Monday, 26 July 1999, 10:02 PM (12:32 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
Unfinished works of the second Hooghly Bridge
Calcutta, India

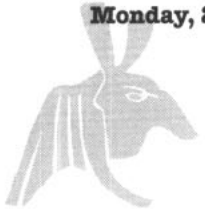


Hesha approached the gypsy camps by the same route he had tried on the past Friday. He walked to and through the site of his previous encounter, down through the northern half of the camp, and under the bridgework itself without being accosted by the feral guardians. He passed through the center—well south—out through the other side, and no Ravnos called him out or tried to do anything to him. It was against all possibility that every *shilmulo* in the settlement could restrain itself when presented such a pretty mark as a serious, public, devout Follower of Set.

Hesha stopped on the southern limits, and looked back thoughtfully. There were, he realized, a great many fires lit among the shacks and tents and wagons—not cook fires, which need not be so large—not drying fires, since the flood-dampened stores weren't hung near them. Hesha had avoided them on the way through as a matter of course. Now he turned his steps back to the nearest, drawing as close to it as his courage would allow, and squinted into the heart of the light.

It was a scrap-wood bonfire, knee-high and not quite four feet across. Piles of fabric lay atop the board-ends and broken crates, charring and melting in the heat—a cardboard suitcase, a broken violin, a pile of books, photographs, a set of hairbrushes, half a dozen decks of cards. As each sheet of paper smoldered through, the ashes peeled away into the wind, and wisps of old cloth drifted with the smoke.

Hesha retreated into more comfortable shadows and watched the people in the vicinity. He was almost certain that the fire was the end of a gypsy wake—the dead man or woman's possessions destroyed by smashing and burning them—but no one grieved at the blaze or in the tents around it. No mourners stood here or at any other open fire he could see, and the passersby averted their eyes from the sight.



Monday, 26 July 1999, 10:35 PM (1:05 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Albert Hall Coffee Shop
Calcutta, India

Subhas's table was empty.

After a moment's contemplation, Hesha sat down in the old man's usual seat. He placed his hands on the table, and the waitress he remembered Subhas dealing with came over to serve him.

"*Nomoshkar*, sahib. What would you like me to bring to you this evening?"

"Turkish coffee, please." As she started to go, Hesha cleared his throat. "Pardon me, but could you tell me where my friend, the gentleman who usually sits here, might be?"

The polite, dark-skinned girl shook her head. "Oh, no, sir." She seemed upset, and turned back with plenty of conversation on her face. "It's funny that you should ask that. We have all been worried—he was a very kind and generous gentleman, and no one has seen him since the night of the earthquake."

Hesha encouraged her with a nod. "Every night he comes in just as the lights go on, and leaves just as we close the doors. He never misses a night... not until the quake came. And tonight is the second evening he has been gone. I am afraid something might be wrong with him. The owner thinks that the old Babu—pardon me, sir—the old gentleman may have lost family in East Bengal."

Her eyes showed more than that; the Setite saw that she feared Subhas had died. "If you see him, sir, do tell him that all of us here are very, very concerned for him. Please ask him to send us word if he is all right."

"I will," said Hesha. "If I see him."

Monday, 26 July 1999, 8:15 PM (1:15 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Grand Bazaar
Istanbul, Turkey

The hot, swollen sun still hung low over the ancient city like a sympathetic lover, and Ruya Hazan felt safe and protected, the buffer surrounding her inviolate. She relished her pampered lifestyle, and told herself she was even socially responsible, using her ample spare time to advance a relatively liberal political agenda. She was shopping in the Grand Bazaar, lolling in the lackadaisical process, imagining herself, with a gleeful bit of shame, as a Western dilettante.

She had no idea that her meeting with death was a mere hour away.

Just as she was handing a dealer an outrageous sum for an imported Annie Pat doll, life changed imperceptibly. The doll was for her fiancé's niece. She hoped its flowery—and by fundamentalist standards, brazen—clothing would sway the child from the strict, repressive practices of Bira, the girl's grandmother and Ruya's future mother-in-law. The dealer had smiled at her. Not wanting to be impolite, she looked up to meet his gaze, but instead caught a glimpse of a familiar light green burka.

The burka belonged to Midya, a young Kurdish woman Bira often hired for odd jobs. The two fundamentalists had found each other in 1997, following the collapse of Necmettin Erbakan's coalition government and the constitutional ban on the two women's respective parties, the Refah Partisi and the Kurdish PKK. Since then, they conspired, in secret they thought, to further their common goal of a Turkey ruled by a stolid version of Islam. Ruya's fiancé, Deren, was a pivotal political figure, one foot among the extremists, another among those who sought to emulate the West. Ruya's devotion to him was born of a desire to drag both his feet into her world, making her and Bira instant, implacable foes.

Midya's presence at the bazaar was disconcerting, to say the least. One of the early tasks Bira had given the petite woman was to spy on Ruya. With nothing to discover, after a month, Midya gave up. Even so, when Ruya spotted the small head and tiny eyes, spread a little too far apart on her face, poking out from the veil, she was convinced Midya was at it again.

An old anger tightened her stomach. She wrestled her outrage in an effort to seem nonchalant. But after a few moments, it was apparent Midya hadn't even seen her. She was shopping, buying a small card with gold writing on it, paying what to her must have been a fortune.

This was a rare opening. The woman was utterly unaware of her presence. Doubly intriguing, doubly wicked, were the whispers Ruya had heard from giggling household servants about the woman's sexual preferences. Bira had heard them too, once. Ruya had never seen the woman so totally disarmed. Bira ranted. She spat. She slapped. She could not, would not believe such a thing of Midya.

Intellectually, Ruya accepted lesbianism, but gave it little other thought. Once she read with some amusement a pamphlet on Bira's shelf that had likened homosexuality,

male or female, to a classic monster image. Vampires, it said, were metaphors for displaced, perverted sexuality, using the mouth rather than the genitals to exchange fluids and reproduce. According to the author, gays were thus just as loathsome, and just as worthy of destruction by the righteous, as those mythic nocturnal creatures.

So here was Midya, unaware. If Ruya learned more about the woman's habits, maybe she could rob Bira of a valuable ally, or even scandalize the old woman into a stroke. The decision was made: She would follow Midya.

The green burka fluttered through the streets like a giant butterfly dexterously weaving among the crowd. As darkness tugged the remaining light from the sky, Ruya clung to coves and alleys, just out of sight, imagining herself an international spy. But as the crowd thinned to occasional pedestrians, she began to feel alone. Realizing just where she'd been led gave the lonely feeling more sway.

Midya had traveled from the busy shopping district into the gray squalor of a row of old warehouses, one of the many *gecekondu* formed over the last few years. Government services to the rural areas were few, so scores of Kurdish migrants had swarmed to the city. Just two years ago, she'd read somewhere, they'd increased Istanbul's population by 400,000. Ruya had trouble thinking of such a mass as human. They seemed more a herd, like the cattle they once tended, only somehow more frightening because of their constant, pained need.

With no housing available, the *gecekondu* sprouted weed-like in any available nook or cranny—and a city as ancient as this had many. The ad hoc slums were usually sans running water or electricity, and were a danger as well as an eyesore. On this block, most of the buildings were half-standing shells of crumbling concrete that threatened to tumble in the next rain. Ruya imagined them all as packed with rural Kurds trying to remake themselves, despite generations of farming, into instant urbanites.

Ruya had just about steadied her faltering confidence when the green burka fluttered into an especially old, especially seamy warehouse, one so badly damaged that, by rights, it should not have been standing at all. Its walls, rattled perhaps by the last earthquake, leaned at impossible angles. Wooden supports popped from concrete. Door and window frames were more trapezoidal than rectangular. In the gloaming, it seemed a monster. Midya went into it. Perhaps it was her home.

Ruya reconsidered, but in the end, Agent Hazan—international spy, Mata Hari of the new, liberated Turkey—would complete her dangerous mission, even if it meant risking, even losing her own… Well, never mind.

She walked up and peeked in. It was an entrance hall. Large windows with thick glass, cracked and broken, allowed the scant streetlight in. Apparently, the space was deemed too unsafe by even the most desperate, because other than garbage, it was empty. No, not quite empty. The bottoms of Midya's sandals padded the few visible steps on a metal staircase in the back.

Ruya crept across the threshold, crunching fallen plaster as she went. At the stairs, she reached out to steady herself with the railing, but then snapped her hand back. She had not wanted to get dirty, and now red rust covered her finger. Stretching her neck, trying to look up without making contact with any other dirt, she caught glimpses of Midya in flecks of green burka. She climbed, quick and steady, to what looked like the fourth floor.

Ruya tried to be quiet as she followed, but every scrape of her low-heeled shoes reverberated as loudly as if she were stomping like a foot-heavy toddler. On what she hoped was the right floor, the landing opened to a wildly crooked corridor that defied every expectation of what a hallway should be. It was festooned with ceiling holes and gaps in the walls where doors should be. Among the wreckage, a single wooden door remained intact, its frame atypically straight, but its paint so frayed, old and dirty it was impossible to guess what color it was supposed to be. That must be where Midya was. Ruya skulked up as much as she dared, then leaned, close as she could without touching her ear to the door, and listened.

She made out a shifting inside, the sound perhaps of leisurely steps and vague humming. Shadows played along the crack at the foot of the door, but just as Ruya was telling herself she would not kneel in such filth, a loud thud from inside slapped her ears. Insulted, the silence would not let go of the echo for the longest time. Ruya froze until the rustlings resumed. Then she waited, and waited, until waiting any longer seemed pointless.

Unable to walk in, unwilling to kneel, she tiptoed along to a wide, empty area that seemed likely to share a wall with Midya's room. There, the fallen plaster had left a few half-foot gaps in the wall, just the right size for peeping. Ruya thought it serendipitous, a word she had always liked.

Embarrassed at her pleasure, she reminded herself that her motives were purely tactical, part of an overall war between harsh old, destructive ways and new, humane ones. But the pleasure was still there, the age-old desire to see things one was not supposed to see. Terrorist plans? She'd often suspected—no, *assumed*—that Bira and Midya's ties extended to terrorist cells—if not the planning, then the support. Or maybe it was lesbian sex? What would Mata Hari uncover? Ruya stepped up, the packaged gift for Deren's niece still under her arm, and looked.

Many cheap candles had been lit and placed on the bare floor in vague patterns, throwing a series of friendly yellow lights on the scene. But dominating the room was a bare, tawdry, mattress, no box spring or frame. There was at least one large white sheet atop it, and beneath that, two female forms twisted and writhed and heaved and whirled.

Following an old admonition she could not place, Ruya immediately averted her gaze and tried to concentrate on the rest of the room. Tall warehouse windows bathed the rest of the room in hues of nighttime blue. Cardboard boxes held clothes and personal belongings. The little card Midya had bought and held so tenderly sat on the dusty floor, abandoned. It was close enough for Ruya to make out the Arabic letters. It was a paraphrased passage from the Qu'ran, which said:

If one takes a life,
it is as if one has taken the life of all humanity.
If one saves a single life,
it is as if he has saved the life of all humanity.

For the first, but not the last time, Ruya felt sorry for Midya, to have such a great sentiment so close to her heart, at this time, in this place.

But the dominating mattress, tugging at her eyes, put Bira's servant in yet another new light. A yellow circle, courtesy of one of the candles, hit the top of the bed where a pillow should be. Midya's head lay there, uncovered, her stringy, dry black hair let down from its usual bun, spread brush-like along the waves of the mattress. The head of the other woman was under the sheet, moving quickly along Midya's undulating body.

Ruya was shocked, but also spellbound by how abandoned Midya seemed in her lovemaking. She'd always struck her as Bira-like: tightly wrapped, frigid, owing her longevity to sap that barely flowed. Yet there she was, head bucking, snapping side to side, her face disappearing and reappearing between the fingers of shredded plaster from which Ruya watched. Unintelligible cries burst from Midya's thin lips: "Aahnngghhhhh! Ahhhnnngghhh!"

Ruya pressed forward, unconsciously gripping the bagged doll tighter and tighter, fingernails bursting the brown paper of the bag. The part of her that was free to wonder wondered why her own sexual experiences never seemed quite so extreme, so powerful, so complete. Was it a fault of her body, genetics? Some lacking in her soul that denied her such ecstasy? Or was there some schism between her mind and her form that she'd somehow unknowingly bought into as a result of being a woman born in this place, at these times? Though she never wore a burka, there always seemed to be a veil in her life, one she wanted to push aside, if only she could see it. Was this it? This pure, puerile longing?

Midya's small eyes suddenly looked as large as twin black moons. They twisted wildly, turning further left, then right, than Ruya thought eyes should turn. Her small hands jutted briefly up. Her legs kicked beneath the sheets. But these were not the sensual, rhythmic movements Ruya associated with sex—they were too spasmodic, too desperately twitching, as if the body were fighting, not dancing.

And all the while, the cries, the moaning: "Aahnngghhhhh! Ahhhnnngghhh!"

It dawned on Ruya that perhaps what she was watching wasn't sex at all. Perhaps it was something else entirely. Midya's mouth sprang open, exposing the truth.

"Aahnngghhhhh! Ahhhnnngghhh!"

Beyond Midya's crooked yellow teeth, Ruya could make out a brimming black liquid and a strange pinkish stub.

"Aahnngghhhhh! Ahhhnnngghhh!"

It took a moment to register: someone had cut out Midya's tongue.

The new image shredded Ruya's understanding, Finally, she saw the black wetness spreading along the sheet, its edges oozing through the fabric like plague, glistening dark red wherever it hit a candle-lit fold. As the covered bony head of the attacker sloshed beneath a wet spot, the cloth clung to it, echoing its details. For a moment, Ruya made out its mouth, even the tips of its strange teeth, gaping, then pressing down hard.

Midya wasn't moaning in pleasure; she was trying to scream, but couldn't. She didn't have the right pieces anymore. So Ruya did it for her—long and loud, hysterical and impassioned, hoping the sheer volume would suck her back into her familiar home, her familiar bed and her familiar vision of the world.

Lightning-quick, the thing on top of Midya rose, pulling back the protective sheet as it rose—revealing what was left of its prey. After that it was all flash and blur. Still screeching, Ruya stumbled backwards, dropping her package. The creature, mouth open, incisors dripping with the ebb and flow of Midya's life, burst through the plaster wall.

Afraid to turn, running backwards now, Ruya felt the floor suddenly vanish as she fell through an unpaned and broken window frame. Her back slammed, bruising if not cracking her vertebrae, into a jutting chunk of two by four. Then her torso rolled, ready to slip into mid-air, but her arms, obeying their own survival instinct, caught hold of the wood.

She clenched the board so tightly the painted red tip of the fingernail on her right index finger snapped off. The tiny piece fluttered like the petal of a hard plastic rose, forty feet down to the cracked and pitted asphalt that lay below her dangling feet.

A harsh voice, vaguely feminine, rasped from the window above: "Don't worry. I will help you. It will all be over soon."

The words were Turkish, but the Slavic accent was so thick even Ruya's untrained ear placed it. As she twisted her head up, she had her first unobstructed view of the creature. It clung to invisible fissures in the wall like a giant, starved rat, more a parody of a severe Russian woman than a living thing. What desiccated skin showed through the formal jet black suit it wore was stretched so taut over its skeleton, it looked ready to tear.

Ruya held the board tighter, and an absurd thought maneuvered past her fear of death, like a mischievous spider on long, spindly legs: she worried that Bira, her mother-in-law to be, would notice the broken nail at dinner and say something cutting. Taking in the monster once more, though, Ruya realized she wasn't likely to see Bira, or anyone else, again.

Just as Ruya Hazan, failed Mata Hari, realized her predicament was now much too much like the adventure she'd fantasized, the rotten wood she clung to emitted a loud crack. Soon it would splinter with the same dreadful ease as her bubble-view of the world.

Monday, 26 July 1999, 9:33 PM (2:33 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
An Abandoned Warehouse
Istanbul, Turkey

Fatima al-Faqadi's devout, practiced patience finally ran out when she decided it best that the Russian *fida'i* become aware of her presence. With little more than a thought, she allowed her skin, black and reflective as crude oil, to whisper from nothingness to vague visibility. To her disappointment, the Russian didn't immediately notice her, so she twisted her tightly held jambia a bit, letting some specks of street light glint on the blade. If that didn't raise the awareness of her fellow Child of Haqim, she resolved to decapitate her without further ado.

As if hearing her thoughts, the former KGB agent lurched back from the window, spun and bowed. The Beast, and whatever else had been driving her, was immediately cowed.

Had the elder waited another second, the mortal, still clinging so desperately to the wooden beam outside, would be dead. In the short run, the lack of living witnesses might have made things easier, but Fatima didn't know why the mortal woman was here, and wanted to. In truth, she wasn't sure why any of them—herself included—were here, gathered in the ruins of an Istanbul warehouse, so far from the sanctuary of Alamut. Not knowing made her mood as dark as her skin.

"Fatima al-Faqadi, I am ashamed to have brought you here," the Russian said, staring at the floor.

Fatima answered slowly. "It pains me to witness that shame, Nedezdha Tarasov. You're the second *fida'i* to dishonor the blood in a very, very short time."

"I did not seek to dishonor, but to protect," Tarasov protested.

Fatima ignored the excuse and let her disgust show in the tone of her voice. "You were selected for your obedience, your discipline. You were watched for years, tested and strengthened before even being considered for the Embrace. Through all that, you persevered admirably. Now you've thrown it all away in a single night. Before we return to Alamut, where I am sure your blood will be reclaimed, I want to know why."

The fact of her imminent destruction should not have been a surprise to the Russian, but it was. Upon hearing it, something flashed in the eyes of the *fida'i*. Her facial muscles twitched. Fatima could smell her fear and anger, but moreover, the particulars of the expression looked familiar. They were nearly the same as the agitation that danced within the now-nameless Kurd who had tried to assassinate her. The same tics betraying inner disquiet were on Tarasov's face, the same look that preceded the explosion of full madness. Fatima had gotten a good look at those glazed eyes when the Kurd had pulled himself along her jambia to deliver his poisoned blow. And now here it was again.

"You want to know why?" the Russian answered, allowing herself a bit of a hiss. "Because one does not sharpen the axes *after* they are needed."

Fatima hissed back: "Don't presume to quote your Slavic peasant platitudes to me! I'm older than the language they were first spoken in!"

The Russian's head went back down, then she stretched her neck forward, giving an oddly feline ambience to her submissive posture.

"It was for you, I came. For Haqim!" the Russian answered.

"You reason like a child! How is that possible? How is this foolish breach for Haqim or for me?" Fatima demanded. "Do you even realize what it looks like? I spent two nights following you here thinking you were in league with the Kurd who tried to poison me! I might have destroyed you before we spoke."

"Nyet, Nyet, Nyet!" the Russian mewled. A frantic, pinprick look surfaced strobe-like in her blue eyes. "...The Kurd," she began, almost saying his forbidden name, "he was my companion through training, through our Embrace. The caliph said he acted alone for his own reasons, but I *knew* him, I knew this was not true."

This much at least made sense. Fatima knew herself the *fida'i* couldn't possibly have stolen past Gharok to steal the gin-gin. She knew Gharok was being tortured as they spoke, not for his guilt, but for the sake of appearances. Clearly, the judgment of the elders concealed something more. She waited, indicating she would listen further.

The Russian nodded toward the corpse on the mattress. "This woman was his sister. I thought she might provide more information, some hint, some clue to this madness."

At that Fatima's brow furrowed. She shook her head. The bloody scene did not tally with the words. Getting information from a kine was much simpler; even an Assamite ghoul knew that much.

The Russian cleared her throat and groped for the words, but only dug herself in deeper. "In KGB there were ways we had of getting truth," she said. "Knives and electricity. But since then, my teeth have become sharper than even those blades."

Fatima cut her off. "You lie badly. To interrogate her, you cut out her tongue?"

As if wounded, the Russian went down to her knees, the illusion of composure fading as she dropped. "You don't understand! It was a frog! A trapped little frog! I had to cut it from her head so it could speak! A choice had to be made! The blood or the spirit! As it was in my dream!"

The Russian was either struggling under some influence, or utterly mad. But, a dream? How long since Fatima had experienced that? For decades after her embrace by Thetmes, echoes of her mortal psyche produced such shadows during her daylight slumber, but none had come for centuries.

"What did you dream?" she asked, on guard, but still genuinely curious.

"A great frog sat upon me, here," she said, patting the center of her chest with a thick finger. "It told me Haqim's night had been divided between two opposing masters, but that soon there would be one. Chances to choose were few and far between. It said that my opening was coming and if I did not recognize it, I would be lost."

Fatima weighed the words, wondering if there were any solutions to be found in them, or if they were a mad waste suited more to Malkavians than her own clan.

But then, though Fatima did not so much as move her eyes, she noticed that the mortal had not plunged as expected. Instead, slowly, she was crawling back into the room, through the window. The elder was genuinely surprised the Russian hadn't noticed already.

Had her senses, so much more powerful than any mortal's could hope to be, somehow been dulled by madness?

The mortal was sticking to the shadows, thinking herself unseen. Fatima did nothing to dissuade her of the illusion. In fact, she decided it was to her advantage to wait see how long it would be before the Russian *fida'i* realized what was going on.

"And what did you learn here? Anything?" Fatima asked. She already knew the answer, she'd witnessed it all, but now she wanted to keep Tarasov talking. Fatima circled the room to better keep the Russian's attention. The bandages were gone, but Fatima's arm was still stiff from the poison. Even so, at her best, the Russian *fida'i* should be no real threat, but Fatima recalled only too well how in his madness, the Kurd had breached her defenses with a brash, random, unexpected move. She would not allow that to happen here.

The mortal woman would make it simple. The second the Russian noticed her, Fatima would strike. Of course, it would be too late for the kine, but there was little to be done about it.

Tarasov followed Fatima's movements first with her eyes, then her whole head, "She didn't even know that her brother was an assassin during his time among the kine, let alone what he had become afterwards. There was nothing to be told."

"So this was all for nothing? This is how you serve Haqim?" Fatima was still circling, inching her jet-black form, muscle by muscle, between the shades of gray in the room. The Russian had to twist her whole body along to follow now. Awkwardly, Tarasov stumbled to standing position. The mortal woman was a few yards behind her now, probably weighing her options.

How can she not see the kine? Is she playing her own game?

"If you don't understand, I can't tell you," Tarasov said. "I have to show you."

Then, as if finally unleashed from the contradictions that snared her mind, the Russian leapt at the elder. Fatima was so busy wondering why Tarasov hadn't seen the mortal that she was once again taken off guard for a moment. But in the end, it was a suicidal leap. Fatima didn't bother to tighten the grip on her weapon. Nor did she swing to protect herself. There was no need.

As the Russian came forward, both arms outstretched in the vague hope of concealing which would strike first, her chest suddenly stiffened. There was a slow, deliberate crunching noise, accompanied by the grunts of an extreme human effort, before Tarasov crashed to the floor. A large section of two by four protruded from the center of her back at an odd angle. The Russian clawed forward a moment, then went still.

Ruya Hazan stood shaking behind her. Fatima realized she'd been waiting for a moment to flee, or strike. If she'd tried to run, Fatima would have had to stop her, but the choice never presented itself.

Monday, 26 July 1999, 9:49 PM (2:49 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
An Abandoned Warehouse
Istanbul, Turkey

"Stake in the heart, right? That's what works on vampires?" Ruya said nervously as she rubbed the splinters in her bloodied hands. Though it was warm in the close room, her teeth chattered. "I killed her?"

Fatima raised a single black eyebrow on her black face. "No. Not quite. You've only immobilized her."

Fatima stepped up, sliced the Russian's head neatly off with her curved dagger, then collected the flowing blood in a cup she carried in her backpack. As the fluid oozed out, the Russian's body sighed into dry leather.

"Now," Fatima said, "she is destroyed."

The sight was shocking, but not quite as shocking as the death of Midya, so Ruya was able to keep vaguely steady. She looked at the dark thing that remained in the room with her, scanning what she could of the black clothing, the straps, the weapons held here and there. Now *this* was Mata Hari.

"You saw me coming?" she asked.

"A blind worm would have seen you," Fatima answered. Then she looked down toward the crumpled thing on the floor. "She should have, too. Instead, she left you a rare opening. You took it."

"I was hoping—"

"I know what you were hoping."

"—that you wouldn't kill me. That maybe if I helped you—"

Fatima cut her off. "You had a better chance of surviving when I thought you were beneath my notice."

"Ah," Ruya said. Her shoulders slumped with a sigh of acceptance. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she started babbling, "So then, are you going to kill me? Because if you are, I'd like to get it over with, and if you're not, I'd really like to go home."

The skin around Fatima's eyes crinkled, slightly lightning the ebon color at the tops of the small wrinkles. Ruya noticed, and thought this meant the monster was smiling, maybe at her bravado, or maybe she looked particularly tasty.

Without thinking, Ruya took a step towards her fallen bag. A drawn dagger appeared to block her path.

"My package?" Ruya asked innocently.

Fatima lowered the jambia, grabbed the bag and pulled the Annie Pat doll out. She pivoted her wrist in what seemed to Ruya an impossible angle, rolling the box in her hand, regarding the thick plastic and multiple wire coils that tightly held Ann Patty in her mass manufactured coffin.

Ruya smiled nervously, "They sure wrap them well. That could withstand a…"

A warm blast of air hit Ruya in the face and body. Ruya had seen nothing, absolutely nothing, but she realized that the dark woman had sliced the box open with a single swipe of her blade. The packaging tumbled away, leaving the faux white flesh and thick stitched flowery party dress pressing directly into the ebony hand.

Idly, Fatima stroked the doll's hair. Ruya was struck by the difference between its skin color and hers, but said nothing. She could think of nothing to say.

Fatima picked up her head. In the dark, the black skin of her face was nearly invisible, so it seemed as though the two almond eyes, headless, had floated up in the air without the benefit of skin, skull or will.

"...bomb blast," Ruya said, completing the sentence she'd started so long ago. Suddenly, she was not feeling very well. Swooning, she rubbed the palm of her right hand over her eye, feeling the flat edge where her fingernail had broken, and noticing how much her fingers were shaking.

Fatima, near as Ruya could tell, didn't seem to care.

"Do you like dolls?" Fatima said.

Ruya didn't understand what she was being asked. She knew instinctively that it was more than a surface question, but could not guess its depth or meaning. Without the hidden key, she tried to hide behind a superficial response.

"It's for my niece," she said. "She loves anything American."

Fatima held the doll out to her and repeated the question, kindly accenting the appropriate word: "Do *you* like dolls?"

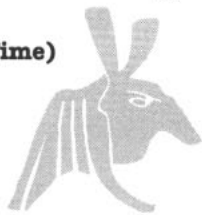
Ruya nodded and took hold of Annie Pat. She pulled, afraid she might be moving too quickly, but there was no resistance. Annie Pat was hers again. After a stray sensation of normalcy, she noticed the doll was cold in her hand. She expected some residual warmth from the woman's grasp, but it may just as well have been lying on stone.

"I won't tell anyone," Ruya said.

Fatima stared at her for the longest time, her unblinking eyes unwavering, until they were all that Ruya could see.

"No. You won't."

Tuesday, 27 July 1999, 1:02 AM
(Monday, 26 July 1999, 3:32 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
Five Star Market, Kidderpore
Calcutta, India



"Old Nag!" The peddler stared in amazement for a moment longer, and then shook his head. "Damned if I'm not glad to see you," the Nosferatu declared wonderingly.

"And I am extraordinarily relieved to see you," Hesha replied.

They regarded each other in silence for what seemed like a long time, even for creatures of their patience. Then the gray-skinned monster rasped out: "About our arrangements..."

"Yes?" Hesha's tone implied a limited bargaining distance, and the face in the little bookshop bobbed nervously.

"You found Michel before I did, I hear. Which renders that deal null and void, I'm afraid. But the other... I won't be able to fulfill your wishes for some months, at least. All my contacts are temporarily unavailable."

"I accept that as an excuse for nonpayment of the debt," Hesha said, and the monster amid the magazines appeared relieved. "Tell me, though, where were you Sunday morning, when the quake hit?"

Warily, the Nosferatu answered: "In a drainage tunnel."

"Underground and underwater?"

With even more caution: "Yes."

"There are no creatures of the night in Calcutta but ourselves, are there?"

After a terrible, rattling sigh: "No. No one. I was on my way to meet some friends that night. I came up to street level, and they were gone. Every one. The Ravnos are gone, the court is gone, the prince is dead..." With a hint of hysteria in its voice, the bookseller shouted, "I am the prince of the city, Old Nag!" In a lower tone, he added, "My first act is to abdicate my throne. How about it? Want a city, Prince Hesha? Lord Ruhadze?"

"I'm leaving town, I think. I'll see that you receive at least partial payment for your attempts on my behalf." Hesha leaned on his stick and resumed walking toward the hotel. "If you ever find yourself in a position to tell me what I asked about, the Grand will have a method available: ask after me at the front desk."

The short, gray, spindly creature looked down at him, and the Setite's long strides halted. Trembling, licking its lips, nervous, the Nosferatu leaned in. It asked, "What did you *do* to Calcutta, Old Nag?"

Hesha stared at the hideous face for a moment, shook his head, and moved on.

SP

Monday, 26 July 1999, 11:02 PM (4:02 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
Outside an Abandoned Warehouse
Istanbul, Turkey

With the sort of contempt only a working man could have for the rich, the paramedic regarded Ruya Hazan's dress, her hairstyle, her makeup, and the plastic doll clutched to her chest.

"What are you doing in this place?" he spat, angry at having been commanded to answer this call. They were horribly understaffed. Better to let her die here than for him to come out alone. If she had broken bones, or internal bleeding, he could easily make things worse just trying to get her into the ambulance.

Then, as he tried to lift her, she laughed and started to talk.

"Vampires," Ruya said, delirious. "They're a metaphor for displaced sexuality, you know. Like lesbians."

"What?" the paramedic said.

The moment he saw her sprawled in front of the warehouse, he'd pegged her as an over-privileged, self-indulgent wife, no doubt buying drugs. Now he knew she was as high as a kite. Exhaling hard between clenched teeth, he carried her towards the ambulance, wondering if those who preached that the West was a corrupting influence may have been more on the mark than he originally thought.

Then he noticed she was getting pale.

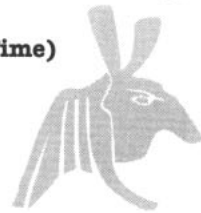
"Miss?"

He felt her hands. They were going cold. She was in shock. The ride back to the hospital would be quiet, at least.

Atop the warehouse, Fatima watched the ambulance inch along the narrow spaces between the decrepit buildings that passed for a street. It was difficult to get medical help to show up in this area, but she had many strings she could pull.

There was much to consider. The crazed look in the Russian's eyes was so much like that of the Kurd's. There was a pattern to be sure, a hidden truth, but it was muddled in her mind, mingled with the images of the child's doll and the shredded corpse. Those had set off a series of strange recollections for the ancient warrior, including one of the first times she'd seen a child of Khayyin succumb to the beast. Was it the beast that took the Russian? No. What were the links? Were there any? Both the pattern and the memories were dangerous paths to follow—the elders had spoken on the former, and the latter might be better off forgotten.

Then there was this mortal. She'd held her own, albeit very briefly, against a child of Haqim. There were so few women among Haqim's children. Now there was one less. That was a loss, but perhaps one which, given time, could be corrected.



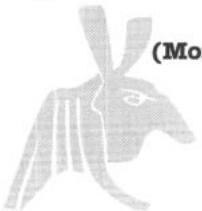
Tuesday, 27 July 1999, 2:51 AM
(Monday, 26 July 1999, 5:21 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal

Elizabeth lay swathed in blankets. Her eyes moved like a dreamer's, but her face never relaxed into peaceful sleep. The covers were undisturbed; she could not have moved much since Thompson and his master had checked on her at sundown. She had not eaten since Sunday. She took water only when bullied into it, and even then in small sips. Hesha looked at his pet antiquarian with concern; if the trance were unbroken another day, they would be forced to put her in a hospital to keep her from dying of dehydration.

He pulled her by the shoulders into a sitting position, and propped her up with mounds of pillows. Liz showed no reaction. He called her by name—softly, sharply, commandingly, even (though it took an effort) with tenderness in his voice to bait her. The Setite took her hands—she neither resisted nor clasped back. The expressions on her face reflected things she saw outside the room, not horror or happiness that Hesha was near.

Without guilt—simply as a point of information—he recalled drinking a fair amount from her. Nothing more dangerous than a pint or two, but a weakened body might not protect against the… trance so well as a healthy one. Hesha went to the washroom and filled a glass with water. Slowly, with a few spills, he persuaded her unconscious mouth to swallow properly. He brought more, managed to give it to the woman without choking her, and sat beside her for a while, holding the empty cup in his hands. A faint clicking sound caught his attention, and he glanced down. His claws, extended, tapped a rhythm on the thin glass. Hesha lanced one wrist with the other thumb and let the blood flow into the cup. He held the reddish-black fluid under Elizabeth's nose, and called her again. Faint signs of recognition rewarded him—he put the glass in her hands and held the rim to her lips.

"Elizabeth? Can you hear me? Try to drink this."



Tuesday, 27 July 1999, 4:00 AM
(Monday, 26 July 1999, 6:30 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
The Oberoi Grand Hotel
Calcutta, West Bengal

Ron Thompson came into the sickroom quietly, looking for his employer. He found a scene that disturbed him more than anything else he had known in Calcutta: Elizabeth, apparently awake, sitting up, seeing nothing, talking nonsense about kings and monsters and page-boys and demons—amulets draped around her neck—a tape recorder on the bedside table—traces of red on the girl's lips—Hesha sitting at the foot of the bed, listening intently and holding an empty, bloodstained cup.

Hesha caught his driver's eye and signaled silence. He mouthed, "What is it?"

Thompson glared at him like a thundercloud. He beckoned brusquely. Hesha eased off the bed carefully, so as not to disturb the recitation, and joined him on the other side of the door.

"Sir," began Thompson in darkest tones.

Hesha scanned the conference room over Ron's shoulder. Janet's line was open; the Asp and Khalil sat at the main table, playing cards.

"Thompson," Hesha whispered warningly, "you know how deeply I value your opinion. However. This is not the time, the place, or the *company*," his eyes flicked meaningfully toward the Ravnos, "in which I would desire to hear your views. Understood? We will take this up in private, later.

"Now," he said, resuming conversational volume, "what was it you came to see me about?"

Ron hesitated, stumbling over the sudden change in gears. He pulled his notepad from his breast pocket to reassure himself. "Our agents have their exit assignments, sir. We're prepared to close up shop on your word." He turned to the marked pages, but hardly glanced at them. "The 'good-will' items we brought with us have been delivered to the bookseller in the Five Star. The gentleman was rather overwhelmed by the consignment, but we persuaded him to accept."

"So, you progress," said Hesha.

"Yes, sir. But so far, the agents know where they're going, but you haven't given me any information yet to start arrangements for us. What's the next step, sir?"

The Setite stepped away from the wall, seeming to grow taller and more commanding. He approached the table and looked down at the card game in mild disapproval. Thompson, guessing ahead, unobtrusively took his place at the foot of the table. The Asp laid his cards face down and waited respectfully for his employer to speak. Khalil Ravana, sensing the shift in atmosphere, fanned his cards perfectly and elegantly, and set the hand to one side. He made himself comfortable, relaxing into the soft chair, resting his arms on the padded rests, and letting his quick fingers play amongst the poker stake in front of him.

"Bullets?" Hesha remarked.

Khalil picked up a 45mm round and spun it on its point like a top. "He wouldn't play for money."

"I warned him not to."

"And Khalil here didn't want to play with matches," the Asp sneered.

"I see." Hesha seated himself, dialed Janet into the conference, and began: "As you are all aware, my primary project at this time involves tracking down the Eye of Hazimel. Khalil Ravana," he nodded at the Ravnos, "has provided substantial aid in this direction. In return for his services, we will provide transportation and sufficient false papers to allow him to emigrate to the United States.

"What none of you have been told yet is that Calcutta, as a nucleus of Family activity, no longer exists." The Setite regarded his guest reservedly. "Perhaps you need confirmation of this?" The Ravnos shook his head, and Hesha smiled inwardly. There were, as he had thought, at least *four* survivors—the bookseller, himself, this errand-boy, and Khalil's master. Of course, Khalil's master need not have been in the city at the time.... Hesha shelved the speculation for later and continued his speech.

"When we concluded the second half of our agreement, Khalil, you implied that your knowledge of the Eye and its properties would make you useful to me as I searched for it. I have called this meeting to discuss our next move toward the artifact, and I would be grateful if you would contribute to that discussion."

Raphael's face twitched slightly at his master's implied invitation to "discuss" anything.

Thompson, more accustomed to Hesha's tactics with third parties—and more often asked in fact for an opinion, despite the scene over Elizabeth moments before—cleared his throat and started talking. "Well, sir, maybe the time has come to go to Atlanta ourselves. If you knew for certain what had happened to"—he paused, looking for terms to hide behind—"your associate, you might learn something. Isn't that where the first trace led?"

"That is true," said Hesha.

Thompson snatched at straws to keep going. "California? The professor's notes will be there; you know from Liz that he had relevant info. He probably didn't tell her all of it."

The Asp translated "discuss" in his head: *Play up and play dumb.*

"I like the idea of Atlanta," he said slowly. "But I can't help but wonder about the little nest of lines running around New York City. There were traces headed that way we never followed up."

Hesha nodded, and Raphael let his pent-up breath go. He'd taken it—whatever it was—in the right direction. Let Ron pick it up again....

With a sleek and superior air, Khalil held both hands up to stop the conversation. He shook his head condescendingly. "Gentlemen, gentlemen. You're on the wrong track entirely. Professor's notes? Cold killings? You're lucky I'm here. Atlanta is old, old news. And New York is no good; the Eye has never been in the city, whatever you may think." He let his voice lilt up, and his final word rolled off his tongue momentously: "Chicago."

"Chicago?" Hesha inquired evenly.

"Chicago." Khalil smiled.

"You are certain of this?"

"The Eye is in Chicago," said the cocky young gypsy. "I swear. See? I told you I'd be useful. Atlanta, hell."

Hesha studied his partner. "Very well," he said. "Thompson. Janet. Reservations and security through Chicago." Hesha had no more use for Calcutta. His discovery in the underwater chamber of the tomb had prepared him for this next, and perhaps final, leg of his quest. "I want to be out of India by sundown. Khalil, you have two hours until dawn. Be ready by the time the sun catches us. If you have more things to do than can be accomplished in the time, make a list of them and the team will attend to it."

The Setite rose. "Questions?" No one spoke. "Then I look forward to seeing you all... Wednesday night, I believe."

As the dead filed into the next suite to rest, Hesha clapped a hand on his bodyguard's shoulder, and Ron felt a paper pressed into his palm. After the door closed on them and the sun rose, he sat down at the table to read it.

Thompson,

Ignore Khalil. Find out from Miles where Kettridge is and arrange for our transportation there. If the good professor has gone to ground in Chicago, very well—the Ravnos is telling the truth. Simply be sure that we arrive before him.

Send Khalil to Chicago no matter where we go.

—H.

Tuesday, 27 July 1999, 3:16 AM
Chantry of the Five Boroughs
New York City, New York

"All of them, Regentia?" the overwhelmed novice asked.

"All of them," Sturbridge replied. "And I want all of his papers: his notes, his letters—his grocery lists for that matter. All of these books that are not in their proper places, I want them. If they are lying open, mark the pages. If they're not open, scan them for marginalia and mark those pages. Give the whole room—make that the room and the entire way down to the *Exeunt Tertius*—a good going-over for any resonances. Anything you find, I want that too. That ought to get me started. What do you know about the ritual he was enacting when he was… interrupted?"

The novice's eyes kept involuntarily straying to the desiccated body at the room's center. "I don't… I mean, it's a questing, obviously, looking at the *diagramma hermetica* but… Surely Jacqueline would be better able to answer these questions. She assisted in preparing for—" The novice broke off, but recovered herself quickly. "I'll send her along too," she added hastily, forestalling the next order.

Sturbridge paused, then dropped the finger that was raised to instruct Eva on this very point. She smiled. "Better. Tell me, how would you say he died?"

"Something went wrong, Regentia. The protective circle has been effaced in places, the candles overturned. We're lucky the whole room didn't go up in flames."

"It can't, but go on," Sturbridge interjected.

Eva looked questioningly at the regent, but as no further information seemed forthcoming, she continued her speculation. "The ritual went wrong. Something… stepped through. It killed him, claimed his vitae, and fled. That way, toward the *Exeunt Tertius* and out. Aaron tried to block its escape and was killed as well."

Sturbridge shook her head slowly. "You're rushing ahead. But perhaps you do not appreciate the danger. We're dealing with death here—the Final Death. Do you understand? When you hunt mortals, you can be ravenous. If you would contest with Death, however, you must be dispassionate. You must be disciplined. You must be patient. Death is so very… patient."

She drew out the last word like a caress. But there was no warmth in it. "You proceed from too many assumptions. For starters, how did the ritual go wrong? Foley was a regent secundus. He was assisted by two apprentices, one of the Third Circle, one of the Seventh, either of whom could have pulled off a simple questing by himself. It simply does not hold together."

Eva began to protest, but was cut off.

"Two. You can't 'step through' a questing. Nor can any of the denizens from the 'other side.' That's an old wives' tale, fit only for frightening neophytes. A questing is not like throwing wide the postern gate. It's more like putting an eye to the keyhole. A seeing, rather than a going. Or, as a *diligent* novice would say, a scrying rather than…"

"An apportation," Eva finished quickly, ducking a rather longish lecture implicit in the regent's glare. "But what if it wasn't just a questing? What if it was a full-blown summoning? I know the standard precautions aren't in place—there are none of the names of the archangelic protectors, no proper warding of the cardinal points, nothing more efficacious than chalk and candlelight and quill and parchment. But maybe he didn't want anyone to *know* it was a summoning."

The regent gave her a look of stern reproach. "You know full well that it is forbidden to perform any summoning within the *domicilium*. Even to assist in such an ill-conceived venture would be to invite my extreme displeasure."

The tone of this last pronouncement carried a far greater threat than the words themselves. Eva, however, was too caught up in fitting together the pieces of her theory to take the hint.

"All the more reason for him to conceal the true nature of the ritual! Any of the protective *diagramma* would have given him away. His assistants would have divined his purpose and," she paused triumphantly—and then suddenly remembered herself. "And dissuaded him from such a disobedient course of action," she finished, somewhat lamely.

"Yes, the assistants," Sturbridge resumed the narrative. "Whom Foley had decided to include in his 'secret' ritual for what purpose? It seems to me that not even druids, Satanists and Templars go to such great lengths to ensure that their secret rites are so well-attended."

"If I might speak frankly, Regentia," Eva began meekly, "There are those within our chantry who do not feel as fervently about the *interdicti* as you and I do."

Sturbridge raised herself up to her full height and seemed for a moment as if she might strike the novice. Eva, for her part, scrutinized some detail of the complex pattern of floor tiles, her head bent in submission.

Sturbridge exhaled audibly. "The *interdicti* exist precisely to keep foolish novices from indulging their folly unto self-destruction. Whether you realize it or not, we are besieged here. Do you know what lies beyond these walls?"

A slight smile stole over Eva's features before she could suppress it. She was thinking about the relatively cloistered campus of Barnard College upon which the chantry was situated. She wisely did not give voice to these thoughts.

"Beyond these walls," Sturbridge continued, "lies enemy territory. New York is a Sabbat stronghold. *The* Sabbat stronghold. Notwithstanding anything you might hear to the contrary from the self-styled Ventrue 'prince' of the city. Thus far, you have been carefully shielded from this harsh and uncompromising reality. But surely, even from within the safety of this chantry, you realize what is at stake here."

"Yes, Regentia." Eva's tone was submissive.

Sturbridge raised the novice's downcast face. "We can hold the ravening Sabbat at bay. We *will* hold them at bay. But we will do it the right way. We will not resort to high-risk rituals—especially those that dispense with proper wardings—within the confines of the chantry. We will not endanger our sisters in our search for better weapons to bring to bear upon our enemies. We will not embroil other powers—particularly those from beyond this terrestrial sphere—in our struggle.

"What is most important in fighting monsters is to ensure that one does not…"

"Become a monster," Eva finished quoting Nietzsche. He was a countryman of hers, part of the complex intellectual and mystic tradition that was her birthright. Eva could not help but call to mind, however, that the catchy phrases of the philosopher were also a part of the birthright of the Reich. How often had his aphorisms been used to defend and expound a pogrom or genocide that humbled even the worst excesses of the undying?

Words too, it seemed, could become desperate and monstrous.

Sturbridge put a hand on the novice's shoulder and steered her toward the doorway. "But you look weary. Go to the refectory. Get some nourishment into your system. When you are quite certain you can hold something down, then—and only then—may you return here and gather the things I have requested."

As Sturbridge closed the chamber door behind them, Eva visibly sagged as if the immediacy of the corpse was the only thing that had been keeping her upright. She staggered down the corridor toward the refectory. A somnambulist.

Sturbridge watched the receding figure until it reached the bend in the passage, as if to make certain that it would not stumble and fall before then. Satisfied, she called after her, "Eva..."

The figure turned with apparent effort.

"Be wary. Not all monsters come from beyond these walls."

Sturbridge strode off purposefully toward her sanctum. The few novices she passed along the way, catching sight of their regent's demeanor, pressed back into doorways and side corridors to let her pass.

Sturbridge batted absently at something before her face as if trying to clear away a cobweb or persistent insect. She purposefully triggered no fewer than three defensive systems (two silent and one very much audible), which she left for the security team to disarm in her wake. She was none too pleased with the demonstration of their obvious shortcomings two nights earlier, and was not inclined to make their work enjoyable tonight. She even went so far as to collar a particularly perverse guardian spirit and dispatch it to convince the chantry's autonomic defenses that the *domicilium* was ablaze. That particular impossibility ought to keep them occupied for some time. They would probably have to take the "malfunctioning" system oh-so-carefully offline, dismantling and reassembling the complex series of mystic, electronic, biochemical and geomechanical wardings one by one.

It was, perhaps, a small cruelty. But not one for which Sturbridge repented. The punishment was, if anything, overly lenient compared to the blood-price she might have exacted for their recent failure—a failure that resulted in the murder of her second-in-command in the sanctuary of his own workshop.

As she passed into her own sanctum, she noted with satisfaction that the door sealed itself behind her with the hiss of hydraulics and the singing of steel bolts ramming home. She called for the status of the chantry's exits and found them all secured. She crossed to the desk and keyed a gimmal-level override, unbarring one of the exits (the *Exeunt Tertius*, just to rub their noses in it a bit). A few quick gestures and she set a ward—a screamer, and a loud one—to go off when the door was secured again, crying the exact response time.

Only then did she allow herself to collapse into the overstuffed armchair in the room's farthest corner. This chair was the only concession to comfort in the austere study.

Even so, there was something imposing, almost throne-like, about it. The chair seemed to rise from a dais of piled books. Jumbled stacks of tomes rose to well above shoulder-level in places, swaying precariously. Not infrequently, an entire wing of the edifice would break away and cascade to the floor in an avalanche of illuminated manuscripts, fashion magazines, papyrus scrolls, advertising circulars, penciled manuscripts, clay tablets, and loose-leaf paper.

Safely ensconced, Sturbridge was finally able to ignore the dark shapes that fluttered in her peripheral vision and demanded attention. Instead, she focused upon thoughts of Eva and, more specifically, the faulty theory the girl had hastily constructed. Johnston Foley not had gone to Final Death at the whim of a beast of spirit—the preparations for his ritual were all wrong. Rather, he'd met destruction at the hand (and blade) of a beast of flesh, undead flesh. The killer had indeed, as Eva hypothesized, claimed Foley's vitae, but he'd taken something else as well—a certain gem that had been the subject of Foley's ritual. This was where Sturbridge held a distinct advantage over poor Eva. The regent had access to much more data. She was aware of so much more—such as a disturbing pattern of murders perpetrated against Clan Tremere, a pattern into which Foley's demise fit all too well.

Sturbridge sank further into the voluminous chair. She wrapped herself in the enfolding wall of books, pulling it tightly about her. She felt its reassuring proximity, its warmth, its protection. Slowly, the dark wings that buffeted about her face began to recede.

She was more than casually acquainted with their shadowy touch—the flurry of blows that neither cut nor bruised but rather seemed to smother. Her ears rang with the cry of carrion birds. She could feel their weight above her, hovering oppressively like the noonday sun, waiting. One among them, bolder than its fellows, picked experimentally at the hem of one sleeve.

She snatched back her hand to within the shelter of the cocoon of books. Her first instinct was to lash out, to strike, to shriek, to frighten and scatter the murder of crows. With effort, she suppressed this instinctive animal response.

She knew better. There was no point in expending her energies in avenging herself upon mere messengers, upon these harbingers of the end. She withheld her scorn, reserved it for their master, the one true nemesis.

So he is come among us once again. Sturbridge found herself unconsciously gathering her defenses about her, sketching the outlines of cunning wards, beckoning to unseen allies. She harbored no illusion as to the eventual outcome of the life-long confrontation. Even her (not inconsiderable) powers would avail little against her unwelcome guest.

Sturbridge was no legendary beauty, to compel suitors and rivals to overcome intervening oceans and generations. Her particular suitor, however, possessed an inhuman patience and persistence.

It was not the first time that Death had come to call upon her. On his last visit, he had robbed her of not only her mortal life, but also of her humanity, her art, and her only child.

She only hoped that, this time, he would not be inclined to linger.

Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 7:27 PM
Ausable Lodge
Near Keeseville, New York



The cabin was small, rough, new, and intended to look both older and more rustic than was plausible. It smelt of disinfectant, detergent, dog, tourist, grass, fish, and dirt. Over country-print curtains black duct tape stuck black plastic sheeting to walls and windows. Patches of sunshield on the door and near the ceiling testified to the scrupulous care with which the creature's servants looked after his interests. When Ra released the Setite from sleep, Ron Thompson was there, waiting patiently.

"Good evening, sir. I've brought you breakfast."

"Local bank?"

"Your own vintage, sir. I had it driven up with the car. We're in Upstate New York, by the way."

"You've been busy. Report."

"Yes sir. Pauline Miles and her team tracked Kettridge here. Presumably, Chicago was a blind by Khalil, and I hope the left-luggage office opens that skunk's crate in the daytime." Thompson ran a hand through his grizzled hair.

"Pauline's team has been weakened by the losses you already know about. I sent all but the die-hards home for a break. They need it—they saw more than they should have. Kettridge has been amazingly popular these three weeks.

"I kept Pauline here; she's in the know now, for certain, and she's weathered the storm well enough. She's still my top pick to manage the detective work if I buy it, but there's a lot to be said for brute force and the ability to manage that. So I've brought in Matthew Voss for a try-out. He comes from the executive-protection side of the business. His team is fresh and ready to come in, but so far I've kept his people away from what's left of Pauline's squad to minimize the risk of Family rumors spreading. We have a small army of security, a fair-sized arsenal, both the cars, Miles and Voss, the Asp—who has already sighted in half the guns for his own aim—Janet taking care of the baggage difficulties, myself, and you, sir."

"Where is Elizabeth?"

"Awake and in her right mind," said Ron with satisfaction, "having dinner with the others."

Hesha rose, stretched, and selected a map from a pile on the unfinished table. "As your replacement, are you suggesting Miles, Voss, or both?"

"Both, I think."

"I am inclined to agree with you." Hesha pored over the country as represented by contour lines, tree cover, water table, fault zones, stratification, highways, local roads, footpaths, fire breaks, school districts, police jurisdiction, zip code. At last, he picked out an ordinary trail map showing points of natural interest, and sat staring at it. "When the others have finished eating, we will go. Voss's team for backup. You, the Asp, Pauline, and Elizabeth will travel with me." His shoulders twitched. "I can feel your disapproval, Thompson, but she has proved to be an invaluable sensitive. If there is trouble, she will know, probably before we do.

"Also," said Hesha, "if these two are satisfactory, you might look forward to joining the ranks of Set once the Eye is secured."

Thompson sat very still. "Thank you, sir. I will certainly keep thinking about it."

KR

Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 7:54 PM (8:54 PM Eastern Daylight Time)
O'Hare International Airport
Chicago, Illinois

Khalil Ravana woke to hot, cramped, noisy darkness. As the day's stupor faded, he became aware of pressure confining him from every direction—of his arms pinned tightly to his sides—of legs bent, frozen, and unfeeling—of his neck forced down toward his chest—of toes and twisted hands supporting the weight of his body—of the friction of bare skin on some rough substance—of a hard, unyielding knob thrust uncomfortably against his chin—

Outside the tiny prison, he could hear thumps and thuds, muffled voices, and a gentle creaking sound. Khalil stretched himself, expanding to fill the last free space available. The knob in his face ground uncomfortably up his jawline, and he recognized it for what it was: his own left knee. The Ravnos shrank himself down again, trying to feel his hands. They weren't tied... they could move, a little....

Suddenly, the gentle creaking stopped. Khalil felt himself come to a halt with it, realizing for the first time that it had been moving him along. He had roughly one second to think on that before his body, and the shell around it, tipped and slid down a long, skidding drop. He seemed to half-fall for an eternity, and the dried-up memory of his stomach complained.

The impact flipped him over. Instead of being hung limbs-downward in his shell, his head was now bottom-most. Jarring, shrieking vibration traveled up through the corner—he was coming to feel that his casket was oblong—and into his ears. Khalil shrugged off the jolt and noise. The shift in position had freed his hands a little more, and he groped eagerly around the confines of his world. There were rounded, bristly, soft protrusions covering the walls. He pulled on one and the tip of it tore away in his hand: foam. He let the little fleck drop and explored further. Farthest from him, in a small clearing of the spongy bumps, he discovered a tiny handle, a metal latch, and a button. He pressed the last, and a soft light came on. A wave of relief poured over him.

He was inside a suit- or gun-case, packed comfortably enough in gray eggcrate padding. He wished, fleetingly, that whoever had done the job had had a real trunk or a coffin handy, but considering the hurry his new ally had been in to leave Calcutta, this was first-class travel. Khalil peered up at the latch—yes, it opened from the inside. Hesha Ruhadze's men were clever. Smuggling corpses from nation to nation—no trouble, apparently. The Setite had gone to sleep at the same time Khalil had—Hesha's mere retainers, then, were competent to move contraband on a global scale and jury-rig accommodations for unexpected travelers at the last minute. Calcutta to Delhi, Delhi to London, London to Chicago—he added in time for layovers, and decided it was just now turning night in Middle America. He nearly laughed out loud. The inexplicable rocking, the long drop, the squealing metal, the heavy noises from without—he must be on the baggage carousel at O'Hare already, bumping around with all the other luggage. Something fell on him

from above, and his own case settled onto its edge. Both bottom corners shrieked now, but Khalil relaxed almost cozily in his foam cocoon.

Just a little longer, and one of the old snake's boys would come pick him up, cart him through Customs safely, and take him out to join "partner" Hesha in some luxurious suite stocked with plenty of blood. Cold blood, Khalil thought wistfully, but free...

Blood...

Khalil was hungry. It went almost without saying. He'd nearly starved to death as an honest gypsy boy in India. He'd been merely hungry and poor after his family died and he turned to thievery. When the *shilmulo*—the vampire—adopted him, he'd had a month or two of real food and regular meals to fill in his ravaged muscles and hollow face. When the change came, when the *shilmulo* took him as a son forever, then he knew *real* famine. He'd learned every trick of dodging it, feeding it, taunting it, hunting for it, filling it up with promises when there was no blood, filling it to bursting when there was. The hunger of the past four nights was desperately different.

He wanted family blood. He could taste it in his mind. Memories of his "father" and the first sweet wine of immortality rose up in him. A girl he had loved, twenty years later, and traded kisses with—an elder whose strong blood had closed wounds Khalil had taken defending him—a living Rom with *shilmulo* blood flowing through his line, fought and conquered and destroyed. Every Ravnos he had ever known... the demon inside him lusted after them as it had never lusted after any lives before. Three nights now, he'd felt this. Ever since the earthquake and the desolation of Calcutta, the impulse, overwhelming, to run out and devour his own kin. Each day he dreamed of their legendary ancestor Ravana dying, his giant body scorched black by the sun, his shadow looming over his children, his irresistible voice commanding them (Khalil shuddered) to undo all his works and wipe their race from the earth. The dead Rakshasa King flashed bright in his descendant's eyes. Khalil would rise up and find the others—he would take an honor guard to the hells with him—he would—

The small, huddled creature in the gun case shivered and blinked away the image. The hunger faded into the background. Fear flooded him instead.

Calcutta had been empty of other Ravnos (all but one, he reminded himself), but how did he know what had happened in Chicago? Had the founder's command been heard this far? Was there already some kin of his waking to the smell of fresh Ravnos blood in the city?

He cursed Hesha. "Hurry up, goddamn it," he muttered under his breath.

Hesha is not coming, said a voice in his head.

Suddenly the case seemed twice as crowded as before. Khalil fought off the impression and recoiled from the intruding thought. He'd figured he'd left that thing far behind.

"Get out of my fucking head, you shit," he said aloud. The presence retreated slightly. The young Ravnos's chest expanded with pride. He'd made *it* do what *he* wanted, for once—maybe five thousand miles was enough distance after all. Then he felt the aftertaste of the thing's mind. It was smug. The old one was smug and satisfied and just as much in control here as it had been in India. It seemed to nod at that. Sullenly, Khalil dropped his head back. The tendons on his neck flared up. He spat out, "I was strong enough to defy you even in Calcutta. I told Hesha your precious Eye was in Chicago, not New York, you bastard."

The presence shook its head sadly. *You were not strong enough even to keep yourself from lying, you weakling. How do you hope to defy me?* The tone altered, became even more

contemptuous. *And he saw through you like the water-carrier through the temple-dancer's robes. You are pathetic and I pray to Siva that through you I will find a worthier servant.*

Khalil felt the carousel slowing. It ground to a halt, the squealing noises stopped, and the few voices left outside moved away. More time passed. Khalil squirmed. It felt like hours going by, and he began to suspect that the old one was right. And if Hesha had abandoned him, he would have to start moving soon. Even if no *shilmulo* arrived to kill him, even if no unknown American terror jumped out of the shadows, someone might open him in the morning.

I am glad that you have come to see my point of view. Now you will go to New York City, and you will do exactly as I say. Wait... wait... now there is no one looking at you. Get out.

Khalil plucked at the latch and handle and cracked open the case.

Baggage from the late flight out of London had been sent to the last claim area in the row. The only people at that end of that bay were one elderly female cleaner, mopping up where passengers were least likely to be at that hour, and a near-teenage security guard sneaking a highly illegal smoke. Neither of them had been paying any attention to the sole remaining item from Calcutta, a shallow black trunk with nickel-polish hardware. When the top of it flew up and smacked into the conveyor plates, the noise hardly impinged on their tired brains. By the time either of them looked around, the sound was thoroughly explained: A dark and curly-haired, handsome young man held the strap of the rolling carrier. His clothes, slick and fashionable, were as wrinkled as those of any other victim of economy-class seating. If he seemed rather pale and thin, well, cheap air travel could do that, too. The guard turned away to hide his cigarette. The lady with the mop eyed the devilish face and impish black goatee of the passenger and wished herself forty years younger.

Khalil Ravana winked at the old woman and walked calmly through an unattended Customs station. "Nothing to declare," he murmured to himself, and smiled.

Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 10:01 PM
A subterranean grotto
New York City, New York



Calebros tugged the thin, beaded chain of his temperamental desk lamp. The flickering light died, letting him bask in the tranquility of total darkness. He raked his claws back and forth across his scalp, enjoying the sensation, and tried to will the tension from his body.

The pace of events had simply spiraled out of control, and much of that was his own fault. There was a danger in pulling strings without knowing exactly where they were attached.

He tried to bury such thoughts and stretched his crooked spine. For a moment, in the darkness, he'd thought perhaps that he felt the tug of strings of which he was not the master.

28 July 1999
Re: assassins

FILE COPY

7/13 assassination of Maria Chin in Baltimore.

Courier reports---no sign of Ravenna/ Parmenides in Washington that night.

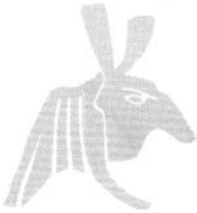
Seems likely our Assamite pawn responsible. Possible to steer Assamites against Sabbat? Colchester to press Lucita (Las.) plan with Pieterzoon. Her work might provoke response.

especially considering past interactions

Also - rumor of trouble at Five Boroughs Chantry

Distance ourselves from Assamites as possible, but don't make them angry.

Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 10:45 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



Elizabeth hiked last along the steep, winding trail. No clouds marred the night. The full moon shone so brightly overhead that none of the hikers had turned on their flashlights. Hesha appeared for a moment, above her, on a switchback of the path. She looked up at him, admiring the figure he cut as he moved—proud, silent, sure-footed—his skin gleaming blue-black and the whites of his eyes glowing like stars. He vanished beyond the curve. Thompson filed into view close behind, and Liz could see every gray hair silvered by the moonlight; she saw, and pitied, the bent back, the tired set of his shoulders. The Asp, lighter-stepping, stealthier, more sly in every movement, passed his partner at the turn. He pulled Ron's pack open, dug something out of it, and stuffed the item into his own gear. The older man marched more easily, and his thick hand reached up to Raphael's shoulder. The Asp pretended not to notice, and moved out of sight.

In front of Elizabeth, Pauline Miles kept steady pace. While it was hard to hear the Asp make his way along the path, it was difficult to see Pauline. She was short, thin, naturally dark, and her dull, dark-blue clothes blended easily with the shadows.

The track widened just after the bend, and the two women matched step for the last few yards. Their three companions had stopped ahead of them in a break between the trees. Pauline and Elizabeth caught up, found places opposite Ron and Raphael, and held their position quietly. Hesha waited, stock-still, for a full minute, and then moved across the meadow in a straight, unfaltering line.

Elizabeth brushed through clusters of some plant that smelled terribly sweet, and picked a branch from one to carry with her. She looked at their destination—another climb, she supposed—a majestic, tumbled mass of stone and forest rising above the shallow valley. Hesha was two-thirds of the way to the foot of it already.

"Liz—watch your laces," Pauline whispered.

Elizabeth stooped to one knee to tie her shoe. For a brief second, she felt a wave of heat. The earth beneath her hands felt more like asphalt than anything else. Liz blinked and saw stars—shook her head, and felt the ground again. Grassy, rooty soil. Her fingers dug in and found a worm, a few pillbugs—she knelt until her cheek nearly touched the dirt, and no scorching sensation came to her face. Liz rose in doubt and walked the rest of the way trying to see out of the corners of her eyes.

Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 11:09 PM
Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn
Baltimore, Maryland

"Any more Sabbat incursions near the city?" Jan Pieterzoon asked.

"No," answered Hans van Pel, Jan's current assistant, in crisp, clipped English. As always, he carried a small pad of paper and a pen, but Jan had never seen the man take notes. Which was just as well, since written records were more vulnerable to destruction or theft. Hans stored a multitudinous array of facts in his mind and exercised infallible recall. "There have been minor probes, but none have progressed past the outer perimeter that Mr. Bell has established near Fort Meade."

Jan nodded. The effectiveness of Bell's perimeter was aided immensely by the sudden spate of construction along massive swaths of northbound I-95, the Gladys Spellman Parkway, and other major arteries of traffic from Washington. Garlotte, via several government officials within his considerable sphere of influence, had had no trouble arranging for the overly ambitious projects by the Department of Transportation. Snarled, one-lane, bumper-to-bumper traffic was relatively easy to monitor, and from the mortal viewpoint, there was nothing unusual about the DOT closing and tearing up miles and miles of road more than it could ever work on at one time. "And the inner lines are prepared?"

"Yes. The second line at Baltimore-Washington International Airport, the third along the perimeter highway, and the fourth at the city limits are all as secure as possible."

Jan began to slide through his fingers two of the bullets that had been lodged in his body and which had popped out when the wounds healed. His assistant did his best to ignore the grating sound of the metal slugs.

"Speaking of Mr. Bell," van Pel continued, "the increased resistance he met on his latest raid into Washington suggests that the Sabbat forces are consolidating."

"Which seems to corroborate information from our source within the Sabbat high command that they are massing for an all-out assault on Baltimore." Jan caressed the smooth surface of the bullets, slid them over one finger, under the next.

A slight frown crept over Hans's features at mention of the mysterious informant. "Are you confident of the veracity of your source, sir?"

Jan's gaze focused on his assistant. "No."

Colchester, on the first night they had met, had briefed Jan about the assassin faux-ghoul who served the Lady Sascha Vykos but still reported to his Assamite masters via the Nosferatu. Jan was suspicious of the chain of information; not that Colchester would mislead him, but there were too many links, too many possible ulterior motives. If the information from that source, however, was confirmed by other reports...

"Bell's losses on the raid were relatively light," said van Pel. "And they were all Brujah, at any rate."

"We'll need all those Brujah when the time comes." Jan was amazed that Bell managed to withdraw from Washington with *any* of his forces. Several times, he'd pressed well within the Beltway and fought his way back out. Some losses were unavoidable, and Jan knew that he might as well try to bottle a hurricane as control the Brujah archon.

"And the refugee corps?" Jan asked.

"As Prince Garlotte decreed, the majority of those Kindred seeking shelter in Baltimore have been pressed into service—the price of sanctuary. The sheriff and Gainesmil have formed them into units, and they man the checkpoints along the inner perimeters. The Brujah and our friends from Chicago have been assigned the more sensitive and vital areas."

"Good." As the bullets clicked among his fingers, Jan could not chase a nagging thought from his mind. "Why attack Baltimore first?" he muttered to himself.

"Sir?"

"Why attack Baltimore first," Jan repeated, his gaze focused on some indeterminate point in the mid distance, "when they still have to worry about other points: Buffalo, Hartford, the Tremere in New York City? Why not pick off the others, then bring their full weight to bear on Baltimore. That's what I'd do."

"They didn't have much trouble so far just marching up the coast," van Pel suggested.

"But none of the princes were expecting such massive assaults. We've had time to fortify now, while the Sabbat consolidated its gains."

"Perhaps," said Hans, "they'd rather attack the defenses here than face the Gangrel at Buffalo."

"Possibly." Jan removed his glasses and rubbed the tiny red marks on his nose. "And Xaviar might be close enough to support Hartford if it were attacked."

Talk of Hartford raised other concerns in Jan's mind. His overtures to the Giovanni in Boston had met with lukewarm response. Representatives of that incestuous clan were willing enough to talk with him, but with the outcome of the East Coast war so definitely up in the air, they were quite unwilling to support the Camarilla. Granted, the Giovanni refusals were couched in such diplomatic language as to seem practically to agree with Jan's requests. But they would not endanger themselves for the Camarilla. They had not survived as an independent clan for so long by choosing sides. *If it comes to it*, Jan thought, *I might have to point out to them that, eventually, not to choose the Camarilla is to choose the Sabbat. If they're not with us...*

"Sir, is there anything else?"

Jan waved away his assistant. "Inform Baas that I am not to be disturbed for the rest of the night, unless the prince or Archon Bell call."

With that, Hans van Pel, efficient to a fault, was gone. The full weight of ominous responsibility was upon Jan again, and he had no desire to discuss more details unless absolutely necessary. Baas, the head of security now that Herman and Ton were dead, would see to Jan's privacy. The replacement entourage had been in place for over a week. In addition to van Pel, there were four clerks—all five satisfied Jan's dietary needs. And, of course, there was Anton Baas and the fifteen members of his security team. Prince Garlotte had not gone so far as to say anything about the additional armed presence. How could he, after Jan briefed him in detail regarding the assassination attempt? But the

number of the prince's guards on the premises of the inn had conspicuously increased as well—a response either to the attack on Jan, or to Jan's additional personnel.

Surely Garlotte can't believe that I present a threat to him, or that I want to take his city, Jan thought. Although, the more he thought about it, the more wistful he grew. The trials of a prince, of ruling over a single city, would be child's play compared to the burden Hardestadt had laid on Jan's shoulders: dealing with various princes, each habitually consumed by his own needs and desires; trying to keep abreast of the secretive activities of Clan Tremere, which had seemed strangely passive through the crisis thus far; puzzling out the motives driving certain loose cannons, like Theo Bell and Victoria Ash.

The mere thought of Victoria made Jan's chest involuntarily constrict. He couldn't help but picture his hands on her slim waist. He saw the pain and fear in her eyes when he'd noticed the mark on her jaw.

She is marked by the Tzimisce, he thought. *Is she their pawn?* He couldn't be sure—Colchester had watched her for a few nights, but there was too much to be done elsewhere—but the mere suspicion was excuse enough for him to stay away from her, to keep sufficient distance between them so that he didn't have to contend with urges he hadn't felt since... Since many years ago and his turbulent relationship with Lucita.

Lucita. There was a name Jan had long since hardened his heart against. Victoria was infinitely more vulnerable than Lucita. Besides *wanting* Victoria, he wanted to protect her, to watch over her. These emotions that Victoria evoked were different from what he'd felt for Lucita, but similar in that Jan didn't want to feel any of them. Eternal existence was fraught with enough pain and disappointment without the additional inconvenience of such sentimental weaknesses, which were more the hallmark of mortals.

Jan's suspicion of Victoria, the fact that she might somehow, with or without her knowledge, be under the sway of the Sabbat, was justification for avoiding her altogether. Victoria's having moved out of the inn a week and a half ago made the task of avoiding her that much easier. Since the attack, Jan had kept to the inn and under the close eye of Baas and his security brigade. Jan hated to think how difficult that confinement could have been, how disconcerting to have known that Victoria was just at the other end of a long corridor. But, thankfully, she had left. She and Garlotte had argued about something, and she had stormed out to set up house with Robert Gainesmil. Jan wasn't sure whether to be grateful to or envious of the Toreador architect who had inherited Victoria's proximity.

More consequential, however, were the implications of her departure's timing. She had left the night after the assassination attempt on Jan. *Is there a connection?* he wondered. His suspicions rose to fill every crevice of doubt, but was this justified, or merely his own attempt to crowd out any other feelings he harbored for Victoria? He couldn't be sure. He seemed incapable of purely rational thought where this woman was concerned.

Better not to think of her at all.

Jan rose to his feet and was relieved in a way when the stiffness and ragged pain of his ankle suddenly consumed his thoughts. He'd fed repeatedly since his new entourage had arrived from Amsterdam, but it was simply not feasible for him to consume the amount of blood required to make him whole. Besides, there was no time for the surgery required—that would *still* be required at some point—to align properly his broken bones. So for now, he hobbled. The first few steps were always the worst, or if he remained on his feet for very long at a stretch the pain became disagreeable. At times like this, however, when

certain thoughts dogged him, thoughts he didn't want to face, Jan found the distraction useful.

He hobbled to the door of the smallest of the bedrooms attached to the suite. "Estelle," he said quietly as he entered.

She didn't lift her head, but he knew that she heard him. Her dark, shoulder-length hair was lustrous in the sparse light. Jan had washed her hair, had washed her, with warm soapy water and a soft washcloth, just last night. He had caressed her body with expensive lotions. Their subtle fragrances still lingered in the room. And though his attentions had soothed her, Hans reported that she'd done no more than lie on the bed and sob throughout the day. Again.

"My Estelle," said Jan. He brushed the hair from before her face, gently removing the strands that stuck to the tracks of her tears. This was an intimacy he'd never allowed himself with Marja. "I will protect you," he whispered to her. His lips were mere inches above her ear, above her delicate neck, her increasingly pale skin.

Why do I do this? he asked himself. Hans and the others were more than sufficient to feed upon, yet Jan came back to this poor, frightened girl time and again. Prince Garlotte had been less than pleased; an elaborate story of a prize vacation, an in-house lottery, had been devised for her family. But the prince had humored Jan. *It's a small thing*, Jan knew, *but one that Garlotte can hold over me*.

Why do I do this?

Instead of answering the question, Jan buried his face in her silky hair. He could smell the salt of her tears and hear, louder than thunder, the beating of her heart.

KR



Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 11:15 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Hesha approached an opening under a tilted rock, peered inside, and then confidently beckoned to the others. He led them around and to the right, pulled up and over a sizable boulder, and looked down into a passage the width of a city sidewalk and the height of two men. A wall of rock had long ago split in two. The forces that had riven it had forced the pieces closer together at the top, wider apart at the bottom, forming an irregular tunnel sloping down into the earth. The floor was dirt and rubble washed in by water. The walls sported moss and small plants only so far as light might enter the crack.

The Setite observed all this without pausing. He turned on his light and led the others into the hill. One by one, four lamps clicked on behind him.

At the end of the descent, the tunnel opened out into a large, ungainly chamber. The five lights—very small and dim in comparison to the dark expanse they had to contend with—played over the billowing curves of the cave. Elizabeth recognized the smooth, weird shapes of water-cut and water-built limestone. She fanned her flash's beam out as far as it would go, and turned it on the ceiling, which soared to the right past the limit of the light. To her left, it swooped down to within four feet of the floor. A bizarre combination of claustrophobia, agoraphobia, and vertigo washed over her. She looked to her footing, sharpened the focus again, and tried to keep the light on the same level as her eyes. The others stepped out, each taking a slightly different route to avoid the stalagmites and columns jutting up from the floor. Hesha picked his way to a narrow, nearly invisible opening and the team followed—though it was a tight and difficult squeeze for Thompson.

On the other side was a disturbingly familiar chamber. Elizabeth felt as though she had walked into a natural chapel, the cave's roof vaulted like a cathedral's. More stalactites, stalagmites, and columns had formed here than in the first room, and the largest of them formed two uneven lines, like rows of pillars in a ruin. The few formations down the center of the room lay low; pillows, rope coils, and buttons dotted the gently rolling floor, and the icicles and curtains suspended from the ceiling hung no lower than the tops of the pillars on either side.

"Wait here," said Hesha. His voice echoed. He lowered it, and went on: "The professor will be easier for me to handle by myself. I don't care to have him harmed by one of you," he said, glancing toward the Asp, "even by accident, and I do not want any of you shot or burned by him in an attempt on me."

Elizabeth clambered up and found a damp seat on a stone stump. She watched as Hesha picked through one of the packs, strapped a large and heavy rubberized-canvas sack to his back, and set out across the "chapel." He traversed the slippery, rounded terrain without a misstep, selected a deep shadow in the right rear corner of the cave, and headed unswervingly toward it. By the moving shadows, she realized that what she had taken for the back wall of the cathedral must be a freestanding column of enormous size. She squinted to see better.

Hesha reached the side passage he had chosen and turned back to look at the giant pillar himself. His lamp caught the thing in sharp profile, and Elizabeth gasped. For an instant, the side-lit formation had seemed to move; an optical illusion gave it a hundred monstrous faces and distorted limbs. The Setite moved on and darkness settled on the far end of the cavern once more, but Liz dropped off her perch. She knew that ghastly image; she had seen it last in a mural under a tenement in Calcutta. She popped the filter off the powerful lens in her hand, and started running along the "aisle" of the chapel.

The hot halogen bulb flooded the huge hall with light. It stripped the shadows away from the pillar and threw them into the corners of the room. It picked out dirt and rust imprisoned under the translucent calcite film. But the faces were gone. Elizabeth studied the surface of the hundred-headed demon—of the natural, two-story, stone pillar that must have grown for eons and stood for millennia—and tried desperately to find an angle from which she might see the faces again. The harshest light refused to bring out the contours that could have fooled her eye. The softest light, filtered again, as Hesha's lamp had been, failed to duplicate the conditions. Thompson, confused but willing to help, took the flash and stood where Liz thought their employer had been, and though she returned to the stump and called out directions to him, the faces never reappeared in the stone.

Ron came back, curious and slightly worried. He asked, "What was it?"

"I thought I saw something."

"Moving?" The Asp jumped in.

"No. Just... there."

Elizabeth said nothing more, and Thompson stayed by her while Raphael and Pauline went off to search the room for more practical things, like exits. Their voices ricocheted up and around and back to Ron and Liz's ears, and the girl flinched.

"You've got a feeling about something?" The old cop asked softly.

She grimaced. "No. It's just... the echoes... sounded as though there were more than four people in here. Can we go back to the first cave?"

"Sure," said Thompson, and they jumped down off their stumps together.



Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 11:22 PM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

Hesha followed the trail of the red eyestone easily—almost smugly, with a full-belly kind of contentment. The bead around his neck seemed to tug him along the track, and the sensation of cool, carved, blood-colored chalcedony hovered like a beacon when his steps aligned with the correct direction.

The Setite savored the potential for triumph. He had nothing, yet, and he knew the danger of assuming victory before the battle had been fought—but by night's end, he might have accomplished his goal. It was *possible* that the Eye would be Set's by daybreak. It was *possible* that his quest would end, and that was an astonishing possibility.

He cherished, too, the confrontation ahead. Hesha could admit to himself that he looked forward to seeing Jordan Kettridge again. The young man—no, not so young, he realized—was an unusual specimen. Rarely did Hesha encounter a mortal so hardheaded, so unshakable. Kettridge could be won over, but not bought. He could be convinced by evidence, but not turned by anything Hesha could find to tempt him. Any mortal could be broken, of course, but they were of so little use afterwards. So for the past sixteen years, Hesha had made Kettridge's career into something of a hobby. The Setite amused himself by funding Jordan's work, supplying him with grants and minor clues to support the archaeologist's theories. He smoothed over governmental difficulties, kept the academic wolves at bay, and used his influence to help the professor obtain any visa to any nation he wished.

Someday, he might tell Jordan all that he had done for the man—but he liked the picture of a dead Kettridge standing before Osiris (if Osiris ever regained proper control of the underworld again), faced with the feather of Ma'at, reciting the list of his deeds, being questioned by the gods about his relationship to a Child of Set called Hesha Ruhadze, and giving, innocently, all the wrong answers.

The red line fell to a level below. Hesha wedged himself into the corners of a ladder-like, easily climbed chimney, and descended carefully to the slick stone beneath.

He found a dead end.

In a den-shaped space the size of a double bed, a man's body lay prostrate on the rock. The Setite braced himself for what might come, and touched the outflung arm of the ragged figure. His fingers gripped flesh as cold as stone, but not rigid. An old corpse? It smelt very dead, but the texture of the skin suggested withering flesh beneath, not the corruption of the grave. A Cainite—dormant or meeting Final Death in a way Hesha had never seen before.

The Setite swung his light around to examine the carcass. The stick-thin, haggard shape was bare-chested but wore loose trousers, sneakers, and a belt. Filth, caked mud, and dried gore hid the original colors of his clothes and encrusted most of the body. More significantly, to Hesha's mind, an old swath of something paler overlaid the other stains like a sash. The fat-yellow stream began at the man's swollen, ravaged left eye socket and

dripped down his face, neck and shoulder as if a tallow candle had melted out of the blinding wound. Some of it still glistened as if fresh, and new drops of the stuff had fallen onto the cave floor as though the candle had been wrested from the corpse very recently.

Hesha leaned over the body and picked up the red eyestone. He held the bead between his palms and attuned himself to it for a moment, then attached it to the cord that held the white eye and the amulet. He retraced his steps as far as the top of the chimney, turned completely around twice, and realized that he had a new problem. The white stone was as good as a bloodhound for tracking the red ones. The red one around his neck felt the call of the Eye itself, gave a location, and general bearings—but only as the crow flew. In the labyrinths of a limestone cave, Hesha could not walk a straight line toward the source.

The Setite pulled out a compass and his phone.

"Either the professor is being very, very clever," he said to his team, "or we're dealing with someone else altogether. Someone more dangerous. There is a dormant Cainite here. The prize is gone, but there's no sign of a struggle. How our friend might have managed that, I don't know, but he has the object we are looking for. I want you to have the backup team come up and cover the cave entrance. They are to prevent any other persons from entering the caverns. If our subject tries to leave, allow him to do so, but alert me immediately, have him trailed, and keep him closely guarded. Do not, on any account, fire on him.

"In the meantime," Hesha continued, "you and the others are to split into even groups and begin a search for our friend. His position at the moment is to my southwest, up roughly eighty feet, and half a mile away. From the point at which I left you, I approximate him to be due west, forty feet above you, and just under a mile away. Concentrate in that area and mark everyone's feet before you go. I will contact you again if I scent any of your paths or if our target alters his position."

SW



Wednesday, 28 July 1999, 11:59 AM
Cathedral of St. John the Divine
New York City, New York

The sculptor sagged before his work. Deep inside the mountain, he had worked nonstop while Anatole the Prophet watched him. The artist had thought himself alone with his materials, but Anatole knew that they had watched him too.

His work was a little universe. Or perhaps a gateway to a larger one.

Blood of wolf, eye of mongoose, soul of wizard, all molded by the hands of a wizard directed by a dove and a dragon. They had hidden him as well, for his truest master yet searched for him.

Had he hidden himself in the creation?

The master who had no part of this creation, who deserved no part, would find the artist soon. Should Anatole care?

He must. This creation had to be found, and though Anatole could see it, though he could feel it, he could not see the way.

The sculptor had become his work. All artists create themselves over and over in their work, and a piece of every part of them goes into it as well. This rock… it was kin to legion. A prophet to the immortal wizards. A shrine and graveyard to the wolves. Both—all—looking only as deep as until what they saw was familiar. Then they stopped.

Anatole had never had that privilege. Never been able to stop when still comfortable. Always delving deeper than what he should see. Or was meant to see. And then forced to trace those patterns on a brain immortal but still of flesh.

Familiarity. Connections. The blood was coursing from the mountain in an artery as vast as the tunnel through a mountain. And it stretched vast distances. The mongoose around the world. The dragon fish nearby.

That was the answer!

The music of the spheres played for them all.

Would these connections fade? An ancient man could not judge gunpowder.

So many ingredients already. Was there room for more? Would the pleas of the wolves be too loud and drown out the messages? Or could they be tamed?

Was the wizard a seductress? It had been through carnal charms that she continued her life. Such as it was. Would she do the same to reclaim it as it had been?

The dove flew.

The white dog ran.

The black asp slithered.

The mongoose's child danced.

They ran so many paths, crisscrossing so many different places and times. Which was to be Anatole's route?

And if this, a solution to this simple puzzle, remained so vague, then what chance did he have to know the dragon?

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 12:30 AM
The Plaza Hotel
New York City, New York

Nickolai held the beaten copper bowl before him at arm's length. The severed digit drifted lazily atop the coagulating liquid. He squinted one eye and sighted along the line of the finger's point. North by northeast. Deeper into the mountains.

Like a hawk catching sight of its prey, Nickolai dove headfirst into the questing. The luxurious hotel room fell away forgotten behind him. The spurting pain in his hand—the rhythmic backbone of the ritual—was all that anchored him to his physical form.

So far he had little to show for his efforts. A series of frustrating attempts to reestablish contact with his own kind had led him here, to New York City. It was like starting over from scratch. House Goratrix was an insular order; Nickolai had few close ties outside his brethren. He knew that attempting to contact anyone who knew him too well might quickly turn into a death sentence for everyone concerned.

In the end, he had called an old business partner, someone who could be persuaded to help him. But afterward, Benito Giovanni, too, had gone missing. Nickolai should have been able to find him, but the trail had grown suddenly and ominously cold. Nickolai feared the worst. The very possibility that the enemy might have taken Benito made it absolutely imperative that Nickolai find the one Kindred who bound them together.

He must be close now. The blood did not lie. He slipped deeper into vision. The very light on this remote mountainside had taken on an unhealthy aspect. It was far too white, too glaring for the reflected glow of moonlight. It reminded Nickolai of the piercing white of hospital or sanitarium—an obvious and futile attempt to hold back the encroaching darkness of death and madness.

He could feel the weight of that light pressing down upon him, slowing his ascent up the mountainside. It was like walking underwater. The membrane of light shifted to anticipate and resist his every movement.

Still he struggled up the exposed rock face. He tried to keep to the infrequent trees, if only for the brief moments of shade and respite they offered. But the light seemed to come at him from all directions at once, as if the mountain were blanketed in a luminescent fog. It seemed to Nickolai that the glare brightened near the mountain's peak. There was no hint of the ruddy glow of sunrise catching the summit. Rather, the light grew paler, harsher, white-hot. Nickolai found himself thinking of the desert wastes near the Mexican border, of shallow roadside graves, of moonlight on bleached bones.

Nickolai stumbled, but retained his balance. The ground here was broken, craggy. Jagged shards of rock seemed to rise up suddenly to block his path. He gingerly picked his way over and around these obstacles, wondering at the cataclysmic forces that had, in ages past, so violently thrown these mountains heavenwards. Judging from the jumble of boulders littering the rock face, many of these throws must have fallen a bit short of their mark.

Perhaps it was a trick of this infuriating light, but as he struggled toward the summit, Nickolai began to think that the tumble of granite was taking on more recognizable shapes. Here was surely a great obelisk toppled from its pedestal. There, a collapsed bridge spanned a dizzying fall into the luminous mist below. There again, a great flat table of granite, large enough to feast several score of guests.

Nickolai found himself absently wondering where the guests had rushed off to in such a hurry and why they were so long away from their feast. Many of their seats were overturned and their food had grown stone cold.

As he progressed, the tumble of rock littering the mountainside seemed to grow more regular, as if some hidden pattern were struggling to assert itself over the landscape. Nickolai could not help noticing and then admiring the artful arrangement of the stones. There was a hand at work here, an artistic eye. He could plainly read the devotion of some unseen groundskeeper.

Without any hint of apprehension or distaste, Nickolai now realized he was among the precisely ordered headstones of some forgotten cemetery. He paused, head cocked to one side, listening for the telltale whispers among the tombstones—the litany of the dead, repeating to themselves endlessly their same discourse: names, dates, deeds.

But the stones were strangely silent. They held their peace.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 12:41 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



Ron Thompson slid warily down a steep incline. It was scattered with loose stones and extremely treacherous. He knew this because he had spent the last half hour climbing carefully up it to see whether the shadow at the top led anywhere.

"Blind alley," he said to his partner. "Let's go back to the junction and try the center."

Liz had tried to move like the Asp. She now discarded the example and tried moving like Pauline Miles, and felt better. Bare rock to bare rock—loose stone was bad; it slipped under your shoes—avoiding damp places and pools—she could still hear herself, but not so loudly as Thompson's heavy footsteps.

The middle way went nowhere, but quickly. The crevasse at the end of it was too wide and deep for them to cross; logic argued that Kettridge could not have crossed it either, and they returned to the junction. The first of the left-hand holes descended. They believed they were still underneath Kettridge's level, so they took the second. An hour later, mentally exhausted by the vast variety of hiding places in the honeycomb they had just explored, they turned to the down-slope. That, at least, was wide, smooth, and easy to walk along.

It looked as though it would dead end in a pit, but Thompson flashed his light around the bottom of the tunnel, found another shadow he couldn't explain, and the two of them scuttled down into it. The light revealed the shadow as more streambed; they crawled beneath the low but narrow, knife-like knee of the ceiling, and stood up in a chimney with a near-perfect ladder wall rising higher than the lights would reach.

Thompson clipped his flash to his chest and started the ascent. He pointed, ordering Elizabeth to another route, not directly beneath his. She took hold of a ledge, got her feet beneath her, and mounted the steep stairs. Reach, step, reach, step…

Her light bothered her, her fingertips chafed on the rough stone, and her jeans weren't as loose, climbing, as they had seemed while hiking. Liz began to lag behind. She looked over at Ron, realized he had two full lengths on her. While she watched, he stopped moving straight up and started pulling himself forward—he'd reached the top. Elizabeth grinned and picked up the pace. Twelve feet to go, at the most.

Sounds from above:

"K—"

Spang. Thwack. Thud.

Elizabeth froze.

"Shit." A man's voice—familiar, but not Thompson's.

"Liz—" Thompson, sounding strange.

She fairly ran the last eight feet to the top, slipping twice in her haste, pushing her head over the top without thought for the consequences. Thompson lay there, twisted to one side, lying in a curled, half-fetal position. His right hand, speckled with sticky crimson, touched the blunt end of a

golden-brown stake in his chest. Liz shoved her light above the edge and saw another man—Jordan Kettridge—running to and kneeling at, the body of her friend.

"You're a rotten shot," said Thompson angrily. "Feels like all lung."

Jordan choked. "I thought he'd come alone. Oh, shit. Ron… I dropped the aim when I saw it was you, I swear to God… but the trigger—"

"Save it, Jordan." Ron coughed, and Elizabeth swarmed up beside him. She held his head off the ground and tried to keep his body still. Tears poured down her face. She fumbled frantically with the buttons of her phone.

"Wait," Ron groaned. "Stop. Don't call him."

Elizabeth misdialed, cleared, and started over. "He might be able to *help* you—" she pleaded. "You told me, he healed you after the snake bites—"

"Maybe he'll heal me. Maybe he'll kill me." Thompson looked up at her, trying to explain. "He wants to replace Vegel." His glance caught Kettridge's, and the younger man looked away. "I thought I wanted that. Since then—" He gasped, and a little more blood spilled from the edge of the wound. "I know that I don't. But I don't think… that Hesha… will just let anyone go…."

His hand closed over Elizabeth's. She let the phone fall into her lap.

"Let me tell you something," he said gently. "You think he cares about you? You haven't seen him lie enough. I thought there was something to him. Then I saw how he manipulated you. I don't believe much of him anymore… I don't want anymore to be like him…." His voice trailed off like a sleepy child's, and his eyes shut for a moment.

Then, wide-eyed and suddenly stronger, he asked, "You love him?" Elizabeth's eyes shifted uneasily. "You don't really love him. His blood—their blood—does things to people. One sip, you care about them. Two, you love them. Three drinks makes a slave out of you. That's how *he* put it, little sister."

"I haven't—"

"You have. *Twice*." Ron's voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "The hangover cure, that night in New York." She opened her mouth to protest, but the dying man overran her. "Then, in Calcutta, I caught him feeding it to you while you were in that trance, telling stories…. Two drinks, Liz.

"I've lied to you, too, of course. You start to do that, around him… for the best of reasons. But I'm just a liar, Liz. The Asp is a cat burglar and an assassin. And Hesha's a vampire, no matter what fancy words he puts over it or whose definition you use. *He's* the thing from the late show. So don't call him. Give me a quiet grave, first."

Thompson rolled a little, toward Jordan Kettridge, and his lined, fading face fairly begged. "Get her away from him," he whispered. "Get the hell out of here. Leave the Eye… just don't risk yourself or her… get Liz away…."

His hand pulled Elizabeth down to him, and she wrapped her arms around him tightly. "Ron… please… we'll get an ambulance…."

"They're gonna airlift me out of a cave?" he tried to joke. He coughed again, and this time blood spilled freely from his mouth. "Don't worry, little sister. I'm getting away. Watch me run. Watch me—"

Ronald Thompson ran out of his life smiling, with his eyes fixed on Elizabeth's face.

Kettridge covered the old cop's face, and Elizabeth hung her head, crying bitterly. Jordan walked away and left her alone for a long time.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 1:12 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York



"Miss Dimitros..." Kettridge approached the kneeling woman cautiously.

"Yes," she answered, dully.

"I am sorry. Ron and I... were friends, a long time ago. If he had wanted Hesha—"

Elizabeth turned her head to look at him. "That's easy to say now."

"I mean it." His gray-green eyes locked on hers, and she discovered sincerity there.

"What now?"

"If you will let me, I'll try again for Ruhadze."

"To kill him?"

"Yes." Jordan nodded, adding, "and to destroy the Eye for good. There's a way out uphill from here. If I can stake the vampire, I'll be leaving by it. If I can't, I'm going to die here," he said calmly. "You can go now, if I can trust you not to warn him."

Liz took a deep breath and let go of Thompson's cooling hand. "I want to help you."

"Are you sure?" Elizabeth nodded vigorously, and stood up. She took a gun off Thompson's hip, and Kettridge stepped back, despite himself. "Then call him. Tell him something... convincing."

Liz stared at her phone. Hesha's number—she dialed it in, and waited.

"Yes," answered the rich, deep voice she remembered.

Elizabeth looked down at Thompson. *No names*, she thought. *I could use his name and warn him*— "Hello."

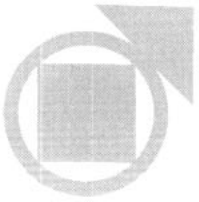
Somewhere in the labyrinth, Hesha paused. For the woman to call was unusual. "Report," he said guardedly.

"We found a campsite. My partner is looking it over; we think you should take a look. Without the supply you're carrying," she said, thinking of the sack of wet Ganges mud, "he's afraid to go into the bags."

"Why are you making the contact?"

"The phone wouldn't work in the area. There may be too much rock between you and it—or the object may be there and interfering. He sent me back to the last junction to try." She gave detailed directions and then cut the call off. Kettridge laid a hand on her shoulder, led her around a corner, and set her down by a backpack and rolled-up sleeping bag. *A campsite*, she thought in surprise. *True enough*. Then the professor dragged Thompson's body out of sight of the chimney, cocked and loaded a crossbow, and settled in for a wait.

EG



Thursday, 29 July 1999, 1:58 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

A cloud passed before the moon and the rows of tombstones vanished from Nikolai's sight, replaced with the more mundane jumble of broken boulders that littered the ascent. Far away, in a luxurious hotel room near Central Park, Nickolai's body deftly shifted the bowl he was carrying to his right hand and sketched a complex sigil in the air with his left.

He caught himself in the act and cursed his own foolishness in a long-forgotten tongue. In the many lifetimes since his demise, he had never quite managed to shake the ridiculous superstitions of his mortal life. It was tenacious peasant magic. A thaumaturgy of dung and onions. To Nickolai's embarrassment, no amount of sophistication could quite suppress it. No true power could shout it down.

Perhaps it was another trick of the light or the lingering grip of visions, but it seemed that the tracery of his fingers hung there before him in midair. Nickolai scrutinized the familiar glyph.

The sign against the Evil Eye.

With greater deliberation, he pricked the tip of his index finger with his thumbnail and retraced the symbol in blood. The delicate network of lines devoured the precious vitae and then blazed suddenly to life.

Elsewhere, high within the Adirondacks, another aspect of Nickolai took a step backward in alarm and nearly fell over the nearest tombstone. He caught himself in time to see the last of the flaming remains of the glyph gently raining down upon the rocks below.

The moon, drawing back its cloudy veil, fixed him with an accusing stare. He could not abide the intensity of her visage and quickly turned away. He thought for a moment that he caught a glimpse of a retreating gossamer form among the tombstones. Nearby he heard the trickling laughter of a brook fleeing down the mountainside. Resolutely, he turned his back upon the snares and distractions of the night and began the last leg of his ascent.

The path between the tombstones (boulders, he reminded himself) led him to the lip of a precipice. He was very near the summit and looking down into a wide depression, a hollow carved out by an ancient spring. The floor of this bowl was crowded with crude obelisks of rock jutting up at improbable angles. It was as if the entire floor of the hollow had been pierced from below by uncounted spear thrusts from an angry mountain god. Disturbed, no doubt, in the midst of his stony sleep. Nickolai was envious of the slumbering god. Each night, he grappled with the temptation to sink into the earth's arms and surrender himself to her embrace and stony sleep. To be free of the dangers of the Final Nights, of the manipulations and covert dangers of the Jyhad. Of the hunters, and of the hunters of hunters. To sleep, to forget, perchance to be forgotten.

But Nickolai was the last and he now must bear the responsibilities of his House. Alone. He scanned the broken ground for a likely avenue of descent.

Not far from where he stood, one of the mammoth obelisks had fallen like a lightning-struck oak. It leaned drunkenly against the wall of the precipice, its tip extended well above Nickolai's own height. It should be possible, Nickolai thought, to descend its sloping side to the floor of the depression.

As he neared the fallen giant, Nickolai began to get a sense of its great age. Its sides were pitted with evidence of the slow passage of trickling water and years. He thought immediately of stalagmites and stalactites. He had never, however, seen such intricately carved columns of rock above ground before. He would have thought that the indiscriminate hand of the rain would obliterate all such delicate chiselwork.

Nickolai put one foot upon the great column of rock to ensure that it would not shift under his weight. Unlikely, he thought. If the giant were in the least bit unbalanced, it would have collapsed long ago under its own mass.

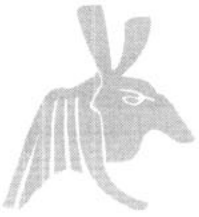
He looked to the spot where the pillar had impacted and settled into the wall of the precipice and was surprised to see newly broken earth. It was as if the impact of the colossus had taken place a matter of days ago rather than of centuries. Nickolai put his hand to the stone and ran his fingers across the deeply gouged surface. Was it his imagination or was the stone warm? For a brief moment, it seemed the stone still trembled slightly as with the remembrance of its precipitous flight through the earth's surface, its first glimpse of sky and the impact of its calamitous fall to earth once more.

Nickolai shook his head as if to banish such nonsense, but he could not quite shake the picture of the angry mountain god, awakened from its slumber.

There were other powers, Nickolai thought as he picked his way down the treacherous slope, that slumbered deep beneath the earth. Dark powers. Angry powers.

It occurred to him that he might be traipsing barehanded into the lair of just such a mountain god. He searched back through his memory for tales or stories of the taming of a mountain, in the vain hope that he might find some efficacious weapon.

KR



Thursday, 29 July 1999, 2:09 AM
Adirondack State Park
Clinton County, New York

After nothing for almost an hour, a sound from the chimney:

A faint, scraping footfall.

Kettridge turned, aimed, and fired. *Spang. Thwack. Thud.* He loaded another stake into the bow, then flashed Thompson's bright, unfiltered light at the prone figure by the stair edge. The body lay still. Elizabeth joined him at the corner, checking the color of Hesha's skin. It was fainter and grayer than the tone he affected while waking. It was, in fact, the shade she remembered from the dream of his death, and the night in Calcutta when he let his illusion go. The tattoo stood out in the flash.

Liz crept forward and tried to lift the body. It came up all in one piece, rigid and stiff as a board. Hesha's eyes complained to her, and she looked quickly away.

Jordan Kettridge lowered the crossbow. He brought Hesha into the center of the chamber he'd used as a camp, and pulled a clear, zip-lock bag from a pack at his waist. It bulged with pale goo and an eyeball the size of a baseball. He laid it down three feet from Hesha's corpse.

"We're leaving." He shoved Liz back down the passage, threw his backpack on, and started running up a side path. He took a gray metal box with three lights and four buttons from the same pack that had held the artifact, armed it with the first button, pressed a second, and glanced back to see fire and rockfall consume the room behind them. He turned up another corridor, and started running, nudging the girl along whenever she faltered. He pressed one and three, and the passage they had just left collapsed. At the end of the tunnel, a tiny hole led out into moonlight. Liz scrambled through, while Kettridge shoved his pack ahead of him and fell out headfirst.

The slope under them was grassy and steep, and they ran down to the valley floor in minutes. Breathing heavily, falling down under the weight of his bag, Jordan triggered the last charge, and half the hill seemed to shake and fall in on itself.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 3:43 AM
Seasons Restaurant, Bostonian Hotel
Boston, Massachusetts



The night could end only in disaster. That much Chas Giovanni knew. Isabel expected him to accompany Genevieve Pendleton in her discussion with the Camarilla's diplomat, Jacques Gauthier. Pendleton was dead, Gauthier was pompous, Isabel hadn't made the diplomat very welcome when they last met, and Chas wanted to tear the guy in half on principle.

In the interests of keeping things from becoming a complete cluster fuck, Chas had kept his involvement fairly low key. Isabel hadn't called him, which meant that the Milliners had assumed that she was taking care of things after they'd received Pendleton's resignation, and hadn't bothered her. The best thing for him to do was…

Well, was what? Buy time? Wing it? Tell Gauthier to fuck himself? Chas had to meet with the guy—he didn't have Gauthier's contact information to postpone the meeting—but he didn't know what the Giovanni's stance was going to be. Sure, he had an *idea* after speaking with Isabel, but he didn't know any of the finer details, and "Screw you, we're going to stay neutral" didn't seem to be the best way to handle things.

Chas had decided that the best thing to do was meet with Gauthier and tell him that the Giovanni needed a bit more time to consider what they planned to do. After that, Isabel could handle it. With any luck, Chas would get off with only minor punishment for indirectly—well, all right, directly—fucking up the situation in the first place, by preventing it from becoming any worse.

But shit never went down like that, Chas knew. Something bad was bound to happen. He felt worry gnawing behind his hunger when he woke, shaved, and dressed for the evening. To be sure, he left his pistol and brass knuckles at the Milliners' guesthouse where he stayed and didn't bother to take the sawed-off Louisville Slugger from the trunk of the car. If he didn't want a fight, it wouldn't work to look like he did, after all.

Jacques arrived early, which was a good sign. It showed that he took the matter seriously and cared more for the content of the meeting than he did for his own status. *Maybe this won't be such a problem after all*, Chas thought to himself. Still, Jacques and Chas hadn't exactly been pleasant to one another at their last meeting.

"Good evening, Mr. Gauthier," Chas greeted the emissary.

"Good evening, Mr. Giovanni," Gauthier replied in kind. "Where is the esteemed Miss Giovanni?"

"Something came up at the last minute and she was unable to reach you."

"I've been available all night. Every night, in fact, for the past two weeks. I even left her with information on how to leave a message for me during the day, should something strange have come up."

"I understand that, Mr. Gauthier, and I apologize." Chas wanted to go back to the name calling that had suited him when dealing with this prick earlier, but that wouldn't

have made things run any smoother. "She had left another representative of the clan"—not *too* far from the truth—"to attend this meeting, but something came up that made her unable to attend, too."

"I see. So, the original negotiator with whom I had spoken about our mutual concerns left, and put someone who couldn't attend our meeting in charge, thereby leaving only the bodyguard who sat in on the first meeting to handle the follow-up. A very indelicate solution, to be sure."

"Now, settle down; I'm not Isabel's bodyguard."

"Then what are you, Mr. Giovanni?"

"We're working on something else together."

"I beg your pardon?" Gauthier looked incredulous. He raised his eyebrows in a manner that suggested he'd be quite interested in hearing what could possibly be more important than a consultation with a Camarilla dignitary in the middle of a sect conflict.

"Something different. Not related to the Camarilla interest in Boston."

"Oh, I understand perfectly. Allow me to outline the situation as I see it. A member of your clan receives me and then decides that something else demands her time more than seeing the initial concern through. In her stead, she leaves a proxy, who also has business elsewhere. And the person who finally does deign to meet me to resolve the matter doesn't actually have anything to do with the situation in the first place. I'm afraid this doesn't look very good, Mr. Giovanni. At the very best, even if I determine that Clan Giovanni has not chosen to entertain Sabbat sympathies, it certainly has no intention of forging some arrangement with the Camarilla because it won't even lend their spokesmen an ear. Am I correct?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Chas felt himself grow embarrassed, and then angry. He knew how this looked, and knew he'd have to take a few jabs for it, but there was no need to keep escalating.

"Oh, not *exactly*? Well, then, Mr. Giovanni, please tell me *exactly* what sort of impression I am to draw from the current turn of events?"

"Look, man, I'm trying to tell you—"

"Don't presume such an informal relationship, Mr. Giovanni. I can assure you that even if I chose to ignore the utter disrespect you've obviously assumed for myself—which I haven't—I still would not overlook the fact that the collective Giovanni of Boston have such a low estimation of the Camarilla that they do not choose to treat it as a serious partner even when faced with the possibility of suffering harm at the hands of a mutual enemy. Whether or not you openly embrace our overtures, Mr. Giovanni, ignoring the threat posed by the Sabbat does not make it go away."

"Hey, you want to listen to me, here? I fucked up. This isn't Isabel's fault and it's not what the clan intended. I accidentally screwed up the situation with the woman who was supposed to talk to you, and I didn't know where to reach you. And rather than just no-showing or running with what I thought might be best, I just thought I'd tell you what happened."

"Ineptitude!"

"Hey, pal, sometimes things just go wrong. This is one of those times. Sorry it had to be you."

"As you should be. Do you have any idea—"

"Look, don't get all fucking sanctimonious. You don't want me to go back and tell everyone that you're getting all indignant, 'cause that might hurt your precious relationship or whatever you were just yammering on about." Chas couldn't resist the dig. Despite the fact that he had almost defused Gauthier, his temper refused to let him yield.

Gauthier once again looked shocked. He had apparently never been spoken to so plainly—at least not to his face—by anyone, especially someone who should by rights have taken a deferential attitude. "You had best stop while you're ahead, Mr. Giovanni. Before you do any more damage to this potentially explosive arrangement, I think you should hold your tongue."

"Don't talk down to me, you stupid motherfucker, or I'll give you the beatdown of your unlife. I apologized, Isabel will fix everything, so just shut the fuck up and let everything go back to normal." *What the fuck am I doing?* Chas wondered to himself, but he couldn't stop. Gauthier had pushed him too far—with just a few words! *Chas, fucking rein it in. You know he was going to be all prissy when you came here, so just let it go.*

But the voice in Chas's mind didn't have control—something else did. He wasn't saying anything he had been actively thinking; the uncontrollable part of him had roused from its sleep and taken over.

"Threats?" It was a statement, not a question. Jacques's voice had become ominously deep and his eyes focused into a stare. "I will not have you threaten me. Do you hear me, *boy*?" This last he punctuated with a snarl and a spit, his fangs jutting out, revealing him as the monster he truly was. Jacques's hands had become talons; his face twisted into a mask of rage.

Chas, overwhelmed, shrank away from Gauthier's withering display—

—for a brief second, before his own Beast snapped the chain on which it had been tethered. Balling his hands into fists, he charged Gauthier as visions of blood and murder spun through his mind.

Jacques proved to be too nimble, however, and spun quickly out of the way. Chas barreled past, knocking over a table, scattering the settings across the room. Gauthier looked over his shoulder, his eyes slits, a reedy laugh coming from his demoniacal mouth. Almost too fast for Chas to see, he sprinted toward the kitchen. Indeed, if Chas hadn't seen the door move, he wouldn't have known Gauthier had passed through it. Like an enraged animal, he followed, bursting through the door with enough force to hurl aside anyone who had waited behind it.

Fortunately, even the staff had left the restaurant by this time, or bodies would have surely littered the kitchen floor. The room was lit in a sterile white—which suddenly became darkness. Had Chas been able to think clearly, he would have guessed that Jacques could see in less light and turned off the lights to give himself an advantage. In his frenzied state, though, reason had left him and he rushed blindly at where he guessed the light switch to be. A great row of ranges and ovens stood to one side of him; to the other loomed a tall row of shelves stocked with oversized cans of food. Chas gave this second a heavy shove, toppling it and the one behind it like a series of dominoes. One by one, the entire kitchen's worth of shelves toppled to the floor. The cans and jars likewise fell, some shattering, others clanging loudly. As the last shelf fell, Chas saw a speed-blurred shape streak from behind it. A half-second later, he found a huge metal fork protruding

from his chest and he doubled over in momentary shock before jerking it out and spraying a gout of blood across the kitchen. Again the kitchen doors swung—Gauthier had bolted out of the room.

Chas roared and followed, perhaps foolishly, fork in hand. Still, Gauthier had drawn first blood, which only infuriated Chas all the more. Bursting back into the dining room, Chas saw the outline of Jacques's form, backlit by light that poured in from the outside. A pair of headlights.

Jacques Gauthier laughed once more. "You ignorant brute! You can't catch me, you know."

But Chas didn't need to be faster. Someone entered the front of the restaurant. Jacques looked over at the intruder in disbelief and Chas took full advantage of the opportunity. He dived at Gauthier with all his might, knocking over the hostess's podium. As he pinned Gauthier to the ground, he noticed another person outside, in addition to the one just beyond his peripheral vision. He could deal with them later.

Gauthier struggled beneath him, but Chas's strength was far superior. Over and over, he drove the heavy cooking fork down through Jacques's face, using the stabbing motions to punctuate his spoken hatred. "You... stupid... fuck! What... did... you... think... would... happen..."

Another voice cut him off in mid-stab and sentence.

"Don't move. Jessica! Spray him!"

A cold mist washed over Chas. He looked up in surprise, a snarl on his face. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Can't you fucking see I'm trying to kill this guy? Go away!"

The voice continued, unwavering, "Get thee behind me, Satan. Tempt not the Children of Seth, and return to the hell from which you were spawned!"

Beneath Chas, Gauthier bucked, taking his aggressor by surprise and throwing him off. Chas tumbled backward onto his haunches. Like a bolt, Gauthier was off into the night, leaving a viscous trail of blood-gobbets behind him.

"Goddamn it. God*damn* it. What is *wrong* with you? Now they're going to kick my ass over this!"

Another cold mist hit Chas in the face. "Creature of darkness! Thief of the living's blood! A walking affront to the righteousness of God!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, give it a rest! That doesn't work! Jesus, where do you people keep coming from? First Frankie's thing in New York and now this? Who the fuck are you?" Chas peered into the darkness and saw a pale glow outlining what must have been hands. The cold mist came from the left, where he saw a slighter shape wearing some bulky backpack.

"The holy water has no effect! Jessica, switch to the other tank!"

Chas heard a click, heard the hiss that accompanied the bursts of mist and smelled gasoline. "Oh, no you fucking don't," Chas growled and leaped toward the black outline with the glowing hands. He swung the kitchen fork upward, calling upon his hellish strength to carry it through. With a sickening wet slap sound, the fork traveled upward, through the unseen man's mandible, past his mouth and into the upper part of his head, breaking through the topmost bone of his skull like a bullet punching through sheet metal. A feeble noise came from the man, who immediately slumped forward into Chas's

arms. Chas dropped the man and whirled to face his other attacker—a short, thick woman holding some kind of spray gun. She must have bought it at a hardware store; it looked like the kind of thing someone would use to treat a yard with pesticides. The woman stood frozen, aghast at the death of her partner, and Chas slapped the clumsy nozzle from her hand.

"All right. What the fuck is this about?"

The woman only stammered.

"Hello? I'm talking to you, you crazy bitch. What, you can shoot me with holy water and set me on fire but you can't talk to me?" Chas shoved the woman backward, sending her asprawl over a small dinner table. The spray gun dangled uselessly aside. The woman's eyed gaped as big as saucers. She choked out some kind of simple, repetitive prayer, presumably for protection, but an answer didn't seem likely. "I'm fucking serious here. Who the fuck are you people? If you're vampire hunters, I think you need to do a little more homework next time, because that holy water crap doesn't work."

The woman kicked weakly as Chas advanced, her stout legs unable to turn back his greater strength. He slapped her on the thigh, sending her spinning sideways, and stopped her just as her head ended up before him.

"Now, are you going to give me a fucking answer or do I have to eat you?"

Still the woman protested weakly, too terrified by being so close to such a monster to summon her strength.

"Jesus, you freak, you'd rather die? Fine. Fucking have it your way."

Chas bit down as hard as he could, not even bothering to find a large vein or artery. The woman finally found her voice and shrieked, a long, shrill wail that could have shattered glass. When he had finally drained her to the point of collapse, he licked the wound and it sealed. With any luck, when whoever found this mess tried to put two and two together, they'd assume some sort of fight between two lunatics, one with a fork through his head and the other wearing an atomizer filled with bizarre liquids. Fuck 'em—it didn't scream *vampire!* and it was probably weird enough for the police to keep it quiet from the media.

With that, Chas adjusted himself as best he could and drove back to the Milliners' guesthouse. He'd have quite a job explaining himself to them and to Isabel—but that was best accomplished on another night.

As Chas drove away, Gauthier slunk from the shadows and sated himself on the woman's remaining blood. Then he fled into the night.

KR



Thursday, 29 July 1999, 5:00 AM
Heading south on Interstate 87
Near Albany, New York

In a rented car on its way to Manhattan, Jordan kept a close watch on his passenger. She wept some of the time, and she talked about Thompson, trying to arrange for herself the things she thought she knew about the man. She ranted at other moments, and though a fair amount of the anger came at Kettridge himself, she was most bitter and furious at Hesha. *She hates him*, thought the hunter. *She's definitely not still under his control.* With a great deal of relief, Jordan relaxed behind the wheel.

Hesha Ruhadze had died for the last time beside his victim, Ron Thompson. He would never haunt antique-shop assistants or obscure Berkeley anthropology professors again.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 9:12 PM
Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel
Baltimore, Maryland



The message at the front desk had been left by a Mister Schreck, which made Lucita roll her eyes. *Schreck* was German for "terror," as well as being the name of the actor who played the original cinematic vampire in the 1922 version of *Nosferatu*. In short, the note was simply an overly cute sewer rat's way of saying that he wanted to get in touch with her, and that he didn't mind having her know that he was Nosferatu.

Lucita graciously accepted the slip of paper from the desk clerk, made a show of reading it—*I'll call later*—and then tore it into shreds as she headed for the open elevator. She dropped the scraps into the ashtray as she entered the elevator car, which was blessedly empty.

The ride up to her floor was mercifully brief, which Lucita counted as a small favor. The fact that the Nosferatu had announced his presence meant business—well, either that or incredible arrogance, but that wasn't a trait most long-lived Nosferatu possessed. While she was already engaged on a contract—which was looking more complicated each night, as the Sabbat offensive washed over old havens and safe houses that she had spent decades establishing—she was by no means averse to lining up additional commissions. On the other hand, it might be that her coy contact had information to sell, which might well make her current job simpler.

The elevator slowed and halted, and Lucita strolled out onto the fourteenth floor. Her room faced north, giving it the maximum protection from sunlight, and the DO NOT DISTURB tag still hung from the door handle. She unlocked the door and glided in. The room was immaculate, and she kicked off her shoes and lay down on the too-soft mattress to await the inevitable Nosferatu contact. She'd discounted the notion of a trap almost instantly. The Camarilla had bigger problems than her at the moment, and it simply didn't make sense for them to expend the sort of resources it would take to neutralize her. Lucita had long ago matter-of-factly assessed the manpower necessary to eliminate her; taking that kind of power out of the front lines would cost the sect another city, minimum. By the same token, the Sabbat had larger concerns. She'd received information to the effect that her sire was taking a very personal interest in the entire American affair, and that was another surety of her safety from at least those vampires who reported to him. Cardinal Monçada would not look kindly on anyone who destroyed his childe.

Lucita realized that such logic didn't protect her from assaults launched by the foolish, the ignorant or the suicidal, but she was confident in her ability to protect herself from any and all of the above.

And if she was wrong? She'd been wrong before, very rarely, and endured. She'd endure this as well.

Precisely three minutes later, there came a knock at the door. "Miss? Room service," was the muffled call.

"Of course. I'll be right there." Lucita unwound from the bed and opened the door without looking through the peephole. She was eminently aware of who was waiting on the other side.

The young man with the dinner trolley looked distinctly uncomfortable in his uniform. "The dinner you ordered, miss," was all he said as he rolled the cart into the room. Lucita smiled without amusement.

"Please take that ridiculous disguise off—Mister Schreck? I would prefer that you were comfortable if we are going to conduct business."

The bellhop took a step back from the tray and bowed from the waist. When he stood back up, he was no longer a pleasant-faced young man, but a warty, bald man with a build like a linebacker's. He still wore the hotelier's uniform, which fit him about as well as one might expect, and the required cap sat jauntily on his bald and scarred pate. "Didn't want to scare the guests quite yet, miss. And I'll bet you say that to all the bellhops."

"The ones I have to dispose of later, yes. Are you volunteering?" Lucita sat herself down in a large chair by the sliding door to the balcony, leaving her guest to scramble for someplace to sit. It occurred to Lucita too late that the creature might sit on her bed and befoul it, but it was inconsequential.

"No. Not at all. And I'm not Schreck. I just work for him." The ersatz bellhop flopped down cross-legged on the floor. "I am, however, empowered to negotiate for him."

"That's good to know. So, how long were you waiting in the elevator for me?"

The Nosferatu was unabashed. "About an hour. Spent entirely too much time using the old heebie-jeebies to scare kine out of it to make sure I wouldn't miss you." He paused for a second and blinked. "Just to satisfy my professional curiosity, how did you know?"

"Elevators at rest for that long generally don't have their doors wide open, for one thing. The muddy prints on the carpet were another clue. And then there's the smell. You're going to have to get better at this if you expect to survive."

The other vampire rubbed his lumpy chin thoughtfully. "Hmm. Hadn't thought of the door angle, and I stashed the cart up here to keep the cage clear. You'd be surprised how many times people ignore the other stuff, however. In any case," and he cleared his throat, "I'm here to talk business. I just thought you might appreciate the courtesy of a personal elevator." He grinned horrifically. "It's the little things that help close a deal, after all."

Lucita made a graceful gesture with her off hand. "Of course. But you're not here to play cage operator for me. What does Mr. Schreck have to offer?"

"Six million American, a copy of two pages of the Sargon Fragment, all the resources you need, the best protection from reprisal he can offer, transportation in the form of both air transit at your convenience and a vehicle of your choosing, incidentals, expenses, equipment and other sundries that are on the balance sheet but aren't worth mentioning here, and, if I read the fine print properly, a hundred free hours on AOL. The last is, of course, negotiable."

The only sign that Lucita was even vaguely interested was a slight lift of her right eyebrow. "The Sargon Fragment? Interesting. Mr. Schreck is certainly emphatic about wanting me to take this assignment. What does he want me to do?"

The Nosferatu shrugged. "What you do best. Return a few people to the sort of state dead people should naturally be in."

"People?"

"Our kind of people."

"Ah. Of course. Still, Mr. Schreck seems to be willing to spare no expense. Dare I ask what the catch is?"

To his credit, the Nosferatu declined to be ingenuous and ask what Lucita could possibly mean. "Mr. Schreck felt that a sufficiently large offer would impress you as to his seriousness and eliminate so much of that, and I quote here, 'troublesome haggling' that he finds distasteful."

Lucita stood up and began pacing. "A marvelous answer, and one that avoids the question completely. So what *is* the catch?"

"Time pressure, for one thing. The quality of the targets, for another."

"The fee isn't quite as impressive for multiple targets."

"Mr. Schreck is aware of your usual rates, and also notes that the offer is not strictly limited to cash. He also thinks that you may enjoy one or two of these assignments."

Lucita whirled and faced the Nosferatu. Part of her noted that he was clever; deliberately sitting cross-legged in an indefensible spot was about as good a job as a Kindred was likely to do of saying "I'm harmless." He'd also chosen the floor, not the bed or anyplace else that she was likely to use, and hadn't commented on the mirrors. All in all, he was well above the usual cut of messenger she dealt with, and as such, she found herself at least willing to listen to the meat of his pitch.

"Who?"

"Four targets. One archbishop, worth $3.4 million and the text. Another higher-up, whom I understand you may have met once. Two lesser war leaders who show some potential. They're worth a half a million each. We just need them done fast."

"For shame. You should never let your artists know that they have pressure on a deadline, little Nosferatu. You should also learn to use euphemisms better. Someone listening in, say, with a directional microphone might well pick all of this up and find a use for the information."

The Nosferatu shook his head almost imperceptibly. "Actually, I have a friend on the roof keeping the pigeons stirred up right outside your window. Should give anyone on a directional fits, and mess with microwave eavesdropping as well. You'd be amazed at how effective a wall of feathers is for that sort of thing. But I will take your advice to heart, and I thank you for it. Now, are you interested?"

Lucita pursed her lips. "Of course I am. But I'm not going to commit immediately. I'd like a bit more information, so that I might make an informed decision."

Inside, Lucita had already made her choice. The Sargon Fragment was something she'd been chasing for a very long time, and the opportunity to obtain even two more pages of it was not one she could lightly pass up. Besides, she was already contracted to deal with one archbishop; what was one more? And no prey short of an archbishop really concerned her. The fees for at least three of the four would be found money—but it never hurt to know more.

In response, the Nosferatu stood, his hands held palm outwards to emphasize the fact that he was no threat. He took two steps over to where the forgotten dinner trolley stood and lifted the lid from the metal tray that normally would have housed whatever delicacy the kitchen had produced. Instead, underneath were a number of folders, bound together with thick rubber bands. He lifted the tray and placed it on the bed. "All that you'll need is here, including terms for payment, what resources Mr. Schreck has placed at your disposal, and timetables on known enemy movements. Take a few hours. Read it over. If you decide you're interested, come on down to the lobby and sit in the chair opposite the elevators. Someone will come along to guide you to a place where you can meet with my superiors. The identification sign is simple: My man will ask you if perchance you read the latest *Blackwood's*. Seeing as the magazine's been gone for decades, it's not the sort of thing that's liable to get stumbled into."

Lucita frowned. "I would prefer another position. That chair faces some... decorations... that make my state rather obvious."

The Nosferatu chuckled. "We need our *bona fides* as well, Miss Lucita. Don't worry; we'll collect you fast. Incidentally, there's a decanter of lunch on the second level of the cart for you if you want it. Mr. Schreck likes to make people comfortable." He put the container on the dresser, bowed, and said, "Now, if you will excuse me?"

"Certainly." Lucita waved him out the door with the cart even as he shimmered back into his disguise. Her attention was already on the folders.

Suddenly, her so-called plate was very full indeed.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 11:08 PM
Sub-basement, the Wesleyan Building
Baltimore, Maryland



Contrary to what one might expect, the meeting was not in a sewer. It was, however, in a sub-basement that contained a leaky pipe, so the concrete floor was liberally spattered in puddles. Lucita assumed that this was so that her hosts could keep track of her movements by the sounds she made. Either that, or they were aware of the tricks she'd picked up from Fatima and were just playing to their own stereotype. Her guide had led her down here, cautioned her to wait, and vanished. Lucita probably could have tracked the man, but decided to play by the client's rules. To do otherwise would be rude.

The room itself was pitch black. She'd dealt with this Nosferatu before, however, and was reasonably confident in his sincere interest in keeping her alive. Still, it was always worth being cautious. She stepped forward.

"Schreck?"

The voice that answered her was rough and low, but unmistakably that of a woman. "Mr. Schreck was unavoidably detained, and sends his regrets. He does, however, want you to know that a quarter of your fee has already been wired to your account in the Caymans, per your standard instructions, as an earnest of his good will. If necessary, I can provide proof of that."

"I trust Mr. Schreck, though I must say I am disappointed in him."

There was a pause. "Mr. Schreck is a busy man. However, I have his full confidence and authority."

Lucita laughed. "So did the bellhop. Mr. Schreck is quite free with that."

The reply was a trifle strained, and Lucita knew she'd won a point. "Mr. Schreck trusts his valued subordinates. Now, business?"

"Business. Of course. So your Mr. Schreck wants an archbishop? It's quite a task."

"Yes, we want a particular archbishop, though if you decide to get greedy and take down multiples we won't be too terribly upset."

"You don't aim small, do you?"

"We aim for the necessary targets, regardless of size. Is the price acceptable?"

"For all four? Barely."

"It's more than you were paid for the last six combined, Lucita. Plus, I believe at least one of the four is someone you were considering putting out of his misery *gratis*."

"True enough. Excellent dossiers, incidentally."

"Thank you. We take pride in that sort of thing. Rumor has it we're good at it, you know."

"Rumor does indeed. Anything else?"

"A few. We've arranged transportation that we hope will be to your liking, and it's waiting for you outside the entrance you came in. The paperwork has, of course, been

taken care of. It's yours now. Your guide is waiting outside this chamber, and will lead you there with due speed. When we receive more information on your targets' whereabouts and circumstances, you can rest assured that we will pass it along to you."

"Time frame on the first kill?"

"As soon as possible."

Lucita frowned. "That's rather vague, and a bit sudden."

Her opposite number laughed bitterly. "Believe me, we would rather have given you more lead time, but circumstances have changed very suddenly. Great things are afoot; every Sabbat war leader who's gone tonight is an offensive we don't have to counter tomorrow. And every pack priest who's looking into the shadows for you isn't keeping his mind on his job. That buys us time. Buy us enough, and you will find our appreciation made tangible."

"With this kind of time frame, I can make no promises." Somewhere off in the dark, a rat splashed through shallow water.

"Godspeed and good hunting, Lucita."

"You sound like my sire when you say that. It doesn't inspire confidence."

There was a quiet chuckle from the far side of the room. "We all make mistakes." Then came the sound of receding footfalls on wet concrete, and Lucita was alone in the dark once again.

She waited until the room was absolutely silent, and then retraced her steps. True to Schreck's representative's words, her erstwhile guide was waiting outside the door to the chamber, and graciously conducted her through a maze of tunnels and pitch-black corridors. Lucita felt that she probably could find her way back unaided, but accepted the assistance in the spirit in which it was offered.

After an interminable half hour of travel, the pair emerged at a fire door. The Nosferatu opened it for Lucita, then vanished back into the darkness. Outside on the city street sat a car that was clearly intended for her; there was no other reason she could conceive of for a BMW 325i to be parked there in particular. The keys were inside and the doors were locked, but that was no difficulty. She merely exercised her will on a patch of shadow in the coupe's interior. It snaked up and unlocked the door, then unlatched it and pushed it open. Lucita slid in and shut the door behind her. On the passenger seat was another folder, with a legend written in black Magic Marker. She ignored it; it would be her bedtime reading. A quick check of the glove compartment revealed a thick wad of bills labeled "For expenses."

Lucita took a second to reflect on the situation. It was not what she would have chosen, but it was what she had to work with. The pay was certainly good enough, and the client sounded desperate enough that she could no doubt extract additional concessions. All in all, it was far from unworkable.

The dashboard chronometer read 12:34. She had plenty of time to read the additional briefing material before the sun rose. Her employer had even been so kind as to provide two sorts of audio selections: briefings on all of her targets, and an extensive selection of classical music. She slid one of the former discs (home-burned and lettered in the same hand as the folder) into the player and started the car.

Thursday, 29 July 1999, 11:30 AM
The Dragon's Graveyard
New York City, New York

Leopold carefully picked his way over the pocked, bleached landscape. He could not see his footing clearly through the glare. Progress was treacherous. An unbroken expanse of gleaming white stretched away before him. Bones. As far as the eye could see, nothing but bones. They jutted up sharply like obelisks. They leaned like palm trees in a strong wind. They cascaded to the ground in crashing waterfalls. They rippled outward in concentric circles of rambling ruins.

Leopold found himself returning longingly to the cool, silent recesses of the Cave of Lamentations—and of the masterwork he had wrought there. But all that was lost to him now. *Stolen*.

He had come to his senses half-blind and hysterical—groping at the wound where the Eye had been. Through the haze of pain and outrage, he was struck by the unsettling sensation of someone standing over him, shaking him awake.

The figure flickered uncertainly in the dim light of the cavern and was gone again almost before it registered on Leopold's senses. The artist caught only a momentary glimpse of a stern figure balancing a beaten copper bowl brimming with blood.

Leopold's first thought was of recovering the Eye that had been stolen from him. It was not difficult to follow its trail back down the mountainside and away to the south—toward the gleaming white towers of bone in the distance. The Dragon's Graveyard.

Why here? Leopold thought. *Why do I always find myself here?*

He again wiped the blood-sweat out of the raw, gaping eye socket. His silk shirt was already soaked through. It hung about him like a second and ill-fitting skin.

The shirt bothered Leopold. Not just in the way that it clung to him. Rather, it was the fact that it was already ruined. A distant part of his mind was nagging at him, telling him that having only just arrived in this dismal place, the shirt should still be fresh.

No, that is not quite right. Even as he formed the thought, a second and conflicting memory imposed itself. He distinctly recalled battling through the heat all morning long. Past the Whispering Fields, through the Witch's Shins, across the Sea of Dust. He remembered them all distinctly, but somehow removed. Like a story overheard at a crossroads.

The glaringly bright heat of the noonday sun seemed to hang above him, circling lazily. He was an easy target—the only moving object above the horizon. The oppressive heat marked his progress, bided its time, coaxed out drop after drop of life-sustaining moisture.

The light of the sun? Something was quite wrong. Leopold's every sense screamed danger, deception. He shook his head as if to clear his muddled thoughts.

Somewhere, tall, silent ladies in satin slippers were gliding through cool corridors of marble. Leopold closed his eyes. He could hear the gentle rustle of silk, the sound of

distant laughter, the hint of a reel drifting up from the ballroom below. It all seemed so real. So very close.

As if only the thinnest of barriers separated the two impressions.

Leopold opened his eye again into the glare of the harsh noonday sun. The air went out of him. There was something behind the wall of life-sapping heat. A purpose. A hunger. Leopold could feel its breath against his skin.

Somewhere at the heart of the sun-blasted landscape—a flickering, twirling maelstrom of hunger. An unappeasable, longing emptiness. The stirrings of the dragon. It broke over him like a wave, like the sound of distant keening.

Leopold shook his head to banish the thought, scattering precious drops of life on every side. He could ill afford to think about hunger. There was precious little hope of any sustenance in this inhospitable place. He tried to focus his thoughts on more immediate concerns. It must be nearly noon. He had to find shelter soon.

If he could just outlast the afternoon sun, he might have enough strength for one more attempt to free himself. To slice through the skin-taut restraints of the desert heat. To slip between the bars of his own skeleton, his prison these thirty-three years. To take one step back from the clumsy canvas of flesh and bone and, surveying it with an artist's eye, make it anew.

Overhead a solitary desert bird caught an updraft, banked, and vanished against the face of the unforgiving sun.

Friday, 30 July 1999, 12:53 AM
Sub-basement, the Wesleyan Building
Baltimore, Maryland

"A basement?" Banks of fluorescent lights flickered into life as the elevator shuddered to a halt and its doors opened. Jan Pieterzoon, scion of a noble Ventrue bloodline and survivor of a botched Sabbat assassination attempt almost two weeks prior, stepped out blinking in the sudden harsh light, and found himself squarely in the middle of a puddle of stagnant water. Beside him, his Nosferatu guide clucked concernedly.

"Actually, a sub-basement, Herr Pieterzoon. It's the sort of thing that's expected of our business operations, I'm afraid." The speaker was a short, squat Nosferatu whom Pieterzoon *thought* was a woman, though truth be told he couldn't be sure. "The water on the floor adds the required touch of sewer chic that people seem to demand when dealing with our little consortium. Really, it's a pity Monsieur Rafin isn't here; he gives a wonderful performance."

"Yes, yes. Wonderful. But a sub-basement?"

The Nosferatu shrugged. "It's secure, it's as defensible as your kid sister's virtue and it helps us get the second party to relax because she's dealing with 'typical' Nosferatu. They think they know what they're working with, they relax. And they don't think to look for toys like the swivel-mounted guns with overlapping fields of fire that Nigel controls. That's the guy over there behind the one-way glass on the south wall; he's a video game freak with fast-twitch like you would not believe. The slugs are birdshot suspended in Teflon with a steel jacket—same effect as opening the chest cavity up, pointing a shotgun full of #10 at the sternum, and pulling the trigger. Even your basic badass war ghoul tends to slow down when he's got holes in him the size of hubcaps."

"Ah. Very clever." Pieterzoon explored the confines of the mostly bare room, taking care not to step in the puddles. "Is that the only precaution?"

Pieterzoon's guide chuckled with a sound that Jan instinctively associated with the terminal stages of consumption. "Well, no. But I wouldn't want to bore you with the details."

The Ventrue closed his eyes and prayed for strength. He simply did not have time for this sort of thing, not with the Sabbat ravening up the coast like the plague given flesh. He had a great many things to attend to, and smart-alecky Nosferatu were nowhere on the list. "Wonderful," he managed at last. "So did the meeting at least go well?"

"Oh, perfect," the Nosferatu said breezily. "She waltzed in, gave verbal agreement to the deal, admitted to having read the packets that Sheldon had left with her, and went off to do her thing. Apparently she found the information satisfactory, though she was a little cranky about the time frame."

"Ahem. Yes, well, can't be helped. We simply don't have enough forces in the field at the moment—where *is* Parma when you need him? It's not like we couldn't use another strategist here—to do things any other way."

"Whatever." The hideous creature shrugged, or did something approximate. "Don't ask me; I'm scared of them all. But I can promise you this, Herr Pieterzoon: If they ever get down here, they're not coming back out." She (he was almost sure it was a "she") smiled hideously and tapped the concrete wall with a misshapen finger. "We're prepared."

Pieterzoon managed a wan smile. "Wonderful."

KR



Friday, 30 July 1999, 2:43 PM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York

Home again, thought Elizabeth. She stopped for a moment on the threshold—she had never thought to see her rooms again. They were, for that instant, the most beautiful place on Earth. Then she looked down at herself, shuddered, and ran for the bedroom.

Liz stripped off her blood-stiffened clothes, threw them into the trash, and plunged under the full force of the shower. First it was too cold, then scalding hot—she adjusted the knobs, but she didn't care—Thompson's blood had soaked through her jeans. It was in her hair. It was under her fingernails. She scrubbed away the gore, then washed again, trying to forget that Hesha had ever touched her, anywhere. After forty minutes, she got out, pruny from the water and rubbed raw by the washcloth. She went to her wardrobe, realized that most of it was in Hesha's house... with her dissertation notes... and her favorite dress... and her grandmother's silver jewelry.... Liz pulled on a white dress shirt that she'd bought to give to her sister-in-law and a pair of khakis that had somehow escaped being packed off to Baltimore.

She rambled to the kitchen and started her answering machine. It told her there were forty-seven messages, and she hit PLAY as she opened the refrigerator. An old boyfriend called to see if she still existed, and the fridge was empty. There was a note inside from Amy explaining that she'd had it cleaned out. A series of clicks represented wrong numbers and telemarketers. Liz pulled a cardboard dinner from the freezer and slammed it into the microwave. More clicks. Her brother had called. The museum wanted to know if she could fill in while a permanent staffer took a sabbatical. Liz made juice from a frozen tube of concentrate, poured herself a glass. She snagged her dinner and sat down at the coffee table to sort through her mail. Later, satisfied, somehow, by the ordinariness of the junk, the coupons, the credit-card offers, the sales notices—fur coats and dishwashers had so little to do with dead men in the mountains—she drifted over to her workshop.

Antonio, the delivery foreman at Rutherford House, had left a stack of small pieces and a few notes. Liz looked through them and put the pieces away for later. She saw the eye molds still sitting on her workbench; she threw them out hastily.

Sleipnir—her desk, and the object that had somehow started it all—caught her eye, and she ran a hand happily over it. She sat down on the polished top and gazed out the huge, gorgeous windows. Her thoughts turned to Amy. Better to call her tomorrow, when all the things that had happened had settled a little more. She knew, thinking about it, that it would be hard to talk to someone *outside*—and now Amy *was* outside—about everything. Kettridge had offered his phone number, had let her talk. She had needed badly to talk, and Jordan had even listened. After the shock, he understood. He was still intense and a little awkward, but very nice, very kind. Paranoid, too, she realized—trying to give her tips on sunlight and fire and how to get the right weapons if she ever needed them. He was running scared and didn't know how to stop. Elizabeth supposed that a thing like Hesha might do that to a person.

New York settled down under a golden afternoon. People left their buildings and walked to buses, unlocked and un-Clubbed their cars. The locals stepped down to the corner grocers and back, and drifters simply did. Elizabeth watched them all, and a sinister feeling crept up her back. On impulse, she reached for a spray can from the shelves, found a lighter by the candles in the library, and put them together experimentally. A very satisfactory jet of flame rewarded her. She sat for a long time on Sleipnir's broad back, cradling the can to her chest and holding the lighter white-knuckle-tight in her left hand.

The sun began to fade. The warehouse shadow grew longer and longer, and streetlights glimmered on one by one. Suddenly Elizabeth felt called to action. She gathered up all her spray cans, matches, lighters, lamp oil, and candles and set them out strategically. She double-checked the bolts on the (thank god!) inch-thick steel door to her apartment, locked all the windows down tight, and piled a heap of light, noisy junk in front of the swinging pane that led onto the fire escape. She ran down the curtains and retreated to the sofa, keeping her improvised flame-throwers close at hand. At the slightest noise her hand reached for them; she started whenever unexplained silence fell on her. The vampire had taught her to sleep by day—free at last to fix that, exhausted, and bone-weary, Elizabeth realized that she would not shut her eyes until they closed of themselves.

KR



Friday, 30 July 1999, 11:05 PM
A studio apartment in Red Hook, Brooklyn
New York City, New York

Elizabeth felt her left shoulder tighten up. She flinched and looked back, sure that something had come up behind her. There was nothing—she looked to her right—and suddenly, Hesha's face appeared in front of her own. His eyes were yellow, with inhuman, slit pupils. Her heart jumped as she stared at the apparition. She thought of the fire, but her body had turned to lead and refused to obey her. She could not even look away.

Hesha said nothing.

Liz sat frozen like a statue, in a paralysis so complete her lungs gave her only short, quick breaths; as she panicked, the rhythm quickened, her head grew light. Terror dug deep claws into her, and the vampire's golden eyes bored through her brain. She was dizzy and felt like falling, but her body refused even to collapse.

The monster spoke at last. "Good evening, Elizabeth." He reached out and took the can and lighter from her. "Clever, as always. And you paid attention during our time together. That you failed is not your fault; you cannot fight what you cannot see." He placed his hands on her chest and pushed her unresisting body back on the couch. "Be comfortable."

He knocked the woman's petty arsenal off the coffee table with one sweeping arm. The cans clanged horribly on the floorboards, and the raucous noise echoed down from the rafters. Hesha seated himself on the table, and kept his unblinking eyes on his prisoner.

"It has become necessary for me to kill you. I doubt that you would appreciate many of the reasons for this. It is not in my nature to explain, and it would not be within your ability to comprehend me should I speak the whole truth to you." He paused. "While you await your death, however, you may desire something to take your mind off your situation, and I invite you to consider this: If you had not allowed Thompson to die—yes, I know about that—I would not be here to kill you now.

"You betrayed me. I understand that, and I fault myself—my handling of you has been flawed from the beginning. I sinned. I almost fell into compassion. I allowed myself and my meditations to be distracted by the Eye. I underestimated a mortal—the same mortal—more than once. I saw clear signs and misunderstood them.

"You killed Thompson, Elizabeth," he murmured, puzzled, "and I had not seen even the shadow of that in you. I see most things...." The golden eyes came closer, until Elizabeth felt she was drowning in them. "Have you anything to say?" His irises deepened slowly to black. "If you sit still, you may whisper."

Elizabeth tried to leap up and scream at the top of her lungs. Hesha seemed disappointed. He raised an eyebrow.

"How did you know about Ron?" She could hardly hear her voice herself.

"I found Kettridge's cave at the same time you did. He believed there were only two entrances. He neglected to consider holes a human body could not squeeze through. I listened to it all."

"Why did you let him die?"

"Why did you?" he asked in a tone of genuine curiosity.

She swallowed hard. "How did you escape?"

"You staked me. I am not a vampire; I am a Child of Set. I have no heart for Kettridge to spear me by, and I am difficult to destroy. No more questions. No more explanations. Do you have anything to *say*?"

Elizabeth thought for a moment. "Kill me quickly."

"No." Hesha's gaze turned gold again.

"You die tonight for Thompson's sake," intoned the Setite. "You die tonight that I may redeem myself in my Lord's grace. You die tonight because alive you are a temptation to me." He began to chant in a language Elizabeth did not know. Then: "You are beyond my control. You are a burden on my will." The strange language flowed through her ears again. His voice rose, repeated one phrase half a dozen times, and fell to silence.

Hesha's fingers traced the line of her jaw. His hand tilted her head back, and his arms snaked around her. Elizabeth watched terrible, sharp fangs like a viper's drop down from behind his canines. She closed her eyes and braced herself for pain, for a torn throat and a severed windpipe; she prayed for unconsciousness to come soon, even if the monster were determined that death should await some plan of his own.

She felt an unexpected softness, a tender kiss, on her mouth, and the shock was worse than a wound. Hesha, pretending to want her, in a room in Calcutta... his lips slid along her cheek, kissed her again beneath the ear, and finally bit into the vein.

Elizabeth screamed for what seemed like an eternity, but was less than a second; the scream never passed her lips. Her breath caught. A gasp escaped her. The worst of the attack wasn't pain, but heart-wrenching, bittersweet ecstasy. She clutched at him desperately, drawing him closer, and forgot everything. She pressed herself against him. Her heart ached—it couldn't beat fast enough. Her cheek rubbed against his, and she felt his skin grow warm with what he stole from her. She flushed for a moment, and felt it fade as more blood left her. Elizabeth lost the strength to hold him, and sagged into the strong cocoon of his arms. Time slowed—or Hesha sipped more delicately—and she seemed to float in a luxurious sea. Bells rang in her ears, and lights danced before her eyes. In a moment, the chimes and colors fell behind her, and there was nothing left but the sea—she couldn't feel the pressure of his hands or the tingling of her own fingertips—there was the sea of ecstasy, darkness, and the faintest memory of a body... somewhere... with a tiny, stinging pain in the side of its throat. She held

onto that a minute longer, dizzy and dwindling, thinking not of her life ending, but of the touch of him going away forever... she could remember his arms....

Then there was nothing—just enough of it, for just long enough, for her to know always what nothing was like—

—and a single drop of fire landed in her mouth.

She had a mouth. She had a body. It was a mass of sharp pain and chill, stiff, dull agony. She kicked and clawed at something she couldn't see—it tore back at her, trying to destroy what little there was of her—and the fire came back to her mouth. Wine, pure water, strawberries, acid, thickened passion, mother's milk, bitter gall, vinegar, burning hatred... singing guilt... a power... other men's memories... deliciously and unspeakably wrong to drink, but impossible not to swallow. The stuff filled her heart and coursed through her veins, and the sharp pains went away. It went on flowing, and the agony subsided.

Elizabeth opened her eyes.

She was sitting in her father's old office chair. Hesha's face, devoid of expression, looked into hers. His eyes were gold. His hands held chains and shackles, and while she tried to understand why he hadn't killed her yet, he clamped them on her wrists, through the back of the chair, and around the steel pillar in the center of her apartment.

Hesha left without another word.

Appendices to Volume Two

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.

amr: The traditional title for the eldest of sorcerers among the Assamites.

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.

caliph: The traditional title for the eldest of warriors among the Assamites.

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.

Chantry of the Five Boroughs: The Tremere chantry in New York City. The city is under Sabbat influence, so the chantry (aligned with the Camarilla) is something of a stronghold. Aisling Sturbridge serves as regent, seconded by Johnston Foley.

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.

du'at: The tripartite council that is the governing body of Alamut and the Children of Haqim. Made up of the caliph, *amr* and vizier.

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.

fida'i: A neonate of Clan Assamite still undergoing training in the ways of the clan.

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.

Haqim: Traditional name of the Antediluvian founder of Clan Assamite.

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 handpicked 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.

Lupine: A werewolf. These savage beasts are said to hate Kindred and to hunt them for sport. Thought to be found only in the deepest wilderness.

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 unlives. 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.

pontifex: A title of high rank among the Tremere, it is usually given to vampires who act on behalf of the clan elders in Vienna rather than for the sake of their own chantry.

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.

rafiq: A full-fledged member of Clan Assamite, who has successfully undergone training as a *fida'i*; literally, "comrade." *Rafiq* is most often used to refer to members of the warrior caste of the clan.

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.

regent: The leader of a chantry of Clan Tremere. The regent is often the most potent thaumaturge in the chantry, but not always. Especially large chantries—like the Chantry of the Five Boroughs, in New York—may have an assistant regent ("regent secundus") and other ranked officials.

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.

Ventrue: One of the seven clans of the Camarilla. The Ventrue 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 two.

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, and has traveled to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

Anwar: Clan Assamite. A warrior and assassin of the clan, seeking to avenge the insult of a blood curse Clan Tremere placed on Clan Assamite during the Renaissance. Currently operating in New York City.

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. Until recently a primogen of Atlanta, she has a long history, including a liaison with Prince Alexander Garlotte of Baltimore. She organized a ball for the solstice night in Atlanta, one interrupted by the Sabbat assault on the city. Victoria was captured and tortured by the Tzimisce Elford, but escaped to Baltimore, with the help of agents of Hesha Ruhadze.

Bell, Theo: Clan Brujah. An archon working under Justicar Jaroslav Pascek.

Benison Hodge, J.: Clan Malkavian. The fallen Camarilla Prince of Atlanta, Benison had imposed a harsh rule on the city in the wake of the Blood Curse, taking desperate measures to repress the anarch movement. He survived solstice night but has not been seen since he took refuge in a secondary haven in suburban Atlanta.

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 along the Eastern Seaboard.

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. To do so, he engineered the kidnapping of Benito Giovanni.

Chin, Maria: Clan Tremere. Regent of the Washington, DC chantry, she made the strategic decision to have her clanmates fall back to their chantry rather than fight the Sabbat invaders. The chantry remains the only Camarilla enclave in Washington, while Chin has traveled to Baltimore to partake in the discussions there.

Darnell: Clan Unknown. Originally from Southern California, he is a traveling companion of the Gangrel neonate Ramona.

Dimitros, Elizabeth: Mortal. A restorer and historian of art, Elizabeth Dimitros lives in New York City and works for Rutherford House Antiquities. There she was approached by Hesha Ruhadze and has been brought into his entourage. He has invited her to work on a "project" of his at his retreat in Maryland.

Dorfman, Peter: Clan Tremere. Pontifex in that clan and a resident of Washington, DC. He was away during the assault.

Elford: Clan Tzimisce. A fiendish torturer and crafter of flesh, he worked his arts on the captured Victoria Ash, twisting her flesh and imposing terrible pain. His depredations only ended when the agents of Hesha Ruhadze (searching for Erich Vegel) destroyed him.

Emmett: Clan Nosferatu. Based out of New York City, Emmett is an agent of Calebros and participated in the abduction of Benito Giovanni.

Eva: Clan Tremere. A novice at the Chantry of the Five Boroughs in New York City.

Fatima al-Faqadi: Clan Assamite. An elder and feared warrior, Fatima al-Faqadi is among those in her clan who most ardently marry worship of Haqim (the clan founder) and Muslim faith. She has a longstanding (if difficult) friendship with the Lasombra *antitribu* Lucita.

Foley, Johnston: Clan Tremere. Regent secundus of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs in New York City. A powerful thaumaturge known for his ability to train novices and his skill at language.

Gainesmil, Robert: Clan Toreador. Primogen of that clan in Baltimore, Gainesmil has participated in the defense of the city.

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. With the fall of Atlanta and Washington, his city is the Camarilla's last bastion in the South.

The General: Clan Malkavian. Hailing from the Antebellum South, the General recently rose from long slumber beneath the earth and had become a de facto member of the primogen of Atlanta. He foresaw the attack on Atlanta.

Gibbert, Marcia: Clan Giovanni. Recently arrived in New Orleans, Marcia is an agent of Isabel Giovanni in her search for information about the "old clan."

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. In 1997, he was involved in the murder of Nosferatu Justicar Petrodon and has recently been kidnapped by members of that clan.

Giovanni, Francis "Frankie Gee": Clan Giovanni. A boss in the parts of the New York City Mafia under the influence of the Giovanni and the superior of Chas Giovanni Tello. He has assigned Chas to find Benito Giovanni, who owed Frankie several debts.

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. She has come to the New World to oversee negotiations with Camarilla and Sabbat as to the fate of Giovanni-held Boston in the current sect war and to investigate the disappearance of her clansman Benito Giovanni. She is also pursuing leads about the fate of members of the "old clan"—the ancient race of vampires the Giovanni necromancers usurped during the Renaissance. Evidence is mounting that some of these may be resurfacing and seeking vengeance.

Giovanni Tello, Charles "Chas": 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, Chas is nevertheless known for getting things done. He has been assigned to assist Isabel Giovanni in her activities in the New World and to locate Benito Giovanni.

Hannah: Clan Tremere. The once-regent of the Atlanta chantry of Clan Tremere and their representative on the city's council of primogen, she was destroyed by Sascha Vykos during the assault on Atlanta.

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. The Eye of Hazimel resurfaced in the midst of the assault on Atlanta.

Don Ibrahim: Clan Lasombra. Once a Muslim scholar in Moorish Spain, Ibrahim is now an elder Lasombra and confidant of sorts of Cardinal Monçada.

Jen: Clan Unknown. Originally from Southern California, she is a traveling companion of the Gangrel neonate Ramona.

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 Vegel. He recently made contact with Elizabeth Dimitros and seems to be in possession of an artifact linked to the Eye of Hazimel.

Leopold: Clan Toreador. A neonate among the Kindred of Atlanta, Leopold survived the assault on the city only by taking the Eye of Hazimel from the dying Erich Vegel. Responding to some dark impulse from within the thing, he placed the Eye in his own head (after gouging out one of his own eyes).

Lucita of Aragon: Lasombra *antitribu*. The childe of Cardinal Monçada, Lucita has spent a millennium opposing her sire's machinations. She is a highly trained warrior and often acts as an assassin for hire among the undead. She has a longstanding (if difficult) friendship with the Assamite Fatima al-Faqadi.

Lucius: Clan Unknown. A mysterious informant of Sascha Vykos's within the Camarilla, "Lucius" seems to have a love-hate relationship with the Tzimisce fiend.

Mercurio, Gabriel & Raphael (a.k.a. "The Asp"): Mortals. Identical twins and ghouls of Hesha Ruhadze, the Mercurio brothers maintain the illusion that they are one man (named Angelo) and serve as drivers, weapon experts, assassins and occaisional cooks for the Setite.

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.

Montrose: Clan Nosferatu. A Nosferatu primogen in Las Vegas, Montrose was involved in the kidnapping of Benito Giovanni and disappeared from Las Vegas shortly after Chas Giovanni and Victor Sforza arrived.

Nickolai: Tremere *antitribu*. A thaumaturge and member of the Sabbat, Nickolai is a long-standing schemer, notably using the vampire Benito Giovanni in his plans. The *antitribu* has recently suffered serious setbacks and Nickolai fears that he is the last of the line, which he calls "House Goratrix."

Parmenides: Clan Assamite. A loyal Child of Haqim, Parmenides received the unsavory task of serving as a delegate of Alamut to the Sabbat in general and Sascha Vykos in particular. There he fell under Vykos's cruel sway and has become masochistically enraptured to the Tzimisce. Parmenides' body has been reshaped to resemble that of Ravenna, a ghoul of Vykos's.

Pieterzoon, Jan: Clan Ventrue. A respected elder of the Camarilla with holdings in the Netherlands, Pieterzoon is the childe of the vampire Hardestadt, one of the founders of the sect.

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).

Ramona: Clan Gangrel. A young vampire originally from Southern California who has relocated to New York City.

Ravana, Khalil: Clan Ravnos. An Indian vampire considered by most to be of little import. Thought of as thief and guttersnipe among the undead. Years ago, he fell under the sway of an elder of his clan who sleeps under Calcutta.

Rolph: Clan Nosferatu. An agent of Calebros operating in Atlanta.

Rothstein, Milo: Clan Giovanni. The highest-ranking clan member in Las Vegas, Rothstein had made enemies with other branches of the clan. When Rothstein refused to cooperate with Chas Giovanni's investigation, the *capo* let his anger get the best of him and murdered Milo.

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 Vegel.

Sforza, Victor: Mortal. A ghoul of Chas Giovanni Tello's, Victor was murdered during their investigations in Las Vegas.

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.

Talley: Clan Lasombra. Templar in the Sabbat. Called "the Hound" for his tenacity, Talley is a shadow warrior of great skill and perseverance.

Thompson, Ron: Mortal. A ghoul of Hesha Ruhadze and the chief of his security detail, Thompson is a retired policeman who looks forward to becoming a full-fledged Setite.

Vegel, Erich: Clan Setite. Formerly the principle second of Hesha Ruhadze, Vegel had contacts among the Nosferatu, including Rolph, who brought him the Eye of Hazimel during the solstice ball. Vegel was seriously injured during the subsequent assault and finally destroyed by a desperate Leopold.

Vitel, Marcus: Clan Ventrue. The former Prince of Washington, DC, Vitel now shelters in Baltimore and seeks revenge.

Vykos, Sascha: Clan Tzimisce. A feared elder of the Sabbat, and the newly installed Archbishop of Washington, DC, 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.

Xaviar: Clan Gangrel. The justicar of his clan and one of the most feared warriors in the Camarilla.

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.**

Richard Dansky (RD)

Richard Dansky has been the developer of several White Wolf game lines, most notably **Wraith: The Oblivion** and **Vampire: The Dark Ages**. In addition to penning **Clan Novel: Lasombra** and a story for the **Clan Novel Anthology**, Richard is the author of the **Trilogy of the Second Age** for Exalted. He is now a computer game designer at Red Storm Entertainment.

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 if 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).

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**.

Stefan Petrucha (SP)

The author of **Dark Ages: Assamite** (the second of the **Dark Ages Clan Novels**), Stefan contributes a story of Fatima al-Faqadi for this collection. He is best known as the author of Topps' acclaimed *X-Files* comic-book series.

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**.

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, 16 July 2003; 12:45 PM
Offices of White Wolf Publishing
Stone Mountain, Georgia

Welcome back, intrepid readers.

The volume—**The Eye of Gehenna**—continues the compilation of the thirteen-part Clan Novel series that started in **The Fall of Atlanta** (volume one). As Eric Griffin rightly points out in his foreword to this volume, the **Clan Novel Saga** isn't a simple reprinting of the thirteen original novels. Each chapter has been gathered and reorganized so that it all flows chronologically. This volume includes the entirety of **Clan Novel: Gangrel** as well as large portions of **Clan Novel: Setite, Clan Novel: Ventrue, Clan Novel: Tremere** and **Clan Novel: Giovanni**. Portions of **Clan Novel: Malkavian, Clan Novel: Lasombra, Clan Novel: Nosferatu, Clan Novel: Assamite** and **Clan Novel: Ravnos** are also included. We're halfway through the compilations and only **Clan Novel: Brujah** has yet to appear (although its protagonist, Theo Bell, does come on stage). This volume also includes all-new material by Stefan Petrucha featuring Assamite protagonist Fatima al-Faqadi.

As in volume one, the vast majority of the text herein appears as it did in the original clan novels. There are a few places in which I've made some edits to better suit the chronological style of the **Clan Novel Saga** compilations. Chapters that covered especially long spans of time in their original format have been split up to place text breaks where appropriate. This was especially true of the chapters from Kathleen Ryan's **Clan Novel: Setite** that took place in Calcutta. Several of these included a variety of small scenes scattered over an entire night. Each got its own treatment here to permit dramatic placement in relation to other events. Several chapters from Eric Griffin's **Clan Novel: Tremere** and Gherbod Fleming's **Clan Novel: Gangrel**, which dealt with the magus Johnston Foley and the Assamite Anwar, portrayed the same scenes from the same perspective. Those chapters have been merged for the purposes of this compilation, with preference usually given to the more detailed versions that appeared in **Tremere**. The scenes from Stewart Wieck's **Clan Novel: Malkavian** that originally appeared in the first person and the present tense have been edited so they appear in the third-person, past-tense style of the rest of the novels.

Finally, very astute readers will note that two small scenes are absent from this volume that, technically, should be here. Both are being held for more appropriate placement in the next volume. Isabel Giovanni's meeting with Anastasz di Zagreb in Havana, which appeared in **Clan Novel: Giovanni** as dated July 25, 1999, deals with matters that haven't fully passed at that date. The same is true of the Teletype Aisling Sturbridge receives from Baltimore, which appeared in **Clan Novel: Tremere** as dated July 27, 1999. Both of these scenes will appear, with new dates, in volumes three or four, as appropriate.

Until next time,

—Philippe Boulle