

CLAN LASOMBRA TRILOGY

SHADOWS™

Bruce Baugh



VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE

CLAN LASOMBRA TRILOGY

SHADOWS™

BOOK TWO OF THREE

in chains of night and blood

The vampire Lucita is a prisoner to the fanatical monsters of the Sabbat, who are forcing her to hunt for a hidden enemy and powerful shadow-caster. Every night in captivity further erodes her soul and enslaves her to the sect born of the murder of the tyrannical progenitor of Clan Lasombra.

But soon enough, these concerns fade before the mounting evidence that the enemy they all face is no mad ritualist or lone elder. The shadows whisper words of doom: if this is the final night, it will last forever.

Lasombra returns.

DARK FANTASY



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BRUCE BAUGH



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SHADOWS



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prologue



Friday, 2 June 2000, 1:15 AM

Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia

The oldest surviving Lasombra walked quietly through the night. He knew that many of his cousins in blood thought that he spent most of his time in the Abyss, and he was content to have them think so. It meant fewer crazed successors to his blood brother Gratiano trying to track him down and destroy him. Behind him, a faint breeze stirred through the space that had until recently been occupied by eight young rebellious vampires who thought themselves quite clever for settling down in this town, removed even from Australia's centers of power, let alone anything of significance to the world at large. One of them had learned just enough shadow control to make incautious ripples in the Abyss, and the eldest chose that one and his brood as prey. It wasn't even a fight, really. They had charged, shouting racial slurs. They had failed. He'd drained them of their blood. He'd destroyed all remains. He'd moved on.

The dying echoes of their thoughts in his blood told him that these attackers thought of him as an "Abo" or "Aborigine," a member of one of the tribes that inhabited this land before Europeans came. They were wrong, though having seen some of the "Abos" he understood their confusion. The natives here looked as much or more like him than did the modern inhabitants of his true homeland. He was not truly related to modern Africans, but a member of one of the tribes that passed away with the first great migrations of the peoples from farther south and west in Africa. In truth he was a walking fossil, not really kin to anything that breathed upon the earth. The closest thing he had to living kin are the occasional Africans whose genes hinted at the legacy of intermarriage

back in the age of migrations, and those were mere accidents of appearance. The way he thought and felt, hoped and dreamed, were quite alien to modern humanity.

Others called the eldest "Montano," and he accepted that name. It was not his, but he knew it referred to him and that sufficed. He had realized one evening several hundred years ago that he no longer remembered the name he was born with, or indeed anything very definite about his mortal life.

His sire, the Lasombra clan founder, used to tell the marvelous tale of how Montano gave himself willingly to the founder to spare his tribe, but Montano did not entirely believe it. It was at least a remarkably convenient story for the founder to tell, since it hinged on Montano possessing a unique trait—honor—which the founder could not engineer through social manipulation. Thus there could be no blame attached to the founder for his less-successful or less-obedient progeny, since not even he could guarantee righteous behavior. After the self-styled anarchs destroyed the founder's material body, Montano had spent several winters wandering the northern ice and trying to reconstruct his own story. He'd found that he simply couldn't do it. Too much time had passed. Too many other people's memories, human and vampiric, had passed through his blood and soul. He could say with certainty merely, "This is what I am now, and I was such as would make me thus."

The wind rose as he walked, turning from merely warm to hot. It felt comfortable to the eldest, who retained a fondness for climates reminiscent of his lost home. Perhaps he'd grown up on the slopes of Kilimanjaro, or along the banks of the Congo. It scarcely mattered now. A hot night suited him well. The heat relaxed his skin, making it easier to form expressions. He had not actually smiled or frowned in at least a decade, but he was aware that he might wish to do so again sometime and appreciated it being as easy as possible.

He walked along the Sturt Highway out of town, going east with no particular plan beyond strolling to see if perhaps he found other foolish rebels to destroy. Then the wind turned icy cold. He recognized this as a spiritual manifestation, rather than a material one, and turned off the road to compose himself and receive whatever omen lurked within him. He made a simple burrow for himself beneath eucalyptus trees on the bank of the river, whose name he could not remember, and turned his attention within. An observer would see him as motionless as an obsidian statue.

Cut off from his senses, his mind roamed through his inert form. No, there was no lurking corruption in him, beyond the taint that made him the vampire he was. There were no unexpected weaknesses, no signs of hostile assault on his physical processes. The uncertainty lay elsewhere. Millennia ago he had mastered the art of extending this isolated awareness outside his body, consciousness drifting down into the Abyss without the complications of projecting flesh and blood into that negative space. Back in the ages when he associated regularly with others of his lineage, he'd sometimes tried to teach this art to the handful of individuals he respected, but it never worked. This particular ability apparently came only with age, and no other Lasombra—apart from the founder, before the great revolt—was yet as old as Montano was when he mastered it. So, in a way only he could, he peered into the endless darkness.

He was immediately appalled.

The Abyss has something like weather of its own. He could sense when creatures thought in new ways and made fresh connections across the range of intellectual and spiritual gaps that functioned as space there. This was a full-blown storm, such as he had not seen for years. Powerful forces were at work here, stirring up entities and ideas that had lain fallow for thousands of years. He

recognized certain rising tides of manipulation that the founder had shown him just once, before there were cities in Europe, and promptly laid to rest again with the remark, "They are dangerous." This unique combination of power and folly scared Montano as nothing had scared him since the night the founder's body perished.

Carefully, very carefully, he probed for signs of the Abyss's entry into the material world. As always, there was a global mosaic of pinpricks in its skin, where individual Lasombra and the few others who'd learned the power had recently wrapped themselves in shadow or drawn on the Abyss as a personal weapon. The eldest disregarded these, searching for greater manifestations. There. All through the founder's homeland, someone had torn great rents in the skin, letting forth Abyssal entities stronger than any vampire. Even the eldest would have had to rely on skill and luck, rather than innate power, to survive an encounter with the things that could pass through those holes. Surely the openers could not really control their invited guests. Did they have the faintest idea what they were doing?

If the initial omen wind had been a cold breeze, what struck next was like the depths of an Arctic blizzard. The eldest sensed where the openings clustered most densely, the very island on which the founder had built its palace and where it had ruled the clan for so many millennia. Had the founder returned? The eldest knew that destroying a body was much easier than destroying its animating soul, and he had always assumed that the founder chose to release its body for reasons of its own. The eldest thought that if the founder had returned, though, it would seek out its only loyal child to use as a weapon in the inevitable war of clan reconquest. But might some clever mystic have found a way to draw on part of the founder's power? The eldest hoped not. He would never tell anyone else this, but part of him rejoiced at the destruction of the founder's body and always hoped

that more clans would do likewise with their founders. The world was not truly safe with such things loose in it.

But these summoners, whoever they were, seemed to be working to usher in a new age for the founder. This was not good. Something had to be done.

The eldest retreated back into his own body, though he did not yet engage his senses again. Instead, he bent his thought to the blood, crafting a warning and command to send to certain others of his clan. The eldest partook of a goodly fraction of the founder's power, and while he could not compel total obedience the way the founder had been able to, nonetheless he could make the blood whisper useful words inside the minds of his clanmates. Something had to be done, and others would do it in the belief that they had thought of it themselves.

part one:

Looking down into
darkness



Friday, 2 June 2000, 11:25 PM
Island of Sikinos, Aegean Sea, Greece

An observer who didn't know the two women would have thought the ritually scarred African much older than the dark-haired European by her side. The African bore the marks of prolonged weariness and grief, with wrinkles where she'd cried and raged too often for her body to heal. The European was young, scarcely past adolescence, and her complexion was nearly pristine. The African moved with a calm confidence, though unfamiliar with her immediate environment, while the European walked with hesitance and paced restlessly after just a few minutes of standing in any one place.

Together they watched the surf roll underneath them from the vantage of a balcony thirty feet above a narrow, rocky beach. Behind them was the dark bulk of an unlit mansion, one of countless private holdings on small islands like Sikinos. No passing tourist or sailor would have suspected it teemed with occupants. The owners needed no lights, and their few living guests made do as best they could.

"Icy," the African said, and laughed briefly.

The European looked at her with open curiosity. "Is there something amusing about ice?"

"In a way. You've always been linked with ice in my imagination, and that gave you a special place of mystery."

The apparently young European continued to lean on the balcony railing, but glanced up from the surf. "What about me reminds you of ice, precisely, Conrad?"

The European didn't put any particular emphasis on the name. She had long-since given up worrying about the idiosyncrasies of vampiric names. If this Congolese woman wished to use a man's name, apparently because of the author who'd famously written of her homeland, then so be it.

The African didn't return the European's gaze. "There are two links in this particular chain. The first part is that

just before I left my home to see Europe, my sire Elias briefed me on some of the famous and infamous members of the clan. Mostly, of course, he instructed me in the protocols for introducing myself in unfamiliar Sabbat gatherings, but he also talked about the clan's... dissidents? Is that the word I want? Yes, he used it with a deliberate air of the political about it, which I suspect has always colored my view of the clan. 'Monçada's childe Lucita,' he told me, 'she is icy. Perhaps she once had a heart, but now there is only the quest for vengeance, and that without true philosophy.'

Lucita suppressed a small flinch.

Conrad continued. "The second is from when I was still alive, and a young woman under the sway of the great reformer. He told us stories of the world beyond the river. Some of them, I later found out, were outright fabrications, and even then we could tell that some of his marvels existed only in his mind. But we had no way of telling which were thus and which true. I remember when he told us how very cold water became hard like a rock. My parents doubted that one, but I thought of all the things that are solid in normal temperatures but which melt when you heat them enough. I pictured Europe as a land where the normal course of things was reversed, so that everything hard flowed and everything soft was icy, like a rock."

She thought for a moment. "It's tempting to say, 'And so it was.' But that was the sort of flourish the reformer engaged in, and I've always tried not to sound too much like him."

Lucita resumed her pacing. "So. Am I icy?"

Conrad watched a starfish caught in mid-move by an arrhythmic surge, this pounded to pieces by the next three waves as it struggled to regain its place in a rocky cleft. "In a way, I suppose. At least I can see that you once were."

"Were?"

"Even if I didn't know how old you are, I could see by the way you move that you have experience surviving in hostile territory. Someone leading your existence would have to cultivate a smooth, hard shell, unless you were willing to

give yourself up to one of the passionate paths of enlightenment. Which is..."

"...not an option."

"Just so."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No. I had expected I would be, but it doesn't seem to be necessary. The reality is far more interesting than I expected, and provides me plenty of stimulation without my needing to manufacture additional entertainment. You remind me of the ice-plugged rivers I've seen as the first thaw is well underway. Anything trying to balance on top of the ice will get pitched into the river. So will any curious fish poking up through a momentary opening. When I was in Siberia, we often drank the blood from still-warm fish that had been decapitated by an ice surge that cut them in two and tossed them up onto a floe. That's your situation now."

"I could destroy you right now," Lucita said very evenly.

"Yes, you could," Conrad agreed with a faint smile. "But you won't, for two reasons."

"And they are? Please, explain your remarkable insights."

"First, there's the practical matter that if you did, you wouldn't survive to enjoy it. You know that we're constantly watched here."

"Yes. And the other?"

"You know I'm right."

"I do?"

Conrad laughed a peculiarly deep and slow laugh. "Of course you do. You can't expect me to believe that a pack of neonates, even one led by as astute a young man as my child Andrew, could capture you if you were in anything like your right mind." She watched Lucita twice start an answer, pause, and reconsider. Finally she continued. "I can speculate what you were doing in the desert, but I don't know, and I don't expect I could make you tell. But whatever it was, it was not the only thing distracting you. You've had bad moments before, I understand. This is more like a bad year, or worse. You have lost your anchor and are repeatedly

running into shoals. Eventually, I think, you will run into one too many and sink without a trace, unless you find a new anchor. And now I go to attend to other matters."

Lucita did not watch her leave.

Cardinal Timofiev heard the exchange, of course. He heard everything spoken in the mansion, the shadows rushing to carry him the words of the others filling this place. It would take an act of will to quiet the whispers, and he had no desire to do so just now.

Lucita... an interesting case, that one. He still wasn't quite sure that his fellow judges in the Court of Blood had decided correctly. It would be so much simpler to just destroy her right now and mark an end to Monçada's twisted little lineage. There might be some childe of the fat Spanish bastard out there somewhere—very likely there was, given Monçada's propensity for fallback planning—but with Lucita gone, the clan's leaders could perhaps regain a semblance of poise.

Then Timofiev remembered the Abyssal creature that had attacked during Lucita's trial.

Someone out there was playing dangerous summoning games, and while they had to be tracked down and destroyed, it was merely sensible to put someone expendable in the front rank of that search. With moderate luck, Lucita herself would perish and allow more loyal Lasombra to bring back word to their masters, after which the overwhelming might of the clan's elders would put a stop to it all. If Lucita survived, she could be destroyed at the clan's collective leisure. There might be something educational in doing it that way: Timofiev could have his favorite paladin arrange a suitable cage somewhere in the warrens beneath Mexico City and make Lucita a featured entertainment in the Grand Balls for years to come. It was even possible she could decide at last to throw in her lot with the Sabbat, though Timofiev wouldn't lay up mornings waiting for that.

It was also possible that the Abyssal creatures were after Lucita in particular. Timofiev didn't think Monçada could

have set up such an elaborate scheme to take effect upon his destruction, or would have if he could, but Timofiev wasn't omniscient and had run into unpleasant surprises before. Nor would the mastermind have to be Monçada: Lucita had gained quite a few enemies in her long run as a freelance nuisance. If she were the target, it again made sense to keep her out and visible.

In any event, something needed to be done, now. She was, after all, under sentence, and needed to be reminded of her situation. With the faintest shuffled step, Timofiev stepped into a shadow and left his room empty.

Friday, 2 June 2000, 10:45 PM
(11:45 Sikinós time)
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

Tonight the eight did not gather in the great chamber. The echoing screams from last night's disastrous summoning and banishment made it an uncomfortable place. Tonight the eight gathered in what had been the castle's main library, its bookshelves cleared and painted with flat black lacquer, the walls, floor and ceiling all covered with obsidian tile. It made a convenient place for meditation, since the senses already were largely cut off from fleshly distractions.

Tonight there would be no summoning. They were all drained, physically and emotionally. There would be magic, however. They had enemies to observe and plans to make. The summoners repeated simple mantras to themselves, stilling the blood, resting in ebony chairs so that their bodies could cease even the motions of the unliving. Gradually their minds became unaware of the world, and from there thought could drift out of the world altogether and into the Abyss.

Small fractions of entities moved through the conceptual spaces in the endless darkness. There were constant eddies of isolated memories and emotions, and occasional swarms of ideas of all kinds. The pieces of what could amount to a complete mind coalesced and broke apart, the spiritual equivalent of the bottom layers of a terrestrial food chain. The disciplined minds of the summoners held themselves apart from the predation around them, probing gently for a certain combination of impulses. *Wound. Enemy. East.*

Some of the entities with that combination were on errands of their own, unrelated to the summoners' concerns. But others were indeed stirred by memories of the awful light that their opponents had unleashed into the Abyss the night before. Carefully, the summoners followed the tide of aggregated impulses in the wake of their unknown enemies' departure. From Thera the tide spun across the Aegean, to a small island. None of the Abyss dwellers knew its name, of course, but that could come later.

Friday, 2 June 2000, 11:45 PM
Island of Sikinos, Aegean Sea, Greece

After Conrad left, Lucita forced herself back into calm by making a systematic investigation of her surroundings. This was the second floor of a four-story mansion, built on an outcropping on the eastern shore of one of many small Aegean islands. It had been modified over time, and Lucita could form no clear sense of its original edge; none of the features readily available to her were more than a few decades old. Lingered odors told her that human beings often lived here, but now there were only a handful of them, including her own bound servant Angelica. All the living people seemed to be on the top floor. Vampires filled the rest of the house.

Lucita was not accustomed to being surrounded by her own kind. She seldom appeared in gatherings of vampires in any number to speak of, and when she did it was almost always in disguise among enemies, as part of an assignment. There were nearly as many vampires here as there'd been at the London Camarilla Elysium, and all of these were her own clan. She felt constant motion on the edges of the Abyss in response to careless and even unwitting uses of the clan's power over shadow. ("Obtenebration," the elders here seemed to prefer calling it. Lucita thought the name clunky, though she admitted it was at least clear about the power's crucial association with darkness.) She also felt *kinship*, a rare thing for one committed to the outcast's path. She was aware of the ambitious young vampires who desired to take her blood's power for themselves, just as she felt an urge to assault one of the powerful elders and suck him dry.

She didn't think anyone was actually on the verge of trying to commit an act of diablerie, but it formed a constant unstated foundation of tension to interactions here. Strictly speaking, of course, the benefits of diablerie had nothing to do with clan. Any elder of a generation closer to the Father in Darkness would serve. But something in the Lasombra

blood called out with particular force. Lucita tried to remember if she'd felt this same sense of urgency in the nights before young Gratiano and his cabal destroyed the clan's Antediluvian founder, but the memories slipped away. Perhaps.

The little cardinal, Timofiev, stepped out of a corner shadow onto her balcony. She looked at him without a nod or greeting, and turned back to the night surf. He stayed where he'd emerged. Finally he spoke in that surprising deep voice.

"Childe of Monçada..."

She interrupted. "That is not a title I've accepted in at least seven hundred years."

"So?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have no more interest in indulging your fancies than I would in indulging my own childe's delusion that he can escape gravity by parting his hair on the other side. It doesn't matter what you think, the fact is that you are Monçada's childe and you will always be so. Neither his passing nor yours can change that. And perhaps if you were less in flight from yourself, you'd have avoided the foolish errors that led to you being here, now."

"Have you come to taunt me?"

"Not primarily. I am simply here to remind you that you have a duty, and that the sooner you begin, the sooner you may complete it."

Now she did look away from the surf, to peer down at his wizened face and its flat unstirred eyes. "Do you expect me to believe that I can hope to survive once I've done your dirty work? You think of me as someone you can expend in the hunt for the summoner."

"Of course I do. And you are expendable. Now that we have you, you can't hope to flee fast enough to get away from us, and you know that. But you're useful. We did not become the great founders of the glorious crusade by being careless about our resources." He held up a hand, seeing her about to speak. "Nor did we get or maintain our position by engaging in idle duplicity. If I don't want you to know what

I think, I can simply not tell you. Once I make a commitment, it's at least as easy to keep it as it would be to break it, and more desirable for several reasons. I am your enemy, but that fact does not give me license to use absolutely every means at hand in the pursuit of your destruction."

This time she did break in. "So you expect me to trust your word?"

"Of course not. I don't expect you to do anything except what you must to avoid your destruction this instant. Anything else will come only in time. And speaking of time, we must speak of your quest."

"If we must."

"You lack refinement in your sarcasm, cousin. You've spent too much time away from the real masters of ironic assertion. Perhaps once your task is done we may school you. Be as that may, you know that we will not let you travel alone. You must go with companions amenable to fate and the judgment of your Court."

"I hadn't really thought about it."

He snapped back. "If you wish to think me evil, go right ahead. By your pathetic standards I am. But please do me the courtesy of not treating me as stupid. Of course you've thought about it. You have someone in mind, and I believe I know who it is. But you must tell me so that we can actually discuss it."

Lucita was startled. She was accustomed to doing any significant business wrapped in endless circumlocution and misdirection. If the Sabbat's masters always spoke so frankly, no wonder they managed to get so much done with less than half the Camarilla's numbers. "All right, yes, I've thought about it. I want to search with Conrad."

"Why?"

"I believe she's loyal enough to the Sabbat to warrant your trust, but she's enough of an outsider to seem more comprehensible to me. I understand how she looks at the world in some ways." Timofiev nodded at that. "In addition, while she's not as innately strong as I am, I would hate to have to fight her one on one. I believe that she makes at

least as effective use of her talents as I do when I'm less distracted, and since you require a watchdog to look over me, she should be acceptable for that reason."

"Very noble of you to think of us like that. Anything else?"

"She interests me." Timofiev waited patiently for her to continue. "Conrad brings an interesting perspective to her situation. I would like the opportunity to speak further with her away from this crowd."

"And do you believe that the two of you will stride forth into the night and accomplish mission alone?"

"Not at all. There is a third I wish you to bring me."

"Name this favored one."

"You won't like it." She was right. He didn't.

Roxana practiced a solitary meditation tonight, since Simon Peter wanted to spend his waking hours in the mansion's library. She looked at the collection briefly, found little of interest—theoretical treatises held no fascination for her—and decided instead to work on her ability to enter the Abyss with minimal disruption. Getting across the barrier between physical reality and the Abyss was relatively easy. Doing it without attracting swarms of curious creatures who'd like to rip her soul apart and drag off the pieces as food, nesting material, or whatever it was they did with the physic debris of unfortunate mystics, was trickier.

This time she made her crossing smoothly, but at first she didn't think so. The Abyss throbbed with an intensity of movement that she'd never encountered before, and at first she thought it was because of her. As she maintained her calm, she realized that she'd entered a current already in existence, pursuing some goal of its own. She set herself tumbling in small eddies, trying to look like part of the notional backwash while gently probing for common factors among the agitated entities.

Eight complete intelligences loomed behind the fractional minds she could reach most easily. They orbited the weak points in the Abyss's walls here, clearly studying lines of approach and withdrawal. She lacked the skill to

discern much about the observers, not without risking exposure, and she felt quite sure that they were stronger than her, whether they were fellow Lasombra or something else. Her frustration at this inability to understand any more actually reinforced her camouflage, as she blended in well with the streams of hurt and revenge.

She sensed that some of the fragments orbited around and even passed through the eight minds, and wondered if she could gain any useful secondhand impressions from them. Slowly, she turned her eddies toward these returning fragments. The faintest whisper of void wind marked the small gap through which she'd entered, allowing her to maintain some basic orientation as the turbulence grew more profound. She reached out an extension of her dark-bodied self....

And fell briefly into madness.

This thing was a mass of rage, and at first she couldn't even sort it out. She was not aware of extending other Abyss tendrils to thrash the surrounding void, nor of the eight seeing an outbreak of conscious power within the Abyss and deciding to flee. Rage at the glowing light yesterday, rage at the Lasombra who had dared confront the sacred monster, rage at all the Lasombra who refused to see the darkness as anything more important than a tool, rage at the difficulty of ending the world...

She came to herself then and began disentangling her own thoughts from this thing. Her motion attracted the attention of other fragments. She wanted to fall back out of the Abyss, into the world, but she couldn't maintain the proper concentration while the rage fragments still tainted her consciousness. Rage and a sense of enemies pressed in on her from all sides, and she felt herself sliding into a state something like Beast-driven frenzy. At that thought, the Beast rose within her, and before she could even begin to object, it blasted into the foreground of her soul.

After that she watched from a detached angle as the Beast whipped itself into a whirling vortex. The fragments close in were all impaled on shadow tendrils, and those farther away were flung off into the distance. Her Beast

thrashed up and down, tumbling back toward her hole in the world. The fragments tried to draw out nourishment from the Beast but found themselves overwhelmed. Her Beast yearned above all to *live*, to experience the full complexity of physical existence, and their own existence was predicated on the absence of all that. It exuded the equivalent of a poison touch, and left tattered husks in its wake, pieces too broken to constitute even one impulse.

The Beast weakened when the last of the attached fragments perished. It was in something like her right mind that Roxana threw herself at the hole in the world until at last her thoughts and ritual gestures came together, and she could tumble back out into her room.

The eight had turned in their flight to reexamine the scene from a distance, only to look back and see a rage of shadow that matched their own. Given the wounding of the Abyssal entity last night, they all assumed this new display of power was intentional and controlled. They drew back.

There was, after all, no need to risk closer contact. Now that they knew where the enemy was, they could investigate by other means.

Saturday, 3 June 2000, 3:25 AM
Island of Sikinos, Aegean Sea, Greece

After his argument over Lucita's second choice, Timofiev returned to his customary room and paced quietly for more than an hour. It always unsettled him to find his initial judgment subject to questioning, particularly when the questions came from someone like Lucita. He would have to take time later to trace the errors in his thought; a lord of rebels could scarcely afford any sloppiness. For now, though, he could act as if he'd never suffered the lapse, and if Lucita cared to claim otherwise, well, anyone who would believe her rather than him deserved what they might get.

There was a knock at his door, interrupting the flow of his thoughts. He didn't recognize the rhythm, but then there would scarcely be an enemy here now. "Come."

The young female mystic, Roxana, entered. She was wan, drained of blood, perhaps recently emerged from a frenzy of some sort. When she didn't speak, Timofiev quipped, "What is it? Speak promptly, as I have other business."

"Yes, Your Eminence," she said. She laid out her experience in the Abyss, as coolly as she could.

"Hmm. Thank you, you have done well. Replenish yourself and rest, and we'll speak further of this later." He watched with approval as she bowed and exited while facing him. *Eight.* The thought chilled him. The intelligences must be kin to the monster they'd defeated at Thera. The hunting pack and the others here must be on their guard whenever they dealt with the Abyss.

The cardinal summoned a well-conditioned soldier and sent him out to bring Conrad and the paladin to his room. Both wisely chose to enter physically and on foot. Conrad left a faintly warm wake in the air, having fed on tourists taken in for the purpose. The paladin was its usual cool self, wearing a simple white suit that would have fit into most fashionable tourist crowds of the area any time in the last century and a half and holding a freshly fired pistol. Timofiev

decided not to ask about that right at the moment. He had long suspected that the paladin had a hidden sense of playfulness, and didn't wish to provoke an unnecessary frenzy by forcing the issue.

Timofiev began simply. "She's decided."

Conrad nodded. "Yes, Your Eminence. Will she and I be getting to work immediately or will we wait for someone to deliver the would-be rebel—Rosa, I believe?—to us?"

The cardinal seldom blinked, but he did so now. "Have you been eavesdropping?"

"No, Your Eminence!" Conrad was genuinely startled. "Even if I thought I could get away with it in practical terms, I've been in close study of the principles of hierarchy and would not. Of course you know of my studies." Timofiev nodded as she continued. "I drew what I thought would be obvious conclusions from my conversations with Lucita. I irritate her in fairly complex ways, and she is clearly not one to leave challenges unresolved. So it seemed obvious to me that she would request my company."

"And the girl?"

"I won't rush to call any of my worthy elders 'superstitious,' but it is true that you of the founding generations seem to take omens more seriously than most of your descendants in the blood. Andrew told me about capturing Rosa and her quest for Lucita, and she was in the room at the time. I presume that she regards Rosa as a connection to whatever oracular forces may be shaping her destiny at the moment."

"Those are very nearly exactly the words she used, in fact."

"And will you be honoring her requests?"

"Upon consideration, yes. You will accompany her immediately, tomorrow night, and my paladin will escort you." Conrad and the paladin exchanged brief bows. "Your childe and his pack will go retrieve the rebel and train her in pack discipline, then bring her to wherever you and Lucita are at the time."

"Very good, Your Eminence. Do you have instructions for what to do once we do find the summoner and remove him?"

"I am glad to see you feel confident in your mission."

"If I did not, Your Eminence, I would ask you to replace me with someone who did. In any event, your orders?"

"Once the summoner is no longer a threat, bring proof as to the correctness of your chosen target and of the efficacy of his removal to Mexico City. We will then assemble a Court to consider at that time whether Lucita warrants further punishment."

"Very good, Your Eminence."

"Childe of Elias, do you take this assignment seriously? You seem unduly amused for someone about to play a crucial role in the execution of one of the greatest sentences delivered against one of our clan in the last eighty-five years."

Conrad was startled again. "Eminence! I understand fully that this is the single most consequential assignment ever given to me. I appreciate the danger I'll be facing and the seriousness of my role as the trusted figure close to the accused. I do admit to being amused by the juvenile confusion within Lucita and to finding a certain unexpectedness in the whole affair. But no, Your Eminence, I am not amused by your orders, at all."

"Very good. Then I'll leave you to discuss matters with the paladin." Timofiev dropped into shadow and left the scene.

Conrad put on her best impassive gaze to examine the paladin. She had never cared much for androgyny as a matter of vampiric style. It lacked both the pragmatic simplicity of keeping a known form and the wholehearted commitment of exploring alternative forms, and merely wallowed in continuing fascination with mortal possibilities. At least the paladin was competent and not using androgyny as a distraction from its lack of basic survival skills. It was taller than she was, with a thin but well-muscled frame—muscles that had developed in life, Conrad guessed from the naturalness of their movements beneath smooth white skin.

The paladin wore its nails with short tapering spikes, and filed them thick. A mandarin collar covered its throat and framed its elegant oval face. There was a touch of Indian or Southeast Asian ancestry in those features, but Conrad suspected that *that* was a post-mortem change.

The paladin's suit had a somewhat masculine style, but no more so than the women's fashions Conrad had seen in Europe between world wars and from time to time since then. Its jewelry was simple and elegant, rings and a bracelet all of platinum, each set with a single ruby. None of it was loose; none would get in the way in a fight.

The paladin took a short step toward the balcony. Conrad matched it. When she took a second step, the paladin matched her. Both moved quietly, confidently, and without wasted effort. Both kept their hands free, fists unclenched, and they both kept their feet facing forward and well apart. On the balcony, they alternated glances at each other with glances out to sea.

Conrad broke the silence. "Are we going to fight?"

"I don't know," the paladin answered. "We must skirmish before speaking with the judged one, I think."

"'Judged one'? Do you really think of her in those terms?"

"Of course I do. She chose to separate herself from us. If she has no use for our identity, then I have no use for hers and need only some suitable marker to indicate which entity I refer to."

Fascinated, Conrad leaned back against the far railing. "I see. What do you do when you face—" As she began saying "face," she pushed back against the balcony's barred floor, tumbling backward. Sometimes she followed this leap, one of her favorite opening gambits, with a grab for some convenient target, letting her arms dislocate in the process of spinning around. Healing them was easy enough when she was freshly full of blood, after all. This time she chose not risk even the slight delay, and tossed shadow tendrils from her cupped hands to pull her up against the underside of the balcony.

She'd hoped that the paladin would move to where she'd jumped off, so that she could attack it through the balcony. No such luck. By the time she had somersaulted and could look in her sparring partner's direction, the paladin was up off the grating, hanging easily by one hand from the eaves. It looked down calmly, its suit unrumpled by what must have been a seam-straining leap. The surf crashed steadily down below while the vampires watched each other.

A shadowy silhouette tore loose from Conrad and plunged between waves into the sea. She pulled concealment around herself while grabbing onto the balcony with both hands as well as commanded shadow. Unfortunately, the paladin didn't take the bait. It paid no attention to her shadow decoy; instead it dropped back onto the balcony and peered through the bars at her. "You haven't mastered this technique sufficiently."

"Oh, very well." Conrad climbed up. "Are you particularly gifted as a seer? I can conceal myself perfectly well from most of my targets."

"Not especially talented, I think," the paladin replied, "so much as very dedicated to the art. It's useful in my line of work."

"I can see how that would be, yes." Conrad straightened her blouse. "Well, shall we go speak to the judged one?"

The cardinal stepped out of shadow against the interior wall of a room looking out over the island rather than out to sea. He found Bishop Andrew Emory engaged in a spiritual exercise with his pack priest, Barry Morn: Andrew had bound Barry in a knot of animated shadows and surrounded him with knives that would slice him if he flinched. Timofiev noted with approval that every other blade shimmered with some freshly applied chemical. It might be a poison or something as straightforward as bleach—Timofiev didn't know Andrew's style well enough to say—but in any event it was a good touch. Despite the fact that Andrew's legs had been shattered in life and were now eternally useless, he was clearly the more powerful of

the two packmates. Barry, clearly the inferior, did his best to recite passages from select Lasombra philosophers of the classical and medieval eras.

Timofiev chose to wait a moment before making himself known. Barry's current recitation drew on a text Timofiev remembered fondly, the work of his old friend Alicitus, who'd perished so unfortunately in the great revolt. "...thus we see that the essence of this way of seeing the world is strength. The weak cannot change the strong: the weak sword shatters on the anvil, the anvil does not shatter; diamond cuts glass and steel alike, and is not cut. You are the anvil and the diamond upon which sinful flesh shatters and sinful mind tatters. As you have no opportunity for redemption, so should you have no need to want for it, since God has appointed you to the ministry of destruction of all that is wicked. You cannot inspire fear if you fear, nor can you inspire repentance while yourself yearning to repent. You must at all times act boldly..." The familiar words rolled by until the cardinal chose to scuff his feet and attract the young vampires' attention.

"Eminence!" Andrew drew his shadows away from Barry, around his own damaged legs to pull himself erect. Barry, his eyes sensitive even to the cool reflected moonlight, winced before noticing the cardinal. Then he too stood up for a proper bow.

"Good evening, Bishop, Ductus. I'm pleased to see you cultivating yourself this way, Ductus. It sets a good example for your packmates."

Barry smiled. "Thank you, Eminence. Bishop Andrew has been very helpful, too."

"I'm sure he has. Andrew is nothing if not devoted to his spiritual progress." Timofiev knew that Andrew had been building a network of sympathizers among the West Coast American Sabbat, linked by their interest in teaching others the basics of the various paths of enlightenment. He wanted Andrew to know that the scheme had not gone unnoticed. Andrew responded with a look so bland that it amounted to a shouted confession. "Now I have another assignment for your pack, Bishop."

"Your Eminence, I expected that our mission would be done as soon as Lucita began serving her sentence. We have matters left undone...."

"Yes, yes, to be sure. However, your superiors have need of your service as a pack for a little while yet. I trust this is acceptable."

"Of course."

"I thought as much." Timofiev noted that Andrew had suppressed his early problems with flinching, and reminded himself to point this out to Conrad as a mark of progress. "You and your pack are to fly back to Mexico City by whatever means you deem acceptable, retrieve the renegade Rosa, and bring her here, again by whatever form of air travel suits you. You will bring her into the pack, by as much use of the Vaulderie as may prove necessary, and ensure that she will take straightforward instruction from the sect's hierarchy. You are to leave this morning if possible, this evening if not, and to return with an absolute minimum of delay. Do you have any questions?"

Barry spoke up. "Your Eminence, I don't mean to question your judgment..."

"Naturally not."

"...but we've already got one big rebel running around here. Is it wise to bring a wannabe to the same place?"

"It is indeed wise, for reasons that need not concern you now. The Sword of Caine commands that you bring Rosa here, prepared for service. Is this clear?"

"Perfectly, Your Eminence." Andrew cut off Barry this time.

"You do not approve." Timofiev paused. "You may speak without fear of retribution on this matter, until I depart."

"Thank you, Your Eminence. No, I don't approve," Andrew continued to speak without giving Barry another chance. "I don't doubt that my pack has the means to break Rosa's will to resist. Barry performs the rituals as well as anyone I know who's less than two hundred years old. Roxana and Simon Peter are very capable at their craft. Niccolo was a mistake to Embrace in the first place, but

he's learning and I don't think he's likely to jeopardize the operation."

"So then?"

"The fact that it can be done doesn't mean it's the best use of our time and effort. I have a city left in the hands of subordinates. As a hunting pack, we could pursue other assignments, or disperse. We aren't very well prepared to do the sort of rehabilitation that Rosa requires. We tortured her well enough, I think. Can't we let someone else do the rest?"

"Certainly there are individuals and groups who specialize in this sort of thing. But I prefer to give you the assignment. You may not guess. When you can tell me with definiteness why I prefer this, you may tell me. If you guess incorrectly, you will face the customary punishment for insubordination. I trust this is clear."

"Perfectly clear, Your Eminence." Andrew and Barry spoke almost in synchronization that time.

"Then carry out your orders." Timofiev faded back into the shadows.

"Now what do we do?" Barry asked.

"We pack, of course. We'd better be out of here as soon as everyone's awake after sunset."

Saturday, 3 June 2000, 5:00 AM
Island of Sikinos, Aegean Sea, Greece

Lucita spent an hour after Timofiev left rehearsing basic combat maneuvers. She made a deliberate effort to drain blood out of her limbs and to suppress the reflexes which supplemented her natural abilities with supernatural power. Complete separation was impossible, of course. As a young living woman she'd learned the basics of swordplay and close combat, but that was long behind her. Still, she could at least try to rein in her vampiric side and function as something more like a living woman than an ancient animated corpse.

It wasn't easy.

The fundamentals of defense came easily. She was as limber and flexible as ever, capable of turning, bending, and tumbling out of the line of imagined attacks. And she knew from experience that it would be a moment's effort to let her vampiric potential flow back. It was not easy to take her by surprise or to mount any sort of direct assault that could overwhelm her ability to resist. But...

Offensive expertise eluded her this night. Like all vampires, Lucita had to deal with the Beast, the side of her that yearned to lose itself in a frenzy of carnage and death that would end only with its own complete annihilation. She had erected monuments—burying ash was seldom very satisfying—to the memory of trusted old associates who lost themselves that way. She'd known moments of frenzy in her time, of course; all vampires did. One of the most important ways of managing the Beast was the construction of a moral code within which one could exist, holding fast to the sense of oneself as a being guided by principles beyond the immediate gratification that interested the Beast. For a very long time, Lucita had existed in what she thought of as a viable middle ground, restraining herself from senseless slaughter and seeking some sort of good for the world to come from her actions.

(Turn, turn, right arm up, adjust balance, left arm down, pivot. Pause. Step back. Arms together, apart, up. Step back. Adjust balance. That sequence had gotten her out of more than one assault by an ill-coordinated mob. In a real fight she'd need to resort to powers at this point. Spring forward, cock to one side... feel the Beast. Pause to stand and calm.)

Now she drifted without anchor. The confusion that had grown inside her ever since Monçada perished, the distraction that had led directly to her capture and trial, these weakened her conviction of justification. The Beast stirred ever more frequently, no longer constrained by that sense of larger purpose. She found herself unable to say with any confidence that this action was right, that one wrong, and so every response became the occasion of an inner striving for simple chaos. Every time she struck out, even at an imaginary sparring partner, she lost a moment's initiative because of needing to check herself from frenzy.

(Adjust balance, weight onto left leg, kick off with right, throw center of mass forward and low. Land on hands, spring. Forward or back? Forward, momentum carrying her into the center of imagined assailants' grouping. Reach for knives, if she had them; otherwise rely on claws for low, raking swipes. Then up, fast. See the light fixture, grab, ignore the charring in her palms, heal it later. Hoist, push off, fall back. Legs back, arms close, avoid the tumble for now. Land, assess the patterns in imagined feet, lunge... feel the Beast. Pause to stand and calm.)

From time to time she'd debated matters of vampiric morality with fellow travelers and even with clients. The sort of truncated humanity she preferred was by no means the only alternative. All around her in this mansion were vampires who'd committed themselves to "paths of enlightenment" which offered complete ethical frameworks codified and systematic enough to hold the Beast at bay, but which began by rejecting any distinctively human virtue. (The most extreme efforts to reject any virtue that might be assigned to the nature of living animals had all ended in failure, as nearly as Lucita knew.) If she were to decide that humanity no longer served her, she'd have no shortage of

mentors willing to help turn her into a monster. But she felt that doing so would be nearly as great an act of suicide as throwing herself into sunlight: a death of her self, leaving behind a husk with her memories but without her soul.

(Flat against the wall, arms extended, push into leap, cheat a bit and burn just enough blood for a good clear enhanced reach. Arms folded back against ceiling, legs drawn up against wall, survey the situation. Identify a leader and lunge, arms straight... feel the Beast. Pause to stand and calm.)

She knew she needed some fresh foundation for her existence, and she had no interest in turning herself into a loyal daughter of the Sabbat. Philosophy had never come easily to her, and she wished once again for her lost mentor Anatole. Even his less-than-holy childe Beckett would be welcome company. She doubted that she could manage the task on her own...

There was a knock on the door. Before she had a chance to speak, it opened to admit Cardinal Elieser de Polanco, one of the judges at her recent trial. He was dressed in simple dark trousers and shirt beneath a vest embroidered in rainbow geometric designs. He seemed calm, though she knew that he was very, very good—even by elders' standards—at concealing his reactions. De Polanco made the slightest of bows to her and sat in one of the chairs she'd pushed up against the wall.

"Good morning," he began without preamble.

She didn't speak, merely nodded back.

"I came to inquire what your thoughts were about your judgment. You've sent Timofiev and his minions into quite a little whirl of activity, which amuses me. But do you expect to get anything useful from it?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Is this part of my trial, or are you just snooping?"

De Polanco managed to look hurt. "I have never 'snooped,' not even when I was pursuing a private agenda. As it happens, however, I am inquiring in an official capacity,

as the judges would like some sense of your proposed strategy, if you have one."

"I never liked you."

"I beg your pardon?"

Lucita sat down in a chair on the other side of the room. "When the cardinal first introduced us, you seemed like just the sort of greasy schemer that Father liked to rant about. After a few meetings, I decided that it was worse than that, because you had genuine talent that you were frittering away in your effort to be the next Alfonso Diaz. Or Rodrigo Diaz, in your fits of thinking you could follow in the path of El Cid."

"I see." De Polanco remained composed. "Fascinating as your juvenile assessments may be, of course, they have no bearing on the question at hand. How do you propose to identify the Abyss summoner you seek, particularly since you have not chosen as an associate anyone with real expertise in Abyss mysticism?"

"By the time your precious Reconquista was over, there wasn't room for you to be the sort of prince you imagined, so you turned to nostalgia. As long as it was lost, it was welcome somewhere in your domain. That's why you started building that huge library of Moorish trinkets, once they didn't matter to the living anymore." Lucita saw de Polanco quivering slightly, and pressed ahead. "The cardinal wasn't good for much, but at least he looked forward, rather than behind. Or at his behind, for that matter."

Her visitor's composure crumbled. He threw himself out of the chair and across the room, pinning her down with shadow tendrils supplementing his actual arms. No words came until after he'd ripped two mouthfuls of flesh out of her neck and shoulder. "Insolent tart! I was a king while you were running around with that fool who thought he was an angel!" He wiped his lips and leaned back a little, letting the shadow tendrils keep her down. "It's lucky for me that the cardinal chose his progeny so poorly. With his backing, any childe of his could have been a real threat. But instead you did my work for me, so busily sabotaging his plans and saving me the effort. I once considered paying

you a retainer for services rendered, but I suspected that you wouldn't appreciate it."

Since she had no air in her lungs to worry about, Lucita didn't actually gasp for breath. She did struggle to work herself free while healing the new wounds, with little result. De Polanco had her pinned very thoroughly.

"Now then," he continued, "let me explain your position to you. I could destroy you right now and face no very severe penalty for it. I choose to let you continue to exist, because once again I'd rather have you do my work for me. You clearly think that you can wriggle out of this situation. You are wrong. So you will tell me your plan or I will drag it out of you."

She felt frenzy-fear rising within her and barely retained the self-control to spit out a short insult from twelfth-century Spanish at him. He gazed sadly at her, while shadow tendrils reached into her wounds and pulled them wider... blood red overwhelmed her vision... she lost all sensations except the growing pain of her wounds and the terror...

Then it was over. She was collapsed on the floor. De Polanco stood by the door, a few flecks of blood on his cheeks and vest. The stirring in her veins warned of impending daylight, though the sky was still dark. How long had she been at his mercy?

"Thank you," he said smoothly, and stepped out. "Rest well."

Saturday, 3 June 2000, 10:30 PM
Yacht *Latter-Day Feast*
Aegean Sea, Greece

Lucita began to relax, ever so slightly, as Sikinos receded from view. Soon it would sink below the horizon, and with moderate luck she'd never have to see it again. The yacht's crew went quietly about their business, leaving the foredeck clear for Lucita, Conrad, and shadow-formed Zarathustra to speak without interruption.

"But do you really expect to find anything by revisiting the wreck?" Zarathustra's voice emerged smooth, baritone in pitch and altogether free of the modifications to pure tones that a physical throat would introduce. Lucita suspected that he pushed directly on the air with very precise manipulation of shadow, though she wasn't entirely sure.

"Not particularly," Conrad began. Then she stopped herself and looked over at Lucita, who waved a hand. Conrad continued. "Not particularly, no. But right now we don't have many other leads. We've put a couple of the ship's crew to work searching out news stories that suggest the kind of thing we're looking for, but it takes time. I suppose that we're after the equivalent of ballistics data: physical evidence of how the summoned thing moves and fights. That might help us weed through the hallucinations and distortions that clutter the archives."

"I see. What sources are you using?"

"Everything we can get to with a satellite, I think. They're starting with British sources—BBC and Lloyd's, since they've worked with those before. After that, I imagine they'll move on to other European sources."

"I see." Zarathustra drifted calmly, his fringes ruffling in the breeze stirred by the ship's passage. Lucita watched him for any sign of deliberate movement. Minutes passed quietly.

Finally Lucita took the initiative. "Sir, it's clear that we've overlooked something. Will you please explain to us what it is?"

"Of course." Zarathustra made a windy sound that might have been laughter. "You haven't asked the elders of your own clan, proverbial for its interest in the sea, whether they've noticed anything unusual in this or any other sea lately."

Lucita and Conrad looked at each other for a moment. They began nearly simultaneously. "Have you noticed..." "Is there..." Conrad halted to let Lucita continue. "Have you noticed anything unusual lately?"

"I have."

"Sir, will you tell us?"

"There's an interesting question of obligation here."

He enjoyed those disorienting pauses, Lucita strongly suspected. "What question is that?"

"Finding the summoner and destroying him is your sentence. If I assist you, am I interfering with your trial by ordeal, by multiplying your assets in a way the court didn't consider in sentencing you? If I do interfere, what will you owe me in return?"

For a moment Lucita felt herself as a neonate in Monçada's court, listening to the elders play their endless games of status and patronage. It was very much like the marketplace in the square outside his precious cathedral, albeit generally quieter and less smelly. The sense of being there overwhelmed her, then passed. "Sir, you know at least as well as I do that if I survive because of your assistance, I will owe you the largest debt possible, which you may collect either in extended service or in specific service rendered without question or reservation."

"You appreciate your position, then."

"Very much so. I don't particularly expect to survive long enough for the Court to re-convene and decide whether I'm adequately punished; I will take everything I can get that might increase my chances."

Zarathustra made his perhaps-chuckle again. "I wonder how true that will be. In the meantime, you acknowledge your obligation to me."

"Yes."

"Excuse me..." Conrad broke in. The others both turned to look at her. "I trust that you're not binding me because of information you provide her," she said to Zarathustra with a shrug of her hand at Lucita.

The pillar of darkness rotated around its axis, pointing a knot of turbulence about where a face would be at Conrad. "No. This is an arrangement I strike with Lucita. She has chosen you as her associate, but that's her decision, not mine. You incur no debt or obligation because of my action here."

"Thank you. Carry on, please."

Zarathustra laid out a precise series of times and places, all of which Lucita followed readily and Conrad with some difficulty. His shipping interests had lost half a dozen vessels in the Mediterranean since mid-April; he had the dates and times of last contacts, and reported coordinates, along with estimated error rates. In response to questions from Lucita, he had descriptions of their cargoes as well, along with explanations of the potential hazards involved in each and the assessment of the safety evaluators who reported to his conglomerate. Over the next several hours, Conrad and Lucita assembled a plan of action.

The paladin spent most of the night watching Lucita and her partners in conversation from the bridge, with occasional breaks to stroll to the stern and review the preparations of the templars chosen for this mission. There were five of them, all with obsidian theatrical masks fused to their faces—two with the smiling mask of comedy, three with the downturned sadness of tragedy. Like the paladin, the Masks adopted an androgynous look, and in protective clothing (which they wore anytime they might be called to duty), it was impossible to tell what genders they might once have had.

The Masks were good, the paladin knew from experience. They'd clashed once before with Lucita and lost, but that wasn't to their discredit. She'd had better intelligence than their sources realized and had time to set up two very effective ambushes. Against slightly less entrenched

opponents they did marvelously. The paladin knew that any two of them could take down Conrad on short notice, and believed that any three of them could take out Lucita on equally short notice. Certainly the team as a whole could. And they would very much like the excuse to try.

One of the Masks kept watch on the ghouls preparing the dive tanks for the night's work. Vampires didn't have to worry about air but did suffer pressure effects at great depth: pressure could squeeze blood out through a vampiric diver's pores. A brand-new neonate would lose all his blood and fall into torpor after a couple of hours below about fifteen hundred feet. Elder vampires, capable of storing more blood, would last longer, and vampires with supernatural toughness would lose blood more slowly, but everyone suffered to some degree from the "blood sweats."

The night before, two Masks and a pair of ghouls had abducted the dozen or so passengers aboard *Beau Soleil*, the yacht of a vacationing Frenchman with the misfortune to choose the same waters as *Latter-Day Feast*. Each of the victims was carefully exsanguinated into a storage vat, and the blood mixed with anticoagulants to stay liquid. (That made it taste foul and diluted its power, but then this wasn't a pleasure dive anyway.) Tonight they drained the vat out into scuba tanks fitted with hoses wider than usual and mouthpieces containing an anticoagulant gel, all to help keep the blood flowing. After the divers started down, the ghouls would deface the victims' bodies with markings intended to suggest satanic and chthonic cult activity, put them back on board *Beau Soleil*, steer it toward some nearby island, and start a slow fire. The remains—if anyone got to the boat in time—would keep investigators busy and the scandal-mongering press happy, and none of it would suggest vampires.

Sunday, 4 June 2000, 2:23 AM
Somewhere beneath Mexico City

Rosa hung on her cross, barely conscious. It had been months, she guessed, since her captors had come to torture her. Now only a single flunky came once in a while to bring her just enough blood to stay functional. The pain dragged on and on, and only the need for slumber punctuated her long twilight struggle for a sense of self.

Sometimes she dreamed, often sharing the subconscious impulses of damnable Niccolo and his little friends, sometimes of Lucita. Once she'd dreamed of Lucita and Andrew looking at each other, her viewpoint rushing from one set of eyes to the other and back again.

Tonight, flitting in and out of wakefulness, she dreamed of Lucita climbing up some steep mountain, reaching the brink of a high cliff, and throwing herself off. Spending precious, irreplaceable (in her dream, Rosa knew it was irreplaceable, but not why) blood. Lucita climbed again, and threw herself off again. Again and again. Rosa found herself standing on the rocky slope below the cliff, and as Lucita fell for the fifth (sixth?) time, the young vampire stepped up to her object of admiration and said, "Let me help."

"Gladly," Lucita answered, and drained Rosa dry. The young vampire could only lie there and watch as Lucita repeated the cycle of climbing and falling.

Monday, 5 June 2000, 11:02 PM
En route from Athens to Mexico City

"I can't do it."

Andrew didn't bother to sigh, but he did glare at Niccolo, whose whining protests filled the cargo hold. Falling air pressure had quieted the last of the yapping animals, leaving the hold free of immediate distractions. Andrew and his pack were far enough back that the engines' roar wasn't overwhelming. He knew intellectually that the grating whines wouldn't really carry anywhere, but they still put him on edge.

"And why not?" Andrew made an effort to maintain calm. There'd be time enough to beat on Niccolo later, should it be required.

"She'll kill me, that's why!"

"Niccolo, she's nearly to the point of no return right now, and by the time we let her have strength back, she'll be conditioned and bound to attend to your well-being as if it were the most important thing in the world to her. So what's the problem?"

"She's clever, Andrew. She'll find a way."

"Are you really telling me that you think she can pull off what four hundred years' worth of Camarilla spies and miscellaneous would-be revolutionaries haven't? You know what's involved. Have you ever seen the Vinculum broken just because someone really wanted to?"

"I never saw so successful a diablerie until that last trip with our sire, either, Andrew. I'm telling you, she's trouble."

"Fine. We'll spare you the unpleasantness of the encounter."

"Really?" Niccolo became even more whining in his moment of relief. He paid no attention to Andrew disassembling an umbrella the pack leader had pulled out of a luggage rack. "That's good. I'll be glad to do something else to serve the mission, you know. I just need to be away from her...."

Andrew lunged across the hold and speared Niccolo through the heart with the wooden umbrella shaft. The metal screws for the handle stuck out through Niccolo's back and hit the hull with a faint *ting*. The shaft held firm, ringed by a slow leak of dark vampiric blood. "Don't worry," Niccolo heard as his senses clouded over. "You'll be fine for target practice this way. Next time..." But the rest was lost in the all-consuming darkness.

"Next time," Andrew finished, "don't be so quick to tell me what you can't do because you're afraid." He looked up at the others. "Does anyone else want to tell me all about their worst fears? No? I thought not. Back in your boxes sometime soon, and practice a little calming discipline. It'll be daytime when they unload us, and you'd better not do any stirring until we're safely stored."

Tuesday, 6 June 2000, 10:30 PM
30 miles west of Paxos, Ionian Sea, Greece

The two women watched the hull of *Latter-Day Feast* as they sank toward the probable location of Zarathustra's cargo ship *Alexander Red*. It had dropped out of sight on May 22, and efforts by Zarathustra's conglomerate to locate the remains with sonar had failed. This wasn't too surprising, though, since this was the western edge of a geologically active, massively convoluted valley that ran parallel to the Greek coast. Zarathustra regarded it as fortunate that the ship hadn't sunk a few miles southeast, which would have put it more than a mile below sea level.

This dive would be bad enough as it was. The sea floor here varied from three thousand to five thousand feet below the surface. Lucita could manage this depth with relatively little problem, but neither Conrad nor their escorts could do it so easily. The Masks carried tanks of blood, compressed to the extent that an already dense liquid could be and attached to slightly modified scuba respirators to replenish what pressure would squeeze out. Lucita and Conrad each carried a pair of high-powered dive lights, with extra batteries attached to belts.

It was cloudy this evening, and the last surface light faded within fifty feet. Lucita turned on a light, promptly attracting the first of many intermittent swarms of jellyfish. Their small stings did nothing to bother the vampires, of course, and the descent continued.

Not for the first time, Lucita wished she'd learned the art of projecting her thoughts, and once again reminded herself to seek out a mentor in the discipline when she had the time for some study. Tonight she'd have to communicate with a wrist-mounted keyboard or a writing tablet. She decided to start with the tablet, since writing still came easier than typing, even after a mortal lifetime of regular typing. *Let me know when blood sweat starts.*

Conrad nodded curtly and didn't bother to write a response. She'd never dived deep enough to experience the squeezing out of her blood by the pressure of surrounding water, but she knew the theory. At least she'd been able to give an account of it that satisfied both Lucita and Zarathustra, before diving in. Nonetheless, Lucita felt a continuing urge to check on her young (or at least younger) companion. Part of it was self-interest—if anything happened to Conrad, blame would surely fall on Lucita. Part of it was self-interest of a different sort. Lucita didn't want to lose future opportunities to argue with the other vampire. It had been a while since she'd had such... interesting... times debating motives and means with anyone else. They continued to sink in silence.

The Masks circled around them, four at the same depth and perhaps twenty feet away, one fifty feet deeper straight down. Once a small shark swam up to investigate Lucita's light. The nearest Mask shattered the cartilage of its spine in four places, crushed its head, and sent it drifting on, all within the space of a few seconds. Lucita recognized that the exhibition had been partly for her benefit and heeded the demonstration of combat prowess.

Somewhere below two thousand feet, Lucita noticed the first traces of red in the water around Conrad and the Masks. Sheer pressure was now squeezing their bodies hard enough to force blood pooled near the skin out through pores. The Masks with the tanks of blood passed them every ten minutes, letting the afflicted divers replenish their losses. The temperature was now close to freezing, but that didn't matter to any of them; diving anywhere warmer than the deepest parts of the polar seas posed no threat through chilling. The blood was the limiting factor, and, assuming nothing made heavy demands on their supply, they all could operate safely until it was time for slumber. To Lucita's surprise, no predators came for the blood diffusing through the surrounding sea, and she suspected that one or more of the Masks had enough power of animal control to keep nuisances at bay.

Finally the bottom came into view. A sounding line from *Latter-Day Feast* rested lightly on a rocky outcropping, weights dangling off to the southeast as the current tugged gently at them. There'd been vegetation here once, but litter lay thick on the sea floor, and occasional bubbles that shone in rainbow hues when the light struck them marked pockets of oil and other toxic waste out of sight. Fish chased each other and down-drifting debris but gave the bottom itself a wide berth.

Lucita and Conrad each carried a map marking three clusters of complex sonar echoes that might be the wreckage of Zarathustra's ship. The nearest lay a few hundred yards away, "upstream" from their sounding line. The current stirred up enough mud and debris to keep visibility down to just a few yards, and the Masks closed in so that each one could see at least two of the others. They swam slowly, a dozen feet above the muck, looking for any signs of recent disturbances. Gradually a pattern emerged: a twisted piece of hull plate, a shattered stump of a pump or lamp. It looked like their first target would prove the right one.

The vampires crested a small rocky ridge and found the main hull of a sunken ship right in front of them. Its bottom had been blasted open at least twice, barely above the keel, and the ship had very nearly torn itself into several pieces on the way down. It was badly charred. There was no sediment on the decks or sides; the ship clearly had not been there very long. The shock of the ship's impact had thrown up peculiar marks in the nearby ridges, parallel grooves running perpendicular to the summits and troughs, almost like foot trails through the muck. Lucita and Conrad peered at them carefully but could come to no conclusion.

The first Mask approached the main deck, and its dive light blinked red twice. The women rose to find the shadows on the deck writhing, clearly under willful animation. Nothing material stirred—the power at work here didn't extend beyond the darkness itself—but then the combination of bright light and deep sea meant that there were shadows everywhere, for dozens of yards around, all waiting to do someone's bidding. Lucita had once fought

on the very threshold of permanent darkness in an Alpine cave and realized that in some ways this situation was even worse than that. Attacks could come from any direction at all.

The shadows rising from the bow took on vaguely human forms in contorted poses. It took Lucita a moment to realize that they were shaping themselves in memory or mockery of the poses the ship's crew must have had as their vessel sank: first shrinking back from the water, then twisting and breaking on their way to the bottom.

But this was not a memorial display. Once their brief initial *danse macabre* was complete, the forms wheeled around to launch themselves at the Mask who'd signaled. In seconds it was engulfed, pressed in upon from all sides by shadows, which continued to repeat their terminal sequences even as they crushed the Mask. A faint trickle of blood marked a break in the Mask's skin, one large enough to squirt out blood that could make its way past the shadows.

Conrad and Lucita looked at each other and nodded. It was worth at least an initial round of confrontation to find out how strong their attackers were. Lucita had been drifting about twelve feet up, and kicked herself down rapidly. Conrad had floated slightly higher, illuminating the deck with the big spotlight to let Lucita's superior vision get best scrutiny; she let the light float free and dived down right behind Lucita. The spreading light pushed the shadows' formation farther away, but they closed the gap soon enough.

Remembering Roxana's account—or rather Timofiev's summary—of penetrating, absorbing Abyssal entities, Lucita resisted her first impulse to summon forth many weapons herself. Instead, she turned away from the lights and drew on her own shadow to create a simple barrier below and behind her. The darkness unfolded into a soft semicircle, and, as the first shadow creatures reached it, they sank into it and became immobilized. That freed her to pivot and face the ones coming in from above. They were more numerous than she'd expected, and stronger. Despite her blood-boosted speed and strength, she was quickly enveloped and crushed. She could feel the blood sweat

saturating the surrounding water, where it wasn't just absorbed by the shadow creatures. If she didn't find a better response soon, she'd pass out, and that would be the end of her ability to resist.

Conrad swam back down below the level of the hull and wrapped herself in deep darkness, with the intent of waiting to see how long it might take the shadow creatures to notice her. The answer proved to be no time at all. A compact cluster of writhing figures descended on her, pushing off from the deck and aiming down with strong kicks. Whatever sense they used to track her, it obviously wasn't sight or any of the others that tenebrous concealment could affect. She looped around them, pushing off their groping efforts to pull her in for constriction, and saw Lucita being swarmed.

From the blood sweat, Conrad realized that she'd have to act fast to forestall another crushing death like the ones taking out more of the Masks. The African woman grabbed one of the drifting dive lights and swam at her very fastest right into the cluster of shadows around Lucita. The shadows made no sound as the hot lamp plunged into their deepest darkness, but their writhing changed from memory or reflection to a response to current pain. They tried to squirm away from the light while remaining attached to Lucita, without much success. Conrad spun in tight circles around the elder, orbiting around her waist and from head to toe, leaving no place for the shadows to cling. The most stubborn ones dissolved into dustlike motes or inky smears when the lamp ripped them apart.

More shadows swarmed in to replace the lost ones, and now they seemed a little smarter. They concentrated on coming in directly behind Conrad so as to snatch at her heels. She was forced to alternate between protecting Lucita and protecting herself, pulling up her legs and swinging the lamp to clear away the tangling shadows. Their clutching reminded her of big river snakes from her childhood, and she was fleetingly grateful that they didn't seem to have fangs or claws. They were bad enough as it was. She could feel the fire of the blood within her dimming as she spent

more and more energy in efforts at rescue.

Finally the two women drifted free for a moment. They looked for the other Masks, and saw that there'd be no hope of rescue for half of their escorts. The first Mask's corpse drifted free, a floppy knot of broken bone and shriveled tissue from which all blood had been extracted. Two more lay still on the deck, each dismembered and held down by shadows, which seemed to be drinking the blood oozing from their wounds. The remaining trio of Masks were protecting each other with the same lamp trick Conrad had used, and were likewise free for the moment. When Conrad and Lucita pointed up, the Masks nodded in unison and swam back toward the surface as fast as they could.

The shadows stopped swimming after them somewhere about the two-thousand-foot mark. With three fewer vampires coming up than had gone down, the blood they had was sufficient—barely—to keep them going. When the dawn far overhead began slowing them down, they lashed themselves to the sounding line to sleep the day away. Conrad's last note to Lucita was brief: *Hope they don't come now*. Lucita could only nod in agreement.

Wednesday, 7 June 2000, 2:00 AM
Castle of Saint Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

There were eight of them again, gathered calmly around an opening into the Abyss. Tonight they worked no great magic; they merely listened to the whispers rising out of the depths. Their master had not spoken to them since that one great rising, and they hoped to discern even indirect messages of encouragement or caution.

A deep strong breeze echoed from the east and north. *Caution caution stirred caution*, the simple thing warned its creators. The eight made the incantations necessary to summon an awareness of the Abyss where it connected to the wreck, where the wind had come from.

"You see," said the next-to-youngest. "It is as I said."

"It is," the eldest answered. "They have stirred up the ship whose profits fed our old enemy in Antioch. You were right, and we were wrong."

The triumphant magician didn't press the issue. "Can you see who it is?"

"No. I only feel their passage. More than one... perhaps five, perhaps more. They work in coordination..." The eldest paused. "Ah. They are leaving the guardians behind."

The eight continued to watch and feel, but it was soon clear that the survivors had risen out of sight. The eight called back the remaining shadows; no point in wasting them in the lighted realms of the world. "So," the second eldest said. "Zarathustra seeks us, and seeks us cleverly. Should we demonstrate to him the folly in his approach?"

They all concurred, and the next work began.

Wednesday, 7 June 2000, 9:44 PM
30 miles west of Paxos, Ionian Sea, Greece

The sun had set an hour ago, and up on the surface it was deep twilight. Sluggish sleep drained out of the vampires waiting below, and they began their tired swim up. They exhausted the last of their blood in a post-sleep feeding and let the empty tanks fall to the sea floor. Let some later explorer make sense of them if he could, Conrad thought, and the others seemed to agree.

The crew of *Latter-Day Feast* had lowered small lights to mark the ascent. Zarathustra came down to meet the divers for the last fifty feet, curiously examining the survivors and their damage. Ghouls hoisted the vampires up on deck and supplied them with fresh blood, while Zarathustra began his questioning almost immediately.

The divers didn't respond immediately, and when they did it took time to draw out the story in anything resembling coherent form. Zarathustra questioned them about the disposition of the ship, but none of the survivors remembered many of the details he wanted to know. Had the forward hole been ahead of or behind the bridge? Had the stern hole been ahead of or behind the stern end of the superstructure? Had they seen evidence of holing continuing below where the hull vanished into the bottom? What had the debris field contained? How much damage had the interior suffered? Gradually he realized how little time they'd had to examine things, and how serious their opposition had been.

Zarathustra and the paladin both examined the survivors' injuries very carefully, calmly prodding to establish the extent and depth of marks, the degree of internal compression, and the overall effects of blood loss and pressure. The paladin seized a Mask's arm and exerted increasing force until it and Zarathustra agreed the new wound matched the ones sustained below. "Remarkably efficient," the paladin remarked. "It's pure strength. The

strategy probably works better underwater, with potential targets at a disadvantage through sheer lack of familiarity." Zarathustra agreed, and shifted his questioning to concentrate on the shadow creatures.

The paladin considered overriding the self-defense reflexes of one of the Masks, establishing a mental link, and sending it down with the intent of experiencing its destruction, but decided that this would waste the Mask's training and experience. Better to get a ghoul with minimal experience in deep diving and expend him instead, and that would take some time to set up.

Sometime after midnight, the paladin and Zarathustra decided that recuperation time was in order. *Latter-Day Feast* had weighed anchor and headed south as soon as the crew grasped the basics of their unknown underwater peril; Zarathustra persuaded the paladin that Antioch would make a good haven. "Nothing moves in or out of Antakya Harbor without my knowledge. I seldom choose to interfere, but it remains my choice." So the yacht continued southeast.

Thursday, 8 June 2000, 12:30 AM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Ionian Sea, Greece

Angelica sat quietly under the stern canopy of the yacht's cabin, watching her owner talk with the other vampires. There was blood, and that attracted Angelica's attention. She thought about rushing forward to drink it up. Perhaps if her blood were stronger or richer or more diversified or *something*, her owner would take interest in her again. The last full sentence Lucita spoke to Angelica had been more than a week ago. Since then, nothing but nods and gestures to follow.

It had been several days since Angelica felt any emotion she could clearly label. Lucita wanted her alert, so she was alert. She watched. Sometimes she took notes, though it appeared that someone was sabotaging her efforts in that regard, since when she reviewed them later, many were simply incomprehensible gibberish. She tried to review events in her mind, but it was hard to establish a consistent chronology. There were the times when her owner's mind was calm and quiet, and the rest of the time. That much Angelica was sure of. Sequences were much harder. But Angelica watched and felt that she understood things as they happened even if she got confused later.

She'd tried to talk to her fellow "ghouls" operating the yacht, without success. Some apparently didn't speak English. Those who did treated her as they would any other piece of furniture—something to steer around unless it mattered for a specific task. That was fair enough, all things considered. Angelica didn't like to think of herself as furniture, but clearly she was a tool to her owner.

The tailor, Trasaric, liked to speak of masters and mistresses, but that made Angelica uncomfortable, particularly the talk of mistresses. It suggested some exotic sexual orgy, and being owned by Lucita wasn't like that at all. Angelica yearned for her owner's approval and attention,

yes, but if there was anything with less of a sexual component than her owner, it could only be one of these creatures without a body at all. Lucita did not lust for Angelica's body, nor did she want Angelica's lust. It was a matter of obedience, of having an instrument capable of carrying out instructions and performing services useful to the owner. Angelica could remember having independent desires, but the memories carried no weight of significance. Now she could no more think of independent action, particularly rebellious innovation, than she could cease to breathe or blink. Her identity had become dependent on Lucita's.

A small plane passed overhead, hopping from the Greek mainland to one of the resort islands. Angelica remembered flying. She remembered Lucita's promise of doing a great deal of flying, and waited calmly for the opportunity to do so. She... her thoughts began to flow together, and her awareness of the outside world slipped away.

She had a home. Or she had had a home. In Colorado, a land now as far away as the center of the sun as far as she was concerned. Colorado did not interest Lucita, and therefore ought not interest Angelica, but the memory was there, and a feeling flickered up into consciousness. In Colorado she had not been owned. She had owned her plane and her car and her phone, and would have owned her home in a few more years. Or had she been owned and not realized it? She remembered the time her toilet clogged and she had to dig out the plumber's snake she'd bought many years earlier. It had waited there on a shelf far in the back of the garage until she needed it. Perhaps she had waited her life the same way. Did everyone wait that way, marked as prey or tool or child without knowing it? Perhaps. But the thought made her upset, so she stopped thinking it.

Calm returned inside her, and she became aware of the world again.

The world. Her phone. The pieces fell together gradually. She must be missed at home. Had Lucita taken care of that? She could speak a single word to calm fear and make disbelief disappear, Angelica knew, but had Lucita done that? Angelica became short of breath, panting, not

realizing that she felt the lingering effects of pressure on Lucita, carried across intervening space by the power of her owner's blood. She started to get up, then sat down again. She had not been told to approach, and it would not do to make her owner angry. An angry owner could break a tool. Angelica had done that once with a soldering iron. When it burned her hand and ruined a socket board with its uncontrolled heat, she'd stomped on it and broken it. Lucita could do that to her, she knew. And could throw her overboard, too, letting her sink like a discarded bottle or trash bag and seeking out a more obedient piloting tool.

Nightmares swept around the edges of Angelica's vision. She actually saw images of herself: snapped in two and drained of blood by happy vampires, sinking, wandering through some unknown landscape abandoned by her owner. She closed her eyes, and gradually the visions faded. She opened them after a few minutes. When the first flickers started coming again, she closed her eyes again, and waited longer.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

The eldest made his way through the Abyss carefully, entering slowly, wherever possible using holes which some other manipulator of shadow had recently created, and traveling and exiting just as slowly. He could fling himself around the world with a single step if he chose, but he no longer trusted the darkness the way he once did. Whether his sire now stirred or not, great powers were on the move, and he had no wish to confront them. So night by night he proceeded, sometimes traveling by distance and sometimes by associations. One night he emerged by the shores of the Indian Ocean, not terribly far from the site his village once occupied, and the urge to set it all aside and just go home was very strong.

Nonetheless, upon rising the next night, he continued his journey. He'd been home and knew what the trip would do to him now, quite apart from his present concerns.

Establishing precise correlations between Abyssal movements and physical locations was difficult at the best of times. The world changed, and with each change, the whole matrix of conceptual associations changed. For someone as old as Montano, most of the modern world's interface with the Abyss was simply a cacophony of shouts in unfamiliar languages. Different ideas, different shades of dark in the world and in souls, and precious few of the old ways remained to give him marks he could use to orient himself.

The matter was only complicated by proximity to the founder's fortress. In the physical world, it rested in Sicily, which put it well within the Abyssal troubles now concentrated on the Mediterranean Basin. In the Abyss itself, the fortress retained a huge presence, associated not only with its location but the multiple concepts of darkness the founder had embodied before the destruction of his physical shell. For ten thousand years, his transhuman

willpower had forced itself onto the world and into the Abyss, that could not be undone by only a few centuries of neglect. If most of the world resembled shouting children from distant lands, then the Castle of Shadows exerted a force more like a deranged parent's senile cries. Everything around it took on some of the founder's nature, and it became that much harder to detect individual variations.

Certainly the great vortex arose in this area—not from the castle itself, but from somewhere nearby, its point of contact lost in the spiritual turbulence. Montano sensed that he couldn't interfere with the vortex itself. But perhaps he could complicate things...

The concentrated darkness in the Castle of Shadows was like an iceberg, extending much farther in the Abyss than it could in the material world. When the founder still inhabited it, the castle had loomed like a colossus in the souls of shadow magicians all over the world, a constant presence that might bend its gaze toward them at any time. Now the colossus was broken, waiting for an animating will which, Montano hoped, would never come again.

But part of that will rested in him. He drew deep into himself and simultaneously sank into the remaining bulk of the castle's darkness. Both moves were the same, steps toward the legacy of the founder. There lay a particular mindless rage, which Montano had seen displayed only a few times a millennium, a whirling destruction that shattered everything in sight. Montano had lost his dearest companion among the founder's childer to one such rage and never forgot the experience. He entered into that memory now, and his body would have cringed again if the motion could have any meaning here.

The castle's darkness throbbed, slowly at first, then more and more quickly. Trailing fragments of the founder's will rose in search of prey. They were attuned to no particular concepts, guided by no principle but the urge to destroy. The vortex itself provided a rich source of nourishment. Colossus clashed with Scylla (or was it Charybdis?) as Montano let the rage flow out of himself and into the castle. He certainly did not envision himself as the great animating

will the founder had been, but his spirit would be enough for his purposes.

Now all he had to do was make his way out of the Abyss and watch developments from a distance.

Saturday, 10 June 2000, 11:10 PM
Somewhere beneath Mexico City

Rosa fell heavily to the floor. She lay at the foot of her cross, tormented by the fresh flow of nervous impulses through her tired limbs. A small dish of blood rested beside her, and it took all her strength and concentration to raise her head, then lower her mouth into the dish. She missed on the first try, and almost cried in frustration. On the second try she made it, and felt strength begin to return at last.

When she rolled over to look up, she found her tormenter Andrew looking down at him. There was the young priest, the thin magician and his thick rival. And there, over the priest's shoulder, was her brother in blood Niccolo. With... an umbrella through his heart? Interesting times. She smiled for the first time since her crucifixion.

"Hello," Andrew said calmly to her. "They've decided to let you down."

She nodded once at Niccolo. "He... going up?"

"Eh? Oh, no, he hasn't done anything warranting serious punishment. He just didn't want to talk to you, so we spared him the distraction."

"Time..." Rosa gulped the last of the blood. She was still perilously weak, but she had normal sensations again. "Time to finish me off, then?"

"Not at all." Andrew smiled at her. It was the most disturbing sight she'd seen since her last disembowelment.

"What, then?"

"Someone wants to see you."

Rosa nodded again, feeling her neck shed the last of its lingering cramps. Of course. One of the grand mucky-mucks wanted to use her to make some sort of point to the masses. She could expect more torture, and then her destruction. That is, if Andrew wasn't lying to her. Some executioners liked to lure their victims into a false sense of confidence and then strike, but he seemed like the sort

who'd want her to know, to feel her final thoughts in all their details. "Who?"

"Lucita."

The bottom fell out of Rosa's thoughts. If she hadn't been lying on the floor already, she would have toppled out of sheer confusion and disorientation. This *had* to be a lie, a trick of some kind. Whatever Lucita's faults, she would never willingly ally herself with the Sabbat. And if they had captured her somehow, they wouldn't be paying any attention to her wishes. They'd hold a quick trial for the sake of formalities and wipe her out. They might risk prolonged torture first, but probably not—she was just too dangerous. Rosa wondered what sort of game Andrew was playing.

"Of course," she said as lightly as she could manage. "Naturally the bishops go running when milady calls."

Andrew's genial manner disappeared. "If it were up to me you'd never come off that cross except in ashes. Shut up. Get up. Time to go."

Rosa struggled to her feet, wondering once again. *What on earth is going on?*

Monday, 12 June 2000, 11:55 PM
Yacht *Latter-Day Feast*
Aegean Sea, Greece

The yacht traveled almost due east now, keeping islands as far away as possible. Clouds hid the moon, and there were occasional rain showers. Lucita and Conrad spent most of their time in reclining chairs on top of the main cabin, watching the world go by and feeling their bodies regain precious strength.

"What made those things?" Conrad asked, not for the first time. "Have you ever seen anything like them?"

Lucita replied, not for the first time, "Not quite like those, but..."

Conrad interrupted. "There were necromancers in the tribes away from the river when I was growing up, did you know?"

"Yes, I did. You've told me..."

"I saw the walking dead twice before the reformer came, and once afterward. But they weren't like those things. The walking dead are solitary creatures, and they keep some of their old personalities. It's a curse that requires the nectomancer to know a fair amount about the victim, not something you can do to a whole lot of strangers at once." The flow of Conrad's monologue gradually slowed as memory overwhelmed her again.

"There's more than one way to command the dead," Lucita reminded her once again. "You've met Giovanni, you said, and you can take my word for it that there are solitary elders with all sorts of peculiar arts—"

"Like you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"By several centuries, you're the oldest vampire I've actually *talked* with. I'm sure some of the cardinals are older than you, but I don't engage in conversation with them. They give orders occasionally, and I go carry them out. I've

never had the chance to *discuss* anything with someone as old as you."

"I see," Lucita said in the most thoroughly noncommittal tone she could manage.

"You're right, I've seen that elders have strange tricks. So what's yours?"

"Ah."

Conrad waited many minutes. The rain let up, and a brief break in the clouds let starlight fall. "Well?"

"Nothing very interesting, I fear. I've refined what I know, of course, but none of it's particularly a matter of secrets or research into the mysteries of the blood. 'More of the same,' I think the phrase is."

"But of course." Conrad clearly didn't believe it.

Lucita thought about trying to convince Conrad, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. The truth really was that, with a single exception, there was nothing very exotic in her repertoire of powers. She had cultivated the strong and creative application of existing lore, finding that approach better suited to her temperament. From time to time she learned something new from one of her contacts in the clan or a relatively trustworthy associate of some other lineage, but that was rare. The exception, now....

For a few decades after the discovery of the New World, Lasombra were an object of fascination for many blood magicians and mystics. Word got out about the Lasombra Methuselahs who believed that Aztec priests' sacrifices really did let the sun rise each day and who therefore championed their extermination (what the young ones now called "genocide") so as to plunge the world into everlasting night. The weather was strange for a while, and seekers of portents thought that it might be the beginning of the new era. Until the point where it became clear to everyone that the sun did not in fact need Aztec hearts to rise, it seemed to Lucita and other Lasombra who dealt with the rest of Cainite society that the organs were practically fetishes and idols for a certain class of power seeker.

Angelo Cavaradossi, his name was, this young Franciscan turned worshipper of the Egyptian god Set. He

thought that the Lasombra inclination toward shadow held the promise of fresh insights into his own clan's object of devotion, and he was willing to trade secrets. Lucita thought him a fool, but didn't care to pass up the opportunity for new power of her own. So it was that she inducted him into the mysteries of shadow control and he inducted her into the mysteries of serpentine evocation. Then he went his way, and she never heard from him again. From time to time she thought it would be worth cultivating a new source of information among Set's childer, but she somehow never quite got around to it. So she did have the beginnings of a distinctive and rare advantage, but in practice all she could do with it was awe mortals in yet another way.

"In my experience," Lucita added after the reverie passed, "exotic specialization is usually a trap. Figuring out how to make better use of my strength or my ability to set priorities for healing, that's widely useful. It comes in handy in many different situations. Knowing the secret name of a particular foe gets me one loyal servant, until he's destroyed. You won't know much about them, but the Cappadocians could make themselves look just like real corpses. That's all well and good, but it just does the one thing, and the time spent mastering it could have gone to something with more applications. So I've never been very interested in accumulating a huge repertoire of narrow little tricks. Vampires who do that have always been some of my favorite targets, because once you know their list, you know they're vulnerable to anything they don't have a trick for."

"I see." Conrad calculated the risks of provoking Lucita, and decided they were worth taking. "You sound very much like your sire when you talk that way."

"What?"

"Truly. The second time I went to Europe, I attended some of his sermons. He spent three Sabbaths on the theme of diablerie, mixing together harangues on the errors of the Path of Caine with practical advice on choosing targets. He spoke about clans, of course, with an emphasis on benefiting the standing of the clan as a whole along with

one's own position, but he singled out overly specialized practitioners of strange arts as the best victims."

"I... see." Lucita briefly entertained the notion of destroying Conrad right then, or at least of ripping out her vocal cords, but managed to regain composure. It never made Lucita happy to find that she was following in her sire's intellectual footsteps. Her concerns seemed to her to make sense on their own terms, but perhaps that was just one more trap the old bastard had laid for her.

"But we'll speak of that another time," Conrad added smoothly. "Speak to me as you would to a client. What are we facing?" Lucita looked blank—not the blankness of maintained composure, but of the failure to understand—so Conrad continued. "If I hired you to evaluate and deal with this threat, what would you tell me?"

"Ah." Lucita pondered. "First I'd tally the evidence at hand." She raised a hand and folded down fingers.

"First, we know that our target can create openings into the Abyss at a distance and can call up one or more deep-dwelling inhabitants of the sort that normally shuns any area that breeches into the world. Therefore, we face someone skilled in both the theory and practice of Abyss magic.

"Second, we have the opinion of a longtime resident of the area that a similar attack may be behind one or more disappearances. The point of evidence here is Zarathustra's opinion, which may be mistaken in one or more ways but is nonetheless worth considering.

"Third, we have the presence of a full hundred magically animated corpses supported by what appears to be an unfamiliar application of shadow magic." She closed her hand into a fist.

"I think it likely that we face multiple opponents. The level of power we're seeing here is certainly within the grasp of one of the Antediluvian's childer, but if any of them were to go on a rampage, I think they'd proceed more directly and personally. This is the work of an individual or group that cannot engage in direct confrontation and needs to

work through Abyssal intermediaries." She considered the matter further.

"It's possible that our target lies outside the clan, but that's unlikely. I must remember to ask established elders if they've heard of any fresh caches of magical lore turning up, such as would indicate some magician's haven getting sacked. More likely, we face someone inside the clan, who's either developed new techniques independently or acquired them from someone else. Possibly both. We should gather up a list of abandoned or lost havens belonging to famous magicians within the clan and send out junior packs to search them." Lucita didn't notice Conrad quietly smiling.

"At some point, I presume, we'll get a manifesto—an ultimatum of some sort and a set of demands. We can interpret that when it arrives."

"You've dealt with this kind of thing before, then."

"Oh, yes. Usually without the benefit of expendable scouts, which makes this much easier." Lucita embarked on a tale of her hunt for a rogue thaumaturge just after the American Civil War, and the night wore on.

Tuesday, 13 June 2000, 9:49 PM

Cutter *Black Aegis*

The Atlantic Ocean, 200 miles west of Portugal

Archon Captain Kleist was frustrated. This should have been a perfectly straightforward operation, and now things were getting weirder and weirder.

His encounter with Lucita two months ago had left him feeling unsettled. Despite her protestations of honor, he didn't trust her ability or desire to avoid spilling his secrets to targets of *Black Aegis*. It seemed a good time to inject some variety into his routine, engaging in operations that he hadn't discussed with her. So it was that the cutter had spent the last few weeks in and around the Sargasso Sea, tracking ships outside normal lanes. They'd encountered no Lasombra or other vampiric operations to interfere with, though they had dispatched three crews of mortal pirates so far.

The basic strategy for this sort of attack was simplicity itself: cloak the ship in shadow, reduce the engines to a crawl barely faster than the prevailing current, and approach as close to the target as possible before coming into view and making the assault. It hinged on an assumption that Kleist had always found so reliable as to scarcely warrant examination, that he and his officers could command sufficient darkness and expect it to behave the way they wanted it to.

Now it wasn't working.

The first problems had appeared on the ninth, and "appeared" was precisely the right word. Just as *Black Aegis* made a textbook-perfect approach on an oil tanker that Kleist's intelligence said was harboring a pirate band that might include vampires, the cutter's concealing shadows suddenly blew off due west. But no wind out of Europe could have done that, even if mundane wind could affect the summoned shadows at all, which it couldn't. Suddenly revealed, the cutter had to make its final approach under

heavy small-arms fire from the tanker's crew, and it was all very messy.

Other problems fouled up missions on the eleventh, the twelfth, and now again tonight. The farther east they went, the worse it got. It seemed to take more energy to summon the darkness, more concentration to control it, and it was still vulnerable to capricious dismissal. Kleist traveled with no Abyss mystics, but he didn't have to stick his head into the void to feel a peculiar resistance to every use of shadow manipulation. His nightly routine of solo and partner melee training with shadow tendrils was slower than usual. His "arms of the Abyss" emerged more slowly and behaved less cooperatively, to the point tonight where it was more efficient to do without them altogether. His crew reported similar problems.

On the horizon, steaming away from them now, was a small cargo ship which actually did have a vampiric crew. *Black Aegis* had gotten close enough that binoculars showed Kleist chained captives waiting to give blood and the paraphernalia of Sabbat rituals. It could have been a glorious conquest. There was no sign of shadow manipulation at all, and the generally ragged nature of the vessel's gear suggested that it belonged to outcasts trying to make good. That would make for good propaganda value. As Executive Officer Thomas put it, "We don't want the rabble thinking they have the slightest fucking chance in hell of lasting long enough to impress their new bosses. If they think that trying it at all makes them the best damn targets on the sea, so much the better."

So the cutter had sailed in... and then the shadows had blown straight upward, blotting out the bright stars as they fanned out and drifted east. Only the most incompetent of watch officers could have missed it, and their target didn't have those incompetents. The alarm went up and so did the cargo ship's steam. Kleist quickly calculated the odds. It was just barely possible that his ship could catch the other, but only if absolutely everything went right, and this was not the night to gamble that way.

"Well, shitfire and damnation," Thomas said. He'd done the math as well, Kleist could see. "What the fuck is going on, anyway?"

"I don't know," Kleist said. "But it's worsening night by night. Set a course due west and let's see if it improves any in that direction." He paused. "Let's consider letting our favorite justicar know about this, too."

Thursday, 15 June 2000, 10:00 PM
Somewhere beneath Mexico City

Rosa woke from the day's sleep to find herself in an unfamiliar room. Again. Every night since they'd taken her down from the cross, Andrew and his pack had done something to her in her sleep. She was getting low on blood—they'd given her a couple of peasants that first night, and nothing since. If she didn't eat again in a couple of nights, she was going to pass out and not wake up. Presumably there was some purpose to all of this, but Rosa hadn't been able to figure it out.

Tonight she was in the middle of an old subway tunnel. She lay on the tracks. As soon as she stood up, she could see a station deserted for years, the exits all bricked up except for one secured with a heavy chain link gate. Ahead of her, the tunnel ended in a solid concrete plug fifty yards away; behind her, it curved out of sight. There were faint rustling sounds from somewhere beyond the corner, a quiet trickle of water from near the plug, and no sounds at all from wherever that sealed gate led. The only illumination came from two flickering fluorescent lights near the gate.

Suddenly there was a loud clang and the pounding of running feet. Rosa resisted the urge to boost her speed; she might need the blood later. Whatever it was would come into sight soon enough... and there it was, a crowd of at least a dozen living men and women, brandishing sharpened fence pickets. When they saw her, they began shouting, in Spanish and English, "Death!" and "Destroy the monster!" This didn't look very promising.

Now she did set her heart pumping to accelerate herself. She'd need the edge if she was to come out of this fight. It seemed safe to assume that the gate wouldn't yield to such strength as she could muster—this was too well constructed a setup for that. The real question was, could she take down the attackers before they exhausted her reserves of power? She launched herself away from the crowd, first

backstepping, then turning to run. Within a dozen paces she was up to her full speed, several times what any living person could manage. She searched for anything she might snatch up as a weapon, but Andrew and his flunkies had left her nothing. Angry, she wheeled around to face the enemy.

They didn't seem very well coordinated, the... fourteen of them, she counted. They all twitched their heads a particular way; most likely they'd been subjected to vampiric domination and programmed with who knew what story to make her as appealing a target as possible. Out in front were two big burly guys, probably construction workers or something of the sort. They had a three-pace lead on the next rank, and that was sufficient for Rosa's purposes. She aimed herself between the two and stiffened her arms into right angles, fists facing the men at groin level. They didn't notice. In an instant, both had subjected themselves to genital impacts of supernatural strength at a speed of more than thirty miles an hour. There wasn't the slightest chance of their recovering before Rosa grabbed their stakes and broke their necks in parallel blows.

Things looked better once she was armed. There was a clot of half a dozen attackers coming up, jammed close enough together that they could scarcely swing their weapons. Behind them came stragglers. Rose considered making a dodge up onto the platform but didn't trust the strength of concrete that had been sitting who knew how long in at least some dampness. Instead, she went over the clot, kicking down the big man just left of center and jamming her heels into the matrons on each side. Then she was up and over, tumbling twice, taking only minor cuts from ineffectual spearlike jabs. *Then she jumped over parallel to the left-hand wall, crushing the throat of a pert young secretary type as she hastened by.* Three, maybe four, attackers down, eleven or possibly ten still to go.

At the bend in the tunnel, Rosa slowed, but not much. She didn't have the luxury of a thorough reconnaissance and simply had to trust that there'd be something helpful ahead... and hopefully no waiting backup attackers.

Beyond the bend the tunnel ran about as far as it did past the station in the other direction: no more than fifty yards, perhaps a bit less. A cargo elevator rested just above the floor, its massive metal door flopped down to serve as a ramp. Guide rails defined its path of ascent, and its cables disappeared through holes in sliding panels in the roof. The panels looked heavy, and Rosa decided not to try messing with them now. The elevator had been designed to carry small service vehicles: it had tracks on its floor and along the inside of the door, and it rested centered in the tunnel. It blocked more than half of the tunnel's width, creating two well-separated channels of approach, with about ten feet between the elevator's back and a concrete plug at the end of the tunnel. Rosa recognized her opportunity.

While the main mass of the herd were still wheeling around, she attacked the two slowest stragglers, a young man and a middle-aged woman. Both were well dressed but ill coordinated and looked wildly out of place. Rosa wondered just what Andrew's vampires had done to them to make them want to risk life and limb this way. A flurry of punches with her newly acquired stakes left both of them dead in very short order, before the others could draw close enough to attack. Rosa had plenty of time to climb up to the roof of the elevator and watch the eight survivors approach.

After that it was straightforward slaughter. An attacker would come along each side of the elevator, and Rosa would take that pair out. Only one of them managed to get in a good blow before her strike, running his stake through her arm in a wild uncontrolled swing. It posed no real threat, though it hurt intensely and would require healing later. When the last of them fell, she paused to rest her aching arms and legs. Then she picked up the nearest body and bit into it, knowing that freshly dead blood wasn't much worse than the blood of the living...

...and tasted something unbelievably foul. For the first time in decades, she was actually sick to her stomach. She tossed that body aside and picked up the next, and probed

it cautiously with her fangs. The same awful taste filled her mouth.

Now freshly angry as well as genuinely hungry, she pulled open the corpse's shirt. Right over the heart there was a raw, fresh wound, precisely round. Obviously Andrew or one of his flunkies had injected some of the bodies with poison of some kind. A drug? Toxic waste? Bacteria? It only had to be something that wouldn't kill the people before they had a shot at taking out her, and preferably that wouldn't impair them much. That still left a lot of possibilities.

Enraged, she stalked from body to body. All fourteen had been treated the same way. Unless Andrew provided her with fresh blood, when she went to sleep at the end of this night, she wouldn't have the reserves to guide her body into waking back up. Presumably that was what he was after, and this was just some spectacle along the way to amuse his lackeys. It could all have been as quick as the staking that had immobilized Niccolo.

Dismembering the bodies felt satisfying for a few minutes, long enough to leave her surrounded by gore. But her strength and speed were already fading. She'd never be as weak or slow as a mortal, but the enhancements she'd used in this fight came at a cost, one she could no longer pay. She thought about going ahead and drinking the poisoned blood and passing away right now. Whatever Andrew had in mind for her behind that lunatic story about Lucita, it could scarcely be pleasant. Somehow, though, she just couldn't do it. As long as she remained aware, there was some hope. By definition there could be none once she was gone. So she stalked over to one of the crumbling platforms and sat down to await developments.

She didn't know how much later it was when footsteps echoed down from the other side of the barred gateway. She didn't bother looking to address the newcomers as they unlocked the gate. "Andrew."

"Bishop Andrew, if you please. Or, better yet, Ductus Andrew."

"You aren't any authority I respect."

"Oh no?" His voice remained calm as he walked up behind her. The others followed; Rosa could make out their footsteps distinctly. The big one—Roxana?—moved with a distinct imbalance; presumably she was carrying Niccolo again. Or still. It could be a spiritual exercise of some sort. "Not yet, perhaps." He came into her field of view, squatting down a few paces away. The others gathered directly behind her, out of sight. "And what would it take to change your mind?"

"Power, of course," she said curtly. "There are any number of ways you can break my will. You have numbers and leverage, so it's really just a matter of time. Get on with it, will you?"

He scowled. "Very well. Priest, the Vaulderie." He nodded at the short beefy man, who held an old chalice and knife. Barry in turn made the rounds, collecting blood from each of them, including comatose Niccolo. With the briefest of blessings—"Father of darkness, grant us resolve in the face of adversity and unity in the face of chaos"—he handed the full chalice to Andrew.

Andrew remained squatting where he was, passing the chalice from one hand to the other. It was a lovely piece of work, silver with ivory inlay. Rosa suspected that it had been "liberated" from a Christian church sometime early in the Spanish conquest. Andrew struck her as the sort of Lasombra who'd find using the holy artifacts of unwitting pawns satisfying, just as Rosa had in her first couple of centuries. "You'll perish without this."

"So?"

"Take it. You are not at liberty to perish at this time. I have my orders—"

"From Lucita." Rosa sneered. "Naturally I'm supposed to believe this."

"You have a simple choice. Drink from this now, or drink from it when you wake up in the evening, desperate for blood and unable to control yourself."

"Why are you offering me the choice? What does it matter to you?"

"Time, mostly. If we can get underway tonight, so much the better. But I won't risk the trip until you've got another round of bonding underway. I'm willing to give up some of my own freedom to destroy you, if that's the price I have to pay to keep you from trying to destroy me. After all, I can always call on allies, while you're by yourself. At least, you are until someone else in our pack becomes more strongly tied to you than to me. It's happened before."

Rosa stared at the chalice. The others waited patiently. Finally, after some unknown quiet interval, she snatched it from his hands and half drained it.

The Vaulderie blood never tasted quite the same twice. Mortal blood was finite in its possibilities, and while there were minor variations from person to person (and in the same person over time), in the end it was all constrained by mortality. Vampiric blood could, potentially, keep changing forever. Something happened in the ritual consecration, drawing out some elements, suppressing others... always different. This time around she felt the ambitions in the others: Andrew's confidence and aspirations, Barry's struggle against something in himself, Simon Peter's quest for the words that would make God tremble on his throne, Roxana's yearning to shed her self and become one with shadow. Niccolo was a cipher to her, walled up in his fear of her and showing unexpected strength of will.

Sometimes Rosa felt the imperatives of the Vinculum bonds meld smoothly with her own desires. Not this time—her hatred for Andrew and the others kept it sharp and distinct. She knew her reluctance to continue considering their destruction was artificial, imposed on her by blood and magic, not that this fact made the reluctance any less real. She couldn't feel changes in the others as they drank what remained in the chalice; she hoped the feelings were as acute and uncomfortable for them.

Thursday, 15 June 2000, 11:50 PM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

For one full week the summoners had labored in vain. Something besides the great entity stirred in the Abyss, and it didn't answer to the summoners, despite their best efforts at commanding it. Reluctantly they had reached a most unwelcome conclusion: it was something with a name of its own, a label referring to the totality of its essence as distinct from the sum of its components. That meant one of two things. Either it was a native of the Abyss that had been commanded and named by another practitioner of the shadow arts, or it was something of the physical world translated into the Abyss. Neither prospect was encouraging.

If it were native to this world, then it was one of their rivals, whether he knew it yet or not, or a servant of one of their rivals. Not many souls could survive for long in the Abyss without losing pieces of themselves in the endless swarm of fragments, but it was possible. The founders of this circle of summoners had hunted down some such individuals in their time, pinning their souls with stout cords of void and ripping them apart slowly, leeching out power for their own uses. Though they didn't speak of it, the eldest two of the circle often suspected that one or more childer of the founder had fled into the Abyss the night Gratiano turned on his sire and destroyed the clan as it had existed until then. They might well still lurk there.

Monçada had thought himself the most successful summoner of his time, not knowing of the circle gathered here, and indeed his accomplishments with his leviathan were impressive. He had had much less success projecting living (or undead) beings through the walls of the world the other way. The summoners had sensed some of those victims' terminal throes. Other shadow magicians tried the same trick. It never seemed to work.

"But up until now," one of the junior members of this circle pointed out as they prepared for tonight's ritual, "nobody had ever proven that the founder survived, let alone established contact. We are the founder's chosen. But perhaps others have managed to blaze a new path or rediscover one of the old ones even without our blessings."

"Who, though?" the eldest asked. "You have studied the lists. More than that, you brought us some of them." His cowl would have obscured his face even without the shadows he preferred to wear as an inner garment, but the others knew the rhythms of his speech. He was reflecting on a happy memory. "Do you believe any of your brethren from far Cathay have mastered translation and sustenance?"

"No, not really," the seventh replied. "I just want to make sure not to miss something in the shadows of my own mind, so I proceed carefully, without relying on the bright light of conviction."

"You speak well," the eldest said. "Now we begin."

The familiar chants unfolded. Tonight, they'd decided, there would be no effort to reach the founder. It had waited this long, it could wait a little longer while they removed their enemies—who must be its enemies as well, of course. Tonight they needed a powerful but essentially simple weapon. The sacrifices were correspondingly simple, all children taken from tourists in the port towns. None of their parents would complain, since trivial exercises of will sufficed to make them forget traveling with the offspring bound for this chamber. The blood flowed easily, and the final breaths made a soft, warm mist over the altar.

The Abyss opened. A column of darkness rose up, smooth and untroubled. It radiated the simplest of emotions, *consume* and *end*. The eldest spoke to it, not in words but in streams of thought. A web of blacker-than-black tendrils spun around the summoned thing, mapping out the associations that would lead it from the castle to Turkey, from the summoners to Zarathustra and his minions. When the web was complete, the column descended back into the Abyss, sliding toward its new prey.

Friday, 16 June 2000, 2:02 AM
Antakya, Turkey

The hunter emerged in the spot near its target that most closely resembled the Abyss: beneath the bottom of the Asi River, in a flooded tunnel shrouded in unnatural shadow. Anything closer to the Abyss could scarcely exist at all. The web wrapped around the hunter thrummed in dissonant echo. There were things here associated with the target, but they were not the target, nor close enough to warrant attack. The hunter ravaged them nonetheless—the world hurt, and these things had small sparks of Abyssal power within them, or at least they did until the hunter swept over them.

Confused thoughts echoed within the hunter. It lacked the conceptual universe to understand that these were progeny of its target, grandchilder and great-grandchilder who'd violated one or another of Zarathustra's laws and were paying the penalty in torpor. Their hopes of returning to the waking world, walking under night skies and playing their grand games once they'd atoned for their crimes, made no sense to the hunter. It pushed against the web, regaining a comprehensible set of motives as the drained bodies dissolved into the dank water.

Renewed and sated, the hunter pushed against the tunnel's sealed entrance and finally succeeded in oozing in molecule-thin slivers up into the river. A dense mixture of vital and antivital essences flowed here: the waste of what fishes could survive in the pollution, the pollution itself, the lingering taint of many Abyss-manipulating vampires in close proximity.

Zarathustra had maintained a haven somewhere along the Asi waterfront almost continuously since his return home after his Embrace centuries ago. For the last twenty years that had been a block of warehouses marked as government property—and duly registered with an obscure

branch of the Ministry of Commerce—hollowed out and furnished in classical style. But even Zarathustra's powers were not infinite, and he couldn't stop the Organized Industry Site of Antakya project from refurbishing that whole stretch of waterfront. Most of his goods were already relocated to a half-emptied hotel on the far side of town, leaving behind only rudimentary amenities for himself, his most essential staff and his guests of the moment.

Lucita and Zarathustra walked together and examined a wall hung with stone friezes depicting battles in and around Antioch, from Alexander the Great's time through the Crusades and Mongol invasion. Lucita recognized old acquaintances in a few, and reminisced surprisingly comfortably with Zarathustra about their mutual friends and allies from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Conrad, the paladin, and the surviving Masks watched from a distance, knowing better than to intrude on the recollections of elders. The ghouls mostly went about the business of packing the remaining goods. Angelica sat in a corner, largely unresponsive.

As she examined a fourteenth-century tapestry commemorating nightmares of events she'd been tangentially involved with in Transylvania, Lucita carefully, calmly asked Zarathustra, "Why did you get involved in this?"

"Two reasons. The first is that Timofiev asked. It's been some time since I was asked to take part in clan politics, and I prefer to be remembered and considered. It seemed to me that if I declined, I'd probably have to wait another eighty years for such a contact. Second, you struck me as an interesting case the last time you passed through here, and I wanted to see what you'd do now."

"When was the last time I was here?"

"Five hundred seventy-one years ago. It was spring—a late spring, but beautiful nonetheless. You didn't stop to make proper demonstrations of deference to my authority and lord of the domain. I thought about destroying you and the one you traveled with, but I listened to enough of your

conversation to realize who you were and decide that I didn't need trouble with Monçada just right then."

"I had no idea."

"No, you didn't. Perhaps you might wish to consider at some point what else you have no idea of. You inhabit a very simple world, or so you think, and that view may yet end with you brightening sunsets."

Lucita looked back at the stone pieces from centuries before her own time. "I would like to ask a personal question."

"Certainly. I don't guarantee that you'll understand or appreciate the answer, of course."

"When you wish to visit with someone, whom do you visit with?"

Zarathustra laughed, sounding far more human than usual. "That was one of the most transparent rhetorical ploys I've encountered in some time, you know."

"That's as may be, but I am in fact curious."

"Very well, then. Yes, I retain a circle of acquaintances from the time around my own Embrace. Most of them are travelers, and their paths seldom cross mine. But when they do, then we catch up on news, experiences, ideas and everything else. I find that a few such weeks like that from time to time help keep me anchored in my identity and interested in the future as more than just a source of uncomfortable omens."

"Tell me about these acquaintances, please."

"Dexicos is the closest. He maintains a haven just across the Aegean, near the university in Athens. Sometimes he travels here physically; more often he comes psychically for a few hours. I often don't understand what he's talking about when it comes to his current research, but he's always got something interesting to say in interpreting the way my holdings work."

"Tegyrius came through here in some haste just a few months ago. It's been a long time since clan matters concerned him as anything more than a source of lasting discouragement, but he was freshly worked up this time. He took a few of my choice warriors with him—with my

permission, that is—and headed off to start what sounds like a civil war. It'll be interesting to see what he comes up with next.

"I haven't seen Phaedyne in the flesh since that ghastly affair with her kind last year. For most of the year I worried that she'd succumbed to the madness as well, but she's written a pair of letters that make it clear she survived. I gather she's doing something rather like Gratiano these days, training newcomers who might unravel the mystery of their predecessors' perishing..."

"Excuse me, sir."

"Hmm?" Zarathustra stopped and spun in place. "Yes?"

"I thought I knew the lore of our clan better than I apparently do. I'm not aware of any elders like those."

"Why did you assume that any of them are Lasombra?"

"I... that is..."

"You've adopted the Sabbat's assumptions without realizing it. You were listening for the names of elder Tzimisce—and cut me off before I got to any—and assuming that I would mention anyone not associated with our Father in Darkness. But in fact I'm not very interested in most of the lineages related to me. Apart from my own descendants, living and undead, I have little use for the claims of blood tie. I prefer to deal on the basis of minds and souls, and never mind what's in the veins."

At first none of the younger vampires or ghouls paid any attention to the slight darkening. Such effects were common around intensely alert or aroused elders, and the others all assumed that it was a reaction to the furies and conversation. They became concerned only when Zarathustra's shadow-substance rotated in place and his voice echoed through the warehouse, "Whoever is doing that, stop now."

The paladin looked at all the others in quick succession. "Sir, none of them are, and I'm not. Are you sure you or the judged one aren't?"

Lucita shook her head as Zarathustra said simply "No." He began, "Prepare..." when the darkness made its move in strength.

The hunter made its way up out of the river into the painful glare of starlight and wharf lights. Fortunately the place with the strongest resonance was relatively dark, though still painful enough. The warehouse's loading dock door blocked its further approach. The hunter was used to dealing with this sort of barrier by now and had incorporated a memory of response into the web. It pushed, found the barrier too strong, and instead slid around its edges, reforming on the far side.

Here was the target itself, a physically small but deeply powerful creature whose identity resonated in perfect harmony with the traits the summoners had imbedded in the hunter's web. Two weaker but related knots of power hung in the space between the hunter and its target. It charged them, hungering and hurting and hoping for release as quickly as possible. The hunter's smooth boundary erupted into sharp edges, which lanced into their fleshy shells, releasing a familiar stench from their cuts.

Activity whirled all around. The target, its familiars, and the weaker knots of related pattern began moving rapidly. The hunter couldn't reach them all, and wasted precious time seeking a spot from which it could strike most effectively. The hunter had little experience thinking in terms of physical space, and the web of instructions didn't provide it with adequate guidelines. By the time it decided to abandon large-scale movement and settle for simple advances, pieces of the Abyss itself under command of these alien things hemmed in the hunter on all sides. It cut as rapidly as it could, but they kept making more. And they closed in to press their own attacks as well as using the hunter's home against it.

The hunter felt fresh pain of a particularly excruciating kind. The Abyss-commanders, both the target and others, were drawing out some of the hunter's own essence. Their minds bypassed the web, which maintained the hunter's integrity, and yanked the hunter into long ribbons; as they moved farther from the hunter's core, the ribbons fell out of its control altogether. It was no longer itself. The portions

of the hunter that remained attacked with ever greater frenzy, and they did win some battles. Where once the second and third targets had been solid things, now they were two tattered and weakening things. The hunter was weakening as well, but it wasn't defeated yet, and now it could advance on the primary target.

The web of associations now grew tattered in a fresh round of attacks. The hunter had underestimated the targets' ability to maintain their command over the Abyss with their webs of flesh so injured. And it wasn't just the Abyss commands. Bright lights flared overhead. In the face of that anathema, the web could not hold. Purpose vanished, and without external guidance the hunter had no imperative but to flee. It fell back into the Abyss, crumbling as it went. Its final cuts did great harm to the knots of power gathered around it, but the knowledge provided it no satisfaction. In short order it no longer had the capacity for knowledge at all.

Lucita stared at the warehouse through shock-glazed eyes as the shadows she and others had invoked cleared. One of her arms was severed just below the shoulder, and her other hand was a mass of mangled tissue trailing like ribbons. She couldn't walk, not until healing the blows that had gouged out one knee and reduced her other hip to shards of bone and gristle.

"What." She fought off unconsciousness. "What was that?"

Zarathustra had shed shadow form, needing the concentration for combat and now for healing. He proved to be a handsome young Greek man who might have appeared on a tourism poster, if his face and torso weren't a continuous bloody mess. "I... I don't know for sure. I think."

The paladin was the most alert of the group right now. It had come through with only minor damage, thanks in part to the luck of having lethal blows absorbed by the remaining Masks as they rushed ahead. Now they were nothing but ash and empty uniforms. The ghouls, mostly

unharméd, cowered at the back, except for Lucita's pilot. She wandered the scene with a calm and curious expression. When it noticed her, the paladin shooed her back to the other ghouls. "Sir, that was altogether too reminiscent of the thing that attacked the Court of Blood. I didn't see it emerge from the Abyss, though. Shall I send someone to search the river?"

"Oh. Yes." Zarathustra nodded vaguely. He didn't pay attention to the ghouls who raced out to the dock, there to meet up with vampire security guards on the waterfront. Let them search; he didn't think they'd find anything. And he needed blood right now. Lots of it. He made his way through the ghouls' ranks at a random ramble, taking a bit of blood here, a bit there, shooing plump specimens over to where Lucita had fallen.

"That. Someone is playing with the Abyss," she declared. "Yes. What can do that? Can you, Zarathustra?"

He lapsed back into shadow form. "Do you accuse me?"

"No! I want to know if the summoner is stronger than you."

"Oh. Hmm. Let me think." He pondered, but was distracted by fresh noises into resuming human form.

The streetside door swung open. Conrad stepped in. "Sir, worthies, I return with..." She froze in her tracks. "What the hell happened?"

"Abyss monster," the paladin said curtly. "Someone sent an Abyss monster here shortly after you left for the airport. How's your summoning?"

"Nonexistent," she said, hoping that none of her rush of fear showed. She knew from experience that difficult situations usually called for a scapegoat's sacrifice, and she had no desire to perish that way. "Remember? You tried to train me and it didn't work."

"Oh, yes. Hmm," the paladin spoke half to itself. "Very well, then. As you can see, we have needs. I expect you to donate."

Friday, 16 June 2000, 3:33 AM
Antakya, Turkey

Roxana felt disoriented, her consciousness sharply disengaged from her emotions and almost literally detached from her body. The flight from Mexico City to Madrid and then on to Turkey had been long and arduous, with Rosa and Andrew endlessly debating the morality of rebellion and other issues of little concern to Roxana. Rosa's grating skepticism about Lucita's involvement in their mission passed through the realms of annoyance to become simply tedious, and as long as Andrew prohibited the others from saying anything about it—for no reason discernable to Roxana—it was just one more mind game.

Then Roxana had walked into the Methuselah's warehouse and found it a scene of carnage. Conrad let only Simon Peter and Roxana enter. Was this *more* game-playing around Lucita and Rosa? No, Roxana realized soon enough, it wasn't. The elders wanted undamaged practitioners of Abyss magic to join in a ritual of investigating the thing they'd just banished. So here Roxana was, drinking blood from old ghouls and sitting as an equal in the ritual ring with the Methuselah and Timofiev's paladin.

Lucita was nearly delirious. She'd seen or heard of Rosa's arrival and could scarcely talk about anything else. Roxana knew that loss of blood could weaken a vampire's willpower and speed of self-governing impulses, but it was nonetheless very uncomfortable. "I dreamed of her," she said as one ghoul moved away to let the next offer her blood. "And she of me. We have one dream in two minds, perhaps. A great resonance of the ages. Do you believe in dreams?"

Roxana pondered her options for response. "I don't believe in dreams. Dreams are just echoes of the daylight in the brain, spurts of light that we must purge. I believe that when we do, the Abyss may enter into the darkened places where dreams once were and tell us true things."

"Do you think that what Rosa and I share is the light, then?" Lucita seemed earnestly curious, but Roxana couldn't

help noticing that the elder's eyes weren't really focusing.

"I don't know."

"What do you know, then, you who sever dreams from visions?" Lucita added something else in archaic Spanish that Rosa couldn't make out. The process of healing had begun, and it was twisting the elder's neck and shoulders.

"I know something about her, at least." Roxana repeated Rosa's story as she'd heard it argued on the plane, and wondered if she were just playing a link in some oracular chain. Concisely, she laid out Rosa's centuries of service to Lord Rudesi; Lucita interrupted from time to time with anecdotes of the Jyhad in Europe of centuries past, some of which were apparently relevant and some of which weren't. Roxana passed politely on to Rosa's dreams of great achievement and dissatisfaction with the Sabbat, and managed to deflect another ramble from Lucita about "dream" and "vision."

Finally, Roxana quoted Rosa directly. "We spent a century and more considering possibilities. Then came the word that she'd *destroyed* the old bastard, with the help of Assamites. That reminded us of how Gratiano used Assamites when he destroyed the Antediluvian. We didn't have any of them, but we had weapons and manuals of training, and we made ourselves into assassins for the cause. You see, she showed us the way. We had to strike, then join her."

Lucita regained some lucidity. "She's written her own story onto my deeds. That's not what I was out to do at all, particularly not anything to imitate that little weasel."

"Which?"

"Gratiano, of course."

"I, um, we don't normally refer to the Grand Rebel as a little weasel."

"Of course not. You've probably never met him, let alone dwelled in the same castle with him for years on end. But anyway. You want me to excuse your act, even applaud it. But you're wrong!" She raised her voice, heedless of the attention she was drawing, and apparently no longer distinguishing between Rosa and Roxana. "I never set out to destroy my sire. He forced it. It was self-defense. If I could

have saved him, I would have, precisely because I am not kin in any way except ancestry to the little weasel. This isn't about my example at all."

"You sent her dreams, though, or at least you sought someone like her in spirit."

"No. You... she sought out visions of me, and you have enough talent that the blood answered when you called. And you sent visions to me so that I'd feel interested in your case. But now that I know, I wouldn't have brought you here. You can continue to hang for all I care."

Neither Lucita nor Roxana noticed Simon Peter trying desperately to suppress laughter. "So much for prophecy," he whispered, and very nearly cackled out loud, which would have been unfortunate. Zarathustra, still in human form until he could heal more of his wounds, listened intently and didn't seem to find anything at all amusing about it.

Lucita continued her angry harangue at a Roxana-cum-Rosa. "You're a fool! Gratiano got away with it because of perfect circumstances—the general revolt, disorder in the stronghold, Montano having another long sulk, the founder too lethargic to defend itself. Even with everything going his way, Gratiano had to go hide again until he could build up a following. How on earth were you thinking that I'd mount the grand army you're dreaming of? Do you think I can just summon the great of the Lasombra to my side, or that I have some secret world we can wait in? No. You didn't think at all, you just dreamed, and we already have too many oracles for our own good."

Angelica did her best to understand her owner's rage, but it was so hard. This conversation was all about revolt, and that was the thought that would not allow Angelica to think it. Every time the vampires spoke of rebelling, a little fire burned in Angelica's mind, driving out the notion with pain. She imagined her head filling up with scars, perhaps one day to burst through her skull and trail along like a dinosaur's crest. She'd like that. She'd like that much more than hurting about the bad word.

The argument raged on until slumber began to overcome them all.

Friday, 16 June 2000, 3:02 AM
(4:02 AM Antakya time)
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The summoners felt the last fading pains of the hunter, as their web of associations frayed into nothingness. Finally it was gone, and the summoners could feel no certainty that either the primary target or his lackeys had been destroyed.

"We need a ninth," the eldest said at last. Even his normally flat, detached voice now sounded tired. "This magic needs another celebrant." The others nodded in agreement. "Tomorrow we will put out a new call. There must be someone out there whose soul is ready to hear it."

The seventh and eighth each began to speak, and then paused. They started again at the same moment, and paused again. The eighth bowed to his elder. This time the seventh spoke alone. "Suppose more than one hears the call?"

"What of it?" the eldest replied.

"When I came to you, remember, I traveled across steppe and mountain with two others who might have been worthy additions to the circle. It wasn't until your dream came to us in Armenia that we realized that only one of us would be acceptable, and I destroyed the others before they could rouse from slumber."

"Yes. This is the way of it. The soul that hears must further prove itself. There is always some challenge along the way."

"Do we have the time for that? And can we risk losing the right one now?" The seventh looked at each of his brethren, peering through their shadows to the faces beneath. "The founder waits for us. We have no luxury of trial or test; we must find the right one *now*."

"Ah," the eldest said. "I see. You wish to issue the call and then..."

"I wish to hunt along its echoes and find who answers. I—and any who wish to join me—can administer the

challenges on the spot, and bring the chosen one with us immediately."

"Very well," the eldest nodded after a brief deliberation. "You may go. But the rest of us will remain here to continue the work as best we can."

Friday, 16 June 2000, 11:35 PM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

The Abyss creature's attack had been focused enough that the boats moored outside Zarathustra's warehouse suffered only minor damage. Ghouls serving the Zarathustra lineage moved them to nearby anchorages during the day, transporting their vampires—and Lucita and the others—in crates bearing the seal of the Ministry of Commerce. The local press gave good coverage to the tragic drug-related violence, with lurid accounts from police investigators speaking off the record about how the raw ingredients for exotic new mixtures had exploded so dramatically in the midst of a typically brutal gun battle.

Latter-Day Feast started down the Asi River while its true masters still slumbered, and by the time they woke it was onto the Aegean and moving west into deeper waters. Zarathustra and Lucita would be spending weeks healing the damage they'd suffered—the cuts were as slow and difficult to heal as major burns or the scars of sunlight—and the Methuselah preferred to do so in a less strategically and tactically complex environment. "Besides," he added when explaining his plans, "I like the feel of the sea." So here they were, enjoying the blood from the night's harvest of bodies. Zarathustra's extended family would spend many nights taking waterfront thugs and would-be pirates, easy to abduct and unlikely to be missed, to provide the huge quantities of blood that the elders required to heal.

(Angelica began to wonder if perhaps blood and shadow were the true fundamental elements of the universe. In her dreams, everything above was blood, and it all flowed down into darkness, which in turn rose up to fall like rosy rain.)

Andrew's pack kept their distance from the elders. In Andrew's view, anything that could do that much damage to elders and apparently home in on them was something well worth avoiding. He hadn't really grasped the magnitude

of the problem when the Court of Blood passed its sentence, thinking of one rogue summoner (or even a small coterie of summoners) as no serious threat for a smoothly functioning hunting pack. Now he felt more like the leader of a parade of ants climbing a mountain. If any of his pack had suffered the damage that Lucita and Zarathustra had, they'd be as dead and gone as the paladin's followers, the Masks.

Conrad sat on the bow deck with Lucita and Zarathustra, enjoying the sea spray and watching the lights of the Turkish mainland recede. It was cloudy again, and the ports cast harsh glares onto the canopy overhead. The view had the lurid quality of missionary descriptions of a world trapped in sin, which pleased Conrad. She'd always had a touch of the melodramatic. Tonight, however, there was little time for purely aesthetic concerns. "Sir, madam, I wonder if you've given thought to an alternative force now that the Masks are all gone."

Zarathustra hated spending this much time in the flesh. He was acutely aware of being vulnerable. Almost nothing... short of creatures like the one last night... could significantly harm him in shadow form. This form was like a spun glass bauble bouncing on a table during an earthquake. The awareness made him irritable. "Yes. You're going to propose your childe Andrew and his pack, with the justification that they have demonstrated experience in reining in Lucita and now incorporate the rebellious childe Rosa whom Lucita requested. You would like to exercise a tactical command to offset the paladin's authority."

"I cannot deny any of that," Conrad said.

"Of course you can," Zarathustra snapped. "You can do whatever you wish, and pay the price. You choose not to deny it because you doubt your ability to maintain a plausible lie in the face of elders with unknown mastery of physical and mental senses."

Conrad merely nodded.

"Tell me what answer you've prepared," Lucita asked, "to my observation that I cannot be expected to operate most efficiently while surrounded by ambitious young vampires with a history of rendering me inert."

"That's an easy one." Conrad relaxed slightly. This could have gone much worse. Lucita might not be aware of how much her manner expressed resignation to a decision already made, but Conrad was and she suspected Zarathustra was as well. "This is not really an exercise in your comfort. You are under judgment, and you know that you'll be watched. The presence of familiar vampires gives me some added efficiency, which I suspect is definitely of interest to the judges."

"Yes." Zarathustra spoke dryly. "It is."

"You see," Conrad continued. "You asked for me. You want me as attentive as possible, to avoid any unfortunate errors in judgment..."

"Don't waste my time," Lucita interrupted, "with idle fantasies. You must know that I know you are not at liberty to destroy me pointlessly. You'd be accountable for your actions, and the judges would rip every last thought out of your head searching for evidence of wisdom or folly. Stick to your real points."

"Well." Conrad paused. Lucita was more responsive than she'd quite expected; time to set some planned rhetoric aside. "Yes, sir," she said simply to Zarathustra. "I'd like Andrew's pack to join the paladin and me."

"Very well. I approve."

Silence descended again for a few minutes. Finally Lucita spoke up. "Someone needs to say it."

"Yes?" Zarathustra tried to look nonchalant. Conrad thought it one of the ghastlier things she'd seen in recent years. "What do you think someone needs to say?"

"Sir, I don't need to play games with you any more than I do with her," Lucita said bluntly. "Our wounds are evidence of more power than I expected, and, I think, more than any of you did. I have to ask the obvious question at this point. Has the founder come back?"

Zarathustra nodded. "I've been thinking about that. I wasn't there for the great diablerie, of course. It's never interested me all that much, as long as my own domain remains intact, which it has. But this control of Abyssal

creatures within the real world, at a distance, with enough power to so severely damage one like me... yes. It could be Laza Omri Bara, the God of the River of Darkness."

"You've set your staff to work?" Lucita had started to ask something else, but retreated from that for a moment.

"Yes. They're busily trying to assemble the records you asked for, about old havens and recent efforts to buy, sell or trade in unusual magical lore."

"Good. In that case..." Lucita hesitated again. "I have to rule out this possibility. If it is the founder, then I need to know before committing suicide. I don't really think it is, but I have to know. I believe we must speak with Gratiano."

part two:

Looking Inward
into Darkness



Saturday, 17 June 2000, 11:05 PM

Av. Rio Branco

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Gratiano de Veronese seldom stood out in a fashionable crowd, even halfway around the world from his home. In the centuries since he drew his last breath, aristocracies had intermingled. It wasn't out of the question that some of these Cariocas, the people of Brazilian high society, shared his physical legacy, those "genes" that had displaced sperm-borne homunculi in scholars' affections. Whether or not they shared blood, though, they shared ideas and culture. They were his people on whom he could prey with familiarity. Until he unleashed his powers, he was just one more short man with long brown hair and wearing this season's second most expensive suit from Yves St. Laurent. He walked confidently and (this was the only unusual touch) quite conspicuously turned to look at his fellow pedestrians.

He'd been pacing back and forth in front of the Teatro Municipal for the last half hour. He didn't need to overhear the occasional whisper to know that other passersby regard him as an almost stereotypical lover, there to meet some beautiful woman and whisk her away behind the back of her aged husband. Or, depending on the predilections of the particular gossips, in front of him. That suited him fine. Just in case there was an investigation later, they'd be more likely to protect his privacy than if they thought he was just some random gentleman without an interesting attachment.

White and red spotlights played across the theater's marvelously baroque façade. It reminded Gratiano of the palaces back home, though fancier than anything they could actually have afforded in the early twelfth century. This was a later time's dream of the past, a mask over tawdrier realities. That suited Gratiano fine—he liked to feed on dreamers and to hide in their own illusions. Banners proclaimed the opening of a new staging of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* with glowing quotes from the local press. Literally glowing

quotes, he saw with a second look; strands of luminescent plastic were woven into the fabric. He'd seen the dress rehearsal last night and was unimpressed, though admittedly it took a lot for any opera to move him. The theatre's soft interior interested him less than the exterior, in any event. Occasionally he climbed the front stairs in a rapid burst, pausing each time to look around the square and its crowd, then paced more slowly back down.

Finally he heard applause. It was loud enough that the living people around him heard it, too; the audience was programmatically enthusiastic. He wondered briefly if they actually liked it or if they were merely responding as they felt they should. But in either case, it was time to go to work. He hastened down the steps once more and turned around the corner, looking very purposeful as he went. In the darkness between alley lamps, he wrapped himself in shadows and pressed up against the theater wall. His quarry could see preternaturally well, but not nearly well enough to pierce his concealment.

Behind him, half a dozen scruffy young men and women in fashionable outfits detached themselves from the crowd at erratic intervals. Nothing obvious connected them, apart from the rather conspicuous dirtiness that clashed with their clothing. They weren't the only ones in the crowd with such a contrast—some of the beautiful people had been in fights, or fallen while drunk. Only when gathered in a bunch did they stand out as an identifiable group, marked by shared expressions of anticipation and hostility in addition to their scruffiness.

"Ready," Gratiano whispered from the shadows. It was a command, not a question. "Disperse."

Two of the young men drew digital cameras out of their coat pockets and positioned themselves to take candid shots of the emerging theater crowd. One of the men and one of the women leaned into a passionate embrace halfway back along the alley. The remaining man and woman put on dark glasses, hung police ID from jacket pockets, and stepped to the rear of the theater. Dispersed physically and behaviorally, the six no longer looked like a group.

The first wave of opera watchers poured out of the theatre. Taxis gathered out in front, jockeying rudely for position and hastening off with their various fares. Limousines nudged in between the taxis at first; within a few minutes, theatre security guards cleared the lane closest to the curb for the best-prepared patrons and their luxurious rides. Most of the crowd departed on foot for nearby after-show destinations; soon sleazy dives like the Amarelinho and high-toned establishments like the Bar Luiz would both be packed. True to stereotype, many of the beautiful people genuinely were beautiful: handsome or beautiful features, fit bodies, and minds trained to move their assets with grace and flair. There were, of course, also the ugly or merely homely rich, but they faded into the background, yielding the stage to their aesthetic betters.

In the midst of this crowd moved a beautiful woman without obvious escort. In high heels she stood almost six feet tall, and she moved with a confidence that encouraged others to make way for her. Her features showed a mix of heritages common to Brazil, the legacy of conquistadors and plantation owners who'd had their way with slaves, and whose descendants had enjoyed slightly less coercive relations with peasants and laborers. She was cold—physically cold as well as rigidly blank in her expression, though bystanders seldom had time to notice more than the fact that they felt uncomfortable until she moved on. Nobody got a good enough look through the side slits in her burgundy gown to notice the long scars or flanking ridges below her ribs, and the vial of blood in her purse was sealed tightly enough that no human senses could pick it up.

Gratiano's nose, far more acute, did notice the scent of stored vampiric blood. Once he wondered about the woman who called herself Octavia. She was a chilly bloodsucker familiar with the conventions of Cainite society, and there was no question of her basically vampiric nature. But... there was something strange about her. Gratiano had nearly a thousand years of experience in identifying and understanding vampires, and she didn't fit any of the categories he knew. He wanted to understand her better.

And since inquiries at a distance hadn't worked out, it was time for direct action.

The cameramen went to work. "Octavia! Give us a smile!" and "What did you think of the show?" She smiled broadly and came over to offer them better pictures. They saw her looking over their shoulders, noticing the two police officers move up, speak to the necking couple, and move back toward the rear of the alley. They knew that the man would be turning his neck so as to expose veins he'd specially trained to throb as if carrying the blood of a highly agitated heart, and that she would smell that the man and woman were both burning to produce humanlike warmth. It would be a very tempting tableau. "Octavia, come over here. I want to get a shot of you with the moon and the museum in the background," one of the photographers asked with a slightly pleading tone.

"Very well," she said with another smile. "Anything for the arts press, of course. As long as you spell the gallery's name right." She stepped into the alley, moving close to the photographers. They backstepped three paces, and she matched them. As she moved in, she waved her right hand in a complex pattern at waist level. There was a momentary flicker of dark blue light in the largest ring on that hand, and the air behind her rippled slightly. "But dear me. I suspect that your backdrop may not photograph very well."

"Did you just do something?"

"Don't play games with me," she said, the smile vanishing. "At least not that one. You're both cold. Far colder than them—" she gestured at the couple further back "—and you left no reflection in the marquee. You're Lasombra come to test my prowess, and I suggest you get on with it. I have plans for the evening."

The two men tossed their cameras aside and sprinted back from the street, moving to opposites of the alley. "Get out of my way, assholes!" the right-hand one shouted, pushing the necking couple down. They crumpled and lay in matched heaps. The photographers each grabbed at fire escape ladders and pulled themselves up a flight.

Octavia appraised the scene for a moment, then raced down the alley faster than the photographers. She landed on the couple, who promptly roused from their feigned unconsciousness. Before they could rise, however, she'd put a fist through the skull of each. Blood immediately began to flow in an automatic effort at healing, but it would take hours. "That will keep you for now," she said to the near-corpses, and turned to look up at the photographers. "Do you want to come down now?"

They simply snarled. The right-hand one pulled out a balcony railing pipe to use as a weapon; the other simply forced as much blood as possible into his limbs. They jumped down in unison. Their blows were strong and well aimed, but by the time they connected, Octavia had changed. A black chitinous arm shot out of each of the gussets in her gown, longer than her human-formed arms. One sent the pipe spinning while the matching human arm snagged the pipe's wielder around his throat. The newly extruded arm on the other side simply impaled that attacker, punching through his sternum with a sharp crack, and the claw at arm's end hooked over as it came through his spine to hold him in place.

The two "police officers" drew their guns and opened fire from where they were. Silencers kept the shots quiet, more than quiet enough to be lost in the traffic noise from the square. Half of their shots struck Octavia squarely in the chest, but she just buckled in place, as any vampire would. In half a dozen strong strides—practically leaps—she was upon them. They couldn't get a good bead on her as she moved, since she seemed to slightly shimmer in place. On her last step she pivoted, letting the extruded arms reach behind her to pin down one of the gun-toting vampires while her jaw lengthened into protrusions as much like pincers as fangs. They jabbed into the other shooter's face, striking just below his eyes and injecting a caustic poison beneath his skin. Blind and in agony, he couldn't see or even think clearly through the pain.

In another moment, both were down, their corpses beginning to crumble as Final Death took its toll. She pulled

the limbs and fangs back into herself and proceeded in a leisurely way up the alley, looking in all directions for the observer she knew must be there. After beheading the fallen couple and the photographers, she looked around last time. "I know you're there. You conceal yourself well. Tell me, will you feel so amused about this when I tell your little chums the Toreador how the Lasombra respect their compact to maintain the peace?" When no answer came, she climbed up the theater's fire escape and was gone across the rooftops of downtown Rio. Somewhere she'd replace the ruined gown, no doubt, and then be back on the streets in short order.

Gratiano drifted out of shadow when she was well on her way. Now that was interesting. He'd heard garbled accounts of Octavia's shape-shifting powers, but the reports didn't quite do it justice. It seemed clear now that she was either a member of the Gangrel clan or had acquired their shape-shifting art somewhere along the way—some time back, judging from the precision of her control. It might be worthwhile to spread some queries among his acquaintances to see if they knew of any rogue lineages like hers. The spider manifestations were certainly striking. Now, how to test her next....

Oh, yes. He popped open his cell phone and pressed a speed dialing code. "All six fell. Remove the traces immediately." He'd disconnected before the answering flunky could do more than begin a hasty assent.

Sunday, 18 June 2000, 1:40 AM
Yacht *Latter-Day Feast*
Aegean Sea, Turkey

Lucita looked curiously at Angelica as the pilot lay stretched out on the roof of the yacht's cabin. Angelica was making small gestures with her hands, little loops and spirals that Lucita suspected were related to the process of flying an airplane. Inside the pilot's mind, though, there was almost nothing for her mistress to seize on as recognizable thought.

Flying in blood rising through blood into blood the cables of the aileron the cables of sinew the motion of a dissected body corpses chained by blood and rising through dark air... There was only a babble of thoughts orbiting a few dominant images. Angelica could make her way through daily routine all right—feeding, grooming, and so on—though sometimes she needed help from one of the other ghouls to deal with some unexpected complications. All around that routine there was simply madness.

"I don't have the time for this," Lucita said to Angelica. "You will have a job to do, and you must be ready to do it as soon as Conrad and I are ready to travel. Discipline yourself or I'll do it for you." She walked away, treading gingerly on still-shredded bone and muscle.

Angelica had watched the sun sink into the sea several days ago, burning as it went until it was quenched and dark, like a clot of blood. Now the moon fixed itself in the zenith (had it risen earlier, or did it just appear now?) and cracked open to reveal a new sun. Its face burned with a black fire that cast harsh, stark shadows of pure white all around Angelica. In the center of the face there was Lucita's face, scowling. Her fangs dripped a pure red venom that leached all vitality out of the ground and water where they fell; Angelica could roll her head to one side and watch the surrounding sea fill with dead fish killed by Lucita's anger.

"Discipline yourself," the angry sun told Angelica, and she did. She opened up her chest to search out the organs of rebelliousness, and laid them out for the venom to destroy. She started to remove the organs of disorder as well, until she saw what the venom did to the organs of rebelliousness. They were not killed. In fact they flourished, sprouting radiant foliage in gray and rainbow hues. Dead insects rose from the yacht's decks to harvest venom-nectar from the organ's blossoms. Clearly this would never work, so she closed up her chest, leaving the organs of disorder where they were for the time being and concentrating on the rebellion problem.

Her next thought was to throw the organs of rebelliousness overboard. They dropped to the sea just fine, but they bounced along the surface, and bounced up higher and higher until they were back on deck again. Clearly that wouldn't work.

"Your meal," a man said behind her. She turned to see the tailor Trasaric holding a plate from the galley. The rebelliousness foliage parted to let him approach.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "Be careful of the bees. I don't know what else they might want to eat."

He looked past the blossoms with a vaguely confused look, nodded, and went on his way. He made a show of not seeing many of the most important things in and around Angelica, and she couldn't figure out why. Perhaps it was another test. She wondered if all the ghouls went through this kind of experience, but they seemed bound to secrecy. None of them would discuss it with her. The blossoms bobbed up and stole parts of her food, scattering it around the deck, and when she tried to gather it up, the bees stung her. She felt hungry, and she wished now that she'd never opened up her chest at all. But now that they were out, she had to do something with the organs, she felt.

Suddenly inspiration struck. She grabbed the nearest of the organs, quickly sliced it into four pieces, and popped them into her mouth. With half a dozen quick bites it was all chewed and swallowed, and she could feel her stomach extracting the bad essence while preserving the nutrients

rebelliousness had stolen to feed itself. Pleased at her ingenuity, she ate the other organs as well. The bees and other insects stung her with increasing ferocity until she was done eating; then they got bored or resigned to the situation and drifted elsewhere to resume being dead.

Tuesday, 20 June 2000, 11:19 PM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

Lucita and Zarathustra again sat in the yacht's bow. He was healed enough that he could adopt shadow form for minutes or even hours, but he'd decided to remain in human form until he could resume his customary habit of persistent shadow. Both had taken the night's extra blood and were engaged in the painful process of healing the worst of their wounds. Their deck chairs came with restraints to keep their legs from jerking spasmodically as everything from the bones out grew again, and both had needed ghouls to strap them in, since thrashing around could break open the new growth and waste a night's effort.

"And...?" Zarathustra spoke just the one word and let it hang.

"And..." Lucita considered. "I don't really know." She flexed her damaged hand, wishing it would stop itching.

"You know where he is, at least." This was not a question.

"Oh, yes, I do. He's been in Rio de Janeiro for at least five years. Timofiev tells me that he was thinking of sending Conrad's child down for training at some point, before all this came up."

"So you'll just step on up, introduce yourself, and ask him to recount his most glorious moment for you. He will of course be delighted to do this, and will neither require a price nor interfere with you as you depart. At least this is the plan as I understand it so far."

"It really does sound that bad, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does. So much so that if you attempt to proceed on this basis, I will feel obligated to notify the other judges that you are attempting suicide as a way of evading your duty."

Lucita turned as far as the restraints would allow to look directly at Zarathustra. "Are you serious?"

"Completely so. I too have met the little weasel, as you called him, and while I have no respect for his character and not much for his intelligence, I do respect his power. I can't force my way on him—I couldn't even when he was last night's neonate, let alone now that he's got the soul of the founder in him. Nor can you. If you go in this way, seeking favors, he will destroy you and challenge the Court to make him submit. You know this as well as I do, and I am not at liberty to condone your suicide at this time. You have a sentence to discharge first."

"I see." Lucita leaned back, trying to find the least uncomfortable position available to her.

The problem was that she couldn't really see any options offering her much more leverage than her original idea of facing Gratiano alone. She could take Conrad and others with her, but they were all more generations removed from the founder's blood than Lucita, less able to resist Gratiano's will. Even the judges who'd convicted Lucita lacked effective leverage. So... change the terms of engagement somehow. But how?

She could try going in disguise. Gratiano had never been the most perceptive individual in the world, and she suspected that he wouldn't care to surround himself with advisors or followers capable of feats beyond his own ability. But she couldn't think of anyone she could impersonate safely that he'd be any more likely to cooperate with. There was no question that the cardinals would give permission for such a deception, any more than they would ask on her behalf.

If she could at least have someone monitor her state of mind to look for signs of manipulation... but that raised problems of its own. None of her probable travel companions had the strength of blood to overcome her innate resistance, and the nature of these things was such that she couldn't even choose to voluntarily submit to a tightly defined act of domination. The blood wouldn't let her. She could cultivate a blood bond with Conrad or someone else and rely on the vague impressions that flowed through it from subject to dominator. Except that she'd rather perish than

gamble on such a fate. She had precisely no reason at all to expect that she could ever regain her self-ownership in such a circumstance. There was no one here she'd trust with that kind of power over her.

There was another alternative, of course. She understood that the bonds created in the Sabbath's rite of *Vaulderie* allowed for shared feeling and awareness, in at least some cases. But how could she submit to the act that defined her enemies as a sect? No. There must be some other answer, somewhere.

Her silent deliberation came to an end with the arrival of Gustav, a timid researcher who'd been investigating the trade in thaumaturgic lore. He was built like a Viking warrior, tall and with marvelously smooth long blond hair, but he carried himself as if expecting someone to start picking on him at any moment. He moved cautiously and without sign of any greater-than-human physical prowess. What he did have was one of the most remarkably analytical minds Lucita had encountered since hiring Willa Gebenstaler. He might be terrified of Lucita, but he also had information she needed, and at least he appreciated his worth within that narrow context.

"Excuse me? I have the figures you asked for. At least some of them." He gestured vaguely with the stack of file folders in one hand.

"Thank you, Gustav," Lucita said as patiently as she could under the circumstances. "What do you have to tell me?"

"To begin with, over the last twenty-four months, I can document forty-eight transactions through human-run auction agencies with provable thaumaturgic significance, seventy-two with a probability of such significance higher than seventy-five percent, and one hundred nineteen with..."

Zarathustra spared Lucita the need to interrupt. "Do you have a lead?"

"Um, I'm not sure."

"Start with what you're sure of," Zarathustra said, "and work from there."

"In addition to the two hundred thirty-nine human-mediated transactions, I tally a total of eighty-one transactions of known or probable thaumaturgic references within..."

"Start with what's relevant that you're sure of."

"Er. Yes." Gustav fumbled through his papers. "All right. We discounted most of these transactions early on thanks to..." He noticed both elders looking distinctly impatient. "We have fourteen candidates for transactions in Lasombra-related occult lore within the last twenty-four months."

"Thank you," Zarathustra said. "That's a good starting point. Now, what else do you know about these transactions?"

"Five of them were deals conducted between Sabbat whom we can account for. If necessary you can arrange for them to be interrogated, but preliminary investigation suggests that they cover known ritual topics. There's no evidence of the involvement of the sort of expert researcher that the phenomenon at hand requires..." He saw the signs of impatience and stumbled on. "So. Anyway."

"Three involve a buyer or seller within the Sabbat and a transaction partner outside. Naturally, we scrutinized this set more closely. We can trace all three back to the same source: Cardinal Monçada's library. There were regrettable lapses in security for at least two weeks after the event, when, uh." Gustav suddenly remembered who he was talking to. "Um, I'm sorry ma'am, I don't mean to bring up painful events."

Lucita waved a hand. "Continue."

"Uh, yes. So. Three transactions out of the cardinal's library. One had actually gotten into Tremere hands in northern Spain and then been sold back into Sabbat hands. I gather that someone suffered for that one. We have not been able to decisively establish the particular contents of the documents involved, but we know that two of the buyers lack the occult foundations necessary for advanced Abyss mysticism and the third buyer has a long-established

opposition to over-involvement with the Abyss. We're maintaining surveillance, of course, but expect none of these cases to prove relevant."

He set one stack of folders aside and opened up the next. "Now then. That's eight of the fourteen. Six remaining. Five of the transactions consist primarily or exclusively of Assamite lore, brought to market in the wake of whatever it is that's been disrupting scholarship in Alamut." He didn't notice Lucita's extra measure of stillness; she was not about to discuss rumors of schisms and Antediluvian childer risen from torpor with someone like Gustav. "We know, of course, that some of their 'viziers' have a long-standing interest in our traditions, but none of the purchasers whose identities we can establish have any demonstrated aptitude for Abyss mysticism."

"Identities..." Zarathustra let the word hang unaccompanied.

"Er, yes. The fifth purchaser worked through the most elaborate network of relays I've seen since the time I tried to crack Lucita's chain of... oh dear." Gustav flinched, and dropped his papers to raise both arms protectively.

"Oh!" Lucita smiled. "That was you in 1962."

"Yes, ma'am, it was."

"You did very well. You had only two links to go, in fact."

"Wow. I mean, thank you. Um, anyway." He gathered up his papers. "Anyway, we've got the same team trying to pin down this buyer, and we'll see what results we can get."

"And the remaining case?" Zarathustra spoke soothingly.

"Setite lore," Gustav said abruptly. "Um. That is, the sellers were elder Setites emigrating from Egypt after what seems to be the usual intraclan factional feuding. There may be Lasombra lore included, but we can't establish that for sure yet, and they're lower on our schedule of priorities."

"In other words, you have no leads." Lucita's leg and arm itched more intensely now, and she felt uncharitable.

"That's, um, substantially correct, ma'am. Unless fresh research turns up something, we don't have any signs of the sort of deal you're talking about within this time frame."

"Thank you, then. That will be all." Lucita closed her eyes and listened to Gustav's footsteps recede.

Friday, 23 June 2000, 2:30 AM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

"All right, I think we're ready." Andrew and his pack spread around Rosa on the yacht's stern deck. The rest of the crew had cleared space for them and strung cables to define a ten-foot-square arena right at the rear of the deck. Andrew stood inside the arena; Rosa sprawled on the deck, her wrists and ankles manacled. The others leaned on the cables and watched. "Barry, your assessment in your professional capacity, please."

Barry wasn't happy about it, Andrew could tell. "I don't feel I can give a fair appraisal. We've fed enough blood back and forth that I know I'm constrained six ways from Sunday when it comes to her. I don't think you can tell without giving it a try."

"All right, then." Andrew was wearing running tights—largely concealed by the shadow tentacles he used to hold himself upright—and a mesh shirt with two small snap pockets. He drew out a key from one of them and dropped it in front of Rosa. "Here." Without looking, he reached behind him. "Simon Peter, please." The magician handed him two identical switchblades; he flicked out one and set the other down beside the key. "There you go."

Rosa twisted to pick up the key, then freed her ankles and feet. She had on the same sort of running attire that Andrew did. No place to conceal anything... not that she had anything to conceal. With a tap of her foot she sent the knife spinning up into the air; she caught it and opened it calmly. "Now what, esteemed leader?"

"Take your best shot." Andrew spread his arms wide. One hand twitched and sent the knife into a high tumbling arc overhead. The other caught it and sent it back, back and forth. Rosa watched it long enough to get the rhythm, and then concentrated on the slight shifts in Andrew's posture. He still wasn't used to standing stationary on a ship,

and occasionally overcompensated for erratic jostling. Rosa, he knew, had substantially more experience at sea and must be analyzing weaknesses he was scarcely aware of. The experience terrified him, but he couldn't risk showing fear. And besides, he needed a way of knowing what was at stake here.

Rosa paced all the way around him once. He debated turning to watch, but decided against it. Let her come back. She would want to see his face when she made her move, he thought.

He was right. The actual blow came fast. She tossed her knife back and forth between overhand and underhand grips, settled on underhand, and lunged at him. He felt the tip ram between ribs and come perilously close to his heart—close enough to press the tissues over it and send a small surge of blood throughout his torso. It hurt as much as he'd feared, even with his best efforts to ignore the nerve impulses. She started to push again... and couldn't. With a yelp of pain, she pulled the knife out and dropped it.

"I can't," she said, on the brink of tears.

"You can take your second-best shot, if you want." Andrew made precisely no effort to avoid sounding scornful. It was a moment's effort to heal the stab wound. He chose to rip off the shirt and let her get an unobstructed view of his freshly intact chest.

"No. There's no point. Damn you!" she shouted suddenly—not at Andrew, but at Barry. "You little prick! You're not any good at this, damn it, you're just lucky!"

Barry shook his head. "I don't think so. Andrew doesn't think so. The cardinal doesn't think so. It doesn't even matter whether I'm that good or you're that vulnerable, daughter of the Sabbath despite herself. It's not luck, it's that you are bound very tightly indeed."

Andrew nodded. "I wouldn't expect as few rites as we've had to keep you from the killing blow when you had such a good opportunity. I thought that I'd have to do a lot more than this after letting you at it. I must remember in future just how well you take to submission."

Rosa quivered. The knife blade, still out, vibrated rapidly enough to emit a high whine. She charged at Andrew again, but her feet crossed over and she fell to the deck two paces away from him. "Damn you."

Andrew moved up to stand directly over her. The Beast stirred, and he let it come. In his imagination, his arms became the limbs of something like a wolf-man or ape-man out of the horror movies he'd once loved. They grabbed the knife in a two-handed grip and stabbed downward. But Rosa's most vulnerable areas, the veins and arteries closest to her skin and the heart further down, radiated a mirrorlike light. For the Beast it was like striking through a great arc at its own veins or heart. Not conceivable, not permissible if conceived. The rest of Rosa was a fair target, and the Beast hewed at her shoulders and collarbones, leaving bloody tracks. As she weakened from the frenzied assault, the mirroring spread, and finally the Beast fled out of mind in disgust, leaving Andrew holding the knife calmly.

"I'd like to take this—" he waved his knife in a slow semicircle "—and slice right through your neck, see how long your head lasts before the Final Death takes all. But you know, I can't, either. I don't have to like you, and all the powers know I don't. But being part of this pack means that I can't just throw you away. So are you willing to finally start talking to me like an adult?"

Rosa glared up at him.

"Silence is progress," Andrew said conversationally. "It got tiresome listening to you rant and rave about how you'd show us all, all the way across the Atlantic. It wasn't any better with the talk about how you were going to destroy yourself and escape our torments, all the way from Spain here. Maybe sometime you'll say something worthwhile. But here." He extended her a hand. "Come on. Get up. It's time for you to meet your maker, or something like that."

Silently, she stood upright, carefully ignoring his assistance. Healing the wounds took less than a minute. The knife remained on the ground, he was relieved to see.

"You never did believe me when I told you why you came down off the cross. Well, come along." He took her

very gently by the shoulder and escorted her out of the arena, down the length of the yacht to the bow. They'd only arrived the night before, and he had only actually walked this distance once himself. But he'd studied charts beforehand, and he certainly wasn't going to risk looking uninformed in front of Rosa now.

"You have Lucita on a ship full of Sabbat." Rosa's voice dripped scorn.

"Well, no, *he* doesn't," said one of the two vampires sitting in chairs looking out over the yacht's bow. It was a female voice, one Rosa had never heard in person. The face that turned to stare at her was very familiar. It was the one that filled the portrait gallery she'd accumulated after she conceived the plan for her own revolt. The great rebel sat calmly, sipping occasionally from a porcelain mug filled with fresh blood. In the other chair, a Greek man sipped from a matching mug. He smiled briefly at Andrew and Rosa, but didn't speak. Lucita continued. "They all do, collectively. Or Zarathustra does, as the present representative of the Friends of the Night and the relevant Court of Blood. Your Andrew is an accessory in all this, though a reasonably valuable one."

Rosa groped for words and didn't find any. Her mouth opened and closed in a very mortal-seeming shock.

Lucita continued to appraise her. "So you dreamed of me." Rosa managed a nod. "And I dreamed of you, on the cross. Do you have a history of psychic sending?" Rosa shook her head. "I thought not. Zarathustra here tells me that I should be mindful of omens, which are the voice of the world that shall be, speaking to us so that we may in due season make it. Sometimes the world lies to us, you know, showing us visions of what is not or will not be so that, deceived, we do what will in truth come to pass. Do you think the world lied to me about you, or to you about me?"

Finally Rosa found something to say. "I don't know."

"That puts you ahead of most of the individuals on this boat," Lucita said. "What is it you know that you don't know?"

"I don't know about either of us. I... this isn't what I..."

"You saw false visions?"

"No." Rosa struggled to get her thoughts in order. Andrew found it terribly amusing. "I... I only saw two visions of you, one when Monçada fell into the arms of his monster and one when you were on the road, somewhere in the desert. The rest I hoped for. You'd done the deed so publicly, I thought you must mean it as an example. So my brothers in the blood and I, except for that cowardly little shit Niccolo, we set out to follow your example, and then to follow you. We came looking to you for advice. Leadership. We thought..."

"You thought I had decided to establish a latter-day Sabbath, and you were going to be the apostles to the new Gratiano."

"Yes." Andrew watched Rosa as she scrutinized Lucita. She could see the extent of Lucita's injuries still unhealed and must wonder about the whole situation. He admired her quickly regained composure; whatever turmoil she felt was now all inside, leaking out only through her aura and then only to a trained observer.

"No such luck for you. I am here very much in accord with clan protocols, on a matter of concern to the clan." Lucita spoke as if it were all very straightforward. Andrew realized that Lucita didn't want Rosa to know about the circumstances that had brought them together now, and made a mental note to speak with Lucita and Zarathustra later. It would not do to say much more or much less than they wanted him to. "However, you will have an opportunity to examine revolutionaries close up." Lucita turned back to face the approaching sea again. "Soon we'll go have a conversation with Gratiano de Veronese. You should join us."

Andrew bowed, knowing that neither of the elders would see it with their eyes, aware that neither of them needed eyes to sense such things. "Thank you, Your Excellency, my lady. We'll see you at...."

"One moment." Lucita interrupted, still facing forward. "Send Rosa back with the ghouls. We wish to speak with you further, Bishop Andrew."

"Very good, my lady." Andrew waved over two of the ghouls. "Escort this one to my pack, and have her participate in the evening exercises. Tell the priest to use his judgment in discipline." The ghouls bowed and led Rosa away. Once she was gone, Andrew folded his hands and waited in parade rest position.

"Have you told her what's going on?" Lucita asked.

"No, my lady."

"Would you stake yourself on that claim?"

Andrew thought carefully. He had taunted Rosa from time to time, and so had the others. Had they actually said anything about Lucita's capture? "With reservations, my lady."

Lucita laughed. "What sort of reservations to you have to offer in the face of impending destruction, Bishop?"

"At no time has any member of my pack directly discussed Cardinal Timofiev's plan to hunt you, nor the circumstances of your capture and trial, nor any of the events since then."

"But..."

"But we have spoken of apparent weaknesses in you, and of our collective ability to best you in combat. I cannot guarantee that she lacks enough information to put the broad outlines of the situation together for herself."

"So you won't stake yourself. Perhaps dismemberment, if not death?"

"My lady makes insurance jokes."

"Your lady does in fact make insurance jokes, yes. How uncertain are you as to the extent of your talking out of turn to a captive of the sect awaiting full trial?" Now there was no mirth at all in Lucita's voice.

"Very uncertain, my lady."

"Thank you, Bishop. Just so that we're clear on this matter, if you or any member of your pack directly communicates my situation to Rosa, I will destroy you out of hand."

Andrew swallowed reflexively. "Yes, my lady."

"You want to ask why."

"Very much so, my lady."

"You understood what I meant by 'experimental controls,' I assume. Your sire tells me that you have an interest in scientific matters."

"Yes, my lady."

"Then I need say only that I wish Rosa to be my experimental control in our investigation. That will be all."

"Yes, my lady." Andrew bowed and left.

Latter-Day Feast continued to trace a not-quite-random course through the eastern Aegean. No dolphins came to leap alongside the ship's prow, and the local sharks had learned that the constant taint of blood in the water carried its own perils. So the sea remained calm and quiet.

"I'm curious," Zarathustra said as a cloud crossed the moon.

"About what?"

"How on earth did you ever successfully impersonate an elder with responsibilities, in either sect?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Lucita answered, with honest confusion.

"You were far too forthcoming with information, to both of the children there."

"That was what you call 'far too forthcoming'? I thought of it as something more like 'regal imperative detachment.'"

"This may have something to do with why you got captured so soon after taking on an associate again, then."

Lucita adopted a formal tone, though her body remain stretched out comfortably. "Noble sir, I come before you as a child in the blood, seeking the wisdom which is the stuff of growth for our kind. As Caine saw in the darkness without God, so I would see in the darkness. Be my eyes."

"Very good. I'm glad that someone still remembers the protocol. Very well, then." Zarathustra shifted slightly to expose more of his injured flank to the early morning air. "You have given both Rosa and Andrew a look at your

motives, both positively in affirmative declarations and negatively in the absence of certain information they seek."

"So?"

"Any such information diminishes your status in their eyes. If you would command them effectively, you should remove yourself from the realm of individual volition altogether. Did you not heed the scriptures when you were a girl in church? 'I say to one, Come, and he comes, and to another, Go, and he goes.' The centurion understood the principle of command and recognized it working in the Second Caine whom mortals call the Christ. You must be less human, more divine in your operations."

"I see."

"No, you don't. But you'll consider it, and perhaps act on it merely out of concern that I'm watching. Fear is not as worthy a motive as pride, but it will do until you can assume more of the primal nature into yourself. That, of course, is a lecture for another time."

"You wish to lecture me on Roads of Morality?"

"Ahh. Using the old-fashioned term won't sway my views, you know. But yes, another time we must speak of your moral universe. Not tonight, however. For now it suffices to say that you *should order more and avoid the appearance of explanation.*"

"I see."

"No, you still don't. Heed, that's sufficient for now."

Sunday, 25 June 2000, 11:54 PM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

It was the first night that Lucita woke feeling no unusual pain or stiffness in her legs. Her arm would take time yet; Zarathustra was just back to full strength, and he had had better luck pushing the healing process than she had. Tonight, Lucita walked and walked and walked, endless circuits around the yacht, readjusting to a sense of full mobility. From time to time she stopped to engage in a brief workout, testing her ability to jump, turn, and run through sequences of attacks and defenses.

Conrad walked with her, watching, not saying anything for the first hour. Just before midnight, she finally asked the question that had been weighing on her since rising. "Do you expect to survive?"

Lucita didn't stop her routine, stalking through the paces of a fencing regimen she'd learned just before the French Revolution. It was an obsolete approach now, but it was still good for her against paired opponents and sometimes gave her a good element of surprise. In her memory, the distant strains of a harpsichord played in Breton moonlight accompanied the paces. "Everything perishes, Conrad."

"You know what I mean. Do you expect to survive this judgment? And if so, what then?"

In the midst of a series of lunges and feints, Lucita said quietly, "I don't know."

"Well, what do you know?"

"I know that few vampires last as long as I have. I don't think there are any natural limits on how long we can last, but things take us down. Mostly each other. We..."

"This is not an answer to the question." Lucita whirled, and actually started half a pace into an attack before reining herself in. Conrad smiled a big toothy grin. "I'm glad you remembered your situation before drawing blood rather than afterward."

"Is interrogating me in this fashion part of your responsibility?"

"That's between me and Timofiev. Do you want to take it up with him?"

That was a trap, of course. If Lucita pressed the issue and the cardinal backed Conrad's program of interrogation, it might well go poorly for her. If Lucita did not press the issue and the cardinal later disapproved of Conrad's actions, it might also go poorly for her. It came down to a judgment call as to whether Conrad was willing to bluff with authorities so close at hand. Lucita pondered. No, Conrad had more fun being bluntly honest, she decided. "Not at this time. Later, perhaps."

"Well, then. Do you expect to survive this judgment? And if so, what then?"

"I don't know. I greatly fear that I am—we are—facing a force greater than we can possibly overcome."

"The founder." Now there was no mirth in Conrad's voice or manner.

"Yes."

"But if anything is certain in this world, surely it is that the old beast is gone."

"Perhaps... did you ever meet Lambach Ruthven?"

"I never had the pleasure; I don't recognize the name."

Lucita hoisted herself onto the railing and lifted herself into a handstand, shifting from one hand to the other, judging her center of mass and the flow of power through her regenerated limbs. "He's a Tzimisce, a peer of mine, more or less. I met him just once, in New York City, shortly before the original Code of Milan went out. I was on a mission to remove some of his clanmates who'd have been troublesome to the Sabbat accord. Meeting him was something of an accident, and I'll skip the details for the moment.

"After our introduction, we spent three nights talking about the experience of being rebels against rebels, as it were, dissidents against clan consensus predicated on dissent against their founders. He was a melancholy soul, and furtive. I have seldom seen someone literally look over a shoulder on a regular basis, but he did, clearly expecting to

see something dreadful at any moment. Finally I asked him what it was.

"He spun me a story about how the Tzimisce founder had used illusions to make their rebels think they were destroying him... it... when in fact they were destroying their own leader. Lambach saw the truth and was commanded not to interfere. He said that he'd been trying to warn his clan ever since, but none of them would listen to him."

"Clearly delusional. I've run into the same sort of claim for every single clan, and some claims about Antediluvians that I don't think ever existed at all." Conrad watched Lucita from the deck, occasionally performing an isometric stretch. "And that's by far the worst sort of dementia I've encountered."

"Oh, I agreed at the time, and would have for most of the time since then. I laughed at him, in fact, and asked if he expected the founder to show up on the next train, since we were visiting in one of the subway tunnels. He became very hostile and agitated, and I parted from him. I kept expecting to hear that he'd been destroyed, but he seems good enough at self-preservation despite the delusion."

"And the point of all this is?"

"We don't have anyone like that, as nearly as I know, claiming that they saw the Lasombra founder after Gratiano's diablerie."

"Not in any plausible way, no. So?"

"But... when I look at the power of these creatures, I begin to wonder. Injuring me takes a fair amount of work when I'm in any position to mount a defense. Injuring someone like Zarathustra takes a great deal more effort. I thought about Lambach's claims about illusion." Lucita jumped down from the railing and resumed her orbits around the yacht's decks. "What's the closest you've come to the founder, in terms of blood strength?"

"Hmm." Conrad considered. "Probably Zarathustra, if he's of the Fifth Generation. I met your sire, of course, and a few others of the Sixth."

"You've seen, then, how the earlier generations can snap the will of weaker ones like so many twigs."

Conrad shuddered at the purge of would-be rebels at the first Grand Ball she'd attended in Mexico City, most of a century earlier. They hadn't just met Final Death, they'd been commanded through painful humiliation along the way. "Oh, yes."

"We have a goodly number of survivors from the great revolt, starting with Gratiano himself. They're all very confident that the deed was done. So confident, in fact, that..."

"You suspect they've been commanded to be that confident. What do you think the founder has been up to since then, if it hid itself that way?"

"I can't begin to imagine. I have no idea how it thought—thinks, perhaps. I think that the gulf between the founders' generation and the next is greater than the one between any typical neonate and the thin-blooded. I never felt like I could quite understand it, on the occasions I met it, and nothing I've experienced since then has led me to feel any differently."

"How serious are you about this?"

"I'm not sure. The power level points worryingly at the founder. But it never acted stupidly, for all its mystery, and these attacks don't strike me as having a high degree of intelligence behind them. The founder might have just plain gone insane, of course, or senile, but those are lower-probability concerns."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Speak with Gratiano, of course." Lucita finished her workout and moved to a review of the stealth arts. She took a position flat against the yacht's outer cabin wall and fixed her head with reference to a porthole and a nearby nail. She worked to keep her head there, bobbing up and down as necessary as the yacht bounced over the waves, neither losing contact with the wall nor making the slightest sound as her body shifted. The ability to wait patiently this way was one of the foundational skills for anyone in the assassin's

trade, and a good exercise in physical calm in the midst of emotional turmoil.

Conrad watched her, studying the exercise. "And how do you propose to avoid having him snap your will like so many twigs?" She rolled slightly off her heels so that her eyes were level with Lucita's, and flexed and extended her legs as necessary to maintain eye contact through crests and troughs.

"I don't know." This exercise calmed the random twitches from nervousness in Lucita's muscles, but did nothing to settle her thoughts.

"Of course you know," Conrad said. "You're simply denying the truth to yourself in hopes of maintaining your precious independence. You've finally encountered a situation in which your little mission of independent crusading provides no strength or recourse, and it scares you. So you're avoiding it."

Angelica had taken up knitting. She felt a compulsion to weave things together: anything that came to hand would do. She'd plucked out much of her own hair and made some rather handsome cords, feeling that it was her body's duty to weave itself. It did not occur to her to wonder why this compulsion came upon her while Lucita was healing; it sufficed that she felt she must weave, and so she did.

After a day's work she felt that she'd woven enough hair and went scouting for other things to weave. She settled on a couple of spools of wire tucked in a corner of the engine compartment. The wire was stiff, and so bending it without breakage posed an interesting series of technical challenges. The engine crew wouldn't let her use of their blowtorches, for reasons she didn't quite grasp. How could she be unreliable when she was in the service of Lucita, who seemed to be the point for this whole expedition? This argument carried no weight, unfortunately, and she was forced to her own devices.

Eventually she discovered that she could heat the wires somewhat by resting them on the radiator in her cabin with the heat turned up high. She sweated, but so what? They

could always get more water. The hot wires sometimes burned her hands, but again, so what? She could withstand the pain. Her owner's blood in her made her strong. If necessary, she could simply burn some of it with an interior fire that would cancel out the exterior scars. Blood was no more scarce than water here, after all. The vampires were veritable fountains of it, straining it out of the living through the woven mesh of interlaced fangs and distilling it into its pure essence, a sort of blood beyond blood.

Sometimes she took a break from weaving and went to watch the world go by. She studied shadows intently, looking for the next monster that would come for her owner and the others. For a while she thought she had a crucial insight, involving the sequence of angles and shapes of curves in shadows resting on vertical surfaces, but when she tried to explain it to the others, they weren't interested. Most of the other living people onboard were so cruel and distant. Maybe they weren't loved in the blood, Angelica thought to herself. Trasarc the tailor was kindlier, but he freely admitted that he lacked the background to appreciate Angelica's geometry, and he kept fidgeting when she tried to teach him. Talking to others was so hard.

So Angelica wove. Soon her owner would want to move against someone, and Angelica would be there to offer cunning nets which could catch the fugitives. She would have to experiment with throwing them. Maybe she could crimp them into suitable curves, like the flags the astronauts had taken to the moon, curved to look like they were waving in vacuum. To the moon. Flying to the moon. Angelica missed flying. She practiced every day, steering imaginary planes, sometimes holding her wire webs as if they were controls. Someday soon, perhaps, she would get to do the flying her owner had promised. That would be good.

Andrew and Rosa again faced off at the stern, once Lucita and Conrad had moved on. This time there was no barrier; the rest of the pack formed an informal wall, but the struggle could move where it would. Andrew again produced a switchblade each for him and Rosa, tossing hers

in a studiously casual way. "Same as last time," he said cheerily. "Give me your best shot."

Rosa circled quietly. She knew that she couldn't risk a directly lethal assault. His blood blessed by the rites wouldn't let it work, and any sort of internal distraction at the wrong moment would leave her wide open to attack. It would have to be indirect. She jumped onto the railing and pushed herself as hard as she could, somersaulting directly over him to land just inside the opposite railing.

"Impressive," he said, "but not very useful unless you were hoping to give me motion sickness. You may have to come closer." The shadows reinforcing his ruined legs thickened and spread, wrapping him in darkness. This wasn't the full-blown dark metamorphosis—he didn't want to use up precious reserves of blood or concentration unnecessarily—but it would make him harder to strike, and he wanted to see how she dealt with it.

She jumped again, but not nearly as far this time. Her arms spread wide, her hands reached into the shadow for the solid form underneath. In a moment she had his arms pinned. Her knife balanced precariously in the clenched fingers of her right hand.

"Not bad," he said, still calm. Hard tentacles emerged from the general shadow to break the grip and push her back. With one of his fleshly arms, he reached out to gouge at Rosa's eyes. The move wasn't quite fast enough, and left only a small mark down her cheek.

The blow seemed to strike Rosa harder than Andrew had expected. She wobbled and pitched forward. He quickly extended shadow arms to grab her and hold her down... and got an unpleasant surprise. She spun within his grasp and neatly sliced both his hamstrings. Before his shadow supports could compensate, he'd fallen over backward. In a flash she was on top of him, knees in his chest, shadow arms of her own pinning him. "Yield." It was not a request.

"I could press the issue, you know," he observed. "If this were a serious combat, you'd still have a lot of fight on your hands."

"Yes. But I've got you now."

"You do." He dropped the shadow, healed the cuts, and turned to face the rest of the pack. "That was clever thinking on her part. As you've seen, the Vinculum keeps her from actually destroying me. But an immobilized opponent is no threat, as long as he really is immobilized and not just inconvenienced. The cuts to topple are good responses to an uncontrolled frenzy at the wrong time in one of your packmates: quick to remove later, but very effective in the heat of the moment." He and Rosa stood up. "Dismissed." The pack unobtrusively scattered, leaving the two alone.

Andrew leaned on the railing to take some load off his legs, which would be somewhat tender until he next slumbered. "Are you thinking of another rebellion?"

Rosa studied his apparently relaxed features, trying to understand what went on underneath them. "Of course. Aren't you? Isn't that the whole point of the Sabbat?"

"Not really. Just because rebellion is sometimes necessary or desirable doesn't mean you can build a routine out of it. Most of the time, really, we don't behave all that much differently from the Camarilla or most independent vampires. Leaders give orders, underlings carry them out."

"How can you stand that?" Rosa burst out. "Aren't you ashamed?"

The mask of calm dropped as Andrew snarled. His fangs shot out and his hands clenched into tight fists. "You mean, ashamed of not pursuing a fantasy that Wonder Girl out there will make me her vanguard? Ashamed of acting in ways that let me survive and thrive, and do my part to rule the world some night? Ashamed of having a modicum of prudence and foresight? No, I'm not ashamed of that at all. How about you?"

Rosa stumbled back two steps. She felt the Beast trembling within her, yearning to bathe itself in the fine arterial spray from the crippled whelp. Calm. Slow. "Treason doth never prosper; what's the reason? For if it prosper, none dare call it treason."

"I wouldn't have taken you for a member of the John Birch Society, dear." The worst of Andrew's snarl was gone now, but his still-extended fangs and his effort to peer down at her gave him a substantial sneer.

"I don't know the man."

"You just quoted them. Archetypal right-wing ranters. I often made fun of them when I was still alive, and they haven't stopped being funny. I suppose I'm not surprised to hear you quote Luddite reactionaries."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. I was quoting Sir John Harrington. Before your time, of course, and from England, so I wouldn't really expect an American to know about him. I mean to attack your cowardice. The whole point of the Sabbat is that we glorify success. I haven't succeeded yet, but I'm not going to stop. There will be another revolt, and I will be helping instigate it. No doubt you'll be there to toady along when you see it working. That's what your kind does."

Andrew again rushed to the brink of frenzy, but this time he managed to hold it back, at the cost of rigid silence. He knew that Rosa could read the signs, know that she had found a lever to use against him. He'd have to deal with that in time.

After a long quiet wait, she continued. "The mighty ductus seems to have no answer to the concerns of his packmate. How sad. How will we survive this terrible void of leadership?"

"I can do a great deal to you short of Final Death."

"True enough. But you aren't. Because you don't want to take the risk that I've got the true rebel heart that you pride yourself on. You worthless piece of craven filth, feasting on the praise of cowards and fools. You wouldn't even be talking to me now except that someone you fear more ordered you to—if it were just a matter of us, you'd run as fast as far as your twisted little limbs could carry you."

"So?"

"What do you mean, so?"

"None of that matters. Because the way this works is that I give the orders, and you submit, or you get destroyed. No amount of glorious rebellion makes you any less of a slave."

Now it was Rosa's turn to suffer in quiet misery.

Saturday, 1 July 2000, 2:02 AM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

Lucita drifted below the surface, feeling the long waves roll her body gently up and down. She felt for a few moments like a genuine corpse, going where the sea would carry it... though of course if she actually did move more than a few strokes from the yacht, the paladin would be after her at once. The illusion and the reality itched inside her head, grating like those confounded meshes Angelica kept stringing together for no apparent reason. Lucita longed to let go of it all, drain herself of blood, and sink into the depths to wait for the turning of the age.

But then the depths were no longer so welcoming, were they? Those wretched bodies animated by black lightning could be walking or swimming along at this very moment, waiting for the smell of someone like her, so they could converge and finish the crushing they'd begun weeks before. She remembered vividly the sights and sounds of the Masks collapsing under the weight of bodies. That was not an end preferable to the others available to her at the moment.

Her imagination moved on to the meeting with Gratiano that she must soon arrange.

She enters with her entourage. Gratiano of course insists on the formalities, and so the minutes pass. She begins to explain her inquiry. In the moment that she first makes direct eye contact with him, her will is lost. He has no interest in the investigation. Casually, he pits her against the others, and she falls in the fight. Or she triumphs. It doesn't matter, because in short order there will cease to be any "her" worth speaking of.

Unacceptable. Worse than Final Death. Because...

It doesn't matter, because in short order she will be locked in perpetual awareness of her servitude. Gratiano will ensure that her will to resist goes but not her memory.

He will in fact allow her out for brief periods, when it doesn't do any good.

Even more unacceptable. So she must... what?

In principle, she could commit a series of acts of diablerie to strengthen herself.

In the moment that she first makes direct eye contact with him, he attempts to force his will on her, and he is shocked to find that he cannot do so. In her veins is the blood of...

Ah, well, there's a problem. It was just possible that some childe of the founder would create progeny specifically so that Lucita could destroy them and drain their power, or that a Court of Blood would pronounce a sentence of destruction on suitable targets. It was not possible, she thought, that she could take out the Fourth Generation childe as well. Nor, come to that, would it do any particular good if Gratiano had absorbed any significant fraction of the founder's blood. She felt serious doubts that all of the old monster was gone, but clearly Gratiano had gotten *something* for his effort.

She knew the answer. If she wanted to walk in, speak to Gratiano, and walk out again with anything like confidence that she remained herself, she was going to have to let someone else into her soul. And there was precisely one reliable way to do that, the Sabbat's rite of Vaulderie.

Part of her wondered idly why it was so formidable a prospect. She had, after all, freely bound herself individually and in rings, from time to time over the centuries. Her freshly renewed bond of peerdome and camaraderie with Fatima, which outsiders might mistake for something akin to mortal *eros*, had saved Lucita and Fatima alike in their confrontation with Monçada last year. None of her other bonds had ever proven quite that essential, but she did know what it was like to share another's essence so intimately. She knew about experiencing another's thoughts and feelings, including sensing the changes that they could not sense themselves when outside forces manipulated their spirits.

The answer began with the circumstances. She did not

love or even like any of the vampires here, to whom she'd have to submit herself. Nor did she trust them any further than she did Gratiano, and she worried that compromising her sense of self would weaken the advantages she had in her blood. Zarathustra, Timofiev and a handful of others she'd been dealing with since the trial could force her into submission, and sheer brute strength could overwhelm her, but she was not inclined to make either task any easier than it already was.

There was more to it than that, though. The Vaulderie defined the Sabbat as a community of the faithful. It was the Vaulderie which made the great revolt possible, shattering blood bonds and strengthening celebrants in the face of their adversaries. The rite changed its participants, making them into something verging on collective intelligences rather than merely closely knit individuals. Monçada had enthusiastically shared in the rite; as his rebellious childe as well as a woman jealous of her independence, she could only refuse. She trembled at the thought of doing anything so reminiscent of her sire's ways. His voice in dreams, proclaiming, "my loyal childe," haunted her still.

She had to know. She had to hear the founder's destruction described by its instigator and weigh his words with all her senses. No secondhand report would do. Her whole existence as an independent warrior had prepared her for this moment of interrogation, and she could not turn aside now. (A faint chill rippled where her wounds had so recently been. Was this the secret purpose of her existence, planned long ago by her sire? How could she establish that it wasn't?) And if she were to do the thing she must, she must first do the thing she would not.

She told herself sternly that she could emerge from this all as herself. She would partake in the rite, yes, but she would nourish rebellion within herself, and when the time came she would take her departure from the Sword of Caine. They couldn't keep her. She would go... somewhere. Cleanse herself. Begin a new existence. She would do this

as a job, and the job would end, while she endured. Of course she would, for she remained the formidable Lucita, scourge of her clan and terror of Cainite society.

With a rush of resolve, she kicked back up to the surface and vaulted onto the starboard landing. "Conrad!" she called out.

The African peered out of the pilot's compartment. "Yes?"

"I wish to perform the rite of Vaulderie with the custodians assigned to me. Tell that pathetic cringing priest to get his instruments ready."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

"What's the special occasion?"

"Just get him. Now."

Saturday, 1 July 2000, 3:15 AM
Yacht Latter-Day Feast
Aegean Sea, Turkey

They gathered at the bow. Andrew stood on the front mast, slightly elevated, with Barry directly below. Around them ranged the other celebrants: Lucita, Conrad, Rosa, Simon Peter, Roxana, and Niccolo. Zarathustra was no doubt somewhere nearby in the darkness, though Barry couldn't feel his passage; the others were all farther back, out of the way. This was the Court Pack's moment.

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Barry thought very clearly to himself. He took it as a measure of mastery in his study of the ways of Night that no hint of this appeared in his features or manners—he could see it in the eye motions of the others. He stood securely, finally accustomed to maintaining a steady position as the yacht's bow rose and plunged. He had his usual chalice and knife in hand. That was his idea. Andrew wanted him to make a production of it, but Barry thought that the recently made, slightly battered cup and Mexican hunting knife would intimidate Lucita by their very ordinariness. He wanted her to think of this as routine. Or to think that he felt confident enough to want her to think that way. Intimidation, in any event.

Show time. In his imagination, the soundtrack for the big info dump started.

"Brothers and sisters." *Begin at the beginning*, Barry. *Remind them of where they all stand. Or slouch, as the case may be.* "We are all twice family. We are all inheritors of the power of Caine, our Father in Darkness, he who claimed the half of the world that is night as his domain, who slew his kin and cursed God and survived to tell the tale. All vampires everywhere are the first family of humanity." He pointed to Lucita. "She is the sister of Lamech, who claimed a curse greater than Caine's. Jabal and Jubal, Tubal-cain and Naamah are our aunts and uncles, our grandparents and great-grandparents. When living men and women read

the first stories of the race, we are there between the lines looking out at them, and they don't know it.

"We are all of the family within the family, heirs of Lasombra who walked across the night domain and made its darkest recesses home. We dwell in the reaches of the night which are least like the day, and therefore most truly fulfill the claim of the Father in Darkness. We are his truest children."

He held up the chalice. "And this is the gateway to the next stage of our evolution, individual and collective. The descendants of Adam's other children are locked in their own bodies. They have but one soul each, and when the body dies, the soul is lost. That soul passes from the world and is never seen again. It may linger as a ghost or plummet immediately into extinction, but that's the end of it. We endure. And each of us is many: we take into ourselves the souls that Seth's children would lose anyway. More than that, though, we become each other. Most emphatically we do this in the sacred act of diablerie, when we send our souls back along the course of history, becoming more like the Father of Darkness in power as well as in thought.

"But we are not so many that we can all make that backward advance, not yet. Nor is it the time to speak of the role of Caine's lesser childer as our fodder for consummation. This is the time for the smaller expansion of our souls, out across the world rather than up out of it. In the rite of *Vaulderie*, we give up some of our selves and gain back a portion of others. We never stop being ourselves. There is always I and Thou. But when you drink and I drink, I open a window into the barriers around your soul. You do the same for me. We become something that the others have no word for: not a hive, not a single thing, but a community of interbound individuals." Barry took the knife in his left hand and made a long incision down his right forearm, holding the chalice down so that his blood would flow into it at a rate measured through long experience.

"Tonight we come together once again as the Hunting Pack: Andrew, Barry, Simon Peter, Roxana, and Niccolo.

"Tonight we also confirm as our sister in the pack Rosa, who has drunk of us and we from her, once for each of us, so that she is mingled with us. No matter what love or hate she has in her heart, she is bound to our fortune and we to hers, as long as there is night and day. She is no longer our subject, but our sister, to be treated as our equal under the leadership of our ductus.

"Tonight we also bind ourselves with the worthy sire of our ductus, Conrad. She joins us as an associate of the pack, our trusted ally, comrade, and mentor, whose blood strengthens us. In turn, we share with her the fire of youth and the passion of modernity, to keep fresh within her the drive to know all and to conquer all." Barry twisted his wrist slightly, slowing the flow. The remaining drops of blood splashed rather theatrically off the chalice walls and the small accumulated pool in the chalice's bottom.

"Tonight also we take into our union Lucita. She is not of our sect, and does not accept the truths that I tell you—that I remind you of, that is, because the blood carries the truth in it already. She drinks with us for her own reasons, which she has not shared with us. But we have no secrets from her. We are what we seem to be, and we tell her together, we drink with you, sister, to feed the truth within you as well. When you look into us and we into you, you will see that we tell you what you are, what you can do, and what you can be. We do not deceive you, or ask you to do anything we do not do as well. We were commanded to take you, and we have. Now we give you the opportunity to understand your own failure, and to redeem it in the only way any failure is ever redeemed, by triumph." He lifted his arm and commanded the wound to close.

He turned and knelt in front of Andrew. "Brother and leader, give your blood for the strength of the pack." Andrew took the knife and made a smooth cut across his wrist, draining out blood without a splash. Barry examined the quantity, nodded, and took his tools back. From there he made the rounds of each of the established members, requesting the brother or sister to give and approving of the

quantity they offered. Then it was time for the three special cases.

Barry smiled at Rosa. He'd become fond of her in the last few days. She was badly deluded as to her own goals and the likelihood of her success, of course, but her *spirit* was precisely what it should be. If one-tenth the Sabbat felt that passion for new achievement, the sect would topple all Cainite opposition. Barry looked forward to helping Rosa turn her fire to burn more appropriate targets. "Comrade and sister, give your blood for the strength of the pack."

She scowled. The knife went back and forth, back and forth in her hands. The first few times they'd done this, Barry had had to hold her down and cut her himself. He could do that again, but he really wanted to make a good impression on Conrad. So he refrained. Finally she held the knife in a two-handed grip. Before Barry could realize her plans, she raised one leg and sliced through her trousers at a femoral artery. Barry had to hold the cup alongside to catch enough blood for her share of the rite.

Now for Conrad. Barry made no effort to avoid looking impressed around her. That subservience was a sin against the doctrines of Night and he *would* have to atone for it later, but he felt that the honesty was worth the price. Let his Beast struggle for revenge at the act of subservience; it could go kill something later. After all, he was impressed by her own accomplishments and by the training she'd given Andrew. "Comrade and mother to our leader, bless the pack with your blood." Conrad smiled and made the conventional opening in her wrist, moving without flash or flair.

Finally, the night's star attraction. Barry would have liked some time to prepare himself, like an hour, or a year, or however long it might take to find someone else to do the job. He couldn't possibly do this without further sinning against his creed. His mentors had explained the crucial importance of affirming one's equality or, better, superiority—one could accept a subordinate position (as he did as priest, and as he hoped to do some night as templar) without conceding innate superiority on the part of the authority, because that was a matter of structure. It all lay

outside the soul and involved no more sin than did succumbing to gravity. (*Convenient, that, the way it makes the hierarchy so inevitable.*) But this...

The fact was that Lucita was his superior: qualitatively stronger, faster, more intelligent, capable of sensing and understanding and acting in ways beyond him. Unless the Friends of the Night granted him a whole series of rights to diablerie, he would never be significantly greater than human in physical or mental capability, at least not permanently. He could, with training and a century or two of practice, match the living world's best weightlifters and its best poets, if he chose to develop that way. But he could not manage the sorts of insight that came routinely to their prisoner; he was painfully aware of the role dumb luck had played in letting them strike at her just when she was already distracted by something. (*I'd sure like to know what it is, too.*) In the face of genuinely superior power, submission seemed a perfectly sensible response.

The Beast had its own thoughts about that. Barry staggered under a dual wave of conflicting passions, simultaneously feeling the urge to strike out at Lucita while she was lax and eradicate the source of his inferior feelings and an equally powerful urge to fly into the night and blot the threat from all conscious thought. He saw with dismay that the stagger was literal: the blood shook in his chalice, and his packmates wore alert, concerned expressions. Damn them; he'd have to refight his claims to priestly authority all over again when this thing was finished. Blood surged down to strengthen his legs; he drew it back up again with the greatest effort. Damn it, why the hell had he chosen to wear a watch tonight? The ticking against his erratic pulse did not make calming himself any easier.

There, finally he was in control again. "Comrade and stranger," he said, stretching to look at her eye to eye. "Give us your blood."

Lucita had managed to watch the proceedings with detachment, until the young priest fought such an obvious battle against his Beast. Her own roused itself in response,

eager to strike him down and escape. Nor did her conscience, what there was of it, offer any support. It did not care to accept inevitability as a justification, preferring to remind her of all the ways her data and judgment could both be in error. She was fairly sure that none of the others could read a visible sense of the panic within her, but she wasn't sure until the priest spoke directly to her whether she could actually carry through her resolution.

Simplicity, she thought, would be best. A deep slice across her wrist, the long jet of her thick blood, healing. Now it was done. At least the first step was.

The priest—Barry Morn, she remembered, journeyman on the Cold Path of Night for reasons that amused Conrad but which she chose not to share—put the knife into a shoulder sheath and held the chalice overhead with both hands. "We are gathered in this cup as we are in this place," he said. Lucita was impressed at the naturalness of his preaching style. It was archaic but sounded sincere. Very likely he'd been a fan of archaic entertainment when still alive, and quite possibly sometimes thought of himself as experiencing in reality the sort of fantastic fiction he'd enjoyed then.

"The chalice doesn't act. It has no soul and can only receive or deliver as we make it do so.

"The knife doesn't act. It cuts or stays as we command it.

"The blood acts. It contains the spark of primal defiance that moved Caine to kill his brother and to resist God's calls for submission. The blood burns us to make us something other than we have been, at first for a short time and then forever. The blood rages, and we frenzy. The blood chills, and we flee. We make the blood, but it also makes us.

"The blood is selfish. It brought forth Caine from Eve ahead of Abel, making him the first child of the first parents. It drove him to make himself the only child of the first parents. It strengthened him against God's wind and rage. It burned hot enough to temper him, when God spoke to him through the fire outside, and it traced the world for

him when God sought to withdraw the gift of light and sight. The blood seeks to make itself preeminent.

"The blood calls out to us, when it is rich and old but harbored in an unworthy vessel." Lucita was fascinated. It had been many years since she listened to a devout child of the Sabbath explain their monstrous doctrines, and she thought it profoundly clever. "The blood calls out to us, when it is encased in the living and yearns for release into better use."

Barry slowly lifted the chalice through a series of partial circles. The air shimmered faintly in the wake of the chalice's passing. Something Lucita didn't understand was at work there. None of the others seemed to regard this as remarkable, and Barry continued speaking. "Caine's grandchilder, the survivors of the ancient world whom we call Antediluvians, sought to keep this power for themselves. But they were and are foolish in their pursuit. Having won their war against their sires, they chained themselves to particular conceptions of power. They did not continue to grow; they did not seek out Caine either to learn from him or to contend against him and at last destroy him. They became like chalices for the blood within them.

"And so they became our enemies. We were the first. The blood of our founder turned against itself in the Antediluvian's body, and the body lost. We removed that thing's barrier to our growth, our war against every limitation, inside or out. The Tzimisce took courage from our example and did the same. In time, every clan will do the same, or we will do it for them. Clans perish along with individuals, when the blood calls a better master. We are still in the early years of a war that will last until all the blood is destroyed or God Himself is overthrown and we remake the universe to suit ourselves." This went beyond mere megalomania, Lucita thought; this was the most involved suicidal fantasy she'd ever heard.

Barry lowered the chalice. The blood inside glowed, very faintly. "Now we take back the blood we have given, fused with the blood of the others. It is more complete than

it was, more like the blood that flows within our Father in Darkness, wherever he rests. Drink, and become that much more whole."

He handed the chalice around in the same order he had before. Each of the participants took one long sip and handed the cup along. Lucita watched them carefully for signs of reaction, but saw nothing beyond brief moments of intense, eyes-closed concentration. There were very few cues about the internal experience. And now it was her turn to drink. In the bottom of the chalice lay precisely as much blood as she'd donated. It no longer glowed, but it remained highly viscous, almost sliding up the cup walls against gravity.

She drank it all. The blood was warmer than vampiric blood usually was, and it slid with a distinct tingling sensation. She picked up her own distinctive taste, and then... epiphany. The blood exploded throughout her body. Veins and arteries no longer mattered: the blood moved in its own way straight from one cell to the next. Her body could have been a hollow shell in which a grenade had just exploded. The energy created by the rite ricocheted off the edges of her flesh and soul. It ripped through the barriers defining herself as in Barry's prophetic words; she imagined that it must soon fill the universe with splatters and clots.

In the midst of this revitalizing turmoil, she was aware of each of the other celebrants as a knot of essence in the midst of a soundlessly vibrating white cosmos. This awareness of the universe not yet subjected to blood and not yet liberated from the tyranny of day drowned out all her material senses. Time itself became irrelevant to her soul's eye.

Here is Conrad, calm and curious, waiting for the time to enact her special plan. She regards Lucita as she might a precision tool run amok, needing the hand of a master crafter to regain its utility. Her blood welcomes Lucita and scrutinizes it closely.

Here is Andrew, proud in his moment of triumph while dreading the risks that they must face because of Lucita. He imagines her as she was in the airport hanger, and imagines

himself draining her dry then and there. If he could bond her to him without also bonding himself to her, he would, and he believes that his sire has been seduced by the lure of forbidden knowledge or the hope of a personalized weapon.

Here is Barry, who fears her and reveres her, proud in his accomplishments as a priest, clutching a secret fear Lucita cannot see.

Here is Simon Peter, studying the whole thing with the eyes of a scientist even as he revels in the practice of reality-breaking magic. He reminds Lucita of the court alchemists of four hundred years ago with their confidence and folly, believing themselves ever so much wiser than priests or mystics and themselves practicing worship and mysticism. He would experiment on Lucita from now until Gehenna if he were allowed.

Here is Roxana, so young and yet already so thoroughly inhuman. She scarcely has a soul as Lucita conceives it, having purged herself of most emotions and nearly all attachments. She is a conscious tangle of inhuman desires and the basest of instincts, and is very happy with her condition. She has no thought for Lucita beyond contempt for the elder's failures and attachment to lost life.

Here is Niccolo, whose fears are far more manifest than Barry's. He used to dream of himself in a stable position of authority somewhere out of the way, commanding his servants, advancing the cause of the sect in some small way. Now he is surrounded by enemies and enigmas, and altogether lacking in a driving vision. Every night is a torment of confusion to him.

Here is Rosa, the central figure in Niccolo's nightmares. She is a revolutionary not just on the brink of the abyss but out over it. If she ever admits to herself that she has failed, nothing will preserve her from the plummet into the last darkness. And the admission is reaching toward her from below and behind. She frantically guides herself with hastily constructed wings of one explanation after another. Anything to keep from seeing the failure. Lucita's presence here, like this, is ripping her wings away. She does not know what she will do now.

Here is Lucita in them, reflected back to her through the blood. Bloody mirrors, looping endlessly. This is a celestial madness. Here is Lucita in them, a creature who could shake the princes of the world from their thrones and storm heaven, who spends her time skulking on the periphery and pouting about her sire. She could be commanding them all, if it weren't for her narcissism and just plain ignorance.

Lucita struggled to regain a sense of herself in more familiar terms. She couldn't feel her body beneath the flood of rite-created sensations. She occupied a place, but that place was multiplied in the places of the others. Heady sensations there, the closest she'd come to seeing a genuine reflection of herself in almost a thousand years. She began to suspect that the rite must have been developed by a Lasombra; nobody else would have quite that obsession with seeing and being seen in this fresh way.

As she began to come to terms with the experience, the next phase began.

They surround her as gods of the night, purged of all light, glinting beneath an illumination that has nothing to do with the emanations of sun and candle. It is a cascading matrix generated out of the essence of night itself.

Conrad is like obsidian animated and made aware of herself. All of mortal society lies crushed within the massive footprints she's left in the ash from the burning of all their works. They are gone and she endures and at last the ghosts along the Congo are quiet.

Rosa is... Lucita puzzles, and then realizes that Rosa is Lucita herself as she might have been if she'd stayed with Monçada. She is the perfect weapon, untroubled by any lesser concern, devoted to the great crusade and endlessly winning its battles.

Andrew is a malevolent knot of will surrounded by an endless transmuting body. His flesh is anything and everything he needs it to be. His mind is clear and correct in every regard, and he demolishes mysteries by his very approach.

Barry isn't. There is a hole in the world in the shape of

Barry, and peering into the Abyss, Lucita can see the ebbing wake of his passage. He has gone beyond the night to a purer state, and will return changed.

Simon Peter is a scalpel of the mind. Where Andrew abolishes mysteries from a distance, Simon Peter reaches inside them, pulling out their entrails and using them to build prisons for each other.

Roxana isn't, either. But instead of leaving a hole in the world, Roxana has pulled the world around herself. In the wake of her nonpassage, creation itself comes undone, leaving behind a most harmonious and enjoyable silence.

Niccolo is the dark of the moon looming over the cities of humanity. He is the perfect and distant god whom all fear and propitiate. When he must act, it is with the sureness of gravity itself, and he never misses, never hits the wrong target. Gradually the world fills with blown moon-dust from shattered rocks of correction, and Niccolo is glad.

And here is Lucita who is... nothing much. She is defined by her absences: no sire, no mentor, no friend. Landmarks rush away from her, consigning her to a cool gray void. This is not the Abyss, this is merely confusion. Lucita lacks anything to which she can say like Faust, "Stay, thou art beautiful." Nothing defines her.

Lucita felt a tremendous rush of feeling toward the others. Love mingled with admiration and even reverence. These were the true childer of Caine, capable of shouting defiance to God and making it stick. Their condition was true, their dreams worthy. How could she not devote herself to them? In an instant, revulsion joined the mix of emotion, as she realized that she was experiencing the conditioning that accompanies the formation of new *Vinculum* bonds. She hated it, and rejoiced as it receded... almost completely.

Even as the gibbering panic and mad exaltation disappeared, she realized that some echo of it remained. She could hate these fiends and seek their downfall, but when it came to considering their actual destruction, she couldn't quite do it. If they were staked out and left for sun and scavengers, as she had seen the Sabbath do before, she could not drink them dry or aid and abet their terminal suffering.

She would have to content herself with frustration and indirection, and all the other tools of the rhetoric taught her. This was all much more reminiscent of her relationship with her sire than she wanted to think about at the moment; she drove the thought deep for examination another time.

The deed was done. She could feel them, very quietly, and she knew that they felt her. If she reached a state of sufficient torment, they'll feel compelled to rescue her, too, because the pain would eventually echo like their own. They would be able to sense large, coarse alterations to her state of mind. She could confront Gratiano. If, that is, what now stood in her skin were truly "her."

Sunday, 2 July 2000, 1:40 AM
Museum der Arbeit
Hamburg, Germany

Willa Gebenstaler knew well that nothing destroyed more vampires, not even violence initiated by other vampires, than ennui. Three months now since she last had word from Madame, and in her heart she feared that Madame had done something to destroy herself, or to let others destroy her. Whether or not Madame still walked the earth, though, there were potential clients. Much work to do, and Willa to do it.

Shortly after Madame's last call, Willa read an article in the Hamburg paper about the role of auction houses in laundering stolen goods and money. That interested her, since she routinely moved large sums of money, which the authorities would seize if they could. She embarked on a study of the auction trade, seeding a few items from the museum's archives into the hands of trustworthy associates and monitoring their movements through the system. Once a fortnight she updated her data for personal use, and marked some of it for sale to Madame's customers.

She was freshly surprised by the current reports from the small auction houses in and around the Alps. Down there among the sons of Goths, Huns, and worse, a fascinating mix of illicit and even dangerous goods changed hands, sometimes wrapped in euphemism, sometimes apparently relying on obscurity to protect them. This report from the Tirolean House of Donatien, for instance: she'd passed along two small crosses taken from Ventrue chapels sometime in the seventeenth century. They bore inscriptions assisting the knowledgeable practitioner of blood magic in developing certain effects, or so she'd been told. (Willa regarded sorcery suspiciously. It seemed disorderly, despite being so useful.) In short order they'd been bundled with half a dozen other artifacts associated with black-magic modifications of Christian ritual. Thus far, nothing remarkable.

What was peculiar was this most recent development. The lot including her crosses had been merged with another, with the rationale "consolidation in absence of patron" given. The other lot consisted of the contents of a private library from southern Bavaria... and it was the library of an old acquaintance, Count Karl von Ostwer, who'd employed Madame several times in conflicts arising from the Prussian unification of Germany, as he had more than three hundred years earlier in a bid for control of a Gehenna cult he later abandoned. Willa was unsurprised to find that his estate was now being disposed of, having thought fifty years ago that he would eventually find a target that proved not so much worthy as frankly superior. The curious part was the bundling of those books with her artifacts. Mere coincidence, or a careful association by someone familiar with vampiric possessions? She had launched a fresh set of inquiries.

The results were now in hand. Yes, at least half a dozen of these auction houses were putting together originally isolated lots of goods once owned or used by vampires, with recurring phrasing in the descriptions. It appeared very much as though someone were directing these sales in accordance with an overall plan. That conclusion would itself sell at a good price to some of Madame's customers; a further analysis would sell better. Willa began taking notes in her tidy script about where to proceed next.

The phone rang. Willa would have ignored it, except that the caller ID reported the call as originating from "Katherine Scott." Willa did her very best to avoid grabbing the receiver in panic or ecstasy. "Ahem. Scott Services. May I help you?"

"Yes, Willa." It was Madame, or at least a very good facsimile of her voice. "I spoke to you on 1 April about Reserve Fund B. The currently operative password is 'Tabasco' and the authentication number is ninety-seven. Do you accept this information?"

"Yes, I do, Madame. The counter-password is 'orange' and the authentication letters are ALN. Do you accept this information?"

"I do, Willa. I need you to make a travel arrangement for a party of ten."

"Madame, may I ask..."

"No, Willa. There will be time for all that later. This is a matter of significant urgency, and we'll catch up on the personal narratives later."

"Very well, Madame. Party of ten. Are any of the party breathing?"

"Yes, one. She is physically fit, though not particularly psychologically sound."

"Very well. Are any of the party constrained from travel in the usual accommodations?"

"I think not."

"Very well. The point of departure?"

"Antakya, Turkey. Any airfield in the area will serve."

"Madame, what on *earth*... no, no, I know. Later. Very well. And the point of arrival?"

"Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Again, any airfield in the area will serve."

"Yes, Madame. And do you wish me to notify anyone there of your arrival?"

"Yes, Willa. I need you to arrange an audience with Gratiano."

Willa couldn't speak for a moment. "Madame, I believe there's a problem with the connection. Please repeat your last instruction."

"I need you to arrange an audience with Gratiano, as soon as possible after our arrival."

"Madame, please, what is going on?"

"Later. Please make the arrangements and notify me at this number, which my host has provided." Lucita sounded entirely matter-of-fact.

"I. Er." The habits of centuries asserted themselves. "Very well, Madame. I will make the arrangements and notify you at this number."

"Thank you, Willa." Lucita hung up.

Willa went to her terminal and began consulting airline schedules in a nearly absentminded sort of way. What business could Madame possibly have with the Sabbath?

There were at least four ways Madame could have indicated in that phone call that she was under duress, and she'd used none of them. But... the great diablerist? Why would Madame thrust herself into the very heart of the Sabbat? Willa hoped, as she coordinated resources, that sometime Madame would indeed explain it all.

Monday, 3 July 2000, 9:30 PM
Semiramis Inter-Continental Hotel
Cairo, Egypt

The man who called himself *Hassan* awoke with the lingering traces of a dream that receded like the tide, drawing back from his soul not into mere oblivion but into something much greater than himself. Part of him almost expected that he could pull back the drapes and look out onto the world plunged into a night that would never end, or at least see that colossus of darkness striding across the world to crush strongholds of light. But no, the city shone with evening traffic as usual, alas.

The man was not a fool. One could not survive the centuries he had as a renegade within a clan that was itself outcast among *Cainites* if one were a fool. He knew himself in a way no mortal could, having dissected his consciousness and its physical housing and reassembled them carefully. He knew the pools of imagery his mind drew upon for its dreams, and knew that this was nothing from within himself. Someone was calling to him.

Hiding was apparently not an option. The first of the dreams had come five nights ago. Since then he had applied every warding technique he knew and even given precious scraps of lore to this city's most powerful *Lasombra*, *Fatimah al-Lam'a*, and one of its most powerful *Tremere*, *Sylvia Kilver*, in exchange for protective charms beyond his abilities to craft. To both he told nearly the truth, too: some outside source assailed his dreams, and at a time when the practice of shadow magic was unusually difficult to control, he felt the need for extra security. He simply neglected to tell them what he intended to do about the summons or how it had stirred his dreams of dark glory.

The *Tremere* was trusting enough, and so glad to have some pieces of an ancient *Lasombra* manual on blood magic from around the beginning of the Christian era that she asked few questions. Clearly she thought he was doing her

a favor, even that she was distinctly taking advantage of him. He suspected she was hoping to develop a new thaumaturgic path, or to revive an old one. In any event, he got his wards from her and put them to use without effect. The dream returned as intense as ever.

The Lasombra *antitribu* was another matter. Hassan had the uncomfortable sensation of standing before her with all his secrets laid bare, and spared questioning more out of his hostess's sense of propriety than because his deception worked. She received his offering, taken from the haven of a Lasombra Methuselah who'd survived Gratiano's revolt only to perish at the hands of mortal hunters a century later, and she made him a genuine exchange of value with two potent defensive charms. She also commanded him to return and let her know how they worked.

He would not be keeping that appointment, however. The dream contained more information this time. The colossus strode out of the middle of the Mediterranean. Sicily, perhaps, or Malta, or Corsica. He needed to get closer to learn whatever else his caller wanted to tell him. He picked up the room phone and booked a flight for Sicily later that evening. By the time he was supposed to meet with Fatimah, he'd be far from here.

Monday, 3 July 2000, 9:30 PM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

"I feel him," the seventh told the eldest. "He's somewhere to the east of here, and he's accepted the call."

"Is he coming here?"

"Not directly, certainly." The seventh was at least that confident of the content of his sendings. One couldn't be too sure of how some imagery would manifest in the minds of unknown recipients, but the echoes from the summoned man made certain aspects clear. "He doesn't have a precise target. When he's closer, I'll try maneuvering him around some to see just how responsive he is."

"Very well. And you will test him before bringing him to us." This was not a request.

"Of course! If he cannot show the talent, then he will never get a chance to fail here."

"Proceed, then."

Monday, 3 July 2000, 10:40 PM
Propriedade Nova da Lua
Gávea, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Gratiano woke with the expectation of another quiet evening. He still wondered what to do next about Octavia. It was pretty clear that she must be the low-generation but relatively young childe of some elder Gangrel. Gratiano didn't much like elder Gangrel, regarding them as neither predictable enough to make good targets (the way his own clan's founder had) nor quite independent enough to make safe fodder despite the risks. They were prone to unexpected developments. He really wanted to feel that Octavia was no longer a wild card in "his" city.

That last thought amused him. Rio was of course not his city. He didn't really have a city, but if he did, it wouldn't be here. This was just the place he'd come because it seemed to offer him some interesting challenges a few years ago. When he had seen all of what he could do with the area's Lasombra, he'd be on his way somewhere else, and then Octavia would again be someone else's problem. He could leave her for his successor, but... he'd rather not. He liked to know and to control.

Tonight he planned to meet with some of the city's elders to consider the next phase of their plan to undermine the Toreador with whom the Lasombra currently shared power. It was an interesting enough relationship, but in this era of escalating sect warfare, Gratiano preferred not to leave half the city open for use as a staging area by the Camarilla. He might not, certainly did not, respect the sect's leaders for their courage or vision, but he had to acknowledge that in their ranks were some formidable warlords and more good soldiers. It would not do to repeat the debacle of last year's North American uprising, which had looked so promising and then promptly rolled over and died again. Make the city secure for Lasombra and Sabbat interests now, before it

mattered, and when the crisis came they could better deal with it.

One of the locals had given him skeptical backtalk at their last meeting, wondering on her way out why someone as potent as he claimed to be would settle for the rank of archbishop and this footloose existence. Tonight he would explain, reminding her that after a sufficiently great deed...

Here his train of thought derailed. It was Silviano, one of the promising ancillae. He clearly wanted to go with Gratiano, and Gratiano was pondering it. Since one of Silviano's better traits was an excellent grasp on priorities, Gratiano assumed that he wouldn't interrupt without good reason. "What?" On the other hand, no reason to be too cuddly about it, so he snapped in his best harsh manner.

"There's a phone call for you from Germany, Excellency."

"And you have not taken a message, and instead interrupted my preparations, because..." Soft as silk now, the smoothness of cobra venom.

Silviano understood the significance of Gratiano's manner and blinked nervously. "She says she's calling on behalf of Lucita."

Gratiano also blinked now. Just once, but hard. "I see. You have done well. I'll take it." He held out his hand for the cordless phone he knew Silviano would be carrying in, and plugged in his own headphone. "That will be all." He waited until the younger vampire had left the office. Now Gratiano stood alone again, looking down the valley, past that amusingly ghastly giant Christ, to the lights of downtown. It was a vista conducive to thoughts of power.

Composed, he pushed the hold button. "Who is this?"

It was a German woman. "Sir—"

Gratiano made his first bid for dominance. "Not 'sir.' 'Excellency' is the correct title. Use it, or use my personal name if you think you can survive my objecting to the unauthorized personal liberty. Otherwise you can go speak to one of the flunkies."

"'Excellency,' then." The woman made no effort to hide her distaste. "'Excellency,' I provide services for Lucita of

Aragon, whom you know."

"Of course. And how is the pathetic childe of Monçada without her daddy to abuse?"

"Lucita seeks an audience with you."

Gratiano blinked again. If this was a prank, someone surely was willing to live dangerously. He'd heard about her capture and trial, of course, and knew in vague terms that she was engaged in matters of interest to some of the cardinals. But he recalled their last few meetings and knew as well that she would probably prefer to disembowel herself with a spoon than spend any time at all speaking with him, most particularly on his home territory. The thought of Lucita bound to the traditions... that was too amusing. "And what interests my dear cousin in the blood?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss that at this time. I am instructed to arrange the audience, as soon as possible after she and her party arrive in Rio de Janeiro."

"Will you tell me when that is, or must I guess?"

"They will arrive at Governor's Island early on the morning of the seventh and promptly take quarters. They will therefore be available that evening or anytime thereafter."

"Then you may inform our great-grandniece in the blood that we will be ready to receive her on the evening of the eighth. She and her party will be searched for weaponry and denied its use while on the grounds of this estate, and any initiation of hostility will be punished as a violation of my right of domain. Is this clear?"

"It is."

"It is what?"

"It is, 'Excellency.'" Gratiano was deeply pleased by the frustration in her voice. The damnable race of Germans had been no good back when they styled themselves a Holy Roman Empire, and they were no better now. A little frustration was good for them. A lot of frustration would be better, but time for that later.

"Very good. When your mistress is settled in her quarters here, have her contact my staff for authorization to approach. We certainly wouldn't want them mistaken

for intruders and taken for use as so many convenient bags of blood, would we, Frau... I didn't get your name."

"Gebenstaler. 'Excellency.'"

"Ah, yes, I remember you. Still answering phones and running errands? So good to see our clan's tradition of aspiring toward excellence flourishing in this way. When the inferior and stalemated keep their place, it allows more room for the superior breed to advance. Very nice. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

"No. 'Excellency.'"

"I must remember to speak to your mistress on the subject of deference. How unfortunate it would be if, while performing your simple little chores, you were to anger someone who could use the electronic connection to rip your pathetic little mental defenses apart. You would hate, I'm sure, to wake up one night and find yourself the bound pawn of someone you dislike as much as, let us say, an Archbishop of the Sabbat. Wouldn't you hate that? No, no need to thank me for that cautionary word. Good night, Frau Gebenstaler." He hung up.

Well now. This was interesting. Was Lucita perhaps going to accuse him of unleashing Abyss monsters? He had done it, of course, from time to time. Power needed to be exercised once in a while; one couldn't thrive on threats and intimidation alone. But it had been a while, and in any event this kind of random violence wasn't his style—he'd do it in a way that made his point much more effectively.

He summoned Silviano and canceled the night's meetings. He preferred to consider the Lucita situation. He had so much to say to the bitch.

Those early centuries in the founder's castle had been deeply unpleasant ones, even after young Gratiano conceived his vision of revolt on a scale that would shake the very foundations of Cainite society. He knew that prevailing mythology portrayed the founder's motives in relatively simple terms: impressed by Gratiano's willingness to engage in complex acts of treachery and his lust for personal power, the founder had (so the story went) Embraced him, bound him with the blood bond, and doted

upon him as something like a happy father. The reality had been much stranger. Gratiano might never admit this to anyone, but among the few really unshakable convictions in his head was the understanding that he did not know how the founder or the other Antediluvians thought.

In some ways, Gratiano enjoyed tremendous power, during those always-dark nights in the Castle of Shadows. He was, after all, the childe of the founder, and most of the others had fallen into torpor or disappeared or gone their ways. Montano, that enigmatic "man of honor," was nearly always around, of course, and two or three others, but mostly it was Gratiano, newly favored of the founder. He had the potential for almost unlimited power. He did not have anything like the *practical* power of many of the castle's inhabitants, however, and he was subject to constant tormenting in ways just beyond his ability to articulate as clear complaints to the founder. On a few occasions he'd manufactured charges out of whole cloth to get a particularly unpleasant scorner destroyed.

In the midst of this, Lucita's occasional presence was a burning insult. She was not bound to her fat slob of a sire. No, she came and went in defiance of his will. Gratiano often wondered, later, if she realized how much the fat slob had protected her from the Friends of the Night. He continued to reserve the right of punishment and then not exercise it, long after almost any other sire would have agreed to grant her blood to some worthy challenger. He even refused to grant hunting rights after she intruded on the Castle of Shadows. She showed Gratiano tremendous disrespect, making the bare minimum of deference due the founder's childe and positively glorying in her adventures.

She stopped coming while the great revolt was still brewing. Perhaps she sensed the changing currents. Whatever the case, he'd never had the chance to properly take her to task for the misery she'd given him. The closest he'd come was a pair of encounters with the secretary, Gebenstaler, while hunting an old comrade gone perniciously independent during World War II. He bought information from her under a well prepared alias, then

rubbed her nose in the truth with a long explanatory phone call when the hunt was over. This was a rare opportunity coming up to scratch one of those lingering itches from long ago, and he must make the most of it.

Wednesday, 5 July 2000, 11:02 PM

ZF Industries Warehouse #3

Antakya, Turkey

"Angelica will stay behind with the others, of course." The words cut through Angelica like a knife. *No, no*, she wanted to shout, but of course she remained silent.

Up until now she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation. She had the manuals for the flight to review. Her owner was going to provide her with another Challenger 604, like the one she'd flown from Gunnison to London, but this one seemed to have even more customization. As on that flight, she'd be flying without a copilot, although this time that put her in violation of several safe-practice rules. She somehow knew that she would have the required stamina, however, so long as her owner was nearby.

The vampires carried on their own conversation. This "warehouse" proved to have some very comfortable offices in the back, behind three layers of security systems. It didn't really surprise Angelica to learn that Zarathustra had so much influence; she'd figured out by now that vampires did in fact run the world and deliberately chose to deceive themselves as well as others about this for the sake of a challenge. Zarathustra, though, wasn't a game player like that. He knew what he was about, and enjoyed being whatever that was. She found him reassuring in a way; being merely enigmatic was much easier to deal with than being cruel.

Now everything else faded as the shock of her owner's words pierced her again and again. Lucita continued in her matter-of-fact way. "I want Conrad to come with me. Gratiano underestimates women. He hates me, I believe, but he should simply disregard her, which gives her a better chance at surveillance. The paladin should escort us but stay outside the meeting area, and the rest of you should stay away altogether. The hotel is more than close enough for you to tell how I'm doing, isn't it?"

Andrew nodded. "I think so. Let's try an experiment."

Lucita looked wary. "What sort of experiment?"

"Just tell me what you sense." He pushed a single button on his telephone, issuing a scripted command.

A moment later, Lucita felt a sharp stabbing pain running through her right hip, again and again. Her mind conjured up that image of Niccolo as the dark moon, now plummeting to the ground. "What have you done to Niccolo?"

He smiled broadly. "One of Zarathustra's cousins just cut his leg off, over at the docks."

"I see."

"I thought that it would be a good test. We'll be closer than that, but then we're hoping for a less painful experience, so it evens out."

"Very well." Angelica sensed a brief wave of nausea in her owner, followed by a deliberate effort to deny the feeling. Angelica tried to deny it too—if her owner disapproved of it, it must be bad, by definition. "Will he be fit to travel?"

"I'll make sure that he is," Andrew said. "If we need to, we can shovel him into a box and let him heal later, of course. You weren't planning on any major tactical role for him, were you?"

"No." Lucita shook her head, and Angelica wondered if the others realized how much she was denying in that gesture. "Very well," she repeated. "If he does do something to me, there's very little any of you can do to stop him. Your best bet at that point is probably to scatter and notify Cardinal—"

Andrew interrupted. "With all due respect to our new partner in the rite, we do know a thing or two about dealing with powerful adversaries."

Silence hung between the ductus and his prisoner. "Yes. True," Lucita said at last. "So your advice is...."

"If we sense that he's exerting mental or physical force against you, I recommend that we scatter and make separate attempts to notify Cardinal Timofiev. The cardinals acting in coordination can probably do something about interference with the business of the Friends of the Night, where we can't."

"Did you interrupt just to make a point about status?"

"Indeed I did."

"Yes. So. Have we left anything out at this point?"

Lucita looked around the room. Nobody had any comments, or at least if they did, they were suppressing them just as Angelica was.

The labyrinth within Angelica's head began to simplify. She was rejected by her owner except when it came to the specific matter of flying. She would therefore fly the best she could, and she would have to do something to make more flying necessary. Her owner must again see her being useful.

Saturday, 8 July 2000, 10:30 PM
Luxor Aeroporto
Gávea, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

In the course of her centuries, Lucita had learned that one of the keys to survival was the elimination of unnecessary details from both present analysis and past reflection. The trip went smoothly, and therefore she did not bother remembering it in detail. Her primary concern was whether Angelica would remain a safe pilot, and the answer proved to be emphatically positive. But once that question was answered, it didn't matter to Lucita what elevation they flew at or where they refueled, as long as nothing required her intervention. Nothing did.

That freed her to concentrate on the real task at hand: building a sense of herself and her mission. She didn't notice Angelica flying with increasing precision in response to this emerging clarity; she noticed only that she was free for her own work.

She and Conrad stood on the balcony of their suite, watching the airport traffic swirl all around them. The Luxor Aeroporto was actually in the airport's main terminal building; Lucita made a note to herself that if she needed some place to hole up with a really abundant food supply, this would be a good place to come. All of the vampiric members of the party had fed without fuss and enjoyed the contented warmth of fresh blood. It offset some of the chill of worrying about what lay ahead.

"Tell me," she said at last. "Do you think that some portion of the founder survives?"

Conrad considered the matter, while tracking a randomly selected target on the sidewalk directly below. "No."

"Is this an intuitive judgment or a reasoned one?"

"Some of both. I have to assume that Gratiano's been examined carefully by thaumaturgists inside the clan and out. They wouldn't want him to try a hoax, like that poor

fool who used to claim that he'd diablerized Brujah's lover and become inhabited by all the souls of Carthage."

Lucita chuckled. She remembered that crusader, who'd brought a note of comic relief to the Second Sabbat War. "True. I wasn't there at the time, of course, but there must have been some of that. What else?"

"Just a sense that this time isn't anything particularly special. Oh, we've got claims about signs of the end, from whatever it was that affected the Ravnos to the Gangrel panic. But then we've always got signs: there's always something new and unpleasant going on, and something old and comfortable finally dying out. It just doesn't feel like the eve of apocalypse to me, and I don't imagine that anything short of that would stir the founder if it were still around."

"Hmm. I..." Lucita paused as a thought struck her. "But suppose it had gotten *trapped* somehow in the Abyss and had just now managed to get free, so that the only governing rhythm were its own drive for freedom of action?"

Conrad held up two fingers. "I'm going to lecture you." She folded down the first finger. "First. We can construct hypothetical cases until the end of the world and not get anywhere. My old mentor said once that an infinite number of lies are compatible with perceived facts, and he was right. The fact that you can work yourself into a panic is not proof of the correctness of your claim." Now the other finger. "You're looking for an excuse to make this your fault, somehow. You have that classic Christian obsession with sin and expiation. You won't let yourself commit suicide, but if you can find a way to get yourself destroyed while rationalizing it as worthy sacrifice, you'll do it. I've seen your kind before."

"Of course you have."

"You're not particularly good at sarcasm, you know. You do all right with invective, but that sort of comeback just really isn't your style. And yes, of course I've seen your kind before. I grew up around guilty missionaries and imperialists, remember. Think about how comfortable you are with the overt idea of self-destruction, rather than letting it slip by

unacknowledged. We don't really have the luxury of indulging that sort of cowardice right now."

"Cowardice! I—" The suite phone rang. Lucita glared at it. The irony of the timing was more than she could bear calmly. Before she reasserted self-control, she'd pulled out two feet of balcony railing. Then she looked down at the twisted iron in her hand. "Ah. This will go on the bill, I suppose."

The paladin had answered the phone while Lucita stared. "Yes. Very well." With a look up at Lucita and Conrad, "Our ride is here." Back to the phone, "We'll be down directly. Yes."

Saturday, 8 July 2000, 10:28 PM
Castle of Shadows
Sicily, Italy

Officially, this was the ancestral estate of the Ombrivecchio family and now property of the Italian government. In both truth and in official record, a variety of hazardous wastes had been stored here during World War II and for twenty years afterward, and the ground was genuinely dangerous to living men and women. There were occasional mysterious phenomena associated with the place, and an old tale about how the shadows here remained intact even when lava flows from nearby Mt. Etna cast their lurid red glow on everything else. Neither local residents nor visiting authorities realized how thoroughly their minds were twisted on a regular basis to hide all that was genuinely interesting about the castle at the center of the estate.

To vampiric sight it was a different matter altogether. The castle itself was a simple design, modified countless times over the centuries and not really depending on physical strength at all for its defenses. A long outer wall, precisely square, enclosed two interior towers, also square. The eastern tower rose higher, with a spreading upper deck to allow watchers the best view of any trouble coming from the volcano as well as other directions. It was impossible to tell from a distance what the walls were made of, precisely, because animated shadows crawled over every surface in a just barely visible ebb and flow. Tides of shadow rose out of the depths after sunset each night and wrapped around the castle in a generally spiral pattern, reversing after midnight to gradually drain away.

The man who had called himself Hassan in Cairo arrived on foot, having parked his car off the road and out of sight near the southern gate. Though flush with the blood of local farmers, he decided to proceed conservatively. So he climbed up over the fence using only his native strength and speed, and walked up the main road without hurry. He

no longer heard the voice whispering in his ear, the one which had spoken in his dreams and then in waking moments as well, leading him on a chase throughout the central Mediterranean. It took almost a week for the man to realize that a second voice spoke beneath the first one, and *that* voice said only one name again and again: "Castle of Shadows."

Shadows spiraled along the road and lawns as they did up the walls. It was a comfortable feeling for the visitor, not quite like anything in his experience but reassuring. The power he'd devoted himself to was still here, even though its instigator was long gone. He could feel quite clearly that no vampires lurked within—he'd developed a simple rite to enhance his awareness of such things. All of this was merely the memory of the Antediluvian, that being's ferocious spirit impressed on every surface where it had reigned for so long. The shadows ran up over his foot like small animals, bringing the familiar chill with them. This was the place on earth perhaps most like the Abyss. When called here, how could he help but answer?

A small jet arced high overhead, leaving its contrail in the realm of the clouds. He watched it pass idly, holding still more as a matter of practice than out of any fear that its inhabitants were searching for him or could see him if they were. After all, the illusions that surrounded this place remained intact, and they faced up as well as out. Planes and satellites and, he supposed, the eyes of any alien beings observing from another world would all see the abandoned estate mortals believed in.

As he stood in front of the big southern gate, the shadows swirling across it froze long enough for a vampire to step out of them, then resumed their accustomed motion. The new arrival was a little taller than the visitor, and something in his manner suggested a sense of attachment to the place that "Hassan" could only dream of. He was Chinese and wore a simple dark suit that would have blended in on the streets of any major city in the world. "Welcome," he said in unaccented English.

The visitor considered the new arrival. "It was you I saw those nights in the airport," he said at last.

"Yes," the other nodded in agreement. "I needed to know how long it would take you to hear the true call, particularly when distracted so many ways."

"So?"

"You hear the voice."

"Yes. It's the voice that spoke to me many years ago, I believe, telling me that the time would come when the Father of Darkness would rise again and claim the legacy that Caine left incomplete."

The other smiled. "The voice speaks truly to you. The time is now. If you can show your worth, you may join the great work."

"Yes. I am a scholar of the science of the Abyss and of the application of primal power through blood to the transformation of the world. I can pass your test."

"Tell me, scholar, what shadows move in the world now, and who speaks to you?"

The visitor recognized the crucial questions. "I know that there is a great and terrible shadow loose in the world. It rises out of the sea and out of the night throughout the Mediterranean Basin, bringing with it the death and dismay which are the prefiguring of what will befall all peoples in the last night. Mortals talk of pirates and sea serpents, and they do not know the depth of their folly, because what stirs is the returning soul of the founder of Darkness. He comes!" His academic manner collapsed like a cheap stage façade to reveal the fanatic underneath.

"Good. Open the door behind me and you will learn the rest." The Chinese man stood aside and gestured at the gate.

First things first, the visitor thought, and extended a single shadow tendril. As it touched the door, the shadows there ripped it away from him and absorbed it into themselves. He nodded, having expected something of the sort. The next step was to push with all the shadow force he could muster, so he tried that. All the tendrils vanished the same way, leaving the native swirl apparently

undisturbed. "It would need more direct force than I possess, I see."

"Oh, yes. It was, after all, built in part to restrain the founder's own childer."

The visitor nodded once and composed himself on the ground. He let the darkness well up within himself, but contained it just within his skin. The collective will of the castle's lingering forces, almost a soul in their own right, pulled at him, shifting his transformed mass this way and that. He listened to the rustling of shadow against viscera, attuning himself to the castle's rhythms. He rocked back and forth while kneeling, though he was scarcely aware of it.

The visible rhythm of ebb and flow was just the beginning of the currents at work here. There was the minute-by-minute and the dusk-to-dawn pattern, of course. There were also currents within the castle and in the ground underneath. Some of them no doubt preserved the death throes of some powerful Lasombra or were the legacy of particularly successful experiments. Or, the visitor thought while remembering the shadows that had literally eaten a blood magician's cave in the Alps, particularly *unsuccessful* ones. Some of these interior currents repeated themselves within a few minutes; some seemed part of longer cycles—perhaps even years, in the case of one knot woven several hundred feet underground through sealed-off chambers and the ground between them.

He'd hoped to make his entrance without serious harm, but gradually he realized that simply wasn't feasible. There was too much dark vitality here, and no time for him to master it all. He was glad that he'd fed before heading up the hill. The sky rolled overhead as he watched and felt and prepared.

Now. The time was now. He let the darkness break through his skin and glide along the surface of the door. The native shadows pulled at it, of course, and he knew that when he reassembled his body there would be some deep wounds. But he was working with the strongest of the

currents, and they protected him just enough to let him survive.

Suddenly he was through the door, in the main courtyard. He rebuilt his body as best he could, favoring shriveled limbs to gaping wounds. The Chinese man stepped through the local shadows without a fuss and smiled down at him. "Rest, and I'll tell you the rest. You have the affinity with the founder's will. You aren't the first. There are eight of us now..."

Saturday, 8 July 2000, 11:48 PM
Propriedade Nova da Lua
Gávea, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

There'd been a fire at a nearby estate earlier in the evening, and smoke and ash hid much of the approach. So Lucita had only scattered glimpses of elaborate hedges grown around ornate iron railings, of broad sloping lawns punctuated by pools in astrological shapes, and finally of the manor itself. It stood three stories tall and formed a third of a circle facing out toward the estate. Lights blazed throughout, and the Lasombra's traditional fetish for mirrors was in full display—every room Lucita could see had at least one wall or ceiling covered entirely in mirrors set in frames whose styles ranged from Gothic to baroque to starkly modern.

A deceptively young vampire drove the limousine that had met Lucita, Conrad, and the paladin at their hotel. She displayed many of the characteristic mannerisms of the neonate, including a great deal of small wasted motion, but Lucita had done that trick herself and recognized practiced impersonation. The two guards who met them at the front door, on the other hand, were the real thing. They still moved with the memory of life, compensating where it wasn't necessary, occasionally pushing off with more strength than they intended, occasionally clearly timing based on a pulse that didn't come anymore and confused by its absence. Lucita admired the nuances of the choreography their host had arranged.

She wished she could shake the nagging uncertainties in herself. Conrad's remarks about suicide echoed unpleasantly in her memory. They were too close to the condemnation from her ghostly retainer last Halloween. This was a time for supreme confidence, not for... unless, she thought, Conrad had *wanted* her insecure. But why? Didn't she need to be in fullest possession of her faculties right now? Conrad was expecting her to be defeated this

way, so that Lucita would match Gratiano's convictions about his role in the world and how the captured rebel would naturally relate to him. Ah. Yes. She would play into his assumptions, and any manipulations he made would stand out more clearly as she regained her usual poise. Of course now that she realized it, she'd have to defeat herself again to reclaim that state of disarray.

Fortunately, reasons for scorn and deprecation came quickly to mind. Here she was, a millennial vampire of the Seventh Generation, forced to toady to childer of vastly less age and potency. She was the errand girl of the Friends of the Night, on whom she'd turned her back long ago. She suspected that she owed much more of her survival than she'd ever realized to her hated sire's protection, and she was acutely aware of existing now at the mercy of cardinals and all-but-Inconnu. Despair sank into her.

The women had both chosen simple black dresses for the occasion, while the paladin favored a smooth gray suit. It slid out of the limousine first in almost perfect silence. "As arranged, Lucita of Aragon and entourage arrive for their audience with His Excellency Gratiano de Veronese. Please notify your master that his guests are present."

One of the guards spoke quietly into a cell phone, listened for a moment, and then said loudly, "Straight down the main hall, take the last left turn. Don't go wandering."

"We wouldn't dream of it," the paladin assured him. Indeed, they'd talked at the hotel about the feasibility of mounting some little investigation, and all decided it was just too risky. They had no idea of what defenses the estate actually had and too good an idea of what it might have. That could wait for another time, if it seemed desirable. For now they made their way down the main hall.

Lucita had looked up the estate's name in a dictionary and knew it was Portuguese for "New Moon Estate." The decor carried on that theme. The lights overhead nestled behind glass etched with figures of daytime eclipses and nights of the new moon, carved thin enough to cast pale shadows rather than full darkness. The artwork hung between soaring polished mirrors all carried on the new

moon theme, with an emphasis on great deeds from the clan's early history. Lucita recognized the artist who'd done two of the scenes of *Lasombra* in early imperial Rome, a Carthaginian taken as prisoner in one of the Punic Wars and Embraced as part of some typically convoluted scheme. He'd perished only decades after Lucita's own Embrace, but these paintings were meticulously restored to their original vibrancy. She didn't think Gratiano would care about such details and wondered who handled those chores for him.

They saw guards inside the manor—indeed, anyone at all—only twice. Two Mediterranean men of indeterminate age sat at an ornate table in a side hall, sorting through stacks of small cards that Lucita eventually recognized as coming from Tarot decks. Divination of some kind must be afoot. *That* sounded like a matter Gratiano would take an interest in. In a banquet room furnished for dining vampiric style, with generous troughs for blood and viscera, a uniformed guard stood at the far end. He was cloaked in the blood-generated misty invisibility common among some other clans. He was not cloaked nearly well enough to escape Lucita's powers of observation, and she gave him a nod as they passed. She didn't wait for his reaction.

Finally they came to the turn. The two-story arch overhead shrank down to a single-story passage with a flat ceiling, though no less elaborately decorated. Twenty feet away from the main hall, the side passage ended in a pair of oak doors carved with the face of the moon. The paladin knocked once. A familiar voice inside said, "Enter." The paladin pushed open the doors to let Lucita and Conrad enter, but remained outside, and shut the doors behind them.

Gratiano wore a flashy silver suit with metallic threads in the seams. It was the most vulgar outfit Lucita had seen on a *Lasombra* elder in decades, she thought. Entirely appropriate for this one. He also wore a broad smile. "Welcome, cousins. What business do you have with your archbishop this night?"

So he was going to be formal. Lucita let Conrad take the lead. "Greetings, Excellency. We are travelers in this

domain, come on the business of the clan, come in the hope of peace and of victory."

"Who comes before the court?"

"Conrad, childe of Elias, accompanies Lucita, childe of Monçada."

"Who orders and protects them?"

"We are ordered by the Courts of Blood. Cardinal Timofiev sends us in accordance with the judgment of the Court."

"Impressive," Gratiano said. "What judgment would this be, then?" Conrad started to answer, but he waved her quiet. "Let's hear it from the condemned woman."

"The Court convicted me of complicity in my sire's destruction."

"The penalty for that is usually destruction at the hand of your captor. Why is that you're still walking around?"

"They found extenuating circumstances."

"And those would be?"

"I helped save the Court."

Gratiano looked genuinely surprised. Lucita wondered just what he'd heard about the affair. "That's... not the sort of circumstance I was expecting. How did that happen?"

"We were attacked by a creature out of the Abyss, which came through an opening made from an unknown distance by a summoner whose identity we don't yet know. My sentence is to find him, her, or them, and put an end to it."

"What brings you here, then? Are you going to accuse me of trying to assassinate my cousins with Abyss monsters?"

"I thought about it. But I decided that if you were going on a killing spree, you'd want both victims and bystanders to know precisely who'd done it and why."

Gratiano laughed. "True enough. I would. You remember me that well, at least."

Time to move things along a little bit, Lucita thought. "I do indeed, and I gambled that someone as insecure as you would cling to some favored weaknesses and rationalize them as strengths."

As she expected, Gratiano erupted to the brink of frenzy. "Bitch! I could cut you down right now and nobody would miss you!"

Conrad spoke up. "Three cardinals and two others at that Court of Blood would have something to say about it."

He stomped over to her, one hand raised in a clenched fist. "Let them! There wouldn't be any cardinals if it weren't for me!"

"I see you've become a little more confident about your place in society," Lucita said as coolly as she could manage. This was tricky. In truth, he was probably right: if he struck them both down and offered any sort of explanation at all, the Court and the Friends would take it meekly. Some things weren't worth making a fuss over, and they'd just get someone else to carry on the investigation. What she had to do now was goad him in just the right way.

"You were *there*! Back when you were just Monçada's new piece of ass, you were *there*! You remember what it was like!"

Lucita had to nod in agreement. Later generations of vampires had no real conception what it was like to walk on the earth and know that the next best things to gods did the same. They had never felt the voice of the Antediluvians echo not just in their heads but in their blood, speaking to them beyond all words and beyond all power of choice. Lucita remembered that last era of immanent deity and couldn't say that she missed it.

The torrent of Gratiano's rage poured on. "*I changed it! I turned a handful of whining children into something that could pull Antediluvians off their thrones! Me!*" Now the torrent was merely an unpleasantly rapid cascade. Lucita had forgotten that Gratiano whined when he was excited, and the high-pitched nasal tone grated unpleasantly. "Every vampire there ever was marched to the founders' beat all the way back to the Flood. *I decided to do something else, and did it. Without me there'd be no Sabbat. And without the Sabbat there'd be no Camarilla. The entire face of Cainite society is what it is because of me. Do you really think I care if a bunch of lackeys mind my interfering with their toys?*"

"I'm not..."

"Like hell you aren't, bitch. If you got your due, you'd be ash on the wind somewhere. You're here purely and only because a bunch of the old fools think you're useful to them, and the moment you stop being useful, away you go. If your friend here slipped a stake into you once you got them their answers, they'd probably give her a medal. True?"

Lucita kept silent.

"Fine. Yes, then," Gratiano answered for himself, "it's true. You're a toy, a handy tool. Don't get delusions of adequacy at this late date. In fact, make yourself comfortable. It's time for you to be reminded of just where you stand."

"We're here..." Conrad began.

"Shut up," Gratiano said forcefully. The moment of eye contact was more than enough to shatter Conrad's will to resist. She wouldn't be able to speak again until he released her to do so. "Now then, as I was saying before I was so stupidly interrupted..."

"You began as royalty and the chosen progeny of one of the great elders of the time. You were groomed for a position of authority. If you'd been attentive to me back then, you could be regent now. Instead, here you are skulking around until you get caught, and now you're just hoping for some way to keep your hide together long enough to see another year. Do you understand just how much contempt I have for you?"

The shock of it held Lucita almost as still as if he'd used his powers on her. He had been jealous of her, to a degree she'd never suspected. This was the speech of a man consumed by envy. As she thought about it, she could see the routine of the Castle of Shadows from an unsuspected angle, understanding Gratiano as the childe with much potential but little to actually call his own, watching her growing independence and her final departure from the domination of the Friends of the Night. She knew he hated her, but it had never occurred to her that he would feel so inferior to her. She began to wonder if she'd brought herself to her own destruction tonight.

"So if you didn't come here to accuse me of letting loose the bogeyman, what is it that motivated you to come here and be a nuisance?" he demanded.

"The founder." She decided to keep it as short and direct as possible.

"What about dear father? The thing is gone. I'm here and it isn't."

"It's an analytical matter," she said. "I recall you as good at tactics, so look at the situation."

"Oh, yes, by all means, dear cousin. Teach me. I can scarcely wait."

"Someone is summoning Abyss monsters. At a distance. And they're strong enough to make competition for Timofiev, Zarathustra, and the rest of that group. How many Lasombra do you know of capable of doing that, apart from yourself?"

That slowed him down quite a bit. "Hmm. Not many." He held up his hands, ticking off fingers while thinking. "About eight, and I presume that you've already accounted for their movements."

"All the ones we could identify, yes."

"So what's this about the founder? Surely there can be no question of its passing, or my position."

"If it weren't for this wave of attacks, there wouldn't be." She described the human-formed shadows they'd encountered on Zarathustra's wreck.

"That's... distinctive," Gratiano said after a pause. "But why are you here?"

"I need you to tell me a story."

"You want to interrogate me."

"No, as a matter of fact. I need you to tell me the story as you remember it, so that I can check it against what I already know and see what we may be missing—one of the founder's other childer escaped, perhaps, or a collection of lore and tools overlooked at the time and come into someone's hands later. Some legacy of the founder that we all thought passed away with the thing itself."

"Ahhh, very well. This may take a while." He looked over at Conrad. "You're released." Before she could begin to unclench, he'd already turned his attention back to Lucita. "Come and sit by the window. So, where to begin..."

Monday, 1 April 1420, 12:00 AM
Castle of Shadows
Sicily, Italy

Gratiano looked much as he would while talking with Lucita and Conrad, five hundred eighty years later. He had been a vampire for more than three hundred years, and his style was set well enough: whatever was currently elegant, done loudly. The new fashion was for men's doublets to fall higher on the hips and for hose to be more elaborately embellished, so he had an almost scandalously short doublet and hose woven from cloth of gold. Codpieces wouldn't catch on for a few decades yet, and his experiments introducing them to the children of the night had not been well-received.

His chores for this night were simple and tedious. The Portuguese courts had *finally* agreed that the first year of grace was not what everyone else thought was 38 B.C. and decreed an official change in their calendars. Gratiano had to oversee the flock of scribes and archivists making sure that the documents going to Portugal now bore the new dates and revising existing records to make them synchronize. Over the course of a few hundred years, the archives could amass a very great quantity of official correspondence, and checking it all would take time.

Fortunately, it was time to stop all that.

He could hear a caravan coming up the hill, and the distinctive calls of the Libyans and Sicilians who led it. They'd been here before in recent years, a neutral contingent of vampires and lackeys willing to carry important information into realms controlled by enemies of the Lasombra. They did well for themselves at it, providing a valuable service to all sides in the disputes of the age. At least that's what they seemed to be. Only Gratiano and a few choice aides knew that the caravaners had been replaced, one by one, by a mixture of "anarchs," as the rebellious young vampires who rejected the authority of the

founders called themselves. And this time they traveled with a contingent of assassins recruited from the Assamite clan, whose elders had their reasons for nurturing dissension among the European lineages of Cainites.

Within the castle, all was ready for Gratiano's move. He could hear arguments in the great hall, one floor down and two halls over. Dedicated inquisitors were ripping apart the minds of captured anarchists who'd tried to assassinate several of the founder's childer. They all recalled being recruited by the founder's eldest child, that impossibly sanctimonious Montano. They recalled it very vividly, in fact, without doubt or qualm. They should: the memories had been inserted by Assamite and Lasombra childer nearly as powerful as the founder's own progeny, and the real memory of recruitment and conditioning was altogether gone. The quarrel tonight dealt with the perennial topic: if this were a forgery, who had done it, and why?

Montano sat aloof from the dispute, refusing to say anything at all in his defense beyond the barest "No." The founder itself was deep in torpor again, and had been for more than five years. Gratiano had tried to rouse it to bring the news of the French defeat at Agincourt and discuss the implications for Lasombra strategy in France, but to no avail. This current controversy had not disturbed its slumber, either. Montano's silence struck many of the *Amici Noctis*, the Friends of the Night, as an admission of guilt. "If he were innocent, he would give us an account, for that is his way." Others believed his denial but suspected that he too had been conditioned somehow, despite the known difficulty of doing so to one so thick in the blood. "He does not speak because he cannot; he knows not the truth and will not confess to ignorance any more than he would to a lie." Still others didn't know what to believe and argued out of fear. It was not pleasant to think that the clan had powerful enemies whose very identity remained concealed.

Gratiano smiled to himself at the thought. Oh, the *Amici Noctis* would think of treachery from within. Indeed they had already thought of it. But they'd dismissed him

and several others for the most superficial of reasons—in his case, the assumption that anyone whom the founder doted on so much wouldn't be able to hide a scheme of treason from his sire. They underestimated him, and would perish because of it.

This had been brewing in the back of Gratiano's mind for two centuries now. At first he was simply the troublesome child of an inattentive sire. The fall of Constantinople and its court of elders in the Fourth Crusade gave Gratiano his first clue that something greater could await the sufficiently ruthless Cainite. As the War of Princes fed the Anarch Revolt, Gratiano formulated and refined his plans. For more than a hundred years now, his contacts throughout the Mediterranean had probed Lasombra defenses, tested the resolve of Lasombra commanders. More than one elder had already fallen, spilling his (or her) blood to enrich some lucky revolutionary. Now the final blow was at hand.

He descended past the great hall, out to the main courtyard to meet the caravan. It was a busy time at the Castle of Shadow: three more caravans had come in the last three days, each bearing dreadful tales of setbacks in conflicts with the Ventrue for rights of influence in northern Italy, and of complications stemming from the increasingly ambitious line of necromancers—the Giovanni family—whom the Cappadocians had recruited. Those damnable breathing fools gave grave personal offense to Gratiano for occupying positions of secret influence that he regarded as the property of the de Veronese line. But there'd be time to settle those scores later. In any event, a significant fraction of the stories were plausible lies manufactured to spread that much more fear among the Lasombra. As with tonight's caravan, all the new arrivals were members of his conspiracy.

The great tower carillon finished tolling the midnight changes, its marvelous bass bell sending its final chime echoing throughout the castle. "Now!" Gratiano called into the returning silence. Now it was. The caravan covers came off to reveal great stores of weapons: crossbows, stakes for close-in action, sharp swords for beheading, flasks of oil with which to stir the Röttschrek or red frenzy of flight. Robes

fell back to reveal glittering knives and vials of poison with which to coat their blades. The rebels fell upon their prey.

It would have been harder but for events in the great hall. When Gratiano's command came, the tortured prisoners burned themselves out in desperate efforts to escape. Of the eight on scaffolds or racks, three managed to get loose and wreak considerable damage to their interrogators. Half of the eighteen waiting for torture also broke free and decimated the ranks of bystanding elders. Montano fled, and his flight convinced many present that he was indeed guilty as charged. In the midst of all that turmoil, those who would have taken the lead in organizing resistance to the rebels were distracted in the crucial opening minutes. By the time they brought order to the great hall, it was too late.

This was not to say that the rebels had it all their own way. Gratiano expected great carnage among his followers, and his expectation was not disappointed. A lucky shot from one of the guard towers set a whole wagon of flammable goods on fire, and the resulting panic cleared half the courtyard in one fell swoop. The biggest strike, on the great hall and assembled elders, went well enough, if messily, as did the next biggest strike, on the archives. That whole wing was alight within minutes of the initial signal, and precious little survived to see the next morning. But the smaller thrusts all perished, rapidly or slowly, in the face of stronger resistance. Gratiano wished he'd planned more distractions.

For himself, however, there was only one place to be, and he went there as fast as he could run. Down the great hall's east staircase, past the ground floor (with a quick look at the courtyard now covered in flames), past the warehouse level and the dungeon level, into the founder's crypt. This was a sprawling labyrinth several times wider than the castle, built out of caves whose carvers were so old that Gratiano suspected they might not have been entirely human. It was, of course, pitch black, but Gratiano knew his way. He destroyed the guards at the foot of the stairs with matching thrusts straight through their brains and ripped their heads off before they hit the ground.

At the entry to the founder's actual vault room, Gratiano heard a noise. The guess was an obvious one: "I know you're there, Montano."

The familiar dark, tired voice spoke out of the blackness within. "You must not do this, Gratiano."

"I *am* doing it. The deed is done, or may as well be. Overhead your kind are perishing like so many drowned rats and burned fleas. Soon my army will be coming this way, and you cannot stop them all, particularly not when they're freshly fed on the blood of our brothers and sisters. You've already lost, from the moment I gave the order to attack."

"You have no idea what you're doing, child."

"I have every idea what I'm doing. This is the beginning of the end for your kind, you bastard. Our sire and you bloated old things have had your time beneath the moon. Now you'll be leaving, and we'll complete the work that Caine began and you resist. Yield to me or fall beneath my soldiers' spears, it scarcely matters to me."

There was the faintest whisper of intruding air. Gratiano knew that Montano had taken himself into shadow, and would emerge somewhere far away. That was slightly disappointing, but not really surprising. There were some elders that could be expected to join the rebels: some sincerely, out of the desire to perform the great work of Night or out of simple hatred for the founder, and some insincerely, in hopes of self-preservation or revenge against some other enemy. There would be searches and purges later. But there were also a few that Gratiano expected to be unable to intercept, with Montano at the top of the list. His time would no doubt come later.

Before Gratiano now lay the great prize: the founder, locked in the sleep after death so deep that nothing could wake him. Gratiano felt the magnificent form in the darkness, its flesh as smooth and cold as marble. As usual, the founder slumbered in simple robes, perhaps inspired by a tradition from its living days. Its neck was here, ready. Gratiano leaned down and plunged in his fangs.

The sensation was indescribable.

In an instant, Gratiano knew the answers to some of the mysteries of the Cainites. He remembered with Lasombra's eyes the Flood, the war against the Second Generation, the establishment of the First City and its tragic, confused ending. He saw the Antediluvians whom later vampires thought lost, and saw the arcs of the Jyhad wrapped around the world like great serpents. He understood what had happened to the Salubri, and what would happen to the Cappadocians, and why. He understood what the Tremere truly meant and why the Assamites played the role they did. He saw beyond the boundaries of the world known to him, encountering the legacy of those with the third eye and strange gifts. He saw into the future, when old prophecies would take on new costumes.

Most of that rush of knowledge faded almost as fast as it arrived; in centuries to come, Gratiano would dream of those insights and try to reclaim them, always without success. But even as that frustration began, he felt sheer power given to him. His mind became quicker and clearer, and he knew that when it was time to run, he would run faster and more precisely than anyone who would ever chase him. He felt a new understanding of how to use his force of will on others and a new kinship with the darkness and the Abyss. And these gifts stayed with him.

The vault filled with a dry crackling. The founder's body crumbled as its blood flowed out. The robes crumbled too, apparently bound in some magical way to their wearer's rapidly passing existence. Thick corpse-dust filled the air, and Gratiano knew that he would get a mouthful of it when the founder's neck fell away. It did, and he did. The act was over now. Childe had killed sire; clan had killed founder, for the first time since (according to legend) Brujah's childe Troile had done the great deed. It was the first night of a new age, and Gratiano had an empire to survey. He shut the vault door quietly, then sprinted for the stairs.

Sunday, 9 July 2000, 1:01 AM
Propriedade Nova da Lua
Gávea, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

"...and after that," Gratiano concluded, "it was really just a matter of mopping up." He'd recalled that glorious night in a reverie, his eyes closed. The spectacle that confronted him when he opened them was not pleasing. "And why, pray tell, dear cousins, do you look skeptical?"

Lucita gave him a sorrowful gaze. "You must remember hearing the news of how Lugo and his band assaulted the Tzimisce founder and destroyed it, inspired in part by your deed, though they claimed other inspirations as well. An old friend of mine described your reaction."

"Oh, yes, I was furious at their lack of respect. They had the unmitigated gall to act as though they invented the revolt in the first place."

"Do you remember when that was?"

Gratiano thought for a moment. "1413, it was. Summertime. I remember because..."

"Please, attend." Lucita knew she was taking a terrible risk. The memory of old glory had inflamed Gratiano's ego, and he might not brook this sort of interruption. But she felt that she couldn't risk letting him get lost in reminiscences like that. This was going to be unpleasant enough as it was. Sure enough, he rose half out of his chair, fingers shaping into lethal claws, before he stopped and laughed.

"Very well, milady. What is so important that you would interrupt a hero in recollection?"

"What year did you just tell us you destroyed our founder?"

"1420."

"Do you not see the problem here?"

"No, I don't. I did my deed, and the word spread, and twenty-two years later the Tzimisce did theirs."

"The year of your deed was..."

"1420."

And the year of their deed was..."

"1413."

"And in between there were..."

"Twenty-two years."

Lucita looked over at Conrad, who was aghast. The younger vampire hadn't expected anything like this. Lucita had hoped not to find it, but was not at all surprised. "Do you not hear yourself saying '1413' for their deed and '1420' for yours?"

"Yes, of course I hear myself saying the correct years."

"Tell me again what was going on at the time of your revolt."

"I just did, but I'll tell you again. The Portuguese had just made their calendar change, and we had reached the fifth year after the battle at Agincourt."

"So you don't remember just the date, but surrounding events." Gratiano nodded and let her continue. "By the same token, you no doubt remember events around the Tzimisce revolt: Henry IV dying, and all those complications with the anarchs in England."

"Of course." Gratiano was rapidly losing his patience. "Will you make a point, or do you just want to give me a history lesson?"

"Your memories are false."

"No, they're not."

"When you describe the chronology, you give nonsensical answers. Here, let me write down for you." She didn't expect this to work, but she reached for a piece of paper and wrote down the dates that he'd given her. "Please, read this to us."

With a sneer, he did. "1420, Lasombra perishes. 1413, Tzimisce perishes." He looked up. "What is your problem here?"

Lucita looked at Conrad again. "Do we need to continue this?" Conrad simply shook her head numbly. "Your Excellency," Lucita said with the formality she'd not exercised in many a decade, "we thank you for your

assistance in the pursuit of my judgment. May the strength of Caine be yours."

"Ah, so you've abandoned this calendar obsession. Very good. Go in peace from this domain, and may," he said with another sneer, "may all your endeavors bring glory to the Sabbat and to the Lasombra who are its rightful masters."

In the limousine, on their way back to the hotel, Conrad began trembling. "What was that?" The paladin looked confused. The women had emerged blank and unresponsive, giving only a curt "later" when it asked about their meeting. Now both of them were clearly on the brink of shock, if not actually over the edge.

Lucita tried to maintain a steady tone of voice, with limited success. "That was the highest level of domination."

"Who did that to him?"

"Don't be a fool now," Lucita snapped. "You know perfectly well who must have done it to him. The only question now is how far the manipulation ran. We're going to have to talk to the other survivors."

"Do you think... do you think that the founder is *still out there*?" Hysteria crept into Conrad's voice.

"Not out anywhere in this world, actually," Lucita said. "What I fear is that it's down there in the Abyss coming back up for us." She clasped her hands around one knee and rocked back and forth on the limousine seat. "I don't know. I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I have the strength to do this."

Monday, 10 July 2000, 5:10 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The summoners gathered in their usual circle, but without any of the formal apparatus of their craft. Tonight was a time for speech rather than action.

The seventh entered, leading the man he'd met at the Castle of Shadows. Both wore unadorned black robes, without the decorations the others displayed. This was his trial as well as that of his nominee, the seventh explained, and if the nominee failed, the one responsible for bringing him might well perish alongside him. And if the seventh were to meet Final Death tonight, it would be without the honors that came from membership in the great work.

"I bring you the ninth," the seventh said confidently. "I called to him with the voice of the founder, and he answered. He has come. He has entered into the great stronghold and shown thereby that the voice speaks within him as well, guiding him through the perils that wait there. He will complete our work."

"It is good that you proclaim success," the first said, "but it is not your proclamation alone. We must see for ourselves. Bring him forward."

"I need no guide here," the newcomer answered. He walked into the center of the circle while the seventh watched from outside the ring of celebrants. He took a resting stance facing the first. "Test me and know that I am called for the great work."

The first nodded to the others. The fifth, who had a particular knack for thaumaturgy, made the gestures necessary to kindle a spark. The newcomer felt his blood turn to fire and just barely suppressed a scream. He managed to shift into shadow form just before he would have lapsed into frenzy, and shifted back once the fifth stopped that ritual. The fifth gestured again, and the newcomer felt his blood begin to freeze. Again he shifted into shadow form

and back. Now he was tired, but his fatigue didn't show (he hoped) in his posture.

"Good," the first said noncommittally.

The routine of challenge and response continued on into the morning. The newcomer felt the sunrise dragging his soul into slumber and knew the others must also feel it. But he would not suggest by word or deed that he wished to relent until they were ready. The final test caught him off guard, beginning as it did with a simple sharp blow to the back of his head from a heavy iron bar. He fell to the ground, stunned, and was only dimly aware of hard-to-interpret motion.

The next thing he was aware of was his feet bursting into flame. He opened his eyes to find himself teetering on the brink of daylight. The others had locked him into a cage on the roof of the castle, and arranged for his feet to catch the first rays of dawn.

This was bad. His powers were weakened substantially in the portion of the day ruled by the sun, he was already severely depleted in blood and, having put forth unusual effort to cope with the earlier challenges, he found it hard to maintain the focus he needed now more than ever. He was, for the first time, genuinely worried about his ability to survive. As he hauled himself to his feet, he was aware that he'd have the energy (and time, as the sun crept into his cage) for only a single act of shadow mastery. It must work...

And it did. With the very last of his strength, he pushed through the wall of the world and the floor of the cage in a single act, stepping into the Abyss just long enough to get inside. He fell from the ceiling of the chamber below to its floor, and lay stunned. Slumber overcame him.

When he woke, the others were gathered around him. The first extended a chalice full of rich, fresh blood. "Drink. We who were eight are now nine. You are the one the founder has chosen to complete the great work. Come, drink, and we will speak of what is to come."

part three:

Looking out
into darkness



Sunday, 9 July 2000, 3:20 AM
Somewhere beneath Mexico City

Trasarc sometimes considered that the telephone had done more harm to the cause of good tailoring than any other invention of the modern age. It was altogether too easy to interrupt a craftsman or his subject in the midst of a work, and too difficult to explain to the interrupters that they should no more want to intrude here than in the midst of a surgical operation or one of the great rites. No, those concerned about their status would intrude without the slightest regard for the practice of the tailor's craft, without any concern about the harm they might be doing to the public image of their own superiors.

If the capture and trial of Monçada's rogue childe had done any good, as far as Trasarc was concerned, it was this: Cardinal Timofiev finally agreed that his wardrobe needed some improvements. What years (nay, centuries) of argument on Trasarc's part could not accomplish, the visible reactions of other cardinals and their inferiors among the Sabbat at large did. Timofiev consented to let Trasarc take full measurements and discuss possibilities for garments that would enhance the cardinal's dignity and commanding presence without detracting from his chosen simplicity of style.

Unfortunately, the night chosen for this task also seemed to be the night favored for crises of all kinds throughout the world. First there was the call from a desperate bishop somewhere in the American Midwest, babbling about humans with flaming swords. Timofiev dismissed him with the reminder that the Garden of Eden had been closer to Mesopotamia than Minneapolis, and arranged for the immediate punishment of the underlings who let that call get to him personally.

Next was the call from Lin Baloh, in far Cathay. Trasarc had met the Archbishop of Nanking twice and remembered him fondly as a truly cultured gentleman, who

had conversed at length with the tailor about the clothing of the Chinese peoples and possibilities for applying their techniques to Trasarc's purposes. Tonight there'd be no such socializing. From Timofiev's half of the conversation, Trasarc could determine that there was something more wrong than usual among the Sabbat's interests in southeastern Asia. The tailor had no head for geography—to him, Nippon and Cathay and the Indias and Annam and Shangri-La were all fairly close together and in no particularly precise relationship—and the flurry of changes in mortal usage didn't help much. So he could make very little of the details, and had no way of knowing whether parallel raids on havens in Bangkok and Jakarta warranted concern or not. Then the cardinal asked a long string of questions which made even less sense to the tailor, about the movements of cryptically named individuals (or perhaps groups), and received disturbing answers. The call ended with Archbishop Baloh arranging a visit in person a few weeks hence.

Upon reflection, the tailor decided later, he should have ended the fitting session then. The cardinal never quite regained his poise, and it became increasingly difficult for Trasarc to get proper measurements or observations. Then came the third call. After brief preliminaries, one of the guards in attendance passed the phone to Timofiev. "It's the hunting pack, sir, and they say they must speak to you."

"Oh, very well." The cardinal took the phone. "Timofiev. Is there some reason you cannot report in correspondence like most loyal subjects?" He listened. Then he went pale. That wasn't a sight his tailor saw very often, but it was possible when a vampire became sufficiently intimidated to withdraw blood from his extremities but not sufficiently offended to immediately channel it outward again for combat enhancements. It was a mark of very profound fear, and Trasarc didn't really care to contemplate anything that might make the cardinal afraid. "I see. Have you spoken with... yes, very good. All right. Yes, return if you think it wise, but notify me of your decision tomorrow

in any event. Yes." He hung up without any of his usual closing formalities.

"Your Eminence, if you'll raise..." Trasaric began hesitantly.

"Hmm? Ah, no. We'll have to do this another time. I have business to attend to, thank you." He didn't even look at Trasaric, instead proceeding immediately to speak to the phone-carrying guard. "Take this note. At the top of the Lucita file you'll find instructions on contacting an anonymous voice mailbox in Berlin. There's a one-time code pad along with the instructions. Encode this and send it *immediately*." The urgency in his voice reinforced Trasaric's dread. "'Timofiev must speak with you tonight. Call immediately after rising hour in Mexico City. Authorize with Cardinal Code Two, Lucita Contact Two.' Be sure to date that so that she knows when I mean. Go!" The guard went, hastily.

Trasaric knew better than to speak when the cardinal was in that mood. He watched with a sense of impending doom as one of the young guards recently transferred to Mexico City from a European bishopric came bustling out of a side tunnel and called out, "Eminence! A serious matter has arisen!" Trasaric winced. He liked Kris, a friendly massive young man with a genial nature that did not interfere with his zealous mastery of terrorist tactics or espionage. The tailor and the guard had discussed matters of costuming in recent months, and Trasaric had gained valuable insights into the state of commercial attire in modern Europe. Trasaric appreciated Kris' endless good cheer and unbounded optimism about the sect's prospects, particularly in the wake of recent setbacks on many fronts.

None of that mattered now: the cardinal snarled and lashed out at the convenient target. Darkness enshrouded Kris and squeezed. Trasaric heard a very distinct pop as Kris' skin ruptured in countless places at once. The cardinal had stalked on by the time the darkness dissipated to let mangled remains fall to the floor. The other guards kept very quiet.

Sunday, 9 July 2000, 6:02 PM

Luxor Aeroporto

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Lucita forced herself into wakefulness the very moment the curse in her blood would let her rise, and she felt the lethargy that came from too-close proximity to the sun. For a moment the experience of burning in a Zaragoza hotel last All Hallows' Eve filled her senses, but she forced the memory down deep. Time for that later. (*And besides, the thought came unbidden, if what we fear is true, there may yet be plenty of time for all to burn.*) She had most of an hour to herself, to think and plan.

It was possible that Gratiano was simply insane. That was a comforting thought, compared to the alternatives. Elder blood often brought derangement in its wake, both to those its bearer subjected to blood bonds and to those who drank it in the act of diablerie. The passionate conviction of what couldn't be true was by no means unknown among elders, either. Lucita had encountered elders—some of them far younger than Zarathustra, who seemed to have his own tenacious grip on sanity—who literally couldn't be told they were wrong. The right combination of overwhelmingly majestic presence and mind-control powers would not allow anyone in the vicinity to think contrary thoughts, or to express them if they did, or to remember them after a correction if by chance they managed to get something out once. The fact that Gratiano had let them leave with their own memories intact was a good sign, in its way...

...if he had. That was something she'd have to check.

There simply hadn't been time the night before. The trio of emissaries arrived back at their hotel in a state of shock. They did well, Lucita thought, to have managed the phone call to Timofiev and all the social hurdles along the way. By the time they were done, morning was simmering in their blood and everyone had to sleep. Lucita suspected that the others had had—probably still were having—the

same sorts of nightmares she'd suffered. It was not a situation conducive to rest.

Lucita roused from her eyes-closed meditation to realize that she'd wasted much of her hour in an endless loop of panicked reiteration. So much for the vaunted wisdom of the ages. So what next? First, the mutual examination for signs of tampering, of course. Second, Lucita thought, getting the hell out of Rio, as promptly as possible. She thought that they would all feel much safer once up in the air and well away from Gratiano's domain. Flying... best to check on Angelica.

The pilot sat calmly at the table in their suite's common room, eating a sandwich from room service and rereading the manual for her plane. She looked up happily as Lucita came in.

"Is the plane satisfactory?" Lucita asked. "The flight felt very comfortable, even though I understand you hadn't piloted this sort before the trip out of Denver."

"I hadn't, just drooled over them. But it seemed to go very smoothly. I felt more and more in control as I went. Does..." Angelica paused to consider her phrasing. "Does your blood make me smarter?"

"It doesn't usually do that, no. The blood enhances your strength and your general vitality. I wonder whether your period of insanity left you clearer-headed."

"Insanity?" Angelica was clearly confused. "When was I insane?"

Lucita decided not to press the matter just right then. "We'll talk about that another time. The important thing is whether you'll be ready for another flight soon. Could the plane leave tonight?"

Since her owner had set the question of insanity aside, so did Angelica, without a further thought. "Oh, yes, I think so. I got the plane fueled and serviced during the day. That cost a little extra, but I decided that it really is just money at this point. I hope that was okay." Lucita nodded; relieved, Angelica continued. "I walked over to check the plane out when I got up this afternoon, and they did a great job with

it. And I can get a flight plan in and approved very quickly, particularly with a few bribes."

"Very good," Lucita said and meant it. It was a great relief to know that something was going right in the midst of this calamity. "Keep yourself out of the way and ready."

Now the others were beginning to stir. By 7:30 the whole pack was assembled in the common room. Angelica moved quietly over to a chair in a dim corner and sat hunched over her manual, and none of the others paid any attention to her. Lucita was the first to break their general silence. "Who examines the paladin, Conrad, and me?"

"I do," Barry said. "But I'll need to get some help from Roxana." The massive woman nodded. "There's a distinctive pattern to any particular mix of blood for Vaulderie," Barry explained to Lucita. "It's not entirely reliable, but it tends to keep a certain shape and way of behaving. If Roxana helps enhance our collective awareness, I think we can probably tell if there's been a significant change in anyone's soul since last time."

"We need to perform the rite again." Lucita forced a very authentic sigh.

"Yes, we do. Surely you're not afraid of it?"

Barry spoke seriously, as nearly as Lucita could tell, but she still felt a flash of rage. She wanted to slice him to ribbons and leave him and his earnest concern to rot on the floor. "Of course I am. I have no reason to trust you and every reason to fear you. I wouldn't be doing this at all if the matter at hand were any bit less serious. If I thought I could tell you to go to hell and survive on my own, I would. You have me here because of a greater threat, nothing else, and I will thank you to remember it. If the situation changes again, I will be glad to act the way I would prefer to."

"I see. Well. Thank you for explaining." Barry suppressed the tremors he must be feeling; Lucita noticed his external composure and was impressed. "Yes, we do perform the rite again."

The rite went very differently this time. It began with Barry and Roxana tracing symbols in the carpeting, and pressing finger marks around their eyes, deep enough to draw

defensive bruising which they then arrested rather than allowing the healing to continue. It looked as though someone had tried to pop their eyes out. The blood gathering and blessing proceeded in complete silence—Barry simply handed the knife to each vampire in turn and held the cup to catch the shed blood. He stirred the chalice and held it aloft during an eyes-closed prayer, while Roxana stared out from her bruised eyes at each of the participants.

When he lowered the chalice, it again glowed and bubbled faintly. There was a matching glow in his eyes. No, Lucita saw, from the bruises around his eyes; the eyes themselves remained dark. Still silent, he handed it to each of them to drink. That rush of awareness descended again on Lucita, and she saw each of them as they dreamed of themselves, hoped for themselves, and saw her in themselves. This time the general scorn was blunted by their mutual fear of Gratiano and whatever had made him the way he was.

The glow remained in Barry's bruises as he passed the chalice, and a matching glow kindled in Roxana's bruises after she drank her share. They both looked around the gathering, again and again. Finally Barry spoke. "I don't see any major alterations. Do you?"

Roxana shook her head. "No."

"There's the distortion that comes from fear, of course," he continued. "We've all got that. But nobody feels alien or unfamiliar, and nothing seems to be hindering the flow of mixed blood to strengthen Vinculum bonds. I think we all are more or less what we were last night, just burdened with unwanted knowledge."

Andrew had been sitting in a conference chair. Now he stood up to pace on shadow-strengthened legs. "All right. As I see it, we have two options." He looked over at Lucita. "You'll let me know if I miss one, of course. First, Gratiano may have gone insane and developed some sort of delusion that keeps him from seeing the cracks in his story. Second, he may have been dominated by someone else. Any third options?" He waited more than a minute. The room was very quiet, with only the sound of Angelica's breathing and

the rustle of turning pages to break the silence. "I thought not. So."

He went to the windows and opened the drapes, to look out over parking lots and warehouses. "I don't really know how we can proceed to check out either possibility. Certainly he won't give any of us another audience. I suppose we can ask Timofiev to make a query. Does anyone think we can count on Gratiano heeding a cardinal? No? Me neither. But unless we think of something else, we'll have to see if we or the cardinal can come up with a plausible story that warrants some repeated scrutiny. 'We think you're crazy' probably won't do it, so anyone who gets a better idea, let me know."

The drapes swung shut as he moved away, tugged by small tendrils of animated shadow. Lucita realized that he was showing off, and took note as he continued talking, now facing the others. "If he's being mind controlled, we need to know by whom, and how far it goes.

"The pool of candidates is small, I think. It has to be someone of his own generation or closer to Caine, and there just aren't that many. Thirteen Antediluvians, unless there are some we don't know about, and their childer. How many of Lasombra's childer were still active before the revolt?" He stopped and looked at Lucita. She'd detected the slight slowing in his speech as he approached the question and wasn't caught off guard.

"At the Castle of Shadows, three. Montano. Khanom Mehr. Tepelit." She thought for a moment. "I once delivered a message to a fourth, Blue Eye, off in the steppes, but he hadn't been to the castle in two hundred years and I do not believe Gratiano ever encountered him."

"You realize how little physical distance matters for this purpose." Andrew sound altogether unconfident. Lucita wished she could savor the experience.

"I do. But keep in mind that although it's possible for one of that generation to affect others far away, to change the mind of one of their own generation might well require close-up confrontation. Let's set Blue Eye aside for now and concentrate on the others." Andrew shrugged; Lucita took

it as sufficient assent for now. "Montano, as we all know, fled. I presume he's in torpor in some very obscure corner of the world right now. If anyone wants to search, I suggest starting with his part of eastern Africa and with Australia. Tepelit perished. I have a source among the Assamites"—*what a stale way to refer to your friend*, she told herself, and answered with, *if she still is*—"who worked with his killer. She has artifacts from his haven, and I'm convinced of her claims. Khanom Mehr perished in the attack, I believe. We have multiple accounts of her claiming to submit and then trying to destroy her captors."

"There are others, of course," Roxana said. "Boukephos has had dealings with the Friends of the Night quite recently, and there's Sybil. The American one, that is..."

Barry cut her off. "I mean those who were there the night of the great revolt."

There was another moment of ghastly silence. Lucita spoke again. "Yes. That is, if we can trust any of the accounts."

"So do you want to suggest a starting point?" Conrad stepped in before Andrew could. The sire had her privileges, Lucita noted.

"Yes, actually, I do. Konstantin wasn't the only isolated dweller I know." She paused. "You destroyed him, didn't you?"

"Yes," Andrew nodded. "He held out well enough, but in the end he gave us the lead that let us follow you across the Atlantic."

"Did you..."

"Oh, yes," he smiled. "I drank him dry, and am thereby enriched. At some point I'll have to account for the act to the Friends of the Night, but I think that they'll have no problem with the wisdom or appropriateness of my conduct."

"At some point," Lucita said in a completely flat tone, "you'll 'have to account for the act' to me. I am not so rich in friends that I can afford to lose even one."

Conrad interrupted again. "Anarchs and autarchs can't be choosers, or so I've heard. Your friend paid the price for his association with you. You have your own price to pay.

Any claims you may wish to make against Andrew must wait, and you know that you couldn't actually do what you'd like to right now anyway." Lucita tried to ignore her, tried to concentrate on visions of revenge, but she was right. Every time Lucita conceived an image of enacting lethal revenge on Andrew, the Vinculum flared and broke it. She felt sick inside, as though she'd drunk the blood of lepers and syphilitics, with each attempt at formulating a plan of destruction. Her revenge would have to come another way.

"True," Lucita said, with all the calm she could muster. "As I was saying, yes, I do have a contact to call upon."

Monday, 10 July 2000, 12:03 AM
Museum der Arbeit
Hamburg, Germany

Willa looked at the message with the greatest distaste. Given the choice between sawing off one of her limbs and speaking with any Sabbat cardinal, she felt fairly sure that she'd choose the saw. But she did not in fact have the choice: either Madame had voluntarily authorized this contact, or someone had broken her will thoroughly enough to make her assent to it. She looked at the clock and consulted a chart of time zones. No, this Timofiev wouldn't be up yet. She had time to do a little research.

Madame had compiled fairly extensive notes on the organization of the Sabbat over the centuries. It was, after all, a matter of self-defense. Timofiev, Willa soon saw, was one of those climbers who'd risen to prominence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, presenting himself first as a champion of the oppressed (like himself) and then as a mentor to the benighted. The only particularly interesting aspect of his career was that he'd been severely demoted after one of the Sabbat's sporadic fits of treaty-making, the early nineteenth century accord dubbed "the Purchase Pact," which was supposed to settle disputes about authority in the New World. There was no clear indication of what he'd done wrong or precisely how it was that he'd ended up a pack priest in rural Mexico, nor a great deal of detail of how he worked his way back up to supremacy. Apart from that, he seemed to be the typical sanctimonious, vicious tyrant that Willa expected to find running the Sword of Caine.

Once again Willa wondered what on earth Madame was up to. She constructed various hypotheses as she went about her nightly routine, but none of them seemed entirely satisfactory. In the back of her mind lurked the fear that Madame had gone insane and joined with her enemies. Willa knew enough about the madness of elders to feel that she couldn't simply dismiss the possibility out of hand.

She literally did jump when the phone rang and displayed Madame's personal code, but she composed herself before answering. "Yes, Madame?"

The connection wasn't good. The transatlantic relays suffered from more than usual static. "Good evening, Willa." Madame sounded calm and coherent, to Willa's great relief. "I need you to arrange a meeting for me."

"Certainly, Madame. With whom?"

"Yusuf bin Shamsid."

Willa found a brief notation on him in Madame's file of recluses. "Yes, Madame. It may take several nights to reach him, as the instructions I have here involve a courier in Amsterdam. Reply may come via letter or via a call to a secured number."

"Yes, thank you. Provide the number of one of the phones associated with the airplane you arranged to get us to Rio de Janeiro."

"Very good, Madame. And where will you be, should anything arise?"

"I believe we're going to be mobile until I hear from Yusuf. You should also use the airplane numbers."

"Yes, Madame. Now..."

"You sound unhappy, Willa."

"Madame, I am. I have a very distressing message here."

"For me?"

"Yes. It's contact information for..." Willa struggled to maintain her business-like manner, with only limited success. "For a Cardinal Timofiev."

"I see. Thank you." Lucita listened as Willa passed along the instructions: a phone number and a series of signs and counter-signs. "Contact the cardinal on my behalf and report that you've delivered the message."

"Madame, I beg you, tell me what's going on."

"Not now, Willa. All in due season."

"Madame..."

"Thank you, Willa, that will be all. Please notify me of Yusuf's response. Good night, Willa."

Outside time and space

The Abyss

It would not have occurred to Montano to sigh; he had not practiced living mannerisms since the age of supposedly universal empires that spanned only the Mediterranean. He believed, though he was not entirely sure, that he last faked such a gesture around the time Alexander the Great died. Nonetheless, he was in his way both tired and frustrated, and he would have noticed distinct similarities between his aura and that of some sighing mortal, if any were at hand.

His efforts to disrupt the summoning vortex hadn't worked. Or rather they had worked, but only for a little while. The ritual responsible for the effect was back in greater strength and coordination now. He realized that there must be multiple summoners, that *their* ranks had been incomplete, and that now they were at full complement. Matters would only get worse from here on, unless some outside force could be brought to bear.

He considered withdrawing his animating anger from the castle's shadow, but decided to leave it there. He had no real use for it, after all, and he could retain the factual memory of losing it without keeping the associated emotions. It would simplify his existence, and he would need great clarity of purpose for the steps ahead.

Sunday, 9 July 2000, 8:15 PM
(Monday, 12:15 AM Hamburg time)
Luxor Aeroporto
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Lucita hung up the phone with a regretful expression. Conrad immediately asked, "That's twice you've put her off. Do you intend to tell her what's going on, or is she going to end up as collateral damage?"

That roused Lucita. "Nobody will be harming Willa! I simply don't want her to suffer undue upset just right now. This is a matter in flux, and there's no point in confusing her until it becomes quite a bit more settled."

"Of course, of course."

Simon Peter and Barry watched the elder women's exchange from across the room. Simon Peter motioned Barry into one of the bedrooms and quietly shut the door. Neither expected that this would deter any serious eavesdropping, but at least it was a declaration of intent to maintain privacy.

"So what's up?" Barry asked.

"We don't belong here."

"You've got a warning of some kind? Premonition of an attack?"

"No, no," Simon Peter said impatiently. "I mean this whole situation. Look, sitting out there in the next room is someone who's been on the clan shit list since before there was a Sabbat. And she's scared shitless, hoping that the most powerful member of the clan now active is *just* insane. She's ringing up Inconnu and who knows what else. I'm pretty much expecting Montano to come walking through the walls any second now."

"Well, yeah," Barry said. "I know all this. What's your point?"

"Tell me with a straight face that you think we have even the slightest chance of coming through this intact."

"What do you mean?"

"Lucita could rip us apart with her bare hands and never even notice the blood she burned doing it. Hell, Conrad could take us out without a lot of fuss, and Lucita could take out her. Maybe the Vinculum bonds would stop her, maybe not. It felt like you did a good job—"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Shut the fuck up with the sarcasm, I'm serious. This is no place for a bunch of ambitious youngsters. We should be out beating the crap out of Camarilla spies, or stirring up a bunch of scared blood bags with shock troops, or something like that. Bringing down Rosa was fun. Bringing down Konstantin was fun. I can handle that kind of thing. This..." He waved a hand and settled into a shrug.

"This is pathetic."

"Huh?"

"In the first place, I find your profession of fear repugnant. I realize that you haven't chosen to commit yourself yet to any systematic ideology, but you must know by now that this sort of cowardice isn't compatible with any of them, or for that matter with the most fundamental teachings of the sect. If you can't suppress your fear, you can at least refuse to leak it out in all directions like this."

"Priestly advice?" Simon Peter rallied enough to sound scornful.

"Sure. But also the simple truth. You know this. You know that fear destroys your concentration, makes targets seem more formidable and yourself less capable, and tires you prematurely. Even without doctrine, you should know that fear is one of the most distinctively human emotions and ought to be the first to get flushed out after the last bit of food in your guts gets coughed up. You weren't made yesterday and shouldn't act like it just because the situation is tactically difficult."

"Difficult?" Simon Peter nearly shouted, before reining himself in. "You call going up against absolutely the most powerful force in our clan 'tactically difficult'?"

"Of course I do," Barry said. "It's not easy, so it's difficult. Very difficult. We'll have to be careful, clever and fast if we're going to survive. For my part, I intend to do just that."

But I need you to act more usefully than, oh, Niccolo. Andrew's had enough fun staking him lately. Don't give him reason to do it to you, or me reason to tell him that I think you're a liability."

"Are you offering me aid, Brother Barry? I thought that was another of your sins."

"That's enlightened self-interest, and don't try to get clever with me right now. Being basically functional will serve. Your pack needs you alert and able to exercise your distinctive expertise in accordance with our mission. If you can't do that, we can put you out of the way. Temporarily or permanently as need be."

"Fuck you!" Once again Simon Peter caught himself on the edge of a shout. "I'm trying to keep my hide together and you're getting doctrinaire on me! The hell with that."

"I didn't join this mission to commit suicide, Simon, and I won't aid or abet your suicide. And if you try to run, that's just what it will be. Be a follower, if you need to be, but don't try to be a deserter. This isn't *The Red Badge of Courage*; you wouldn't end up acclaimed a hero by anyone else, you'd just be gone permanently. Whereas if you stick with us and do your part, we can come out of this on top."

"Oh, sure."

"Be honest. You didn't think we'd take down Lucita, did you?"

"Well... not really."

"Right." Barry gestured at the door. "Out there right now is a scared anarch Methuselah who's submitting herself to *our* orders, not the other way around. She's doing what we tell her to. We did what you didn't think would happen. So don't give me this shit about not being able to do the next step, okay?"

"Right. Okay."

"Okay, then." Barry smiled. There was no point in telling Simon Peter right now that Barry had just showed him how to apply some basic precepts of the Path of Night. Anger and the instinct for survival had overcome fear, and then rational appraisal had pointed out the possibilities for innovative action and the opportunity to command rather

than follow. Simon Peter might yet make a good disciple, some years down the road, if he could avoid getting destroyed in the meantime.

Andrew watched the priest and the thaumaturge go off for their little consultation. As they shut the door, he nudged Rosa. "So there's some unhappiness in the ranks. If you had the power, what would you do about it?"

"Is this a serious question?"

"Yes, it is."

"And why do you think you deserve a *serious* answer?"

"First of all, I'm your ductus for the duration of this crisis, and if you refuse any reasonable request or command, I can make your existence unpleasant. Because you're stronger than I am, I wouldn't do it alone, though. I'd get the rest of the pack involved as a learning experience for them, or possibly I'd get help from my sire. You've noticed her. She's less than half your age, but I believe that she matches you in any quality that matters when it comes time for a fight."

"So you think you deserve it because you can bully it out of me."

"No, that's just the first point. Second, you want to prove your superiority to me. You can't expect me to admit directly if you come up with an insight that had escaped me, but you can hope to plant ideas that I'll claim as my own later. Particularly if there's a flaw in them you see that I don't, so that I'll be setting myself up for trouble."

"Do you always speak so bluntly when you're trying to be persuasive?"

"Only when I think it will get me what I'm after."

"Very well, then. My first thought is to destroy one or the other of them publicly, and preferably painfully, as a warning to the others."

Andrew smiled tightly. "I see how you got where you are. No, no, don't flare up at me. We both know that the bond won't allow you to inflict enough damage to be really entertaining, and it's just the simple truth that you failed fairly spectacularly. What would your *second* thought be?"

"They're planning to run, or considering whether they should."

"Of course."

"So pick whichever one you think more likely to tell you the truth and ask to be included."

"That's what I was planning on doing."

Rosa returned his smile. "Then you can wonder whether your cleverness matches mine, or whether you're setting yourself up for my kind of fall."

Lucita clapped her hands once. The sound attracted everyone's attention; Barry and Simon Peter emerged from their room to join the rest. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Sabbat," Lucita said in the driest voice she could manage, "I think we should be on our way. Does anyone have any remaining business in this city? No? Then, unless Ductus Andrew disagrees, let's get out of here."

Sunday, 9 July 2000, 11:30 PM
Antonio Carlos Jobim International Airport
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Ever since the airport started appearing on lists of "Most Dangerous Places" aimed at business travelers, security guards here had tended toward the burly and distinctly thuggish. So this particular pair of guards, both well over six feet tall, heavily muscled, and bearing long scars down the backs of their closely shaved scalps, didn't really stand out. Their thick leather coats concealed the fact that they weren't breathing.

Tonight they'd been making their usual patrol through the half-circle arc of the airport's Terminal One, calmly watching with supernaturally enhanced vision for interesting targets. Anyone whose body radiated too little heat to actually be alive, or whose aura radiated unusual patterns, or who otherwise stood out to supernatural scrutiny would be whisked off to an interrogation room for "discussion," as the pair always described their activities. Each of them carried three cell phones: one that actually did belong to the airport security network, one for reaching other members of the vampiric domain, and one for use only by His Excellency the Archbishop. When the last of these began ringing, the pair exchanged a quick glance and each answered.

"Excellency," they said very nearly in union.

"You must stop a party from leaving."

"Yes, Excellency." The taller of the pair took the lead now.

"There are at least three of them." Gratiano provided brief descriptions of Lucita, Conrad, and the paladin. "I don't know how many more they're traveling with, but stop the whole group. They'll be coming from the Luxor, so plan your interception carefully."

"Yes, Excellency." Neither guard volunteered the insight that they had a history of being careful, and would

be so thanks to the direct command from their Archbishop even if they usually preferred sloppiness. Gratiano didn't take well to that kind of response. "Do you know when they'll be leaving?"

"Sometime tonight. The room is in the name of Angelica Tranh."

"Very good, Excellency, we're on it." After Gratiano hung up, the guards promptly called the Luxor's front desk and confirmed that the Tranh party had paid for two more days and had specifically requested that the suite be left intact. That didn't surprise or disconcert them; paying for extra time was simple protective cover, and after all, it was just money. There was always more money to be had. The pair set up a simple loop through the corridor connecting the hotel's lobby to Terminal One and assigned a flunky to watch the service entrances farther down the terminal's arc.

The late-night crowd in any major airport gives off an interesting mix of psychic emanations, for those who can sense them. Fatigue weakens resolve and lets out frustrations and disappointments, which bubble up so close to the skin that even ungifted mortals can recognize and manipulate the secrets exposed. The dislocation of shifting time zones breaks down travelers' sense of routine and leaves them adrift, again showing the passions and plans they'd prefer to conceal. The guards would normally have taken their time to enjoy the parade of sensations, but they knew that it did not pay to disappoint His Excellency when he had something specific in mind. So they let the rest of the crowd go by unscrutinized, once they could dismiss any particular individual or group as something other than vampiric.

When the targets did show up, they were obvious. The lowliest street thugs recruited as muscle would have spotted them. In front walked a living Asian woman, the only mortal in the group. She radiated the distinctive tang of insanity, her distorted aura throbbing through her jeans and blouse. Alongside her came a young Spanish vampire dressed in a white silk pants suit, with Brazilian tribal designs embroidered in silver threads. It was a stylish outfit, but it wouldn't hinder her if she had to fight. The short guard

muttered, "Would have been nice if he'd mentioned that he wanted us to tackle Lucita."

Behind them came the black woman, whom they knew from her previous visits to the domain, years before His Excellency ever arrived, and Timofiev's paladin, whom they knew by reputation and distant glimpses at rites in Mexico City. Both of them had on androgynous black suits; like Lucita's white suit, they'd clearly come off the Luxor store's racks just hours before. And after those two came a motley crew of more recently created vampires, who showed considerable potential but almost completely lacked the discipline of combat experience. The crippled man leaning on his ornately carved wooden crutches showed some good tactical awareness; the rest would be caught like deer in headlights if a fight broke out.

The tall guard picked up his security phone. "I have a group moving heroin and bonds out of the hotel. Looks like they're heading for a private plane. Intercept after they leave the terminal." He provided quick descriptions. "Be advised that at least some of them are under the influence themselves; our contact says there's a history of extreme violence and tolerance for damage when they're aroused. Do not engage close up." As he hung up, he remarked, "Okay, that should slow them down. Let's try for them behind. I'd rather grab a few of the weak ones and risk letting the others escape than get slaughtered trying to take down Lucita or that paladin." The short guard nodded his agreement, and they fell in quietly as the targets walked by.

Without breaking her stride, Lucita turned her head slightly and remarked in a conversational tone to Conrad, "We're being stalked."

"Yes, I picked it up too. Those two security guards. Vampires, I think."

The paladin leaned forward slightly. "I assume that our host would like us to stay for further questioning. Do we want to confront them or make a quiet departure?"

"Quiet," the women said simultaneously. Lucita raised her voice just enough to tell the others, "Gather close."

The guards both saw Lucita raise her right hand and concentrate for a moment. After that, there was a moment where their targets wavered and disappeared. The tall guard couldn't make them out at all; he had the nagging sense that they must still be there, but somehow his eyes simply couldn't stay focused on any place they might be. It was as if they'd wrapped themselves in a blind spot. "Shit," he said quietly. "I hate this. Lost the sons of bitches."

The short guard had better luck. He couldn't see their targets clearly, but he could vaguely make them out. They flickered as if on the far side of a distant mirage, but they *were* there. "No, I've got them. They pulled over to the outside edge of the hall and they're moving a bit faster, but I can follow them. It's okay."

The tall guard hated to be dependent on someone else for crucial intelligence, but that's the way it went. He continued to squint where his partner pointed, to no avail. "All-right. We'll definitely let them get outside and down to the tarmac. You'll have to give the order to fire as soon as they get there."

"Did we lose them?" Lucita kept the group moving at a slightly uncomfortable walking pace, almost twice what a human being could do without strain.

The paladin glanced up at one of the around-the-corner mirrors. "I don't think so. One of the guards is doing a fine job of looking where we are as well as where aren't."

"Damn. All right. When we get halfway down the stairs, I'd like you to bring up a shroud for us. Conrad, you too. We'll jump off the stairway on alternating sides, and each of you lead a group through the darkest route you can find to the aircraft. I'll carry Angelica so she doesn't slow us down." She turned long enough to make sure that the others heard and agreed, then looked forward again as they passed instructions along. Through the terminal windows she could see two security teams mustering near the base of the stairway she needed to descend, and felt calmly pleased that she'd correctly predicted the next challenge.

"Any sign of other vampires?" She didn't need to turn to ask that one.

"No," Conrad answered.

"All right," Lucita said. "Everyone around us seems to be warm-blooded and breathing. If they've got enough concealment to hide from this search, we're probably up against superior force anyway..." She tried to put a full termination on the sentence, but it trickled out despite her intentions. Of course they were up against superior force, and it was really only a matter of whether Gratiano chose to intervene directly. If he did, it was all over. "If there are just the two of them, then we can probably delay Gratiano's arrival by stopping them. He won't want to talk to living subordinates directly if he doesn't have to."

"So?"

"So I'll drop back and give a few commands to them. You proceed with the shroud and scattering. The guards down below will miss their bosses and probably have been instructed to wait for orders, but I'm not taking any chances I don't have to."

"All right."

Lucita simply stood stock-still and let the others walk on by. She made eye contact with the shorter of the guards, the one who saw her, and said simply, "Stop." He froze in place. It only took one pace for the other guard to notice, stop, and turn to look in her general direction. Now she returned herself to visibility and gave him the same order.

As they stood there, unable to change position, struggling to reach their guns, she closed to within a few feet. "Both of you, forget everything from the moment you were instructed to watch for us." She felt her will flowing out of her almost tangibly, and was aware of their struggling minds as knots of psychic force. Her instructions shaved off outer layers of the tangled cords of thought, peeling their way down to the state of mind the two had had earlier in the evening. Anticipation, tension, confusion all disappeared. It was just another evening watching for potential trouble. As she saw that the command would be carried out, she added another: "I'm going with His

Excellency's authorization and you know not to inquire about my movements."

Inevitably these instructions would mean the guards' destruction. Gratiano would not accept the excuse that their target had instead stalked them. There was a time, she remembered vaguely, when this act would have troubled her. She had herself been subject to the domination of another, including the final horrific encounter with her sire, when he blasted her will for resistance to pieces. According to the doctrines she'd learned in life and according to the standards of her lost mentor Anatole, this was a violation of the essential self, and as a usurpation of God's prerogative must call for atonement—she was not the anointed king or priest, nor any authority recognized in God's order. But at this moment, she felt only an intellectual awareness of wrongdoing, not any conviction of it at the level of her emotions or soul. Another piece of humanity had sloughed away, she realized, and she didn't even know just when the change had happened.

The second command sank in. Now for one last one, just to be on the safe side: "Do not look outside for the next fifteen minutes." She released the guards from her hold, spinning around as she did so and walking away as if she'd just passed them. Conrad and the others, still concealed, were now almost ready to descend.

The guards saw a vampire walk past them, but they recognized the young Spanish woman as one of Gratiano's favored aides. It would not do to try to intrude on His Excellency's business—he knew where she was going and what she was up to, and that was sufficient. They kept getting distracted by motions along the inner edge of the terminal arc, where it looked out over a traffic roundabout. Finally the taller one said, "We'd better go check that out. If we miss something important, he won't like it."

"Wait," Lucita called softly as the others reached the stop of the stairs. They waited. She watched the guards, saw them behave just as she'd instructed and finally turn to

go as far away from the outside edge of the terminal as possible. "All right, down we go."

The rest of their departure went perfectly smoothly. The paladin and Conrad each created compact masses of darkness, and received the other members of the pack into their sheltering shadows. The two groups then made their way in a leisurely manner to the waiting Challenger jet. Angelica emerged from around the plane to speak with a runway attendant and verify that everything was in order, then entered to begin the process of takeoff. The vampires ascended in turn and emerged from the multiple layers of concealment once all were inside and the doors sealed. The Challenger was on its way eleven minutes later, leaving the guards still a little time yet to carry out their instructions.

The guards' phones rang. "Yes, Excellency," they said in unison.

"Do you have them yet?"

"Have who?"

The rest of the night passed in increasing discomfort for the guards, and ended with their ashes scattering on the morning breeze. As Lucita had foreseen, Gratiano was not willing to forgive a failure as drastic as allowing themselves to be commanded by one of their targets. He cursed them for their incompetence and for denying him the chance to step through shadow to take a hand himself. If only they'd kept in touch! If only they'd confirmed their plans! The failure was altogether their fault, for he had trusted them, and now the targets were gone. He settled down to sleep that morning cursing Monçada's childe and all who traveled with her.

Thursday, 13 July 2000, 11:50 PM
Approaching Roberts International Airport
Monrovia, Liberia

Now this is real flying, Angelica thought happily. The lights of Monrovia were twenty kilometers behind her and receding; the airport she flew toward was nominally part of the city, but in practical terms it lay out in undeveloped countryside. This was dark territory, too, largely depopulated by civil war and still not resettled, three years or so since serious fighting stopped in this part of the country. So she flew mostly by instruments and with reference to charts that she knew were out of date because of the war, but didn't know precisely *how* out of date. It was a wonderful adventure.

Officially the airport up ahead had been closed since 1997. Unofficially, it often received mercenaries hired by the Liberian government—Angelica knew of charter pilots in Colorado who'd done the flight a time or two—and both received and dispatch loads of heroin. Her owner had spent time on the phone last night with that German woman who handled her business affairs, and then made a pair of calls to talk to Liberian officials. Those conversations seemed to primarily involve the exchange of account access codes. In the wee hours of the morning, Lucita had come forward to give Angelica a set of directions. First Rio to Brazzaville, then up from the Congo to Liberia... this was fun. Angelica wondered where they might go next.

She knew that her owner remained deeply alarmed by things that had happened in Rio, and she had a general sense that the others were equally concerned. She'd thought about asking for an explanation, then decided that whatever it was that could alarm that many vampires that much was probably something that would interfere with her concentration on flying. So she let it go. But there was something else she needed to ask about. "Madame?" she spoke into the intercom. "When you're free, I have an operations question."

Lucita was up front sitting in the copilot's chair in less than a minute. "Do you have a problem with the information I gave you?"

"No, ma'am, it's all good. I've talked to them once on the radio, and there's supposed to be some landing lights in a few minutes."

"What, then?"

"I was thinking about Colorado. You're not letting me go back there, are you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so." Angelica didn't feel entirely happy about that, but it was what her owner wanted, so she couldn't feel altogether unhappy about it, either. "Have you done anything about my disappearance yet?"

"You mean, have I prepared a cover story for you?"

"Yes, that's it."

"No, I haven't. Other matters have occupied me. Would you like me to arrange something?"

Angelica nodded happily. "Yes. I don't like the thought of that loose end there. Someone could try following and get hurt if they ran into you the wrong way."

"You're concerned about that?" As she had in Rio with the guards, Lucita experienced a moment of nostalgia. She could remember when collateral damage weighed on her as a strategic and tactical concern. Just now, when Angelica brought up the matter, Lucita had thought in terms of her own interests and the risk of complications if an investigator found anything like the truth. The idea that Angelica had friends or colleagues who would miss her and perhaps try to find her out of friendship and humane concern... that had escaped her. Perhaps it had been too long since she'd had a ghoul.

If Lucita disappeared, who would *mourn* her, as opposed to being worried that it might be some subtle trick? Willa, of course, would wonder, but wouldn't initiate an investigation for a very long time, not with her sense of propriety when it came to Madame's covert operations. Fatima might *mourn*, but she would not *do* anything unless she believed that her God commanded her to. Lucita

reviewed that ghastly night in the desert and could find no reason to believe that her old friend would actually stir to investigate a report of Lucita's disappearance. And who else? Precious few.

In the jet's main cabin, the members of the hunting pack conversed quietly. The paladin occasionally told amusing stories about dealing with the independent vampiric rabble of Mexico and the United States, and Conrad reflected on her early experiences of the New World. There was an elegant understated dance of strategy in their conversation. Lucita had read enough about the various incarnations of the Path of Night, the artificial moral code which many elder Lasombra professed, to know that it prohibited the exercise of compassion in several ways. Asking for help from a position of confessed inferiority was one infraction; offering help intended to correct another's inferiority was another. So the conversation had to loop around any admission that the information provided was useful as well as entertaining.

Even within those constraints, though, there was a genuine camaraderie. The pack and the others shared a common vision: they were all aware of being heirs to a tradition of revolution in the cause of self-perfection (as Lucita interpreted it), of sharing a commitment to an organization that, no matter how flawed it might be, advanced them toward their goal. They belonged to something greater than themselves. As, in her very different way, did Angelica here beside Lucita. Lucita was the one who did not. She had taken on the bonds of Vaulderie in the first place as a defensive measure and in the second place in the hope of reassurance after unwelcome surprise. That was tactics, not commitment.

This is an unusually melancholy line of thinking, she realized in a moment of clarity. She was indeed on the verge of becoming melodramatic about her condition. That was very unlike her.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

Montano drifted, carefully tracing currents of disturbance. There was so much activity in the dark realm that he had to work much harder than usual to see into the material world and establish what had instigated a point of connection. He disliked needing to feed so often, but now the cost in blood for his investigations drove him back in search of suitable vampiric victims every few days. It was all taking more time than he felt comfortable with.

The Mediterranean, the obvious place to begin, was effectively off-limits to him. Great creatures, kin to the leviathan that Monçada used to keep beneath his lair, swarmed along wind-ways and in the complex convolutions of exertion and intensity that were the Abyss' equivalent of spatial distance. He'd devoted two weeks to the search for a way to look at his sire's strongholds and other places where the practice of Abyss mysticism had flourished, all to no avail. All he gained from it were wounds inflicted by the swarming creatures. In the end he'd given up and turned to tracking down the individuals he knew or suspected were strong enough to do this and might be working from somewhere outside the Middle Sea.

Montano knew himself well enough to trace his own doubts and fears, but had long ago decided that a little frailty did him no great harm. Thus he allowed himself to spend the rest of that first month investigating the possibility that other childer of the Antediluvian survived and might be responsible, though he really knew it wasn't so. Sure enough, their havens all rested empty (or, in one case, occupied by young Sabbat who had no idea that the "funky old bishop" they'd destroyed was quite a bit more than she'd seemed). Eventually the stall ran out, and he knew that it was time to go examine Gratiano.

His younger brother in the blood might be a pathetic fool in some ways, but he was not lax when it came to

security. Powerful wards in multiple styles surrounded his haven in Rio de Janeiro, as they did several others that he'd used in the past and two that seemed marked for future use. In the end, Montano decided not to press as closely as possible, feeling that he could gather sufficient information from a safe distance. While Gratiano delighted in the routine use of Abyss mysticism and related powers, nothing in or around his city showed the signs of that great summoning. He might become a target at some point, but if he was the instigator, he was clever enough to hide every trace from Montano's scrutiny, and Montano did not think that was possible.

The eldest was on his way out of the city, making a few spot checks of areas where there seemed to be concentrations of Lasombra with the right power and determination, when he encountered an old familiar scent. Monçada! No, not quite. Montano remembered hearing of the cardinal's destruction the year before. And in any event this wasn't him. Related, though... ah, of course. Monçada's rebel childe, who'd been disrespectful to Montano when they met in the flesh and thereafter a self-proclaimed rebel who took herself out of the collective experience of the clan and ceased to matter. From within the Abyss, he followed her across the Atlantic, probing very gently at her psyche in search of anything that might help him in his search.

As they passed over war-darkened lands, a momentary weakness in the walls of the world—the legacy of compressed misery and amorality—brought him into her mind more deeply than he'd intended. And in fact she felt it, becoming aware of his melancholy inside her. Hastily he withdrew. There would be time to speak directly with her later, perhaps.

Friday, 14 July 2000, 12:05 AM
Roberts International Airport
Monrovia, Liberia

Weak lights flared in the darkness ahead. Actual flames, from the look of them, Angelica thought, and she nearly chuckled with the image of soldiers or peasants waving torches along the edges of an unpaved runway. But her owner was distracted, and of course Angelica couldn't disturb Lucita's moment of contemplation.

Lucita roused after a few minutes and resumed as if she'd never paused at all. "Very well, Angelica. I'll have Willa create a plausible cover for your disappearance. If she has any questions, she'll speak with you. But now it looks like time for you to attend to the landing."

"Yes, ma'am." Angelica was very happy. That was one more big piece of her old existence that would soon be put to rest and cease troubling her.

Their line of approach flew over what had once apparently been a power station, and Angelica thought that the maze of outgoing high-power lines must have made for an interesting navigational challenge. Now it was just debris, the surviving towers all toppled. A single gunshot rang out feebly as they passed overhead. She wondered if some poor dissident mistook them for an official aircraft or what, and suspected that she wouldn't ever know.

Finally, here was the airport itself. Truck headlights illuminated dilapidated buildings, most of them clearly untouched since sometime during the civil war. Grass grew along what had been paved roads and lots. Only two low bunkers near the runways were in good shape, and they bore a distinctly military look. Angelica remembered the military encampments of her childhood and summoned up old reflexes for dealing with the military mentality. To her shock, the lights proved to be precisely what she'd fantasized: a column of soldiers ran along each side of the least decayed

runway, and they held torches. The smoke curled up into the night.

The Challenger had great landing gear, and even the heavy pitting of this neglected runway couldn't disturb the passengers very much. Angelica took pride in setting down with a single bounce and proceeding without hitch to the chunk of asphalt marked for the plane to park on. Peering past the torches, she could just make out a runway in somewhat better shape, and knew without a doubt that whoever had taken Lucita's bribes for this access was making a point about what strangers' money would not buy them. She turned to say something on the subject to her owner, but Lucita's very faint scowl told Angelica that her owner recognized the signs as well.

"What now?" Angelica asked as she turned off the engines.

"Wait. Someone will come to us." Lucita answered, half-rising to get a better view.

They waited quietly. The vampires in the cabin went quiet, too. Angelica suspected that she must have missed some explanation about the next step, as this all seemed uncharacteristic. The wait itself was not. She knew that bureaucracies the world over delight in demonstrating that irregularity bears its own penalty. Angelica had no doubt that Lucita would, in the end, get what she'd paid for, but likewise had no doubt that it would all be as awkward as their hosts could make it. Twice soldiers began to approach the plane, and in each case Lucita waved them back with a single gesture. They must have a commander out there somewhere, but Angelica couldn't see where.

More than an hour after landing, the ranks of the soldiers parted to let a small Moorish man through. He moved with what Angelica now recognized as the elder's distinctive poise: completely aware of his environment, never a missed step or wasted gesture. There was nothing humanity could do to surprise him, his manner indicated, and though the soldiers presumably suspected nothing of the truth about him, they gave way. Some made warding signs against the evil eye; his power could not be completely

concealed. He walked steadily to the Challenger's side entrance and waited patiently.

Lucita opened the door and lowered the ladder herself. She offered the man a hand up, but he managed it on his own in two swift steps. He then bowed to Lucita and to the paladin. "Greetings to my cousins in the blood, in the expectation of peace and the hope of profit. May I enter your sanctuary?"

The paladin deferred to Lucita. She steeped forward and bowed in return. "Greetings to my cousin in the blood, welcome guest and protected companion. Enter our sanctuary, and go in the peace in which you come."

He didn't smile. "I must say that your message took me by surprise. The nature of your company comes as another surprise. Have you become the loyal childe of your sire at last?"

"Monçada has been destroyed," Lucita answered gravely.

"Ah. Did you or these—" he gestured at the company—"have a hand in it? Does his blood enrich you now?"

"Yes, no, and no, in that order. The destruction was primarily a matter of others' work, but it happened partly because of me. I'll tell you that story some other time. None of my companions tonight were involved; we're on another matter. And no, nobody committed diablerie on the cardinal. In the end, his own monster devoured him." She turned to face the others. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Sabbat, I present to you Yusuf bin Shamsid, the clan's famous 'Wandering Poet.' Some of you have read his accounts of clan history, I believe. He's here to speak with us tonight about the passing of the Antediluvian, so that we can get an account by which to judge the one we've got."

Yusuf cocked his head with an expression of frank curiosity. "You've joined the Sabbat and turned into a historian?"

"No, and no." Lucita made her practiced sigh. "The truth is, Yusuf, that the company here are my captors. Timofiev assembled a pack to hunt me down, and they caught me, since I was distracted by other matters. Then he

convened a Court of Blood, which was interrupted by the summoning of a very powerful Abyss creature. The court sentenced me to identify and punish whoever's responsible for it."

Yusuf moved from curiosity to outright surprise. "This is... remarkable. Assuming for the moment that you are telling the truth, why are you telling this to me? You know as well as I do the old saying, 'Nothing is more precious than the truth.' Was it not a certain young Aragonese noblewoman, then still new to the blood, who lectured a certain older guest once about how truth is the currency that endures while all else rusts and fades, and must therefore be spent only with the greatest care?"

"Two reasons," Lucita answered. "The first is that you would inevitably find out from someone else, and we both know that. By identifying my weaknesses to you, I eliminate some of the advantages you could gain through subterfuge. This way I set the terms of our interaction, and this gives me some compensatory strength."

"Plausible. And the other?"

"The other is that I believe the situation is grave enough to override many usual concerns. If the worst of our fears are coming true, then it doesn't *matter* whether you think me weak or strong, because in the face of the waiting wrath we are all too weak. If the answer is something less than the worst, it's still sufficiently serious. It might be evolving toward the worst and need prompt resolution. It might involve some force none of us yet know about. Whatever can command the memories of Gratiano so thoroughly warrants all the force I can muster against it. Normal considerations of advantage simply don't matter for the duration."

Barry was impressed. Lucita had managed to turn her admissions into an unexpected source of strength. That was ingenious; he'd have to remember it, if he ever found himself in a situation this dire again.

"Gratiano, you say." Yusuf looked at the paladin. "Is she telling the truth?"

"Yes."

"My goodness. You have been leading an interesting existence lately. I hope you survive it." He seemed very sincere, as well as amused.

"So do I," Lucita said with the same calm intensity. "Now, when we discovered that the summoner is unleashing forces powerful enough to bring Zarathustra right to the edge of destruction, we decided that we had to rule out the obvious possibility."

Quiet prevailed for more than a minute. "I see," Yusuf said. "You went to Gratiano, and you got some account that disturbs you enough that you feel justified in disturbing me. And if I refuse to cooperate, you won't have immediate leverage to compel me to speak, but you come in enough force to make it clear that you can come again with more, until I relent or perish. A very effective little presentation, for someone I recall as terribly lacking in the basic wisdom of clan politics." He paused again. "Very well, then."

Easter Sunday, 1381
Castle of Shadows
Sicily, Italy

Yusuf, like Gratiano, looked much the way he would most of a millennium later. He'd been fifty when Embraced, and often seemed older when he was more than usually fussy or fidgety. The poise that should be the natural state of a vampire four centuries old seldom came easily to him. He didn't want to be here in the Castle of Shadows, of course: it was a defensive stratagem. Starting around his hundredth year, he'd managed to alienate pretty much every domain lord who might offer him sanctuary anywhere in his native Iberia, thanks to his unfortunate combination of rapid poetic inspiration and slow poetic judgment. He knew intellectually how important the rhythm of social graces was for creatures as prone to murderous rage as his fellow vampires, but somehow the thought often arrived a little too late to stop him from executing a brilliant yet unfortunate rhetorical ploy.

Here in the Castle of Shadows, none of his enemies would dare risk mortal violence against him, not without the approval of the Antediluvian. The Father in Darkness maintained a complete monopoly on acts of destruction here, and it did not go well for anyone who suggested by word or action an interest in challenging that monopoly. Even the many acts of blood sacrifice necessary to feed the castle's residents took place in a single slaughtering chamber in the north courtyard or outside the castle walls, in pens maintained by trusted guards. Yusuf's Iberian rivals could and did make his existence uncomfortable, of course. They made sure that the long-term inhabitants regarded him with suspicion as unable to keep secrets and unwilling to show proper deference to his superiors. He could deal with that for the time being, though, at least long enough to find someplace else to go.

So he joined the crowd that gathered in the courtyard every evening a caravan arrived, and listened carefully to the travelers' tales of conditions elsewhere. Unlike the Antediluvian's own childer and the other great schemers, he had no particular interest in affairs of state, whether among mortal kingdoms or the lineages of Caine. Anyone who'd seen the Reconquista understood the transience of all human affairs well enough to need little help in cultivating detachment, and the struggles for status among the Damned seemed like the same thing, just slower moving. The time of tumult that began with the sack of Constantinople—almost two hundred years ago now—only got worse and worse, with webs of alliance and enmity that changed with frightening haste. When even a holy sage like Saulot could disappear and his heirs fall prey to mortals turned into vampires by their own magic, what hope had a fast-tongued poet of building an empire, even if he wanted to?

All Yusuf wanted at this point was a place to practice his craft for an appreciative audience. He'd realized recently that this almost certainly meant taking himself away from all the highly visible and prestigious centers of power, off to some remote corner of the world that happened to be governed by a lord who had a greater-than-usual insight into the merits of good poetry. So he started increasingly disregarding the news from Rome and Cairo in favor of the accounts from the capitals of petty kingdoms, benighted burgs like Paris and London.

For all its many faults, England sounded promising. The land was of course nothing like his homeland, but then home wasn't safe and England might be. The barbarians did not in general favor the life of the illuminated soul, but they seemed to have some real geniuses among them and the lords did grasp the wisdom and propriety of patronage. If he could bring himself to compose the requisite number of obligatory odes to a lord's prowess in whatever fields of enterprise the lord deemed important, Yusuf might enjoy substantial freedom for his own pursuits.

These were his thoughts on this holy evening. Not that Christian feasts mattered much to Yusuf—or for that matter to the Father in Darkness—but at least three or four in every ten of the vampires now in residence regarded themselves as associated with Christian faith in some way. The aura of intense dedication to the purity of and through darkness was stronger than usual tonight, as meditations and rituals filled the air. The handful of human escorts for the caravan just arriving were now all clearly aware of their impending doom, and waited only for the moment when the demons around them would shed human guise and rend the poor victims in the first onslaught of eternal suffering.

Yusuf had just formulated what he sensed of their fear when, to his great surprise, it came true. Gratiano, the Antediluvian's youngest child and an altogether insufferable bastard of a petty tyrant, stood at the top of the great hall's steps and shouted "Now!" Half the vampires present immediately strengthened themselves with great burning of blood: some shifted into shadow forms, others merely built themselves up in speed and strength. Those who'd studied the Tzimisce arts of self-transformation practiced them now. And in unison they descended not upon the hapless caravaners but upon the vampires who didn't respond to Gratiano's command. Yusuf realized with a shock that the "anarch revolt" so often talked about by worried travelers had come to the very seat of the Antediluvian's throne.

It didn't take Yusuf long to decide on a course of action. As hungry anarchs (were those Assamites among the caravaners, as well as Lasombra?) saw him and began to charge, he shouted, "Yes, now!" and promptly attacked the old scribe to whom he'd been speaking. Yusuf bore him no particular ill will, having often enjoyed the other's tales of life in the courts of the later pharaohs. Indeed, Yusuf didn't initially intend to diablerize him, only to convincingly weaken him and then make an escape once the anarchs stopped paying attention. But the blood had its own imperatives, and once he'd begun it was as easy to continue as not. Then it was far easier, and then stopping would have

been inconceivable. The rush of power was its own justification. The Iberian looked up with bloody grin at the anarchs and received gleeful salutes back. The marauders turned their attention elsewhere.

The rest of the night passed in a bloody haze for Yusuf. Fragments of the scribe's memories kept intruding, leading the poet from a clear look at the scene at hand into complex chains of association involving mystery cults and steppe landscapes. It was very distracting; Yusuf wished he hadn't done the deed, but there was certainly no putting the blood back now. He might as well press on to secure his position. At some point, he took part in a sort of vampiric ladder brigade, passing assailants up along two stories of bailey wall so that they could penetrate chambers barred against interior entrance. At some other point, he saw Gratiano emerge from the Antediluvian's crypt positively pulsing with stolen vitality. He was never able afterward to construct a coherent sequence of events; he knew only that when he went to slumber that morning, it was already clear that the world had changed in an irrevocable way.

Friday, 14 July 2000, 1:39 AM
Roberts International Airport
Monrovia, Liberia

"In due season I did make my way north to England, as you may recall," Yusuf said to Lucita. "I remember the irony of it all: on the very night that Gratiano destroyed the Father in Darkness, Richard II slaughtered the leaders of a peasants' rebellion against him... and indirectly contributed to the creation of both Cainite sects, since that was the night Patricia of Bollingbroke was arrested with others and came to the attention of her sire-to-be." He looked around and saw blank incomprehension on the other faces. "Never mind, there's time for the history lesson later. Does this tell you what you felt so important that you had to disturb my quiet little routine here?"

Lucita spoke as calmly as she could. "Tell me again the year?"

"It was 1381 in the Christian calendar. As I said, it was the year of the peasants' rebellion in England, the year Charles died in France. This is all very clear in my mind, as I might expect."

"So if I told you that another survivor recalls the year as 1420, and recalls it with equally clear context, what would you say?"

Yusuf paused just for a moment. His mind was closed to Lucita; something was at work there beyond her comprehension. "Well, if he—or she, as may be—wants to reckon in the calendar of Islam, I have no objection to that."

"And if that survivor identified the revolt with events that occurred significantly later than the ones you remembered, what would you say?"

"I don't understand what the point of this questioning is." Yusuf looked faintly irritated.

"Please, Yusuf, we are feeling our way through difficult matters."

"Very well. Yes, of course I would expect the other account to match mine on the key matters. It was all impressed very vividly in our minds. Were you really expecting us to forget the experience?"

"No, of course not." Lucita laid out the story Gratiano had told her, with the context as clearly laid out as Yusuf's but utterly incompatible with it.

"Well, he got some minor details wrong, but that's understandable. Diablerie does that, you know. Or no, I don't suppose you do know from experience. But you see that his story agrees substantially with mine. I trust this settles any lingering apprehensions you may have had."

"Thank you, yes, Yusuf." Lucita gradually shifted the conversation away from the night of diablerie itself to Yusuf's experiences afterward. He described being brought before a Norman Court of Blood fifteen years later, and run through a clearly scripted session of questions and answers. The judges pronounced him guilty of unsanctioned diablerie, but waived punishment anyway.

He smiled at the memory as he recounted it. "They said that it was the view of the Friends of the Night that that night marked a general test of the clan's fitness. That wasn't quite their word; once the Darwin family made its mark in evolutionary theory, their usage about natural selection became a part of my vocabulary. Perhaps they said 'worthiness' at the time... no wait, I remember now. Yes. 'Our worthy cousin in the blood, Gratiano de Veronese, has tested the mettle of the Lasombra lineage and demonstrated via action who possesses the true marks of election as Caine's worthy heirs.' That was back when vampires still spoke in theological terms without irony.

"All of us who participated in Gratiano's uprising were to be commended as agents of challenge even though we had not formally been authorized to do so before the act. I was cautioned to, let me think, how did they put it? 'This Court instructs the accused that he is not to take this vindication as license for further such acts, and to maintain his fraternal ties of comradeship and obedience as of old.'

Then I was out the door and they were dragging in some Dutch baron who'd been in the castle, too."

Andrew glanced at Rosa and laughed out loud, then quickly apologized for the interruption. "Not long ago I discussed the morality of revolt with her, and she quoted to me the couplet about how treason never prospers."

Yusuf nodded. "Sir John put it well, yes. I always assumed that if I managed to stage an uprising and take down Gratiano, the Friends would again decide that I'd done a wise and noble thing, and that if I tried and failed, I would become fodder for whoever stopped me. We are a practical folk, in some ways."

"Is it so practical to hide out here, then?" Conrad asked. As she had when confronting Lucita, she took the most direct rhetorical stance she could manage.

"That depends on your outlook, I suppose," Yusuf said while waiting for his fists to unclench. "If you can find out how long I've been here, or what it is I do when I'm not being insulted by visitors pushing the limits of hospitality, or what I plan to do next, then you will be in a position to offer a knowledgeable assessment, no doubt. In the meantime, I find Liberia satisfactory for my work of the moment."

"Of course," Conrad said. "I have exceeded the bounds of hospitality and will withdraw within them." She did not feel obliged to extend an actual apology.

After this awkward moment, the conversation continued to wind around the great revolt and aftermath. At last Yusuf looked at the clock and announced, "I must return to my haven. I hope that this has been useful to you, Lucita, even if your purposes make very little sense to me." With bows and formal parting phrases, he was gone.

After the cabin door had swung shut and the soldiers closed their ranks behind Yusuf, Barry looked up at the paladin. "I have a question."

"Yes?" The paladin seemed composed. That meeting with Gratiano had brought an altogether unexpected shock.

Encountering the same unexpected phenomenon a second time was more unpleasant than disorienting.

"I'm not accustomed to dealing with vampires who predate the Sabbat so much. Up until we captured Lucita, I'd only ever spoken to a handful who'd been neonates at the time of the diablerie, or who were created later. So I have to wonder..." He teetered on the brink.

"Yes?" The paladin repeated.

"Does great age make you pathetic?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question." The paladin smiled ever so slightly. Conrad actually chuckled outright. Lucita looked confused.

"I listened to you describe Gratiano's account to the cardinal, and my strongest impression was that he spent a lot of time whining. And tonight, Yusuf did the same sort of thing. I have a hard time believing that anyone with that much self-pity in his diet could dream up anything like regicide, or make it work if he did. If newly created Sabbat came to me with this sort of attitude, I'd put them to work for a few years on basic spiritual practices and then see if they could fight their way out of a paper bag. Since they *did* make the diablerie work, I have to assume that something's rotted their will since then, and I'm wondering if that's what happens to all vampires, or even just all Lasombra, when they get old."

"Ah, I see. Tell me, have you ever subjected a victim to extensive conditioning?" The paladin made a small gesture with one hand; it took Barry a moment to realize that this was an echo of Bela Lugosi's hypnotic-command style, and that in fact the paladin was making a joke.

"Yes, I have. I'm not very good at it yet, but I've had lessons, and I've seen it done by more skillful commanders."

"Then you've seen that the victim almost always retains a certain incompleteness. That it's very difficult to make one crucial change to a personality without unintentionally changing other parts, and that some of these changes surface only gradually."

"Sure. But I also know that with practice that gets smoothed out."

"True enough," the paladin agreed. "But... hmm. You're too young to remember the last major war within the Sabbat, aren't you?"

"By several decades."

"Pity, this would be easier if you'd seen the principle in action. Suffice it to say that very experienced practitioners sometimes choose to make the scars visible. It inspires fear in the target's associates, first by the knowledge that someone else got close enough to break the target's will and second by the implication that there's not-yet-seen damage still lurking somewhere below consciousness."

"Oh." Barry thought about that. "But what would the Antediluvian have to gain by making it easy to disrespect these elders?"

"Any number of things," the paladin said promptly. "It's certainly a good setup for revenge." Seeing Barry look confused, the paladin explained, "You're much more inclined to think about attempting a diablerie of your own when you see an elder of such power and such annoying personal weakness, yes?" Barry nodded. "That may serve the founder's interests... that is, if the founder survives, which I doubt."

"You do?"

"Oh, yes. You've been thinking, 'But that sort of domination doesn't work on a vampire of a generation closer to Caine than me,' and you're right as far as it goes. What you're forgetting, because you're intimidated by the elders, is that they are susceptible to commands from vampires of the same generation."

"Eh?"

"The Fourth, I mean. Their own. The ranks of Lasombra's childer."

Barry thought about that. He wanted to believe it. "You think the founder is really gone?"

"Come now," the paladin said with a slightly scornful edge. "You know our history. Do you think for one moment that the founder would let an *unsuccessful* diablerie go unpunished? You heard us describe Gratiano's behavior,

you've seen Timofiev and Mysancta rebuking troublemakers. Do you imagine that the founder possesses some well of charitable tolerance that it failed to pass on to them?"

"When you put it that way, no."

"Good. We have enough trouble without delusions about Antediluvians walking the earth like so many Wandering Jews."

Angelica came back from the cockpit. "Excuse me, but we're ready for departure now."

Lucita waved her away. "Thank you. Take off immediately and proceed for Morocco." When Angelica left, Lucita said quietly, "Please continue, paladin. What do you think we're dealing with, then?"

"One of the founder's unknown childer. Someone who managed to hide during the revolt itself and later tracked down as many participants as possible, subjecting them to domination with the aim of inculcating incompatible accounts and the inability to perceive dissent. As I said, it's a setup for revenge, waiting for the time when someone would make a systematic investigation of the matter. Presumably the Rogue Fourth, to pick a suitably melodramatic label, didn't think it would take so long."

"I see," Lucita said. Like Barry, she wanted to believe it. "And is the Rogue Fourth our summoner as well?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think so, not directly."

"'Not directly' is a somewhat ambiguous explanation, paladin." Lucita smiled as she said it, but the tension was still obvious.

"I mean to say," and Barry marveled as the paladin actually seemed hasty for a moment, "that I think that summoner is using the Rogue Fourth's lore. Sometime between the diablerie and now, the Rogue Fourth perished. Maybe at the hands of the summoner, maybe sometime earlier. The summoner found the Fourth's haven and gathered up everything that wasn't nailed down. Probably most of what was, too. That couldn't have been more than a few years ago. We're seeing the results of a crash course in the applications of forgotten Abyss mysticism."

Lucita made a short rasping noise that might have been

a failed laugh. "This is nothing but trifles and fancies, paladin. You lack an appreciation of the true scope of the Jyhad. Six hundred years is by no means unprecedented when it comes to revenge. The Sabbat has perhaps made you hasty in your thinking. It would certainly be convenient to believe that we now face a lesser force, but that would still leave the matter of Gratiano and Yusuf's memories to deal with. The Fourth Generation—or the Third—was active here, and therefore may still be active. Life and death are strange things to those creatures, and it seems to me the height of folly to presume that the one responsible for what we've discovered is gone now just because we'd like it to be. Far more likely, I think, is that the manipulator's acolytes roused their master, who now tests the limits of its powers."

"Compared to the alternative," Barry said to the paladin with a wave toward Lucita, "your theory would be relatively welcome news. Any thoughts about what to do next?"

"Of course." The paladin glanced at Andrew. "Ductus, this is not a challenge to your authority, merely a suggestion." Andrew nodded back. "I think we need to go to the Castle of Shadows. If I were to pick a place to attempt to perform a grand act of manipulation or revenge with the aid of the founder's own childe's legacy, that's where I'd go. It is in any event a good place in which to try some divination."

Lucita spoke up again. "In this case I concur. It seems to me very likely that any childe of the founder bent on a great work would want to draw on the power there, if at all possible. We can at least rule out a possibility, and perhaps discover something useful."

Andrew nodded. "Makes sense to me. We'll refuel in Morocco and think about what other supplies we need to get from there, then proceed to Sicily."

Sunday, 16 July 2000, 12:11 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The nine were now back at full strength. It was time to continue.

The first sacrifices after the reunion of the circle called for special consideration. In some ways, of course, all flesh and blood was more or less the same. None of it could compare to the splendors in darkness, it was all tainted with the reek of life and light. Even the founder had been constrained by the petty shell of a body, and had had to plan very carefully to set itself loose without triggering the elaborate defenses planted by the Jailer God. Fortunately the moment had come, as the founder told them (in fragments and visions, of course), and it would come for its new acolytes as well. Soon, they thought, it must be soon. So they took extra care in selecting sacrifices whose offering would have some symbolic value, a sort of sermon in the flesh and departure therefrom.

A whole *danse macabre* waited around the basement altar tonight: a potentate (a European Union bureaucrat snatched on vacation), a priest (Eastern Orthodox, as it happened, traveling as part of an ecumenical study group, but priestly all the same), a knight (a captain in the provincial militia), a merchant (a vendor of snacks and drugs at the nearest harbor), a student (from Ireland), and a child (a local). Duplicates for each position waited in nearby cells just in case a repetition of whole or part of the procession proved desirable. All were sufficiently starved to offer good visages with protruding bones and general emaciation. The nine surveyed the offerings one last time and were pleased.

Small patches of dried blood began to shine with the antilight of the Abyss even before the first chants were complete. How different this was from those first rites, just a few years ago. Now the void knew they were there and wanted to reach them. Soon the wind rose up and the lights

were extinguished, a promise of how all the world would be when the founder returned in triumph. The darkness reached out to absorb the offerings, who had time only for final sighs or abortive cries before their offending bodies were gone and their souls set free to enrich the founder.

The formalities properly observed, the leader spoke into the darkness, "Tell us what to do next."

The thing that was not a voice echoed within them,
intruders come to light the stronghold.

"The Castle of Shadows? They come to violate Your haven?"

intruders come from above to light the stronghold

"Can we stop them?"

darkness rises above all

"What would You have us do with them when we catch them? Are they fit sacrifices for the great work?"

no sacrifice nothing destroy leave nothing

"We understand and obey."

The wind receded and the darkness became merely the absence of light once more. "But what do we do now?" the newest member asked.

"You remember the rhythms within the castle," the eldest said, and waited to see the ninth nod in acknowledgement. "We will invoke those rhythms within ourselves, here, as we have done before. When we sense a disturbance, we will draw them into the Abyss."

The second went to a cabinet mounted in the wall of the ritual chamber and withdrew a set of obsidian knives while the eldest continued with his explanation. "First we will prepare the ritual of gathering, and suspend it. Then we will call up the rhythms so that we may watch them."

"But how?" the ninth asked. "The castle is fifty miles or more from here. Will we go to it?"

"Oh, no. You remember the pain you suffered trying to pass through the wall for the first time. Each of us remembers that. And we know that sufficient pain will release a little of the founder's legacy in the bottom of our wounds." The eldest took the first of the knives from the second and held it aloft. His sleeves fell back, and the ninth could see that

every inch of his forearms bore old deep scars, testament to the sort of magically enhanced wounds that could be healed but never fully removed.

Monday, 17 July 2000, 9:40 PM
Mohammed V Airport
Casablanca, Morocco

Lucita would never have admitted it to the others, but she not only expected the sort of delays they'd run into here, she hoped for them and welcomed them. She needed time to think about the consequences of what they were doing.

At first it had been simple: find a pattern in the details of the Abyss magic being practiced, track down the perpetrator, and capture or destroy him. She'd done that sort of assignment many times in the past, tracking targets on the basis of patterns in their shopping for fine art, their taste in connections with mortal society for purposes of financial or social manipulation, their chosen vessels for feeding. The situation was far more coercive this time, but she assumed that she'd be able to work out some means of escape. The hunting party took her only because she'd been so badly distracted by that conversation... argument... lecture from Fatima. Such grief would necessarily be rare in the future, for the simple reason that very few individuals in the world had the power to affect her so deeply. Short of her sire or mentor returning from the dead, Lucita, thought, she'd be able to maintain the composure necessary to beat the hunting pack when it came time for a return engagement.

Then it all went strange.

She hoped devoutly, in the last mangled remnants of what had been a sincere living faith, that the paladin was right, that their enemy was the unworthy heir to lore of one of Lasombra's childer. She didn't believe it, though. Her centuries of experience as an independent hunter had strengthened her ability to assess changing targets, and it was her considered professional judgment that they faced the Antediluvian's power directly or at no more than one remove. While the paladin was right that peers in the blood could dominate each other's wills, the paladin was glossing

over awkward questions about when that all could have happened. The notion of a Methuselah sneaking around undetected for centuries, changing one mind at a time, just didn't fit the available facts. Someone would have noticed—Lucita and her associates were scarcely the first to probe this question....

Fresh chill descended. They were indeed not the first to gather the testimony of veterans of the great revolt. And yet she'd never read anything in the chronicles about these confusions of fact. The manipulator had gotten to the chroniclers as well. Would he get to Lucita? Presumably he must, in time, if her efforts at protection failed.

She walked through the thick crowds along the airport concourse, pondering. The crowd made her uncomfortable, and she found the discipline of constant self-awareness and self-restraint good for maintaining an alert mind suitable for re-analysis and fresh interpretation of their situation. Once she explained why she liked to wander alone in these circumstances, several of the others began doing it, too. If she chose to, Lucita could turn and look right at the paladin behind her and off to the left, at the street entrance, and left at Rosa, orbiting in relatively clear space around the bathrooms. Close at hand, though, it was just her, many (many, many) Moroccans, and the occasional tourist or business traveler from elsewhere.

She remembered something her sire had said once—not to her, but in her presence to a visiting dignitary from the Castle of Shadows. "The blood cools," the bishop remarked. "I used to think that the curse stopped the process of death, but in truth it merely slows it. Without the rekindling power of God's spirit reinvigorating the soul for its duties, the blood cools and we die. We leak the essence of ourselves. Indeed, I have thought that the terrible frenzy that some of our scholars call 'Wassail' may in truth be an act of contrition gone wrong, the fire unleashed into a soul no longer prepared to receive it."

The blood did burn within her more fiercely tonight. She was fairly sure that the Sabbath was not the Holy Spirit manifest on earth. God's judgment was indeed cryptic, when

it was discernible at all, but the Sabbat were unlikely candidates for angels, the religious frenzies of the *Angellus Ater* and other deranged, deluded fools notwithstanding. God was malicious and capricious, but not precisely stupid, and it was just too much of a stretch to envision the products of Sabbat rites as reliable agents of the Lord. Still, they had something that she lacked. Ever since the rites she'd taken part in, she'd felt more aware of herself and of the world. Not that she could have survived so long without a close appraisal of her condition, but... she was warm in a way that was very rare indeed in her experience.

Was it all a trick? She couldn't dismiss the possibility out of hand, the way she could dismiss that last pickpocket with a bone-shattering flick of her wrist. (A security guard came over to see what the fuss was, laughed at the man's story, and threw him out of the terminal.) Who knew what insights the Sabbat's thaumaturges had conceived in their early years? But it didn't feel like a trick. She did remember, both waking and dreaming, what it had been like to be new to the vampiric condition, how both the horror and the pleasure were intensified. Gradually she'd learned to control the latter and bind the former to the rare moments when she had liberty to feel safely repulsed.

She'd become accustomed to existing in isolation, that was part of it. She had her contacts and business associates, but she kept her secrets from them, and they did not confide her. She'd had her mentor and a handful of other genuinely trusted individual companions, but time took them away. And she'd seen more than enough of what happened to vampires who became too enamored of mortal companions. It was very true, as the old saying had it, that "the Embrace destroys love." Bonds of anything other than self-interest simply weren't reliable. And if one tried to count on them, then one risked destroying the object of desire oneself: it only took one moment of unchecked frenzy, after all.

But the hunting pack was something different. They were monsters, or at least they were children earnestly seeking to become monsters. They courted frenzy and the irrational rather than fearing it. And yet they cohered.

Lucita could see that Andrew despised Rosa and vice versa, and still they kept talking. The Vinculum made it possible for them to interact with each other without fearing imminent destruction quite so seriously. They had opportunities to change and grow because of it. They were spiritually alive in a way that most vampires of Lucita's acquaintance weren't... in a way that she wasn't herself. No doubt Rosa was consumed with fear and anger over her losses, but she was able to move on and try something new, while Lucita did so only under the burden imposed by the Court of Blood, and Lucita could imagine no future for herself once this was over beyond trying to continue as she had been.

With that wistful thought, she stopped striding and leaned against one of the crumbling concrete pillars framing the concourse. The crowd continued to rush by, intent on its various agendas, and she had a strong sense of it as a sort of hive organism. This horde of Moors was not, in her imagination, essentially different from the hordes her father and brothers fought, nor their heirs. This was the great enemy brought back to life, or perhaps never slain, merely displaced by the likes of Ferdinand and Isabella, coiling itself for another strike at her home. She felt a rush of affection for Aragon, even though she knew painfully well how thoroughly it was gone—an attack there now would be like a serpent stinging again and again on prey that was already dead, as in the stories that Konstantin used to enjoy telling her.

The thought of Konstantin gave her fresh regret. She wanted to exact revenge on Andrew and the others... but what, really, was the point? If she did it and anyone (including her) survived to tell the tale, it would lead to others saying, "Ah, yes, that Lucita is a dangerous one to cross." But they'd also say, "It's dangerous to be the companion of one like that. You become a target when others want to find your comrade. Best to let the outsiders drift on their own." If she didn't do it, others might say, "Ah, she's going soft. Time was when an insult like that

wouldn't go unpunished." But did she really care what those others thought? Now that her clients couldn't help her with what had been her great cause in life-in-death, what use were they to her?

Stalls ran along one side of the concourse, offering everything from doubtfully cooked meals of uncertain ingredients to tattered used books. When Angelica announced that all the preflight tasks were done, Andrew led his pack in to inform the elders, and he picked the door closest to the stalls so that he could browse along the way.

He looked in at the rows of books and noticed some authors familiar to him. At some point, some other customer had unloaded a dozen anthologies of small-press writing on political and artistic topics. Andrew could imagine the seller very easily, some newly bearded student or expert collector of state aid who'd come to Morocco for an Authentic Experience and was now leaving, whether in confirmed bliss, wretched intestinal uproar, or both. He had the reading material he'd brought with him for inspiration, but at the end of the trip it seemed so shallow, so he chose to sell it off in the hopes that some curious local lad might read it someday and take the first steps toward enlightenment. The type was familiar to Andrew; he'd heard enough of such people's tales back in his living days in Los Angeles coffee houses.

Then a string of words caught his eye. He stopped in his tracks, looked again, and laughed out loud. "Holy shit!" he managed before collapsing into further laughter.

The others crowded around, intimidating the stall's proprietor into a remote corner. Andrew tapped one of the volumes, but couldn't regain enough coherence to explain. Finally Simon Peter squeezed in far enough to pull it out and hold up the cover.

Garish red letters ran across a pure blue background, and the eye couldn't focus on both simultaneously, so the letters seemed to jump and waver. *KILLING LEVIATHON*, the main title read. Someone had crossed out the "O" and written in an "A" in red crayon. Below that the text

continued, *NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ART AS THE DEATH OF MONO-CONSCIOUSNESS AND FASCISM*.

A list of authors spiraled around the cover's borders: Adam Parfrey, R. U. Sirius, Misha, Mike Gunderloy, Tom Digby, and there up against the spine, Andrew Emory.

Simon Peter held it up. "Not you?"

"Oh, yes," Andrew said. "I wonder how the hell a copy of that ended up *here*, of all places. There were a whole three hundred fifty copies, I think, and they pretty much all sold through about three bookstores in L.A. I wonder if I should buy this one just to put a stake through its heart."

"Were you any good?" Barry asked.

"Hell, no!" Andrew laughed again. "Look, it was 1986 and I'd just been paralyzed—by dear old Conrad, it turned out, but that's another story—and I was this young punk around the post-punk zine scene. The guy who put that together only included me because he wanted to sleep with me. Oh, and so he could include 'promising new talent' as well as 'major voices of alternative culture.' Of course it's no good!"

"Then I think we should buy it," Simon Peter said immediately. Andrew made jesting snatches at the book, but Simon Peter kept twisting to keep it out of reach. The seller seemed to speak no English, but he pointed at a plausible stack of Moroccan currency. Simon Peter handed it over and the seller smiled, though he continued to keep out of the way out of the crowding vampires.

Barry looked down at Andrew with his best earnest expression. "Ductus, as the spiritual leader of this gathering, I implore you to maintain composure. Fate has given us a rare opportunity to reexamine our temporal leader's past existence and for him to enjoy many opportunities to practice the spiritual discipline of restraint in the face of challenge. I am sure you see that levity is altogether inappropriate here."

Andrew had just barely managed to hold in a few laughs, but they started escaping again. "Barry, you'll pay for this."

"Too late," Barry said, his own resolve slipping. "Simon

Peter was the one with the cash, anyway." With that the pack made its collective way back onto the main floor of the concourse.

It was a matter of luck, really, that anyone noticed the meeting. Conrad and the paladin continued their pacing while Lucita stood still. Both had a faint uncomfortable sense about the place. At one point Conrad paused long enough to ask, "Is it just me, or are the shadows moving?" After extended scrutiny, they decided that they just weren't sure. As their routes took them past each other, they exchanged speculations: an Abyss monster approaching, a local Lasombra with ambitions of his or her own, an ally of Lucita's. In the end they dismissed each one, but kept watching.

Mostly their attention was focused into the terminal's dark corners and the shadowed areas outside, though they did check on Lucita from time to time. So Conrad happened to be looking when a tall black man stepped from around a corner, spoke briefly with Lucita, and then started leading her back the way he'd came. Conrad gestured for the paladin's attention and pointed. The other whirled to look and leapt through the crowd, shoving pedestrians aside. Conrad ran close behind him. When they got to the pillar and corner, there was no sign of Lucita or the stranger.

"Shit," the paladin said. Conrad had never heard profanity emerge from that elegant mouth before and was startled.

"So we were right," she said. "Six hells and seven damnations. Surely he can't have gone far?"

The paladin looked very forlorn. "Do you know who that was?"

"No, I don't. That's why I'm hoping. I know very nearly every African Lasombra of note. Anyone capable of actual shadowstepping that I *don't* know only picked up the art recently, and that implies youth, diablerie, or both. Both work to our advantage."

"You don't know who that was."

"No, I don't. Are you implying a gap in my knowledge of my own people?"

"Yes." The paladin seemed on the brink of tears, and Conrad found the whole situation very off-putting. The arrival of Andrew's pack, many of them laughing in a very juvenile way, didn't help. "When we perform the great rites in Mexico City, we often display artwork of the clan's great personalities."

"Yes," Conrad said impatiently. "Get to the point..." Realization began to sink in.

"Off to one side," the paladin continued in the same edgy recitation, "there's a separate gallery of fools and enemies. And the very first one of them after the founder itself is..."

"Montano." Conrad whispered the name. Eldest childe of the Lasombra Antediluvian, not reliably seen in more than a century, cryptic even by the standards of a cryptic clan.

"Yes." The paladin finished abruptly.

Andrew and the others looked confused. "So what did we just miss?"

Monday, 17 July 2000, 11:59 PM

(10:59 PM Casablanca time)

The Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

The ninth had never felt such pain. He had twice been caught in daylight before his experience in the rooftop cage, once when a human satanist entered his haven in search of "devil stuff" and once when an earthquake ripped open the building he dwelled beneath at the time. He had also been on fire twice, both times in laboratory accidents. So he'd thought he understood how much a vampire could suffer.

This was worse. Much worse.

It wasn't just the duration, though it did matter that the pain went on and on. The poisons with which these knives were treated created psychological as well as physical effects. They left him horribly and miserably aware of the lingering traces of humanity with him, and made them hurt. He wasn't entirely sure whether all of that torment was conceptual, either; the aches within his head were terribly tangible, and he wouldn't have been surprised to learn that specific clusters of nerves where those memories lived had become inflamed from the poisons. He knew that the aches in the rest of his body were physical as well as mental. The pools of freshest blood, the ones that were still becoming vampiric vitae, had become caustic, and in several places burned right through capillaries to ooze across his skin.

The actual cuts he'd made throbbed even more painfully. He could feel the long-lost rhythm of his own pulse in the wounds, apparently not as altogether forgotten by his body as he'd assumed. It clashed with the rising rhythm of the castle's shadows. The tension sent spasms all through his body. Soon he could no longer stand up, and thrashed helplessly on the floor, and it was no great comfort to see that others of the circle suffered the same fate. They managed to regain control and stand up again while he continued to twitch.

A new awareness grew in the midst of this agony. He could see the dark side of himself as more thoroughly distinct from his remaining humanity, and knew how he could purge his body and mind to take on some of the pure strength of his seniors within the circle. As he pursued this new sense of self, gradually his eyes sculpted themselves into organs which didn't rely on physical retinas. (The optical tissues remained in place, but shriveled slightly. The tug of overextended optic muscles was just one more pain within this tormented symphony.) The darkness became light to him, and physical illumination ceased to mean anything. Darkness descended across what had been light.

He understood the magical foundations of this transformation, and knew that some vampires experienced it constantly. But now it wasn't just an interesting annotation in someone else's journal. It was... a revelation.

Some darkness remained opaque. The shadows under the specific command of the other celebrants shown with a metallic sheen, polished and smooth, turning back the light-within-darkness that now filled the newcomer's eyes. The summoning circle itself pulsed with dissonant rhythms, partly reminiscent of the castle, and the ninth could see that they extended down into the ground and out into the Abyss. Everything else was as crisp and clear-cut to his scrutiny as if it had been mounted directly in front of the strongest possible lights and surrounded by air altogether free of dust and other contaminants, or indeed put into pure vacuum. There was no attenuation with distance. From this vantage point, it was all laid out for him.

He had to fight down the urge to say something terribly banal, like "How wonderful!" or "I see!" The others, he knew, would judge him by the quality of his response. "The darkness has opened itself to me, and I am ready," he said. The others nodded in approval.

"Look up," the eldest pointed. Through the stones and mortar of the castle walls, the ninth saw, the sky overhead was visible. The stars were writhing obscenities, contaminating the deep sky with their feeble yet offensive attempts at illumination. He could lose himself in scrutiny

of that void, the closest material existence might come to the Abyss, he realized, and forced his attention lower.

There was the Castle of Shadows, beyond the horizon, glistening with the same metallic quality as the summoners' own shadows but far more potent. It reflected starlight through the intervening earth, contemptuously casting off nature's attempts to bring in light. The shadows which dwelled in the castle reached far higher than the ninth had realized when he stood on the spot—they swirled up into the sky and back down like black lava cast up by an active volcano. The ninth understood now how they could sense the intruders. Whenever a mortal's airplane passed overhead or a car drove along the roads at the edges of the great spiral of shadows, the whole system quivered momentarily.

It took little scrutiny to gain information from the resulting tremors. Mortality created spasms precisely like those that had thrown the ninth to the ground. Vampiric nature would, he guessed, create equally distinctive distortions. And when the right disturbances developed, he and his brethren could reach out to cast the offender out of the world altogether.

"I see," he whispered very quietly to himself, and if any of the others heard, they tolerated his moment of weakness.

Monday, 17 July 2000, 11:13 PM

The Atlas Mountains

50 miles southeast of Casablanca, Morocco

"Lucita," Montano said again. This time no airport sounds competed for her attention, only the quiet sounds of small life stirring in this steep mountain valley.

"Montano." Lucita made her best effort to appear composed. "It has been a while. I take it this is something more than a social call."

"Lucita, you must stop what you're doing. Pursuing it will only lead you to destruction, and you will be needed in nights to come. Let the others perish in accordance with their masters' schemes, but you have a duty not to throw yourself away at this time."

Lucita was accustomed to being the least humanlike individual in a gathering, having spent so long honing her vampiric abilities for stealth and action that the tics common to life played no part in her behavior unless she chose to. Recent stresses had weakened that resolve, and proximity to devout Sabbath had reminded her that vampires much younger than herself could purge themselves of humanity very thoroughly too. But neither her experience nor that of the hunting pack and its allies compared to the way Montano conducted himself. He was like a statue gifted with self-awareness. Not one muscle moved unless it was necessary for a specific operation, and then it fell still again. When his eyes moved, nothing else did, not even the small muscles around the sockets. It was a profoundly disconcerting sight, one she'd forgotten the details of in the centuries since their last meeting.

Still, she wanted to answer him, and she managed to do so with a quaver that no human ear could have detected. He noticed it, of course, but what it might mean to him, she had no real idea. "Do you remember the advice you gave me the last time we met?"

"I think so."

"Let me refresh your memory, just in case. One of my allies among the Children of Haqim came to me and said, 'Lucita, my sire let slip that the youngest childe of your founder is hiring assassins and spies from among the worst dregs of our lineage. He does this with the blessing of our elders, but I fear what he plans. He is not an honorable man, and he boasts too much of the power that is now his and will be in the future. Perhaps you should speak to those with honor among your elders and warn them, so that they can investigate.'

"So I came to you," she said, pointing an accusing finger. "You listened, and then you went off, and when you came back three months later, you told me that I had nothing to fear, that all was in order, and above all that the anarch horde would never—could never, I believe you said—seriously endanger the interests of the clan or the Friends of the Night. And then just a few years later..."

"That was then and this is now," Montano said. If he felt any shame or embarrassment at being reminded of the great revolt, it didn't show. "You acted out of line then. If you had not refused to play your assigned part in the Jyhad, you would not have been in a position to receive information that was never meant for your ears. But that error has nothing to do with this."

"Error?" Lucita raised her voice. "What *error* of mine is this? Should I have submitted myself to my sire, then, as a good little childe? Was I wrong to assert my own choice and set out to make a destiny of my own? The *error* is yours! You could have stopped Gratiano if you'd only paid attention to me!"

"You speak of choice. What makes you believe that the choice of independence is ever an option for one of us?"

Lucita stopped her tirade. "I know what the Sabbat would mean by that. What do you mean by it?"

Montano stepped up the few paces necessary to take him to the crest of the ridge, and stood silhouetted against the night sky. "I mean precisely what I say. Your years of rebellion must have dulled your comprehension. None of us can ever choose independence. We do not make ourselves

vampires, and we are never as strong as our sires. Gratiano boasts of his strength, but if he could do what the founder did, he would, and he does not. There is always a sire to direct us, and a sire beyond him, and so back to Caine. There is no 'destiny' for you to choose but what your masters allow for you."

"Do you expect me to believe that my sire wanted me to act the way I did?" She paced up the slope to stand beside him and look at him on equal footing. It didn't help her feel any less overwhelmed, but it was something to do, at least.

"Perhaps not. But then your sire was no more his own free self than you were or are. He had masters as well. If I'd chosen, I could have taken you away from him to use as my own pawn and he would never have suspected unless I allowed him to."

She wasn't sure she wanted to ask the question that occurred to her then. It rose to her lips and sank again. He watched her impassively, waiting for her. In one delirious moment she imagined him waiting there as glaciers rode in and the moon fell from the sky... but that was her fear distracting her from the task at hand. "Did you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I ask because I want to know."

"Hearing my answer won't make that possible. If I tell you the truth, how can you verify it? If I lie to you, how can you detect it? You cannot compel me to answer at all and you lack the power that would let you search the world for clues as to my truth or falsehood. Do you think that the pawn on the chess board knows that it is moved, or the identity of its mover?"

Lucita lost her temper, and anger overcome her fear, at least for the instant. "I am not a pawn!"

"I did not know," he said with the same inhuman calm as ever, "that your sire had produced a fool."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You claim to be clever. Analyze it for yourself. Explain to me what you think I say to you."

She stepped back from him then, unconsciously seeking higher ground in an effort at self-assurance. "We must all necessarily be pawns, you believe..."

"No."

"No?"

"I know that we must all necessarily be pawns. You deny this to yourself because it is an uncomfortable truth, but you can produce no evidence or logic to refute it. The very nature of the relationship between sire and childe guarantees that we are all someone's inferior, and every generation is inferior to the one that came before it." He stepped closer, removing the psychological advantage of her newly opened distance. "You rely on this fact on a regular basis, when it's convenient to know that, for instance, weaker vampires cannot take your will away from you. You simply refuse to look at the implications."

"Suppose I grant that you're right. What difference does that make to me, if I can never know what my orders are or who gives them?" She tried to maintain angry confidence, but it wasn't working. There was too much plausibility in his words. After all, wasn't her survival to this point an awfully improbable affair? First the protection of the sire she'd spent so long trying to undermine, then the coincidences that led to her capture, and to the Court of Blood's remarkable verdict... it would be very easy to construe this all as the result of an unseen mastermind's interventions. "Are you my puppet-master?"

He didn't shake his head. Nothing moved but his eyes and lips. "No. Though I remind you that the answer does you no good. No, I come to remind you of your duty, not to answer questions like that."

"Tell me, then, you who let the great revolt happen. What do you think my duty is?"

"There is a great turbulence in the Abyss."

"It would be fair to say that I know this." Lucita snapped, and semiconsciously flexed her arms where the wounds had been slowest to heal.

"It's destroying all that it comes in contact with."

"So I understand," Lucita said. "Do you think it necessary to tell me that the sun rises each day and that water is wet, too?"

"Perhaps this was a mistake," Montano said quietly.

"I am not contrite," Lucita answered, "but I will let you speak without further interruption."

"The Abyss rises against us. One of our lineage is unleashing monsters. You know this. You see that you have been appointed to survive. When it is time for you to sacrifice yourself on behalf of your masters, you will know. This is not the time for you. Therefore, you must survive, and the only way to ensure that you do so is to withdraw from the struggle to close these breaches in the world. I do not know or care whether the others have been appointed for destruction at this time; they serve other masters. But I have seen you, and know that this is not your destiny. Stay."

"What would you have me do, then?" she asked more temperately. "If the Abyss becomes hostile, am I to just walk into the desert like a would-be prophet and wait for the word of God or Caine to come to me?"

"Yes!" he agreed emphatically. "That's precisely what you must do. You are accustomed to solitude, so this is no hardship for you. Speak to your servants if you choose, but you must remove yourself from the haunts of men and shelter in the wilderness until the word comes, and it will come soon."

"In other words," she said, "you want me to go live just like you, except without the opportunity to travel or go try once again to rouse the Camarilla for a crusade or any of the other interesting things you do from time to time."

"Precisely. I see that you understand."

"I understand. I also refuse."

If he felt surprise, she couldn't see any sign of it. "You cannot. You have a duty."

"Are you going to force me to stop? We both know that you can. If you are my master, or speak on his behalf, you can make me do anything you want."

"You realize, of course," he said after a brief pause, "that you will never know whether this is not your true

instruction. Perhaps all I have said is intended to drive you to destruction rather than away from it."

"Perhaps so," she agreed. "And perhaps you're just bluffing, hoping or guessing what I'll do. But I choose to do what I do, and retreating is not my choice at this time. It's inaction in the face of peril, can you not see?"

"You speak in abstractions, while I speak of practical realities."

Lucita realized that she'd forgotten just how strange this one's mind was. He could speak to her in perfectly fluent if formal Spanish, as he did now, but inside his head were entirely different categories. Perhaps to him there really was no connection between failing to stop Gratiano in time and this current situation. But whether that was so or not, she realized that she couldn't allow herself to indulge in the same luxury of disengagement twice.

"The last time, your practical realities got your sire and every other one of his childer slaughtered. Friends and colleagues of mine perished that night, and you stood by until it was too late, then ran to preserve your own hide. I can't do this again. I have an obligation to act, if by acting there's any chance at all of stopping the new slaughter."

"I ignored you then because it was not your appointed role to deliver that information. You ignore me now out of a purely selfish pride. The two circumstances have nothing in common, outside your dreamland in which the Jyhad doesn't matter."

"Is the founder rising?" She spoke abruptly, surprising herself.

"You are not prepared to receive an answer."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Your very refusal to obey me," he said, "shows that you possess an inadequate grasp of the nature of identity. You persist in thinking of 'me' and 'you' in the face of all evidence that your 'me' is merely an extension of a personality and will which existed before you and which will in time subsume you once more. If you cannot understand how vampires truly relate to one another, you certainly cannot understand how my sire relates to the

Abyss. Until you open your eyes, you cannot see the categories into which the truth must fit, let alone which of them is in fact the case."

"Take me back," she demanded.

"No. I have others to warn, who may heed it better than you did. Farewell. We shall not meet again." And with that he was gone, turning into shadow and fading.

Since she had no audience now, she didn't bother sighing, just trudged up to the canyon summit. It would take several leaps, she thought, to shadow-walk back to the airport, and she needed to see where she was right now.

Tuesday, 18 July 2000, 4:09 AM
Mohammed V Airport
Casablanca, Morocco

Arranging a last-minute change of schedule with the airport was no problem: a few bribes in the right pockets got the Challenger jet a reserved parking strip and the option of takeoff later that night with very short notice. Then it was just a matter of waiting, and that came much harder. Speculation raged back and forth as to whether Montano had kidnapped Lucita or she'd gone voluntarily. It didn't take long to work out that in practical terms they could be just about anywhere on earth right now, or drifting in the Abyss. The faint echoes of Lucita's soul in the Vinculum bonds indicated that she was still more or less intact, but surrounding psychic static made it impossible to determine any details. Montano's very presence overwhelmed the power that the hunting pack could bring to bear for their internal examination.

So they waited and fretted. Three luggage handlers died when feeding ran amok around 2 A.M.; Andrew supervised dismembering the bodies and stuffing them into bags being loaded for transatlantic flights, and made a note to himself to watch the news to see what response they got.

Without fuss, Lucita stepped out of the shadows just inside the jet's door, dusty and looking distinctly fatigued. She drew herself erect and called forward to Angelica, "Take off immediately." Questions poured in while she pulled the stairs up and the doors closed, but she waved them all off for the time being. "Not now. Let's get moving. Sicily is still out there, and we will want to be ready to move as soon as we can tomorrow night."

She stopped for a moment and remained facing the door. "You'd best check me for signs of mind control, I suppose." She tried to maintain calm while finishing the tasks of sealing the plane as it began to roll toward its runway,

with limited success. When she was done, she went to the farthest rear seat and sat quietly to stare out the window.

After many fruitless minutes of trying to get Lucita's attention, Andrew adopted direct tactics. He released the shadows reinforcing his legs and drew the deadened limbs up close to his torso, securing them with a spare belt he kept in a pocket for just that purpose. He swung from hand to hand along convenient protrusions from the ceiling—a lamp here, a fire extinguisher compartment there—until he could drop down between Lucita and her window. "You will speak to us about what he said and did. We'll get best results if we can do this cooperatively. I think that we can force the answers out of you, but it would cost us something and might cost you everything."

Lucita looked up at him. He was shocked to see tracks of blood running down her cheeks. Lucita, the legendary scourge of the Sabbath, the archetypal soulless killer of the modern age, had been crying. A deep compassion welled up inside him for a moment, a regret for the torment this woman was suffering and a desire to help relieve it. He cursed himself for that weakness, reiterating to himself the foundations of his moral code: strength, truth, triumph. Mercy was an attribute of the fallen world, a trap inserted by God or his minions to keep people bound to losers and therefore to doom themselves to losing. His dealings with Lucita must proceed on the basis of positive action in the pursuit of his chosen goals, and nothing else. "Speak, cousin and stranger, in the knowledge that blood consecrated in rite commands us to protect you while you stand and avenge you when you fall."

She looked around the cabin and thought about asking for privacy, to confess to just a chosen few. Quickly she realized that the request wouldn't be granted and wouldn't be honored if it were. Privacy within the pack was not an option. She would have to get used to that. "He took me out into the desert, and wanted to leave me there. He says that this mission is doomed..."

"Did he say what 'it' is?" Andrew interrupted. The interruption was very much calculated. Through the

Vinculum bond he could sense her struggling with some great dilemma, and he wanted to keep her off balance. If she had time to think, she'd reassert her old identity on the basis of the well-established habits, and that would be bad for the mission.

"He said... he said that it's not the Antediluvian, but something that fed off his soul."

"That's good news, if he's right. Better a piece than the whole thing. Did he have anything else to say?"

"Just the most thoroughly apocalyptic predictions I've heard since the last time I spoke with Anatole. Montano has a vision of fire and judgment and wants me to sit out the hunt for the summoner so that I be around to help revenge the founder."

"Are you going to do it?"

"No." Lucita paused. "Very much no, in fact. Bishop Andrew," and here she bowed her head, "I come to you as one who has walked alone in the night, and who now wishes to walk with you. I seek to take up the Sword of Caine. Will you have me?"

A complete silence filled the cabin. Angelica must have sensed something as well through her own bond to Lucita, because her usual whistling tapered off into nothingness. Around them the world was dark: dark night overhead, with moon and stars behind clouds, dark sea below. The world waited along with the plane's passengers for the next step.

"I don't know," Andrew said at last. "I'm not at all sure that I have the authority to make a decision in a case like yours. Tell me more, and I can at least pass it along to my superiors with my comments and recommendations. Why do you now wish to join the Sabbat, after opposing it—us—so long?"

Lucita wanted to look out the window some more, so as not to see the others' expressions, but she knew that was a cowardly impulse. She turned to look at each of the others in turn. "It began with Fatima al-Faqadi." She paused. "You know the name, of course."

"Yes, thank you," the paladin said, that smooth voice now distinctly jittery. "We do make a point of knowing the

names of our most effective enemies. If she hadn't been on the list before, her mission in Madrid would certainly have been sufficient."

"She was the reason I went to Saudi Arabia. Another time I'll tell you where her haven was; she won't be there anymore, anyway. We... argued. I thought, and told her, that she'd become another zealot like so many we had both seen and destroyed in our time, her brain eaten by a fever she mistook for God. She said something back to me, though. She asked me how I could be sure that my isolation wasn't the result of manipulation I didn't discover. She pointed out that as Monçada's child I could command significant force, if I chose, and that by choosing to act alone I guaranteed that I would have no great influence, and how useful this was to those who did want to control Cainites at large."

Compassion told Andrew to say nothing at this point, or to make a sympathetic noise. Therefore, to hold that pernicious weakness at bay, he forced a short laugh. "She was right, too."

The interruption scarcely registered in Lucita's mind. "So I was sad at the split with a dear old comrade, one of the last I have in this world, and angry and confused about what she'd said to me. Then you came along and managed to subdue me easily."

Barry whispered to Simon Peter, "This is some freaky shit." Simon Peter nodded.

"There are three reasons, Bishop. That's the first. The second is from our meeting with Gratiano. He's a spiteful little creature, consumed with envy despite his power, but that doesn't make him stupid. He told me the same thing Fatima did, except more forcefully. He sounded almost ready to follow me, if only I'd choose to lead him. He wouldn't really, of course," she added absently, "in the end he won't follow anyone but himself. But his passion for what he described as my waste of opportunities... again, it left me angry and confused. I was thinking about it all the time we arranged our flight, made our way through those poor unfortunate guards, and all the rest."

She looked up suddenly. "I need blood. This is demanding."

Andrew nodded toward the pilot's cabin. "Call her back, then."

"Angelica!" Lucita raised her voice enough that the lights shook and the windows rattled slightly. "Come." The pilot hastily engaged the plane's autopilot mechanism and ran back to see what her owner needed. "Give me your wrist. No, wait, sit down first, then give me your wrist. You'll feel faint in a minute."

Angelica obediently stretched out her right arm, resting her elbow on the armrest between her seat and Lucita's. Lucita took it and calmly bit in just above the wrist. She drained enough blood over the next five minutes to leave Angelica noticeably pale and somewhat languid. The hot human blood felt good in Lucita's throat, a potent counterbalance to the rotting emotions and bone-grinding fatigue within. Sated, she waved the pilot back up front. "Go carefully, and rely on the autopilot whenever you need to. We'll need you rested and alert later."

When the pilot was back at the wheel, Andrew prompted, "And the third reason?"

"Montano, of course. What else? The way he talked, it was just like Fatima had said, and it was very much like what every Sabbat evangelist used to say back in the early years of the revolt. I would, if I took his advice, be his tool."

Andrew laughed again. "Please tell me that you're not harboring any delusion that you could join the Sabbat and do as you please. Old-fashioned Loyalists don't last all that long, even when they've got your potential for power."

Lucita shook her head. "It's not that. It's... let me think how to explain."

"Please do."

"I couldn't submit while Monçada still walked, because he would take it as confirmation that he was right all along, and it was—is—necessary for me to prove that he was wrong about me. Now that's done with. Unless some necromancer manages to find his ghost, I have the last word, and that

word is somewhere in the sentence, 'You do not control me.'

"For a long time I thought I could serve nobody's agenda but my own. But when the oldest survivor of our clan, the first diablerist of the modern age, and my own best and truest friend all tell me the same thing, I feel that I have to listen. I will end up doing things that help someone else get what they want, and all I can choose is where to give my allegiance. So where?" She was quiet another moment.

"Even before I identified to myself the full ramifications of what I was doing, I set out to look for a place that could be a home for me, since one I must have. I would have liked for it to be in the Camarilla. They'd let me set up myself as prince somewhere and scarcely ever bother me again. But... they're stagnant. Everything they do is aimed at letting them continue to do what they've been doing. Whether it's scheming at court or out hunting pirates with stolen cannon, it's all in the service of business as usual. That's the thing I am *least* interested in, since by definition it's over for me. If I committed myself to their cause, I'd end up throwing myself into the sun before very long, lacking anything to look forward to except last night repeated forever."

In addition to his official interest, Andrew found her analysis fascinating. The Camarilla defectors he'd dealt with were all much younger and less powerful, and they phrased their dissent in terms of personal opportunity for the exercise of power. It sounded like Lucita was going somewhere different.

She didn't disappoint him. "Actually, I should say that there are four reasons. The fourth is present in this plane." That surprised everyone, to Andrew's secret delight. "Look at you. This cabin could become a scene of complete carnage in seconds. Half of you hate each other, to the point of blood feud and beyond. The other half are inclined toward pursuits that would normally take them off in completely different directions. And yet here you are, working together more than well enough to capture me and keep me in line. Together you managed to confront the closest thing to an Antediluvian we have and survive intact. There must be

limits on your collective ability, but I don't think we're anywhere near them yet.

"But it's not just efficiency. It's something about you personally. The really distinctive thing about you is that you are all dynamic."

That confused them. What did dynamism have to do with it?

"You probably don't have any idea how unusual you are, from the vantage point of other Cainites. In London I met an ambitious neonate who explained to me that his goal was to stand on the earth after the sun has gone out, and that he'd do whatever it took for that. But he was thinking about defeating enemies; the self he imagined in that far future was the self he was that night. The world might change, but he would not. The same thing was true of Archon Captain Kleist, even though he was out leading a much more vigorous existence. The tools of his trade would change, but he would remain a glorified policeman of the seas. And so on for all the others.

"And... it's been true of me, too. I've been essentially the same thing for as long as all of you youngsters put together. I started 1999 not much differently than I started 1900, or 1199, for that matter. If it weren't for what happened in Madrid, I'd still be carrying on precisely as I have.

"Whereas, look at you," she pointed to Conrad and the paladin. "Fifty years ago you were doing something quite different. A hundred years ago, something different again. Your bishop," and she pointed at Andrew, "has gone in less than twenty years from the author of a pathetic essay his packmates were laughing at in the airport to what he is now, and clearly he is going to keep changing. Your priest is forcing himself into a fundamental change because of a phobia, and it looks like he will succeed. So with each of the rest. I decided that in the end it was very simple: I want that, and it seems to me that the price of it is submission to the Sabbat.

"So I submit." She leaned back in her chair and looked up at the lights. Part of her wondered if it wouldn't be

sensible to go ahead and slit her wrists right now. Or could she? Perhaps the Vinculum wouldn't let her, and she was merely enacting a script forced upon her the moment she drank from the ritual chalice the first time. Or perhaps... no, she had conceived the desire to accept that risk on her own... if in fact she had. She'd been surrounded by elders with the power to break her will, and perhaps they'd done so and removed her memory of defeat. But then that was the point, wasn't it? She would never, ever be able to say for sure that her decisions were truly her own. She could only decide what she would decide and then act on it for visible reasons as well as whatever invisible imperatives drove her.

"The Sabbath is not a self-help program," Conrad said coldly.

Lucita opened her eyes and leaned forward. "Nor did I think it was."

"Talk of personal growth sounds suspiciously like this age's meaningless drivel. If the Sabbath accepts you, it will not be to let you learn flower arranging or the fine art of cello playing, but to fight against everyone and everything that stands in our way."

"I am well aware of that. Better than you, in some ways. I am fully aware that asking this now means committing myself to acts that I have in the past regarded as undesirable or even actively immoral. But when my code of conduct would lead me only to annihilation, I can see that there's something wrong with it even when I don't yet see what. The process of learning will not be happy or comfortable for either me or my teachers, but it's clearly necessary, and I must learn to overcome my instincts if I want to have any future at all."

Andrew watched her through half-closed eyes, measuring the very complex movements of her aura. "You really mean it." It was not a question.

"Of course I do."

"There's no 'of course' about it," he said, dispensing with the laughter this time. "Every year, some unknown number of Camarilla supporters and vampires with less

institutionalized agendas try to make their way into the Sabbath, for reasons ranging from personal revenge to dreams of toppling the whole sect. As an individual with both personal and collective grudges, and a history of working for hire on matters of sect politics, I *have* to suspect you. And in fact I can't accept your submission without an examination of the sort I lack the power to give. You will be poked and pulled and scanned from front to back before my superiors decide to acknowledge you as kin and ally. Provisionally, yes, I grant you the protection of my pack, but this is not a lasting grant, and it may be withdrawn at any time. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then let's get our rest. We have a busy night tomorrow."

Wednesday, 19 July 2000, 1:31 AM
Over the Altopiano Solfifero
Sicily, Italy

Angelica had suggested that the hunting pack might avoid possible lookouts by skipping the larger airports on the island and aiming instead for an out-of-the-way airstrip. After some work with directories, she nominated Milazzo, on Sicily's northern coast. Roads led to the interior, including the vicinity of the Castle of Shadows, and if the vampires preferred not to get constricted on the roads, they could rent a helicopter in Milazzo. That sounded sensible to everyone, and Lucita instructed her to make the plans.

Now they were flying over sulfurous highlands, areas repeatedly buried in ash and occasional lava flows, twisted and folded by tectonic and volcanic activity. *If that's what the history of the world really was*, Lucita reminded herself, *and not one more move in the Jyhad*.

Little grew down there. It made a good setting for remote retreats and a few grander edifices, churches and castles sponsored by nobles out to prove their wealth or piety by bringing a human presence into the midst of the desolation. Lucita felt uncomfortable with her analysis of the scene. Whenever the landscape turned that symbolic, there was usually a backstage manipulator at work, and she absolutely did not want to concede any truth to Montano's view of herself as just one more pawn.

She felt an unexpected sympathy for Gratiano. Closer to the root of vampiric power, he must have seen the chessmasters and puppeteers that much more clearly. No wonder he resented her bid for independence. Even if, despite Montano's doomsaying, she had the option of freedom, presumably he did not, except in the drastic way he'd sought it. *And was that also part of the grand plan? Torpor couldn't stop one of the ancient elders... could destruction?*

"I can't see it," Roxana said, disturbing Lucita's reverie.

"No, you wouldn't," the elder answered. "It has ways

of concealing itself from a distance. Whenever we rode up to it, it would loom up suddenly, unless for some reason the founder wanted to impress travelers farther away. You'd turn a corner in the valley and there it'd be, where before you'd seen only vague piles of rocks or a grove of dead trees. I never went back after my own personal revolt, but I understand that much of that concealment remains active. It will take more than a single millennium for the power there to rot away."

"Ah." Roxana was again aware of teetering on the brink of matters beyond her comprehension. "Can you point it out?"

"I can try. I don't guarantee that it will let you see the signs, but..." Lucita was looking out the window, and so missed Roxana's shiver. "Yes, there it is. You see that doubled S in the road, there beneath the yellow ridge?"

"Yes."

"It goes up around the east end of the ridge, and then down into a valley that runs north and south."

Roxana peered. "I think I see. It's hard to focus on. Is there a defect in the windows?"

"No. That's the castle playing with the local light. Don't bother straining too hard. The castle is in that valley, but you'll inevitably see a passing cloud, or shadows from nearby peaks, or something else that doesn't let you get a good look. We're as close as we're going to be on this flight," Lucita added this last somewhat unnecessarily, as the valley passed them by and began to recede.

Without any fuss, all the lights in the world went out. The cabin was plunged into complete darkness.

Outside time and space

The Abyss

"I don't suppose this is just a power failure," Andrew said in a conversational tone.

"Power wouldn't make the stars go away, no," Lucita said as the engine noises gave way to the familiar whistle of Abyss winds. "We are in trouble, I believe." As the lights faded, she became aware of the Vinculum bonds as a new frame of reference. While their physical locations were somewhat indeterminate, she was aware of each of the others in terms of their relationships to each other and to her. She could plan tactics on the basis of this information. Like the other vampires, her own shadow-senses also allowed her to sense position and relationships in the Abyss—the closest thing to seeing in a place defined by the nonexistence of light. "I'm going to try sliding us out of the Abyss."

Nothing. She felt the power rise within her and push at the plane and all its contents, but the walls of the world resisted her. This came as no surprise. It was not sound ambush strategy to let your target breeze back out the way it came in. If this was not all the act of a single very powerful vampire, then there was a whole coterie working together with substantial efficiency as well as power—Lucita couldn't even sense their point of entry anymore, and usually those spots leaked slight but detectable energy for quite some time. She and her allies would have to deal with whatever came next.

A thought struck her, and she raised her voice. "Angelica, come here *now*. Never mind the controls, we'll take care of them once we're done here. I need you here." The ghoul rushed back without setting the autopilot. Completely blind, she bumped into chairs, but managed to avoid stumbling. "Lie down here," Lucita instructed her. When she felt the ghoul curled up at her feet, Lucita created a layer of armored darkness; with luck, it would both mask Angelica's scent and provide her with some extra protection

against direct assault. It would not do to lose her investment of time and effort now.

Something massive landed on the roof of the plane, and very shortly thereafter the roof ceased to exist. It wasn't so much ripped apart as simply vaporized directly. Massive shadow limbs probed through the cabin. "Pairs," Lucita called out, remembering Andrew's description of some of the pack's training. "Pull and ingest." The vampires gathered in pairs, flanking each of the intruding limbs: Niccolo and Roxana, Conrad and the paladin, Andrew and Simon Peter, Barry and Rosa. Lucita faced one of the limbs on her own.

Each of the pairs performed a simple act: they reversed the usual process of shadow tendril extension to gather up the strongest nearby darkness into themselves. The resulting force sheared across each shadow limb, and soon broke it into pieces. Lucita took longer to deal with hers, lacking the advantage of opposing force, but then she had more power of her own than the others. She could feel shattered stumps withdrawing and an injured Abyss creature drifting away in search of free fragments to feed upon.

"Very good," she said, "but that can scarcely be the last of this."

"I think I felt the thing come from over there," Simon Peter set up a small current pointing directly away from the howling gale that was the Castle of Shadows' presence in the Abyss. "Can we head that way?"

"But of course," the paladin said. "Simply push." They pushed, and the aircraft—what remained of it—gained a fresh angle to accompany its general "downward" drift. Soon they all felt a wind coming directly at them, where someone was maintaining an unusually strong opening into the world. "Very astute," the paladin added.

An unpleasantly familiar voice echoed in Lucita's head. *This need not have been your time*. At first she thought it was speaking to all of them, but none of the others showed any signs of sensing it. Then she thought it was memory. Only after the third or fourth repetition did she realize that it was indeed Montano, in present time (whatever that might

mean in the Abyss). He was somewhere here away from the world too, taunting or lecturing her.

If you cared, she mentally shouted back along the connection he'd made, you'd help us.

I am not appointed to do that, the answer came. *Farewell.* The connection ended just as the second wave of the ambush arrived. Nine sharp strikes hit the front of the plane in almost perfect synchronization, and dark talons pulverized the nose. If Angelica had remained up front, she'd now be little more than rended flesh and blood.

"By threes," Andrew called out. "Take the hits if you must, don't divide your efforts too far! Get some out and then worry about the rest." His pack gathered in trios, and Lucita slid into closer conjunction with the paladin and Conrad. Part of her awareness remained physically where it had been, overseeing Angelica; the rest now distributed itself across the middle of the cabin.

It was because she was so widely spread that she could sense a slight cross-current in the Abyssal wind. It wasn't an actual opening in the wall of the world, but a region of reduced thickness. "Here!" she said, guiding the awareness of her partners to the area as the first of the talon-wielders reached the hunting pack. "Push here!"

The hunting pack were hard pressed. The Abyssal translation of vampiric potency gave them substantial power, but their unseen antagonists had more. These were unfamiliar creatures, bound together out of very old nightmares of night terror. The former scholar in Andrew recognized the essence of Stone Age fears even as he dodged to avoid getting his chest ripped open. All the shadows he could command seemed merely to slow these things down, not stop them, and there was no point in trying the banishment trick again until the onslaught had been halted. Lucita could hear the first wounds as talons ripped into fragile legs and arms, and knew that their time would be short without something to shift the balance of power.

Lucita and the others in the rear pushed with all the will they could muster. Even here at the thin place, the wall of the world resisted much more than usual, and each

gap they could make closed up, the thicker places nearby sliding in like snake scales. (*Serpent imagery*, a detached portion of Lucita's consciousness thought. *That might be relevant. Remember it.*) Then, with a final splintering, there was a hole.

Wednesday, 19 July 2000, 1:49 AM
Over the Altopiano Solfifero
Sicily, Italy

The remnants of the plane and its occupants were falling free through night sky, the Abyssal wind replaced by the whoosh of purely physical acceleration toward terminal velocity. It was, for the moment, a relief by contrast.

Despite being thrown about some by sudden shifts in direction as the plane plummeted and its damaged airfoils caused it to briefly enter then recover from a spin, the hunting pack kept focused on the Abyssal creatures. They felt the talon-things weaken. Not much, but enough: one by one they could get pinned by one member of a trio and shredded by the other two. By the time the trios had gone through four this way, the others were cringing back to the entry hole at the front of the plane, which fell along with the plane putting the lie to any lingering belief that the Abyss and the physical world connected at specific, immovable place. When the elder trio joined in, it was all over.

Andrew smiled and gave a thumbs-up sign, all world being swallowed by the roar of air through the holes in the Challenger's roof and nose. Then he collapsed, unable to maintain the shadow tendrils bracing him in place. Blood oozed from three large cuts in his chest and half a dozen smaller wounds as he slammed against what had been the floor. The others in the hunting pack were also all ready to give in, except for Rosa and Niccolo, who collapsed in unison with their ductus. (*Their first shared action in quite some time, that detached part of Lucita thought with amusement.*)

Conrad peered out the ruined nose of the plane, watching the Sicilian interior approach. She locked gazes with the paladin, who understood her meaning and used its potent mind to create a mental link between the vampires.

We can scarcely get this plane flying again, Conrad thought and heard the words echo through the Vinculum bond in the minds of her fellow. Time for another exit.

I'd rather not go through the Abyss again right now, under the circumstances, the paladin responded with its usual aplomb.

Nor would I, Conrad agreed, but I don't think we have a choice. The parachutes went with the roof. We could jump out and take our chances, but I don't feel like gambling on the luck of even my marvelous resiliency right at the moment.

Lucita nodded. *If we go now and aim straight down, I think we can keep our exposure relatively brief. I'll go first.* She picked up a walkie-talkie, one of two which had somehow managed to remain in their receptacles through it all. With still-enshrouded Angelica under one arm and Andrew slung over her other shoulder, she stepped into shadow.

The transition was as bad as she'd feared. Creatures swarmed toward her from the region where the plane had disappeared. But she was gone again before they could arrive, standing on the bare rock. The plane zoomed overhead on its terminal arc. She made the walkie-talkie squawk once and stepped back up through shadow to the plane.

She and the paladin gathered the others as close as possible. *This will probably hurt, she projected. But it's preferable to the alternative.* The conscious members didn't care to argue the point.

As Lucita had expected, this second trip down went even worse than the first. The fastest creatures were on them with quick bites and stabs before the vampires could shift away again. The conscious ones did their best to avoid the attacks, all save Roxana, who simply seemed to stare off into the nonexistent distance of the Abyss as they fell. She took several blows but never wavered from that trancelike state.

It was, Lucita decided, fortunate that their ambushers didn't or couldn't reinforce the Abyss barrier in time to prevent this escape. If the wall were any thicker, there'd have been no chance at all. Even as it was, they emerged too high, and fell the final thirty feet to smash into the

ground. Only Lucita, the paladin, Conrad and Roxana remained conscious. Reflexive healing closed everyone's wounds, but they would all need blood before they could do much more. Lucita was going to reprimand Roxana, but the grievously wounded Abyss mystic spoke first.

"I have them," she said as best she could through shredded throat and lips. "I have seven points of association. I can find them again."

Lucita smiled. "Good work. Rest now."

Wednesday, 19 July 2000, 2:00 AM
Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel
Sicily, Italy

"We have failed," the third said.

"No," the eldest admonished. "We have only failed to stop them this time."

"But they must know where we are now!"

"That's true. And do you really think they can overcome the welcome we shall have waiting for them? Do you not think it is time to make the mountain speak to them on our behalf?"

"Ahh..." The third pondered the prospect. "Yes. Let them come, then."

Wednesday, 19 July 2000, 4:45 AM
The Altopiano Solfifero
Sicily, Italy

As the vampires expected, their plane's crash brought attention. A police car and two trucks driven by local farmers arrived to see what the explosion was all about. Their blood relieved the worst of the vampires' hurt, and there was plenty of space under tarpaulins and in trunks to transport the vampires to nearby barns to wait out the coming day.

Entering the fleeting semiconsciousness that presaged slumber Lucita dreamed of release from this mission. And what might come next? Would the Sabbat want to continue to use her talents as she'd done for so long? Was she setting herself up for delusion and self-destruction?

No, she decided. I cannot become what Fatima has, and I will not go down the ages prepared to be one more pawn. Montano be damned, I do choose this. I choose an unknown future, not endless stasis and not endless servitude.

And as to what came next, the answer came from Roxana, who murmured just one sentence before falling into unmoving slumber:

"Now we get them."

About the Author

Bruce Baugh lives in Portland, Oregon, with a cat named after a character in these books. He writes and develops for White Wolf Game Studio, Hogshead Publishing, and other roleplaying game companies. The books of the **Clan Lasombra Trilogy** are his first novels, and he's enjoying it so far.

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into the Abyss

Lucita faces her ultimate test.
Mad Lasombra attempt to raise
the Clan Founder from the
depths of shadow, and what
they call forth risks to
consume the entire world.

Can she stop them and deal
with the Sabbat who still
want her to stand trial for
her sire's murder? And what
does Montano, most ancient
of Lasombra, want with her?

CLAN LASOMBRA TRILOGY™

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BOOK THREE



AVAILABLE NOVEMBER