



# SLAYER

## BLACK MIRACLES

The blade is back  
and you're only 42 inches from hell...

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Slayer

Black Miracles

By Karen Koehler

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# 1

It all started with the party. Which was ironic when he thought about it. He hated parties. Many things had changed in his life, but that was one thing that had remained true despite it all. He hated the inane small talk and the posturing, the clink of the Waterford crystal and the clank of the gold-plated dinnerware, the diamonds and brooches and cufflinks and the insistence on propriety when he didn't know what that meant to these people. These people. They were not his people. They were show mannequins, models, cartoon characters in gaudy attire, caricatures of themselves.

But more than that--they were human and he felt terribly out of place among them.

It had never been like this before, but since things had changed he was acutely aware of the meridian that existed between himself and this creature that called itself a human being. It was a warm, rosy thing, short-lived, bad-tempered, and yet infinitely precious. Now it seemed to him almost an alien species. He had dwelt in the dark for so long, the proverbial light hurt his eyes.

Alek drank some of the rosy champagne and wandered among them. They were pretty in their own

way. Like pictures.

*I'll bet they taste pretty, too.*

*Stop it, he told Debra. Behave yourself.*

*Or?*

*Or I'll leave. Simple.*

*You don't want to leave. You came to see her.*

That was true enough, though he was loathed to admit it. Frowning, he moved to the opposite end of gallery rather than continue the argument with his symbiotic sister--as if that were an escape!--and innocently took in the art. There were sixteen pieces on double-facing boards. Each work was set under shatterproof glass. Each had a plaque in gold with some caption on it. Each was accompanied by a short history. Daydreams, this one read. It was a farm girl in a meadow, tilling the ground. So simple. Yet when Alek looked at it from the corner of his eye he saw an imposed image: a ballet dancer in the vast clouds of the sky behind the girl.

"Ms. Keith redefines brilliance," a small pot-bellied man said beside him.

Alek looked over. The pink ribbon on his suit coat said he was with the American Cancer Association. Presumably, he was the man who would accept the donations from the sponsors dedicating this wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Katherine Keith's work. The question was why he had chosen to approach Alek and why he was staring at him so intently now. True, in some circles Alek was a bit of a celebrity. A number of years ago he had had an exhibit like this.

Well not exactly like this, not this grand, but he had sold all of his work for enough money to keep him until...well, a very long time. That made him famous, sort of. But people did not usually recognize his face. And if they did, it was in response to the work he'd done away from the easel and because they intended to stick some long, sharp implement into one of his vital organs.

"I have yet to see her match," Alek warily agreed.

He had been here a while now, maybe a whole ten minutes. Surely that was enough?

The man continued to watch his face.

"Do we know each other?" Alek asked.

The little man shook his head no. "Not at all. I just recognized you as are her inspiration."

"Excuse me?"

The little man pointed back over his shoulder at one of the pieces Alek had passed without noticing.

Alek slipped on his glasses. No, he was dreaming this. He approached the opposing painting. It was fairly new according to the caption. And quite dark for Kat. A tall, lean man stood wearily amid the rush of a New York crowd, and yet oddly apart from it, his shoulder resting against a lamppost, his face turned down and half shrouded by webs of blue-black hair. Behind him lay his shadow, thrown like

blood across the ground, but it was a deformed thing, the shadow, implying much, the hair almost sentient. The name of the piece was Serpent Boy.

Alek looked away.

Katherine Keith was arriving to the illustrious symphony of babbling excitement and flashing cameras. It happened suddenly, shock followed by shock so he felt like the world had conspired to fall in on him all at once. He stood stock-still beside the Serpent Boy painting as they led her in and the fawning of the press and patrons began. It might have seemed a false fawning--except the heat and adrenaline in the room had jumped up a good ten notches with her arrival. You couldn't fake those smiles, those glittering eyes. They loved Kat. And for good reason. Kat shone. There was a force about her that seemed to push ahead of her as she entered the room in her ocean-blue satin gown. Her hair was a swirl of crimson light, her skin white and painted like a porcelain doll given just a kiss of life. Her eyes were warm and brown and wry. She was well into her fifties and yet she carried herself like a starlet. She put the younger women to shame. For a moment he could not believe the stories he had read in the paper, the rumors he had heard. They seemed like cruel falsehoods fabricated by jealous wannabes.

He had practically convinced himself of the fact when he spotted the out-of-uniform nurse walking a few steps behind Kat. She was young, yet she gave off an unmistakable aura of authority. Alek had escaped Kat's initial perusal of the room, but now the nurse touched Kat's elbow compulsively and Kat turned to shoosh the girl away and the contact was made then. Alek dropped his eyes as Kandy Kat's gaze flicked over her admirers and then came to rest on him. He felt the demand of her attention, how her eyes slowed the room and deafened him to the crowd. He looked up again. Her eyes had gone big like those of a startled animal. For a moment she hesitated in her step. The nurse read it wrongly and gripped her upper arm. Kat pulled away, yet her eyes never strayed from him, not for a moment. In the endless bubbling talk of the room, he saw her mouth form his name.

Alek's mind swirled. And then he was alone with Kandy Kat, here in this crowded room. She had long red hair, swept high and cascading down and adorned with ribbons of white roses. Her eyes glimmered cheekily with her smile, like a young girl with secrets. The corsage on her wrist was white. White roses, because she loved them. Her dress was blue satin. Blue satin, white roses. She would be married in blue satin, she said. She swore it. One day...

She shone like a dazzling summer day, all light and life.

And then Alek turned away, Kat's brilliance burning against his darker eyes.

## 2

*Can we go now?* Debra asked.

Alek patted his face down with cold water from the tap of the men's washroom, and then reached for a paper towel from the dispenser on the wall. His face still felt hot and his eyes still burned from the florescent lighting, but otherwise he felt all right. He hadn't fallen apart, at least. "We'll go when I'm finished."

*Well you're certainly finished.*

“Debra...” He looked up into the mirror over the vanity. It was a nice washroom, very posh and new, and the mirror was framed by milk-glass morning glories. Yet Debra was dressed as she usually was: a skimpy red silk dress and a black wolf coat, her hair pulled high into a long ebony ponytail that just brushed the small of her back. Her eyes and mouth were dusky, smirking, evil, and, as always, alluring.

He hated it when she made him feel this way.

“How do you do that?” he asked.

*Do what?*

“Stay here. How can you be here?”

*Why does the sun come up in the morning?*

“That’s not an answer,” he said.

Debra gave him a pouty look and put her hands on her hips.

I’m still not used to this. How did you get used to things like this? Debra was dead. She had been gone since he was thirteen years old. Yet here she was, a grown woman that existed in this enchanted glass. There she was, taunting him. Plying him with her charms. She was voracious, jealous, and completely infuriating. And yet...he loved her. At times the need for her was so great he thought he should die of it.

She put her hand on the glass and smiled at his thoughts.

“So you see...no reason to be jealous,” he said.

*I'm not jealous!* Debra shouted, her voice rebounding in his mind. She crossed her arms across her glittering fur coat. *I just don't know what you see in her. She's so...human.*

Alek smirked.

*Oh please!* she sniffed. *Dhampiri have better things to do with their time than chase after these pathetic mortals.*

“Maybeyou do...”

A tall, grey-headed older gent stepped into the washroom and looked his way as Alek continued to banter with his reflection. Alek shut up and turned off the taps.

*Can we go home now?* Debra asked.

Alek swept his ponytail off his shoulder. We can go home now, he thought back at her.

Traffic on Fifth Avenue was heavy tonight. Friday night. What was he thinking? For a while Alek was afraid he would not be able to hail a cab and started doing what he usually did in these situations--he began contemplating hiring a personal driver. He had been thinking about it for some time. Maybe it was time to act on it. He certainly had the money. Just no luck at the moment. It took him a half dozen attempts before a canary finally slowed and drew to the curb of the walk. Chill tonight. He pulled his coat closer about him as he stalked past the meters, telephone poles and hookers on street corners on his way to the curb.

Back in his college days--good Lord that was a looong time ago--he had been the proud owner of a vintage 1958 Thunderbird, a shining white shark with a candy-apple-red interior. He missed that car sometimes. Hell, he missed it most of the time, especially on cold nights like this. But cars and New York City did not mix well. One day I will leave this city, live in a big Victorian house down by the sea somewhere on Coney Island, and drive a Thunderbird everywhere I go. That or get a personal driver.

Debra chuckled. *Dreamer.*

He smirked.

“Hi there, Mister.”

He lost the smirk as he stopped to look over his shoulder. He saw one of the hookers had broken away from the pack and was trailing him. Well this was just grand.

*Yes, it certainly is,* Debra whispered intimately.

Alek ignored the implications of that sly voice in his head and kept walking. Hopefully the young lady would take a hint from his hostile reaction and look for work elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

“Mister...hey...!”

Alek stopped just as he was about to step off the curb and into the street.

The girl had caught up with him. She was quite a little thing--then again, at his tall, lanky height, everyone seemed “little” to him. Yet she was more than merely small; she was petite, like a young doe. She had mussed blonde hair screwed into a semblance of a modern hairdo and rain-smeary mascaraed eyes. She was trying to look worldly and sophisticated, yet all of it only made her seem more vulnerable somehow. She had lovely eyes, like aquamarines. Her mouth wasn't bad either. In fact, none of her was. Well...he couldn't help but look her up and down, her flimsy black dress and lacy red shawl left little to the imagination. Red. God, he loved red...

He shook himself out of it. He was ogling a little girl, for Chrissakes. A naïve little girl, on top of it. A professional would not solicit someone like himself, fresh from the steps of the Metro. A professional would know someone dressed as he was in evening wear would have arranged for an uptown escort in advance. The little girl was young and new and stupid to the work.

The idea made him sad somehow.

“You want some company?” she asked, a classic pickup line. As he watched, her eyes flicked sideways, then centered on his face again.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Maybe go for some coffee?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I know a little soda shop down the avenue, all old-fashioned like. You’d like it.”

“No,” he said.

Her childlike eyes frowned as she searched for something else to ply him with. He was tempted to give her a wad of cash if it got her off the streets for tonight. A girl like this was too sweet and young to survive on her own. She was something in need of protection from this filthy, voracious city and all the monsters lurking in it. He continued to watch her face, waiting for her next line. He knew he should have brushed her off from the start, but still...

*Sweet and young...I’ll bet she tastes like a candy-apple,* Debra whispered.

“Stop it,” he muttered.

The girls’ eyes snapped back to his face. “What?”

“Nothing...I’m sorry...”

Her eyes clouded over, so he knew he had finally made the point with her. He only wished he didn’t feel like a bastard for turning her down. He reached into his pocket for his wallet, but by the time he looked up again she had rejoined the other working girls on the corner.

He thought about going back to her and shoving some money into her hand but he was distracted by an all-too-familiar feeling insinuating itself between his shoulders and down his back, a feeling like someone was vibrating a wire down his spine. “Fuck,” he whispered and let out his breath in a long, useless sigh. The girl, assuming the oath was directed toward her, looked his way. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Alek turned to study the museum. All day he had been brushing the edges of this infuriating feeling. And now he saw the source of it: there in the parking lot stood a tall figure draped in black. It was leaning against a Jaguar, watching him. A smile ticked one corner of the man’s mouth when Alek’s eyes alighted on him. With his face otherwise completely impassive, he turned and shrieked his fingernails across the hood of the Jag as he started walking around the lot towards Central Park West, where the fir trees were the thickest and where many of the swamp maples had not yet lost their foliage. There in that dark place, uninhabited except by rats, drunks and the children of the night, was where he wanted it.

So much for my quite night out, Alek thought and turned back to the cab.

It was already gone.

So much the better, he supposed, since there was business to attend to.

## 4

He followed the slayer into the thicket of the park. Here the trees would muffle the sounds they made as well as hide them from prying eyes. And anything that spilled over would be murdered by the raucous traffic forever passing on the avenue opposite the park.

Funny how the slayer would choose to take the path that led down to the children's carousel. Alek followed, his ears, eyes and every other one of his six senses pricked and turned out over the whole park like radar. There were no other creatures like him in the immediate vicinity. None that he could feel, anyway. Only this one. And there were no other humans, either. If there were, he would smell them.

Not a setup then. Just an old fashioned vendetta.

Alek stopped when they reached the carousel. He drew his sword.

The man turned around and stuffed his hands casually into the pockets of his full-length motorcycle coat. He was larger than Alek, which was saying a lot. He stood at least a head taller and had the broad-shouldered, well-muscled body of a comic book character. He trained. His skin was near ebony in color and shone like wet silk. His shoulder-length hair was done up in earthenware beads, a look recently popular with many African-American slayers. He had the cold, effective look of a born killer. His eyes were completely focused. Completely dead. So young...and yet so ready to die for his Coven.

Again a pang of sadness sank through Alek's heart, this time for other reasons. "It's such a nice rainy night. You don't really want to die here tonight," Alek whispered as he slipped the Double Serpent Katana up under his arm. He affected a light, almost casual, stance, when in fact he was terrified, as always. As always, he stuck the fear down an endless black hole along with all the other things he preferred not to deal with. Fear got you nowhere. Fear got you dead.

"You're the Slayer?" the slayer said.

"I am." There was no point in denying it, playing games.

"You made an enemy of me when you killed the Master."

The Master. Amadeus the First Father. Covenmaster. Yes, well, he had made an enemy of about 3,000 other slayers when he did that. And a tragic number of them seemed to be standing in line to claim his head for it. So far, none had succeeded. Fewer still lived to tell the tale of how they had lost.

"And you are...?" Alek asked it of all the slayers who challenged him. He tried to keep a running list of the names because you never knew when someone else would show up trying to avenge a fallen friend or relation. It seemed an endless loop somehow.

"The name's Samson," said the great black slayer, sliding his hands out of his pockets and folding them a bit too casually across his massive chest.



*A belt of knives across his chest, said Debra. A tachi on his left side. A tanto for backup on his right. Magnum in the small of his back, full of hollow-point iron bullets. I think our boy doesn't trust his sword arm too well.*

Alek nodded. Samson looked just the type--all bluff and no stuff, as his best friend and chosen brother Booker used to say. But as always, he was grateful nonetheless for Debra's observations. He checked the sky overhead. She seemed nearer to him somehow, but whether that was because of the situation or because of the Hunter's Moon just beginning to rise, he didn't know. Nearer and somehow sweeter and much more human. He smelled her silken skin, felt her presence wrap itself protectively about him. *I don't want you hurt*, she said. *Be careful.*

He nodded while keeping an ever-watchful eye on Samson. "Now that we've had formal introductions, let's get down to it, shall we?"

Samson let his hands dropped. There were throwing knives in each hand. Alek knew. He could smell the steel. As Samson let fly the twin daggers, Alek was already in the air, tumbling like an acrobat over Samson and landing with catlike agility behind him. It took Samson a whole second to realize his knives had found tree trunks and not his target. A whole second more to realize where his target had gone. Alek waited patiently as the slayer figured it all out and turned around. He could have taken the slayer's head at any point during that two-second interval, but that didn't seem too sporting. The fear was distant now as the war lust began to overtake him and make him playful and more dangerous. Alek hesitated. If there was any way they could just settle this like human beings instead of like animals...?

Samson narrowed his seething black eyes.

No, I guess not.

"Last chance to walk away," Alek said.

Samson drew his tachi and tanto. The tachi was a good piece of work, forty-six inches of priceless jade and polished stainless steel. The tanto was the companion piece to the tachi, at a quarter of the length. Nice, both of them. Alek only wondered if Samson had the kata training necessary to brandish them as more than pretty ornaments.

Alek made an underarm slash at the tanto with his sword, knocking it from Samson's grip.

Guess not, again.

Samson looked momentarily confused, torn between diving for his fallen weapon and retreating so he could prepare a new assault with his tachi alone.

"Don't pick up the tanto. I'll give you a penalty," Alek warned him.

Samson backed up, transferring the tachi into a two-handed grip.

"It's not a broadsword," Alek said. "You use one hand."

"Whatta you? The fucking expert?" Samson spat and dove at him with the sword.

Alek winged the weapon aside, metal ringing on metal, and let the motion take him clockwise around Samson and into his enemy's second assault. Metal skreeked. Alek shoved at the other slayer. Samson

fell back, almost dropping his sword.

Samson recovered at the last moment and made a blurring series of butterfly cuts that send Alek stumbling back a half dozen steps. Samson grinned. When Alek sensed the nearness of the carousel at his back, he dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way. Samson followed through with the move, trying to stab Alek through the heart with the tachi.

Alek rolled over and used his coat to deflect Samson's blade, giving him an opportunity to leap to the top of the stage. "Yes," Alek answered as he sat down on the edge of the carousel, his hair settling against his cheeks, his coat closing about the rest of him like a pair of settling wings. He drew the sword back into its ready position. "I am."

Samson stared angrily at Alek's show of casual disregard for his skill. Angry and confused. He was a fear-eater, as Alek had suspected. A bully. If his victim was not intimidated by his outward appearance then he had no advantage in the fight. Samson showed his teeth and cut the air menacingly in front of him as he reassured his grip on the tachi. Pretty Kung Fu movie display there.

Alek rested the hilt of the katana on his thigh.

"You think you're so tough," Samson growled.

"Tough enough. Go home, whelp, and learn your craft first."

*You're so clever,* Debra said.

He smirked. She knew what affect it would have on Samson as much as he did.

Samson roared and sprang at Alek, his tachi fully extended and ready to take Alek's head.

Alek rolled up onto the stage again, his sentient coat snagging Samson's legs and jerking them out from under him so the bigger man tripped to the muddy ground in a rolling, clattering bundle of leather and steel. Samson slammed into the side of the carousel, his bulk rattling the structure to its foundations. He was raging when he realized how he had been tricked but recovered faster than Alek anticipated.

By the time Alek had found his footing on the carousel, Samson was up and leaping to the top of the stage and swinging at him with the tachi. Alek met the slayer stroke for stroke, their blades clashing like cymbals and kicking up sparks that lit the darkness of the night like firebugs. When the battle of the blades wasn't getting Samson anywhere, he changed tactics and tried to swipe at Alek's legs. Tried to hack at them, really, which was poor form. One of Amadeus's first and most important lessons was to never, ever, attack in anger. Anger was a Wild Emotion...and a liability in a fight. Alek sidestepped the blade and kicked Samson in the face.

Samson flew off the carousel and crashed to the ground under a vast, sprawling elm several yards away. He looked to be out cold.

Alek hesitated a moment, then stepped down off the stage and started stalking the slayer.

Samson suddenly came awake and tossed two more knives at him.

Alek avoided the one, knocked aside the other with his sword.

He was ten feet away.

Two more knives came flying at his face. Alek knocked those aside. “Boring.”

Five feet.

Samson stood up, and gritting his savage white teeth, pulled his magnum loose, cocked it, aimed. Iron bullets, Debra had said. Deadly venom. The only metal fatal to what he was. Fatal to all of his kind.

*Well that’s not fair at all!* Debra said.

No, not at all, Alek agreed as he felt his--their--blood boil. The first bullet whistled past his shoulder. The second *pinked!* off the blade of his sword. He kept making his way toward Samson.

Samson looked frightened. He squeezed off two more rounds. Alek slipped in-between the two bullets

Two bullets left.

Two feet left.

Samson made a valiant attempt to aim for Alek’s head.

Alek bit down on the blade of his sword and leaped, easily clearing the last two bullets and gripping the low-hanging branches of the oak overhead like an athlete’s training bar. His legs came up automatically, hooking around the biggest limb of the tree so his hands were free to handle the sword. And there he hung, looking at a petrified and very upside down Samson like a great winged bat hanging from its perch.

“Penalty,” Alek said in the last moment before he took Samson’s head.

## 5

He wondered if he would make it home in time for Jay Leno. Considering all things, the thought seemed somehow ridiculous, yet it was thinking like that that kept him sane throughout all the bloodshed.

Near Fifth Avenue Alek stopped to make certain none of Samson’s blood remained on any noticeable part of himself. His hair, which had been bound into a tight braid for his supposedly quiet evening out, had come undone but had otherwise been spared. His face was likewise clean. His coat was never dirtied by bloodshed for very long; instead it seemed to somehow *absorb* any blood that touched it. The fact that it did so might have made him nervous, except he was used to dealing with things that were...well, less than normal.

He had almost made it to the curb where he hoped he would be able to hail another cab when he heard the cries for the first time. They were distant. Another human being would not have been aware of them at all, especially this close to the neverending roar of the busiest avenue in New York, but he was wired from the fight. He stopped to tilt his head and listen to them. Coming from three blocks away, in one of the back alley niches no sane person had any business crawling around in. Probably some punk trying to

feed the monkey by working over a drunk.

No...not a drunk. It was a female in trouble. Probably a working girl in a lousy situation.

He glanced around the Avenue, but as always, never a cop when you needed one.

It's not my problem, he reasoned. It's been a long night already.

A cab pulled to the curb. He couldn't believe his luck.

The girl made a pained, animalistic noise that rang in his ears and in his bones.

"Fuck," he whispered as he waved the cab on. *I will* get a personal driver, he promised himself as he turned down the first alley he came to and leaped to the fire escape. He scaled it to the lowest window available. From there on it was an easy enough task to pull himself hand over hand over the face of the building. It was an old brownstone, plenty of windows and fancy cornices to use as a makeshift ladder. When he reached the roof he hurried to the opposite end, jumped the ten-foot crevice between this building and the next, and landed in a crouching lope atop the second rooftop. He repeated the action a second and then a third time, until he found himself looking down into a filthy alleyway cluttered with garbage and an overturned Dumpster. A Caddy was parked at the end of the dead end space, preventing anybody from driving into the throat of the alley. The building he was crouched atop was derelict, the opposite one a thrash club so loud it was unlikely anyone would ever hear a cry for help.

There were three of them. Asian kids with ying-yang bandanas and cheap juvie hall tattoos. Yakuza wannabes. Runners and students of the street arts. And they were doing over one of the working girls.

One of *his* girls.

Turf warfare was none of his business. In most cases, he ignored the violence when drunks and dust heads fell prey to the bigger, the fitter, the nastier. The city had a method of survival you didn't tamper with. But the working girls were his. Well *not his* in the sense that they belonged to him. They weren't his personal harem or anything. It was just instinct. In the underworld of the vampire, as savage as it was, the males protected their mates, something the humans had seemed to have forgotten, or perhaps never learned. Where were the males to protect the human females? Where was this one's mate to protect her? She was alone, threatened, and that pissed him off. He didn't like cutthroat kids tampering with his females.

He dropped the six stories and landed atop the overturned Dumpster with an impressive and attention-getting *whomp*, his coat fluttering down around him like a pair of folding blackbird wings. The boys, clustered around the girl pinned like a bug against the graffiti-splattered wall, turned to look his way.

*Show off*, Debra said.

Alek smiled at the cretins holding the girl, except it wasn't a smile at all.

"Motherfucker, where *you* come from?" one of the endearingly articulate youths said. His red bandana was inscribed with black ideograms that labeled him as the leader.

Alek wondered what the Yakuza were doing so far west of their home turf. They were primarily Lower East Side and Chinatown. The young ones specialized in arson, minor piracy and basic havoc, but only

under the auspicious iron hand of the elders; they weren't major operators, just little pups who ran errands and begged for bones from the House of the Ryuujin. As the leader jaunted forward Alek caught a glance of the frightened, flushed face of the girl, the red shawl and black little dress, and had to do a double take. Then he shoved such detail aside and concentrated on the chump approaching him.

The leader pulled a switchblade from his back pocket. One of his associates--a very young boy with a lean and angry face--moved to bring up his rear with a pair of nunchaku, while the third one, a boy with a ponytail held back in an ivory clip, continued to hold the little blonde girl against the wall.

The girl whimpered and the sound of her cry triggered something inside of Alek. He stared at the three hoods for a long moment, then jumped down off the Dumpster and drew his katana for the second time that night.

"Why don't you take a walk?" Nunchaku said.

"He can't," said the leader. "He's a banpaia--they can't leave fuckin' *nothing* alone."

Banpaia. Vampire.

Well now, this was getting *very* interesting.

"If I was a banpaia you would all be dead by now," Alek said.

The leader stopped and narrowed his eyes.

"Let the girl go," Alek told him reasonably.

"Shit," said the leader. "Your kind fuckin' piss me off. Get lost."

"Let her go and I will," Alek said.

"Fuck you," the leader said and tossed a handful of miniature shuriken in Alek's face.

This human kid was good. Better in many ways than Samson. More training. More control. More desire to please the Powers That Be. Alek deflected all but a few of the razor-keen stainless steel stars with his coat. As an errand shuriken tore a strip of flesh from his cheek he leaped out of the way and tried to find an advantage atop a fire escape.

In a truly admirable choreography of battle, Nunchaku caught him in mid-air, numbing his knee in passing with his weapon so he missed the fire escape completely and landed with a grunt on hands and knees at the back of the alley, his sword spinning off into the dark. Another shot of shuriken. Alek took the brunt of it before rolling out of the way. The rest sank like steel darts into the brownstone wall. His face burned and his blood pounded. He tried to rise but his numbed leg wouldn't give him the leverage he needed.

"He's down!" said the leader. He went to replace Ponytail where the boy had been holding the girl against the bricks. "Take his head!"

Nunchaku and Ponytail were on him in moments. Nunchaku wound his chain around Alek's neck while Ponytail drew a black shirasaya embossed with golden butterflies. The rod clicked apart to reveal a well cared for antique blade that looked sharp enough to split a hair--or a slayer. Alek didn't wait to discover

if that was true, so he put out his hand and felt the katana skreek across the broken concrete and into his palm. He gripped it securely and jammed the handle into Nunchaku's mouth. Nunchaku grunted bloodily and the chain of the nunchaku lost its tension a moment before Ponytail's blade would have found a home in his throat. Alek flattened himself against the concrete and felt the swish of the blade overhead, then dived at Ponytail's middle, knocking him into the wall.

*Beloved--behind you!*

*Kock!* Nunchaku's weapon landed hard on Alek's forearm, numbing his arm up and down.

Nunchaku grinned his blood-slimed, broken-mouthed grin.

That was enough from this one. Alek turned with a feral snarl, sending Nunchaku back a step with a single look. The boy's indecision was all he needed. Reaching out, he grabbed the weapon by the chain and forcefully yanked both boy and weapon into the wall behind him to join his companion in a pile.

Now all that was left was the leader. Alek climbed to his feet. He suddenly felt tired and very cranky. Slayers, punks...all he wanted were a warm bed, a mug of cappuccino with cream and an old book. This was not his definition of a good Friday night. He touched his face, felt the blood there from the shurikens that had found their mark.

He licked his fingers before he was even aware of what he was doing. And the taste of the blood--dark and bittersweet and hot as cinnamon on his tongue--made the thing within him, that thing that he feared more than any slayer, uncurl and stretch and put its claws into his belly. Pain. A low groan--more of an animal whine than anything human--caught in his throat like a knife. He dropped down on the cement with nearly spasmodic speed, fingers snagged in the bloody cracks, seeking. He licked at the blood on the floor of the alley, sponging it up like a cat. And something in his eyes must have gotten to the leader, because all at once the hood released his hold on the girl and turned to face Alek with his guard completely up.

The leader had no weapons. He was a street fighter, then. An animal.

An animal...

Like me, Alek thought when he realized just what he was doing, how degrading and whorish it all was. He sat back on his heels. Jesus. What the fuck was wrong with him? Where the hell was his training? His discipline? He thought about what he must look like, crouched here amidst the blood, his posture like that of wolves and other large predators, guarding...what? The girl? The fucking blood that had spilt during the battle? Even now the stink of it made him crave like some kind of stupid beast...

Whimpering, he slammed his fists against the spattering of blood on the cement in front of him, breaking his knuckles, breaking the cement. But the pain was good...the pain made the craving lessen.

"Fucking stupid banpaia," the leader said, afraid.

Alek eyed the youth and waited for him to go in for a hit; instead, he shifted uncertainly. His smell changed from the deep musky man-odor of battle to one of raw, primal animal fear. He met Alek's eyes evenly, but whatever he saw there was instigating a flight, not a fight, response. As if disgusted by his own cowardice, the youth spat on the concrete. "You want the bitch? She's yours."

Alek watched the boy edge around him. Only when he had cleared Alek's circumference completely did

he go to shake his companions awake. Neither of them looked terribly wounded. A little groggy but otherwise all right. The leader barked some orders to them both in Japanese, something about them getting their lazy asses in the car. After that, as the three hoods started back toward the entrance of the alleyway, the leader turned to face Alek one last time.

Alek stood up. He didn't expect another assault, but it never hurt to be prepared.

Instead of attacking him, the leader only gave him a slit-eyed, sidelong look that said, We'll have it out another time, shithead, don't worry. Then all three of them piled into the Caddy, slammed their doors and screeched out of the alley, the car lumbering into traffic like a charging elephant, the leader blaring his horn at a taxi with the right of way.

Alek waited until he was sure they were gone, and then he waited some more and shivered and felt the last of the craving leave him like a fever burning off. Only then, feeling tired and shaky and very old, did he turn back to the semiconscious woman crouched small against the wall.

The young one. The one who had solicited him earlier.

He watched her a moment, waiting until she came around. And he wondered if this was a portent of some kind and what it might mean to him.

## 6

Charlie Wing was smart enough to let things be when he had to. It didn't happen often. Usually, he could handle anything that came his way, which was the reason Mr. Ashikawa had him in charge of Rich and Xav. They were great fun, the two of them, but they had maybe half a brain between them. On the other hand, Charlie was smart, a survivalist. Not like his father who had been nothing, a big Nothing that drove a garbage truck back in Osaka. He wasn't his father. He was a warrior. Mr. Ashikawa said so. Now all that was left was to convince Mr. Ashikawa that he'd done the right thing in walking away from a fight.

He chewed his tongue and drove the Caddy down Lincoln Avenue with Rich and Xav. Rich was in the passenger seat beside him, Xav in the backseat. Fuck but Rich should have been busy trying to stanch the flow of blood running like a bitch from his nose and Xav should have been working on repairing his busted nunchaku. Instead the two of them just sat there like retarded kindergarten kids, watching him. Waiting for him to say something. Jesus, but they knew about the banpaia, even if they had never actually seen one in action before. What did they expect him to do?

"I'k neva seen anyfing like tha," Rich muttered through his mush-mouth.

"Wipe your fucking blood up, you're getting it everywhere!" Charlie barked.

Rich sniffed. "Awkay...Sheezus...what the hell was that?" He found some fast food paper napkins lurking under the seat and used them to mop up some of the spillage. He did it mechanically, as if he were still in shock from the fight.

Yeah, some fight.

“I don’t know *what* the fuck that was,” Xav admitted meekly from the back seat.

Charlie thumped his hands against the steering wheel. “It was fucking the Easter Bunny. Didja see the pointy ears?” Christ, he so wanted to haul out and bang Rich in the face, except that would make him bleed more over his good leather interior.

“Yeah, he had pointy ears all right,” Xav said. “Pointy teeth too.”

“And a great big pointy sword I’m gonna shove up your asses if you don’t shut the hell up!”

They were his soldiers. They shut up. But the driving-silence made everything worse, because now, as Charlie glided up the white gravel driveway of the Ryuujuu, the House of the Dragon Lord, he had to think about what he would say to Mr. Ashikawa. He played out a half dozen scenarios in his head--hell, his crew would back up anything he said--but what was the point when they were arriving empty-handed? Mr. Ashikawa just wouldn’t buy it, whatever he said. He wouldn’t care. He would only see that they had failed. They had gotten into it, almost gotten the bitch, and then got the shit beat out of them by a stranger from out of fucking nowhere! By a goddamn banpaia, no less! Shit, he knew plenty were out there--Mr. Ashikawa had warned him of that and Charlie had been around Kage long enough for it not to bother him *too* much--but what was the chance of him and the troops running into one of the motherfuckers in that blind alley?

The suits that worked for Mr. Ashikawa took the Caddy from them and left Charlie and his crew to creep into the mansion like criminals. He couldn’t tell if the suits were passing looks between themselves--too many pairs of shades stared back at him--but he could imagine. Dark suits, pressed shirts and ties, shined shoes, and combed hair. Like good little choirboys, all of them, except they all moved like natural-born killers. In the foyer, his boys gave him a look like a farewell--or maybe the look you give a dead relative during a wake—just before he detached himself from the safety of their numbers and went to pay the proverbial piper.

Charlie chewed his tongue until he tasted blood. It wasn’t a good day all around, his fung-shui totally blown to hell, and he knew it the moment he ran into Kage in the hallway outside Mr. Ashikawa’s office. Christ, but he hated these banpaia.

It was like being in the alley again with the other one, except Kage was vastly different--and yet, not. He was much smaller than most other men, but that wasn’t something you noticed. Instead of disappearing in a room like a lot of small men do, Kage seemed to fill it. Right now he was doing his usual Kage-thing, which was doing nothing at all--just standing there outside the door of Mr. Ashikawa’s office. A human being would look sloppy and bored. Not Kage. Kage didn’t wear human that well. Instead he stood at complete attention, his hands in the pockets of his long leather coat and his head canted to one side, eyes seemingly trained on the pattern of the red and gold wallpaper. He too wore dark shades, but for a much better reason. It was said if you looked into the eyes of the banpaia Kage you would fall into the black sleep and never again be awakened. It was ridiculous, stupid Japanese legend shit. Charlie only wished he would convince himself of that fact one of these days.

Kage made no indication that he was aware of Charlie’s approach, yet he said in a low, whispery voice that rode Charlie’s hackles like an electrical storm: “The Ryuujin is taking a meeting.”

“Yeah...okay, fine...” Yeah, he could come back tomorrow. That *was not* a problem.

Kage looked at him. Kage looked through him. “Do you have the woman?”



“Had the woman. Lost her.” Charlie was about to say more, to start the process of weaving together the story that might or might not save his ass, but a single look from Kage silenced him.

“The Ryuujin will not be pleased.”

No shit.

The fear, the tension in the air, the banpaia, and the fact that things existed that had no right existing--all these things suddenly seemed too much and Charlie had to make a conscious effort right then and there not to bolt for the nearest door. “Hey, man,” he said, raising his hands in a kind of hopeless defense, “No one fucking warned me about tall, dark and dangerous.”

Kage’s eyebrows bobbed up. He looked generally interested--a first for him. He looked about to ask something more of Charlie but opted to knock politely on the door of the office instead.

“Come,” Mr. Ashikawa called in Japanese.

Kage opened the door, waited as Charlie skirted past him without touching, and then proceeded to follow Charlie inside the office. Only when Charlie had found the courage to approach Mr. Ashikawa’s desk--he was indeed in a meeting, albeit of the Net variety--did Kage close and discreetly lock the inner office, sealing everyone in like victims in a tomb. This time, unlike others, Kage did not wait outside but chose to listen to the flow of conversation between Charlie and the Ryuujin. That was odd.

Edward Ashikawa looked up from his laptop, took in Charlie’s disheveled, battleworn appearance, and seemed to come to some instantaneous conclusion. He then looked past them to where his loyal pet banpaia stood near the door. Kage shook his head. Ashikawa nodded and looked again at Charlie.

“How did she escape?”

It was as if he somehow knew what had happened. On more than one occasion Charlie was sure things passed between Mr. Ashikawa and Kage that he was unaware of. Odd things. Things not like talk but like feelings. He thought about Rich and Xav and wished he was with them, cruising in the Caddy and looking for a drugstore or deli to knock over or babes to pick up. He wished he were anywhere but here right now. But because he was not, and because he knew he had to say something, he shrugged and said, “Seems there’s more than one Kage out there.”

Now Ashikawa looked generally interested.

Kage spoke up. “There was interference, Ryuujin. A slayer appeared to protect the woman.”

How the hell did Kage know it was a slayer?

“Oh. I see.” Mr. Ashikawa took off his glasses and closed down his laptop.

Charlie felt his heart sink. But it wasn’t fear; it was much worse than that. Mr. Ashikawa was his tether here in America, his fucking sensei. And Mr. Ashikawa taught that when you fail your sensei you fail yourself. You have no honor. And a man with no honor is a man with no life.

“Tell me about this other banpaia,” Mr. Ashikawa said.

Charlie chewed some more on his tongue. Now was not the time to fall apart. In solitude and silence, yes, but not here. "I have never seen him before, Ryuujin. He was tall and very lean. Black hair to his waist. Dark eyes. He moved like an animal, Ryuujin. And he had an unusual sword."

"Tell me about the sword."

Charlie shivered at the memory. The banpaia lost in its personal rage...like a machine. "It was a katana with a white jade hilt like two asps."

Again Mr. Ashikawa looked past him. Again he sought something from Kage.

Kage nodded. "Two asps. The sword of the Slayer."

## 7

"Tell me about the Slayer," The Ryuujin said when he had dismissed the boy.

Kage went to the wet bar in the office and poured the Ryuujin a scotch. After decades of service to the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza it was entirely unnecessary that the Ryuujin speak his needs verbally. Kage could read them. More, they were his own needs. It was like the scotch. The desire for the drink was Kage's own, though logically it could not be.

Kage served the Ryuujin his drink on a silver serving dish.

It was similarly unnecessary that the Ryuujin ask about the Slayer. Kage knew of his interest because the Ryuujin's interest was his own, though in reality the being whom the streets called the Slayer was of reluctant interest to Kage. The Ryuujin simply chose to verbalize many of his needs. As a human, such things were a comfort to him. As a comforting thing to the Ryuujin, such things became important to Kage.

They were bound, after all--in blood, in life, and possibly even in death.

"The Slayer," said Kage. They spoke English now, but they also spoke on a much deeper level of understanding. "His name is Alek Knight, and he was the first acolyte of Amadeus and heir to the seat of Covenmaster of New York City. Two years ago he suffered the sins of what he became and betrayed his Coven. He slew several prominent slayers, among them Robot, Aristotle and Takara. His master was his last victim."

"That is the basic analysis," the Ryuujin said as he sipped his scotch. "What is your personal opinion?"

Kage thought about that a moment. "He is a twin, therefore he is dangerous and unpredictable."

The Ryuujin went to look through his great picture window at the deceptively serene night city lurking under the dark. "Tell me about this."

"His sister crossed over to the other side of the Web, yet she can speak to him still and direct his

actions. Because of her death, he believes all slayers are his enemy.”

“And all other banpaia?”

“He is not a banpaia, my Ryuujin, but something wholly new and different. He is...a dhampir.”

The Ryuujin looked over his shoulder. “I am not familiar with that word.”

“It is a rough Bulgarian word to describe a creature which is the result of a banpaia coupling with a human female.”

“I did not know that was possible.”

“Under the right circumstances...yes.”

“Kage...”

“No, Ryuujin. I am of pure breeding.”

The Ryuujin shook his head. “I find it odd we never spoke of this.”

“It was...unnecessary information, until now.”

“I agree.” The Ryuujin turned around, still cradling the untouched drink in the center of his palm. He was a small man, like Kage, but much more muscular. Well into his sixties and he had the face and body of a man in his early 50s. Many believed Kage to be the son, Ashikawa the young father, when in fact Kage had lived his master’s life many times over. Some of the Ryuujin’s seemingly endless vibrancy was due to the strict fitness regiment he kept, but most of it was the work of Kage’s alien blood on his master’s mortal cells. Still, even Kage’s age-defying blood could not remove the worry and years from the Ryuujin’s eyes.

Kage felt that worry burrow a smoldering hole through his heart. He loved the great Dragon Lord, loved him in too many ways to count, in ways scarcely explored by most mortals--and even fewer immortals. It was a love of common blood, love of self-preservation and survival, and yet love of something else, something greater, vaster, and more perfect than himself. The love one had, perhaps, of a god. “You look unwell, my Ryuujin. Perhaps I could persuade you to partake of my life?”

The Ryuujin swirled his glass of scotch but did not drink of it. “Too many years, Kage,” he said. He looked up. “Kage, tell me, what does time mean to you?”

As always, Kage was tempted to lie if it meant comforting his Ryuujin. As always, he chose to be truthful instead. “Very little, I’m afraid.” After a moment’s hesitation, he chose to take the initiative and approach the great Ryuujin without invite. When they stood with only the glass to separate them, Kage unsheathed his katana. The Ryuujin made no move to discipline him in any way for his actions, so Kage offered his master his sword.

After a moment, the Ryuujin took it.

Kage knelt down and turned his head aside. A moment later his master discreetly nicked the underside of Kage’s chin with the painlessly sharp edge of the katana. When the black blood began to well up--it did not take long--Kage felt his master’s hand on his chin, felt his master’s mouth on the wound, taking.

In most cases such exchanges caused a particularly powerful and sometimes dangerous sexual throb in one of Kage's kind, except that Kage had learned the discipline to curb such awry emotions. He had done so for years. He was not an animal because he chose not to be.

He waited until the Ryuujin had taken what he wanted, what he felt he needed, and then, when his master's mouth was gone, Kage rubbed a bit of his own saliva into the wound to speed along the healing. The Ryuujin told him to stand up. He did so. The Ryuujin gave him back the katana and Kage sheathed it under his long leather greatcoat.

"This dhampir disturbs me," the Ryuujin said.

Kage had seen his master fight in Seoul. He had seen Edward Ashikawa tear the face off of another man with a fistful of ground glass. He had seen Edward Ashikawa break the necks of two of his own hired men when they had sold out to Tong in Chinatown. Once, when he was younger and working for his father, he opened fire on a church to show a group of black gangbangers that had taken refuge in it that there was no part of this city that he did not own. He was a savage. He was a warrior. He feared nothing, outwardly. He only spoke so openly now about his fears because he knew he would not be able to disguise his worry from Kage. And he was correct. "I should not have sent the boys for the girl," he said.

"They were the only ones capable of finding her in this city. You did what you had to. In any event, the more experienced men would have had no better luck with the Slayer than they. If anything, the Slayer might have killed them all."

The Ryuujin frowned. "Doesn't matter anymore. I want you on the job now."

"I will do it," said Kage.

"But you don't want to. I can feel it."

Kage hesitated. And then, with head bowed: "I would prefer not to."

"I sense no fear from you, yet you are reluctant. Should I ask why?"

"You know I will answer any question of yours put to me, my Ryuujin."

There was a moment of indecision on the Ryuujin's part. Then he said, "Find the girl and get from her what I need. When you have it, kill her. If the Slayer intervenes, kill him as well. If he gives her up willingly, then you and he can work out whatever arrangement makes you both happy, according to the rules of engagement of your kind."

"Your will is, as always, my own," Kage answered.

The Ryuujin narrowed his eyes. Again he sensed the untruth in Kage's response, but this time he said nothing more about it.

Her name was Robin Wright and she was a nineteen-year-old runaway from Lodi, New Jersey. She had arrived in the city five years ago, but it seemed much longer, somehow. As if she had always been here, doing this. The streets had a way of educating you in a hurry, and Robin took a crash course. She came to escape a religiously fanatical father and the undying memories of a dead mother. Like most young runaways, Robin found herself at a dead end, penniless, homeless, hopeless, with nothing to offer the city for barter for her survival but her body. She slept in a churchyard the first night and sold herself the second night in order to get up enough money for a loaf of bread, a bottle of whiskey to stay warm, and a room in a dilapidated motel.

She wasn't stupid or oblivious to what she was doing. Her father had taught her all about the wages of sin and all that. But how could she go home after what she had done? Her father had locked her in a closet once for two whole days after she used a spew of profanity on him. She was afraid. He would know she had ruined herself. He would check. And he would probably kill her.

All she had left was to tough things out, try to make a life for herself, so all this was a dark memory one day. Anyway, she was used to her father's hands on her. This was no different. She would simply lie back on a bed somewhere and pretend she was elsewhere until it was over. It wasn't so hard. Not really. It was survival. Survival of the fittest. The only difference between the slag of degradation her endless stream of faceless men inflicted on her body and her father was that she wasn't judged and punished as a sinner afterward.

Well, most of the time she wasn't.

Some did try to punish her. Some got downright nasty and slapped her around or pulled out a knife and threatened to cut her apart like the deserving whore she was. After one such encounter too many--she still had the scars on her arms to prove it--she decided to get protection.

By then she had worked the streets long enough to become familiar with some of the other girls. They told her she was crazy to work freelance, that it was too dangerous, that sooner or later she would wind up dead. Not even the tough young transvestites on Tenth Avenue worked by themselves. They told her she'd be wise to choose her own pimp, that something so sweet and young as herself wouldn't go unnoticed for long and she could end up the slave of some sadistic freak. Not that all pimps weren't sons-of-bitches who treated their women like shit, but some were decidedly worse than others. A girl needed protection. Sure, she'd be another man's property, but the upside to that was that your owner protected you. One of the older girls, a veteran of the streets at eighteen, generously offered to set her up with the "master" as she jokingly called her pimp.

Alek sipped the over strong college-coffeehouse espresso and linked his hands together atop the Formica table separating him from the blonde. Robin had dreamy eyes for a prostitute. Eyes like the kids sitting in this coffee house and chatting on emphatically about what college they would attend, what guy they would marry. Robin should have been with this crowd, he thought, not out on the streets.

Robin lit a cigarette. "That's how I came to know Edward Ashikawa."

Alek bowed his head, looked up at the girl from under his tangle of undone hair. "Edward Ashikawa...the head of the Yakuza here in the city?"

Robin nodded. "Actually, it was a small bit pimp working for him that took me in, but I caught Edward's eye and things just...happened. He brought me into his inner circle and I met his people." For a moment

her storm-blue eyes seemed to darken. "Some were nice."

"Nice people like those boys who attacked you," he said.

"And people like Kage."

Alek jerked his head up, surprised to hear the sound of the name of a master vampire on such an innocent little mortal's lips. More, to hear the name at all...which he had prayed would never, ever, happen.

Robin read his reaction incorrectly as fatherly concern instead of the deep-hearted terror it had invoked. "Kage's okay," she said. "He'll give you what you want. He watchdogs us at night."

Alek felt his lips chap under his tongue. His stomach churned with the bittersweet coffee. "Kage."

"Yeah. He makes people. He also unmakes them."

Cryptic words. Did he want to pursue this? No. But now, having done what he did, having involved himself with Edward Ashikawa's property this way, he realized he had little choice in the matter. "Why does Ashikawa want you? Did you take something from him?"

Robin's eyes crept sideways across the cafe over all the students in their army surplus jackets and French berets and Doc Martens as if she expected the Grand Dragon of the Yakuza--or maybe Kage himself--to materialize any moment and damn her for her sins, whatever they were. "One morning a few weeks ago I woke up and realized I was done with this city. I only wanted to go home," she said. "About that time someone approached me...a narc, I think. He wanted to get wires on Ashikawa but he couldn't get into his home office. He said he would get me out, keep me safe, if I planted them. So I did. Kage found out about them and traced them back to the narc." She took a long sip of coffee and pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders. "The guy called me...said someone was closing in on him and told me where he'd hidden the tapes he'd made. A few days later I came home and found a body on the kitchen table, all messed up..." She closed her eyes and her face froze like a statue. "I didn't know what to do, so I ran."

"Your agent must have had backup...someone you can go to...?"

Robin shook her head. "He never told me their names. And I can't go to the police; Ashikawa owns them. He owns everyone. Everyone is just a thrall to him."

Again Alek started. You didn't hear the word 'thrall' too often unless you were dealing with a hive of vampires. He wondered where she had come across the terminology. Then again, if the rumors were true, Ashikawa, though not one himself, had several vampire heavies on his payroll.

*Vampires like Kage*, Debra whispered.

*I know.*

Ashikawa's immortal warrior army was one of the reasons he was such a force to be reckoned with in this city. But Alek didn't want to think about that right now. Didn't want to think about Kage. Instead he said, "What do you know about his...thralls?"

Robin dropped her eyes. She knew...something. She snubbed out the cigarette and stared at the murky

depths of her coffee cup. She ran a hand through her short, mussed hair. "They're not...normal. The ones like Kage...I can't explain it to you."

Silence pushed in between them. Suddenly the outside sounds of clattering dishes and chatting teenagers that he had nearly forgotten about began to intercede on their private world. And he welcomed them. "Fair enough," he said.

"You're a cop, aren't you?" Robin said.

Alek shook his head no.

Robin studied him a long, hard moment, an unlit cigarette dangling from between her first and second fingers. "You fight like one...or something."

"Do you know what Kage is?"

Robin nodded. "Banpaia. A vampire."

"I hunt them."

The slightest surprise fluttered across Robin's face. "You're a slayer?"

"Sometimes."

"That's why you want to know about Kage. You want to kill him?" She sounded hopeful.

"I don't want to kill anyone. But since he's servant to Edward Ashikawa, that means he's made me his enemy for interfering with Ashikawa's boys."

*You made an enemy of him a long time ago,* Debra began.

*Hush...*

Robin looked glum. "That was my fault."

"Don't worry about it," he said.

*Oh please,* Debra huffed. *Don't be such a crusader.*

Robin looked around. "I shouldn't fucking be here."

"How's your ankle?"

The one boy, Ponytail, had done a good job on her as she struggled. She had a minor fracture in her left ankle. He could tell by the swelling and by the pain in her face.

"I'll live." She got up, balancing against the table as if to prove it.

"You won't get very far on that ankle," he said.

She looked up from beneath her heavy bangs. "I don't suppose you're a slayer for hire, then?"

## 9

He carried her up the last flight of steps to her apartment. It might not have been necessary--she seemed capable of walking on her own, albeit very slowly--but the sooner she got off that swollen ankle the better. He set her down on the landing outside the door and waited for her to unlock the half dozen deadbolts on the door.

The building was your usual run-of-the-mill firetrap. The halls were trash-littered, the walls septic, the doors lining the halls up and down covered in layers of graffiti that passed in some slum lord's opinion for paint. A typical Lower East Side dream palace. Ever since Alek had bought the Covenhouse and made it his home he had forgotten what some of the really wonderful places in New York looked like.

*Like where we grew up*, Debra said.

"Yes."

"What's that?" Robin asked as she turned the last bolt.

"Sorry," Alek said. "Just thinking aloud."

Robin smiled. A pretty smile. "I do that too. Ever notice how people look at you odd when you do that, even though they do it themselves?"

"Human beings are odd," he whispered.

"Yeah. We are."

He wondered what they meant, but he hadn't the courage to ask.

So this was home. A three room flat in a nearly derelict project. Exposed copper pipes a hundred years old. Brick interior walls. Naked light bulbs. Threadbare carpet. More threadbare sofa--it didn't look safe, but he was about to ask Robin to sit down on it anyway so he could take a look at her ankle when he was distracted by the shuffle of a sneakered foot from the opposite side of the bedroom door.

He drew his katana--there was no point in hiding it from Robin; she'd been privy to it in the alley earlier--and moved on silent feet to the door.

Robin said, "Wait...no..."

He ignored her. All he cared about right now was who was lurking in the bedroom.

The light peeking out from under the badly hung door was obliterated momentarily as the person moved back a step. Oh no you don't, he thought. You aren't getting away that easily. Taking the doorknob in one hand, he pulled open the door while moving deftly to one side. He expected someone at any moment to come barreling out--and he wasn't disappointed.



But what came out*did* surprise him.

“Mom!” cried the boy as he charged out of the bedroom and threw himself into Robin’s arms, almost toppling her over where she stood. She caught her balance at the last moment and then returned the child’s strangle-like hug. Robin was so small she didn’t seem capable of lifting the child’s full weight into her arms, but lift him she did--and, in fact, swung him around once before setting him down on his feet.

“Hey...how’s my big tiger today?”

“Made this for you,” the boy said emphatically, holding up a crumpled piece of construction paper with a splattering of watercolors on it.

“A red sun?” Robin said, looking at it as if observing a grand piece of treasured art.

The boy nodded. “Had the dream again.”

Something flitted across Robin’s face, but it came and went too quickly for Alek to determine what it was. Then she looked again at the boy and smiled.

The boy was not looking at her, however. He was staring at Alek standing in the corner of the room, his hands folded across his sword.

Alek caught a glance of the paper in Robin’s hand. There was something there...a man in black with black hair, drawn in a childish scribble but still clearly recognizable. Alek might have dismissed it then and there, except the man was holding a long stick in his right hand.

A stick or a sword.

“Danny,” Robin said to the boy as she broke eye contact with Alek, “This is a friend. He’s going to stay with us tonight.”

I am?

*You are?* Debra.

Alek opened his mouth to say...what? He closed it again and only looked at the boy, this little carbon copy of Robin, but with dark glistening eyes and black tousled, too-long hair.

Robin said, “This is Danny...my son.”

Alek tried on a wan smile, then thought about what he must look like--a man in a long black coat holding a sword like some kind of jonin Samurai about to go into battle--and he put the katana away as discreetly as possible. Somehow he still didn’t think he looked harmless, but it would have to do. The boy looked at him as if expecting something. Shit. He never knew what to say or how to act around children, having never had any of his own.

He crossed his arms and tried to smile. “Hi, Danny.”

Danny smiled at him. A wondrous, brilliant smile. “You’re the dream man,” he said. “Hi.”

## 10

“Does Danny have those dreams often?” Alek asked as he finished bandaging Robin’s ankle. The swelling was still bad and, frankly, he had no idea how she would cope in the next few days without some kind of medical attention, but she would not listen to him about seeing a doctor.

“What dreams would that be?” Robin asked innocently as she grimaced from the tightness of the bandage. She glanced briefly at the kitchenette where Danny sat busily scrawling on whatever he could find—old fliers, fallen bits of wallpaper. Anything, it seemed.

He reminded Alek of himself as a child.

“The prophetic kind,” he said.

“He’s only four. He has all kinds of dreams,” Robin answered, but the strain in her voice said much more. Please don’t ask me about Danny’s dreams. Please let’s change the subject.

“You should get this looked at,” Alek said as he fixed the bandage. “I don’t see how you’ll be able to work tomorrow night.”

At least his attempt at hitting her with that logic worked. Robin suddenly looked worried. “I’ll manage.”

“I really wish you’d see a doctor.”

“Doctors ask questions.”

“I know one who won’t. He works out of St Vincent’s. We grew up together.”

Robin bit her lip. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

Alek gently moved her ankle out of his lap and onto the sofa cushion. “I really can’t stay, Robin.”

Suddenly the look of pain in her eyes was replaced by the daunting look of complete panic. Had she not been injured, Alek was afraid she might have sprung right into his lap. A thousand thoughts seem to flit across her eyes, as if she were desperately seeking something that would hold him, something...anything that would make him stay, anything at all. Then she settled down and lowered her eyes. “Look...I’m asking you to stay for Danny’s sake, not mine. I can take care of myself. It’s just...I can’t protect him from Kage. I can’t fight something like that, you know?”

“And you think I can.”

Her watery eyes opened. “You’re a slayer.” She seemed to gather her courage. Then she said, “I don’t have very much...but I’ll give you anything you want as payment. Anything you need. Whatever it is...”

He knew what she meant.

“I’m not like Kage,” he said.

“Charlie called you a banpaia. A vampire.”

“I’m not a vampire.”

For a moment she frowned, and then her face softened and a look of surprising relief filled it up. “But *you* are a slayer.”

“Yes. Not all vampire slayers are vampires.”

Robin smiled. “Please stay? Just for tonight?”

Alek watched her face a moment. Then he got up off the sofa and wandered to the window. It looked out over a dead end alley. Secluded. Fire escape several floors below. Cornices here. Even gargoyles, which were perfect for purchase. It was like welcoming Kage right into her apartment. After hesitating a moment more, he said, “Just for tonight.”

## 11

It was the shuffling sound that woke him. He sat up in the antique rocking chair—seemingly the only decent piece of furniture in the whole seedy flat—and blinked at the bright blue light of the silent television. He looked toward the door of the bedroom where Robin and Danny slept. It was sensibly closed as it had been when Robin went to bed. A few hours earlier she had put Danny to bed, then stood in the living room as if expecting Alek to pounce on her the moment Danny was out of sight. When he wished her a good night and sat down in the rocker and turned the archaic television on to an old movie channel, she almost seemed relieved. Relieved and maybe a touch disappointed.

No...he didn’t believe that.

The sound again. From outside the window.

*The fire escape, Beloved.*

I hear it.

He drew his sword and moved silently to the window. He stayed to one side and discreetly lifted the tattered curtain. Someone was indeed standing on the fire escape. He could see their shadow reflected against the bricks. Then the someone seemed to sense his presence. A moment later the shadow escaped under the eaves.

Alek climbed out onto the rusted grill of the fire escape. He scraped the blade of his sword shrilly against the iron and saw the shadow shiver in response. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the quag-like darkness under the overhanging eaves, but very shortly thereafter he realized what it was. Not a slayer, thank God.

Instead, a very slight--and very unthreatening--little figure crouched against the bricks.

“Danny...”

“You gonna tell Mom?” the boy asked.

Alek climbed out over the cornice of the building and under the eaves and crouched down, resting the sword on his thigh. “Not if you come back inside.”

Danny looked at him with his big boyish tear-stained eyes but didn't make any move. That left Alek at a loss for what to do. A part of him wanted to fetch Robin and let her deal with the boy--but she was sound asleep. And anyway, he could handle this. It was just a boy, after all, not some bloodthirsty night warrior he was facing.

A scared little boy.

“You shouldn't cry,” Alek said. “Your mother needs you strong.”

“You sound like Dad. I miss him. He says warriors don't cry. Ever.”

Alek thought about that, then pointed to his chest. “They do. But only here.”

Danny smiled and sniffed, the tears suddenly vanishing. “You're cool. But your face is weird. Like a mask.”

Alek smiled in return. And then Danny touched his face as if to confirm that it was indeed real and not a mask. He watched the boy's face, the odd contentment there, and wondered about him. What he saw. What could he possibly think “cool” about his wan white face?

But then he saw the fear return...the hard, undying fear...the child-fear of monsters and the dark. And his heart jumped in his chest a moment before he felt the vampiric presence wrapped him in panic and the shadow fell swiftly over them both. Danger! He jerked backward off the ledge of the building in a swan dive. Wind hit him like knives, tearing through his clothes and hair until he managed to somehow grab the ledge of the fire escape in mid-fall. Metal ripped into his hands. The jar of his body arrested in free fall was nearly enough to make him lose his lunch. His shoulder muscles tore and instantly mended themselves, making his arms and chest feel as if they were constructed of overstretched taffy. His entire body felt as though it were on fire. He bit his lip to keep from crying out.

A black ninja sword cracked the cornice where he had been standing only moments before, its ebony single edge wickedly sharp--sharp enough to chop loose a chunk of the stonework and flick chips of it into Alek's face. The fact that it had so narrowly missed Alek's head only made his heart clock that much faster in his chest. His blood drummed in tangent with his runaway heart so that he was sure his ribs should burst from it all “Danny!” he rasped through a wind-scorched throat. “Danny...run!”

He was too late. He saw his assailant standing on the edge of the fire escape. He was a small man, dressed all in black silk like a kengo assassin, his face hidden by a chain mail mask. He held Danny with practically no effort at all. And then, with one deft motion of his free hand, he tore away the mask. His face was Kabuki white and devoid of human life, his eyes burning black slits as they opened wide like collapsed stars and began to devour Alek one piece at a time. The vampire was perfect and inhuman and the moment Alek saw those eyes he felt such a despair it was as if he were falling already. All of his strength suddenly wanted to leave his body. All of his life seemed a waste. He closed his eyes against the

vampire's power but the haunted, hopeless, completely fated look was imbedded in his memory for all time.

And then it spoke. It. Because it could be nothing else. "The Slayer," it said. "What a find."

Alek grunted as he reassured his grip on the fire escape. As much as he tried, he could not find a toehold anywhere on the building. He was dangling and in danger and he did not want to see those tragic eyes again, but he was more afraid of not seeing what the vampire had planned next, so he looked. This time the shock of those alien eyes burning against his more mundane ones was lessened because Alek knew what to expect, but the horror of them was still there. And the horror still ate at him like a cancer. "Kage," he managed.

Kage smiled but it was not an evil smile. Evil one could talk to, even reason with to some extent. This was something else. Something worse. Something too old and broken to ever be called Evil. "I'm glad we've been introduced. Now you can die," he suggested.

"No."

"Let go," Kage said conversationally.

For a split second Kage's suggestion made perfect sense to Alek and he nearly did so. He nearly let go, because letting go was what had to be done. Letting go was what knocked on his brain like something important he had forgotten to do. Then he remembered the fall would most likely kill him and he chose to hang on instead.

"Fall." Kage's voice was like a hammer.

"No," Alek whimpered.

Kage stepped on Alek's hands where they gripped the ledge like a pair of vices.

Alek grimaced as he felt his finger bones grate under Kage's heel. Agony zagged in random patterns up his arms and made the sweat break out all over his skin. He was going to fall now for sure, whether he did it himself or not. He was going to fall... unless he could distract Kage long enough to escape. And that meant going straight for the heart. "Like Takara, Kage," Alek whispered, "...all tricks and no skill..."

Rage turned Kage's eyes blood red. He kicked Alek in the chin.

Alek's head snapped back and he nearly lost his hold on the fire escape. But the kick had the advantage that it cleared his mind as well and it was sheer stubborn will alone that kept his hands from spasming and letting go of the edge. He wish he knew how far down was; he wished he knew what was done there so he wasn't liable to land on anything that would permanently damage him...

Kage, frustrated beyond words, beyond all control, threw the boy down so he could grip the black ninja sword in both hands. He roared as he prepared to swing the sword.

Of course he wanted Alek to hang on now. Hang on...so he would lose his head.

Alek let go instead. A scream of wind rushed up around him as he dropped the ten or more stories to the alley floor below. He heard and felt Debra cry out inside his head. She didn't like what she saw down there--and now, neither did he, and he regretted every letting go of the fire escape in the first place,

until...

...until his coat caught on the head of a gargoyle waterspout. The leather held only a moment before shredding but it did its job nonetheless: his momentum was temporarily halted and he twisted like a cat in midair and tumble down onto his hands and knees just to the lee side of a wrought iron spoke fence at the base of the building.

Iron. One foot in the wrong direction and he would have had nothing to worry about. Ever again.

But there wasn't time to contemplate that. Kage was still on the ledge.

And Kage still had Danny.

Drawing his sword, Alek threw it like a javelin at the dark figure standing at the top of the fire escape. Vampires and their kin had no special strength that he had ever known about or experienced. But one did not need strength where this sword was concerned. The Double Serpent Katana did as he wanted it to: impaling Kage through the middle and pinning him to the outside wall of the building like a bug on a board.

Kage roared and released his hold on Danny. For a moment Danny looked bewildered by it all, but in mere seconds his good city-wrought survival instincts kicked in and he bolted for the open window into the apartment. Kage continued to struggle like an impaled insect, but his cries had fallen into low animal-like whimpers by then. His rage and pain were almost palpable on the dirty city wind. He gripped the sword in both hands, trying to pull it from the wall and from himself, but the sword was anchored solid by a force far greater than his own. It would not let him go until Alek willed it.

It took painfully long time for Alek to climb the face of the building--by now he was getting very tired of all this endless excitement--but climb it he did, until he was over the ledge of the fire escape and facing Kage eye to eye.

"You haven't won," Kage said, panted, strings of blood frothing from his mouth.

Alek took the hilt of the sword in his hand. "If I let you go, you'll go away?"

Kage's black eyes narrowed, bleeding. He knew he was defeated for the moment. Even a creature such as he was, with his terrible strength, would not be able to continue fighting with a sword wound as great as this through his belly. He would need to feed. He would need to recover. He said, "You have no idea what you have become involved in. You had better finish me off now because next time we meet, Slayer, I shall tear you apart for what you have done."

Alek eyed the vampire. "What I've done to Ashikawa...or what I've done to you?"

For a moment Kage held Alek's eyes. Despite what had happened two years ago, despite the bitter blood between them, he really did not want to kill Kage. And he knew why. Kage's power, his influence, was legendary even among the masters. But it was more than that. Alek had accidentally started this conflict.

This was not like fighting Samson or the hordes of other glory-seekers. He did not want Kage dead and Kage knew it, which was why he used his influence so sparingly. Vampires didn't lie and manipulate. That was a fallacy. They did not make you do anything you didn't already want to do--or anything you did not.

Alek sighed. "Go home, Kage. I'm protecting Robin from your master."

And with that, he wrenched the sword free. Kage dropped forward onto his knees, doubled over in pain, perhaps waiting--maybe hoping?--for the coup de grace to fall upon him. Alek slipped back inside the apartment instead and locked the window. They would have their inevitable conflict but it would not be here and it would not be now.

## 12

Several hours had passed since dawn peaked. Kage was usually long asleep by now. It was not that he feared the sun necessarily, as his kind was reputed to do. It was not that he feared some kind of spectacular horror-movie death--but being what he was did have its disadvantages. His kind of people were extraordinarily sensitive to sunlight. Their skin cooked in it. But it was worse on the eyes. Sunlight could cause irreparable damage to their overlarge irises. Cataracts. Blindness, temporary or permanent, depending on the exposure. It had not been like that centuries ago. There had been a time once spoken of when his kind walked freely in the light No more. The humans had harmed the earth too badly for that to ever happen again. But through the goodness of his masters--how many had there been? Countless, surely--Kage had never had to worry about the sun. In the homeland, the Shoguns had allotted him massive underground apartments where he was shielded by stone and earth from the killing rays of daylight.

Back then. When he had served them.

Now he served the new Monarchy, the Yakuza here in America .

But the Ryuujin was no different, no less good to him. He had built an enormous complex right under his own manor and annexed it to a long-dead sub line for Kage's sake. Kage lived safely in a catacomb of cool, perpetually dark rooms full of the most luxuriant things the master could find. The master spared no expense on his behalf. He was given luxury, honor, and a plethora of men and women he could love, kill, eat or fuck according to his needs.

Everything he could desire or wish for...and still he had failed the master. Which was why he could not now sleep. Instead he sat and stared at the walls. There were no rice-paper shoji screens here to separate the rooms as there were above. There were no tatami mats covering the floor. There were scented candles, but these Kage used for illumination rather than ceremony. He had electric lights, even modern conveniences, but he avoided such things with a religious paranoia he had never himself completely understood. Nothing of the homeland lurked here. Instead, he had decorated it in the Victorian style--an extravagant glory of heavy crimson drapes, brass furnishings, divans, and even a samovar, though it was of Middle-Eastern origin, not Asian. And, oh, how the Ryuujin found that perpetually amusing about him.

Except now, as the master stepped into Kage's quarters. He seldom encroached on Kage's private domain, so Kage could feel the weight of his master's urgency and worry. He looked up but did not rise to stand before the master. For one thing, the master did not enjoy that. For another, he had little strength to do so. "You do me no honor, Kage," the master said. "Hiding here. You make me think of Charlie."

“I have no honor. I failed you. I am nothing.”

The Ryuujin sighed and it was the most terrible sound Kage had ever heard. The sound of his own soldiers falling in battle could not compare to it.

“The Slayer is a worthy adversary, nothing more,” said the Ryuujin as he glanced at the portrait over the mantle and the bookshelves on the walls and the other big duffy Victorian things he couldn’t understand Kage’s affection for. “You will have another chance.”

“He let me live,” Kage said. “You know what that means.”

“This is America . It doesn’t mean anything.” The Ryuujin looked again at the portrait set above the mantel, as if drawn to it. It was set in an oval frame and surrounded by a pair of tachis, Japanese ceremonial long swords. It was the portrait of a young Asian woman on horseback, clearly an antique as the rest of the flat was. The woman was in a riding habit, proud, powerful, and eternal. Yet Kage sensed what the Ryuujin saw in it because it was his own sensation: grief, remembrance. Loss. Failure of the worse kind. Failure that had started with that woman. He turned to look at Kage, a question at the tip of his tongue. But the moment their eyes met, the master let the question drop. He must look a fright indeed for that to have happened, Kage reflected. His master had always been curious about the portrait.

“Well, then,” said the Ryuujin. He lit a cigarette. He never did that unless his concentration was very deep. He was so American in his own way, even though Americanism repulsed him when he faced it in other Japanese. “Let me know when you are done feeling sorry for yourself. We have much to prepare for, and I need both you and Kurayami prepared for the coming war.”

War. How many wars? How much loss? He almost felt compelled to ask the portrait.

How many wars, Takara? How many masters before my honor is returned to me? How much will you demand of me?

What a relief when the master left the flat at last. It was like a part of the failure leaving his miserable self alone. Touching his stomach to make certain the wound was healed enough for him to move, Kage made his sluggish way to the mantel. He had fed heavily in the last few hours--two women and a man, over six gallons of blood, so he felt much more himself, if not a little drunk. He hesitated a moment, then fell down upon his knees and stared long and hard at the portrait of the young woman.

How many?

“Will you not just forgive me?” he whispered with tears in his eyes.

## 13

“Kage is right,” Debra said, her expression dark and pensive in Robin’s hand mirror. “You have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into. You certainly have no taste in women.”

“Oh really?” Alek asked.



Debra pouted. She had changed clothing somehow--Alek had yet to discover how someone who was dead could do that, never mind how someone who was dead could communicate with him from across the Web--and now she wore a sheer black negligee with puffed sleeves and a long lace bodice that revealed more than it hid. Her black hair was down, a wild tangle that made her seem young and innocent despite the scandalous gown. The Debra he remembered. She smirked as his thoughts touched her. Her eyes were a fiery brown tonight as always they were on nights of the Hunter's Moon. Somehow or other--he didn't understand it anymore than he did much else of it--she seemed more powerful on these nights. More real. In fact, on the second night of the Hunter's Moon, when it was brightest and its power the most revealed, he dreamt of strange worlds and awoke in sweats with the insinuating feeling that he was being touched everywhere.

Debra. Her games.

Once he threatened to play them on her, but that did nothing but make her more mischievous. He had since given up. Nothing he had ever said had daunted her rapacious spirit in life, and the same was true now.

He felt an invisible hand brush past his face and shush his hair back.

"Debra," he said, "stop."

Debra gave him her innocent-alluring look.

Alek shook his head. "I'm just protecting her. No need to be jealous."

"Jealous?" Debra cried. This time her touch was hot and whispery, a sharp breath down the front of his shirt. He stood up, dropping the hand mirror to the sofa.

Just in time. Robin was coming back into the living room with a small First Aid kit. She looked at him with some curiosity but said nothing about his somewhat besieged look. "I found some things in the bathroom. Let me see your

hands."

"They're fine," he said.

"Sit down," Robin demanded. "I'm in Mommy mode. Let me see your hands."

Alek sat down and obediently showed her his hands. The skin on his palms had been scraped raw, but otherwise he had come away from his tussle with Kage with nothing but a few bruises and scrapes.

"Anyway, this is the least I can do for the man who saved my son," Robin said as she wiped his hands with antiseptic. It wasn't necessary, this nursing, but if it made her feel better, then so be it. He watched Robin attend to him, fascinated by how her hands worked over him, how much care she took. Absently, he wondered if her touch now was similar to the one she would use with one of her clients. He watched her face, her perpetual little frown of concentration. When she caught him watching her he was not even aware of it.

"You have nice hands," she said, her fingers tracing the rough surface of one of them. "I like calloused hands. You must do a lot of...work."

He dropped his eyes.

“You know,” she said, “in all the excitement I’ve completely forgotten to ask you what your name is.”

“Alek,” he said. “With a ‘K’.”

Robin smiled. “I like that. I guess I should tell you, it’s Robin with a ‘Y’.”

“Robyn. Oh.”

Her hands skated carefully over his palm, and then turned his hand over. “You look all right. I think you’ll live. Alek.”

“Probably.”

She smiled at him. Meekly. From beneath her lashes. Then she spotted the damp spot under his coat. Her eyes frowned that much more in concern.

“It’s nothing,” he insisted, “Just a little scrape.”

“Take off your coat. I want to make sure.”

“I don’t think...”

“Please.”

He was about to protest further, and then realized it would probably not get him very far. He took off his coat. His silk dress shirt was torn and bloodied. But it all looked worse than it actually felt.

“And the shirt.”

He gave her a look.

She said, “This is your Mommy speaking. Take off the shirt.”

He unbuttoned the shirt without looking at her. Several of the buttons had popped, and one button was caught in the unraveling threads. He wound up ripping that one off too. Then he slid the fabric off his shoulders.

For a moment she simply stared at him and he wondered if that was good or bad. If she liked or was repelled by what she saw. “It looks pretty ugly,” she said as she applied antiseptic to the scrape. It was a series of broad abrasions that crisscrossed his rib cage on the left side where he had made contact with the building in his ungainly fall from the fire escape. He hadn’t felt them until now...and now, well, he didn’t really feel them much anyway.

“Looks can be deceiving,” he whispered.

“I know.” She stared with rapt attention at his bare chest as she mopped up the threads of blood. No hair grew on his chest or stomach and never had. The only thing to shield him from her was the raven-black hair tangled across his shoulders and down over his skin like see-through lace. He blushed and surely she noticed the blood rising against his white skin. He felt very naked suddenly. Not like a

Mommy was attending to him.

“You should get some sleep,” he said.

She wore an almost reluctant expression on her face when she stopped and crumpled up the wad of cotton she had used. “Danny has the bed,” she said.

He didn't know what that meant, what she was asking, but the smell of the blood in the room, both his and hers, made him crave. After a moment he slipped on his shirt and got up and moved to his rocker in the corner. He sat down and ran his hands over the armrests, feeling the history of the wood while Robyn made up the sofa for sleep. She probably would have just crawled into bed beside Danny, but now she had made that statement about Danny having the bed, and what else could she do to avoid embarrassment?

What else could he do?

Sleep. He was not hurting anymore and with the distance between them the craving began to lose its power, but he was quite tired, and the sight of Robyn lying stretched out on the cushion did make him sleepy just to see it. It was morning and he knew Kage would not return until nightfall. For one thing, it was bright daylight out. For another, Alek had bled here, thereby marking the place and protecting it from entry by most creatures. Kage would not be able to enter here without considerable trouble. Alek didn't know if Edward Ashikawa would send anyone else--maybe someone more human--after Robyn, but he hoped the Dragon King of the Yakuza was too surprised and troubled by Alek's presence and reputation to try anything like that.

In any event, he would be keeping his senses attuned to the whole area, just in case.

Until nightfall. When he had his own plans.

## 14

It was kind of her to let him use her bedroom to meditate. It helped before a particularly difficult mission. Despite the fact that he still hated Amadeus with all his heart, Alek had to admit that the old Covenmaster had excellent techniques for controlling the craving. Breath. See the energy all about you. Concentrate on the energy. Alek frowned, his eyes sealed tight, teeth locked together. And sealed up in the darkness the way he was he imagined the energy all about his body like a fine white mist. He felt it pour from him and surround him and the sword he knelt in front of. He felt the energy swirl and mate with itself and in time increase in strength and density until it was like an invisible armor through which nothing could penetrate his inner peace.

“What you doing?” Danny asked.

Meditation was a wonderful thing. The only problem with it was that in time he had to return to the ordinary world. He opened his eyes. He might have been annoyed by the interruption...but really, how could such a small, curious creature like Danny annoy him? Always asking why. Wanting to be a warrior.

Alek said, "I was meditating."

He expected the boy to ask what that was, but instead Danny surprised him by nodding. His dark eyes were grave, he said, "Daddy showed me that once. Did your daddy show you?"

"I don't have a daddy."

"No way!" insisted the boy. "Everyone has a daddy."

"I didn't know him," Alek said.

"Oh." The boy seemed to think about that for a moment. Then he nodded as if he understood completely. "Is that why you're always sad?"

Alek smiled. "Who says I'm sad?"

Danny reached out and traced the line of his mouth. Alek didn't quite understand what the boy's fascination with him was, but it was amusing in its way. "This does," he said.

The look of absolute conviction on Danny's face was almost comical.

On a whim, Alek said, "Tell me about your daddy."

Danny brightened. "He's cool. But he and Mommy fought a lot--"

*"Danny."*

The boy turned to look at Robyn looking tall and scary and Mommy-ish standing in the open door of the bedroom. "Are you disturbing Alek?"

"We were having grown-up talk."

"Oh?" Robyn arched a brow. "Well, I want you to come pick up your toys."

Danny hesitated. "But I want to talk to Uncle Alek s'more."

"Alek doesn't want to talk to you, Danny."

"Yeah he does...so there." Danny blew her a raspberry.

Robyn frowned. *"Danny..."*

Danny turned to Alek as if seeking support to his claims.

Alek said, "Do as your mother says, Danny."

"I hafta?"

Alek gave him a look. "Please?"

With an exaggerated sigh, Danny huffed off to do as his mother insisted.

When the boy had gone, Alek got up and slipped on his coat.

“You have a good way with Danny,” Robyn said. “Do you have kids?”

Alek bit back a smile. “No. No kids.”

“Do you want them? I mean, someday?”

He sheathed his sword under the voluminous folds of his long leather greatcoat. “I can’t have kids.”

“Oh.” She looked dumbstruck. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “Don’t be. It doesn’t really bother me.” He held her eyes. She seemed ready to ask something more on the subject, so he decided it was time the subject changed. “What happened to Danny’s father?”

Robyn went to straighten up the bed. “Oh...I don’t know who he was.”

“Was Ashikawa good to Danny when you knew him?”

“You ask a lot of useless questions.”

“Maybe.”

She turned around. For a moment her eyes went everywhere in the room before centering on him. She seemed to decide herself it was time the subject changed. Looking him up and down, she said, “You look like you’re going somewhere.”

“I am. I want you to take a taxi to this address and stay there with Danny until I rejoin you.” He gave her a slip of paper and his house key. He couldn’t think of what else to do. The Covenhouse, at least, was safe. Well...safer than here. Since moving into his childhood home the Covenhouse was becoming increasingly his. His house. His lair. Everything in it was a part of him, and that made it difficult for a vampire to approach it. Maybe impossible. That didn’t mean Ashikawa couldn’t send human agents to take Robyn and her son, but considering the reputation of the house, Alek doubted he would. And bar that, there was Debra, whom he had asked to watch Robyn and her son. Her power was strongest in the house. Debra had huffed and made quite a scene of the imposition, of course, but he knew she would do the job for him. Even if she did believe he had bad taste in women.

Robyn stared at the address. “Edward might have me tailed.”

It would take too long to tell the whole truth. And he didn’t think Robyn needed the whole truth anyway. So he told her only a part of it. “Edward Ashikawa is who I’m going to see.”

Robyn bit her lip. “I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Just get to the house before nightfall, lock yourself and Danny in, and don’t let anyone but myself in.”

Robyn only looked at him.

Alek tilted his head. “I will protect you, but you have to let me do this my way. Robyn.”

He didn't immediately ride off the Ashikawa manor like a storybook knight-errant on a mission. He was impetuous at times, but not stupid. There were things to do. People to see.

People like the Parisian. He and Jean Paul, the owner and proprietor of the biggest hive of vampires in the Lower East Side, went back a number of years. They were not friends, but Alek counted Jean Paul as one of the few beings in the city of New York who had never actively sought his death. That counted for something. In his years with the Coven, Alek had overlooked many things for Jean Paul's sake. Tonight he intended to call in some of his proverbial markers.

A shadow tagged him within minutes of entering Jean Paul's territory. Alek had detected the vampire's presence long before the creature became aware of him, but Alek was in no hurry. Let it look and feel. By playing their little game of cat and mouse, he was able to hone in on its location like a bat bouncing a sonic signal off a moving victim.

He was annoyed but not really surprised when a razor-edged, stainless steel boomerang shot out at him from the dead end alley he was crossing. He caught the glimmer out of the corner of his eyes, drew his sword and spun all in one smooth steel-and-leather motion, using the flat of the blade to knick the boomerang back to its owner. The shadow slammed itself into a trashcan avoiding the returning weapon. The boomerang sank into the wall of a derelict warehouse and proceeded to drill its way halfway through the two-foot-thick brick outer surface.

"Mako," Alek said, recognizing the Moorish warrior-turned-street-tough almost immediately, if not by appearance, then by weapon. Mako climbed loosely to his feet, whitish eyes flashing like porcelain in his dark, primal face--a look of pain, defiance and malicious discontent that changed to one of all-over animal-surprise when he realized who it was he had just assaulted.

"Shit," he whispered.

"Sacrebleu!" came a harsh male voice from somewhere up-alley. "Mako, my pet, is this how we treat our guests?" The Parisian strolled toward them. He was dressed in his usual immaculate white suit and pressed red tie. His hair was swept away from a cruel and perpetually amused face and glinting grey eyes. His rings glittered and crackled garishly in the spare back alley light, not unlike the brass head of his walking stick.

"I'm sorry if I broke him, JP," Alek said, leaning against the wall, his sword butting his thigh.

"Je m'excuse, monsieur, the help never know their place." Jean Paul gave his thrall one long hard unsmiling look. Mako lost much of his inborn toughness in that instant. Interesting enough, Alek had yet to see a vampire, thrall or enemy, brave enough to challenge Jean Paul to an open fight.

Jean Paul Dae. There were stories. Besides being connected with virtually every important underworld organization in the city, it was said his slight, almost childish figure concealed a psi power so great it could crack the earth in half like a china plate if he was pushed to it. Alek had never discovered if the rumor

was true and had no interest in finding out. After Mako pulled himself together sufficiently to resume his patrol of the outer rim of Jean Paul's territory, Jean Paul proceeded to go about his usual preening session, brushing off invisible lint on his sleeves, straightening creases that never existed anyway in his perfectly tailored clothing. He knew why the Slayer had chosen to visit him and was only waiting for the cue to begin.

Alek got to the point. "I need to find out everything I can about Edward Ashikawa."

"The Dragon Lord of the Yakuza?" Jean Paul sounded surprised. "What is there to say? Boring histoire. Human affairs. Why would you think I would know much about *that*?" Jean Paul tapped his cane and turned smartly on his heels. "Come."

"I don't," Alek said as they strolled together down the alley. "I only expect you to know about the vampire Kage."

"Un desastre," Jean Paul whispered with wonder. "You speak of a disgusting creature indeed."

"How so?"

Jean Paul paused at the back of the alley and spun his cane in his hands. He narrowed his eyes. "Kage is quite old and has been blood bound to the mortals since his birth, about 1200 AD or so, if the stories are true. Throughout history, he served most of the Shoguns and their clans. After the dynasties were wiped out he proceeded to join himself to the Yakuza. He arrived on the shores of our new country maybe...a hundred years ago? That seems about right. He and Kurayami arrived as escorts of the Ashikawa war clan. Le monstre despicable. To think of his power and how he has wasted it on the pitiful humans he has served all this time. I recall he and Kurayami are often found together in the records."

"Kurayami?"

"Oui. Kage and Kurayami. The Shadow and the Darkness. I bid you take care with those two, monsieur. They are like...la chienne to Ashikawa. Like a pet. Bound to him in all ways. They will protect him even unto their own deaths. And there is a rumor that Kurayami, at least, is...more than Vampire."

"More than Vampire. What does that mean?"

"I do not know, monsieur. The last soul to hunt her never returned to tell his tale." Jean Paul tapped the bricks at his back with the head of his cane. "I can tell you nothing more. Quelle tragedie."

"Thank you, JP," Alek said, even as a certain line of thinking involving Robyn and her son began to take root deep inside of him. .

As the bricks began to slide back to reveal a narrow fissure in the wall, Jean Paul said, "Can I not tempt you into even the smallest visit into the private desmonde?" He made a gesture toward the entrance. The scent of freshly spilt blood and willing flesh was strong and pulsing in the smoky, reddish atmosphere of the club. Even from out here Alek could feel its penetration. Its heat.

The craving returned with a vengeance.

"Perhaps another time," he said politely.

"Be assured I will hold you to that promise," Jean Paul said.

“But I never promised...” Alek began. He was aware that he had started breathing automatically through his mouth as the taste of the club reached him like fingers, caressing. Eden in a single breath, as Amadeus once warned him. And Eden had the serpent.

Jean Paul smiled demurely. “Please remember: the Pit is always open to you, monsieur,” said the master of the hive. Maybe it was meant to sound like a harmless invitation, innocent even. Yet the splinter of mischief in Jean Paul’s bloodshot eyes said worlds more.

## 16

It was nightfall when Alek arrived at the Ashikawa mansion. It didn’t look like a fortress, not to the untrained eye. It looked like a ridiculously expensive country club. It just happened to have a twelve-foot-tall rock wall around it and a black iron automatic gate and a gatekeeper’s booth. Hidden along the walls, where you could clearly see them if you were looking, were electric wires, electric lights, and penetration sensors. A ridiculously expensive fortress, then. As the taxi let him off at the curb, he noticed the heavy in the booth was looking around pensively as if the gentleman were expecting a meteor to hit the house at any point. Alek didn’t recognize this one or any of the others mulling about the grounds with their hands in their coats from the night before. These were all older, professional barbarians. Alek hesitated a moment, feeling, smelling. Human. All of them.

Human...but still waiting for his arrival. He felt exposed, unclothed somehow.

The desire to rush home was almost oppressive but he pushed it down into the abyss where he kept his usual fears and cravings and all his serpentine emotions. He reminded himself that he and Edward Ashikawa staying in their respective corners would do nothing for the situation at hand. Nothing but intensify it.

The gatekeeper spotted him and started talking into a discreet cell phone-typething as his eyes followed Alek’s long-coated approach.

He reached the gate.

“You have business here?” the man asked.

Alek paused. “I do.”

“Is someone expecting you?”

“Edward Ashikawa. Kage.”

For a moment the gatekeeper seemed surprised that Alek should know his hosts by name. He seemed confused by the whole thing. Then he said, clearly, into the phone. “He’s here.”

“I see I’m expected.”



The gatekeeper ignored Alek's rib and waited for a response in the ear bud he wore. Yet his eyes kept jumping back to Alek as he received his instructions, like a kid in a zoo watching an exotic animal from behind bars.

Alek decided to be helpful. "Not banpaia...dhampir," he informed the man. "Ask Kage all the details."

The iron gate slid open and the man stood back. Far back.

Alek stepped onto the brick path that led to the house. The other heavies had disappeared inside the house but the feeling of a thousand eyes on him remained. As if to prove the theory true, the grand front door opened moments before Alek reached it and a professional butler--or was he a henchmen in a really nice suit?-let him into a foyer the size of a dance hall. The house was many times larger than the Covenhouse, and looked and smelled newer in that white plaster-and-brass pre-fabricated way. The foyer was outfitted with divans, statues and a working fountain. Stairways of blocked glass swept up and away to secret upper floors. Hallways led off in an impressive and confusing warren to other places.

The butler/henchman politely asked that Alek remove any firearms he had.

Alek showed the man the inside of his coat.

"I need to take that," the butler/henchman said.

"You do and I'll rip your face off."

The man blanched but made no move take it.

Good.

The man indicated a pair of cut glass French doors that led to a sea of muted, glossy lights. Alek headed that way and soon found himself in a vast courtyard. Multileveled terraces sprawled throughout the sculptured gardens and running brooks. Peahens moved here and about among the beds of flowers or nested in the trees growing around small ponds laden with floating orchids. And yet, all of it seemed to be a mere frame for the massive marble fountain that was practically an epic unto itself—a sculpted young Asian girl mourning by a brook while a great fish leaped from the water, the girl's two jealous sisters looking on. It was a story Alek had encountered once, a Cinderella tale from the Orient he couldn't quite place the name of anymore...

"The fish's name was Goldeneyes," said Edward Ashikawa as he emerged into the artificial lights of the courtyard. "The young maid's sister were jealous of her friendship with the mystical fish and served him up to her."

Alek looked closely at the fountain. "Family."

With a wry smile, Ashikawa led the way to a gazebo where a traditional Japanese tea arrangement was set. Alek had been dimly aware of a presence here since the beginning, but since it was not the presence of a vampire, he had dismissed it as imminently dangerous. Now he was not so sure. He studied his host. Edward Ashikawa was tall, modern, young-old, of mixed Japanese-Caucasian decent, magnetic and seemingly genial. Yet Alek could feel his presence with every nerve reaching.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," Alek said as he accepted the Dragon Lord's invitation to join him in tea. It was rice tea, traditionally used to seal friendships-or served during great assassinations. Alek sipped the

tea the butler/henchman served. He decided he wasn't much worried about poisons or such. Edward Ashikawa seemed more sporting than that.

"Family," Ashikawa stated. "I tend to believe in it. Perhaps you should too."

Alek tilted his head, his eyes tracking the movements of the peahens out of the corner of his eyes.

"You keep expecting an attack," Ashikawa said. "Interesting."

"The circumstances of our meeting *are* a little odd, Ryuujin."

Ashikawa placed his white silk napkin in his lap. "Are you Japanese?"

Alek looked at the man. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"You're my first dhampir," Ashikawa said judiciously.

*Don't trust him*, Debra said.

I'm not.

"We're known to be unpredictable," Alek admitted. "Unlike Kage."

As Alek had anticipated, the declaration surprised Ashikawa. He had not expected Alek would draw Kage into their conversation so quickly or that Alek would be so direct. Ashikawa's mouth ticked up at one corner but there was little humor in the expression. "No one has given Kage a challenge in over a hundred years."

Alek had been trying to sense whether the vampire was near since entering the manor, but so far he had come up with nothing. "Unfortunately."

"You know," Ashikawa said, setting his tea cup back on the saucer, "if we are both alive when this is through, I will certainly be tempted to try and take you into my employment."

This time Alek was surprised. Raising his eyebrows, he asked, "And what makes you think I'm 'unemployed'?"

"You don't have a master anymore. The slayers want you dead. The Vatican wishes you never existed at all."

"I don't want a master," Alek said, losing his temper. He fixed Ashikawa with a look. "In any event, I'm a rogue. You don't want me around. It's not healthy."

Ashikawa's eyes narrowed. "That could be conceived as a threat, you realize."

"I don't make threats," Alek said. "I make promises. And I promise you the only way you'll be rid of me is to leave Robyn and her son alone."

"And then...?"

"And then I can stay in my world and you can stay in yours."

“I am afraid, dhampir, that our worlds overlap at the moment.” He raised his own eyebrows as if mocking Alek. “In fact, I’m afraid to say our worlds, yours and mine, are more similar than dissimilar. We both live by the sword, do we not?”

“Robyn does not. She has no part in this.”

“She has something that belongs to me. I want it back. She gives it back and she can go free.”

Alek smiled humorlessly. “We are men of action, Mr. Ashikawa. Lies do not become us.”

“Empathy?”

“Among other things.”

“Oh yes. I’d nearly forgotten about your voice from beyond the Web.”

Alek frowned. “How much do you know about me?”

“Enough.”

“Then you know what I’ll do if you don’t give Robyn up.”

“Start a war?”

“I have in the past.”

“Is she truly worth it?”

Alek set his teacup clattering down on the saucer and stood up.

“I do admire your courage,” Ashikawa said. “Other men are mute before me.”

Alek looked at him. “I’m not a man.”

“And so again I ask you: Is Robyn worth this? She is not like you. She is not part of your world. In fact, you haven’t the slightest idea of who or what she is. She may not be what you think, dhampir.”

Alek thought about that. “She doesn’t belong in your world, either.” He hesitated, and then told the truth. “You’re right about one thing. Men like us live by the sword, and in time we all go down. But that doesn’t give us the right to take innocents with us.”

Ashikawa’s face was a stone. “I only want what’s mine.”

“If I get the tapes and hand deliver them to you, will you let Robyn go then?”

Edward Ashikawa, Grand Dragon of the Yakuza, frowned and for a moment he looked almost puzzled. Then he smiled and gave Alek an almost imperceptible nod. “Well...I think that’s fair.”

Alek drew his coat close and turned to leave the garden.

That was when he spotted the mist seeping across the ground. It covered at least half of the courtyard and obliterated the lights. Before he knew what was happening he was standing knee-deep in it. And it was cold. Unnatural. He could feel no vampire-threat from it, yet this was wrong, this mist. He backed up but found the mist would not give. He might as well be slogged in quicksand. He turned to look at Ashikawa.

The Dragon Lord was on his feet, still holding his teacup in hand. He said, casually. “You were expecting Kage, and *that* I was expecting. But Kage is a barbarian. Kurayami is much more subtle, don’t you agree?”

Kurayami.

Ashikawa saw the question in Alek’s eyes. “She is a gaki. A mist vampire that once guarded the temples and gardens of ancient Tibet. The Shao-Lin monks called her The Floating Dragon. Do you see why?”

Alek spun around just in time to see the mist lift. He unsheathed his sword, but the moment he had it in hand it was wrenched from his grip by powerful invisible hands and he saw it disappear into the dark. What the...? He tried to reach for the sword with his mind, but this time, for the first time ever, it was as if something blocked him from it. He could not feel it.

Slowly, cunningly, the mist began building a wall around him.

Alek backed away from it.

*Beloved, behind you!*

Again Alek spun around only to spot two great silvery disembodied eyes opening like the irises of the most beautiful and deadly flowers he had ever encountered. He retreated from them, but it was more than fear of the unknown. The longer he looked at those eyes the quicker all the many years of discipline that controlled his fears and hungers came undone by that voracious gaze. He wanted--needed--to run, somewhere, anywhere, but there was nowhere to go, as trapped as he was in the eye of the storm. Kurayami had him fenced in on all sides. He couldn’t see a thing through the mist—and he *did not* want to charge ahead and touch the misty walls the creature had erected around him. There was something so cold and alone about those eyes. Tears like rain. Hunger unfulfilled. Immortal. It was like Kage’s power, but more so, because the sorrow came from within himself, called forth by a voice he could not resist.

Kurayami’s great unblinking eyes smiled sorrowfully and her suffering hunger drove him to his knees.

“Ashikawa!” Alek cried.

*He can hear you not, dhampir,* came a voice. It was not Debra’s, yet it was every bit as strong and sensual in his head. This one was much younger, the lilting voice of a little girl distorted by the echoes of time and seduction. *Only Kurayami can hear you. Now there is nothing.*

*No,* he told her. *There is me!*

Kurayami laughed as if that meant nothing to her and her laughter was like the sound of evening rain and mourning doves. The sound beat him down. And before Alek had a chance to answer, to even react, the Floating Dragon had swept him up in her iron grasp.

Robyn Wright was awakened by a sound outside the subway car, a screeking noise. Beside her slept her little boy, Danny. For a while she couldn't understand why the sound had awakened her. It wasn't loud. But it was peculiar, even in a city as peculiar as New York. The sound of nails scraping on a blade. She looked around the car, at all the other passengers. The train had an odd mixture of homeless drunks, hip young executive types with portfolios, and teens with drunken, dangerous eyes. When she looked at them they looked back at her with their usual city-reserve of angst. She turned around, simultaneously finding the brass knuckles in her purse and looking through the hand-smeary window.

But all she saw was the dizzy blur of the tunnel, the dirty steam, the stations and the people with their coats blown by the passing line. Maybe she was dreaming. Nightmaring. Maybe she should have taken a cab and stayed out of the underground. But it wasn't night and the city belonged to the humans. Still...she had an uneasy feeling. Oh what difference did it make? At least she wasn't alone. And the vampires wouldn't attack her during the day. She had thought to take a cab, really she did, but then she remembered a lot of horror movies where the cabbie turned out to be a human familiar or whatever it was and had decided to go this route instead.

For a long time she sat there, watching the line, reasoning, and yet expecting to see someone. But no one was there. Everything was so goddamn normal. She wondered briefly where Alek was, what he was doing. She thought about Edward Ashikawa and she shuddered. Finally, she returned back in her seat.

Kage was standing there in his black coat and vampire-white skin, standing amidst the other passengers. He had been there the whole time, she supposed, Charlie behind him. It was only now that he chose that she see them. And that was terrifically horrible to see. But what was worse was that he had her sleeping son in his arms, Danny's head cushioned against his inhuman heart. She expected it. She was appalled to see her son lying so still in the vampire's arms and sucking his thumb as if he were safe at home in bed, a victim of Kage's iron will, but she was not afraid. She had seen too much, gone too far, to ever be afraid again.

"You bastard...let Danny go!" she cried as she jumped to her feet, surprised by her own rage. The other passengers looked her way like she was crazy. Like she was talking to herself. And she probably was, in their perspective. She was crazy, but she was crazy with rage.

Kage stared blankly at her through his black glasses. She saw herself in them, her own pale, incoherent anger that was nothing but a mask to hide the primal, underlying fear all her kind had for monsters. After a moment he seemed to come to a decision, and without warning he turned in his long coat and grabbed and missed one of a pair of homeless men huddled together on the seat behind him. At least...Robyn thought he missed. Then she saw one of the homeless men seem to fold in on himself, his eyes big and angry and mystified as his head dropped into his hands like a toppling stone. He died clutching it while the other passengers jumped away from the spillage of blood like a flock of frightened animals scenting an unseen predator in their midst.

Robyn was numb. Somebody's elbow slammed into her shoulder, knocking her back into her seat. She tried to move, but the press of bodies was too great.

Eruption.

Kage turned back, his black glasses ribbed with droplets of crimson. He smiled. Smiled and showed her his tiny yellow cattish teeth.

Robyn screamed, her whole body agonized with the noise. She screamed and twisted against the frightened flock of passengers until arms--Charlie's arms--suddenly took her from behind and she folded but was unable to slump to the floor like the dead man. Dead man. She looked again at Kage--really she had never stopped--and the site of him tore a new scream her throat and she began to thrash but the arms around her were too strong and all she managed to do was bash her skull repeatedly against Charlie's chin until he grunted and the rapid impacts began to make darkness leak into her eyes like ink.

"Robyn," said Kage with that cattish smile.

Robyn stopped and tried to kick out, twisting in Charlie's arms, the need to survive so strong she could do nothing to stop herself. Charlie was human. Charlie could be harmed. She thought about that and decided she desperately needed to land the brass knuckles in a vulnerable spot. SING, she thought. Solo plexus, instep, nose or groin. The streets had taught her well. Yet right now she simply could not think, could not stop twisting and trying to escape.

Still holding her son with practically no effort at all, Kage stepped over the headless dead man and reached for someone in a business suit who had clambered against the sub wall to escape the chaos. Kage grabbed the man by the cheek, racking the man's skull against the wall over and over until the spattered shatterproof glass broke and the man's head crumpled apart like a relic in Kage's hand. "Robyn," he growled as he continued to pound the remainder of the skull, even as the rest of the body broke away against the dented tin can wall.

Robyn stopped fighting, yet her body continued to vibrate and sweat and heave with the fear and the endless nightmare.

Kage dropped what he held--crushed bone, red tissue, little more than that--and turned his attention fully on her. Shaking the gore off his hands, he peeled off his glasses. The naked black burning eyes on her were worse than the sight of the mashed head and body of the second man. I won't look, she promised herself, I...will...not...look, goddamnit!

And yet she did, drawn as if by a wire to Kage's face, those holes through eternity that passed for eyes. She felt the room constrict around her to the size of those eyes, those immortal, utterly alien eyes.

Kage blinked as his concentration was broken by the whimpers ringing out. Robyn had been spared being sucked down that damned black hole by a woman trying to crawl between them to the far side of the train on her hands and knees. She was sloshing through the blood and bodies scattered across the floor. What does she expect to do? Robyn thought numbly. Escape? She wanted to laugh at the woman and tell her what a damned fool she was.

But then Kage, her Danny still balanced expertly on his shoulder, reached down and grabbed the woman by the spine as if she had a handle, lifted her up, and slammed her down into the muck of the dead men. The woman stopped trying to escape but she didn't stop the whimpering. Again Kage wrenched her up by the cord of her spin. But this time, instead of slamming her into the floor again, he bit through the crazed flay of the woman's hair and into the back of her neck. Robyn heard two things at once: an audible crunch that echoed about the small space like a thunderclap and a muffled "*Jesus,*" in her ear from Charlie. And then the body of the woman dropped lifelessly to the floor at Kage's feet.

Kage looked up, all bloody smiles and hypnotic gaze, but his feral charms were useless against her this time.

Robyn laughed as she felt the room spin out of control and all feeling left her body at once. She heard rather than felt the brass knuckles clunk to the floor at her feet. She knew Charlie's hands were on her, constricting her, but she couldn't feel them. She couldn't feel anything. It was as if she were being suspended in the dark from some great far point, unable to touch the ground.

Kage growled as he approached her, his spittle full of blood and bones.

And then Robyn's world turned black as she escaped Kage for another place.

## 18

She came to very slowly. She was lying on a strange bed in a strange room. There were elephants painted on silk shoji screens and she remembered that was a sign of good luck. Except she had an enormous headache beating at all sides of her skull, as if the elephants had been trotting through her head. Or rather--as if she had had one too many vodkas before going to bed. Except she had not. She had not worked tonight. She had not drunk. She had not slept. She had been on the subway with Danny...and then...

She suddenly sat bolt upright and the motion was too much for her aching head and a wave of nausea overcame her. Robyn turned her head and vomited all over the side of the bed she was lying on. Then she choked and wiped her mouth on the silk spread. The vomiting was terrible but at least it cleared her head somewhat. She could think and she could remember.

She always threw up when Kage turned his will on her like that.

Kage...

Then she recalled everything, the nightmare onboard the subway, the blood-slathered nightmare that walked like a man. She shuddered uncontrollably when she thought about the thing. Thing. It didn't deserve to be called a man, an animal or anything else. It wasn't even *ahe*. Just a thing. An It.

Kage the It. The horrible, immortal It.

She nearly laughed at that musing, then wondered what the fuck was so funny about death and vampires. She looked around the room, trying to anchor herself in the now, but for a moment she barely recognized her surroundings. She was in a vast bedchamber of the Ryuujuu, the palace of the Dragon King of the Yakuza. She recognized too much of Edward in the furnishings of the place, even in the dark, even in this room she had never slept in before. She studied it, the silk and sapphire bedclothes, the rice paper screens and decorative wall fans and the fragile and heavily veined marble pottery with its assembly of peacock feathers. So much beauty, she reflected, to hide so much ugliness beneath.

She tested herself on her feet. She still felt drunk or sick, like how she felt just before she got a bad case of the flu. Adjoining the room was an elaborate brass and marble bathroom and--more importantly--a

big bottle of painkillers. She took six, then slumped down against the soaking tub, her cheek numbing against the cold bone-white porcelain. And she wondered. She wondered where Danny was. She wondered if Alek would come for her, trapped as she was in the enemy's camp. She wondered what time it was and how long she had been out. Finally, the wondering was too much and that got her going and creeping to the door to discover what had become of everyone.

The door was unlocked and no one appeared to be in the hall outside. But Robyn knew she was being watched. Edward was always watching. He and Kage. They trusted no one. She wandered down a hall. Now she recognized the wing of the house she had been deposited in. Taking a connecting hallway down to a flight of stairs, she wound her way to the ground floor and headed for the study. Along the way she passed the foyer and checked the front door. Locked. Unsurprised by that, she went on into Edward's study.

He was alone. He was dressed in a flowing black kimono embroidered with gold lotus. He had a razor-sharp katana long sword tucked into his red sash. She remembered he always wore the katana, even around the house. He looked ready for battle, as always. Yet he was sitting very quietly on the window seat, his attention fixed on the courtyard beyond. He had a glass of scotch in one hand but it looked untouched. For a moment Robyn looked around, certain she would see Kage here somewhere, lurking in some corner--Kage had surely been the one to pour his master the scotch, after all--yet he was conspicuously absent.

"Where's Danny?" Robyn whispered. She was so scared, yet so tired too.

Edward never looked away from the window. "Safe. Kage is looking after him."

"I want to see my son, Edward."

Edward sighed. "Do you honestly think I would harm Danny?"

Tears welled up in Robyn's eyes, yet they were not tears of worry. No, she seriously doubted Edward would harm Danny. Nevertheless, she was helpless, as helpless as Danny was. The fatigue was suddenly too much. The horror. There was no escape from Edward Ashikawa. No escape from this fucking city at all. "Goddamn you," she said, hoarse. "I don't know *what* you're capable of anymore. I don't know who you are. You're as alien to me as Kage."

Edward turned to her, stunned. "How dare you damn me after what you have done," he whispered. "After how you betrayed me."

She almost laughed. She wanted to dash that Waterford crystal out of Edward's hand, wanted to grind the glass to shards and stab it through that empty place in his chest that passed for a heart. The place where once a heart had beat, a very long time ago. She sank bonelessly into a chair and lit a cigarette to keep from shaking. Funny, but Edward had never smoked until she came into his life. They had shared so much of themselves with each other. It had beat for her once in that same long ago time, his heart. It had. But that was what the men told you, she reminded herself. They said I love you just before they hurt you. That was their way. That was the way of the world.

And she had been a fool to forget that.

The cigarette would not light. The pack had been too dampened by her tears.

"I only want to be free of you, you bastard!" she wept suddenly, almost hysterical. She dashed the



cigarettes and lighter to the floor. *"How dare you hold me against my will!"*

Edward's eyes halved and his glass seemed to sing with some unspent power. "You love him."

Robyn ran her hands through her hair. "Who?" she spat.

"Your beautiful lover, your knight in shining armor," Edward whispered savagely. "I mean your *dampir*."

Robyn shook her head, mystified.

"You don't know."

"Know what?" she demanded, standing up.

Edward flashed his cold eyes at her, and then turned back to the window. After a moment, he signaled her to join him. Robyn was completely reluctant. It was a trick. It had to be. Men were good at that, tricking. Tricking and hurting. But after a few passing minutes she realized there really was something out there, something going on in the courtyard interesting enough to capture his attention. No small feat where Edward Ashikawa was concerned. He had seen it all. There was little that interested him anymore.

The curiosity and the silence pressed in and forced her forward. Robyn crossed the room until she was a safe distance from Edward--what distance would that be? her cynical mind chided--but was still able to peer through the grand bay window. Down there was Edward's magnificent courtyard, the trees and fountains she knew so well. The peahens. But there was also a powerful mist blanketing the earth. As Robyn watched it twist and flow, she thought she saw creatures moving at the edges of it, flickering like lightning, yet she could only see them clearly out of the corners of her eyes.

So it was no normal mist.

It was Kurayami, the Floating Dragon.

And she had a victim tonight. Two to be exact.

The one victim was human. Robyn could tell by the ghastly site of him, how his emaciated figure hung like a coat on a rack within the mist, his face white and lifeless, his limbs mere sticks, his skin as brittle as old leather as the gaki sucked the life and juices slowly and painfully from his once-young body. Soon it would drop to the ground, a body no longer, a mere crispy husk, his life, his very soul, stolen to feed Edward's ravenous mist vampire. Robyn did not know the man personally who had become Kurayami's latest victim, but she thought she recognized him from one of Edward's offices as someone who had worked for him. Someone who had done some menial tasks for him or something. Someone who had betrayed him, she supposed.

But the other one...the leather greatcoat, the long lacy-black hair, the face and hands so perfect like rare white jade...

"Jesus," Robyn whispered. "Let him go, Edward," she said. *"Let him fucking go, Goddamn you!"* She nearly grabbed Edward's arm, then changed her mind at the last moment and grabbed a hold of the window seat instead. There were tears in her eyes, despite her will--her *wanting* --to halt them, and they turned the whole

scene into an eerie, dreamlike mosaic.

“You truly love him,” Edward said, his voice dead like his eyes.

“Please don’t kill him,” Robyn said, hating the childlike, pleading quality of her voice, hating it.

“Please...I’ll stay with you and do what you want, but don’t harm him.”

“Robyn,” Edward said with enormous patience, “does he look harmed to you?” He indicated the whole lurid scene with his upraised glass. “You’ve slept a whole day, my dear. In fact, that other unfortunate young man has been here for only a fourth of the time your valiant knight has. Kurayami has had the dhampir for almost twenty hours now.”

Dhampir again.

Robyn frowned and dismissed the word. Twenty hours--but that wasn’t impossible. It took Kurayami no more than four or five hours to emaciate and kill a full-grown man. If what Edward said was true...that meant the gaki had been feeding off Alek for four times as long as the dead man. It just wasn’t possible. Except for his apparent lack of consciousness, he looked perfectly normal, no aging, no decay at all. She racked her brain for an answer, trying to remember all the folklore she knew or had learned about mist vampires, about slayers. The only way he could possibly survive Kurayami...well, that was if he had her power--or a power similar to it.

Robyn felt her heart sink and her breath catch like a claw in her throat. She didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to know, but she had to. “What’s a dhampir?” she said.

Edward sipped his drink. “You might say,” he said, “that it is the folly of a vampire’s passion and a human woman’s stupidity.”

Again Robyn looked at Alek. Really looked at him. He didn’t look real. He looked like an automaton or a great beautiful doll, something not human and only painted to look human. Something that missed being human by a hair’s breadth. Something far too perfect to pass for human. Dhampir. He had felt human when she touched his hands. His downcast, perpetually hurting eyes were human. He was human, and yet not. Dhampir. No. He wasn’t Kage. He wasn’t an It. He was strong and perfect, and capable of protecting her from an imperfect world...

“Poor Robyn. You still don’t understand.”

“He isn’t...”

“He is,” Edward said. “He is human, in his way, I suppose. Yet he has their hunger. He plays their games. And if you stay with him, Robyn my love, he will rip you apart in time.”

Robyn stepped back, away from the window.

Edward saw her horror. And then he turned the last screw. “You might as well be in love with Kage,” he whispered.

“You fucking liar!” This time Robyn did strike the glass from Edward’s hand. The glass shattered against the vast picture window, the amber liquid running down the glass like the tears on her face that she could no longer hold back. Turning away from the window and the endless nightmare she called life, Robyn raced from the room.

Kage watched the girl flee from the Ryuujin's study. He was crouched on a ledge halfway up the tall eastern wall of the foyer, the bleeding light of the stained glass window washing over his leather greatcoat like a spillage of blood. The girl never noticed him. Few ever did, and only if he chose so.

The sun was coming up and he felt wearied by it. It had been a very long night, a lot of activity, and he had not had much time for nourishment. Not even to feed on the humans he had killed. He had thought about the blood in those bodies, two gallons apiece--how he hated to waste such things--but there was Charlie to think of. Feeding was like...well, it was a lot like sex. So he had done nothing about the blood. He had washed the incident from the other passengers' memories and replaced it with the details of some terrorist incident, which was easy in a city as terror-stricken as New York. And then he had taken Danny and Charlie had taken the girl and both of them had returned home. But Kage could sense that the master was still not happy. The moment he arrived the Ryuujin had asked that he watch over the boy, a task he found increasingly difficult to perform--even more difficult than reweaving that clot of passenger's memories--when all he could think about was the warm, glowing human bodies all about him. The life-giving juices in them...

Kage shook himself back to the present. The girl had retreated upstairs to hide in her room, and so Kage leapt down off his perch and headed for the study. The room faced west over the courtyard, sparing him the apocalypse of morning light. Yet the daylight was no less painful to endure. The brightness of the window made Kage squint and sent a worm of reluctance crawling down his spine. He hung undecidedly in the doorway until the Ryuujin sensed his presence and turned his way.

"Danny?" the Ryuujin asked.

"I left him with the men, my Ryuujin. Forgive me."

"I..." The Ryuujin went to retrieve his fallen glass, but his eyes were pinned on Kage's face. "I suppose it's my turn to say you look unwell."

"Not unwell, my Ryuujin."

"Ah." The Ryuujin looked at his empty glass. "Come here."

Kage did, despite the glaring agony of the window.

"You did well, Kage," the Ryuujin said with quiet affection as he tuned to pull the drawstring and the heavy velvet drapes shushed closed over the window, blocking out the light and the courtyard and the dhampir still suffering Kurayami's power. "Your plan worked exactly. But tell me...how did you know the dhampir would come here?"

Kage bowed his head. "You honor me." He thought about telling the truth, that he had planted the suggestion in the dhampir's mind and that the creature was only reacting to Kage's will by coming here, as everyone who stood in his way did--but Kage found himself hesitant to reveal that. He had never been

comfortable with explaining his power, even to his Ryuujin. It was worse than trying to explain the different subspecies of immortal to a human being. Worse than feeding in front of one, the sexual frenzy witnessed. There was something about his power that made him feel terribly odd, as if he were an alien creature with no right to exist in this world. So in the end he opted to say, "I knew his mind well enough to know he would choose a forward confrontation." It wasn't a lie, really. In time the dhampir *would* choose the offense. Kage knew that innately upon meeting the whelp the first time--he was young, passionate, unbroken by the years like most of their kind were. Kage simply did not have the patience to wait around for all of it to come to pass, so he had pushed the dhampir to make the inevitable decision earlier than expected.

The Ryuujin nodded, and Kage used that moment of beaming silent approval to take his master's empty glass and courier it over to the wet bar. He should feel exonerated. Rewarded. Happy. Yet he just wanted to sleep. Sleep and be done with this all. As he poured fresh ice and scotch into the glass he heard the great Ryuujin say, "I would honor you further, if you will allow me to."

Kage looked at the stainless steel decanter on the bar. Yes, he could use to be honored, and very soon, too, before the craving overwhelmed him completely.

"No, Kage. I would honor you."

Kage turned at that, the ice in the glass clinking together. He was stunned. It was rare he was offered such a gift as this. The Ryuujin himself. His blood. Rarer still, that the Ryuujin offered it to him with the option of refusing. It was Kage's duty to serve the Ryuujin, not to be served by him. But this was a gift he was being offered, and no Japanese man with any self-respect turned down a gift, or a gift-giver.

The Ryuujin unbuttoned the two top buttons of his white dress shirt and bared his throat.

Kage stopped breathing and the drink he was preparing for his master was completely forgotten. Dragon's blood, he thought, and from the throat of the Dragon himself. His mouth was suddenly deep with teeth and saliva, his body wracked with a desire so powerful he heard an animal-like whimper catch in his own throat at the sight. The Ryuujin should not see him like this, Kage thought, not like this. Not with his eyes like this. Not as if he were something alien to this world.

Alien and unknown to it. And then the sorrow was there inside Kage like a sob and Kage closed his eyes.

"Don't hide yourself from me," the Ryuujin whispered sagely. "Come to me."

Kage did. He touched his master, the backs of his fingernails grazing the sacred flesh, amazed with it, with the Ryuujin himself. That a man should want him like this. That a man should tolerate his presence.

Yet he hesitated. He remembered the passenger in the subway, the snap of bones and juices as he bit deep into her spinal column. He should not touch the Ryuujin with such a mouth...and yet, savage that he was, he did. He was offered a gift as a man and he took it, knowing he was only an animal. How great you are, my lord, he thought, to offer such kindness to such a beast as I! He leaned forward and kissed the sacred skin as if it were the fragile white flesh of a lily, or a fruit waiting to be opened to the senses, and in that kiss he tasted the sweet nectar of the Dragon Lord's blood, nearly swooning in the sensation of it burning on his tongue and at the back of his throat.

How great Man was.

He felt her lips on him. Everywhere. He was well aware that she was feeding on him, taking him in fluttery little kisses, her killing sweet and slow and seductive, yet he was unable to react. It was like a whisper in the dark, her killing him. A whisper on his skin. Except it echoed everywhere within him and without him and all around him. At first it was like the tickle of a tongue, an arousing and uneasy feeling. Now he felt the pain of it as she drank deep of his strength, leaving behind only her own yawning emptiness. The emptiness that was becoming him. The emptiness that he was filling moment by moment.

Her felt her gnashing teeth, her undying years...

*Kurayami!*

She did not hear his voice, or chose not too. She seemed too enthralled by her power over him.

The pain intensified. Now it was less like a hungry woman's mouth and more like the jagged cuts of a blade. Like tearing. Like bleeding from within...

Alek shivered and felt a gnawing ache grow inside his belly and loins. He knew that ache all too well; it had a sister ache in the back of his mouth. He sucked back a breath as new pain ripped mercilessly through him. He tasted his own blood from the tongue slashed in his mouth by his own teeth. The blood was like water on a fire, like wine. He needed it. Needed it so badly. Needed more. So much more...

*Kurayami...*

The gaki crooned in response, her voice lilting and mischievous. She had begun to sing, such was her passion--a long wordless dirge that spoke only of primal desire met, hunger sated. She twisted, first this way and then that, like a lover in the throes of climax. And then, suddenly, the body of the young man she had turned her attention on some time ago dropped lifelessly to the ground far below. Alek saw it there, crumpled and finished. Like an insect. The boy had held on a long time, or so it seemed. It was impossible to tell. Time no longer had any meaning. After the first few hours Alek had lost his grasp of time. He wondered how long he had been here, lost in Kurayami's pain and years and endless hunger, if it could be measured in hours or days, or something longer still.

No...the boy proved that it had not been long. Not long at all. A few hours. He wasn't lost yet, he decided. Just trapped. For what seemed the hundredth time he tried to focus all his remaining strength and psi power on finding his fallen sword...but the pain--he grimaced--the pain was too great, too distracting. He was drowning in the *tearing* -

*KURAYAMI!*

The cry cut like a blade through the veil of mist. Yet it was not his cry, he suddenly realized.

Something stirred in the mist, something there with them, yet something he had not noticed until now. Something there but apart from them in shape and form.

Kurayami's great silvery eyes blinked open. And for the very first time he saw them half and a childlike shadow of fear come alive in them.

*Kurayami not afraid!* the gaki insisted. *What have Kurayami to fear?*

*Me.*

Someone was there beside him, between himself and the gaki. Alek saw the woman, her writhing black hair and gown, her eyes as dark and seething as blood rubies in the dark. She looked at Alek and Alek recognized the predatory gleam in her face, the stubborn concentration there, the love and the power. *Where would I be without you, beloved?* he wondered.

Debra smiled but it was not a smile of happiness. Instead, it was one of pure, unadulterated greed. Wantonness. She had no intention of allowing Kurayami to harm him. She loved him, but she also *possessed* him. He was her toy, her tormented captor, her greatest passion. And Debra had never been one to share her toys.

Kurayami reacted to the affront at once and tried to snatch up her new foe as she had snatched up countless other victims, but failed because Debra existed beyond life--and certainly beyond even Kurayami's powerful grip. The realization hit Kurayami the same time it did Alek: the gaki had no power over Debra because Debra was dead, and the gaki, though unnatural, was still very much bound to the rules of the living world. The gaki growled like a storm, her eyes cruel with childish fury. Then her mist-like substance reshaped itself into a fearsome reptilian creature full of teeth and horns, an only dreamt-of nightmare out of fable and folklore. Her powerful jaws agape, the mist dragon leapt forward, roaring like a lioness at Debra.

Debra snarled in response and threw out her arms and the vast web work of her hair. And each strand of her ebony hair reshaped itself into a serpent with a great pair of rapacious fangs that sank deep into Kurayami's mist-flesh. Kurayami roared anew, but this time in pain and anguish. She threw back her head, trying to loosen the medusan tangles of Debra's hair. Debra's hair only unfurled farther and wound like unbreakable silken cords around the girth of Kurayami's body. Moments passed as the dreamlike struggle between the two vampiresses went on and on, and soon it became nearly impossible to tell where Debra ended and Kurayami began. The two seemed to merge, black on white, and tangle like threads with no beginning and no end. The earth growled and the air became charged like the sky before lightning was about to strike.

Alek smelled the ozone, felt the tear in the damp cold cocoon all about him. For a moment there almost seemed to be a pocket...he reached through it with all of his mind and power and sought and found the sword lying on the ground not far from the body of Kurayami's last victim. *Come to me?* he thought, and scarcely before he had even completed the thought he felt the smooth hilt of the sword slide into the palm of his left hand. He clenched it and felt the power that was himself and Debra and the Double Serpent Katana--that power that was them and was not them, that was more than them--couple and expand like a seething nuclear explosion-

Stars fell. Time passed.

Alek opened his eyes and found himself on the ground, his hot cheek cooling against the flat of the blade. Someone was shaking him. Rising slowly, feeling drained and weary and hungry, so hungry, he glanced upward. He expected to see Debra's mischievous smile...but was he dreaming? No. The Floating Dragon was there, hovering over him like an angry storm cloud, her eyes and her great carnivorous canines glittering like steel. It was she who had shaken him, as if to gain his attention. Shaken him...or

tried to take him back into herself when she had no strength left.

As he watched, she bared those teeth in a hungry catlike hiss. *Dhampir mine!* she said in his mind.

“Think again, bitch.”

Kurayami roared, her voice tearing through his clothing and flesh like knives. Then she dived at his head.

Alek rolled out of the way, took the hilt of the sword in a two-handed grip, and brought it up in an arch that cut through her belly as if it were flesh and not mist. The sword, as was its nature, hungrily sucked up whatever it encountered. Kurayami screamed as the sword laid her open and ate her out. Alek gasped as the sword grew first warm and then hot, scorching, in his hand. He grimaced and willed his hands to open, but he couldn't let go of the hilt; it felt welded to the palms of his hands. Hissing, the pain almost more than he could bare, he dropped to the ground on his knees, the sword cooking the flesh of his hands even as it absorbed the last of the gaki's spilt power and sent veins of it spitting along his arm and down his back like a loosened electrical charge.

With a cry, Alek heaved the sword to the ground. Finally, it deemed to let him go and Alek released the hilt. He was trembling so badly from the bolts of wild energy in the sword that he doubted he had the concentration to lift it again had he needed to, had *hedared*. Instead, he rolled onto his back, his entire body aflutter with power, his hair and clothing hot and sentient around him, fingernails clawing the earth for purchase as the power made his body arch with agony. His back and skull slammed into the ground over and over, compulsively, until the power waned and finally gave him up.

He dropped like a rock. Exhausted, he watched through a veil of tears as Kurayami's mist unraveled in the sky above him. For a moment she was limned like a shadow in the purplish glow of the new morning light, and then the light overcame her outline and she simply vanished with a long low groan of anguish and a sob that seemed almost human.

For a very long time Alek did nothing but simply lay there, shivering ever so often as the overabundance of power drained out of him in sweating trembles. He felt exhausted through and through. Finished. He'd never rise again, never move again...

*Beloved...really?*

Someone touched him again, but this time a someone he knew. He felt a woman's soft, coaxing lips on his own, then on his throat, over the pulse, then lower, the touch of them fluttery and cool over the sweating flesh of his chest and stomach, then lower still. Alek sat up and the sensation vanished as the sword slid effortlessly and with no pain into his palm. The feeling was only a shadow but it left behind the echoes of the mischievous laughter of the woman he knew too well, the one he was beholden too in this world as much as the next.

## 21

Kage stopped drinking the precious blood of his master the moment he spied the flare of light from beyond the drapes. For a moment even the heavy black fabric could not block the sunburst of bleeding

vermillion light that turned the study a lurid shade of red. Then the light vanished and he heard Kurayami scream in agony and defeat.

The Dragon King forced Kage back and went to the window. The skin of his throat was scraped raw by Kage's teeth, yet he did not seem to notice. The drapes parted and he swore violently at the sight of the Slayer. The sun was up, but Kage had fed well enough for the light to affect him no worse than a bad sunburn. He blinked against the piercing day and focused through the tears in his eyes on the figure of the man in the courtyard, the one in the flowing, sentient black coat and hair.

The dhampir. The Slayer.

Kage was speechless. The danger was upon them and Kage felt the war fever rise in him like the hunger had risen earlier: urgent and volcanic. Yet when the Ryuujin turned to him, Kage resisted the urge to throw himself through the glass at the dhampir and instead concentrated all his attention on the master in front of him.

"So he's free," The Ryuujin's voice was uncommonly sedate. His eyes moved as he spoke, but otherwise he was still. "Take Danny down to your quarters and guard him with your life, Kage. I will keep the Slayer at bay here."

Kage was torn. He had two first duties in his life and they were to both obey and protect the master at any and all costs to himself, and right now the order he had been given was an enormous conflict. He must obey the Ryuujin's every order, but to do so would be to leave him to deal with the Slayer alone, with not so much as even Kurayami to protect him. That could not be. Could not.

"My Ryuujin..." Kage began. "I will not--*I cannot*--leave you."

The Ryuujin looked at him. His eyes were solemn. "Kage...Danny is your master now. Go to him." Then he turned to the window and drew his katana from the red silk sash of his kimono.

The Ryuujin, in his great wisdom and goodness, knew exactly what Kage was suffering and how to resolve it. With those words he had passed the mantle of master onto the boy. No, Kage's mind amended, he had passed the mantle down to the new master. Kage felt as if he were falling, such was his sudden fear. He knew that one day that mantle would indeed be passed on--but it would be in a long and very complex ceremony, a drinking of tea and blood, his hands bound with black silk to those of the young man who would succeed the Ryuujin as master of the vampire Kage.

Danny now was the master. And Danny was with the other human men. Unprotected.

Unprotected.

The word beat at Kage's thoughts like a windblown bird against a windowpane.

*Unprotected.*

The terror was suddenly too great. Too great, even, for his loathing of the dhampir. Putting the old Ryuujin out of his mind as if the man no longer existed, Kage virtually flew to Danny's side.



It took several moments for Alek to orient himself. For a moment as his head cleared and his senses returned to him he found himself staring at the rising sun, the way it touched the length of stainless steel in his hand with fire. The sun did not disturb him and never had. He was too human. But too wickedly tired to care one way or the other. Tired and...hungry.

He turned to stare up at the big bay window where Ashikawa and Kage had been having their little tête-à-tête only a moment ago. Now only Ashikawa remained, his sword drawn, his eyes pinning Alek like the eyes of a bird of prey, cold and unforgiving...

Alek groaned as a pang of need hit him so hard it nearly doubled him over. It was pain like in the alley last night, but pain of the worse kind because he could not resist it this time. So hard he had worked at not allowing this to happen, so fucking hard! So much control and meditation was used to curb the hunger, and now all that work had been wasted. He seethed as another and much greater hunger cramp clutched him in iron claws. Instead of letting it drop him to the ground, Alek harnessed the pain and used its momentum to leap at the bay window a good two stories above him. The impact shattered glass in every direction. Glass blew in like daggers upon the Ryuujin even as the man took several hasty steps backwards. Glass rained down on them both as Alek vaulted through the window and landed in a writhing crouch on the window seat.

The Ryuujin of the Yakuza stood his ground, the sword resting against his outer thigh. Alek had to give the man credit for his courage. To face down and control a vampire like Kage was an astonishing feat. But for a human man to face down Hunger itself was incredible. But there, just beneath the courage in his eyes, was the fear. Primal. Natural. Alek felt for him. He wanted this no more than the man, but fate and chance had put enmity between them. He knew Ashikawa would never let him go without a fight, especially now that he felt threatened on his own ground. Alek showed the man his teeth, knowing that as long as Edward Ashikawa had that inborn fear of predation he would not make any bold moves that Alek might or might not be able to fend off in his present state of weakness.

The man almost seemed to read his mind. He stepped forward, his eyes locked on Alek's in blatant challenge, and said, "Kurayami has drained you, dhampir, even as you drained her...so what harm can you bring to me?"

That was true enough, but Alek couldn't let that show. Instead, he started climbing like a great black cat down off the window seat and onto the floor. Unfortunately, another hunger pang cramped his stomach to the point of agony and he dropped to the floor instead of climbing gracefully down. His sword clanked against the hardwood and for a moment afterward he was aware of himself scrabbling among the broken glass for a grip to push himself back onto his knees. Edward Ashikawa made no move to rush him while he did so. He still seemed afraid, even now, at Alek's weakest point. His eyes kept flicking this way and that about the room as if expecting an unseen ambush at any moment.

"Her name is Debra," Alek whispered through hair and teeth and the pain like a fist in his gut.

"Ah. Should we be expecting her, dhampir?"

"I think I can handle you."

“Are you so sure?” Ashikawa asked a moment before he attacked, his sword fully extended. Alek had no choice but to try and avoid the falling sword. He rolled out of the way and used his coat as a buffer. The sword slipped harmlessly past his shoulder as he avoided Ashikawa’s frontal assault. After a moment he returned the assault with a savage swipe of his hand that was more animal than warrior. Ashikawa, either seeing it or sensing it in some way, changed the sword’s trajectory in mid-strike and sliced Alek’s palm open.

Gasping in shock and pain, Alek dropped his sword and grasped his wounded hand, shuffling sideways to avoid a second cut of the blade. This time the sword landed with a solid *thunk* into the window seat, splitting wood. Desperate, Alek kicked at Ashikawa’s hand and the sword slipped sideways out of the man’s grip.

Ashikawa let the sword go and side-kicked Alek in the face. The force of the blow snapped Alek’s head around and slammed him like a boneless doll into a tall antique bookcase, making it rock and dump its load of books and porcelain atop him in a pelting, shattering rain. But Alek recovered quickly from the blow, as severe as it was. *Too severe*, Debra whispered. Alek nodded and moved sideways again to avoid the shelf as it crashed down against the floor with a massive *breezywhomp*, scattering books and manuscripts everywhere across the study.

Again Ashikawa came at him, relentless, his eyes fixed on his intended prey. This time Alek saw the man diving at him in the midst of a Gung Fu swan dive and he narrowed his eyes and snarled in response. And the sight must have been enough of a distraction because Ashikawa seemed to lose his concentration long enough for Alek to grab his ankle in mid-air and twist him over onto his back on the floor. Ashikawa let out a grunt as Alek snapped his anklebone, but the man made no other indication that he was severely hurt. In fact, even as Alek threw himself over the man and tried to get Ashikawa in a submission hold, he felt the man react—not out of fear or pain, but out of perfect discipline. As if in slow motion, Alek saw the man’s hand snap out for his throat. He tried to pull back but at the same moment yet another hunger cramp seized him and made him helpless to react.

And then Ashikawa had him by the throat, the ring and index finger of his left hand on the pulse points on both sides under Alek’s ears. Alek tried to jerk backward but Ashikawa applied warning pressure, halting his momentum in dead stride. He needed to move but dared not; a bit more pressure and Edward Ashikawa could yank two gaping holes in the most vulnerable place on his entire body.

The Ryujin of the Yakuza smiled. “You see, dhampir, I know more about your kind than most other humans. One move and you die as easily as anyone else I ever killed.” His eyes burned. “Now yield.”

Alek’s hands twitched on the floor, but he dared not move even them. He dared not breathe in that moment.

“*Yield!*” An inch more pressure.

“Yield,” he whispered.

Edward Ashikawa let him go.

And Alek palm-heelled him under the nose, snapping Ashikawa’s head back against the floor. The blow should have knocked the man out cold; instead, Ashikawa came back roaring, all street fighter now, the gauntlet thrown. Both of his fists slammed into Alek’s shoulders with bone-grating power, knocking the breath out of Alek’s lungs. As Alek staggered to his feet, struggling to recover, Ashikawa followed through by leaping effortlessly to his feet and simultaneously jabbing both palm heels into Alek’s

breastbone. The force of the blow lifted Alek up off the ground for the smallest fraction of a second and then hurled him back into the desk at the far side of the room. The desk did not simply crumble but exploded into tinder under Alek's weight. For one dizzying moment Alek found himself moored in the remnants of it. Then he shook himself around to full consciousness and crawled out of the jagged remains, his coat in virtual tatters. Ashikawa. . .he was so goddamn strong. It wasn't natural...

A moment later he collapsed to the floor as the greatest pang of all hit him and turned his whole world red. The pain was like steel claws in his belly, scraping him open and spilling his empty guts to the floor. He almost expected to see himself lying inside out.

A foot landed close to his head, then another. Ashikawa.

Alek flipped over onto his side and clenched himself down like a vice around the craving. Sweating through the pain and the need, he gritted his teeth and whispered, "If you value your life...leave me... alone." Alek's eyes squeezed out tear after tear as the pain waxed and waned inside of him like a silent hungry howl.

"*You are warning me ?*" Ashikawa asked as if it were all a joke. Or some kind of new deception

"You live with a vampire...you know what's happening," Alek gasped out from between his clenched teeth, fighting back the cancer eating him alive from the inside out. Nothing he did seemed to fight it, nothing at all. It was an invisible enemy. Something unharmed by teeth or claws or a sword. Something he simply could not fight. "Touch me now..." Alek whispered as his body shivered feverishly, "...and you die."

Something clanked down beside Alek's head. A stainless steel decanter? He didn't understand it, but the aromatic scent of what it contained commanded him. He snatched it up and brought it to his lips...yes...sucking up the viscous black substance in the container...oh yes. Cold and very old--at least by a day or more-but still good. Still enough to stop the pain. He gulped it down like an animal, mouth and tongue and teeth, much of it going up his nose and over his chin in his greed. Yet his famished body absorbed the blood in any way it could, his mouth and nose, the very pores of his face where they made contact with the substance. He was drinking it in every way possible, not unlike how his sword drank whatever power or substance it encountered. He drank and drank, letting it quell the disaster inside of him...

Yet the moment the pain subsided, the moment the pain let him go, he dashed away the decanter still a quarter full. Blood spattered the floor like a massacre. He had discipline, damnit, and the last thing he needed was to go all the way. Others did that. And those others never came back. Not ever. He snuffled and pushed himself back onto his hands and knees and wiped at his face with the heels of his hands. He was conscious of being watched by his enemy, and that Edward Ashikawa was doing it with a disturbing mixture of revulsion and pity. This was like the alley again...how like a wheel was life. Alek watched him back from under the unruly tangles of his hair, glad for it because he face burned and he felt no less human than now, to be seen like this, drinking like an animal...

How he hated that look. As if Ashikawa were better than him, if only because he was more human.

"How incredible you are," Ashikawa said with something like admiration.

"You did this to me," Alek snarled. He wiped the remaining blood off his mouth with his fingers and dashed the droplets away. "Why help me?"

Ashikawa said, "As you say--I did it to you." He sighed. "Actually, it's a matter of honor. Something you know remarkably little about." He looked disappointed.

"I don't understand." Alek could stand now, and so he did, even weak and wavering the way he was. Better he stand than kneel here before Ashikawa like a servant.

I must look a sight, he thought to himself.

*You look delicious, beloved,* Debra answered.

She would think so.

"You are so American," Ashikawa said. He went to retrieve his fallen sword.

He seemed to be walking very well, as if the broken ankle had mended already, even though that should have been impossible for a human. But for Edward Ashikawa? "You shame your human heritage. Let me explain, dhampir: You warned me off at the moment of your greatest danger to me. I was simply returning the favor, lest I stay beholden to you forever."

Alek pulled his coat close over his ruined shirt. The coat too had absorbed the blood, and its tears were reweaving themselves at a phenomenal speed, like stop-action photography. As if that too was alive. "Good to know we can kill each other like civilized men," he said warily.

Ashikawa smirked. "Something like that. Now yield, Slayer," he said, extending the sword's point at Alek. "Yield for good and I will let you walk out of here today. Fight me and you will never again know another Hunter's Moon."

"I'll yield when you let Robyn and Danny go."

Again Ashikawa sighed. He looked about to pontificate further on that when the door of the study suddenly crashed open and several of his men poured in. Alek recognized them as the ones who had been patrolling the grounds when he arrived at the house. Professional muscle. He put out his hand and the Double Serpent Katana skipped forward over the debris of the study and slid effortlessly into his palm. More foes. He didn't need this now. Not just now, when he was at less than half his strength.

*I'm here, beloved,* Debra whispered wetly into his ear.

He had forgotten. Tonight was the night of the greatest moon, the Hunter's Moon, and because of that, her power would be at its peak. She would be most able to affect his world. Still, he wondered what she was capable of affecting...

*Watch.*

Ashikawa's men clustered in and looked to him for a signal. The Dragon Lord of the Yakuza simply nodded in response and said, "Kill it," to them.

And then the men as one turned on Alek with their Brownings, Magnums and Desert Eagles--weapons that could tear apart even his immortal flesh. Alek held stock-still, undecided about what to do. But almost from the moment the heavies focused their attention on him, Alek felt it. The men felt it too, because instead of firing, they hesitated, looking around the room for the source of the disturbance.

It was like an electrical charge, subtle and dangerous, a silent growl on the air as if lightning were about to strike. And then, through the broken bay window gusted a sudden black wind and on that wind the angelic, mist-like form of a great bird, a dark phoenix or some kind of giant raven. As indistinct as a dream it wafted in, tendrils of its misty form drifting like loose black flames on the open air. And then it truly did catch fire like a phoenix, the darkness consumed by *awhoosh!* of heatless flames that sent the men scrambling back through the door or behind furniture, terrified of the fearsome creature because they seemed to assume it was the *gaki Kurayami*.

*You are so smart*, Alek thought to the fire bird. Have I told you enough times how wonderful you are?

*No*, Debra answered with a sensual laugh, *but keep trying*, she said as she kept her Glamour in place long enough for him to make a discreet exit out the door.

In the vacant hall outside the study he paused to sheathe his sword and get his bearings. He did not know how long Debra could keep the *Ryuujin* and his men busy, but he hoped it was long enough for him to find a way out of this place. Shaking off the last of the weakness, he followed the hallway down to a further branch of intersecting and identical hallways. Now he felt like a rat in a maze—or at least a man lost in a large and very posh hotel. He tried to guess where he was, but everything looked alike. He doubted he would find his way out simply by wandering around. For one thing, this place was enormous and he was almost certain to be trapped by *Ashikawa's* men when they realized Debra's phoenix was only an illusion.

The best he could do was to make an educated guess. The study faced west and the front of the house was east, so if he kept moving in his present direction...

A cry of anguish rose up from somewhere below. It was faint, a very long way off, and only his oversensitive ears picked up on the sound. But it was very familiar. He moved quickly toward the source of the cries and sought and found a set of curving glass stairways that led in their winding way to the vast foyer he had first seen on entering the *Ashikawa* manor. By the time he reached it he discovered the source of the struggle: *Robyn* was on the stairs at the opposite end of the foyer, being manhandled by the young Asian punk from the evening before. As before, his two *hopalong*s were there, *Nunchaku* and *Ponytail*, but all three of them seemed to be having difficulty this time holding the girl.

The moment *Robyn* spied Alek she exploded into a fighting tigress, slamming her elbows into the two boys who had her and simultaneously kicking their leader in the stomach. With a yelp of surprise, the leader flew backward, tumbled over once, and landed at the foot of the stairs. He stared upside down at Alek.

"Motherfucking shit!" the boy growled and twisted around, trying to grab at Alek's ankles and take him down. Alek sidestepped him and the boy grabbed at nothing but air. Again the boy swore and threw himself over, scrambling to his feet with impressive speed and stamina for someone who had just taken a header down a full flight of steps. He looked shaken and there was an ugly bruise on his forehead, but otherwise he looked no worse off than last night as he assumed a light battle stance and flipped out a six-inch switchblade with rust pitting at the guard.

Iron.

The boy smiled savagely, knowingly, at him.

Alek backed up.

“That’s right, asshole. What’s the matter, you not an iron man?”

Alek glanced up at the stairs where the boy’s lackeys now had Robyn in a submission hold. Then he looked at the punk and that damned iron knife. “Let her go, you,” Alek told the boy.

“The name’s Charlie Wing,” the boy spat back venomously. “Didn’t you know I’d get you back? Split your banpaia guts wide open with this motherfucker.” With a twinkle in his eye, he tried to follow through with his promise.

Alek leapt backward, missing the blade of the knife by inches, and grabbed Charlie’s arm at the elbow, breaking it with a simple twist. Charlie gasped with pain. Alek slammed him around into a wall, making him drop the knife. Alek stepped back. Charlie spun around, his one arm hanging uselessly at his side, and eyed him through his haze of pain of hate. Then, spitting out a battle cry, he executed a hook kick intended to swipe Alek’s legs out from under him.

Alek saw it coming as if in slow motion and caught Charlie’s leg in mid-swing and threw him over onto the stairs.

Charlie slammed onto the stairs on his back, grunting on impact. Again, he looked angry, his eyes burning with war, but he wasn’t out for the count. Not just yet. “Fucking banpaia,” he whispered through a bloodied mouth and reached under his coat for his infamous shurikens.

“Don’t,” said Alek.

Charlie drew one out anyway.

Alek kicked him in the side of the head. It was a controlled kick, not meant to kill, and it did its job effectively enough, turning Charlie’s lights out without actually killing the youth. Watching, Alek saw the shurikens drop harmlessly out of Charlie’s limp hand and scatter across the carpet. There they glittered like big fallen quarters.

“Dhampir, asshole,” Alek amended.

There was a truncated yelp of surprise, and then Nanchaku joined his leader at the foot of the steps, the two of them mingling in a large, rowdy lump of bruised flesh and crumpled clothing. Alek looked up. Robyn had one arm free and a great pair of shining brass knuckles on her hand. But Ponytail was in the process of pinning her arms against her back and this time she wasn’t able to swing at him.

Alek started up the stairs.

Someone grabbed his ankle. Charlie Wing. Tenacious fucker. Alek kicked back, mashing the child’s nose against his face with the heel of his boot. Charlie finally lay still.

“Stay where you are.”

Alek looked up the stairs and saw Ponytail had his ornate shirasaya at Robyn’s throat.

Alek stopped and tilted his head. “What’s your name, little boy?” he asked.

Ponytail looked confused for a moment. Then he said, “It’s Rich. And that fine gentleman the bitch did is Xav.”

“Charlie, Rich, and Xav,” Alek said in a low rumble. “I’ll have to remember you three.” He took another step up the stairs, his eyes never leaving Rich’s strained, frightened face. The boy looked as undecided as a puppy that’s lost its master and its direction.

“Stop right here. I’m warning you...”

Alek was almost within reaching distance of Robyn when Rich raised the blade of the shir so it rested against the underside of Robyn’s chin. Robyn stared ahead defiantly.

“Stop!” Rich commanded.

Alek took another step, his eyes now permanently fixed on Rich’s lemur-large eyes.

“You’re killing her!” Rich said. His hand trembled and made the shir nick Robyn’s throat. A trickle of blood began to flow there.

Alek stopped. “You’re going to kill her? Would Ashikawa appreciate that? Rich?”

“You ain’t getting me, you fucking monster!”

Fucking monster. Fucking monster...

Alek felt the rage build. “All my fucking life I’ve had to deal with your kind. You were the reason I was afraid to go to school.”

Rich laughed nervously. “Fuck you.”

Alek narrowed his eyes. “Give me the girl.”

Rich began to shake all over.

Alek took a deep breath and stuck the rage down the mental hole he had dug for everything unpleasant in his life. If he did not get Robyn away from the boy very soon, Rich was going to kill her by accident with that shirasaya. He lowered his voice, making it, not menacing, but persuasive. Seductive. “Let. Her. Go. Rich.”

Something flitted across the boy’s face, a decision...and then he did just that. He let Robyn go, dropped his weapon, and took off up the stairs like the proverbial bat out of hell, his feet thumping like a tattoo on the carpeted steps.

The moment he was gone, Robyn flagged against Alek as if all her strength were gone.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy to see you!” She threw her arms around his neck, her face in his throat, her breasts mashed against his chest so he was all-too-aware of her entire body pressed shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip to his own with nothing to separate them but their clothes. His held her back--sort of. His own body responded accordingly, of course. There was no helping that. He was in need of yet more blood. What Edward Ashikawa had given him had been enough to stanch the pain for the moment, but it had done nothing if not stirred the greedy need within. Even now he could feel his eyes burning as if he had a fever and his teeth felt as hard in his mouth as chips of broken bone. He smelled the blood in her. He smelled the blood in everything. Unwinding her arms, Alek pushed her

gently back and averted his gaze, lest she notice the subtle changes in him.

She looked relieved and tired and unwell. But there was also understanding in her eyes. She knew what she had done to him. Hell, she had felt the results. "I'm sorry," she said.

He forced a smile. "What happened? What are you doing here?"

"Kage happened. I wanted to get away but I couldn't. The things he did..." Something like a commingling of curiosity and fear darkened her eyes. She shook her head. "I thought Kurayami had you."

"She seemed to prefer the other one." It wasn't exactly the truth, but explanations would have to wait. Right now the most important thing was getting the hell out of the house. He finally felt his old self again enough to meet Robyn's eyes evenly. They were so miserable, her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Kage...he has Danny."

Alek nodded. "I think we should just leave for now," he reasoned. Far off--but too far--he could just hear the men assembling. What Debra had done for him was nothing more than a parlor trick. Already it was gone. It would be mere moments and then Ashikawa's henchmen would be pouring out of every doorway of this place. He had to think fast. "I think we can barter for Danny's safety for the tapes. From what I've seen, I don't believe Ashikawa would harm the boy."

"I can't leave Danny!" Robyn insisted.

"We have to get out of here," Alek said as patiently as he could. "I can't fight everyone off right at this minute."

"Then don't. But I'm not leaving without Danny!"

Alek sighed. Of course that meant he wasn't leaving, either.

*I'm sorry...I couldn't any more....*

*I know,* he answered Debra.

"Do you know where Danny is?" Alek asked the girl.

"With Kage, I'm guessing. In the catacombs."

Alek raised his eyebrows. "Catacombs?"

Robyn said, her eyes averted to the hallway where even she could hear the men approaching now, "It's down below. I know them...sort of."

"Then you had better take me there," Alek said, "And now."

Nodding, Robyn took him by the arm and led him on.



Charlie Wing came around the second time someone kicked him. He was vaguely

aware of the impact in his ribs, but he couldn't react until several moments later when the second gut-wrenching blow came, nearly crushing in his rib cage. Charlie groaned and curled himself around the new pain.

“Charlie.”

“Humph,” was all Charlie could manage at first. He felt like every bone in his body had been broken and stuffed back into a skin two sizes too small for them all. Jesus. What hit him? A fucking bus?

“Charlie!”

Again Charlie groaned through his swollen, bloody mouth and made himself turn over, lest more pain be heaped upon his already broken body. Edward Ashikawa was standing over him. He had that look he usually reserved for enemies and betrayers--as if, even being a man as Mr. Ashikawa was, he could rip the very essence of reality apart to get at whatever he wanted. His black kimono was tattered and bloodstained and gaping at the front, showing the magnificent mosaic of tats wound like serpents about his entire body. His red sash was gone, as well as the katana he usually wore, even around the house. His eyes held a peculiar bloodlust Charlie was not accustomed to seeing outside of the banpaia. Jesus, it was as if Mr. Ashikawa was as bad off as Kage, or that other fucking thing that had beat the shit out of him moments ago.

The thought made the pain drain out of Charlie's body. That pretty-faced, long-haired motherfucker had it coming, oh yes. Give him a sword...hell, give him a stake of iron and he was going to shove the damned thing up the fucker's ass the moment he found him...

“Where is the dhampir?” Ashikawa demanded to know.

“Dhampir?”

“Tall man. Big sword. Pointy teeth.”

Charlie shook himself. “I don't know. I think he got Robyn.”

Edward Ashikawa seethed like a tsunami. Oh Jesus God, thought Charlie, he's going to kill me! Suddenly he wished he had stayed in Osaka to be a Nothing like his old man. A Nothing was better than this. Better a Nothing than a nothing at all. It wasn't fair! The world had conspired to throw him up against an enemy he had no defense against! He had lost honor and face in Mr. Ashikawa's eyes. And a man with no honor was a man with no--

Mr. Ashikawa's foot came down hard on Charlie's throat. For a moment Charlie thought it was a warning. He thought Mr. Ashikawa meant to beat the remaining shit out of him and prove a lesson to him and good, and then he would drag Charlie up and dust him off as he always had in the past, and tell him

to take his boys and hunt down the creature that had caused all this fucking trouble. But then Charlie heard the crackle and snap of his own neck bones breaking under the pressure of the Ryuujin's foot and Charlie understood. Underneath the sound, as vast as a volcanic explosion in Charlie's ears, was Mr. Ashikawa's voice.

Before Charlie died he could have sworn he said, I'm sorry.

## 24

Robyn took him down several more of those twisting flights of glass stairs. At the bottom she took a right bend and led him down a hallway with identical doors to either sides. At the end was a vast window that faced out over the courtyard at ground level, the morning sun slicing through the colored glass and turning the hallway and the grandfather clock standing against one wall a weird shade of crimson. At the foot of the clock Robyn stopped, reached for the face, and toyed with something.

"Edward doesn't know I know about this. I found it by accident one day." And then she did something and the whole body of the clock swung open like a door. Inside was a roughly hewn stone stairway that led down into an impregnable darkness. Robyn turned to look at him with somber eyes. "Ready?"

"I think so. How far does this go?"

Robyn led the way down the stairs, pausing only long enough to close the passage behind them and put her ear to the door for a moment. "I'm not sure, actually. The tunnels are really just an extension of a portion of the old L Line that was condemned about twenty years ago. Kage claimed them as his own and now he uses them to move between the house and some haunts he has in the inner city. That way he can get around without being caught out by the sun." She frowned. "I'm guessing that's how he managed to trap me and Danny. I just had no idea his network was so big."

"So Kage could have taken Danny almost anywhere in the city," Alek said without much hope.

"Not anywhere. It's morning so he has to stay underground, somewhere in the tunnels. If we wait until nightfall, then he's sure to take Danny anywhere in the city."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. Ahead loomed a warren of rooms that looked as if they had been decorated by a deranged Victorian Englishman. Alek almost would have thought they were in the wrong place, but the lair, as peculiar as it was, *felt* like Kage--cool, animalistic. The chambers, daisy-chained together with seemingly no pattern to their arrangement, pushed out at him, not physically but with an underlying threat of absolute menace. Robyn went ahead of him, unaffected by the Glamour of the place. Were he a vampire, Alek would not have been able to enter this place at all. He would have been paralyzed by fear. He was not paralyzed, but he still found it hard to move against the fear.

"Are you all right?" Robin asked, her voice a mere whisper as if they were exploring an ancient tomb.

Alek nodded and moved tentatively forward, following the girl's lead with mincing steps.

"Over here." She held back a heavy Medieval tapestry with unicorns on it. A hole had been chopped

through the cement wall, just large enough for an adult to squeeze through.

They clambered through it.

Beyond the human-sized mouse hole an old brick-and-bedrock sub tunnel yawned ahead, black and full of mystery. Debris was scattered everywhere, rags and rotting shoes and broken bottles of booze, what Alek could only guess were the remnants of homeless people who had been unfortunate enough to wander drunkenly into a vampire's lair. His boot came down on something long and brittle. He picked it up, discovering it was a shattered femur bone. The unreasonable fear had returned and he quickly dashed the bone away. He turned his attention on the tunnel instead. There were ancient emergency lights strung along the top of the tunnel, an antique carbide lantern lying on its side, and a scattering of miners' helmets, but Alek doubted anything had the juice necessary to work. Kage would not need such mundane human things to see in the dark.

"It's dark," Robyn said. "I wish we had a flashlight or something."

"Try shaking that lantern," he said.

"I can't find it in the dark. Can you...?"

"Lanterns are made of iron."

"Oh." Robyn toyed around in the dark until she found it. But shaking it revealed it was bone dry. "Nothing," she said. She opened up the tank but all that remained was a black sludge. "All the kerosene is gone."

"Wait a moment." Alek picked around in the darkness until he found an unbroken flask of whiskey. He twisted the top off and the powerful vapors assaulted his senses and made him grimace. Perfect. He told Robyn to pour some of the whiskey in. Then had her swing the lantern to slosh the whiskey around. After a minute he had her add more whiskey. The acrid smell of the kerosene was suddenly stronger. The whiskey was doing its job. He had her continue adding whiskey and shaking the fuel tank until it was two-thirds full. Then he had her wet the wick with the new substance.

"You're so clever," she said as she used her cigarette lighter to tend the whiskey-soaked wick. After a few moments more of grueling work the wick gave off a lurid black smoke, but it did in fact catch, giving them a source of light in the tunnels.

Robyn's face looked so sallow and unwell in the lantern light he could almost wish they were still stranded in the dark. He had to wonder what he looked like. "Are you sure you don't want to try and reason with Ashikawa?" Alek asked as he watched her replace the glass globe. "I'm positive he'd give Danny up if you just handed over the tapes."

"You don't know Edward." Robyn sounded strained and weary. She stood up, holding the lantern at chin level so he plainly saw her ghastly look of determination. Her open, plain-faced hatred. "He'll never let me go. Not ever. Because of what he is."

"Yakuza...?"

"No. A man."

And with that she started forward into the tunnel, brushing aside cobwebs as she went along, the lantern

out in front of her like a talisman that might ward off all evil things. And those evil things must have a form, Alek thought. Only now he thought he knew what it was. What form it took. Not monstrous, but clearly human.

*He'll never let me go. Not ever. Because of what he is. A man.*

Robyn brushed the walls with her hand as she passed to keep from walking into anything. The darkness must still be terrible for her, he thought. His eyes, evolved for motion rather than detail, would spot even the smallest creature lurking in the tunnel with them, with or without the lantern light. He stepped into the tunnel after Robyn, his eyes going everywhere, watching for any ambush that might come. He felt with his other senses as well, but there were no vampires in the local vicinity. That was both good and bad. Good because it meant he didn't have to worry that Kage would materialize out of nowhere and attack them both; bad because it meant they had to go in search of the vampire before a confrontation could be initiated.

The tunnel wound along for a thousand feet, and then took a steep downward direction. Part of the tunnel had collapsed from some unknown subterranean disaster, but much of the sub track remained--a thirty-foot drop into a fatal chasm full of broken concrete, jagged bones and twisted, teething metal that they had to be careful not to slip into it as they made their way around the heaps of debris in their path. At one point, Alek had to climb atop a mountain of fallen bricks and then pull Robyn over it by the wrists. Robyn made a nervous laugh when she landed on the other side. "Reminds me of my old college days when my friends and I used to role-play in the subway. I was never here though." She stared white-faced at the human remains tossed into the sub line like so much garbage. "And I never saw anything like this."

"Kage's discard," Alek whispered as he watched a pair of rats wrestling over a rib bone with some dangling meat still on it. "He must feed on whatever wanders into his domain."

"How many fucking people has he killed?" she wondered. But she was really wondering the same thing he was: Will this be out final resting place too, down in this undiscovered bone yard?

Alek studied the seemingly endless collection of human scrap. A sleek fat rat scabbled up the side of the line and tried to take a bite out of his boot. Alek kicked it back into the line.

"Jesus," said Robyn.

And right then Alek noticed boot prints in the dust, smaller than his own, but with a heavier tread, as if the owner were burdened by weight. He almost cautioned Robyn to be quiet, then realized it was probably unnecessary. Kage was not near enough for Alek to feel him, so it made sense that the vampire couldn't hear them and know they were hot on his heels just yet. And if talking made Robyn feel better about being in this filthy pit and knowing her son was the captive of a man-eating monster, then he would not deny her that small, cold comfort.

They moved on and the tunnel began to twist and turn dangerously, following the winding path of the sub. But Alek consoled himself in that at least the dust was deep enough to indicate which forks Kage had taken, giving them a useful map to follow. After a good half hour of travel in this rank darkness with nothing but an ancient lantern to guide the way and their breathing and the skritch of unseen rats to indicate that they had not fallen into the deepest hole in the earth, Alek began to wonder if Robyn was getting worn down. She seemed all right and hadn't made any complaints, but it was probably only the fear for her son driving her on. Fear was a good source of energy, but not inexhaustible. Finally, after climbing over yet another enormous barrier of debris, she began to sound winded. Her footing became

uncertain and that made him wonder about her abused ankle.

He was almost ready to suggest they take a rest period so he could check on her fracture when his nerves suddenly felt as if they had been lit from within. All at once the familiar tingle was shooting all through his body, not bad--the perpetrator of the feeling was still a ways off--but certainly noticeable. If he could trust his feelings, and he knew he could, then Kage was less than a couple thousand feet away.

Robyn frowned. "I'm beginning to believe what you said. We're just wandering around down here with no direction. Kage could be anywhere at this point..."

"Shhh," he said, and immediately Robyn snapped to attention and looked at him. Motioning Robyn to remain where she was, Alek drew his sword and went on ahead, following the tunnel for a dozen yards down a steep embankment. The ground here was rougher and bad to the step and he soon learn why: they had reached the end of the line. Ahead, no more than a thousand feet, the entire tunnel had collapsed, creating a dead end space and a spew of rocky debris. Luckily, there was an abandoned sub platform off to the left. From the way it made him feel, Kage the vampire was most certainly there. Hiding in the dark with his captive prey.

Hiding...and infinitely dangerous, because he was a captive by the tunnels and the killer daylight.

Alek doubled back.

"You see him?" Robyn whispered. She was huddled against a wall, the lantern on the ground beside her and her arms hugging her shoulders against the cold and the fear.

Alek moved to block her in case Kage knew they were close and had planned an ambush attack. "I feel him. He's at the end of the tunnel," he said, pointing, "just beyond the platform."

Robyn took him by the arm. "Is Danny with him?"

"I don't know. I can't feel Danny."

"Because Danny's human," she reasoned.

He nodded, then realized she could barely see him in the dark and said, "Yes."

"But you can feel Kage," Robyn said. "Is this why you became a vampire slayer?"

Instead of answering, he said, "I want you to flatten yourself against the wall and try not to let Kage see you."

"He's a vampire, Alek. He'll see me. He'll fuckings*mell* me."

"Not if he's occupied." Alek looked around the tunnel. On the opposite side, separated by that murderous rift, was another pedestrian walkway. Over there the supports had not completely collapsed yet and there was an exit to the stairwell that led to the outside world and the sun Kage so abhorred. Well, it was worth a try, he supposed. He didn't think he would be able to get Kage above ground where the light would blind him, or bring the light down here where it could still do damage, but the door was double-gauge construction steel, capable of withstanding a hurricane wind. Maybe, if he couldn't kill Kage, he could at least lock him in the stairwell. He certainly had no better ideas.

He said, "When you see Kage cross the line, I want you to get to the platform and find Danny."

She looked at him and gnawed her lower lip. She looked scared and he felt his heart break at the sight. She and Danny shouldn't be in the middle of this nightmare. Robyn and her human kind should never have to see the things they did. "How are you going to get him to cross the line?" she whispered.

"He will," Alek said, slipping his sword under one arm and turning to face the end of the line. Kage was beholden to Edward Ashikawa, servant to his human master as many of the oldest of his kind chose to be servant to the humans, but he was also a vampire and therefore a victim of his own nature. And Alek knew from too much experience how petty and proud and often very stupid a vampire could be when the right buttons were pushed.

He just had to figure out which buttons were the right ones.

Motioning Robyn to shrink as far back into the shadows as she could, Alek stepped out boldly into clear view of the platform. It was dark, the only muted illumination coming from the network of cracks in the tunnel walls, but it was enough for night eyes to see by. The raised platform had a flight of stairs that took passengers up to the substation overhead once upon a time. Alek waited a moment to see if anything would move. Nothing did, so he reached down and screeked his sword in a line across the broken bedrock at his feet.

He waited. Unless Kage had been following their progress through the subway all along, which was possible but not likely--he would have to be using some kind of surveillance equipment capable of surviving this environment, and that seemed a bit too high-tech for Kage--he shouldn't be aware of Alek's presence until now. The blessing of the dhampir. Vampires could not read their presences any more than they could read the humans they preyed upon. The dangerous tingling that existed in Alek's bones increased, proving that Kage was indeed now fully aware of his presence, was on the move, and was closing the distance between them.

Alek followed it like an open circuit. He could feel the emanation strongest from directly above him. He looked around, found a narrow fissure in the ceiling, and saw a shadow drop through and land lightly, with catlike agility, on his side of the chasm.

As with the first time they had met, Alek had the impression of indefinable power and age. Kage was so ancient and so withdrawn from human civilization he did not even attempt to appear human as most vampires did. Instead he stayed crouched down where he had landed, alien beauty shining, his arms resting on his knees, his head tipped down and eyes upturned enough to show most of the whites and only a fraction of the black slit-like pupils. Body language. It was a gesture that was wholly aggressive. Reptilian. It was a clear and easily readable message: back off or die.

Kage. He was lithe and petite, beautiful, irresistible. Much of his glistening blue-black hair was chopped and feathered into quills with a long narrow braid bound with a length of chain, a studded stainless steel ball tied to the end. His clothing was surprisingly current--snug black jeans, knee-boots, and a grey wife beater that revealed powerful catlike muscles in his chest and shoulders. Everything about him was sweating and revealed by the open leather greatcoat that pooled around his crouched figure. Beautiful, yes--beautiful and as dangerous as a man-eating tiger.

"Where is the boy?" Alek asked. He wanted to ask Kage if the boy was well, but he was afraid of the answer. Anything Kage said right now might drive Robyn out of her hiding place in a panic of frenzied grief.

“Where you cannot harm him, Slayer,” Kage said. He did not move from his position. Did not assume any kind of fighting position at all. So Kage had no intention of fighting like a man, or even like an assassin. Instead, this was going to be all primal power and war. Alek idly wondered if he should be flattered, if Kage adopted this method often or if he was just a special case. And then his musing was answered when Kage’s eyes flared with war lust and he said, his voice an inhuman snarl through his great catlike teeth, “*You will never harm Danny. Not like you harmed Takara.*”

The way he said it made it sound as if his sister had died two hours ago instead of over two years. Like all great ancients, his past was yesterday.

“I didn’t choose to harm her, Kage. Takara made her own decision to fight me,” Alek said, choosing his words carefully. “Every man and woman makes their own decision. She chose to fight me and she lost.” It was important to him that Kage not regress into the past at the moment. Something like that might turn his already wildly unstable emotions the wrong way. And if that happened, it was just possible Kage would harm them all, including Danny. He might bring the whole tunnel down on them in his unforgivable, undying wrath.

“She died in a subway tunnel like this one,” Kage said, looking around. His eyes gleamed dreamily. “I heard the story, though I did not see it with my own eyes. I was with the master in Tokyo at the time.” His eyes focused on some vast invisible point. “Takara...I felt her die by your hands...”

The words hit Alek like a fist, almost staggering him: *I felt her die by your hands*. Kage felt her die? Felt her? He knew how Takara and Kage were related, he had the cold, impersonal facts. He knew they were siblings, but he had had no idea, none whatsoever...

“She was your twin?” Alek said, appalled.

Kage’s face was a stone.

“You were mates.” Jesus. All the understanding and the pity fell in on Alek at once like a hammer blow. He could almost have turned away, such was the look of anguish on Kage’s face, the hopelessness, the ever-wandering loss. A lost sibling was terrible. A lost mate was terrible. But a lost sibling mate was hell on earth. Hell inescapable. He knew that. He knew it all too fucking well.

Kage rose to his feet. When he spoke his voice was unusually calm and measured, like a mantra. “You took my honor, Slayer, and that I can live with.” He drew his sword. “But you also took Takara, and that I cannot.”

And then he pounced. Seamlessly. Seemingly without moving.

Only Alek’s battle-trained eye caught the motion as Kage came at him. Alek sidestepped, countering the blow so the swords clanked together, hissing with sparks and heat. The blow was terrifically powerful, knocking both warriors almost to the ground with the sheer, bone-breaking force of it. Alek was on one knee, the bones and muscles of his broken wrists mending themselves with supernatural speed. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he felt an overwhelming sense of pity.

And then a moment later he was up, meeting Kage’s newest assault, sword edge to sword edge. “I had no choice, Kage,” he grunted as the two warriors pushed at each other in an attempt to gain an advantage. Kage whipped his head around and the steel ball in his hair cracked against Alek’s cheek. Snarling, Alek relented and the swords unlocked. Then the two began to circle each other, looking for an opening again.

Alek licked the blood on his mouth. "She would have killed me for the Coven. I chose not to die for it." Jesus, he thought, what a very cruel Catherine Wheel was life.

For a moment Kage looked confused and seemed to sway off balance. Then he threw aside his katana and put a hand to his face, dirty jagged claws gripping. "Time passes," Kage said, "and time changes all things." He shook his head and looked up. He was changed. His eyes, which had been an obelisk black, had gone blood red. The teeth, already venomous hooks of ivory, seemed to descend further until they reached Kage's chin and pricked streams of crimson that flowed like tears down his white throat. He was a beast, a demon. "Yet time has no bearing on sorrow or on vengeance. Those are immortal," he said, his words slaughtered by the sorrow in his throat. "And I am in hell!"

Alek started to move in a clockwise motion. Kage mimicked the move so that they circled each other again like a pair of reptiles locked in battle. He wanted to stay moving more than anything else. Standing there, watching Kage mourn, watching it twist him...it was unnerving. "Takara was my enemy, Kage. She challenged me and she died for that challenge. But I have no such intentions toward Danny." He took a deep breath and said in a soft, reasonable voice, "I only want to take him back to his mother."

The mention of Danny seemed to do what his reasoning could not, dampening Kage's rage. His eyes darkened and his teeth lifted. "His mother is dead in our eyes," he said. "I protect the master and you will not pass."

The master? Alek stopped and lowered his sword. "Danny is the master?"

But Danny could not be the master. Edward Ashikawa was the master. The only way Danny could be the master was if Ashikawa passed on the gift of the vampire to him. And why would he do that? Why would Ashikawa give that up?

And then he knew. The pieces all fell together and all at once, Alek understood. Or thought he did. Danny and his dreams, his pictures. Danny and his gift. Danny and Kage.

Danny the master.

Danny *was* the master. Danny was the master and everything else was a lie, a mistake. Everything was wrong. Everything. What he was doing here was wrong. Trying to take Danny away from Kage was wrong. As wrong as wrong got.

Kage would never harm Danny. Never. Kage would give his life for the boy.

"I didn't know," Alek said. He sheathed his sword and backed away. Kage tracked his progress but neither said nor did anything. What war had been on Kage's face was gone. He was now no longer the demon, just the watchdog. He was dedicated to one purpose, and one purpose only. The only purpose that meant anything to him anymore: protecting the master.

Danny.

Danny the master.

And as much as Robyn wanted to deny it, Danny and Kage belonged together...

"Kage?"



The little, frightened voice caught Alek unaware. He turned to find the source of it and saw Danny's face in the crevice of the ceiling, dark and backlit from some spare source of lighting in the sub station beyond. Because of the light his features were indistinguishable, but the fear in his voice pulled at Alek nonetheless. So too did it pull at Kage, but with such tremendous power as to make the vampire forget his environment completely and spin in a circle as he sought to find the danger to the boy.

"Danny, what is it?" Kage demanded to know. "What's wrong?"

"It's dark here," cried the boy.

"Yes, Danny. I know. We're going home soon..."

Alek heard the warning crack in the ceiling in the same moment Kage did, but Kage's ears virtually pricked in response to it. Kage said, "Get away from the hole, Danny... get away!" He pushed at thin air as if he could force the boy away from danger.

The boy did so, but it was already too late. A portion of the ceiling, weakened by the quake that had demolished the line, lurched and dropped dust and with a grinding growl began to collapse into the tunnel on top of them all. Danny screamed and grabbed at the sides of the crevice as the floor gave way beneath him, the ceiling slanting him down into the rolling slate of debris that filled the tunnel with thunder and an unbreathable cloud of dust. Helpless, he went with it.

It all happened too fast.

Alek moved sideways, narrowly avoiding the falling mountain of rubble, and grabbed Robyn who had suddenly appeared beside him. She began to scream, her voice melding with the roar of the settling ceiling and the cries of her young son. The blindness was like the chaos all about them. Unending and nerve splitting. He pulled his coat over them both and felt the slamming weight of the ceiling as it crushed them both to the floor, he on top of her. Some of the collapse struck him across the shoulders and for a moment he saw a kaleidoscope of lights and found he was floating in a quiet, distant nothing. Then reality began to intrude, and with it the heat and the coughing dust and the remembrance of what had occurred.

He was buried alive and his ribs were on fire. He tried to rise, but he was pinned to the floor. He ran his hands over the space beneath him, but Robyn was gone. Gone. He began to crawl, heading toward the only source of light directly ahead of him. By the time he managed to crawl out from under the debris some several moments later, he saw Robyn had wormed her way out ahead of him. She was on her feet, stunned and disheveled but otherwise okay. She was standing atop the fallen debris and trying to reach Danny where the boy dangled from the ceiling, wrapped like a monkey around a tangle of electrical cords. There he hung, a frightened little monkey dangling over the fifty-foot plunge into the sub line. Kage had not been so lucky. Standing directly beneath the collapse and unwilling to take his eyes off his new master, the whole brunt of the debris had buried him completely.

"Alek!" Robyn made a valiant leap to reach her son, falling short by at least twenty-five feet. "Help me, Alek! Please!"

Alek shook his half-shattered sense back into his head and judged the distance. Even with the collapsed floor, he was looking at no less than a thirty-foot jump to reach the boy. And even if he managed to snag the cords that Danny clung so desperately to, he might bring the rest of the ceiling down on them all with his weight. He stared dumbly at the sight of the shocked, shuddering little body. Think, damnit! There had to be some way. He looked at the boy, then looked at the ravine, that deadly ravine. He thought he knew

the only way out of this as bad and dangerous and crazy as it was. But if he failed...

The ceiling gave another warning growl and Alek made the decision, for better or for worse.

"Robyn," he said, patiently, "tell Danny to let go on three."

"What?" Robyn turned to stare at him with glassy big-eyed horror. "Are you crazy? That line doesn't have a bottom!" she said, pointing to the ravine.

"On three," Alek said, shucking off his coat and taking several steps back. "Do it!"

Robyn shook her head helplessly, shooting tears off in every direction.

Danny cried out and Robyn looked ready to explode from the tension.

"Trust me," Alek said.

Robyn considered that. For a moment he thought she would continue to defy him. Then she turned back to stare up at Danny's dangling figure and said, hesitantly, "Tiger... I want you to let go on three. Uncle Alek is going to catch you."

Danny wailed plaintively, filling the tunnel with his terror and his misery.

"Oh three, honey," Robyn said, keeping her voice calm. "One...two..."

Again it happened too fast, too fast.

Danny lost his grip on the wires, making Alek leap the cavity much too soon. It was all automatic: one moment Alek was standing on solid ground, the next he was sky bound. It was an awkward jump at best. Alek saw the boy fall...felt the cords brush his cheek...caught a handful of the back of the boy's windbreaker...but the far side of the chasm looked too hopelessly far away for them to make it. So Alek wound himself like a snake around the boy, somersaulting over once--just enough to give him the spurt of distance he thought he needed, that he *prayed* he needed--and felt them crash down against the opposite side of the line. He gripped something as they began to slide down the side of the chasm, hoping it would hold their collective weight...hoping...and there!...their momentum was stalled. Then he hoped the something he gripped was secure and waited to see if they would fall anyway. Nothing happened. But pain lanced all the way up both his arm and into his shoulders. His body felt like a lead weight waiting to fall into that dead place for man and train. Yet he couldn't let go of either the top of the chasm nor Danny, hanging suspended over the line the way they were.

It hurt like hell, but the alternative was too horrible to even think about.

Mustering his courage, Alek looked down. The bottom of the rift was a tangle of steel railroad shards, iron rebar and shivs of shattered bones, all of it covered with a moving coat of filthy, voracious sewer rats. If they fell...no, don't think of that. You won't fall if you believe you will not fall. Alek closed his eyes and concentrated on his grip overhead. "Danny?" he said. His voice sounded hoarse. "How are you?"

Danny whined like a pained, frightened little animal. "I want Kage."

"I know." Slowly, methodically, Alek pulled against his grip, feeling himself and Danny raise a few

inches, then a few more. The muscles of his arm and shoulder began to scream from the effort of pulling them both up by one arm, but he grit his teeth and tried to ignore the burn and the unyielding fatigue and concentrated instead on the work of their survival. Robyn was crying his name, nearly hysterical with terror, and he concentrated on that as well, how very pretty she was and how much he didn't want to see her in tears, all that pretty ruined. The upper portion of his body was over the edge of the line now. Alek sagged against the side, letting his weight anchor him and swinging Danny over the top. When Danny was secure, he then scabbled like one of the rats over the edge. When he had made it he crouched against the ledge under the broken Exit sign, the boy cradled in his arms.

He was exhausted. He felt beaten, inside and out.

"You made it!" Robyn shouted.

Alek nodded and sagged against the wall. As he recovered his strength, he examined Danny for injuries. The boy looked shaken and pale but not really harmed. He lifted Danny's head with two fingers and looked for wounds, just to make certain Kage had not been indulging himself in any way. But just as he had suspected, there wasn't a single mark on Danny anywhere.

"How you holding up?" he asked the child.

"Okay." Danny gave Alek a bit of smile. "Your sword is way cool."

He really was something. A tough little thing. The boy touched Alek's face, brushed his fingers over Alek's cheeks and traced his mouth as if he were the most interesting thing in the world to him. "You're like Kage, aren't you?"

"Shh," Alek whispered and Danny smile grew. "Don't tell anyone."

Danny nodded solemnly. "Promise."

"Alek!" Robyn called.

Alek set Danny down and climbed to his feet. "We're all right," he called. "Danny is fine."

Robyn smiled; she looked relieved.

But not a moment later she lost her smile as a mountain of debris began to move under her feet. It shifted sideways, making Robyn scream and roll off the platform and slam into a wall.

Alek watched helplessly as loose rocks and I-beams were thrust up and away like a child throwing stones and sticks. And then something, no child but a monster of frightening physical strength, emerged from its grave of debris, coated in blood and dust and darkness. For a moment it looked around as if disoriented; then its eyes fixed on Alek and Danny and its entire being seemed to grow darker and heavier and full of clacking claws and saber teeth. Kage looked ready to leap the chasm to their side, something he could probably have done easily in his present state, but as blinded by rage as he was, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings.

And when Robyn came up behind him with an iron railroad spike in her hand and brought it down with both hands, sinking the metal deep into the sucking cavity between his shoulder blades, driving it in, *screaming* it in the way she did, Kage never so much as even looked around. The vampire simply stiffened where it crouched at the edge of the chasm, let out a gurgling, blood-clotted sound, and rocked

forward into the track, its arms outstretched and useless as it smashed through the debris and its weight caused it to punch through the stakes of steel and bone at the bottom. Rats scattered like a skreeking tidal wave of silky black fur as the body lodged itself at the bottom of the line. But no sooner than it landed, the rats swarmed together again like a sewn seam, blocking the body from view.

Robyn dropped the spike and covered her face with her blood-blackened hands. She swayed, and then collapsed into a lotus on the floor, her hands over her mouth to stifle the illness and the shock and the waning terror.

The voices of the feasting rats filled the tunnel with their rank triumph.

Alek kept Danny's face averted as he peered down into the chasm. What little he could see of Kage's body looked pulpy and broken, like doll parts. The rats continued to swarm, a warm living mass of them, furry vultures with only one prerogative in life.

Alek felt sick.

There was another platform on this side of the rail a little ways further down. After checking one last time to make certain nothing down there moved but rats, Alek picked Danny up and shambled down the walk until he reached it. The sub station it led to took a roundabout route through a series of interconnecting corridors, but eventually he found his way to Robyn's side of the line.

Robyn wept and clung to Danny when she finally had him back in her arms, but Danny was oddly calm, even emotionless. He simply stood there like a rag doll as his mother rubbed his shoulders and checked him all over for scrapes and bruises. "How is my big tiger?" she asked over and over again like a litany. In time Danny nodded and that seemed to put Robyn at ease. Taking his little hand in hers, she turned to Alek. "Can we get out of here now?"

"I can't think of a better idea," Alek told her as he started up the stairs of the sub platform. "There's an exit up here. Come on."

Robyn followed him, but Danny slowed her progress. The boy didn't seem motivated to move at all. By the time they reached the Exit door Robyn was fighting to make him walk, pulling at his hand, fighting to get him every inch of the way. Alek put his hand on her arm. "You want me to take him?"

"I don't understand..."

Danny detached himself from Robyn's hand and jumped into Alek's arms.

Robyn looked surprised by it but didn't say very much as Alek settled Danny's slight weight into the crook of his arm.

He was tired and aching and he felt like an entire building had fallen on him, but at least it was over. The boy played with Alek's hair for a few moments, but very quickly his grim adventure caught up with him and he put his head down on Alek's shoulder. He was fast asleep in minutes, and so he missed all the festival. They emerged in Chinatown, one of his favorite places in the whole city, but this time the familiarity of the colorful Hunan restaurants and antique emporiums and herbal remedy shoppes and the vendors with their carts full of jade and bells and the parade passing by with its lighted paper lanterns and dancing dragon brought no amusement to Alek as it had so often in the past.

It had taken some persuasion on his part to convince her that he was not seriously injured. He was touched. She seemed genuinely concerned for him. But Alek told her he was perfectly fine. After a while, Robyn seemed to believe him.

She went to Danny, running her hands through his hair, and glanced around the foyer of the big antique house. She looked lost. Alek hung his coat on the rack by the door, and then looked around the house himself. It was cool, dim and silent, as always. No one had been here that he wasn't aware of--vampire, dhampir or otherwise. He would know. The Covenhouse was as much a part of him now as the coat he wore was or the sword he carried. He just wasn't much of a homebody. Somehow or other he always seemed to have business to attend to, and the living space reflected that fact. It wasn't unkempt or anything like that; it just looked un-inhabited. The spaces were too large, the furniture too sparse, the motif a bit too old-fashioned. It looked like a museum, or the cover of a Victorian-style magazine. He didn't have much to offer Robyn and Danny, just this big creaky house full of shadows, but what he had was theirs and he told her so.

At least they were safe here. Protected. "You can have whatever you find in the kitchen," he told them at length. "The bathroom is upstairs and down the hall." They could have the run of the house. The only places they were forbidden to go were downstairs to the Great Abbey, and the dojo with its collection of razor-sharp weapons. But he didn't say that outwardly. In fact, he didn't say it at all. Those places were locked electronically against invasion and he had no fears of strangers wandering into them. "The master bedroom is yours too, if you like," he said.

"Where will you sleep?" Robyn asked.

He shrugged. "I don't sleep much, and I won't sleep at all until this is over."

Robyn dropped her eyes. She was wondering the same thing he was: When and how would all this end--if indeed, it ended at all? On the way home she had made mention of an aunt in Milwaukee that she hadn't seen in ten years. Alek's mind had already turned over the idea that if he could somehow convince Edward Ashikawa that enough blood had been spilt in his insane crusade, he might be willing to let the girl and her boy go. Robyn could go to Wisconsin. That seemed far enough away from this city. And if that failed...well, he still had connections with the Coven, as tenacious as they were, and he knew the Vatican would not be pleased to learn Edward Ashikawa had been stabling vampires among his cotillion of soldiers. Somehow or other he doubted even the Yakuza was willing to take the Papal bull by the horns.

Robyn took Danny by the hand and started to lead him up the narrow Victorian stairs. Halfway up, she turned around and seemed to take in the wainscoting and the old tintypes on the walls and the glistening antique wallpaper all at once. "Is this house yours?" she asked with some wonder.

Alek said, "I inherited it from my father."

"Oh. He must have been something."

"He was." Then without waiting for an answer from her he went into the kitchen to make a pot of strong

coffee. It did little to quench his remaining need, but it took the edge off some. He was so tired. He listened to the sound of activity from upstairs and felt very old and lost.

I should not live in this tomb, he thought for the hundredth time since buying the Covenhouse. He didn't understand why he had done that, only that the fear of the Coven taking his home, living in it, desecrating it further with their bloody purpose, was more than he could bear. He had to protect the house. And he had. And now the house protected him. Jean Paul said it was his hive; in affect, his personal lair. None that entered it could escape his influence. In fact, no one he called enemy could enter it at all. It was all part of the mythology of the vampire, some of it truth, some lies, some half-truths.

He, having lived more than half a century as a dhampir, was still learning the ins and outs, so to speak. In fact, he had begun to keep a journal about it, wondering if anyone else ever had. He wasn't undead, nor was any vampire. He had never died. Garlic, running water, silver, wooden stakes and religious paraphernalia could do nothing to harm him. Only profoundly strong and long direct exposure to sunlight could do him damage. Only the severance of his head or a stake or shard of iron--or indeed, any instrument of iron stuck in a vital organ--could kill him. As far as he could tell, he was immortal. At least, he looked half his age, which was pushing fifty-five these days. He had a hunger, but it wasn't usually bad, except on the full moon--what the vampires called the Hunter's Moon. Like Debra, and like all vampires, his power as well as his need was redoubled on those nights. Nights like tonight.

I'm a vampire living in a crypt, he thought and almost laughed aloud. He hated this house and he loved it. It was his passion and his sin. What else could he do with it?

He changed into his lay-around clothes--black silk slacks, silk slippers and a kimono--and went to the library and stood in it, feeling the house close about him. The years and books and learning and blood. All his. Every scrap. Every memory. He was so tired. Tired and in need. Not for the first time he wondered if visiting Jean Paul's private pleasure club would help. If it wouldn't at least ease the discomfort.

No. All he needed to do was fall once, and he would keep falling.

Instead, he lay down on the divan, setting aside Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, and slept. The toll on his body was so great he did not dream and he did not awaken until almost nightfall. The Hunter's Moon had risen. He got up and went to the window and watched it laze across the sky like a weapon. But the sight of it made him anxious and in time he returned to the divan and picked up the Wharton book and read a page, not really seeing the words. After a few moments he became aware of a presence in the room with him, subtle, like perfume. He looked up and glimpsed a familiar figure in the gilt oval mirror on the wall between two bookcases.

"Thank you," he said.

Debra smiled and the tie of his kimono loosened.

He secured it. "Stop it...I can't play with you tonight," he said patiently.

"Why? Because of her?" she asked in her plaintive little girl's voice.

He tried to find something to say, some wisdom or reason, but Debra pouted and simply faded from the glass. He was just wondering what that meant when he heard light footfalls from the hallway. He turned and found himself staring at the subject of their controversy. Robyn--her face was pale and makeupless, her eyes big and demure. She must have misinterpreted his interest because she plucked at the oversized

robe she wore and said, "Do you mind? I didn't have any clothes..."

"No," he said. "I don't mind."

"Danny's asleep," she said. Then she stepped into the study, looking around. "I didn't have a chance to thank you for what you did." She watched him for some moments from beneath her long blonde lashes. "You wear glasses?"

He closed the book and took off the wire rims.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just didn't expect...someone like you would."

"Someone like me?"

She toyed with the ties of the robe, eyes downcast. "Edward told me what you are. He said you're just like Kage."

"Not exactly."

She looked up at that and something alighted in her eyes. Something suspiciously like hope. When she approached the divan and picked up his glasses, he was mystified. Then she placed them back on his face. "They become you," she said as she sat down beside him.

He had never examined her this closely before. Her skin had a particular scent to it. He had noticed that about all the women in his life; every one had her own individual scent. Debra had the subtle, cloying scent of a carnivore. Kat had always reminded him of lavender and rain. Robyn was different from all that. She made him think of vanilla, something soft and fragile and infinitely feminine.

He touched her face, fascinated, almost expecting her flesh to give like silk beneath his touch. Soft. When her lips sought his, he did not immediately kiss back. Instead, he put out his tongue and licked the petal-soft pinkness there. Ah yes, here too was the scent. He licked some more. He heard a barely audible moan rise up in Robyn's throat. Then he accepted the gift of her mouth. To his senses she tasted like cream, but because it was not in his nature to kiss with the lips alone, he soon found himself dipping his tongue into all that honeyed sweetness, running it along the rim of the silken lips and then the chin and throat, all of it as delicious as if she had been daubed with the sweetest nectar known to mankind.

She whispered something in his ear, something sweet and obscene, and touched his bare chest with her fingertips. His whole being responded to her invitation. After a moment she slid her hands across his ribs and used her weight to pull him over her on the divan, the book caught between them. She kissed him again, bumping her nose on the glasses that had fallen to the end of his nose. Instead of removing them, she turned her head, slanting her mouth against his, her hands in his hair, on him, everywhere suddenly, her ministrations so aggressive and complete he felt compelled to return the tasks one for another. It was like a dance or a war. A delicious confrontation.

Finally, emboldened by his response, she touched his teeth with her tongue and kissed and explored his mouth, exciting him all the more. He was afraid he tasted of blood, but if he did so, it no longer frightened her. Good. The heart-pounding desire within was almost more than he could bear. Almost more than he could control. Almost more than he wanted to control. As the moon came out in all its powerful white brilliance and touched off his black hair with a spell of silver-blue light, he lowered his head and nipped playfully at her chin, then wetted a path from her throat to the cleave in the robe and nuzzled against the comforting clocking of her heartbeat. She was so sweet...as sweet as tea or coffee...her soft, warm

woman flesh so intoxicating he was scarcely aware of the change in his face until it was almost too late.

He stopped. With his face down he could hide it at least, until it passed.

“Alek?”

He hid his face in her lap, his reams of long hair falling like a curtain between them. “I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

“It’s all right.” She tried to hold him and smooth his hair but now there was little comfort to be had in the feel of a woman’s touch. She was so human, so alien to what he knew. She wasn’t Debra. There would be no blood sport. He couldn’t do the things he wanted to do. The things he dreamt of. “I’m not afraid of you,” she said.

“I am like Kage,” he whispered.

“No, you’re not,” she insisted. “Kage was a killer.”

A killer. A slayer.

“Jesus.”

“What? What is it?” Robyn asked.

He shook his head. The burn in his face had passed so he chanced looking up at her. She didn’t flinch so he took that as a good sign that he was over the craving. She touched his cheek with the palm of her hand and tried to kiss him but he drew back away from her and stood up, moving discreetly away from the divan.

“What’s the matter?”

He went to the empty mirror, trying to decide what to do. He wanted to think about something other than the craving. Needed to. “Why did you lie to me?” he asked.

The reflected Robyn looked surprised. “I didn’t lie to you.”

“Edward Ashikawa is your husband, not your pimp. Danny is his son.”

Robyn closed her eyes. For a moment he almost thought she would continue in the lie. Then she said, “How long have you known?”

“A while. There are no tapes. It’s Danny he wants, just Danny.”

“Edward told you...?”

“Danny’s dreams. He has premonitions because Edward Ashikawa and Kage shared each others’ blood.” Alek looked aside. “Vampire blood sometimes creates such bonds...and such abilities.”

Robyn stood up. “What I told you about my past was true, most of it. I did run away. And my father...my mother died when I was born and that son of a bitch held me responsible.” There was a terrible lilt in her voice. The sound of raw anguish. Then it was gone, just like that, replaced by raw anger.



“But there are no tapes, no.” She looked away. “I just wanted you to help me get free of Edward. You looked like someone who would help me.”

Alek turned around and considered the girl. “Ask him for a divorce.”

Robyn made a short, derisive laugh. “The Ryuujin of the Yakuza? Do you honestly think he’ll give me one? And even so, I would still lose Danny.”

“Stealing Danny away from his father isn’t the way--“

“He’s *my* son!” she spat vehemently. “I don’t want him growing up to be some criminal like Edward! You’ve seen what he does...what he nearly did to you!” She stopped short, looking about the library as if she were not quite sure where she was or how she had gotten here. Her eyes flickered everywhere, and then seemed to travel to other places, other times. She folded her arms about herself like a cocoon and said, her eyes downcast, “My daddy hurt me, Alek.”

He was numb. “So did mine. You live past it.”

“You son of a bitch.” She looked up. There were tears in her eyes but he would not be moved by them.

He said, “You live past things and you live on. You have to become your own person or your past will own you forever. That’s the only way.”

Her eyes still held unshed tears, but she seemed to understand something of what he said. “Look,” she said, sniffing, “I’m sorry I lied to you, but I didn’t have a choice. Everything I did, I did for Danny. I know you can’t understand what it’s like to be responsible for someone, but there are things you just do sometimes.”

The glass shivered at Alek’s back and he was glad he was blocking its view from Robyn. He said, “I do know. But running isn’t the answer, Robyn. Believe me. All you are going to do is wind up hurting yourself in the end. You can’t run away. It isn’t that easy.”

“I’m not going back to Edward,” Robyn stated. “And neither is Danny. He’ll have to kill me first.”

And what could he say to that? Edward would kill her if she ran, if she didn’t run. Circles in circles. Wheels turning, but taking their victim nowhere.

She held his eyes a moment, and then she said: “I’d better go. You’ve done enough already and I’ve fucked up your life enough.”

“It’s nightfall.”

“Kage is dead.”

“Maybe. It depends on how he fell, how badly he was injured, and how powerful he is.”

“You mean he could still be alive?” She sounded incredulous. Worse-convinced and frightened.

“I don’t know,” Alek answered truthfully. “But if he is, he won’t rest until he has Danny, you can be assured of that.”

Robyn sank down onto the cushions of the divan. Her face white, hands wringing, she said, "Come away with me?"

"What?"

"Let's get out of this city, Alek. Please. Come with me."

Alek shook his head. "That's impossible."

"Why?" Again she stood up, but smoothly this time, like a graceful little animal. "There's nothing here for you, is there?" she asked in a lilting voice. And then, quite suddenly, she undid the tie of her robe.

"You're right. We both live in the past, Alek...and we both need each other." When the robe was open she approached him, eyes seeking an answer in his face. He tried not to notice her generous charms, the full, inviting breasts, the pale, kissable skin and the treasure further down, all of her as silken and aromatic as vanilla cream. He concentrated on her eyes instead, the storm there. "I love you...and I know you care for me," she said. "You wouldn't have kissed me if you didn't." She trailed her finger from her lips down to the places still damp from his kisses.

He looked away, his face flushed with shame.

"Why do you have to turn away?" she asked. "Do you hate me so much? Do you hate yourself?"

And then she was there, and he turned to look at her as she began to slide the robe off her shoulders. He reached for the fabric, to cover her again, but instead his hands fell lightly upon her shoulders and traced the smooth skin of her arms down to the crooks of her elbows, wondering at her, at how such a beautiful animal could be put together with such perfection and grace. She shifted slightly so that his hands fell instead upon her breasts. He cupped them, the calloused pads of his thumbs brushing lightly against the pert pink nipples, wondering about her, wondering if she had nourished Danny with her precious mother's milk. The thought sent an erotic shiver all throughout his body.

He stared at her as if his rampant thoughts could really touch her, wondering what Edward must feel--having her and then losing her. Her and Danny both. His family. He wondered what it felt like, to have a mate. To have a child born from that mating. She and Danny seemed to fill the empty space in this dead old house with life and humming energy, vanquishing the void that forever lived here, the past that never let go. And the fantasy entertained him for some moments--he and Robyn and Danny together, a family--before reality gradually began to bleed in through the many cracks along with the futility of Robyn's generous offer. Finally, he moved his hands to the edges of the robe and drew them up, covering Robyn completely.

She stared at him a long hard moment, mystified.

"You don't know me," Alek whispered. "If I was with you, you would be no happier than you were with Edward."

"I was afraid of Edward. I'm not afraid of you," she said, her hands alighting on his chest.

"You should be. I've done things I can never talk about. Things I can barely live with..." And then he groaned as her hands dropped further down and found his most sensitive place, stroked him. The flush of heat and animal was back in his face and eyes and this time he could not help himself. He twisted in her hold, his glasses lost, shivering with the horrific lust shooting like lightning through every nerve and starved vein in his body. He made a sound too much like an animal-snarl in his throat. And with the onrush of the

lust came also the rage-against her and the moon and nature and all the darkness and wanting he could hold back no longer. But more than that--rage against himself, because he was reaching for her and it seemed perfectly normal that he should have her in any way he wanted. He could have her and make her whimper, and he knew he could enjoy making her enjoy it.

And he hit her, a smart smack against the cheek, not hard but as sharp as a blade, not cutting her but separating her nonetheless from him. It was a necessary evil, a barrier between herself and the monster that would crush her if let off its leash even a moment. And having struck her, he simultaneously backed away until his shoulders hit the mirror on the wall and he could go no farther.

For a moment the mystery remained on Robyn's face like the slight red mark of his hand. Then it changed as if someone had hit a switch, and she went from absolute wonder to absolute understanding. She touched her face and frowned like a little girl being punished for a transgression she was entirely unaware of. She shook her head but there was no denying what had happened. For a moment Alek felt a powerful desire to apologize...then realized he could not. He was not sorry. He had hit her to save her life.

She didn't understand. Still clutching her cheek, she took a step back, the painful, hateful fear burning in her eyes. And it was a shivering natural human fear--*awoman* fear--and that at last was too much. Alek closed his eyes and said nothing in the end and only listened to the terrible sound of her retreating footsteps.

## 26

For a moment, after locking the bedroom door behind her, Robyn could do nothing but stand in silence in the middle of this vast Victorian suite and look around, lost, bewildered. Danny lay asleep on the duvet that seemed from another century, his thumb in his mouth. Danny was four and he had not done that in months...but now things were going backwards, it seemed.

How had this happened? She had run from Edward and Kage, had run so far, and yet she had not gone far at all. She loved Alek, loved him with the same fierce wanting she had once felt for Edward, sitting so proud and fierce among his warriors--they both had such a presence, such barely-restrained power--but he did not love her. Or at least, did not want her, which was worse in its way. He could love her if he chose to, but he had chosen otherwise. His heart was strong but his will was stronger.

And why? Wasn't she pretty enough? Desirable enough? Robyn will be a model and her face will be her power, her Aunt Claire used to say when she was a little girl and would pose in the pretty dresses Daddy bought for her. But it would seem all that was a lie. None of it was meant to be. And Alek was wrong. He may not be exactly like Kage but he *was* just like Edward. Both of them wanted her but wanted to not want her. Like it was their weakness. Like it was her fault. Like Daddy, who had wanted her but did not want to want her and had punished her with the closet when he could no longer control the wanting. Like that.

Robyn began to shake with sobs, feeling like a fool, to shake and sob until she felt wrung out and finished and too tired to stand up anymore. Then she climbed into bed next to Danny. Danny did not stir. If only she could be like that--to not dream, to not have to remember. Alek said you got past things, that

you got over them. But what would he know? He'd never been hurt so badly he couldn't live with the pain. He wasn't human. He couldn't feel human pain.

He was a thing. An It. Like Kage.

The sheets were black satin under the duvet. Somehow Robyn wasn't surprised by that. But they also smelled like Alek--leather and musk with the cloying, undercutting taste of metal--which made her feel as if she had somehow fallen into him with no escape in sight. She touched her face and then closed her eyes. She did not sleep, only dozed and tossed as night began to come down. Finally, after an hour or so, she climbed out of bed and went to the bundle of clothes lying on the floor, filthy and bloodstained from the sub tunnel, and dug through them until she found the brass knuckles. Useless. What defense were they against an enemy who could invade your mind? She threw them aside and continued to dig until she found the iron railroad spike she had used to send Kage to hell where Daddy was. Clutching it like a crucifix to her heart, she returned to bed and lay down on the black sheets and closed her eyes.

In time she slept and dreamt her father came into the room, spewing Scripture and curses, and started pounding a large iron cross into her heart. She tried to move but her body just lay there like the immovable curse it was. But because she was human and not a vampire, she would not die for Daddy's pleasure and he started to get angry with her and slap her and the sting in her teeth was horrible and she awoke some time later, grinding her teeth until her jaw hurt. She sat up, afraid suddenly. Of the dark. Of the night lurking beyond the window. Danny was still asleep and so angelic she felt her heart break inside her. He was so innocent and she could not protect him. She wept but found she had no more tears to spill. Daddy, Edward, and now Alek had taken them all from her. Taken even that. Even her sorrow.

The last of the departed dream, the pounding and the anger, was as cloying as the scent of Alek--no, no the *dhampir* --in the bedclothes and she got up and moved away from them. She stood at the window for some time, watching the sky and the scuttle of the night-clouds. There was blood on the moon tonight and that meant something. She frowned and again she touched her face. It didn't hurt. It hadn't, really, even from the start. Rather, the wounding was in her soul.

She held the spike against her heart, feeling its coolness burn against her skin. And then suddenly she knew what she had to do. She knew what escape was. At last. And sliding the spike into the waistband of her underwear under the robe, the spike that was her only savior, her only hope, she crept to the door and began to open it.

## 27

It was a blood red Hunter's Moon tonight and he knew that that meant. The rules would bend, the rules that governed his world. Tonight thralls would turn on their masters. Females would turn on their blood-bound mates. There might even be a war, two hives invading each other's sacred ground and soiling it with blood. Alek stood at the great bay window of the Parlour--not the parlor, but the Parlour, the cozy turn-of-the-century sitting room that faced east over the city--and tried to feel the change in the environment. But the city was silent. Not the city the humans saw--that bustled and pushed and lived and breathed as usual--but the city beneath the city. The society under Society. So silent it was. Maybe because the vampires had lost interest. Maybe because his feelings were too complex right now to pick up on anything. He didn't know.

The craving was back, gnawing at him like a rainy-day ache. But he was grateful for Robyn's presence in the house despite the conflict she aroused in him. It gave him purpose and a mission when otherwise he might give in and see what Jean Paul could do for him.

Yes--the house needed that humanity. He made the decision. When this was over he would seek out a maid or butler or chauffeur service. Something human that could fill this house. Robyn? No. It had to be human but know nothing of his world. It would serve this house, but it would also live in danger from the very beings that sought his downfall. The Coven. The hives he had harmed in all his years as an agent of the Coven. That was the only way he could focus on something other than the craving. He would be using the poor unfortunate

individual, yes, but better than the alternative.

Become a predator of men. Lose himself.

Even if one soul fell, that was better than a legion of them. Wasn't it?

"Hi."

He turned his head when he heard the high sweet voice of the girl. There she stood in the Parlour, still dressed in his robe. "Hi," he said uncertainly.

She ventured forward. "I'm sorry for before."

He shrugged. He ought to be the one apologizing, but he still wasn't sorry. He had done what he did to save her. To save himself. "Things happen."

"You're very forgiving," she said. "Alek."

He had a sudden urge to run away from her. He didn't know why, only that something was wrong somewhere. He tried to pinpoint the exact feeling but it eluded him.

She reached for the front of his kimono and traced the embossed tigers there. The kimono had once belonged to Akisha. Precious, eternal Akisha. And it bore her insignia. The Tiger. Power in battle and adversity. Now Robyn touched the robe she wore with curious wonder and familiarity, and he wondered if she would make another play for him and sighed inwardly at the coming battle. Their arrangement would not work. Not in any way. He wished he could make her understand that.

But instead of trying to divest herself of the fabric, she reached into the waistband of her underpants and withdrew the railroad spike she had used on Kage. He was surprised she had kept it. She showed it to him. Its tip was rusty with age and discolored with the vampire's blood, but still very sharp. And it was iron. Deadly iron. He looked at it. What did she mean by showing it to him?

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I love you."

Amadeus had professed such love himself, once. Alek thought about that in the second before Robyn rammed the sharpened tip of the iron stake into his heart. And then he had another thought. He thought about how everyone who ever said they loved him did so just before they tried to kill him.

The dhampir glanced up at her with curiosity. He was confused and in that instant Robyn struck, spearing the tip of the spike at the creature's heart. She should have known better. Inhuman reflexes enabled the thing to shift to the left to evade the stab even as its hand closed around Robyn's wrist and squeezed. Exquisite agony shot up Robyn's arm and shoulder and she automatically dropped the spike. She tried to wrench loose, but the dhampir shoved, sending her to the floor on her knees and close to where the spike had landed. Her left hand wrapped around it as the dhampir twisted her right arm in an attempt to make her drop the spike. Gritting her teeth against the anguish, Robyn lanced the spike in her left hand up and in, the point cutting deep into the dhampir's stomach.

It was not its vulnerable heart, but it was close enough.

As if jolted by a stun gun, the dhampir stiffened, pushed her away, and tottered backward, his shoulders smashing into the window and cracking it like an eggshell. Knocked onto her back, Robyn saw the dhampir double over and fall to his knees, his cloak of long hair mercifully hiding his wan, tormented features from Robyn's view. It would not be like last time, Robyn reflected; it would not be like with Daddy or with Kage. She would not have to see the monster's eyes as he begged for life and then began to die for her.

Robyn rose into a crouch. By all rights the push the dhampir had dealt her should have cracked her skull open or at least stunned her. Yet it had been no worse than the slaps she had gotten from Daddy when he wanted her and didn't want to want her--which meant the creature was weak. Maybe it was dying.

There would never be a better opportunity for escape. Scrambling up, she made for the bedroom and for Danny. Not thinking. Fleeing.

Of course she should have known better. She should have known Kage was not dead. Things like Kage and like Alek and like Edward and like Kurayami and like Daddy never died. They just lived on and on, hovering at the edges of dreams and nightmares. She stopped in the doorway, just looking at Kage, or what remained of Kage, crouched in the open window.

The vampire was in pieces. Not merely his clothing but himself as well, his skin and in some places even his bones, as if the flesh had been separated and worried and scraped bleeding off his body, the bones broken, tendons torn and frayed like hemp. There was a gaping hole in his chest where Robyn had put the railroad spike in, and from out of that hole bubbled a seemingly endless supply of fetid black juice shot through with the poison of iron and a colony of writhing grey maggots. Kage breathed, a rattling sound that made Robyn think of snakes and the chains on wolf traps. And then black stuff, as black as leather, as black as his inhuman, hungering eyes, coughed past Kage's torn lips and shattered teeth. .

Kage grinned but it was not a grin of pleasure, nor even one of menace.

It was hunger. Pure, animalistic hunger. Bestial. Unbound.

He was like a god of hunger.

Hunger for her...hungerat her...

“Do you know,” Kage grated like his mouth was full of blood and dirt, “what it is like...to be eaten alive?”

Robyn shook her head. She needed to back out of the room and slam the door between them, but the site of the half-eaten, ravaged creature paralyzed her. The suffering in his eyes.

Have to leave, she thought frantically, have to-

Stay.

No!

Stay, said his eyes.

*Stay...*

He still had that power.

Kage leapt at her and it was over in seconds. She could not have reacted. She could not have resisted. She could not have uttered even a single cry of alarm. In seconds she found she was inches from his ruined face, his black, pupilless eyes. She tried to cry out, to pull away, but she was held fast in an unbreakable vise. His hands, his godlike, alien eyes...

Kage smiled.

Robyn saw the creature's sharp, bonelike teeth and smelled its meaty breath, the ghost of the things it must have consumed in the tunnel pit to get him this far. The rats. The rats he--*It*--had eaten, the rats that had eaten it. She nearly gagged. Eyes wide, she beheld its tongue slithering out of its mouth--a narrow, black, forked tongue. A dragon's tongue. Nausea welled up within her as the tip touched her mouth. She pressed her lips tightly shut, yet Kage rammed its tongue into her, filling her with the taste of raw iron and spoiled meat, entwining with her own, making her shudder with nausea.

Sobbing, Robyn finally began to fight for her life, scratching and clawing at Kage's face. Yet nothing she did seemed to hurt him. She peeled off strips of dripping red flesh and still he grinned his hungry grin. Kage struck her and she fell roughly back onto the bed to within inches of Danny's still, stunned form. His slap was not like Alek's, nor even like Daddy's. She saw the room dance this time. She tried to rise but she was too weak. And then Kage was there, burying under her robe, touching her everywhere, tasting her everywhere, its tongue flaying at her flesh. Rage flooded through her when the creature's tongue darted out and licked at her navel. “Leave me alone!” she screamed, squirming uselessly, pounding him with her fists and her voice and her rage. “*Goddamn you all to hell!*”

“*Hell,*” Kage said, though it was little more than a rattle forced through his bloody-caked mouth and reptilian teeth.

It was the last word Robyn heard before the creature's broken shark like teeth sliced through her throat and ended her pain forever.

Alek opened his eyes and saw the demon directly overhead, backlit by the milky light of the city and the Hunter's Moon. He blinked in confusion and tried to rise.

Dizziness and a rending pain in the deepest part of himself convinced him otherwise.

"No," spoke the demon in a scathing, rattling voice. "Just lie still."

He waited, watching the attentive face of the demon. After a while he realized the demon was not a demon, after all. It was a vampire, but he took cold comfort in that fact. It was a horrendous vampire, a fiendish being covered in blood and wounds and strips of black fabric that passed for clothing. It was something from a pit. Something from its own grave. Something unto death. As he watched, the vampire disappeared for a moment, and then stepped back into his line of vision with its hands cupped. Something splashed down on top of him, making him bite his tongue at the agony that zagged through him like a steel knife. He clamped his teeth shut, yet he could not prevent the mournful sound of anguish that rose up and up in his throat.

"It hurts," said the vampire. It canted its head to one side and Alek saw its ragged mane of hair was bound with chain and a steel ball. Kage. "That's good. If you could not feel at all, that would mean you were dying." More blood was dribbled into his wound, and with the blood, more pain. The heels of his boots beat arhythmically against the floor. He thought he would explode from the pain, the immortal pain. Finally, mercifully, after some minutes Kage stopped tormenting him and knelt down. He smelled like death and Alek began to breath out of his mouth by reflex to cut the odor of the grave.

"You don't smell so well yourself, brother," Kage said. His grey, caustic face showed no emotion, as always, yet there was purpose in his gestures. He reached down and took hold of the stake of iron in one of his hands. The other hovered over Alek's face a moment before clamping down over the bridge of his nose, the heel sinking under his palate, his upper canine teeth sinking deep into the hand.

Alek choked, but it was a momentary discomfort. And then there was a sensation to which his entire body responded--a white-hot flash of fire from within that ripped a gushing hole loose and actually lifted his body several inches off the floor. Alek screamed through his teeth, biting against the hand preventing him from snapping his tongue loose, and it was like the roar of a lion or the cry of a wolf, something elemental and inhuman, a sound so strange it did not seem possible it came from his own throat. He tasted blood, rotten, and he began to gag in earnest this time. To gag and writhe.

Be still, said Kage's eyes.

And Alek was. And he lay as still as a corpse and felt the hissing heat of his own immortal blood filling the hole the iron stake had left in his stomach. His fingernails tore strips of the blood-soaked carpet from the floor. He was in hell. He must be dying. He was...

"Alive," Kage whispered as he released his hold on Alek's face, the palm of his frayed hand smearing the blood across Alek's cheek like war paint. "Alive and immortal and cursed to walk this world forever, a plague unto yourself."



Damned.

“Yes.”

Alek felt the pain recede...not fast, not fast enough for his liking...but at least he could breathe now and he had stopped roaring in anguish. He tasted his shed tears and blood. He felt his heart--it was running like a clock in his chest, but at least it was running. He sagged back against the floor, unable to move, unable to do more than shake his head at Kage and utter silently the only word he was capable of:

“Why?”

Kage threw down the railroad spike. “It was what the master wanted, nothing more. Don’t read too much into it. The next time we meet, Slayer, things will be very different.”

The master...

And then Alek remembered. Through the pain he remembered it all. Danny, Robyn, Kage. Everything.

And then it was obliterated again by a waxing cramp of hunger. Craving. The wanting that never, never seemed to leave him, damned and immortal as he was. He curled himself around the pain, almost weeping in the clutch of its power, as helpless as a child. As helpless as Danny, his Danny...

Kage seemed to regard him with something like curiosity. “You saved Danny. I can’t tell you what that means to me, and so I will show you instead.” Again he touched Alek, but this time he took great care in it, unwinding him, his fingers on Alek’s face, under his chin. With a force that was gentle, yet firm, Kage tilted Alek’s head back. The sensation of having his throat exposed panicked him and he started to whimper and struggle. Again Kage commended him to be still, and he was. He had no strength to fight the vampire’s will. No desire.

Kage held him fast and leaned down, his tongue finding Alek’s mouth in something like an exploratory kiss. Kage’s tongue entered Alek’s mouth like a snake in a hole, stealthy, and twined with Alek’s own for a moment before raking against his canines. The barest touch...and it set his entire body on fire with the need. The endless craving. And when Kage convulsed and offered Alek the gift of life Alek could no more deny it than a dying man in the desert could deny a drink of life-giving water.

Alek drank it all. His body drank it all, his hurting, starved body cleaving to the nourishment. He groaned as his body returned to life, pain fluttering away--not gone but now lurking at a distance--wounds netting at almost preternatural speed. He found Kage’s hair, the chain, his fingers tangling in it, his mouth and tongue seeking and begging yet more and more life from Kage’s mouth. Kage responded. He must have fed heavily for he seemed to give in an endless, frenzied passion before the giving became too much for his own recovering body and he broke the kiss and forcefully pushed Alek’s body down.

Alek’s mind was spinning, body humming with energy. “More?”

“No more for you, Slayer. You’ve had enough.”

Enough. No, there could never be enough...

But too much and he would suffer for it.

“That’s right,” Kage said.

You can know my thoughts?

“For a short time,” Kage said. “Until our bond weakens.”

Our bond...

Alek looked on Kage and he looked inside of him. All that terror, all those years. The loss and the sorrow...and yet there was love, too. He thought it could not be possible, yet it was. Kage was not merely devoted to Danny. He did not mindlessly serve the boy any more than he had any of his great human masters. There was love there as well. The love he cleaved to, because it subjugated the monster. He loved Danny, was in love with Danny. And that love was a wonderful, overwhelming feeling of happiness to be so near someone so special. To be so complete in the presence of another. To be loved. To serve. To be precious.

To feel human...

Alek’s jealousy was like a river.

“He loves you too. You have become a part of us both.” Kage stood up.

Alek knew he was leaving for good, and that they would not face each other again, except as enemies. Perhaps the love would remain, but it would not exist between the two of them. It was love of common blood, Alek realized. Dragon’s blood. A strange elixir.

They shared Danny. That was all.

Alek sat up. He was still weak, but he would live. Not a foot from where he lay was the iron railroad spike that nearly ended his life. He picked it up.

Robyn?

Dead in our eyes, as I have said, Kage said as he hovered in the window. Beneath the tatters of his coat was a little figure with large shimmering eyes.

Alek smiled.

Uncle Alek, said Danny.

Had he really heard that? Had he?

And then they were gone, both of them. Just gone.

Alek was confused. He went to look out the broken window, but there was nothing to see but night. And then went upstairs to the bedroom. There were bloodstains on his sheets and duvet, but that wasn’t so unusual. There was always blood somewhere.

He stood in the room, the stake in his hand, and wondered about Robyn.

She was gone.

And he never saw her again.

## 30

One week to the date, Alek went to see Edward Ashikawa at his house. It was a common day. The men at the gate let him in--somewhat reluctantly as usual--and he was looked over suspiciously and asked to unload any firearms, again, as usual. But he had none of those and had never owned any anyway, so it made no difference to him. He was allowed to keep the sword, and that was the only thing that counted.

The butler-henchmen said Mr. Ashikawa was in the courtyard taking tea and would Alek be joining him this afternoon? Alek said he would.

Outside in the courtyard, at the top of the stairs to the gazebo, sat the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza. He was sipping green tea and reading the New York Times in the beautiful light of day. He folded down the newspaper and regarded Alek with some surprise before saying, "I admire you. You have an enormous amount of courage coming here."

Alek regarded the man overtop the round black shades he was wearing against the fierceness of the light. "Well, the way I see it, you haven't tried to kill me in the last week and I have no interest in killing you at all, so I'm hoping this is a truce."

Edward Ashikawa considered that, but before he could respond, a little voice interrupted them both.

"Uncle Alek!" And then there was Danny running around the side of the great fountain and throwing himself forward into Alek's arms. Alek dropped down and caught him and Danny locked his arms around Alek's neck and started to squeeze like a vice with an iron grip. Alek noted that little Danny certainly had his father's strength. "You sure took a long time in coming," Danny said. "What took you so long?"

Alek looked past the child to his father. "I've been fighting the bad guys."

"Cool." Danny finally let go long enough to study his face. "Where's your mask?"

Alek tilted his head. "No masks for you, Danny-boy."

"I missed you, Uncle Alek," the boy said and gave him another squeeze. "I was scared, but Daddy said you would be back. Daddy was right."

Alek smiled. "I missed you too."

"Danny," said Edward Ashikawa, patiently, "Why don't you go inside so Uncle Alek and I can talk?"

Danny stared up at his father. "Have to?"

“I would wish it, son.”

Danny made a face. “Grown-up talk?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Yuck.” He turned back to Alek and grabbed a hold of his arm, shaking it emphatically. “Can I show you the dojo later?” Again he glanced at his father. “Daddy gave me a sword. I can’t lift it though. Will you help me? It’s cool but not like yours. Daddy says you have the coolest sword ever.”

“Sure.”

“Will you show me your sword? I want to hold it.”

“Of course,” Alek said. “Now listen to your father and go inside. Okay?”

“Kay.” Grinning, the boy ran off. But at the door of the house he turned and waved frantically one more time.

Alek waved back and the boy ran off.

“Kage was right...Danny loves you,” Edward said.

“Where is Kage?” Alek sat down on the stairs of the gazebo.

“Around.”

Alek nodded. “You lost him when you sent him to protect Danny.”

Ashikawa sipped his tea. “Yes. But I did gain you, didn’t I?”

Alek smirked. “I’m not a vampire, Mr. Ashikawa. I don’t serve.”

“All your kind serve,” Ashikawa answered with a mirrored smirk. “It is your nature to do so. And you cannot deny your nature, now can you? Nor more than Kage can. No more than I can.”

Alek shook his head. “I was passing by the house and wanted to know how Danny was. He had an experience last week.”

“Danny is well. Danny is with Kage. That’s all that’s important to me. I have everything I need, you see.” Ashikawa hesitated and glanced sidelong at Alek. “Well...nearly so.”

Alek stood up as the power of the Dragon seemed to reach for him, to push at him, to keep him sitting on the stairs. At Edward’s feet. “You never give up, do you?” Alek said. The anger kindled a fire from within. He would have to leave soon or chance going a second round with the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza, something he didn’t want, not when he was on an important mission today. He buttoned up his coat. “You won’t win, Mr. Ashikawa. I won’t belong to you. Ever.”

But Edward Ashikawa never lost his smile. “Time passes, Slayer,” he said, “and time changes all things.”

He stepped into the hospital lobby just before the end of visiting hours. The receptionist looked up at him with a bored expression that changed dramatically when she got a good look at him. He waited for some snide comment from Debra, but none was forthcoming surprisingly, so he approached the young woman and asked which room Candace Katherine Keith was in.

“1141, sir, but her visitor list is highly-restricted. May I have your name?”

He gave it, wondering if Kat’s family, or Kat herself, had thought to include him on the list. He was mildly surprised to learn she had. He made his way to her room, ignoring the interest of the receptionist. He pushed open her door, expecting to find her in a sad, vacant room, but the room was not like that. It was a veritable garden of delights, flowers and gifts everywhere he looked. Like the grand finale of a stage play, he thought. Like a funeral.

She has changed, he thought. And it had been no more than a week. Her skin was brown and dry, and she had lost so much weight it hung slack on her bones. Her muscle tone and strength were gone. How much weight had she lost in only one week? Twenty pounds? More? He had no way of telling, but he could see the terrible toll it had taken on her body. Even her hair looked lifeless, draped in dry, brittle strands across the pillow, all the curl gone, as if that were too much effort for her body to make.

It took him a moment to recognize the emotion welling up within him. Rage. He no longer wondered why he had loved her once so long ago. She had been worth loving. But this was sacrilege.

His rage gave him power and he cried out silently, trying to touch Kandy Kat’s mind. His hand stroked hers, and then moved to smooth her cheek between the tangles of the tubes and machines that kept her alive these days. He might even have kissed her since princes were reputedly able to bring back fair sickly maidens with such kisses, but the machines would not allow that. And anyway, everything he touched, everything he loved, died.

Kat opened her eyes. They were still bright. They still held mirth.

“Hi there,” she whispered. “I saw you...at the exhibit...so beautiful...”

“You shouldn’t try to talk too much,” Alek told her as he took the chair by her bed.

“Don’t tell me...what to do.”

He smiled sadly.

She returned the smile with one just as sad. And then her smile was wiped away by curiosity. She shook her head. “Can’t be...must be...Alek’s son? Are you?”

Alek tilted his head.

“Are you?” she repeated in earnest.

He thought about it. It would be so easy to lie now, to tell Kandy Kat that that was true, that Alek was gone and he was the son she had never known existed in this world. But somehow...he just didn't want to. The hour was getting late. Lies would gain him nothing.

"It's me, Kat," he said. "Serpent Boy."

"Can't..." Again a shake of her head. Her hand went up, her skinny hand, and touched his face, a face that had not aged a single day since his thirty-third birthday. The thought send a shard of anger so deep through his heart he thought it should stop beating immediately. Immortality for him, but none for her. In some evil twist of fate, the gods had seen fit to take a bit of brilliance like Kat and leave a worthless shadow behind.

It wasn't fair. And the unfairness gave him strength through the anger and he began to speak, and he talked about the night of the senior prom and how Kat's blue dress had caught on the door of his Thunderbird--that 1958 great white shark she loved so much--and how they had gone to a dress-fitters up in Ithaca, the only one they could find at that late hour, to mend the tear. And while there, the dress-fitter, feeling sorry for Kat's plight, had given her a whiskey sour with a cherry, and Kat broke her front tooth on the pit of the cherry and he talked about how, by the time they were done at the dentist, the prom was half over and how they chose to drive out to an overlook near the Hudson and how Kat wasn't angry and how Alek said he felt like Lil' Abner and how things like this always seemed to happen to him and would she forgive him? And she kissed him, though carefully with that swollen mouth of hers, and told him she wished she could spend the rest of their lives together like this. That everything was perfect, the night and the full moon, and so was he, and would he make love to her tonight? She was ready, so ready, and happy to have waited for him.

And by the time he had completed the story, Kat had fallen asleep.

He held her hand and watched her and thought about all that he had lost and all he would never get back, and after a half hour--fifteen minutes or so past visiting hours, yet no one came to get him--Kat opened her eyes again. "Alek," she whispered. "Why didn't you?"

"I couldn't," he answered.

"Because...of this?" Again she touched his face.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

He thought about that. "Something I have to live with for a very long time."

"Tell me about it?"

He nodded. And he did. And he told other stories. He talked about the night and what it was like to see in it with eyes unlike those of others. He talked about history and what role his people had played in it. He talked about growing up different from other boys and not understanding why. He talked about the craving and how he lived with it and how it kept him apart from everyone else.

Kat turned her head and closed her eyes.

Time passed, how much he did not know. Time suddenly meant very little.

She was awake.

“My mouth is so dry.” Kat looked at the beside table, unwilling to ask for any help. Alek set her hand down and reached for the Styrofoam pitcher and the plastic glass with the bent straw. He helped Kat drink, his eyes burning with unshed tears. He wondered why a husband was not here. He wondered where her children were. He wondered at last where all the fans were, the ones who had given her these gifts. He wondered how anyone could be loved and then abandoned so. And maybe the two of them had touched on some deeper level at last, because Kat said, in time, “Tired of lies, Serpent Boy. All of them...all the fans, the fame-givers...why aren't they here? I'm so scared and they're not even here to say goodbye. I don't want to die.”

Alek moved to the head of the bed and gently cradled the crying woman. He shivered at the touch of her. Her first breath left him sick to his stomach; the smell was prolonged death, a fetid miasma of decaying flesh. Alek lifted the birdlike weight against his shoulder, careful of the needles and tubes. He wanted so much to help, to end this.

“You're not alone now,” he said.

Kat didn't have much to say. She spoke in frantic spurts, wandering somewhere between the pain and the medicine, the past and the present. Her life, her loves, the children she wished she had had. She even laughed once when she talked about how she had almost gotten married some time after Alek left her.

Then she slept and Alek waited.

It took a long time. Near morning she opened her eyes again, for the last time. She was painfully lucid. Before she died she said, “What does it feel like?” Then the room turned cold and Alek realized Kat had gone elsewhere.

He sat for a long time, still holding her.

She had gone elsewhere because this world never deserved her. And because his world could not endure such a light. She had not belonged to him anymore than Robyn had belonged to Edward. Like Edward, like Kage, he did not belong to anyone. He was trembling when he gently laid the body out straight. He closed Kat's eyes and smoothed her hair and straightened her gown before he got up and prepared to leave.

What does it feel like?

He told the truth.

“Alone,” he said.

## **The End**

Slayer:  
Immortal

# 1

All of his life, Brett Edelman had wanted to be immortal. He doubted it was an old wish, or a very unusual one. Didn't everyone want to live forever, in one state or another? Immortal in memory, immortal in words, immortal in deeds, good or bad. Yes, he was sure everyone, from king to peasant, from rich man to poor, wanted that. Straight or gay, black or white, dreamer or fatalist—everyone wanted that. Why would they not?

Immortal.

He thought about that word and what it mean even as he lay in Heaven, the loft area of Club Bauhaus, and coupled with Nadine. Nadine, a sweet little bitch, was his usual. Oh he would take others on occasion, but seldom with the ferocity he had for Nadine. Nadine was his. Well, *not this*, really. Nadine belonged to the Master of the Hive, Jean Paul. They all did. If he so much as breathed a word of possession Nadine's way or suggested in any way that she leave Club Bauhaus, Jean Paul would have a fit and demand he leave and never return. Really, Jean Paul, being what he was, might do worse than that.

He had seen Jean Paul do things that didn't even deserve imagining. He knew, downstairs, there was a Members Only room that catered to Jean Paul and his thralls' more eclectic tastes. No human had ever been there. It was reputed to be the most spectacular place in the world by those in the inner circle. A place where pain transcended pleasure and became something altogether different. Paradise. Hell. Brett didn't care which. At times like this, draped over the raven-haired, emerald-eyed beastly beauty Nadine as he was, the only thought he had was what it would be like to be a Member of Jean Paul's clan.

To be Immortal.

Holding that thought, Brett nearly swooned in the throes of the bloodletting. That Nadine had deigned to feed on him tonight only elevated the thrill. Nothing he had ever tried with anyone else had ever had the power of Nadine's bloody kisses. Softly he felt her delicate breath on his neck, felt the astonishing terror of being held captive to a natural predator—the pain and relief of surrender to a power greater than his own, so rare in this city where he was all but king in his own way—and the wet, exquisite demand of her mouth, her endless mouth. Endless hunger.

Endless... immortal.

He had never understood what the word swoon meant until he darkened the doorway of Club Bauhaus. He had done so about a year ago, when he and a small group of businessmen decided to see what went down in the seediest and most popular club in the Lower East Side. They had sat at round tacky-topped tables and watched the human girls dance and throw off the silk handkerchiefs that passed for clothing. The guys he was with had catcalled as they sank an endless stream of greenbacks into bras and g-strings and called themselves daring. Even now, if he turned his head just right, he could catch a glimpse through the one-way glass wall of the loft at the naïve newcomers to the club sitting down there, their eyes glued to the redhead on the runway, thinking they were the most adventurous fools who ever lived. But he didn't want to turn his head.

Later he would suffer a tingling all-over headache from the blood loss. That and a nagging, exciting



sensation of shame. What they did, after all, they did on a divan in the middle of a crimson pit of smoke and lust and there was nothing but a few feet and the haze of the cigarette and clove smoke and incense of Heaven to separating them from the next couple. But for now it was beautiful. It felt beautiful. There was something scientific about it, he'd learned. Something about the high that results from the loss of blood and the odd alchemy of the vampire's venom mingling with his human blood. But for now, he found he couldn't care less. For now it was only about the feeling. Only about being immortal.

Was this what it was like? Was this feeling what they felt every day of their unending lives, these beautiful beings? Many times he had wanted to ask such questions of Nadine. What she was and what it meant to her. But in the end he always held off, afraid of the truth. Afraid that if he knew too much about them—about the vampires of Club Bauhaus—he would spoil the fantasy. And this was his fantasy. His world away from the world of work and wife and kids and everything that pulled him down into dull, oppressive normality.

This was... immortal. And for the few short hours a week that Brett Edelman got to savor it, he called it his hidden treasure.

## 2

"I'll make you immortal," the guy was saying.

Irena Sullivan snubbed out her cigarette and checked the clock on the wall of the employees' lounge. Ten to nine. She had some time. She looked around. The lounge was a little makeshift room at the back of JP's club. There was a couple of folding tables, a vending machine, and a coffee pot she depended on for her life. Jean Paul didn't usually allow anyone in the back of the club, but somehow or other, this fool who thought he was a producer had gotten through.

And he was starting to piss her off.

Her face and hands felt hot and throbbing but she told herself to have control.

Control.

The guy was wearing some kind of outdated John Travolta-inspired lounge lizard suit frumped up for the new millennium. His badly dyed blonde hair was blow-dried and his shirt was open almost to his navel where a legion of chains jangled amidst what looked like black wolf hair growing wild on his chest. He smelled like a French whorehouse, as if he'd been swimming in cologne. But Irena could still smell the cheapness on him underneath it all. The pimp cheapness. She'd grown up around these types, after all. Vampires, every last one. Looking to prey on her kind of desperation.

"Serious acting?" Irena asked, eyebrows raised as she used her teeth to pluck loose a new cigarette from the pack.

Mr. Pimp lit it for her with a monogrammed silver lighter.

“That’s all I employ, sweetness. Serious actresses.”

But Irena knew serious acting for strippers usually involved arriving on a set at three in the morning only to be tied down in various unlikely angles for hours at a time while your muscles grew sore and the set director pumped you full of heroine to keep you going through a fourteen-hour filming shift. That was what Bess said, anyway, Irena’s best friend in all the world. Bess had worked in films on the side, usually in the winter months when dancing didn’t pay as well as it should. Not that JP didn’t pay his girls well, but some of them had expensive habits and the tips they got nightly helped in a big way. And when those tips weren’t there, well...

The thought of money depressed Irena. How did that old joke go? Honey, our money problems are over. We’re out of money. She sucked back on the cigarette, kicking herself mentally because she smoked too much and drank too much and she was using up too much of their money of late. If she kept this up, she wouldn’t be able to afford school clothes for Lilly next fall. She had to be sensible. And she did try, she really did, but somehow or other, things always seemed to get away from her.

Lack of Control.

It had always been like that for her, for as long as she could remember. Even as a little girl she could never eat or drink enough, not that she had ever suffered the consequences of such indulgences. If she had, this guy would not even be considering her for the job. But the more she indulged the more she needed. She was a skeleton, and even JP had begun to eye her suspiciously, probably thinking her habits were sucking the life out of her. But no matter how much she consumed in food, wine, beer, drugs, or tobacco, none of it made any change in her. And nothing made her happy. She’d tried it all at one point or another, and sometimes all at once, but there seemed no point to it anymore; the drugs had no affect on her. The liquor was wasted. The tobacco only made her crave.

Lately, though, things had gotten worse. She didn’t sleep and nothing tasted good. Probably because of the damned cigarettes. She had to stop the fucking smoking, she knew, watching the cigarette burn fitfully between her fingers. The caffeine was driving her crazy. The lack of money was making her crazier than ever.

“Well, you think about it,” Mr. Pimp said. “Young beautiful thing like yourself shouldn’t be wasting your time on a stage working for peanuts.” He reached out to touch her hair and Irena instinctively drew back. Mr. Pimp lowered his hand and instead plucked a card out of his breast pocket, setting all that metal against his chest to jingling life. “Auditions are on Tuesday,” he said coolly, dropping the card to the table.

She looked at the name in gold gilding on the card: Chad Bellerophone, Producer.

“Phoenix?”

Irena turned to glance at the doorway behind her. Erebus was there with his arms crossed. He looked imposing, as always. Like always, like a mahogany version of Mr. Clean. The analogy had once made her giggle. Now it just annoyed her. Erebus was always watching her. Like she wasn’t just employed by JP but belonged to him, like the sick girls upstairs, the ones who did the fetish work for him. But she tried to be civilized anyway. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Who’s this?” Erebus nodded at Bellerophone.

Irena put her hand over the card. “Just someone who wanted to talk to me.”

“I’m a fan of the Phoenix ’s,” Bellerophone said, standing. “I wanted to know if she was free Tuesday.”

“She works Tuesday nights,” Erebus said in a barely audible bass growl.

“Phoenix.” Bellerophone turned to glance at her, his eyes glittering. “I like that.” And then he took her hand and kissed it.

Irena resisted an urge to wipe her hand off on her dance outfit. Mr. Bellerophone looked her up and down, as if measuring her. The outfit was one of JP’s best, a silk blue kimono carved overtop her breasts and cut into banners around her legs. Yet despite the fact that she took most of it off almost every single night, she had a sudden, chilling need to cover herself up in front of him. She pressed her knees together. And though she hated herself, her hand swept the card into her lap. She needed the money bad and she didn’t see herself making that much this winter onstage. The club was too close to the Twin Tower disaster area and getting people in was a job. Getting them to stay even harder.

No tippers meant no tips.

And then what would she and Lilly do? It wasn’t like there were a lot of jobs available... and really, she liked dancing. The music. The dance that made her feel alive when she felt like shit mostly all the time. She couldn’t see herself scrubbing floors or waiting tables. Anyway, all those types of jobs were done during the day when her astigmatism was at its worse.

Bellerophone pushed open the Exit door, letting in the lights, smoke and stink of the city. “It was nice to meet you... Phoenix . Maybe I’ll see you again.”

Irena didn’t know what to say.

A moment later Bess flew through the stage door past her, her flash dancer’s outfit glittering like Broadway all over her. Bess Girimonte always looked pantherish to Irena, dark and lithe, teeth white as light. Even her name purred. Bess slapped her on the shoulder before making a beeline for the coffee pot. “Girl... them boys are sweatin’ tonight!” She poured herself a mugful, then watched Mr. Bellerophone exit stage left. “What you doing in here talkin’ to that hustler?”

Irena looked toward the heavy pneumatic door swinging closed.

Mr. Bellerophone was gone. And so was Erebus, when she thought to check behind her, which meant she could talk freely with Bess.

“He’s got a job.”

Bess flopped down into the seat opposite Irena, yet she still somehow managed to make it look graceful. She lit up a long slender cigar and grinned, her teeth shining like pearls in her dark face. “He gonna make you a star?”

“He says.” Irena sipped her coffee, then put more cream and sugar into it and stirred it around. “What do they make you do?”

“No sex. You make him realize that early on and everything will be fine.”

“No sex. Riiight. No sex in a porn film.”

Bess grinned and said, “It’s all fakin’ it anyway. You ever hustle on the streets, you’d know.” Bess struck a dramatic pose and went into her Scarlett O’Hara routine, the same one she used in all her films, complete with a fake accent from the South where she’d never been: “Oh Lance... oh dahling... Ah do believe you give me the vapors.” Then she did a mock swoon across the table.

Irena laughed into her coffee, making it sputter up her nose.

Bess picked herself up, grinning from ear to ear. “You be a star, girl. You go and do it. You got the looks.”

“No, I don’t.”

“All that red hair? Those brown eyes? You calling me a liar?”

“Liar.”

“Shush! You go do it. Get your pretty ass outta this hole. Why not?”

Irena thought about that a moment. “Because JP pays well.”

Bess waved it away. “Fuck JP. I hate the way he looks your way anyway.”

“What way?”

“That... look. Like he’s sizing you up for Heaven. What if he asks you to work upstairs? What you gonna do? Say no?”

Irena thought about that. What, indeed? True, JP was infamous for his kindness to strays, but he also worked his girls like a pimp. You didn’t tell him no. You just said Yes or I quit. No was not an option. And if JP asked Irena to work Heaven, what could she say? She wasn’t like that. She couldn’t sell herself. She couldn’t do the things those sick girls did.

She would have to quit.

She stared hard at her bitten nails, wondering what she would say. And where she would go if she lost this job.

“Count Dracula was out there tonight,” Bess said, choosing a good time to change the subject. She sipped her coffee. “He must be looking for you.”

“He is not!” Irena said with a smirk.

“The way he looks at you? Shit.” Bess grinned.

The changed of subject let her mind wander off the more pressing problems. She had to smile. No one knew who “Count Dracula” really was. He just seemed to be someone who showed up at the club from time to time. But he didn’t act like a regular. He was quiet and acted like somebody looking for someone. Maybe he was a cop. He had a kind of cop look about him, though he didn’t resemble one in any way—tall and lank, but not at all in an unattractive way, with long black rock-musician hair and a

long black leather coat. Like some character out of a moody black-and-white movie. Maybe he was with a band. Irena didn't know. No one did. The only thing for certain was that whenever she made eye contact with him while dancing he always chose to hold it in his dour, unblinking way. As if he were trying to communicate with her. Trying to tell her something.

"Damn, girl," said Bess, staring at the clock, "you gonna be late for your own funeral."

Late?

"Oh my God! When was my set?" Irena asked more to herself than to anyone in the room. She checked the wall clock again and saw she was already ten minutes into her first set. Oh Jesus God... JP was going to have a fit and might even fire her! And then she really would need Mr. Pimp's job!

Gulping down her coffee and smashing out her cigarette, Irena rushed for the door. The sight and odor of the club hit her like a wall, making her feel like she was running through molasses. The booze, the smoke, the spilt blood from upstairs... there was some nights she actually felt her head spin from it all, like she was drunk on nothing. And so she was not entirely certain if it was real or if she was just hazing out when JP grabbed her arm from out of nowhere. He was just suddenly there with her backstage, hurting her.

Irena stopped dead in her tracks.

"Ma cher," Jean Paul said, his voice almost like a purr across her skin. Like a tongue. At least, that was what it might feel like to others. For her it was like an electrical charge. She hated his voice. She hated being anywhere near him.

"I'm sorry," Irena stammered. "I lost track of time."

JP looked unconcerned. "You look unwell."

"I'm fine," Irena said. Her hand suddenly felt very hot.

JP seemed to notice too. He let her go, flicked a lock of hair out of her eyes, and put his left hand over his right where it rested atop his antique walking stick. He was dapper as always in a pristine white suit and a tie as red as a crimson tongue. As always, he reminded Irena more of a priest than a pimp. He smiled, but it was a smile full of promise. Not like a priest's at all. "We need to talk. After."

Irena nodded, too frightened suddenly to say or do anything but watch his storm-grey eyes watch her back. He looked like a man until you looked more closely at him. Then he looked like a man-eating tiger watching you from between the tall grass, waiting to strike.

"I better go," Irena said, her voice a mere whisper. She felt her heart running like a clock in her chest.

"Oui." JP's hand lifted and he touched her face with the back of his hand. Fingernails like glass whisked across her cheek. "But... after."

"After?"

"I believe it is time you understood many things."

Irena did not know what that meant, did not know what things there were to understand, but she also

had no interest suddenly in finding out. She stepped backwards, unwilling to take her eyes off of him. Then, when she was a safe distance away, she turned and rushed headlong through the heavy purple stage curtain and let the music and the dance have her and drive some of the eternal frustration out of her soul.

### 3

Few things were as immortal as revenge. Words came and went. People died, buildings burned. Maybe love survived some of the daily apocalypse of life, but revenge was certain to pull itself out of the rubble time and again.

Alek Knight thought about that as Dante swung at his head with his rapier. He ducked and met the fall of the sword with the Double Serpent Katana. The two blades clashed, shearing their edges in a spectacular shower of blue sparks that briefly alighted the abandoned warehouse on the docks. The place had once been an import hostel, a place where goods were housed for the bigger New York corporations. Later it had been turned into a machine shop. Even now, the husks of the burned out machines that once dominated the space lurked in corners like steel and iron carcasses, half seen reminders of dreams that had gone up in smoke and fire.

Alek fell against one of those machines as he skirted another fall of Dante's blade. The sword, a magnificent piece of Madrid steel, hacked into the machine mount behind him and held a moment. Alek used that moment to kick Dante in the stomach, sending the slayer crashing to the floor some twenty feet away. Unharmed, Dante climbed to his feet and gave Alek a sweeping bow, rapier and all, as if he were on a stage in London rather than here in this filthy bowel of a building dueling to his death.

Alek held his ground and waited, the katana resting lightly against the outside of his thigh.

Dante smiled, his eyes never leaving Alek for a moment. He was small and fragile-looking, like a young boy. Although vampires stopped aging at the age of 33, he looked closer to 23. His exact age was unknown. Even his clothing gave away no hint since the cut of them was current and in vogue with most of the Underground crowd: a chain-mail jerkin, leather pants, tall boots, a spiked submission collar, and a long leather greatcoat armored with stainless steel plates the size of teacup saucers. His hair was cut in a long ragged blonde David Bowie-inspired mane that framed eyes that were either grey or green, depending on his mood. Right now they were green like a sky before a violent storm breaks. "Bravo, old son!" Dante said. "I had heard stories, but I never imagined the little whelp from all those years ago would become this stout warrior of today. Such a shame the Coven lost you, Slayer."

Alek smiled a smile that was not. "You might say *I* lost it."

"Nearly destroyed it, in fact," Dante said. His voice was rich and came from deep inside his chest, like the voices some of the best actors emanated. It was a voice that his body didn't seem capable of producing somehow.

"You flatter me," Alek said and raised the sword so it rested against the underside of his sword arm,

ready for Dante's next attack.

He wished things had not turned out this way. He had gone hunting this Saturday night, but it was not supposed to be for slayers. No, he had wanted information on a series of unsolved crimes that had been plaguing the piers the last few nights. Working girls butchered like cattle. Brutal. Inhuman. Naturally the first thing he thought of was Jean Paul's hive of vampires. Not Jean Paul himself—the Parisian was too smart for that—but his thralls were another matter completely. And if one of them wanted to hunt in his territory then it was important that they prepare to be hunted in return.

And then he had spotted Dante crouched over the desecrated corpse of a girl and everything fell together. Every murder. Every question. Dante...

The slayer had something in his hand—a glimmer of stainless steel—and then that thing was in Alek's sword arm and a rush of fire encompassed his shoulder and arm and nearly made him lose his grip on the sword. The plates on his coat, Alek thought and tottered out of the way of Dante's next attack. The shurikens embedded themselves in the wall behind Alek as he dodged them. Unfortunately, he was clumsy in avoiding them and crashed shoulder-first into a wall, sending the shuriken embedded in his shoulder that much further in. A spike of agony turned his vision red around the edges but Alek forced it back and turned, instinctively using a wing of his leather greatcoat to deflect two more shurikens.

Dante giggled like an insane little boy.

Alek tore the shuriken from his shoulder and threw it aside. Almost at once, another got him in the side under his open coat, nearly doubling him over with the searing, eye-watering pain. And then he did indeed double over, and ignoring the screaming agony in his ribs, rolled to the floor, swinging his sword. It grazed Dante's ankles and tripped him up.

But there—it was enough. Dante, lost in his concentration on the target, was never aware of what Alek was doing until it was too late. He went down, twisting onto his stomach to protect his throat from Alek's blade.

Alek grabbed the ankle of his boot.

“Bloody hell!” Dante kicked him in the face. Alek took the impact and twisted Dante's ankle until it crackled and Dante grunted and flipped back over from the impact on his leg.

“Bloody, yes,” Alek growled and towed the slayer toward him and his blade. “Hell, yes...”

Dante reached for another plate on his coat while simultaneously trying to kick out with his good leg.

Alek applied pressure on Dante's broken foot and Dante screamed.

Brett Edelman paid Erebus at the back of the club, in the nook that looked more like an accountant's office than the rear side of a fetish club. Then again, what did he expect? This was a business Jean Paul ran. In fact, Erebus was an accountant—or had been, among other things. Wouldn't know it to look at the seven-foot vampire weighing in at more than three hundred feral pounds. Right now, Erebus wore a dark suit jacket over the concert T-shirt he usually wore when he was on the door. He also wore glasses. Who would have thought that, either?

Erebus gave him back change for the wad of hundred dollar bills Brett paid him with. Jean Paul ran a high-end circus, but because Brett was a regular he was privy to certain benefits and discounts. Hell, maybe one day Jean Paul would offer a Club Bauhaus credit card. Well, maybe not. After all, this was a private expense that never showed up on any records, which was why Brett always paid in cash and made a point of never taking a receipt of any kind. Nadine's kisses were his receipt. That and the tapes he always had made. Speaking of which...

"I need to pick up my camera," Brett said as he slipped his wallet back into his pants pockets, which was a feat in and of itself. He always arrived with a hard-on and left with one too. It was as if he couldn't be sated while he was here. He wouldn't feel his normal self until he was halfway home and the stink of the club was out of his clothes.

Erebus took the ballpoint pen out of his impressive canines. "Gotta talk to Sticks if you brought your own."

"Yeah, I've been bringing my own. Where's he? Still in Heaven?"

Erebus gave him a slightly baleful look. "Sure. Where else?"

Brett nodded and waited. Heaven was a place no humans were allowed to go unless you were scheduled to be there. Right now, Erebus was giving him the typical down-the-nose look, as if he was thinking of what a piece of worthless shit the human race really was. Then again, he gave that look to almost everyone. Pushing away from the terminal, he hit an intercom and said something into it, but it was in a language Brett had never learned.

A few minutes later Sticks, another vampire lackey of Jean Paul's, stepped into the accounting office holding a camcorder no larger than the palm of his hand, which was exceedingly small considering Sticks's size and seeming frailness. He had not gotten the name by accident.

With the camera safely tucked away inside his suit, Brett Edelman made his way out to the Porsche parked in the lot of the Italian restaurant across the street from Club Bauhaus. Before he started the motor he checked himself in the rearview mirror. He didn't look especially pale and Nadine was always certain to keep the bites where his wife wouldn't notice them. Not that he was necessarily afraid of Laura finding out—Laura knew better than to question him about anything—but he didn't need his coworkers and clients seeing them. He also had to be careful around Wes these days. His nosy firstborn was just old enough to start wondering where his father went after work and if he couldn't find out and blackmail his old man for enough money for the blow he favored. Catching Wes stealing money from his safe last week had been enough. Brett didn't keep anything of consequence at home anymore. If it was important and private—like his tapes—he kept them at the office.

So his office was his first stop. He would stash this tape with the others before he even dared step foot into his house up in the Pocono Mountains where life was as normal and dull as Mom's apple pie. He started the car and took River Drive since it was the least likely to be clogged with evening traffic, unlike Madison or FDR. If he made good time he'd get to the office in just under half an hour, change clothes,



dump the tape and camcorder and be up in the Poconos in less than three hours. Just in time to be greeted by the family St. Bernard and hear Wes and his sister coming to blows over something or other again. He sighed. The fights never amounted to much, but Brett didn't like the idea of his son hitting his sister. He didn't like the idea of any violence in his household unless it was much-needed discipline, such as in Laura's case, when she got suspicious and spoke out of line with him.

He passed a row of abandoned warehouses crouching in the night. The wharf had been home to the fireboxes for more than two decades. How he would like to raze that piece of real estate to the ground and put up a project, or maybe some row houses of the kind he remembered from growing up in San Francisco. He could dig that, yeah. In fact, if he closed this big deal with J. Stephan Paul, his biggest stabled author to date, he was sure to be able to afford that sweet piece of land. After that... well, he'd sell out the company to the smaller lingering publishing houses too stupid to give up in an industry that was on its deathbed and get his ass into the real estate racket, where the big money was. It killed him to imagine how the drunks and dustheads were wrecking the wharf as he dreamed about what it could do for him.

He almost didn't believe it and had to do a second take when he thought he saw a rain of sparks coming from the warehouse on the end, the big one that had once been a machine shop. It was by far the largest warehouse and would pull him down the most bank as a condo. He usually paid the most attention to it, which was why he noticed the sparks as he drove past it. What the hell were the refuse of society doing to his building? He told himself it was none of his goddamn business, but if it burned to the ground there might be a move for urban renewal, and then he could just as well kiss his dreams for Edelman Estates a fast goodbye.

He pulled over to the curb of the warehouse, squeezing the Porsche in between a Dumpster and the garbage spewn across the gutter, and killed the motor. He got out of the car, his head swimming a bit from the bloodletting and his own anger. Fuck. Probably a bunch of asshole kids trying to burn the place down.

There was a broad, unpaved driveway that ran around the warehouse to the back where the loading docks were located. The driveway was, to be frank, undrivable due to the garbage and debris scattered across it. A single sodium light stood sentient over the lot, broken a long time ago. But there was a pair of security lights mounted over the front entrance and juiced from one of the lines that ran down that side of the street. It was the only light in the whole goddamn place, creating a limited pool of luminescence that Brett avoided like the plague. The last thing he needed were a bunch of pissed off speedfreaks spotting him here. Instead he stuck to the shadows and moved alongside the wall of the building until he found a basement window that wasn't boarded over. He knelt down and peered in through the dirty, cracked glass.

To his utmost surprise, two men were down there. One was small and blonde in a long leather coat. The other was very tall and slender with waist-length hair tied back in a long, shining blue-black braid. The big one looked like a Samurai warrior crossed with an 80's-style rock musician: black leather greatcoat, stainless steel greaves and gauntlets, a chain laced through his left ear, a heavy silver cross in his right. This couldn't be for real. Yet beyond a shadow of a doubt the most incredible thing about the two warriors was that both of them were going at it with swords.

As he watched, the big one got the blonde down on the floor and began twisting his ankle. The blonde sputtered and growled like an angry beast. Brett saw the flash of the blonde's silvery-green eyes, saw his fanged eyeteeth scissoring his bottom lip in the throes of pain, and had no doubt in his mind what he was witnessing. Not a couple of punks. Not human, anyway. This was what he'd heard of only in rumor at the club. This was what happened when two vampires clashed. Or rather, when two slayers clashed. It

didn't happen often, but sometimes there was a conflict, and according to Jean Paul's thralls, it was spectacular.

Brett watched, spellbound, as the blonde twisted unnaturally, a feat no human could possibly perform, not with bones in their bodies, anyway. The action was purely serpentine. The blonde snapped at the big slayer's right arm, taking a savage bite out of it. The big slayer reflexively let go of the blonde slayer's ankle, and almost immediately, the blonde was up, his sword drawn and trained on the wounded slayer. The big dark one retaliated by sweeping to his feet and meeting the blonde slayer's blade head on.

The two swords clashed and kicked up a shock of new sparks. The sound of the two blades grating set Brett's teeth on edge. Jesus, the swords even *sounded* sharp. Brett reached under his jacket and found the camcorder. He was getting a hard-on just watching it. He palmed the camera and simultaneously hit the Record button. Jesus, the things you saw in New York. And crouched there before the window, oblivious to all else, Brett aimed the camera at the basement of the warehouse.

## 5

Someone to see you, girlfriend.”

Irena turned away from her locker while simultaneously slipping her sweater over her head, making one smooth motion of it as she caught a glimpse of a little blonde figure dashing toward her across the room. She pulled the sweater down and dropped down to meet Lilly's joyous assault.

“Reena... surprise!” Lilly locked her arms around Irena's neck and gave her a squeeze.

“Hey, Tiger Lilly... what are you doing here?”

“Came to walk you home.”

Irena held the little girl at arm's length and gave her an icy look. Lilly was four and a half, small for her age, small and bony despite how much Irena fed her, which was a lot, and Irena hated the idea of Lilly walking even the four blocks down to the club on her own. The little girl looked like the wind could blow her away. But it wasn't the wind Irena was afraid of. This city ate kids. It ate everyone. “You know I told you never, never, *never* to leave the apartment.”

“I was bored.”

Irena played with Lilly's hair, running her fingers through the fragile cornsilk, brushing wayward strands out of Lilly's big periwinkle eyes. “I still don't want you out. Bad people are out tonight. You're making me mad.”

And she meant it. There was that maniac the police were calling the Ladykiller. Bess said she even knew one of the prostitutes the bastard had carved up, which meant the attacks were getting close to home. As much as she loved having Lilly accompany her home, she couldn't risk her little Lilly being the Ladykiller's next job.

Lilly nodded solemnly. “I'm sorry, Reena. Don't be mad.”

“Just don’t do it again. Okay?”

“ ‘Kay.”

Irena stood up and took her bag out of the locker, then slammed the door.

“JP talk to you?” Bess asked from the doorway, her voice a conspiratorial rumble.

“News travels fast,” Irena said, slinging the strap of the bag over her shoulder.

Bess stopped her at the door, her hand on her shoulder. This was important. “What did he say?” she asked, keeping her voice steady so Lilly wouldn’t think it was something too important.

Irena shrugged and watched one of the dancers from the next shift skirt past them. “I believe his exact words were, ‘It is time you learned many things.’ ”

“He call you ‘ma cher’?”

“He always calls me that.”

“He’s setting you up, girl.”

Irena felt the heat rise in her face. “I don’t give a fuck. I’m quitting this gig anyway.”

Bess smiled. “Going to be a star?”

Lilly looked up wonderingly and took Irena’s hand. “You’re going to be in the movies?”

“Yep.” She looked at Lilly, then smiled at Bess. “Of a sort.”

“You go girl! Just make certain Don-Fucking-Giovanni doesn’t put the moves on you, okay?”

He’s not going to *fuckintouch* me, Irena thought. But instead of saying that she only nodded. Raising her voice would only make Lilly nervous. “Wish me luck?”

Bess grinned and crossed the fingers of both hands. “I already have.”

But Irena didn’t have the luck just yet, she soon realized. Outside it had begun to snow. Snow in September, she thought. How odd. She cuddled down into her leather jacket and held Lilly close as they crossed onto Broadway where the lights were the brightest. It wasn’t cold, but it felt weird. Like Halloween. She wondered why she would think such a thought, and then dismissed it as the distant prattle of her overworked body and her overtired brain. Just ahead, the rearing, neo-gothic complex they lived in slipped out from behind another, taller, office building.

“It’s cold,” Lilly complained.

She was wearing next to nothing, her denim jumpsuit and a blouse, that was all. Irena slipped her jacket off her shoulders and put it around Lilly. “That will teach you not to come to the club. JP doesn’t like it when you’re there, anyway.”

“JP is scary.”

I know, Irena thought.

They crossed the street and found themselves out of the lights of Broadway. It was colder and much darker here. The dark did not really frighten Irena, but she hated the idea of crossing it with Lilly. Their footsteps always sounded so lonely on the broken asphalt. And when there was leaves or snow on the ground, their footsteps still sounded lonely.

Except tonight they weren't sounding lonely at all. Behind them, maybe at a hundred feet, Irena could hear someone following them. She could feel someone. When she was alone, she sometimes chose a number of back alleys as a shortcut home, climbing a fence or even a fire escape so she was up high and the drunks and freaks left her alone, but tonight she veered away from such dark niches, cutting across a big derelict rail yard instead. The moon was full, affording them some light, however lurid. She glanced up at it and saw that despite its filmy brilliance there was blood on the moon tonight. She hurried along. A pool of light greeted them ahead, making the snow-wet street just ahead shine like spilt gold. It was only a few blocks, after all. Horns blared as cars and cabbies rolled by just beyond the rail yard fence.

But the footsteps behind them persisted.

Pulling on Lilly's arm, Irena quickened her steps until she emerged from the rail yard and onto the avenue. Maybe she ought to go back to the club, she thought, except she was halfway home already.

She wasn't afraid. Not yet.

"Phoenix."

Irena stopped at the curb and turned to look behind her, getting mad now. With the light spilling all over the two of them, no one in their right mind would think to try something.

It was the guy. The moviemaker. Chad Bellerophone.

"You fuck. Why are you following me?" she cried back, watching his form divide from the darkness.

He was smoking, looking casual. He put his silver cigarette lighter away and pulled out something else. Something small and unusual, yet she instantly recognized it. A taser.

"Oh my god... you're him," she blurted out before she had a moment to think. She felt her entire being clinch up, and she wanted nothing more than to wrap herself tight around Lilly and fly away, but right now she couldn't take her eyes off of the man standing in front of her.

"Him?" said the man.

"The jerk cutting up women."

"I don't cut up women." He threw his cigarette down. He was finished playing games.

"Everyone saw us together, goddamn you!" Irena said. She could easily outrun any man, but with Lilly there was an added concern. Lilly could not keep up. And she wasn't about to abandon her, no way. So if Bellerophone tried anything she would fight and scratch at him the way she did in alleys and on the street and in the subway. She would fight him and win. She always won. "You don't think you'll get caught?"

“By whom?” He grinned, showing saber teeth. His eyes glimmered like diamonds in the dark. How had she mistaken him for Bellerophone? she wondered distantly. He looked nothing like the man. He—it—was tall and rangy, white-faced, dressed in a black leather jacket that smelled like musty copper and decay. Death. “Who will catch me? Your human police? Phoenix ?”

This wasn't real. He wasn't human, she was certain of that. But what he was was unimaginable. What was he? She looked at his fanged eyeteeth, his night-shining eyes. A ghoul? Some kind of freaky cannibal? A vampire? No. Vampires were stories. Stupid myths. Movies. Vampires didn't carry tasers.

The vampire sighed. “Everyone saw me in Jean Paul's club.” One dark eyebrow lifted. “Well... everyone saw Chad Bellerophone, in any event.”

Irena shook her head. “What the fuck are you?”

“And after this the police will never find me. They will be looking for Bellerophone.”

He seemed to be talking to himself.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Irena turned around and sought a car, any car. To her astonishment, one pulled to the curb. She couldn't imagine her luck. The window rolled down.

“Help me...?” she asked.

But only another pair of diamond eyes glittered up at her.

No!

The taser went into her back. Irena turned, scarcely able to believe the vampire had moved so quickly. The current raced through her blood like fire, numbing her lower half and making the rest of her spasm in unbelievable agony. Irena tried to scream but her voice caught as the pavement came up to smack her in the cheek. She felt her teeth break on the pavement. Voices. She was drifting. She could feel... what? She was being dragged into the car by the vampires. She was being kidnapped. She tried to move, she was conscious, damnit, but she couldn't react. She was frozen. She tried to see, but her body would not respond. The last thing she wondered before blessed oblivion overcame her was where her Lilly had gone.

## 6

So they were both wounded now.

Dante had a badly broken ankle. Alek had a massive, bloody wound in his arm just above his right

gauntlet where Dante had sank his carnivorous eyeteeth into the flesh and shredded it. For Alek, the wounds from the shurikens had begun to mend, but the bite wound would take hours to do heal. The anticolagents in Dante's spit would make certain of that. The same was true of Dante. Almost any kind of wound with a steel weapon would have begun to heal on him by now, but a broken bone like that was not so quick to heal. The ankle was nearly snapped in half. Dante would have to feed heavily and quite soon if he had any prayer of mending it.

Dante leaned heavily against a machine mount as he fenced. His strokes were less sure, more erratic. It was difficult to fence with only one leg. Still, the same problem plagued Alek. His sword arm was stiff from Dante's venomous bite and basically useless. He had switched to his left, but he wasn't good with it. Their blades now clanked together with more power and less skill. Alek came in close and Dante reached for another shuriken. Alek retreated automatically and Dante lifted his hand off the plate.

"You are really starting to bugger me," Dante growled.

"Yield and you walk away," Alek answered, circling around the slayer.

"Fuck you." Dante changed his mind and tossed the shuriken at him anyway.

This time Alek was prepared for it. Ducking under the flying shuriken, Alek rolled to the floor on his back and twisted around in mid-motion, bringing the katana up in one great thrust. The knife-edge of the blade entered Dante through the stomach and pinned him like a bug to the wall behind him.

Dante dropped his rapier. His eyes fell on Alek. Hate. Venom. Like an immortal disease, Dante's mind and body were wracked with it. Yet he grinned.

"Well done, Slayer," he whispered around his agony. "But you had better... finish me off..."

Alek pulled the sword loose from Dante's body, dragging with it plaster dust from the wall but no blood—the sword always drank up the blood—and rolled to his feet.

Dante's eyes flashed as his hand went to grasp the hole in his gut. He knew the stories. He knew the Slayer killed in defense. Never cold blood. Never that. He knew they would again have their time, and soon. A rematch of sorts.

It was only unfortunate the stories about the Slayer were so goddamn wrong.

Dante's eyes registered surprise less than a split second before Alek butterflyed his sword and with it cleaved Dante's head from his shoulders.

## 7

Jesus Christ.

It wasn't like in the movies. It wasn't like that at all. The defeated slayer didn't die some spectacular death, bursting into dust or fire or something. In fact, it was almost an anticlimax. The big slayer performed some deft motion with the katana that even Brett with all his concentration could not follow, and suddenly Brett found himself staring at the blonde slayer slumped against the machine mount, sans head. The blackened blood of the thing was everywhere, on the walls, on the floor, on the other slayer. It wasn't neat and perfect, a good death. Quite the opposite. Blood still pumped and drizzled out of the stump of the dead slayer's neck, sizzling when it touched the floor or some substance cooler than itself. And then, almost like an afterthought, the hands clenched and the body stiffened and the dead slayer crumpled to the floor, emptying out the remainder of his blood onto the thirsty, cracked concrete. And then the body lay still and Brett knew it was over.

The big slayer with the long black hair and coat had won. Were that him down there, Brett knew he would be retching his goddamn guts out right about now. Jesus, but he couldn't *smell* the death of the thing even through the closed window, a cool and evil smell that sent his flesh crawling. But instead of retching, the slayer found a wall to lean against and worked on catching his breath. Sheathing his sword somewhere under his coat, the slayer started to explore the wound in his arm. It looked damp and painful and infected, even from what Brett could see of it.

Then it occurred to Brett, the way the slayer was turned, all the thing had to do was glance up and he would catch clear sight of Brett and his camera. What the hell was he thinking? Almost frantic now as the paralysis of what he had witnessed let him go, Brett hit the stop button on the camcorder.

The slayer looked up. He had heard the switch of the button through the glass.

Jesus God.

He was staring right at the goddamn thing. Right into its eyes. It had brown eyes flecked with crimson. Nothing had eyes like that. Goddamn *nothing*. It looked right back at him, right into his eyes as if seeking something, and Brett started to shudder inside and out so badly he nearly lost his hold on the camera. No, nothing had eyes like that. Nothing at all. Dead eyes, they were. The eyes of a natural-born killer used to preying on Brett's kind. Used to preying on whatever crossed its path.

Move, goddamnit! Brett ordered himself. Fucking move it!

The thing blinked balefully up at him, and then Brett was moving. Tearing his eyes off the thing—he didn't want to, what if it followed? How could he watch it and get away at the same time?—he bolted for the Porsche at the end of the drive. It was behind him, Brett knew it was. Right there, breathing down his neck quite literally, and when it caught him it would be the sword Brett would know, that sword and those eyes. He would know them both all too intimately.

Brett was whimpering by the time he reached the Porsche. Thank God he had left the driver's side door open. He didn't think he could manage the keys. Pulling at the door so that he nearly ripped it off the car, he threw himself inside and shut it with the sound of a vault being slammed.

Silence.

Brett was trembling so badly he could barely grasp the steering wheel, yet grab it he did. He fumbled with the keys for a full half minute before he got the motor running, all the while not looking through the driver's side window, certain that a katana was going to come crashing through the glass at any moment and shiv him through like a side of beef. He could see it happening.

Brett wasted no time. Grinding the gears and stomping on the gas, Brett took off like the proverbial bat out of hell. He didn't dare glance in the rearview mirror until he was off the unpaved drive and onto River Drive again. Then he looked.

The slayer was there, standing on the rocky drive, limned in a narrow halo of illumination from the security lights. His coat burned as if with a blue flame and his hair shone crimson in the weird lighting. And there was something else, something flashing under his very long coat—the stainless steel of his sword, Brett supposed. The slayer had not gone very far from the warehouse but it was watching him with a kind of animal-like curiosity, head tilted slightly, burning white eyes narrowed.

Brett wondered two things at once: he wondered what the expression on its face meant and he wondered if he would see it again, someday, someday soon.

## 8

The horror was immortal. A sheet over her face blocked her vision and the temperature around her numbed her to the bone. Cold. She was so fucking cold. She was hardly breathing so there was nothing really to smell, but she knew, despite the utter deprivation of her senses, that she was in a morgue. She had heard its cold echoes on arriving, had felt herself slide into a drawer and heard the door close like a seal. Now, as she lay listening, she heard the hum of the refrigeration units around her while she dreamt nightmares and wished the police had not found her body. Maybe then she might have awoke in a dark alley somewhere and been able to crawl back to life, or death. Better that than to have been found by the idiot cops and the bastard coroners and now lie here in this hated purgatory of stainless steel and pray to God that someone found her before she froze to death. She prayed Lilly would not have to see her like this.

Lilly...

But before she could even complete the thought, another took its place. There might be an autopsy. She felt her entire body contract with fear. Was this what death was like? And what would it feel like, to lie naked in running water on cold steel as she was sliced from neck to groin and her body turned inside out?

Her heart thrummed with fear. Her heart! But that meant she could not truly be dead. But it hurt, her heart. Every beat was its own separate agony, sending out ripples of fresh new clenching pain throughout her body. She felt every inch of herself. Every bone and every vein and artery. She was a network of never-ending throbbing pain.

She cried but it was a tearless weeping. She had no tears. She had nothing. She could not even move, her body too leaden and broken around her. Who had done this to her, who...?

The cold... the waves of pain...

She made a strangled sound in her throat, but it did not come from her mouth. Instead it seemed to hiss



from her very throat, a wretched noise she associated with people who smoked through tracheotomies. Jesus. Her body... what had become of it? She didn't know, couldn't remember, but whatever it was, she was still alive, and lying in a morgue locker and dying again, this time of the pain and cold. Could she attract attention by pounding on the door?

She tried, but she could not move. Could she hang on until they took her out for the autopsy? She tried to stay alert, thinking that by doing so she could fight off hypothermia, but she must have dozed because the motion of the drawer sliding out startled her. She had not heard the door open. Light blinded her as the sheet came off.

"Would you look at that?" came a scouring male voice, musing to itself. "Fucking goddamn shame. I could do a girl like you, sweetheart."

Someone touched her face, then ran an invading hand over her breasts and then between her legs. The violation triggered something, a memory, but too dark and vague for her to hang onto for very long. A fleeting image... eyes like diamonds... a pain splitting catty-corner through her womb and another at her throat... being absorbed... being food for some beast... and then pressure built inside her and all she had was the pain and the resulting anger, the immortal rage... rage...rage ...

"Do me," she said, hoarse.

Silence.

She had said that. She had. Now that she had someone's attention, she opened her eyes. A gasp sounded just above her, but she hardly noticed. Just above her was the most intriguing thing she had ever seen. She stared up at the morgue attendant, at the cords of blue under the hairless white skin that grew just under his ear. Except they were not properly blue. They were stained by a pattern of shifting crimson. All of him was, as if she had stared into the sun too long. The brilliant webwork bobbed as the man swallowed in surprise and tried to back away. Heat. She felt his heat, tasted it, saw it, and his heat seemed to animate her.

Her body acted on its own, with no mitigation whatsoever on her part. She sat up and put her arms around his shoulders, her face in his throat. The skin was tough but her teeth seared it open on the second bite. And then her mind went all glittering darkness as his enormous red heat filled her body and brought the pain to a boiling point at her throat and groin and every violated place before washing it all away in a sore red flood. Her body was pulling the threads of heat from the morgue attendant's body, stealing it. Her body was taking it in steaming mouthfuls that exploded inside of her mouth and throat and stomach like spasms, each one making her hands clench that much tighter around the attendant's neck. Finally, the bones crackled under the pressure of her fingers and she feared she was doing something irreparable to him and let him go.

He dropped to the floor, grey and lifeless like an empty bag, the gaping red maw of a wound where his throat had once been.

She trembled, but not in shock. She touched her mouth where the warmth remained. It had spilt down her throat and over her breasts. Her hair was clotted with it. But even as she watched the crimson stains grew fainter and less distinct as her skin absorbed it like the sun evaporating a spill.

Absorbing it... why? Because it had needed it?

Because it—she—was not human?

The panic returned, and with it only one prerogative—no matter that she may or may not be human any longer, no matter the crime she had just committed, she most certainly could not stay here. She had to go. Had to. There was a dead man on the floor, a man she had killed. A man she had feasted on like the beast in her memory had feasted on her. And if she were convicted of his murder she would lose Lilly. She knew she would. She would lose everything.

Lilly. Where was Lilly?

She slipped off the gurney and nearly fell to the floor. She had enough strength to stand but her head ached with a migraine and the lights made her eyes simmer and burn. Despite the strength and the warmth in her stomach, she still felt sluggish, lost and old. For a moment she looked around the refrigeration unit and wondered what to do. The body. She had to get away from the body. She had to think straight. Pulling the sheet about her for warmth, she went to the swinging door and pushed it open. The rest of the morgue was silent, but she could hear voices from the opposite end of the corridor, where the autopsy room was located. She started down the corridor, then veered off toward another door that read **EMPLOYEES ONLY**. Something told her there were clothes there to stave off the chill. Orderly whites. She found some in a size much too large for her but wrapped herself in them nonetheless. There were no shoes so she padded barefoot from the room and kept moving down the corridor until she saw a crash bar to the outside. The voices began to call down the hall, to call for Phil. Phil the dead morgue attendant.

Phil, whom she had killed.

As if in a daze, Irena pushed against the door and out into the world.

Time passed. And she walked within and without it. She was so cold. She found a ratty old coat in a Dumpster somewhere along the way and wrapped that around her as well. Now, looking like one of the faceless legion of the homeless, no one questioned her or even looked her way. She continued down the streets, picking them seemingly at random until she realized where she was going.

She climbed the wooden steps of the project to the fifth floor and found the apartment door by running her hands along the numbers. Her eyes would not focus. She was so tired she thought she might fall asleep where she stood. But in time she found the right door. Locked.

“Lilly,” she called softly, staring at the peeling layers of paint on the door.

No one answered.

“Lilly.” Louder.

Nothing.

Because Lilly is not here.

No! The thought terrified her. She has to be here!

Does she? The police and the child welfare people probably have her. You did such a wonderful job of protecting her, Irena.

She narrowed her eyes at that snide inner voice. Yet she could not refute its logic.

She went back downstairs and made her way out and down the street to the club, the filthy coat pulled up tight around her and smelling of only God knew what. Evidently it was enough to keep any more attackers away because she made it to the club without incident and wove through the door and across the floor as if in a haze, the music a muted roar in her ears, the stink of blood and sex making her feel doped beyond reason. She sat down heavily at a table.

It was early evening, almost near the shift-change, and she didn't know any of the girls. But if she stayed here long enough she was sure to be spotted by Erebus or Jean Paul. She asked herself if that was what she wanted. Maybe not, but she certainly could use Bess right now.

Could use Bess for what? So she could tell her best friend how she had murdered a man and torn his throat out? What would Bess tell her to do? Turn herself into the police, more than likely. She shivered. The panic was back and more powerful than ever. Something was wrong with her, and she could deny it no longer.

She wasn't human anymore. She was something else.

She was like Mr. Bellerophone. He had done something to her, and she thought she knew what it was. It was impossible, utterly impossible, yet she could think of no other rational explanation.

Unless she was dreaming and none of this was real.

Her stomach cramped up as if someone had laid a fist into it, proving that all of this was very real indeed. Too real. Irena doubled over and felt the sweat bead up on her face and hands. This couldn't be happening. Things like this just didn't happen in the real world. Things like this didn't exist. She forced herself back into her seat and made herself take a long, deep breath. There was one way to find out, she thought, and ran her tongue over her teeth. But whether her teeth felt sharper in her mouth or not she could not tell; they ached too badly for further inspection. Her body ached. Her being ached. And it must have showed, because one of the waitresses she didn't know came by, looking concerned.

"You want something, honey?"

She asked for water, except the taste of it when it came was like chlorine and burned her tongue. She needed something, but she doubted what she needed was on the menu. Then she thought of other places in the city that catered to weird fetishes, places like Dracula's Den up in the Harlem Heights. But that was so far. And anyway, just because a place had an odd name didn't mean anything. The whole idea was ludicrous. Except for the fact that it gave her a better idea. She hoped.

She called the waitress back over. "Looking for someone," she whispered. "Tall. Black waist-length hair. Leather longcoat. Have you seen him?"

The waitress cracked her gum. "I seen him, but not tonight."

Another cramp made Irena's eyes mist over. "You know where he lives?"

"No." The waitress paused. "I think a few working girls know, though. Velvet does. He beat the shit out of her pimp a few days ago."

"Velvet... where...?"

“Can’t help you, sweetheart. I don’t know the beat anymore.”

The waitress, looking uncomfortable, found some new customers to wait on.

Irena rose from the table, steadied herself, and moved toward the door. It was better she had some air anyway. The cramped smoggy air of the club was choking her, making her sick. Outside, the snowy night air tasted wonderful. Velvet. She knew where some of the girls hooked outside the club; many of them took their coffee breaks in the café across the street from Club Bauhaus.

She asked a few girls if they knew where Velvet was. A few had no idea, but a few more did. Thank God for the network, Irena thought as she forced herself to keep moving down the avenue. Velvet was working Times Square these days, one girl said. Irena found her easily enough after that—she was mahogany dark and trussed up in a red velvet cat suit. Velvet laughed when Irena asked her about the man, the one they called Count Dracula.

“No, hon. They wrong. That’s the Slayer.”

“Slayer?” For some reason the word jammed the raw edge of fear deep within her.

Velvet nodded and smiled cheekily. “He’s the patron saint of whores. Ain’t a pimp or hustler on the East Side who’ll mess with us girls, not unless they want a three way with his pig sticker.” Velvet went on to say he lived in the old Victorian house on Castle Hill. She also had a lot of other nice things to say about him but the house was the important thing. After Irena knew where it was, she thanked Velvet and headed toward Castle Hill.

The house wasn’t hard to find. There were few on the street like it: a three-story crouching stone Victorian surrounded by a tall wrought iron cemetery fence. There were carvings on the gate like serpents. Again, Irena felt a stab of fear.

What if he wasn’t what she thought—hoped—he was? Or worse yet, what is he was and he saw her as an enemy, someone invading his territory? She would be delivering herself right into his hands.

But she couldn’t let herself believe that. He might be like her, but that didn’t necessarily mean he was a killer like her. He had helped Velvet on at least one occasion, and according to the other hookers, he kept an eye on the working girls in this whole area. An evil man wouldn’t have been bothered.

Satisfied that she had convinced herself, Irena let herself through the gate and walked down the stone path to the grand porch. There was no doorbell, nothing to indicate habitation at all. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she used the doorknocker fashioned like a coiled dragon to rap four times on the door. She had to believe this would work. He—the Slayer—was the only one she knew of who might be like her. He might be able to give her answers. At least then she wouldn’t be alone with this.

She didn’t have long to wait. No lights came on in the house—she supposed he didn’t need them—but after a minute or so the doorknob turned and the door opened.

The Slayer. It was him. She knew it. The tall lanky height, the eyes like opals, the hair like black velvet. The face as beautiful and seamless as that of a white angel, a saint. Like JP he was a priest, but one done all in warm silk black, not white. Then she thought it odd that she should see him so clearly in such a dark corridor. It was the last thought she had before she collapsed into his arms from exhaustion.

## 9

... dhampiri,” said J. Stephan Paul, and it was the only word Brett Edelman had heard in the last half an hour.

Crushing out his third cigarette of the meal, Brett looked up and said, “What was that?”

Jay shrugged in his seat. He was a ponderous man so the seat—a wooden captain’s chair that complimented the nautical setting of the Overlook Café but hemmed Jay in like a barn animal—squealed in response. John Stephan Paul—or Jay to his friends—was in his mid-fifties, overweight and out of shape like a lot of people who made their living on their asses in front of a computer. He had scant brown hair that he liked to comb sideways over his pink scalp and a pink face and chubby little pink hands. He always reminded Brett of what would happen if they decided to make a male counterpart to Miss Piggy in the Jim Henson Workshop. Jay’s suits were always pressed and he never looked unkempt, yet Brett had the nagging suspicion that at home, behind closed doors, Jay was a certified slob. Brett, of course, would never openly hint at such a suspicion.

For one thing, Jay was his biggest stabled author.

For another, Jay was the biggest fucking author in the country.

Jay smiled and made that annoying little snorting sound that passed for an embarrassed laugh in his book. Brett wanted to call him Mr. Piggy.

Mr. Piggy Bank, to be exact, which was what he was.

“You think it’s a stupid idea?” Jay asked with upraised eyebrows.

Brett waved the waiter over and pushed his coffee cup to the edge of the table. “Not at all, but try and explain it to me again, in more detail,” he said to cover his ass. Truthfully, ever since they had sat down, Brett had been off in dreamland. It wasn’t a good place to be, especially when he needed to be on his toes to cut this deal, but he couldn’t help himself. Since the incident at the warehouse last night, Brett had been unable to think about much more than the two slayers. He slept, he ate, he fucked, he cut contracts, and he thought about the two slayers dueling to the death in the bowels of a warehouse on River Drive. That had become his life now. The slayers and what they did had become an integral part of who he was. He knew they were important—he had not been shown this thing for nothing, after all, that was not how the cosmos worked—but he had yet to discover how it all fit together. He had no real fears of the surviving slayer hunting him down. Hell, the slayer couldn’t know the face of some publisher—even as big as he was—at first glance, and he had not been close enough to see Brett’s license plate, nor even the make of his car, so Brett had convinced himself there was no real danger in his newfound knowledge. Brett wasn’t afraid, not at all, not anymore. He just wished he knew how to make this knowledge work for him.

“I take that vacation I’ve been promising Maggie,” Jay said now, and Brett made an effort to pay attention this time. “See, I have a contact in Bermuda who specializes in forging identities. While I’m

there, I have him make me over. Meanwhile, you and Maggie announce to the world that J. Stephan Paul has passed on.” Jay shrugged. “I make you a shitload of money on the new release—the last release—and it gives me a break from all the Baron Blood bullshit.”

“Stage your own death,” Brett said. It wasn’t a bad idea, just full of holes. “Isn’t that a little tricky?”

Paul waved it away. “Naw. My pal in Bermuda can get me a new Social Security number, tax number, everything. And I’ll slide everything we make under your tax shelters. If it’s one thing I’ve learned from twenty years of writing, it’s that nothing is as hard as everyone makes it out to be. The only tricky part is, I have to stay out of sight from now on while I’m working on the new series.”

Brett lit up his fifth cigarette of the hour. He couldn’t understand it; Baron Blood had made Jay the fortune he had today. Hell, it was the biggest erotic horror series in the fucking country. Yes, it was stupid and redundant and slathered with sex and blood, but that’s what people wanted. And so far, after fifteen novels, no one looked to be losing interest. It was easy money, and Brett was getting pissed that Jay was thinking of killing off the series. It wasn’t Jay’s place to create art; he was a fucking author. His place was to produce units that would move on the open market. His place was to listen to his publisher before his publisher kicked his pink pig ass out of the industry. “And what’s wrong with Baron Blood?”

“Christ, Brett,” Jay whispered, staring down at his shiny plate. Jay even cleaned his plate like a pig. “Fifteen fucking books is enough already. I’m sick to shit of Baron Blood. I wrote it on a dare way back when. It wasn’t supposed to be serious, you know.”

“The audience takes it seriously, that’s all that matters.”

“You’re telling me. The last time I went to Dragon Con there were fools there dressed like the Baron pretending to seduce everyone in sight. I mean, that kid had his dick chewed off by his idiot lover because of the fucking books. The asshole thought he was Baron Blood. I’m tired of the slack and the lawsuits. I ain’t Socrates trying to corrupt everyone. I’m just a fucking author, for chrissakes.”

As always, Jay made a big dramatic mountain out of a molehill. Yeah, some kid got mutilated by his lover because of Jay’s books. Whatever. Stephan King got the same slack. Hell, so did Robert Block, way back when. It just went with the industry.

“At least this way,” Jay went on, eyes downcast, “I can get serious for a change. Write something that will make a difference. Something deep. Not just sucking and fucking all the time.”

Inwardly, Brett rolled his eyes. People didn’t want deep. They wanted to get their rocks off. And Jay had better shape up or something would have to be done about him. Brett only wished Mr. Piggy Bank was as easy to discipline as Laura and his kids were.

Suddenly Jay brightened, the way he always did when he had an idea. “I already have notes. Maggie thinks it’s really something.” Jay took a deep breath, his face flushed red. “Still has vampires in it—hell, Baron Blood can even make a cameo appearance—but get this, the book—the whole fuckingseries—is gong to be about the dhampiri.”

“What the hell are dhampiri?”

Jay grinned. “It’s an old Balkan legend I fell across while researching the last Baron Blood book. Dhampiri are beings sired from one human woman and one vampiric father. They’re immortal, sensual, yet tortured creatures. They crave blood, they crave human affection. They want to be human.

And”—again that excited grin—“it’s believed they made the most talented vampire hunters of all.” Again, Jay shifted around his chair. “Imagine it... Baron Blood is being hunted, not by humans this time or by other vampires, but by his own goddamnson , a half-breed vampire hunter. I can run with the idea under a new name, a whole series about the dhampir that killed Baron Blood, his struggles to be human, his lost loves...”

“It will never work,” Brett said, crushing out his cigarette and lighting a new one. “Who the hell is going to want to read about a half-breed? It won’t sell. And you can’t kill Baron Blood. It says so in your contract.”

“Change the contract.”

Brett narrowed his eyes. The bile in his throat—the sudden venomous hate he had for this fool—was enough to make the cigarette taste like shit in his mouth. “Write another Baron Blood, Jay. Don’t fuck with perfection.”

“I can’t,” Jay said petulantly. “I want to do this.”

Brett sighed and crushed out the stinking coffin nail. But the thought of that term—coffin nail—made him think of vampires. Not Jay’s inane kind of vampires, those fags he wrote about who ran around in outdated formal wear with cheap European accents, but the real kind. The kind he had seen killing each other a week ago. The kind that were animals in human skins. Those kinds.

And then it all came together, just like that, in one silent thunderclap, and Brett had a fully formed plan sitting in a nest in his head. The nest where all his best ideas originated. But could he do... that?

Jay looked at him hopefully, like a child begging his parent for a treat or a day off school. And Brett’s hatred for the man overwhelmed him. Yeah, he could go ahead with the plan. He sure as hell could do... that.

“Okay,” Brett said, continuing to crush out the coffin nail. Jay’s coffin nail, he mused. “Give me a week to work out a plan on my side of things, and we’ll go ahead with everything the way you planned it.”

Jay brightened and turned a deeper shade of pink, if that was possible. “You won’t regret it, Brett. I promise,” he said. He actually rubbed his palms together like a character in one of his books.

“No,” Brett responded with a smile, “I certainly won’t.”

## 10

When Alek opened the door to find the girl with the hair like old rusted gold standing there he thought he must be dreaming. The pounding on the door which had drawn him away from the dojo had left him wracked with the certainty that Michael had arrived and was calling a duel. Now he saw he was wrong. Wonderfully wrong.

He recognized the girl at once from the club. A dancer. Her name was... he couldn't remember her name. But he knew her. She danced with her hair down so it moved like russet leaves caught on a thick bush. Her face was white, catlike, fierce, her eyes a somber amber brown to reflect her hair. She wasn't beautiful; she was horsey, her face all derisive bones and shadow, like a young Meryl Streep. He was caught in her spell. Then the girl fell into his arms. He couldn't be certain if she was conscious, but it seemed not. He picked her up. She weighed absolutely nothing. A little thing in a ratty coat held closed by a piece of hemp, all long hair and bones and little else. He took her upstairs, took off her coat, and put her into his bed. He didn't know what else to do with her. She seemed to need looking after, at least until she gained consciousness.

And then he sat in a corner and waited.

The sun set and a hunter's moon rose.

She came around slowly, her eyes blinking open and finding him. There was something about her... that white skin, those eyes like amber glass full of shadows. Something powerful and elemental. He felt an instant attraction to her, not sexual exactly, though there was that too. It was more primal than that. It was almost an endearment. As if he knew her blood. As if he could love her. Her mouth worked, and a moment later a word emerged: "Ssslayer."

He was confused. He held himself in the shadows of the room. "Who told you that?"

"A girl. I've been... looking for you." She sat up. He had divested her of the coat before putting her to bed, but not the peculiar hospital whites she was wearing, and still she clutched his sheet to her chest as if she wore nothing at all. As if she was embarrassed. And he had seen her onstage in so much less, her body almost insectlike in its slenderness. It was a body he knew many men would not find particularly appealing, but such things did not apply to him.

Alek picked up the sword lying on the dressing table. "Really?"

She nodded, looking at the sword. "Going to kill me now?"

"That depends on your motivation for finding me."

She was afraid. He smelled it on her. She had not come here to kill him, then.

"You're the Slayer," she said.

He lowered the sword, but did not put it down. Not yet. "My name is Alek. Why are you here?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were miserable. "To see you."

"So you say."

She doubled over. For a moment Alek thought she was weeping, but then he realized it was much worse than that. He put the sword down and went downstairs and retrieved the bottle of rabbit's blood he kept in the refrigerator for emergencies. Then he got a crystal goblet from the cupboard and returned to the bedroom where the girl was curled up in his bed. He uncorked the bottle and watched her entire body attune itself to the scent of the substance being poured into the crystal. When he offered her the goblet she did not hesitate but swallowed the blood down like a starving animal, then proceeded to lick out the



goblet. Her tongue was grey.

He poured her another.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked.

The girl nodded miserably and drank down the blood. “More?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No,” he said. “Any more will make you sick.” He put the bottle and goblet aside and sat down on the edge of the bed. “Who are you?”

“Irena.” She kept her face down, the wild unruly tresses of hair hiding her expression from him.

He stroked it back. She flinched and he withdrew his hand. She looked at him, impenetrably.

As much as he didn't need this right now, the skeletal shoulders heaving with her short breaths and the constantly twitching hands pulled at him. Seduced him. “Lie back,” he said gently.

She did so, though her eyes were big with fear and never left him for a moment. “Don't hurt me.”

“I have no intention of hurting you, Irena.”

A blood drop leaked from the corner of Irena's eye, making a rust-colored streak against her alabaster cheek. He used his thumb to wipe it away, and this time she did not flinch at all. If anything, she seemed to welcome his touch.

“Tell me about yourself.”

She did. And he listened. And when she was done she looked more exhausted and older than seemed humanly possible, as if she had relived the events of the last day all over again. He thought about everything she told him. It all made sense, though he was loathed to explain it to her. At least he knew then what he was feeling. At least he knew what she was now.

“I thought maybe you could help me,” she said at length.

He considered that.

“What's happened to me?” she asked.

She looked so earnest, so frightened by the changes going on in her body. He thought he could hear his own heart breaking. Stupid, but true. Wasn't he so like her at her age? But he had had instruction in the years leading up to the change. He'd been part of the Coven then. He'd known what was about to happen to him. Amadeus had seen to that.

“Don't be afraid,” he whispered. “This is only natural for us. You would not have killed that man had there been an alternative.”

“Us.” Irena’s eyes brimmed. “I don’t want to be vampire, Alek,” she whispered.

“You’re not. You’re much more than that. And much less.”

She looked lost. She sat up and put her arms around his neck. He was surprised but did not pull away. Her grip tightened about him and she buried her face against his shoulder. And then she did weep, all the misery pouring out of her at once in her trembling bird-boned body and heaving sobs. He held her, scarcely able to believe he still had the heart to do so. To feel this. To feel her misery pouring into him like blood into crystal. He put his face into her hair—it smelled so like the night—and waited until she had cried herself out.

Then she lay back on his pillow, swallowing tears, and simply stared up at him. The image was heartbreakingly sweet—innocence tinged with the raw, unlearned sensuality all his kind seemed to possess. Despite himself, he found himself leaning down to kiss the corner of her mouth. She tasted like blood and like hunger. The angry, racking hunger that never left, that never let go. How she must be suffering.

He smoothed her hair and then the sheet over her, folding it down for her like they did on TV. Then he gave her another goblet of the rabbit’s blood. But this time she was so wearied from her crying he had to help her to drink it. But drink it all, she did. Then he used a handkerchief to wipe her mouth clean and smudge the bloody tears on her cheeks.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

“Shh. No reason to be.” He stroked her cheek until her body was still. Then he got ready to leave.

She grabbed his arm. “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going very far.”

“Please. It’s dark. I’m so afraid of the dark.”

So am I, Alek thought.

And so, instead of leaving her, he lay down on the bed beside her and she cleaved to him. He was silent, feeling the night and the flush of cool autumn air on his face from the open window. Cars and cabs ran up and down the street. The noise and stink was distinctly New York —busy, bothered, angry, unattached. Irena nestled close against him and sighed like a cat.

How odd, he thought, stroking her hair. He had thought to bring someone into his home. Someone who might train his thinking away from the craving, someone to occupy him and run his tasks, but he had never dreamed they would be delivered like this into his hands. A girl. He had not wanted a girl. Females always died at his hands. Always. And there were other concerns with that, as well. He shifted slightly so she wasn’t pressed quite so closely against him. Irena was enlivening feelings in him he didn’t want to content with. Not now. Not ever.

So this was the House on Castle Hill. It was old and stony and simple and extravagant, with gables along the front side and turrets capped by cupolas and an imposing black iron fence that completely surrounded the house, making it seem about as hospitable and homey as a medieval castle. There was even a coach house out front. And although it had probably been converted into a maid's quarters or garage at some point, it still gave Brett the uneasy feeling that somehow or other he had sidestepped out of the century he lived in and into some older, half-forgotten one. The whole house looked like it belonged in the Welsh countryside, not smack dab in the center of one of the busiest boroughs in New York City .

An old house, he thought, for an old soul. As the Porsche ambled by the house—traffic was always so bad this early in the morning—he recalled all the things he had heard about the house. Some were probably true. Some had to be patently false.

Most of it he had heard from Nadine. She said the house was full of time. Brett had thought that meant it was just a very old house. Hell, it dated back to the fucking Pilgrims, didn't it? But now, seeing it in the flesh, so to speak, he realized how much more she had meant with those words. The house is powerful. The house is a power unto itself. Yes, it did indeed seem to keep itself. In fact, it seemed to smirk at Brett as he studied it, to study him back like an old sage full of secrets. Or an old predator. Could a house be predatory? He didn't know, but maybe...

The Slayer emerged from it, taking the steps down the stoop.

Brett hadn't expected that and panicked. He didn't know vampires could walk around during the day. He had had no idea. And now he was going much too slow. The Slayer would spot him and recognize him from the warehouse two nights ago. He was three cars away from the house with no hope in sight but to trundle along with the rest of humanity. He checked, but there were no side streets or escape routes to take. So he did the only thing left to him and put his sunglasses on, hoping it was enough. Then he wondered why he was so frightened, considering why he had come here. Except that somehow or other, he had envisioned this confrontation differently, and now he was off his game plan completely.

He moved past the house, sweating it, certain any moment the man on the stoop picking up the morning paper would look up and give him a knowing smirk, a wink, a complete reflection of the house he dwelled in. But the man, the Slayer, did not look up. He was too preoccupied by some headline on the paper. Brett took the opportunity to study the Slayer as he drove past, his foot doing a nervous tap-dance on the gas pedal. The long black hair, the long thin white hands, the pretty Asian-inspired face, the sinewy, vulpine body. Even out of the coat, Brett could not forget that man, how every element worked together to make him a perfect hunter. A perfect machine.

When he had reached the end of the street he turned off onto one of the main avenues that ran parallel to Hill Street (once Castle Hill Road , he remembered Nadine telling him) and rode it numbly down in the direction of Madison . He passed St. Patrick's Cathedral along the way and had to suppress a shudder. The big stony monolith of a church reminded him a bit too much of the House on Castle Hill, as if both structures had been cut from the same rock.

He sighed with relief when he reached Madison . It was as if he had been lucky enough to escape the den of a lion or something. Stupid. He should have just parked off the street somewhere and approached

the house. He had only a short time left, after all. He had told Jay he needed a week to get his business affairs in order for Jay's great Shakespearian death, and so far he had done nothing but try to egg up his courage to visit this one stupid house. Jay would be gone on his vacation with his wife in only a few days and Brett would have spent the whole time driving past the House on Castle Hill, making up excuses why each day was the wrong day to do this. If he didn't do this right now, he never would, and his finely crafted plan would be ruined.

But he found he was reluctant. Because, for some unknown reason, he was afraid. Afraid in a nail-biting, sleepless, gorge-constantly-rising-in-your-throat kind of way he had never been before.

Don't mess with this shit.

Brett frowned, disliking the sound of cowardice echoing up from inside of him. It sounded almost like his father's voice. And his father had died a penniless bum, working for a Brooklyn slaughterhouse for four bucks an hour. It sounded like his grandfather, who had died even poorer, with a row of numbers like something from a meatpacking plant stamped up and down his arm. You back down and that's when you lose everything, he thought. Everything.

Not me. Not this bum.

Angry with himself, he pulled back into traffic and headed toward Hill Street.

## 12

The first thing Alek thought of when he heard the doorknocker was, Not now! Not so soon! His heart raced, seeming to echo every heavy knock of the brass fixture on that front door, so that for a moment he felt paralyzed by the sound of his own traitorous heart. He closed his eyes to an article about the Ladykiller in the Times he was reading and cocked his head. His hair brushed against his cheek and trailed along the floor from his upside down position on the athlete's bar. Taking a deep breath, he commanded the fear away. It worked, sort of. He felt his heart slow a little and the instinct to leap straight for the ceiling wasn't quite so strong, but still...

I can't live like this.

The knocking continued, making him lose his concentration completely. Dashing the paper away in a waterfall of pages, Alek reached up, grasped the stainless steel bar, and turned himself over once. Then he dropped soundlessly to the floor of the dojo despite the heavy heels of his boots. Another trick of Amadeus's he had learned a very long time ago. No matter where he was or what he wore, he had been trained to move with the obscurity of a shadow. He had changed into a black T-shirt for his daily training session, but he still had on the jeans from the evening before and now his boots zipped to mid-thigh. He knew his training. The clothes he would wear on the street were always the same ones you trained in.

A towel lay draped over the bench, and beside it, the sword. Alek reached for the sword and saw it drop off the bench and slide halfway across the floor before it stopped in mid-journey. The knocking

persisted. But his thoughts were so scattered he could not even perform the simplest tricks anymore. Manually grabbing up the towel and sword, he ignored the fear and concentrated on the anger of his own cowardice as he stalked his way down the long corridor to the front door.

At the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor he paused to listen for Irena, but the poor thing was so exhausted from the night before even the insistent knocking could not wake her.

Someone was out there. He saw the shadow of the visitor reflect against the stained glass of the door. He tried to feel the presence but could conclude nothing about it, which told him nothing except that it was obviously not a vampire. Thank God. Maybe it was a Jehovah's Witness, he reasoned. That would be nice. I must be the only man in the city who would welcome one now, he thought.

Still keeping the sword at hand, he unlocked the door and opened it a few inches.

Out on the stoop stood a small man in a sandsilk suit and sunglasses. Upper West Side corporate type. Human. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but Alek could not for the life of him figure out what it was, nor why such a being would be here. Unless... was he a human ghoul of Michael's? No. He didn't have the look. The smell. If he belonged to Michael, he knew his Jacobson's organ would pick up on some of that immediately. Not a lot, but some. This man was a blank slate... and yet, he did have an odor about him. Fear, excitement.

A distrustful smell.

The man looked him up and down.

Alek opened the door further but closed his slightly parted lips, cutting off the man's taste. "Can I help you?"

"I think you can," the man answered cryptically. "If you're who I'm looking for."

Alek lowered his eyes. "And who are you looking for?"

"A man," the man answered.

Something wrong. Suddenly Alek discovered he did not like this man. Not at all. "There are clubs for that," he said and tried to close the door.

The man put his foot on the jamb, halting it. "Six-two, about a hundred and eighty pounds. Dark hair and eyes. Good reflexes. Has a leather coat and a sword," he said, looking at the sword in Alek's hand.

The jolt of remembrance made Alek let go of the door and step back into the hall. The man took the initiative to let himself in and close the door behind him. Alek stood numbly, his sword knocking against the outside of his thigh.

The man looked at it again, then up at his face. "You remember now."

"The warehouse." Alek slipped the sword under his arm, making the man's eyes skip to follow it. Fear still there, but too much arrogance to let a healthy amount of it in. The man lit a smoke. He had sensed Alek's distress and it had fueled his arrogance further. Alek couldn't believe this. He shook his head. "Get out."

The man raised his eyebrow. “Anyone tell you how photographic you are?”

The camcorder. So he had a tape. Alek had not imagined that little device his lurker had slipped under his coat just before he took off. In the beginning, he had thought there might be something there, something that could get him in trouble. But to be honest, he had not worried about it. There was little to worry about. Rome did not tape and take images of vampires or their kin. And tapes and images of vampires and their kin did not last long otherwise, either. That or the filmmakers.

The Church took care of its own that way.

Alek said, “Get rid of it.”

Predictably, the man smiled, misreading Alek’s reaction completely. “Nice house,” he said, looking around. “Must cost you a fortune to maintain.”

Alek turned around and went down the corridor to the dojo.

The man followed him. “Jesus,” he said when he had taken in the full measure of the dojo, the miscellaneous and barbaric training equipment that had trained dozens of slayers, the iron fans and training staffs on the wall, the innumerable swords, the Catherine Wheel and the Cage—a stainless steel device resembling a child’s jungle gym that Amadeus had used to pit slayer against slayer in near-death matches. “You know,” he said when he had managed to compose himself, “I know what kind of sick shit you’re into. I know what you are, Mr. Knight.”

Alek chose a buck knife off the armory wall. “I’m happy for you, Mr. ...?”

“Edelman. Brett Edelman.”

“I’m happy for you, Mr. Edelman. Now please leave.”

Instead, Mr. Brett Edelman followed him out of the dojo, down the hallway leading to the butler’s pantry, and out through the rear door to the garden. Alek breathed in the cool morning air, enjoying it. The garden, though not large, was his only indulgence. Encompassed by a ten-foot tall stone wall, it was impossible to see over or even climb, unless you had wings or a very good reason to be doing so. There was one iron gate to the outside, but locked from the inside to keep lurkers out. In the shady part of the garden he had set up four rabbit hutches, each containing six cages apiece. Of the twenty-four cages, eleven had occupants.

“I’m Brett Edelman of Edelman Enterprises. I own and publish Summit Books,” Brett Edelman was saying.

“Congratulations on your success,” Alek whispered as he tied on the leather apron he kept draped over the overhang by the cages. The overhang was little better than a retrofitted acrobat bar fitted with hooks and a stainless steel bucket at its base.

Edelman looked at it. Then he looked at Alek and the buck knife in his hands. “Maybe you’ve read a few? I publish the Baron Blood series.”

“I don’t read horror novels,” Alek said, looking at him and running the blade edge of the knife softly along his cheek to check for sharpness.

“I don’t publish horror, Mr. Knight. I publish supernatural erotic adventures.” Edelman decided to lean against the hanging bar, and then changed his mind when he saw the rusty-brown bloodstains on it like on the pavement at his feet. He looked at his clothing to make certain nothing had rubbed off. “Stories about vampires.”

“Should I be impressed?” Alek asked. Turning, he opened one of the cages and pulled a struggling brown and white rabbit out by the scruff of its neck. It wriggled a moment, its eyes as big as orange jewels in its head. Then, as exhaustion overcame the animal, it hung still, ears and nose twitching erratically.

“Maybe. Depends on how much you value your life here.” Brett Edelman hesitated, then visibly winced as Alek pressed his thumb against the back of the animal’s head, breaking its neck with a resounding crack that seemed to echo against the stone walls of the garden like a gunshot. The animal went limp in his hands. “Jesus.”

This was of course always the hardest part—getting the blood to run before rigor mortis cut off the supply. He’d had ample practice with this so far, but sometimes he was still not fast enough. With one deft motion, Alek used the knife to slit the great vein under the animal’s ear and then slammed the body down on the hooks. The blood ran red, no taint of purple. Good. He’s gotten it fresh. He turned back to Edelman, the bloodied knife in his hand, and crossed his arms.

“Would be a shame if the whole world discovered your awful secret,” Edelman said without much conviction as he stared at the knife.

“Get rid of the tape before it kills you, Mr. Edelman.”

“It’s quite safe, Mr. Knight. No one knows the truth except you and I.” Brett Edelman watched the blood sputter into the bucket. The man paled as if he were the one being bled.

After the blood had leaked out of the body—it did not take long—Alek took the body off the hooks and tossed it over the wall for the stray dog that always came around begging for scraps. He took the bucket and funneled the contents into a jar on the bench, added ten milligrams of sodium citrate to keep it from clotting, and capped the jar and gave it a slight shake so the blackened substance settled correctly. Brett Edelman watched wide-eyed, the cigarette nearly falling out of his mouth.

“What exactly is it you want from me, Mr. Edelman?” Alek asked the man.

It took Brett Edelman a moment to compose himself. Then he said, tossing his cigarette down, “Baron Blood is finished. So is his author, J. Stephan Paul.”

“I’ve read his work. The good work.”

“Jay’s finished,” Edelman said, lighting a fresh smoke. “Right now the man is worth more to me dead than alive, if you get my drift.”

Alek blinked with disbelief as the truth began to sink in. “You want me to murder your author?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Excuse me . . . but yes, I am.”

“Mr. Knight, I thought you do this all the time.” He looked at the jar.

“I am not an assassin for hire, Mr. Edelman.”

“But you are a slayer.”

Alek narrowed his eyes. “*Wasa* slayer.”

Brett Edelman jabbed his smoke at Alek. “*Youare* the Slayer.”

Alek said nothing.

“You look surprised.”

“Where did you hear that?” Alek asked.

The man smiled. “Doesn’t matter. What does is whether we have a deal or not.”

“Not.”

“And the tape?”

“I told you: get rid of it”

“But I like watching you fight, Mr. Knight.”

“You have no idea what you’re fucking with,” Alek whispered.

“No, Mr. Knight,” Brett Edelman said evenly. “You have no ideawho you are fucking with. Who are you, with all your blades and your Kung Fu shit? I have media connections that stretch from the Post all the way up to NBC. I have a fuckingvampire dying on tape, Mr. Knight. One transmission over the airwaves and the Internet and the whole world knows the truth about your kind. And if I know you, and I suspect I do, you don’t like media attention. I think media attention would kill your kind faster than the Coven does. What do you think?”

Alek sank the buck knife into the bench beside Edelman.

Brett Edelman backed up.

Alek untied the apron and folded it neatly. He said, “I think you’re in way over your head, Mr. Edelman. I think you should stop thinking about murdering your author and go home. Now.” Alek pulled the knife from the wood and drifted toward him. Edelman began to back up very slowly, more or less walking backwards until his back hit the rear door of the house and there was nowhere left for him to go.

Alek leaned forward and laid the flat of the blade against the collar of the immaculate white shirt poking out of Mr. Edelman’s sandsilk jacket. The white turned pink.

“You kill me and they’ll find the tape,” Edelman said, hoarse.

“I’m not going to kill you, Mr. Edelman,” Alek answered. “I’m just showing you the way out.” He wiped the bloody knife on the white material.



With a little nervous whimper, Edelman dashed for the gate at the end of the garden path, rattled the lock until it opened, then took off walk-running down the sidewalk. Alek stood at the gate and watched him go, wondering about it all.

He could almost have smiled. It was almost a comedy. But after a moment the amusement faded as he remembered other pressing things that demanded his attention, and he closed the gate and returned to the house with the jar.

Irena was in the kitchen, standing there in his black dressing gown, looking like an odd choirgirl. "I heard voices in the garden."

He looked her over. Her hair was a wild tanglewoods and her eyes haunted and fever bright. Her skin was freckled but it was light against her white skin, the dappling of a young filly. Again he felt his heart contract at the sight of her. "It's nothing important."

She looked around the kitchen that had not been renovated in thirty years. The stove and refrigerator were spotless. Dusty pots hung from a rack above the oven. The clear glass cupboards were filled with goblets, but only a handful of dishes filled one of the shelves.

He poured the rabbit's blood from the jar into a goblet he had placed on the table. "Lesson number one. You must drink constantly in the beginning. It is the only way to maintain control." He gave her the glass. "Control is everything. Without it, you die."

She took the glass. He could feel the hunger radiating from her in waves. She started to drain it like she had last night, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Sip," he said. "Control."

A war played out on her anguished face, but in the end she did as he instructed. Her hands shaking, she sipped from the goblet and then placed it down on the table.

"Good." He sat down at the table.

So did she. Then she took the glass and gulped.

He yanked the glass away. "No."

She sat quietly, clasping her hands in her lap to keep them in place.

"Lesson number two. Food. Since your first kill, your metabolism has begun to change. You probably notice that what humans call food now nauseates you." He pushed the goblet forward but Irena didn't reach for it this time. "You must continue to eat human food. Every day. Humans believe we cannot eat. We can and we must."

Irena stared at the goblet. "I've eaten food all of my life."

He said. "What has happened to you is a natural step in your growth. You were not changed. Vampires cannot change humans any more than a human can bite and change a vampire. The two are separate species. The trauma of your attack simply invoked your true nature."

“You said I wasn’t a vampire.”

“You are and you are not.” He watched her sip.

She wiped her mouth and said, “Why doesn’t anyone know?”

“They do. But they think this is a myth. This is not. This is your survival. Lesson number three. You are immortal, but you can still die if your head is severed from your body. To prevent this, you must learn to fight.”

She looked up, angry, afraid. “I can fight.”

He kicked her chair out from under her.

Irena slammed into the floor on her back, knocking the goblet over and splashing blood across the tiles. She curled up on the floor, shaking.

He got up and came around the table. “Get up.”

She reached for the spillage of blood instead.

“No. I said get up. Control.”

She did so, but hesitantly. She watched him from under the tangle of her hair with her wounded trust.

“You don’t know how to fight,” he said. “Not in the real world, anyway. Our world. Follow me.”

He walked down the hallway and into the dojo. He wasn’t certain she would actually follow, but she did. He moved aside so she could see the training equipment, the fall mats, the training bags, and the various weapons on the walls. She took it all in with silent wonder.

“If you want to learn I’ll teach you,” he said. “But I won’t coddle you.”

Her eyes darkened. “I don’t need coddling.” After a moment more of silent observation, she walked to the far wall to study the weapons more closely. He watched her. She was a dhampir and she was powerful and moved like a hunter. It wouldn’t take much training to get her where she needed to be. She was a survivor. She looked up. In over three hundred years Amadeus had collected every conceivable weapon in existence. Eastern. Western. Middle Eastern. Here there were broadswords, katanas, iron fans, knives of various lengths and uses, scythes, manrikisa, Chinese stars, bo staffs, nunchaku, shirasayas, maces, bows and arrows, quarterstaffs, and every conceivable spear in existence. She looked at them all as if she knew what they were. “These are all yours?”

“Yes.”

“And you can use all of them?”

“Most of them.”

She turned around and hugged herself like she was cold. On someone else the gesture would have made the person seem small. Not Irena. There was something about her, about them both. Humans were small, vampires were tiny, but the dhampiri were titans, like something that should never have existed at all.

“Think about it,” he said.

Leaving her in the dojo, he went to the library to be apart from her and let her think. To let himself think. I can't do this, he thought. I should not. I'm not a crusader anymore. But he had already involved himself in Irena's life. What else could he do? He had left himself no more choice than he had where Michael and Dante were concerned.

Another dilemma that needed closure.

But he did not want to think about that, either. He absently ran his hands over the lines of books until he found the one he had bought in a drugstore a long time ago. Some ghost-love story J. Stephan Paul had written early on in his career when he had not yet become a bit of marketing on Wall Street. Alek turned to the back where a portly young man was sitting on some rocks by the Jersey Shore with his hand resting on the head of an Irish setter. The dog looked content and so did the man.

“What are you thinking?” Debra asked from the mirror on the wall.

He looked up, running his hand up the spine of the book. “Just... people.”

“Which people?” She put her hands on the glass.

“The ones that have everything and want more. What kind of hunger it creates in them.”

“Are you going to warn that man?” she asked him, looking at the book in his hands.

“You would tell me it's none of my business. That dhampiri have better things to do with their time.”

But for a change she only looked sad. So sad and wan and more like an old moving portrait than anything real.

“I'm not real, Alek,” she said as she began to fade. “I'm dead, remember?”

And he sat down on the divan and watched the empty glass and felt he could weep.

## 13

The business with Dante and Michael began with hunger and with wanting more than was permissible. In that time, 1973, there had been trouble, but not trouble as Alek and the rest of the Coven had ever know it before. Capital T Trouble, as Booker called it. Book was twenty-five at the time and had been apprenticed to Robot for seven years. Alek was two years younger and had been apprenticed to the Covenmaster Amadeus two years longer. Booker talked to him. They were brothers. The others avoided him. Booker said it was the green-eyed monster. And for years afterward Alek would watch that monster grow and become steadily more ugly. But in 1973 it was still just a curiosity.

The twins were from Europe. They were vampires who had made within the circle of the Coven an illustrious joint-career for themselves at Cambridge as hematologists working for Rome. So the fact that they had recently left their secret underground facility—something they had not done in over a hundred years—and suddenly appeared in New York City indicated to Alek that something very important was going on. They had been summoned here. There was Capital T Trouble afoot.

He felt it further when Amadeus called him into the library of the Covenhouse the evening of the day before the twins arrived. Amadeus seated himself in the antique rocker he favored. Alek remained standing. Somehow or other, the tension in the room wouldn't allow him to rest. He went to the shelf and fingered a book at random.

“Michael and Dante have requested you, mein Sohn,” Amadeus whispered.

“Should I be impressed?” The words were spoken harsher than Alek intended. But he did not like people requesting him. He was the Father's apprentice, and he was getting sick of the steady procession of slayers that came though the Covenhouse looking him up and down like a pet for sale. He knew there was a distinct possibility that he would be called out to another Covenhouse somewhere else in the country—or indeed the world—but he had no intention of going. New York was his city, and if he had to lie to the Vatican herself to retain tenure here, then he was willing to do just that. So far, though, the Father had intervened on his part when necessary and that had not happened.

And now, like the other times, the master slayer of the New York City Coven seemed to understand his misgivings. “It is not a permanent position,” he said. “They need you to guide them whilst here.”

Alek turned to face his master. He had never heard of more than two slayers on any one case. Despite the fact that there was some relief in the fact that it was a temporary apprenticeship, he still felt uneasy about the whole deal. “Sounds like a big problem.”

Amadeus looked on him with fear and pain and love. Alek read the emotion as if he were reading one of the books in this vast library. “It is a housecleaning. The Abyssus.”

Omigod, thought Alek. Please don't say Akisha is marked! He didn't know what he would do in that case. What he would say. How do you hunt the woman who was your second sensei and one of your best friends in all the world? Alek was almost too paralyzed to ask. “Who's... the target?”

“Carfax.”

Alek let out a mental sigh of relief.

Now Carfax he could live without. They all could. The half-sane metallurgist had been causing a stir since the early 1950s. For a short time following World War II he had worked with Dante and Michael, then done work for a private government-run facility, experimenting with metals, recombining the molecular structure of elements in America's never-ending race to create the perfect Cold War weapon. They said he had pioneered a certain kind of compressed titanium that was capable of remaining in a liquid state like mercury. But though his experiments were sometimes successful, they had also proven too unstable to continue.

When he refused to desist from his bizarre experimentations, the Coven cut him off financially. But a Medieval alchemist by trade, Carfax had not stopped there. Instead he had chosen to hide in the inner city and continue his experiments. Now, instead of pioneering new metals, he had turned to genetics. It

was his unwavering belief that he could generate the perfect vampire, one that would rival even the dhampiri in power and invulnerability. He began with experiments on animals but quickly moved to humans and vampires. The Vatican did not care about the vampires he murdered in the process. They did care about the humans that had begun to disappear.

Rome was remarkably tolerant through it all, but even she had her limits. One night one of Carfax's "creations" managed to get loose. It wasn't much more than a ghoul—a human tainted by vampire blood—but constant exposure to radiation, genetic therapy and vampire blood had turned it monstrous to behold. It destroyed a line of stores on Eight Avenue and mutilated seven onlookers before it was brought down with a massive hail of bullets by New York's Finest. In the weeks of investigation that followed, the carcass of the beast and the police records both managed to disappear. The five victims who had survived the initial ordeal suffered the same fate. The media gurus never did publish anything that resembled the truth, and the one stubborn reporter who refused to nose off the case suffered an unfortunate coronary due to snakebite. Witnesses were unavailable for comment, even the officers who had witnessed the destruction and shot the beast point-blank in the face. A few months following the incident, most of them disappeared as well. The cleanup turned out to be massive and costly, both in work and time as well as human lives.

But the Church took care of its own. If the humans discovered the existence of vampires among them, their world would be disrupted, Rome accused, and the whole world thrown into chaos.

Now Amadeus, in enunciating that one little word "Carfax", was telling him that Rome had finally had enough. Carfax had revealed the Vampire's presence to the outside world. Humans had witnessed the vampire power at work and running amok through their streets. The cost had been greater than if Carfax and his hive had begun outwardly preying on the human population. Carfax had wanted too much and gone too far, and now he was marked. His whole hive was marked, in fact—or whoever stood with him when the Coven arrived to pass judgment.

Alek poured himself a drink, a brandy. He did that rather a lot when he was uneasy, and it that was probably not a good thing, but he couldn't help himself. His control was not perfect. He took the drink with him to the divan and finally sat down. "That's why they've brought in Michael and Dante."

Amadeus nodded.

Alek took a long sip of the drink. "Why do they want me?"

"You know the Abyssus. They do not. They thought it a good gambit to have you with them."

Alek took another, longer sip. "You mean they can't handle the Abyssus. So why didn't they come to me personally with this request?"

"They asked me to come to you," Amadeus replied.

"Because they know I could refuse you nothing." Alek put the glass down with a clink. "So it was never a question at all."

"You don't care for them."

"I think," he said, "that the cure is sometimes worse than the disease." He stood up and paced to the door, his coat swinging. He was halfway to the door when he stopped and peered into the gilded oval mirror on the wall. The man inside it was still a boy—a long-legged colt with long coal-black hair and

haunted eyes. The leather longcoat looked all wrong on him, but he knew he would grow into it in time. It was as much a part of him as was the Double Serpent Katana. As much as the blood of the Coven was. Yet he felt an odd sort of pity for the boy grown so fast in the mirror. The warrior. “Father... I don’t want to declare war on the Abyssus.”

“They knew that,” Amadeus answered judiciously. “That is why they would not come to you.”

## 14

Erebus looked at him oddly when he asked to see Nadine. Jesus Christ, he’s going to kill me. That was the first thought that went through Brett’s mind. But Erebus did not kill him. Instead, Erebus, loyal guardian of the Underworld, snorted and leaned back against the wall of the banker’s office, his massive gorilla arms crossed and his eyes at half masts. A big bald black-skinned vampire with muscles on his muscles, Erebus looked as if he could bust the seams of his T-shirt and the black suit jacket he wore overtop it by breathing alone. He was like a professional wrestler off duty or something. At least, that was the impression Brett always got from him. That was the impression he liked to give.

Especially at times like these, when a patron wanted into the club on a day he wasn’t expected or welcome.

Erebus said after a moment—or rather, grunted, “I’d have to pass it by JP.”

Brett felt his desperation edge up a notch. Getting it past Jean Paul was probably a good idea, but at the same time, he didn’t want to involve Jean Paul at all. The back of his shirt and suit coat, already soaked through with sweat, seemed to dampen further. He wanted to tear the clinging wet clothes off his body. “Look... I only want *totalk* to her. That’s it.”

Erebus smiled, amused. “Are you sure it’s only talk you want?”

“Yes, damnit!”

“You humans,” Erebus said. And there was a palatable anger about Erebus like a crimson halo. Brett was certain in that moment that had he not been a paying patron Erebus would have done him serious harm. He seemed to be contemplating it anyway, and that made Brett take a step back.

Erebus disappeared into the office.

Brett waited, his eyes drifting down the corridor that led to the main floor of Club Bauhaus. A live band was playing something feedback-riddled and incomprehensible. Patrons were chanting like a church. The smell of smoke, sex and blood blanketed the whole building like a rank mist, giving Brett some bad wood despite the dire circumstances of his plight. It was odd to be in the club on a night when he wasn’t usually here. It was stupid, maybe, but it was easy to believe a club like this existed for you and you alone. The idea that it had its own life apart from Brett’s never really occurred to him.

Erebus returned. “JP says no.”

“*What?*”

“N-O,” Erebus repeated, enunciating each letter like a parent communicating with a retarded child.

“He can’t do this!” Brett shouted overtop the music. “I have to see Nadine!”

“Nadine isn’t working tonight,” Erebus growled. “And she doesn’t want to see you.”

Since when did Jean Paul’s own thralls tell him when and if they would see their clients or not? His clients? Brett wondered with bewilderment what kind of establishment Jean Paul ran when the hivemaster could not even control one of his own people. It wasn’t as if they had their own will. They belonged to Jean Paul. They were his property. His whores. They did as Jean Paul commanded. It wasn’t even as if they were people, for chrissakes...

Brett opened his mouth to say something to that effect, but one dire look from Erebus made him change his mind. He put his shades on instead and lit a smoke. “You vampires,” he said in retaliation.

“What about us?” Erebus asked with some interest.

“Bunch of motherfucking, bloodsucking cunts.”

“Sue us.” Erebus said and returned to the office, slamming the door behind him.

That’s it, Brett thought savagely. You’ve fucking lost a client, Jean Paul! He’d go north to the hive in Bethlehem. True, it was smaller and stuck in the center of a redneck town, but at least he wouldn’t have to put up with this bullshit. Seething, he kicked the door, making the glass rattle in the pane. Erebus looked up from his desk. Brett spat at the glass and stormed out the exit door. The heavy pneumatic door closed with a soft thomp behind him, hitting him on the ass and knocking the cigarette from his mouth and leaving him standing in the filth-encrusted alley behind the dive, despondent. He lit a new smoke and daydreamed of the different kinds of harm that he might rain down on Jean Paul and his whole lot of whores. But it was an ineffectual wish, and in the end Brett only returned to the Porsche and slipped down into the driver’s seat.

Well, what next?

Brett smoked and thought. Originally he had planned on getting information about the Slayer out of Nadine—what she knew of him, if anything. What the guy wanted. What his weaknesses were. But now Brett thought better of the idea. What would Nadine be able to tell him? She was Brett’s only real contact to the Underworld, but in the end she probably knew very little more about the Slayer than Brett did himself. She probably had never even met him. No, there had to be a better way. He was smart. He knew what to do underneath it all. He smoked some more and thought about everything and nothing at all.

Finally, for reasons only his subconscious could know, he started thinking about Jay and Baron Blood. There was that book, *Baron Blood, Vampire Detective*, where Blood is stuck in a frame job for a London Jack-the-Ripper-type murder spree. It was typical erotic inanity at its best, but Jay had managed to write in some real detective techniques, wonder of wonders.

Without further ado, Brett put the Porsche in gear and pulled out into traffic, taking River Drive down to the warehouse district. He reached the gravel path that led to the warehouse where all this had begun and rolled to the very edge of the first building. It looked abandoned as before. Nothing moved but shadows on the grates and behind the overflowing Dumpsters where the vermin crawled. Brett got out of the car. In the darkness he found the broken basement window more by touch than anything else. He crouched

down but there was nothing to see but more darkness.

He used a brick and his suit coat to break out the window, then picked out the last teathy bits of glass before sliding on his belly through the narrow opening and dropping down onto the dank concrete five feet below. His leather pumps made a breezy echo that drifted down the empty basement and rebounded off the walls and machine mounts like the whisper of a malevolent spirit. There were no sounds or movements, save his own. Flicking his lighter, the weak splinter of light illuminated the space a foot ahead of him, no more. More machines. Water-stained concrete walls. The wires of the electrical system dragged along the floor from the open ceiling like entrails. And the floor was a filth-encrusted mess that made Brett wince to crunch it under his six hundred dollar deck shoes. Scooting low, he shone the light across the floor in particular. Yet more filth in more explicit detail.

But in time he found the part of the floor that looked more damp than usual. The place where the little blonde slayer had bought it. Here the floor was blackened and rough and stank of ammonia, as if some form of weak acid had been allowed to soak through the cement. Brett touched the floor and found it curiously warm. His hand came away with streaks of purplish rust that made his skin tingle. Weird. He continued to shine the lighter, not sure of what he thought he would find until he saw something crumpled in a corner off to the side, white against the darkness. Brett used a silk handkerchief to pick it up. Luckily, there was no acid on it. The paper had been spared, and good thing too because it was a fragile cocktail napkin and it wouldn't have survived whatever odd substance the dead slayer had poured out onto the concrete.

The napkin said **MELMOTH HOTEL** .

Brett tucked it away, thinking it was as good a lead as leads got.

## 15

She was sitting in the middle of the dojo when he went to check on her, the morning paper spread out around her like a holocaust. She was shaking, her arms over her head. Rocking. Rocking.

Alek picked up the part of the paper she had been reading. It was a follow-up to one of the Ladykiller murders. According to the story, there had been two new victims of the Ladykiller crimes a couple of nights ago, one a young woman identified as Irena Sullivan, 19, an exotic dancer who worked in a club in the Brooklyn Heights, the other a little four-year-old girl named Lilly Langford. The body of Irena Sullivan had been found missing from the morgue and a morgue attendant slaughtered almost ritualistically, making the police suspect local inner city blood cults of snatching the body and killing the man. The remaining victim, Lilly Langford, was being buried at St. Patrick's Cemetery on Friday with general services held afterward for the familyless dead girl.

Alek lowered the paper. "Was she your sister?"

For a long time Irena said nothing at all. Then, slowly, reluctantly, she unwound. Her cheeks were rusty with tears. She looked dazed and unwell, her eyes going everywhere and seemingly into a far place



where he had no welcome to come. “No,” she said in time. Her voice was hoarse as if she had been screaming for hours. “She was just a little girl. We lived in the same project. Lilly’s mother... she was my age. One night she put Lilly in a Dumpster and ran away. Then Lilly was mine.”

Silence pressed in around them.

“I’m sorry,” he said. It was inadequate, but he had no idea what else to say.

Irena stared up at him. “Why didn’t Lilly wake up like me?”

“Lilly wasn’t like you.”

“Immortal.” Irena looked confused, then rose to her feet and began to circle the room. But now there was purpose in the way she moved. Purpose... and a dangerous grace. She was waking up. Moving past her pain and into something else. Something that made the hairs on the backs of Alek’s hands stand on end. Something that singed his nostrils. Irena stopped to stare up at the weapons, her red hair streaming down her back like a curtain of blood. “What is that?” she asked, looking up.

Alek followed her gaze to a carved wooden staff with a massive flint scythe at both ends and rawhide and beads wound throughout its length. “It’s called a Jatarri staff. It was used in battle in ancient Africa.”

Her voice was calm. “Can you use it?”

The change of conversation made him feel better, made the suffocating presence of sorrow depart. He went to the wall armory and took it down. The weapon was massively heavy and awkward, nothing like the slender, flyweight katanas he was used to using, but he could still use it. He moved to one of the fall mats and spun it carefully in his hands, wrist over wrist, remembering the physically demanding moves he had been taught. It was not his type of weapon, but he could still wield it.

He watched the shadow of the weapon fall across Irena’s upturned face.

Irena was stone. And yet an odd calm—almost a determination—had driven the sorrow from her face and from the room. He didn’t know what that meant, but it frightened him.

He gave her the staff. She took it and weighed it in her hands as if it were very valuable or fragile. He said, “It takes years, if not decades, of dedication before it can be properly used.”

She gripped it solidly. Like a warrior would. Her tears were gone but her face shone with their spillage as if her flesh had been burnished with gold. “You said I’m immortal,” she said. Her eyes narrowed. Fired steel. Scarlet. “I have all the time in the world.”

## 16

The Melmoth Hotel was an ideal vampire hangout. Its architecture was a queer mixture of the gothic and

the Victorian. Its façade was grimy and full of turrets, curlicues, gargoyles, gingerbread and weird bas-reliefs that looked almost surreal in the weird Londonesque glow of the midnight streetlamps lining the street. Brett went through the revolving doors and into the somber antique lobby, ogling the people, goths and freaks, many of which might be vampires themselves for all Brett knew. They certainly were spiritual sisters to his kind of people. This was a dive for the well to do to either slum it or for the street ruffians to pretend at elegance. Brett simply could not decide which. It was also one of those trendy joints that catered to much of the bar and club scene. Ignoring the night clerk, who did not choose to look his way anyway, Brett proceeded down a rather dark hallway to an even darker club where some bass-beat techno blitz was beating against the black, neon-spattered walls. The look was tacky and overdone and infinitely false. Nothing like Club Bauhaus, which was a meat locker but had the self-respect to keep the lighting low.

He ordered a scotch and water and gave the barkeep, a young woman in a backless tux and short white-dyed hair, a fifty-dollar tip and a question.

“Seen him but he doesn’t drink,” she answered distractedly.

“You mean he doesn’t come in here often?”

She looked at him as if he were stupid. “He came in a time or two. But he said he never drinks wine.” She rolled her eyes.

He let her go service some red-haired whore at the end of the bar. Well, at least he knew for a fact that blondie had indeed been staying here. Now all that was left was to discover which room on which floor he had. Since the joint was one of those pay in advance dives, it was possible his belongings were still here and would remain so until his bill ran out, which might be now or never. In any event, he had to move.

But how to tell where he had been staying? There were twelve floors. Twelve fucking floors! Brett was just about ready to start feeling sorry for himself again because this lead was a fine one indeed—but what the hell do you do with it?—when he thought he was going crazy and had to all but keep from falling off the stool with shock when the shadow entered the room, temporarily blocking the light from the lobby before moving off to one side.

Brett immediately recognized the sharp, foxlike features, the blonde hair—shorter now—and the same stormy grey eyes. This was impossible! There was no way in hell something could walk away from a beheading, no matter how immortal it was. It was simply impossible! Yet there he was, the blonde slayer, a cigarette in his fingers, his eyes scanning the floor of the hotel. Brett turned back as the slayer looked his way. The thing’s eyes swept past him and came to rest on the whore at the end of the bar. Sitting at this angle, Brett saw the woman quite well. She smiled her professional working smile the moment the thing’s eyes alighted on her.

The slayer wandered past Brett and started talking to the woman. Even from the back he saw it clearly for what it was. It was not human. It was like some insect or alien species dressed in a frock coat and slacks. He couldn’t understand how the woman could not see it. The slayer bought her a drink and they whispered to each other for a while. The whore’s grin broadened. The slayer put out his arm and she latched onto it immediately.

Brett followed the new couple down the corridor, trying to stay at a safe, unobserved distance. Back in the lobby they chose one of the elevators. That was when Brett realized he had no idea where they were going and quickened his step, letting them see him now, he was so desperate. The whore, not the slayer,

stepped on the track of the elevator as he approached.

“Thanks,” he muttered, slipping into the elevator.

The whore cuddled against the slayer as the slayer gave him an uninterested once-over and then punched the button for the tenth floor. The old Otis elevator rattled upward, making Brett feel like he was trapped in an oversized upright coffin. But luck was with him, because the whore had dug the slayer’s keys out of his pocket—they were the old-fashioned kind, a real key on a ring with a marker, not a key card, thankfully—and Brett stared intently at the whore’s hands until he made out the number.

1022.

The elevator let the couple off on the tenth floor. But for appearance’s sake, Brett rode the elevator to the next floor, then took it back down to the lobby. Although he knew exactly what he had to do now, he leaned against the wall of the lobby by the pay phones for almost five full minutes as he arranged his thoughts. Then he pushed off the wall and staggering like a drunk toward the revolving doors.

How? he wondered. How could it still be alive? He had seen its head come off. He had seen its blood spill like a flood to the floor of the warehouse. He had touched the blood for chrissakes...

How?How ?

How can something come back from the dead? he kept asking himself as he made his way across the sidewalk toward the Porsche. Because it was a vampire? But vampires were not dead or undead. They were very much alive. Malevolently alive. So how...

Unless...

In*Blood Brothers*, the Baron had met a complete double of himself. A creature as good-natured and gentle as the Baron was evil. Baron Blood’s twin brother...

And then he knew.

Back in the car, Brett smiled and switched on the radio to a hard-hitting all-metal station and smacked the wheel in victory. Ah Brett, he thought, you are smarter than the average bear. If he ever attained a true measure of immortality—if such an impossible thing was indeed possible—Brett knew he would make one hell of an unstoppable vampire.

## 17

He was leaning against the gymnast bar and watching Irena assault the big Wave water bag hanging from a chain from the ceiling when the doorbell rang. Assaulting it was an understatement, he realized. She did not assault it, but literally*attacked* it like an animal, her taped hands and feet landing lightning-fast blows into it, sweating and kei-calling as she did so, making the bag sway dangerously on its chain. Her gaze

was vapid; she saw nothing but the bag, her concentration so complete, he took up his coffee cup and went out into the hall without her even noticing.

Brett Edelman was on the stoop, fingering the rose bush outside the door. It was a project of his he had taken up some time ago. He had grafted red roses onto white. But the white ones had all died. “Don’t touch that,” Alek said, slamming his cup onto its saucer after taking a quick sip.

Edelman looked up slyly. He reminded Alek of some kind of animated character in a TV show somewhere. A shark in a suit.

“The answer is no,” Alek said.

“I haven’t asked the question.”

“Go home.” Alek slammed the door in his face and turned and went down the hall and into the library. For some reason, the room calmed his nerves when he felt jangled. The flow of books, the smell of the leather, the sight of the gilded spines lent him a feeling of enormous peace. He wandered to the window where the lights of the city were already shining like bright fallen stars and heard that troublesome little man enter the hallway and then the library behind him and shut the door. From the sound of him—or the lack thereof—the little creep was in awe of the collection. Alek turned around and glanced down at the lighted screen of the computer where he had been busy translating the Ninth Chronicle before he became aware of Irena’s workout in the other room. He scrolled up the screen so the man would not see.

Edelman took a book down off the shelf and examined it a moment before saying, “I was wrong to try and blackmail you into the job. I realize that now. Someone like yourself wouldn’t let himself get caught up in such machinations. . . .”

“Let’s cut the bullshit, shall we?”

Edelman looked up, startled. “Yes. . . lets.” He put the book back on the shelf and said, “Here’s the deal. You do this job and I give you a very valuable bit of information.”

“I don’t do work like that,” Alek stated evenly, “and you have absolutely no information I could use.”

“Not even the whereabouts of a certain angry slayer who lost his brother recently?”

Alek tried not to let the surprise show on his face, but the little rat was such a conniving bastard, he recognized it anyway.

“I thought so,” Edelman said. He lit a cigarette and started to wander among the shelves. “See, you and your kind are odd creatures to be sure, but not entirely impossible to figure out. You think you’re so superior to us, so much more than we can ever be. But when it all comes down to it, you’re no different than anyone else. If you can understand the mind of a man, then the mind of a dhampir isn’t so difficult.”

Alek leaned against the wall and drank his coffee.

“At first, when I saw the thing you murdered walking around, I thought it must be the same creature. Then it occurred to me that that wasn’t true at all. It’s the thing’s *brother* .”

“It isn’t a ‘thing’,” Alek said.

Edelman shrugged. “Whatever it is, it wants you dead. I know it and you know it. Now the question remains, my friend, how much do you want to know where he is?”

“Stay away from Michael,” Alek said. “I will tell you once. Next time you learn on your own.”

“Michael,” Edelman said with a flickering smile. “What a dull name for such an interesting character.” The man flecked his ashes into a nearby urn. “And why should I stay away from Michael? Because Michael will kill me?”

“No,” Alek said. “He won’t kill you.”

Edelman dropped his cigarette to the flowered Victorian carpet, grinding it out with the heel of his wingtip while he held Alek’s eyes. “You’re really beginning to shit me, you know that?” he said. “And you might not want to do that.”

“Because you’ll kill me?” Alek mocked him.

“I make men wish they were never born.”

“I’m not a man.”

“And you won’t be anything else when I finish with you!”

Alek tilted his head. “If you’re done posturing, Mr. Edelman, the door is that way.”

“I know where the goddamn door is, Mr. Knight.”

“You also know where the sword is, Mr. Edelman.”

Baring his teeth in what could only be called a human grimace, Brett Edelman headed in that direction. Alek waited until he heard the door slam shut against the jamb, rattling the stained glass in its panes. Then he waited a few moments more.

Irena appeared in the doorway, drenched in sweat, her beautiful white-boned body heaving with exertion under the tank top and sweat pants she was wearing. This time the clothing was her own. He had gone last night and gotten it for her, dragging as much of it as he could from the filthy shitbox she and Lilly had called home. “I’ve finished, Alek,” she said. “Can I practice with the Jatarri staff?”

“No.”

She waited. She knew better than to oppose his instructions. Then she said, her voice hoarse, “I want to learn to fight with it.”

“First you learn to fight *without* it. How long did you go with the bag?”

“Two hours.”

He nodded. “Did you finish high school?”

Irena looked taken aback by the question. She oriented herself, then dropped her eyes. “I... no.”

“I want you to read these books.”

She looked up and took in the hundreds of thousands of books on shelves that climbed every wall of the library. Books were stacked on tables and on revolving racks set between hard-backed benches. Books were crammed under windows and into corners. Books were even piled on the floor. She looked at them all. “Which books?”

“All of them,” he said. He looked around a moment until he saw the one he wanted, then he walked over to a shelf and took down a fat volume in worn brown leather with soft gold gilding. “Read one book a day. Start with this one.” He gave it to her.

She looked down at John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* .

“I’ll be away for a bit. A few hours.”

She looked up. “Where will you be?”

“Downstairs.”

She stood in his way with the book clutched to her chest.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Lilly’s funeral is today. I want to go to the cemetery.”

“You can’t go to the cemetery.”

“Why?”

“Someone might see you. You’re dead, Irena.”

“Bess will be there. I—”

“That life is over.” He moved past her into the hallway.

She turned to face him. Her eyes pleaded with him. Pleaded for mercy, for understanding.

But he would not be moved. Turning around, he said, “Irena died. And if you want to make the person responsible for her death pay, if you want that person held accountable, she has to remain that way.”

Her eyes darkened.

He watched as the unraveling hem of her tank top crisped and curled while the acrid aroma of burned stuff filled his nostrils. That was something else. She needed to hone her talents. But right now she just needed to heal. To heal and to learn control.

“Then don’t call me Irena,” she whispered.

“What should I call you?”

“Phoenix.”

“Very well,” he said.

## 18

He experienced a chill when he stepped into the Great Abbey. He wanted to believe it was the vastness of the subterranean chamber and the coolness that never left it, even at the height of a broiling New England summer, but somehow he doubted it. He closed the great double doors behind him, cutting off the sight of the stairs that had led him down here to this separate world. But somehow, when he stood in the Abbey, he had the uncomfortable feeling that there was no other world. There seemed to be nothing at all but this great echoing expanse of darkness and the never-ending neck-crawling feeling that he was being watched from the shadows that skirted every dark corner and every half-seen ledge.

Bats cooed above. The sound afforded Alek some comfort, not much. He heard his own rough breathing in the musty silence, but that afforded him no comfort at all. Reaching for the tinderbox near the door, Alek lit the candelabra on the table and carried it with him down the long aisle limned on both sides by columns so large they were like something from a lost Grecian temple. The Coventable was gone, destroyed a long time ago by Amadeus in a fit of temper. All that remained were the tapestries and the arms on the stone walls, the brackets of unlit torches and the stained glass.

And the altar. That was still here.

As Alek approached the altar of skulls sitting there massive and old and full of dead energies, he felt a veritable concerto of fingers playing down his spine. Each grinning grey skull-unit was like a stone, but a stone so powerful, touching it would give him a deadly electrical shock. He had been down here to the Abbey only twice since he moved into the Covenhouse, once in the beginning to see what damage Amadeus had wrought here, and now today. But today would be different. The last time he had been here he had copiously avoided the altar, giving it a berth worthy of an active land mine. Now... well, now he planned to set that mine off.

“You’re crazy, old man,” he whispered. Yet he moved stealthily toward his destination. He had changed before coming down here, but it was not into his usual street gear and coat, and as he moved toward the altar he felt the edges of his floor-length habit lift and spin with his locomotion, felt the ruffled sleeves brush the tops of his hands and lift the hairs there. Why had he changed into a habit for this? Because he was a priest? Because he was crazy? He tried to answer that, but found he had no answers. It just seemed the proper thing to do, though he had not worn a habit since leaving the Coven over two years ago.

You are crazy, old man.

Crazy enough to do this. He ascended the dais and felt the shadow of the beast of bone fall over his face like a spillage of blood, of darkness. He craned his neck back, the size of the altar washing away the fear and replacing it with pure, nerve-numbing awe. Putting out his hands, he felt his psi ignite and the phantoms of the dead alight in his mind like memories on the edges of a fever dream. By moving his

hands in any direction he saw faces, places, lost thoughts, regrets, salvation and damnation. The shattered remnants of a thousand lives bombarded him like punches to his mind. Some he recognized. Some he could only guess at. Many of these unfortunate souls he himself had slain. I loved animals, said one lost soul. I played violin. I was getting married in another week. I would have been the first in my family to go to college. I want my life back! Their outrage and hurt made the gorge rise in his throat and made his eyes smart with unshed tears. It was so easy to lose your way, to lose yourself in an immortal river of never-ending sorrow...

But he forced himself onto a path, searching for a familiar face, familiar surroundings. He passed it up, then backtracked when he recognized his error. Right... there. Yes, there it was. He saw the Abyssus, and fleeting images of Dante and Michael. He felt the fear Carfax had known in his last moment. Fear and a peculiar kind of relief, because it was all over and there were no more fights to fight...

Putting out both hands, he laid them with gentle reverence upon the skull-face of the vampire Carfax. For a moment nothing happened. Then a humming began in his head, followed soon after by a steady rush of air that seemed to come at him from every angle. Then he was in the dark and he was falling and he was terribly, terribly afraid—

## 19

—of being wrong. It was a matter of esteem, you see, that the hivemaster always remain in the right. It would not do to be uninformed or off-balanced. It was bad if an enemy found you thus; worse if it was one of your own. That was the thought centermost in Carfax's mind on the evening when the slayers showed up at the Abyssus on their infernal crusade.

Akisha came into the office. "They are here, my lord."

He wished he could ignore the almost taunting sound of her voice telling him about the arrival of the bloody headhunters, but he could not. Everything his Queen said to him was a mixture of worry and sadistic glee. Worry because she genuinely loved her people. Sadistic glee because she hated him as much as she loved them. Like all her cursed female-kind, she hated her dependence on him and enjoyed watching him squirm thus. "How many?" he asked as he set down his papers, all of them personal and very legal. Among them were his Last Will and Testament.

"Three. Two masters and a whelp."

Carfax looked up into her white porcelain-perfect face. "Who are they?"

She hesitated. "Dante and Michael. And Alek is with them."

"Alek? Isn't that the little whelp you fancy?"

"Alek is my friend," Akisha said neutrally. "And I would prefer it if you didn't harm him."



“Harm Alek?” Carfax asked. “Forgive me, my dear, but it is I who is under the blade, so to speak.”

Akisha crossed her arms and looked aside. “If you had been more careful things would not have come down to this.”

“You know,” Carfax said, rising from his seat, “I often have cause to wonder whether you botched that experiment on purpose, just to be rid of me. You do have that curious history of losing mates, my Akisha, my black widow.”

“You’re paranoid and delusional, as usual,” Akisha whispered.

Carfax hit her across the mouth. It was not a fierce blow, but it was enough to rock her back into the wall and make her slide down it to the floor in the slitted black leather gown she wore. All that grown-up clothes and makeup, and there she huddled like a broken little girl. Helpless. Hopeless. Both the pity and the revulsion rose up together in his throat. All the people to lose face to, to be weak before, but he would not show it to Akisha! He kicked her in the ribs and she doubled over on the floor, spitting blood. “I will die tonight, my dear. Have no doubts or worries over that. But then you must have cause to wonder: will your valiant and beautiful Alek come to your rescue? Will he bind you to him and take upon himself all your years of madness? Will he? I think he loves you. But, surely, he loves Amadeus more to be here in the company of those two butchers. Remember my words when I am gone, Queen Akisha. You love Alek, but what you love is spoiled. A vampire in love with a slayer... what a terrible, terrible joke.”

Leaving her on the floor of his office, Carfax stepped out into the club.

The two masters were there, just as Akisha had said, their blonde heads nearly touching as they sat hunched at the bar like a couple of golden vultures, waiting for the dead to fall for them. A little ways off stood Alek, leaning against the graffiti-sprayed wall in the shadows at the back of the club. Either he was there to serve sentence with the twins and was acting as backup, or he was there grudgingly and wanted nothing to do with this whole affair. Either way, he was as dead as the two slayers if he thought he would take the vampire Carfax without a fight.

Fixing his double-breasted suit coat and cravat, Carfax wound his way across the floor littered with half-intoxicated bodies. It was 1973 and Congress was debating the legalization of several different illegal substances, but the people here were not high on morphine, brown Mexican heroin or marijuana. Rather, the high was death... or near death. Blood loss to be exact—which, according to the patrons, was the sweetest high in the world. He didn’t know from experience. He wasn’t stupid enough to let someone bleed him. The paying customers, however, were another story.

Damn, but looking on it all reminded him of the poor sots lost in the opium dens of his native London . He took a deep breath and wondered if avoiding all that bloodletting was going to catch up to him someday. Maybe today.

The slayers eyed him with their usual combination of disgust, jealousy and disinterest. The disgust was for what he did here. The jealousy was because he dared do it at all. The disinterest was a put-on to keep the other emotions from bleeding through. But bleed through they did. Again he sought out the whelp at the back, but the only thing etched on Alek’s pretty face was uneasiness. Perhaps it was the club. Perhaps it was because he was in the company of these two... gentleman.

“Michael... Dante,” Carfax said magnanimously. “It has been a long time, hasn’t it?”

Dante smiled. Michael did not. Dante was an impetuous thorn in the side. But Michael was a dagger in the throat. They were complete opposites... and yet dangerously similar. Dante was the gunman, Michael the strategist. Or so the rumors went back in the Peninsula, when the two of them drove out Napoleon's army as much with the rumors of their sadistic exploits on the surgery table as with their weapons. It was said they stole half-dead men off the battlefield, and that those men were never seen again. Or at least, not as they once were.

"Carfax," Michael whispered in greeting.

"Hello, old boy!" Dante picked his teeth with a toothpick. "How is it hanging? Still bent and shriveled?"

"Still the comedian, eh, Dante?" Carfax asked.

"Comedy and tragedy," Michael said evenly. "Which brings us to our purpose here."

"Of course."

"Seems you're to be knocked up to the ol' head block," Dante said with a bleeding joy Carfax found infuriating. Even back in their war days, when they worked together, there was no peace between the three of them.

"Dante..." Michael warned.

"Well it's blimey true, ain't it?" Dante laughed like a simpleton and spun around on the stool.

Michael stopped his brother's spinning. He said to Carfax, "We're here to serve notice."

"I know. But why you two?"

"Excuse me?"

Carfax said, "Why did the Coven, that ruthless band of hypocrites, send you and Dante my way? Why not just send the whelp there?" He could have chosen his words better, but that no longer mattered. The truth was out and all hope demolished in it. They were here to kill him. Slay him for his God-given right to unlock the mysteries in the natural world. What did it matter if he pretended congenial now?

"I do not know why the Coven sent us in particular," said Michael.

"That's a bloody lie and you know it!" Carfax insisted. "You're here for the Elixir. That's the only reason you've come. You want to see if it works. *If my* Elixir works, so you can trout it back to your masters like the good little dogs you are!"

Dante stopped grinning like a fool and watched his brother's next move.

Michael reached into his coat and pulled out the written order. He said, "We're here to serve sentence, not to discuss Coven business with you. Had you wanted to be a part of our organization, you might have reconsidered leaving it."

Carfax knocked the paper from Michael's hand. "I was thrown out and you know it!" he said, his voice a low snarl. "Thrown out so I would finish the Elixir. The Coven has simply chosen this time to remove me so they can get at it."

Michael looked away, then back again. “None of this is important. Only that the sentence is served out.”

Carfax felt his heart leap, and then calmed himself. He had one chance now and one chance only. Word and logic had failed on these two, something he once would never have believed could happen, and now he had only the loyalty of his own people to rely on. The power of the hive. “I understand,” he said.

“Are your affairs in order?” Michael asked. And there was kindness in his voice. Kindness but ice too.

“Yes... but, I am wondering... can I have a moment with the hive?”

Michael and Dante looked at each other. After a moment, Michael shrugged.

Carfax glanced at the back of the club. Alek had drawn his sword and was standing at attention—no doubt all the sudden shouting had pricked his fine dhampiri ears. Carfax had made provisions for all things but him. He had not expected the twins would come with an escort, but there was little to be done about Alek now. He could not alter his plans. Amadeus’s first acolyte was the one wild card in the room, and Carfax could only hope he was not as good as his master.

Checking over himself one last time, Carfax moved to the center of the room. The low psychedelic music stopped at once. Whatever the thralls and the human clients were engaged in stopped at once. All eyes turned on the hivemaster, because of what he was and his power over this place. This place was a part of him, and a subtle victim of all his emotions. He silently contacted every member of the hive in one deft, almost offhand, thought. He felt their collective nod. The exchange happened quickly, and the twins did not look alerted to anything odd at all. They simply sat together at the bar, watching him.

Now Alek Knight... Carfax felt the tension there in the shadows. Turning slightly, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Alek was moving unsurely toward his two companions, an aura of worry about him. He felt it, goddamn him. So that meant Carfax must move quickly.

“It comes to my attention, my people, that I am to be removed as your leader. It seems the Coven has passed sentence upon me. And as much as I regret leaving you all, there is nary a thing any of us can do about it. And so I reckon I shall take my new rightful place.” Dutifully he moved to the altar. This being an abandoned church, the altar still remained, with a stone cradle upon it, a device that was often used as entertainment. Tonight, however, the entertainment would be grim. Kneeling before the stone, Carfax motioned for the twin slayers to approach.

For a moment the two looked reluctant to pass sentence among so many. But after a moment the uncomfortable silence forced them from their seats. Michael hung back while Dante skipped ahead, that always-malicious glee on his pretty white face.

“I shall be what I must be, my people,” Carfax intoned. “You hivemaster no more. I shall be—” Alek reached the front and was about to take Michael by the arm when Carfax said: “*YOUR GENERAL INSTEAD! TAKE THEM!*”

The room broke into chaos, a chaos so great even Carfax with his vast power to read and control minds lost track of the errant emotions surrounding him and crackling the air like a dangerous electrical storm.

“*TAKE THE SLAYERS!*” he bellowed. “*KILL THE SLAYERS!*”

The room surged forward as one. The vampires were loyal to him, but the humans were confused,

requiring he push them with as much mental power as he could manage in that moment. And push them he did. Kill a few he did with his explosive command. Maim many others he did also. Some lost their mind or their vision, some bled from every orifice. Yet they did not let that stop them. Tumbling chairs and tables, slamming each other aside, leaping past stone and through glass, human or vampire, they jumped on the three slayers in the club like hungry fleas on a bloodied animal, like flies on a corpse. For a moment the slayers were caught in Carfax's vision—Alek grabbing Michael's arm, Dante looking off curiously and with shock—then they were gone, blanketed by the intruding, rabid-minded bodies. After that there was just the swarm, wood cracking, stone breaking, swords stabbing, blood pooling, jaws chomping with mechanized desire. Carfax smiled with grim satisfaction as the music of war roaring all about him. This was like the Peninsula. This was like Antietam. This was... glorious!

Something struck him in the shoulder, knocking him down beside the altar. It took him but a moment to twist around and recognize the face of the blonde longhaired slayer, the evil imp Dante. Somehow or other he had managed to escape the swarm, and even though his brother and the whelp slayer were still trapped under the mêlée, this one was stalking him like a little lion, jaws agape and foaming bloodily from the injuries he had sustained in the hive attack. And yet Dante's eyes gleamed with his usual malevolence.

"Good show, old boy... but 'tis the final curtain, wouldn't you agree?" Dante asked as he drew his sword, a long thin rapier he was considered a legendary talent with.

Carfax was no swordsman. In fact, he did not enjoy violence unless it was much needed. And he seldom committed it himself. He withdrew the only weapon he carried on himself: a modest if extremely sharp scalpel. It was an antique he had picked up on one of his travels, used by the sawbones of the ancient Roman Empire. But it was not for sentimental or historical reasons that Carfax carried it. Rather, it was because the curious little tool had been forged from iron, the only one of its kind Carfax had ever come across. He brandished it now, a tiny iron scalpel against a stainless steel rapier. And even so, he saw Dante hesitate in his step, afraid of the iron that could kill him.

It was all the opening Carfax needed. He was not a warrior, but he was quick, as all his kind was. Quick, and quite a bit older than Dante. And he had seen enough battlefields and carried off enough bodies to know how to fight when he needed to, when survival was at risk. He feigned a thrust, and Dante, the impetuous fool that he was, naturally went for it. Carfax ducked under the blow and came around behind Dante, his free hand pinioning Dante's arm to his back, Carfax's knife hand snapping up under Dante's chin. Dante stopped in mid-motion, the scalpel at his throat, and held perfect still.

The room fell silent around him. What once was all noise and violence was diffused as he commanded things to settle down. The vampires fell back, most or all dead from various sword wounds. Some lay perfect still. Some lay in pieces strewn here and about. Others gurgled off into dark corners where they had chosen to die. What remained were the two warriors, the two slayers, their swords drawn and bloodied from the impromptu massacre. Blood slathered them as much as it did their weapons—their hair, their black leather coats, their white virgin skin. On Michael it looked almost becoming because Carfax had seen it so many times. But on the other one it made him look a fright—all that whiteness and blackness tainted with red. He looked like some kind of ancient black-clad warrior sprung up from a Cornwall ditch somewhere, the Black Knight come to slay King Arthur.

Yet Alek the slayer was perfectly calm through it all. He had the perfect nature, Carfax realized, for a complete hunter. A complete murderer. Not so for Michael, who looked on Carfax and his captive brother with repressed terror and fury. And Michael never looked like this, never lost his calm and his reserve, except when Dante did something stupid to enrage him or endanger himself. In fact, Michael looked ready to charge ahead blindly at Carfax, and just might have, except Alek put his hand on Michael's arm, halting his progress.

“Don’t be stupid,” Alek whispered through the blood on his mouth.

“Carfax is the bloody stupid one if he thinks he’ll ever get away with this!” Michael said, eyeing the enemy like a frenzied animal caught in bloodlust. “Where are you going to go?” he asked Carfax. “Where are you going to hide?”

Honestly, he did not know. But he could not think about that right now. Right now, the important thing was to get out of this deathtrap. Once they were outside, out in the night where Carfax could breathe and think straight, he would think about what to do.

Alek said, “Michael is right, Carfax. Where are you going to run with a bounty on your head? And after this”—he indicated the bloody shambles of the club—“who is going to take you in? Certainly no hive in New York.”

Again Carfax surveyed the room. It wasn’t all that bad. They were his people. His thralls. His patrons. They had died for their leader. The humans asked their people to die for so much less, to die for vanity’s sake, for pride. Yet the moment he caught a glimpse of Akisha standing in the doorway of the club, Akisha the only member of his former hive still alive, he found himself frozen by the hate in her eyes. The blame.

*I did it for you, my mate*, he told her through the special link they shared as blood-bonded mates.

*You did it for you*, she told him. *And you did it for that Elixir ...*

Alek turned to Akisha as if he had heard their exchange. But that was ridiculous. They were not mates and he could not have heard her thoughts, unless he was utilizing some form of empathy so powerful it dwarfed even his power. And then he realized what Alek was doing. He was not listening to her. He was asking her permission to kill her mate. He was instigating an ancient law. As a slayer, he could kill any marked vampire. But as a vampire, or rather, as part of the community of vampires, he could do no such thing except with her permission.

Akisha nodded to Alek.

“No, you can’t... it is forbidden except to those of our circle, Akisha!” Carfax told her.

Akisha looked at him and through him. “Alek is of our circle, my mate, and he wants to challenge you to this hive. What is your answer?”

Dante made a strangling sound in his throat. Michael practically rushed headlong at them both. Alek, however, intervened yet again, pressing both hands against Michael’s chest and pushing him forcefully back, almost into the wall. Michael looked appalled but said nothing to the younger slayer.

“Akisha is right,” Alek whispered. He handed Akisha his sword and coat, then turned to face Carfax, unarmed to show his intentions. “It’s my right as a student of Akisha to challenge your right to the hive.” Alek folded his hands in front of him in the typical Shao-Lin stance of peace, the one Akisha had taught him all those years earlier when she had instructed him for a short time. “If you lose, you die by my hand. If you win, you die by the hand of the slayers. And if you leave without fighting, no hive in the world will ever accept you again. You will be hunted by your people until the end of your days.”

Carfax snorted. “So you give me no escape at all.”

“No... no escape. But if you fight me, I promise not to make you suffer in death.”

“How gallant! Should I thank you?” Carfax pulled Dante up tighter and began to move sideways through the crush of bodies on the floor, toward the door. “No... I don’t think so. I think I shall take my chances out in the world.”

Alek dropped his hands. Carfax smelled the steel in them before he saw the throwing daggers in his sleeves flash. And then the blade was *in* Dante—Dante of all people!—and Dante was folding under Carfax’s hold and there was nothing left for Carfax to do but drop him and take to the door like a bat out of hell itself—

## 20

—except that Carfax never made it to the door. Using the second throwing dagger he carried in his opposing sleeve, Alek literally nailed Carfax to the broken plaster wall beside the door: the eight-inch blade, as slender as a tool yet as powerful as any of the weapons Amadeus had ever trained him to use, sank into Carfax’s back. It did two things at once: it stopped Carfax, sealing him to the wall, and it severed his spinal column below the waist. Carfax screamed and scabbled at the wall with his long painted fingernails, but it was a scream of rage and frustration, not pain. He could feel nothing below the waist.

The vampire’s wails were the only sounds in the funeral silence of the club. The only sounds, other than the whimpers of the not-quite-yet-dead thralls and the quiet, panicked sounds of Michael going to his brother and holding him as he examined the knife that protruded from Dante’s chest just above the heart.

“You... you!” Michael spat, but Alek turned away and moved swiftly to the door and to Carfax.

Carfax was helpless. A moderately sized man of moderately good looks, very European and infinitely proper. Now he simply looked like an insect smashed against a wall. Now he struggled like any animal stuck in a trap. As Alek approached him, Carfax sensed his doom and tossed back his head. “Don’t let them take my Elixir! Don’t let Rome have it!” he screeched through his teeth. Hair flying, body straining like a violin bow on the verge of snapping, he actually found the strength to pull himself from the wall, and, with a howl of feral anguish, turned on Alek one last time.

But Alek had gotten his sword back from Akisha before he approached the hivemaster. Carfax more or less turned right into it. Alek simply finished the process.

Akisha dropped where she stood, riveted to the floor by the sudden agony of her broken blood bond. Alek sheathed his sword and went to her and lifted her into his arms, taking her seemingly frail body back into the office so she could lie and recover upon the divan.

Her eyes fluttered open when he touched her hair.

“I need you,” Alek began, “I need you to not tell anyone about tonight.”

“That you... you killed Carfax...”

He nodded. She knew as well as he that by killing Carfax and by being a student of the hive Queen, he had the right—no, the duty—to claim himself as hivemaster and Akisha’s new mate and master. And she knew as well as he did that as a slayer he could not perform such a duty. Not now. Not ever.

Yet she was hopeful, nonetheless. “Alek... won’t you consider...?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Perhaps... one day...”

He kissed her mouth to silence her. “Tell your people Carfax was murdered by an enemy. Empirius. One of the other hivemasters. I don’t care. Dante and Michael will have another story to tell, but the vampires won’t believe a couple of insane slayers.”

He held her hopeful eyes a moment more. Then he went out into the battlefield again.

*Don't let them take my Elixir! Don't let Rome have it !*

He thought about the former hivemaster’s words as he returned to Michael and Dante. He was curious enough to ask Michael what Carfax had meant, but one look from Michael shut him up at once.

“You son of a whore!” Michael snarled. “Look what you did!” With extreme precision, Michael managed to withdraw the switchblade from his brother’s chest. Dante’s body jumped at the last moment as the blade was freed from the sucking red cavity. Then Michael sliced his own wrist open with the blade and drizzled blood into his brother’s open wound. All the while his eyes followed Alek around the room. Dante was bleeding, but not badly, and Michael’s blood would certainly accelerate the healing. Alek had studied enough anatomy, vampire, dhampir and otherwise, and had practiced enough with the throwing daggers to know precisely how and where to toss them.

He had never posed a threat to Dante. Not a real one.

“He’s not hurt badly. He’ll recover,” Alek said, annoyed and afraid of the anger pouring out of the always-placid Michael.

“You could have killed him, you stupid cunt!”

“But I didn’t.”

Michael glared at him, his brother’s head cradled in his hands. “Leave now. I don’t want to look at you again.”

Alek buttoned his coat. “Fine. You clean up the mess here. I did my part.” Breaking the heated eye contact with Michael, Alek picked through the bodies and headed for the door. But just as he reached the vestibule of the converted church, Michael’s voice came to him again, drifting out of the steaming meat locker the club had become:

*“If you ever endanger my brother’s life again, I will hunt you down, whelp, and I will tear your*

*heart beating from your chest!”*

Alek ignored the threat and went out into the night.

Nothing very much did come of that night, all told. Akisha kept her promise and claimed the vampire Empirius slew her former mate. Michael and Dante either never spoke of it at all or were not believed, because the story stuck. Empirius, very much enjoying his sudden fame, settled a new hive in the Abyssus with Akisha. Rome and the Coven were satisfied if a bit surprised by the sudden decimation of Carfax’s hive. And the twins went back to Europe to continue their experiments.

Alek never discovered what the “Elixir” was that Carfax didn’t want Rome having. And he never saw the twins again until two nights ago. That night he got a lead on the serial murderer the papers were calling The Ladykiller—a roaming psychopath that was doing a Jolly Jack routine with a scalpel on the Lower East Side working girls. That was when he discovered the identity of the murderer as Dante. And that was when the whole mess suddenly turned personal.

## 21

It had been hard getting J. Stephan Paul’s Manhattan address since Paul had not joined Horror Writers of America and wasn’t listed in their directory. And since Alek could not very well get to him through his publisher, the whole affair caused quite a challenge. Undaunted, Alek called the one person in the city he knew would have the information he required.

Edward Ashikawa picked up on the third ring. Alek was surprised the number Edward had given him the last time they parted company was his personal cell number. “Yes, what can I do for you, dhampir?” the man said in his soft, almost hissing voice. There was no trace of an accent. As Alek paced across the library, his cell phone cradled in his neck, he sharpened his katana on a whetstone and wondered how Edward knew it was him—whether Alek was the only one who had this number, or if Edward was using some odd ability gained from the unnatural mixing of his blood with that of his vampires. Perhaps someone else might find it amusing to speak to the Dragon Lord of the New York City Yakuza, but Alek just wanted it over as soon as possible. Edward was a dangerous man and simply knew too much about everything.

“I thought... an exchange of information,” Alek said.

“Ah. And here I thought you would be calling down a favor.”

“And be in your debt? I don’t think so, Edward.”

“You play at honor, but you know nothing about it.”

Nice line from *Kung Fu* or something, thought Alek. He was being cynical, but Edward always brought out the cynic in him. It had something to do with the fact that Edward was convinced Alek was an unlearned cretin and his perfect servant and would one day serve the Yakuza on his knees, not unlike



Alek's recent nemesis Kage. But biting back the argument already taking form in his mouth, he said, "I have news that the Tong are moving 750 kilos on the Wharf."

"You know," said Edward, "I could pretend to know all this already and simply give you the information you require. Then you would be in my debt."

"But that wouldn't be honorable, Dragon."

"Perhaps you assume too much of me, Slayer."

Alek harrumphed.

"When are they moving?" Edward asked.

"In 72 hours, according to Jean Paul."

"*Yourother* contact," Edward mused. "Seems you have one for one side of your nature and one for the other."

Alek ignored the jive and said, "I need information you probably have."

"Go ahead."

Ten minutes later, with the address written on a piece of paper in his hand and his coat slung over his shoulder—a stylish woolen one, for it was a brisk autumn day—Alek stepped into the dojo where Phoenix was practicing a combination of dance steps and war moves at the bar. She never stopped. Never quit. Not even to eat or drink.

But the moment she saw him she did stop, gliding gracefully to a dead halt. He had to admit she was incredible. Probably better than he was. Her clothing was soaked through with her sweat, her hair clinging like red vines to her white porcelain face. She looked on the brink of physical exhaustion and collapse.

"Are we going to the cemetery?" she asked, looking at his semi-formal clothing and coat.

"No. I have an errand to run. I want you to rest now."

"I want to go with you."

"No."

She scarcely seemed to move. And then suddenly she was in the air, striking at him with a sidekick, her voice a roar that made the mirrored walls at the bar shake as if with a storm.

Alek waited until she was practically upon him. Then he casually stepped aside and clotheslined her in the stomach. The impact arrested her momentum and made her crash to the floor in a sweating, trembling bundle. She recovered quickly, but the moment was lost, and instead of retaliating, she pushed herself to her knees and simply looked up at him, trembling with the mindless, clawing, seething anger going on inside of her.

"Lesson number four. Never attack in anger," he said. "It is not an ally but a liability."

“Fuck you,” she whispered and kicked at his legs.

He minced backward to avoid the impact, put on his day shades, and went out into the hall.

“I’m going,” she cried after him, standing in the doorway of the dojo. A threat. “I’m going and you can’t stop me! I hate you, Alek, I hate you...!”

I hate you, Alek, I hate you to hell! Debra’s words, once, spoken in childlike anger. Alek glanced aside at the mirror in the foyer but it was empty except for his own image.

Empty, he thought, like everything else in my life. When does the sorrow die?

## 22

An hour later he was on the penthouse balcony of one of the most exclusive skyscrapers in the city. The upper floor was dedicated to a members-only lodge called the Overlook Café, created for some of the most powerful men in the city. Bankers, Restaurateurs. And yes, authors. Alek had lived his entire life in New York City, and yet this was not the kind of exclusive club that he was familiar with. This was a club where the forbidden fruits were slightly more mundane: high-stakes gambling, high-end whores and five hundred dollar lunch platters. The maître ‘d of the revolving glass-domed dining area received him graciously even if he was a bit annoyed by Alek’s overall presence and appearance. Alek thought it must be the black clothes and long hair, though he counted no less than three well-known heavy metal musicians sitting at tables in the dining area. No, then, it had to be because Edward had announced him.

“Mr. Paul is expecting you,” the man, who looked like some kind of Hammer-studios version of Count Dracula, said. Taking up a leather-bound menu, he led Alek around the perimeter of the dome to the back where a set of silk screens hid a small private section of the dining room from the rest of the diners. And there was J. Stephan Paul in a tailored Armani suit, sitting at a private table adorned with a white silk tablecloth and eating a steak the size of a small laptop computer.

Alek sat down in the chair across from him but did not remove his sunglasses. It was terribly impolite, he knew, and his strict European upbringing balked at the notion of sitting in a dining room behind a pair of shades, but the glass dome made the room so bright that even the little light leaking in around the rim of the glasses made him wince. Taking them off would make him effectively blind.

Alek waited to see if a busboy or a waiter would appear. None did. “Good afternoon, Mr. Paul,” he said.

“I don’t give interviews anymore, young man,” Paul said as he forked more mutilated cow into his mouth. The effect was... well, unnerving. Alek was reminded of an animal at a trough. He tried to envision this man writing scandalous erotic romances, then stopped himself before he lost his lunch completely. The thought was almost as revolting as the overcooked animal he was feasting on. Paul looked up. “I told Ed that but he insisted I meet with you anyway.”

“I’m not a reporter.”

For a moment Paul simply sat there, staring at Alek with a kind of blinking, myopic interest. Alek could read nothing from the man other than an undercurrent of surprise. J. Stephan Paul had such a negative presence in the room it made Alek want to focus his thoughts elsewhere. The part of him that was Debra seemed momentarily taken aback, as if she neither liked nor trusted Paul. Alek only hoped Paul would not prove her correct. He would hate to think he sold out all those Tong punks to Edward for nothing that was worth saving.

“No,” said Paul. “You’re not.” He put his fork down with a clink. “How do you know Ed?”

“We had some business a while back.”

“Funny. I’ve never seen you in the club.” Paul glanced around the domed dining area as if to emphasize his point.

“This isn’t really my scene.”

“I understand.”

Alek didn’t like the sound of that. Best to get things back on track. “I’ve come on a matter of extreme importance, Mr. Paul. I’m here to warn you about your publisher, Mr. Brett Edelman.”

“Brett?” Paul took a long noisy sip of his café au lait.

“Yes, Mr. Paul. It’s come to my attention that he means to do you some harm.”

Paul sat back in his chair. “Does he?”

“You suspect him?”

“I’ve always suspected Brett.”

Alek leaned forward. “Then you must believe me. I wouldn’t have come here looking for you if I thought it was a joke. Brett Edelman disclosed his plans to me personally.”

Paul’s eyes grew wider still behind the lenses of his Coke-bottle glasses. “To you?”

Alek nodded.

“Oh... my. Oh... well, this... this is unbelievable.”

“I know.”

“And wonderful.” Paul smiled.

Alek shook his head. “What?”

Paul shrugged. “I mean, I admit... it’s an interesting disguise... but you don’t really look human in that, you know.”

“Excuse me?”

His eyes gleaming with a kind of peculiar mirth, Paul leaned in close and whispered his next words in a conspiratorial tone. “I know about Brett’s plans. And I know what you are. But I had no idea he would act on it.”

“It?”

“The tape. I saw it. Well... part of it. The secretary who works for Brett at Summit Books is on my payroll. She keeps me abreast of Brett’s dealings, he’s such a conniving sonofabitch. I saw the tape, and naturally, when he approved of my plans to drop out of society, I knew he was up to something. I’ve worked with the man for over 14 years now and you get to know someone pretty well in that time.” Paul dabbed properly at his mouth with his napkin. “The point is... I know damn well he wants to off me.”

Alek couldn’t believe this. “Have you gone to the police?”

“Of course not! I can’t accuse Brett Edelman of deadly intentions. Anyway, I wanted to see if he would act on it. If he would go to you. Obviously, he did.”

“So you knew he would come to me?”

“Well... to one of you, anyway.”

“One of me?”

“To a slayer. I just didn’t know he had the balls to go *to* the Slayer. He impresses me. He really does.”

“And how exactly do you know who I am, Mr. Paul?”

Paul shrugged, making the chair he sat in squeak. “He and I have some common interests. More precisely, those intriguing clubs you vampires run. He and I don’t frequent the same club, of course, but that’s besides the point...”

“I’m not a vampire,” Alek said evenly.

Paul’s eyes halved menacingly. “You’re not, are you? You’re one of the rare and deadly dhampiri. Half human, half vampire. That’s like a nobility, isn’t it?” Again that mischievous smile. But when no answer was forthcoming from Alek, he went on. “Tell me, Mr. Knight, does it make you feel better to call yourself that? Does it make you feel more human to say you are a dhampir?”

Alek looked away over the city strewn about at his feet like components on a circuit board. “I think that, too, is besides the point, Mr. Paul.”

“Is it? I think it’s a fascinating subject. A man who is not a man. A hunter hunted by a legion of immortal underworld soldiers. A creature so painfully human and yet so profoundly different from us.”

Alek looked back at the man. “As usual, you overromanticize everything.”

“Perhaps.” Paul sipped his coffee and held Alek’s gaze. “So you’ve read my books.”

Alek ignored the question, folded his hands on the table, and got right down to the heart of things. “Is this the place where you offer to write my memoirs, Mr. Paul?”

“Yours? No. In reality, I find your story rather dull, Mr. Knight. What would I call it? *Interview With the Vampire Slayer*? All that running around the city at night, fighting with swords and all? I’m afraid it’s all been done before. No, I am more interested in employing you than I am in writing about you.”

Alek let out a sigh. “Would it surprise you to know I don’t need the work?”

“But the money...?”

This was pointless. Alek began to get up. “I have a lot of money, Mr. Paul. I don’t need yours.”

“You can never have too much money. Especially if you plan on being around a long, long time.” The look on Paul’s piggish face was infuriating.

Why had he ever come here? Alek wondered. What was he thinking? As Alek stood up, Paul grabbed his wrist, then let go as if he had been burned. He looked at his hand as if he half-expected to see something there.

“You’re cold,” Paul said.

Alek smirked. “That’s what they tell me.”

“Look,” said Paul, favoring his hand, “I can make this worth your time. Brett, that shiteater, wants to kill me...”

“And now you want me to kill him.”

“You’ll be doing the world a favor, believe me—”

Alek reached out and grabbed the author by the lapels, pulling him close. Paul stiffened the moment Alek put his hand upon him but did not try to resist as Alek brought the man to within inches of his face. Paul’s eyes and nostrils flared with danger. “Mr. Paul,” said Alek, “forget about murdering your publisher. Forget about these games. Get yourself a new publisher. Read a book. Take up a hobby. Take care of your family and stay out of these affairs.” Alek let go and the man rocked back like a pendulum, practically slamming down into his chair. The waiters looked over and whispered among themselves, but Alek ignored them.

“Go live your life,” Alek whispered as he drew his coat close and turned to leave. “Death catches up to us all in time. *Of that* you can be completely sure.”

She never realized how lonely a cemetery could be. Not scary. Just alone. Lonely. Phoenix moved past the odd assortment of graves, some of them a hundred years old, her Doc Martens squishing against the wet earth and grass. She stopped to take a flower from each grave. A lily. A rose. Most of them were dry and brittle, a victim of the early September frost. But that didn't bother her. Dead flowers for a dead soul, she thought, standing up with an armful of brown flowers.

The wind skated her hair away from her face. Cold. There would be snow again soon, so much frost so early this year. She found the moon over the hump of this next hill, half hidden by a mausoleum with angels atop it, but that too was cold. One cold face shining down on another.

She shivered. Oddly, she felt nothing. Nothing but cold, as if she were still in the stainless steel drawer of the morgue. As if she had left her body behind there somewhere.

She stomped over to Lilly's new grave, walking on the turf that had been laid just the day before, and carefully laid all the grave flowers down. Most were so dead they were whisked away by the night wind.

Phoenix stood up and found the straight razor in her pocket, the same one she tried to take her own life with, once, a long time ago, in a time before she hadn't had Lilly to look after. When she had had nothing to live for, no reason to care. The blade of the razor was cold white like the moon. She cut the cold white flesh of the palm of her hand and watched the black blood drip down onto a brown rose as a tingling sensation played throughout her hand and arm. Then the wound sewed itself up like a special effect in a movie. She cut the same hand again, and then again. Same result.

She could go on forever. She almost wanted to.

She looked down at her feet, at the blood, the immortal blood, spattered everywhere. On her shoes, on the flowers, on Lilly's grave.

For Lilly, she thought.

## 24

The first discovery that Brett Edelman made on inviting himself into Michael's suite in the Melmoth Hotel was that Michael had not been alone. He looked around the room after the slayer let him in. Empty wine bottles and a flotsam of room-service trays proved that not only had Michael not been alone last night, but that he hadn't allowed a maid to clean up after himself and his guest, either. And yet, by far the oddest things to be found here was the miscellaneous equipment scattered around between the more mundane things. Lab equipment, Brett guessed. But he couldn't be certain because it looked like lab equipment which might be found in some creepy old Hammer film: coiled conducting tubes, beakers half full of odd-colored substances, glass apparatuses, medical kits fitted with weird instruments that all looked particular sharp in one way or another, and—oddest of all—four large stainless steel canisters on the table between the double beds. They looked for all the world like giant modern canopic jars.

Michael closed and locked the door behind him.

Brett turned around, a knot of fear balling up his stomach. It was the kind of scorching, acidy fear he had not known since he was a little boy on the way to the dentist's office. And that fear only edged up a notch when Michael looked at him.

Anything that might have been passingly human in the dhampir Alek Knight was absent in Michael. Those long, slitlike, unmistakably baleful eyes, the immoveable mouth, the bloodless, crystalline fingernails, the skin so white and perfect it might have been made of plastic, the whole being more like a weirdly-crafted doll or mannequin than anything alive—it was unnerving. Michael stood there in an old-fashioned black velvet frock coat and ruffled shirt and cravat, his arms casually crossed but his entire form at rigid attention in a posture that reminded Brett more of a lion considering a herd of grazing gazelle than anything humane. And for a moment, Brett was completely undecided about what to say. It had taken a combination of cajoling and outright threats before Michael agreed to see him, and now that Brett was here, facing the vampire, he was struck dumb.

Finally, Michael chose to speak. "You blokes. You stupid, suffering lot."

"What?" And Brett's voice came out much softer and squeakier than he had ever heard it in his entire adult life.

Michael smiled malignly. "You think you are superior to us because you run this old globe. You think you are so clever. So... immortal. But you could go extinct in a heartbeat. Plague. Meteor. It's happened before. And besides, despite the fact that you breed like locusts, how great are your lives in comparison to our own?" The vampire dropped his hands but made no move to jump Brett or do him harm. Not that Brett could do much about it if he did.

Brett swallowed and wiped at the sweat on the backs of his hands. He had listened to vampires and their kind talk before, many times, but never with this kind of superiority complex. He doubted even the Slayer, with his terrible reputation, felt this way about Brett's human race. "Your kind die too," he said. "I've seen it."

"Yes." Michael's eyes clouded over a moment, then snapped back to their present sparkling malice. "We all die. Yet it is the measure of how we live which determines our greatness. And Man is so very small..."

"I didn't come here to debate with you," Brett said, getting angry now.

Softly, Michael said, "Why did you come?"

For a moment Brett thought he heard something, something soft, like a gentle tinkling noise. Like someone tapping on glass. He was tempted to look behind him at the sliding glass doors hidden by heavy drapes, but he resisted the urge. He didn't want to look away from Michael, not for a moment. And anyway, there could be no one else here. If Michael had had company last night as Brett suspected—the whore, as Brett recalled—she was gone now.

Clearing his throat, Brett said, "I came to discuss the Slayer."

Michael narrowed his eyes to mere threads.

"I know him, you see," said Brett, lighting a cigarette to keep his hands steady. "I've talked to him—"

Michael charged forward. Brett realized he could do nothing, not even when Michael plucked the cigarette from his mouth and backhanded him across the cheek. Brett crumpled to the floor, his mouth on fire and full of coppery bitterness. Jesus. He never even had even a moment to react. The blow wasn't staggering, did not even spin his vision around, but it had been so fast and unexpected, Brett did not doubt, even a moment, that these things could kill you before you even knew you were dead.

Michael ground out the cigarette in the ashtray on the table between the two beds, and then he was back in front of Brett, all of it done in such a single fluid motion it almost seemed like Brett had dreamed the last few seconds.

"Don't smoke in here," Michael said coldly. "There are dangerous chemicals you know nothing about!"

"Fuck you."

"Would you like to? But I seriously doubt you could satisfy my needs."

Brett touched his mouth, wondering if it was as red as it felt. "I suppose you had your fill of your girlfriend last night."

"My...?" And then Michael laughed and Brett looked at him, past the groomed Old World British exterior, and realized the thing was inhuman, mad, and possibly going to kill him before he left this room. "My dear chap, I am a priest! I don't have girlfriends."

"But..."

"The redheaded whore? Would you like to meet her?" Michael asked.

No! thought Brett as an unreasonable fear bubbled and boiled within him. No no no no...!

Michael put his hands together. "I assure you she is as chaste as she was... well, as she may or may not have been before I ever touched her. We vampires are an odd lot, you see. We prefer common blood." He turned to the table where the ashtray had his dead cigarette in it and where the three big stainless steel canoptic jars sat.

"Common blood?" Brett mimicked.

"Hmm... yes. We tend to depend on our blood relations to satisfy our sexual appetites."

"You mean, you and... him..."

Michael tilted his head. The look of malice had been replaced with one of almost infinite sorrow. "My brother and I have been many things to each other over the long years. We—I—am over four hundred years old, you see. And we were together since the very beginning. There has not been a day in my life until recently that I have not wakened to see Dante's sweet face on the pillow beside me. Now, though... well..."

"You're fucking sick," said Brett.

The sorrow vanished on the smooth, angelic face. "Ah yes, I forgot your human conditioning," he said as he undid the latch on the nearest jar. The jar gave a feral hydraulic hiss on opening.



Brett watched the jar, vaguely aware that he ought to get up and run for his life. But as if he were some stupid victim in a horror film, he simply sat there, his back to the foot of the bed, watching Michael flip the top of the jar back. “Conditioning...?”

“Yes, conditioning. All those human laws and instincts to keep the gene renumbering from breaking down. Humans mustn’t mate with their siblings or their mothers or fathers. It produces an unclean bloodline, according to the ancients. Actually, the overcompatibility of the genetic codes causes a breakdown in the amino acids that make up the gene helix and the poor creature suffers and dies. Not so with us. Our genes are unique in that they can be spliced with virtually any organic matter in the world and still retain their form. That’s the primary property of what Dante and I used to jokingly call the ‘V Factor.’ Why is it a vampire or dhampir can regenerate wounds or lost parts of their bodies? Why do we cease to age at one point? Why can we not die of natural causes? These are the questions he and I and a choice few others have been searching for answers to for hundreds of years.”

Michael paused to reach into the massive jar and lift out a more conventional specimen jar. It was still enormous, but not unlike what Brett had once seen in his high school science lab, the ones where they kept frogs and sometimes larger animals in formaldehyde. This one, however, was not filled with any substance Brett recognized. The fluid in this jar was jet black, like ink. And anything in the jar was obscured.

“We used to believe the secret was in the blood,” Michael went on, admiring the enormous glass jar and the inky substance licking at the sides of it. “But you see—vampires have no blood of their own. At least, not the substance we accept as blood, which is why we must take it from a host or a victim. No, we had been pursuing the wrong avenue for centuries. And then your technology improved and we were able to delve much deeper into the question.” He looked up and smiled. “The secret is here.” He touched his temple with one long, untrimmed fingernail.

“Your head?”

“My brain, to be exactly. Our brains. The vampire brain secretes a hormone capable of complete regenerative abilities. The substance has a very large scientific name, but suffice to say we who study it simply call it Elixir. An amazing substance, it has no decay time. Nor does it dissipate in the body as hormones are supposed to do. In fact, it doesn’t appear to do anything but build on itself and create colony after colony of V Factor helixes. The older the vampire, the more infused with Elixir it becomes. The more powerful. The more indestructible. Rome has been fascinated by Elixir for decades and it has been my and my brother’s primary mission to disclose its true potential. If such wonders can be worked on a vampire body, what then on a human...?”

“You said Man was small.”

“He is,” Michael said. “And infinitely precious to us. Without Man, we the Vampire must die. Cause and effect. The balance of Nature.” And reaching into the jar with both hands, Michael slowly began to lift something heavy and squirming from the black depths of the jar. “This is Elixir,” Michael whispered, “And this is Man when he is exposed to it.”

Brett stared at the thing in Michael’s hands with an even mixture of fascination and overwhelming disgust. He knew what it was on an academic level, but seeing it, smelling it, being this close to it, made his mind want to shut down and deny its existence. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t. Something like this belonged in a bad science fiction movie, not in real life. Not here now. Not in the really real world.

The jet-black substance drained off the thing and yet defined the odd alien landscape of it, the intricately

whorled grey matter, the great, bloated pestilence of it because it had obviously been feeding off the Elixir—not drinking it, surely, because a brain could not, it had no mouth, but absorbing it through the pores. It had to be. It was too large. Or perhaps it was the tail—made up of a good two and a half feet of curling and uncurling raw ivory-white vertebrae that gave it that affect. Of being huge. Alive. Alive, yes. It was definitely alive. Brett could see that easily. The way it moved and tried to resist Michael's hold on it like a frightened animal. But how? Brett's mind screamed. *How the fuck could anything like that be alive?*

He must have said that last aloud. Either that, or his thought-scream had been so loud Michael the mad scientist had heard it. He said, "I told you. Elixir."

"Keep that fucking thing away from me!" Brett screamed, scrambling to his feet. But the bed was there and the backs of his knees hit the frame and he collapsed upon it, unable to do much more than stare at the living, pulsing horror in Michael's hands.

The creature's tail curled briefly around one of Michael's wrists, then let him go. "I assure you: it's harmless. What will Cherry do to you, Mr. Edelman? Bite you?" Michael snickered.

"Cherry," Brett whimpered. And then, "You're a fucking murderer!"

"Au contraire. Cherry is still very much alive. In fact, she will live forever."

"In a jar."

One of Michael's shoulders lifted in a little shrug. "There are worse places to be." Then he put the thing back into its jar. The moment he let it go it started to move in an abbreviated swim around the confines of its new home, its bony tail clinking against the glass of the jar, making that sound Brett had heard earlier, that horrible sound. Without another word, Michael lifted the jar and placed it back into its hermetic container, sealing it shut. "At least now her life will be worth something to someone. We will study her for years to come, to see how she grows and changes." *Hiss* ... and the cap was sealed. "Perhaps one day we will run our cities and computers like this. Perhaps this will be embraced as the new immortality. The new technology. Do you realize what this represents for your world, Mr. Edelman?"

"You're motherfucking insane." Yet he realized how wrong his words were the moment he uttered them. Things like this were not done by insane men. They were done by men who knew exactly what they were doing and how to do it. He sat up on the bed and looked at the door. He might still be able to make it, at least to open the door and cry out for help. Surely someone would hear him and come. A bellboy. The manager. *Someone*. He only needed to distract Michael long enough to make it out of this den of immortal horrors. "How... how long have you been at this?"

"Dante and myself? About twenty years. We have quite the menagerie in the Vaults in Rome, I assure you. We collect specimens and send them back to the Cardinal who handles the inventory. But I must admit our research began over a hundred years ago, and that not all of it was very successful. In the Nineteenth Century we were still living in Whitechapel and finding our way. And sometimes making quite the mess. Since then we've made a few improvements on the old method. Why, one day we"—a darkness passed across his face when he realized what he had just said—"I may even conclude this experiment and move onto others. I haven't decided yet."

He put one finger to his lips and seemed to ponder something deeply. "That was why we came here to New York in the first place. We wanted to look in on an old field experiment and see how it had fared. But then Dante suggested we collect specimens before we return to Rome and I, being myself,

could deny my brother nothing, as infuriatingly impetuous as he was, and agreed to it.” Michael looked up. “Unfortunately, the Slayer got in our way.”

Brett shook his head helplessly. “The more I learn about you and Dante the more I like that other guy.”

“The Slayer.” Michael’s face flatlined. He looked at the jars all in a row. The first one clinked again. The other two were silent. “He should be part of the menagerie. We should see how a dhampir’s brain differs from the human and vampire brains we have collected over the years. But somehow or other, I doubt that will ever happen.” He undid one of the other canisters and removed an empty jar full of the black fluid, setting it on the table. “It’s a very delicate operation, you see, requiring complete patience and self-control, and I very much doubt I should be able to control myself around him.”

Michael looked over at Brett.

Brett swallowed but his throat was like scorched earth. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Michael tilted his head. “The scalp is peeled away from the skull, then the back of the skull perforated by a bone drill. The spinal column is left intact, of course. The brain and the great vertebrae are removed as one. The complete operation takes less than an hour if you know what you are doing.”

“I told you,” Brett said, “I know him... the Slayer. We talked. You touch me, he’ll—”

“Do nothing,” Michael answered. “He and I have never been friends, but I know him well enough to know he would not associate with one such as yourself. He has better tastes than that. You planned on selling him out to me. But you see”—Michael smiled, a dazzling smile of heartlessly perfect teeth—“he already belongs to me. Like you do.”

Awash in a sudden sea of unbelievable, mind-numbing fear, Brett more or less threw himself off the bed, landed hard on the floor, hurting his shoulder, but still managing to use the momentum to spring back onto his feet. Then the room blurred all around him as he lunged for the door. One twist and he could scream for help...

The only trouble was, he had forgotten that Michael had locked the door and that it was one of those hotel locks which required a key to open it. Still he rattled the knob, oblivious to reason, hoping against hope, against the unbelievable odds themselves, that the door would magically spring open. He could see it happening. He could see himself escaping...

“Mr. Edelman.”

Letting go of the knob, Brett turned around and threw his back to the door.

Michael was standing in the same place Brett had left him, at the table where those terrifying silver canoptic jars sat with their menacing presences. But now he had an almost innocuous looking scalpel in his hands. Michael said, “Did you honestly believe you were walking out of here tonight?”

Brett opened his mouth and screamed for help, his wavering, terrified voice filling the room and making the glass apparatuses rattle. He screamed until the air went out of his lungs. Then he pounded against the locked door, pounded until his arms ached and his body sagged in exhaustion and fear.

And still Michael stood there, smiling his un-smile. “This room is specifically soundproofed, Mr. Edelman. My brother and I are smarter than that, believe me. And anyway, the people in this

building are Coven. This building belongs to Rome .”

Brett sank down with his back to the door. Suddenly the need to sob was overwhelming. And sob he did. “Leave me alone!” he cried. “Just leave me alone! I don’t want to die!”

“Mr. Edelman,” Michael said with slitted eyes and a soft, coaxing voice as he approached the crying man, “There is absolutely nothing further from my mind.”

## 25

She watched the Slayer whip the sword around, bringing it to within a hair’s breadth of the neck of the stuffed dummy hanging from the dojo ceiling. The blade virtually sang with power, as if alive in his hands, alive and throbbing with a heartbeat that seemed almost human. He froze momentarily as if he was listening to it.

Phoenix, standing there, dressed in one of his oversized shirts, felt a jolt of jealousy at the simply and perfect way he had with the sword. Jealous of his grace because she was graceless. Jealous of his beauty because she was not beautiful. But most of all, jealous of the way he controlled his sorrow. It was there inside of him. She could feel it, lodged like a little lead ball in his stomach, slowly killing him. And yet he lived past it. Why couldn’t she be like that? She couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat. She could barely read the books he had given her. She thought her trip to the cemetery would do something, shake something free, but it only made the sorrow worse. The sadness immortal. If only I could stop *feeling* , she thought in utter despair. If only I could stop seeing Lilly’s face. If only for an hour, a minute...

She clenched her fists over the scars in the palms of her hands that were no longer there. She was close to tears and she hated herself for that. But sniffing them back only brought the Slayer’s utterly acute attention around to her.

He stopped, lowered his sword, and watched her for some moments. Watched her as he had watched her so often in the club while she danced. Watched her like some placid forest animal. Watched her as if he were silently trying to communicate something to her. Something important. He was the same being she had known then, tall and beautiful and utterly deadly, like some exotic animal, a black and white tiger perhaps. Or a great snake. He was sweated and unkempt from a long hot morning of kata—the sweat was in his long blue-black plaited hair, on his eyelashes like gems—but still a wonder to see.

She wished she could be like him. No... she wished she were him.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

His voice had an odd affect on her. It was sharp and raspy and quiet, like a man who had cried too much in his life and was suffering for it. She stepped into the dojo and gave him back the book. It was Dickens. *Hard Times* . “I’m letting you down.”

“You’re not letting me down.”

“I went to see Lilly yesterday, but it just made it worse,” she said. “I want to be good. A warrior. But there’s so much inside—I can’t Control it. I feel like it’s tearing me apart. I want to hurt him so much. I want...”

He reached out and stroked her hair.

She didn’t want to trust him. She didn’t want to need him. But she did.

It wasn’t fair! She’d been on her own since she was twelve and no one had ever done shit for her. And now this... and she didn’t know what to do with it. She didn’t know what to say to him. She didn’t know how to show him how much this meant to her. The hard work and the sweat and the blood he gave her and the bruising he gave her too, because they were making her what she wanted—needed—to be. They were forging her. Like a sword. Like a warrior.

She didn’t understand why he cared so much. She didn’t understand why she did.

She leaned into him and buried her face against his shoulder so he would not have to see her tears and her loss of Control.

He held her and rocked her and said meaningless little beautiful things to her. She shook like someone wracked by a deadly fever, wracked and wanting and utterly destroyed. And then suddenly she was up in his arms and she clung to him and he was lowering her gently to the mat beneath them. She lay there, blinking up at him, mystified by his actions. But not afraid. She trusted him. She did. He knelt over her, only watching her with his great breathless silence, his eyes tracing the pathway of her tears as if he meant to take them from her.

“I haven’t cried in years,” he said with some regret.

“I’ll cry for you,” she said. It seemed all she was good at doing these days. Where was the girl who could fight anyone? The girl able to claw at attackers, to spit at the feet of punks? Where was Irena who protected and provided for Lilly? Irena was dead. As dead as Lilly. They were buried together.

The never-ending well of grief threatened to overwhelm her again. She turned aside her head so as to keep him from seeing.

He leaned down and kissed the corner of her eye and drank the tears off her face. His touch was like a brush of velvet. His mouth and his hands where they fell upon her soothed her like an elixir. A balm. Not just her bruised and aching body, but her soul as well. As if he were singing a lullaby to her in some strange old language she had never heard before yet knew instinctively. Telling her it was all right. That she was safe and valuable to him. She sighed and turned her head and blinked up at him. She felt the gift of his kiss like the brush of moth wings on her mouth, not sexual, not even sensual, but loving. Cherishing.

Phoenix smiled through her tears. “What did you do? You didn’t take—?”

“Your pain? I won’t do that. You need your pain. One day you’ll see that.”

He dropped kisses on her face, and with each one an insurmountable weight seemed to lift. The pain and anger were still there—how could she ever forget how she had let Lilly die?—but now the mindless rage

that made her want to tear down the walls around her had gone, leaving in its wake only a lurid and conniving sorrow, like a hole through her heart. It still hurt. It hurt so bad. But now she realized she would one day be able to live with it. She would survive it.

She would survive her sadness like he survived his.

He sat back on his heels.

But the distance between them brought the crushing weight of misery back so quickly that Phoenix felt she would never move again. She would simply lie here for all eternity while the pain ate her alive. "Please," she said. She hated herself. She covered her face. "I can't bear this anymore."

He considered that. Something passed across his face. A decision.

He crouched over her again, pulled loose his flood of inky hair, this time covering her with his body and hair and strength. She felt a faint stirring of fear and licked her lips nervously, but his bare skin touched hers and again alighted the odd feeling of weightlessness in her. His hair fell in loops across her cheeks and throat and she turned her face to feel its soft scented weight drift across her mouth. "Lie still," he whispered wetly into her ear. She did. He kissed her again, a deeper, tongue-rasping kiss, and she tasted blood from where his sharp eyeteeth pricked her lower lip. He narrowed his eyes. They seemed darker somehow, more feral. Primitive.

Her heart tripped. Something inside told her what that meant.

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good."

He closed his eyes. "But you must be certain. I can't... undo this once it's done. I'll be a part of you forever. Even after I'm gone you will carry my blood with you even as I carry the blood of my master within me."

She touched his hair, kissed his mouth reverently. There was sex and sensuality in the kiss, but it was more than that. It was like a communion of sorts. He kissed back, slowly, as if savoring her. "My Master..." The words did not seem silly and did not embarrass her to say them.

He kissed her once more, but now the touch of his mouth was more aggressive and taking. It took all of her Control to keep from pushing him back. She'd never liked a male's touch before. Too many times in JV halls, and sometimes in foster homes, some man had stood too close to her and tried taking her against her will. She had never been with a man before. They were too frightening, demanded too much of you, like vampires trying to steal your soul so they could wound it and make it bleed. They made you feel small and helpless and afraid. She whimpered, but to her surprise, he didn't yank at her clothing or pinch or bruise her flesh like the men she had known before. The men who had wanted her and tried to hurt her. He did not hit her when she panicked and put her hands to his chest and pushed him away. He was not like them, she reminded herself. Not a man. He was one of her own. He sat back and waited. She relaxed and opened herself to him again, welcoming him, and tried to enjoy the comforting warmth his touch brought to the surface of her skin. She touched his great black mane of hair, then held his head against the side of her throat and felt the press of his kiss there. His teeth.

He hesitated and she tipped her head back, inviting him to take.

“I’ll harm you there,” he said and slowly began to unbutton her shirt. She should have panicked, but instead she only lay still, watching him attend to her. He took such care, touching her with such reverence. The air was cool against her bare skin, his touch cooler still. He ran the back of one finger down her throat, from the scar she had there to the valley between her breasts, then circled the nipple of her left breast, bringing a flush of color to all her white skin. He kissed her there and she felt his rough tongue dampen the tip, then his teeth close around it as he suckled her.

He tried to be gentle, but it still hurt as he said it would. The press of his teeth against her flesh brought a shiver of fright to her skin. She arched involuntarily, and only the force of his hands kept her back to the floor. The pain was like a knife in her heart, a knife to which her entire body responded. And then it was done and the sweat was on her skin from the pain and he was there, sponging blood from the wound with his tongue and she wondered if this was what it had been like on the night Bellerophone had taken her, her back to the rough stone wall of a stinking and lonely dead end space as he killed her, and wished she could remember it all more clearly. No, she thought as she felt the smallest bit of herself leak out through the tiny wounds he had made, the wounds he nursed at, it could not have been like this. Not for her. Not for Lilly. Lilly. Her Lilly...

Her body screamed with the rage. For herself. For the dead who came back and for those who did not. She felt her whole body contract with the rage. She heard it echo inside her head and out. She heard her voice, a hoarse roar that turned her throat to sand and made her vision blur and run like rain. He was there again, her murderer, his bulk holding her down as he fed from her in the back of that reeking back alley, and she pounded helplessly against him with her fists, pounded and screamed and clawed like a cat, pouring her rage into him, making him eat that too along with her blood and her soul. Making him suffer even as she suffered...

“Phoenix.”

Her vision ran clear and she saw him above her, her master, the Slayer, and stopped striking his back with her fists. His eyes were halved and bleeding over with tears. Red tears. Her pain and he was shedding it for her. She saw with wonder that a single lock of his black hair had turned white from root to tip, white like a witch’s streak.

He bowed his head and wept, shivering, each tear wrung from his body like a labor, those tears falling upon her skin like rain. Her pain, her blood. And her skin absorbed it all. But now the rage was silent. She felt exhausted, inside and out, drained to the dregs of her soul. She touched the mark on her breast, his mark, smaller than the one Bellerophone had tattooed across her throat yet somehow more powerful than his had been, but there was little pain there now. It was all used up.

The Master sniffed and wiped the blood off of his face.

She touched his white lock. He was just beautiful. Her Master.

And she loved him. Loved him as she had loved Lilly. But it was a different love.

Thank you, she mouthed.

He said nothing. He carried her upstairs and put her to bed because she was quite incapable of walking on her own. She was so tired. So weak and used up. Cold. He removed his clothing and hers and lay down beside her, giving her his spare warmth, entangling her in his arms, his webwork of long hair, his

words. He let her drink him as well, and showed her how to do it safely. She lapped at his skin, at the little wound she had made over his heart, cleaving to its warmth and strength.

His words sang to her. Much was in English, but oftentimes he used other languages. Languages she could not know, yet did. Their bond grew so that words were no longer needed. He told her things, about survival, about war, about history, and he spoke these things to her thoughts. He made her understand with the pictures in his mind. She fell asleep sometime in the early morning, her face pillowed on his hair and her mind full of the visions of the night and what it meant to someone like her born to her blood.

## 26

Phoenix awoke alone, which frightened her some. It must be late evening, she thought. The light leaking past the heavy drapes was a bleeding crimson.

But her Master was gone.

She pushed herself up, sliding against the black satin sheets. His side of the bed was still warm, so he must have just recently risen.

Then she heard the voices talking.

Getting out of bed, she slipped on his robe and went downstairs and followed the murmur of the voices out to the garden.

Master was there, dressed in a long black kimono, the sword at his side. He was talking to two men sitting at the top of the ten-foot-tall wall that surrounded the garden. Both men crouched atop the wall, seemingly more like animals than true men.

As Phoenix stepped into the garden, she understood why.

They were not human. She felt it.

Even the rabbits felt it, scrambling in their cages like terrified beings in a hailstorm.

The one, a vampire, was lithe and small and blonde, like a yellow fox. The other was an oddity. He was not a vampire, nor even a dhampir, but he clearly was not human, either. He was much larger and imposing yet no less graceful. This one was like a tiger. The little vampire turned his hungry attention immediately upon Phoenix. Yet it was the big one who fascinated her. He was so familiar, yet she did not recognize him at all.

“Is this your little whelp, Slayer?” the blonde asked. He had a thick British accent, like an actor in an old movie.



Master moved to block her from his view. “This doesn’t concern her, Michael.”

The big man grinned. “Hello, sweetness,” he said.

Phoenix collapsed to her knees, almost vomiting, such was the force of his voice. That voice...

Bellerophone. But it could not be him...

Alek looked from her to the big creature-man. “Who’s your friend, Michael?”

Michael indicated his associate. “This is Chimera. I’m surprised you two have not yet met. Chimera is a... field experiment of mine on this side of the pond.”

“Chimera,” Master said, standing over Phoenix so as to protect her. “What is he? One of those ghouls you and Carfax enjoyed creating so much?”

Chimera grinned, showing the mouthful of enormous catlike teeth he had used to take both her and Lilly’s life away with. The teeth, his stink—heavy cologne to hide the sweet odor of constant decay—they were both familiar. But this wasn’t the man from the street. This wasn’t even the man from the club. Again he had changed. How did he change?

But Master sensed her confusion, because he said to Michael, “You taught it Glamour.”

“A necessary evil, you realize,” Michael said. “You don’t really want to know what Chimera looks like under all that illusion. Trust me. He’s a fairly successful project overall, but his regenerative abilities aren’t quite as good as our own. And if I can just train him away from”—he slapped at Chimera’s hand when it went to his mouth and he started to gnaw on it—“certain habits, his model will be all the rage.”

Chimera grunted, his mouth full of his own blood.

Master’s voice was dead. “Why did you hurt Phoenix?” he demanded to know of the creature.

Chimera shrugged. “I was hungry. I thought she was human. Her little friend was, anyway...” As he spoke he began to change, subtly, like an odd optical illusion coming into focus. He grew smaller, blonde. Delicate. His face sweetened and his large corded hands grew tiny and white like little gloves.

Glamour, Phoenix thought. Master had taught her about Glamour. Glamour was an illusion. A dream. But looking on Lilly now, she never realized how unfair a dream could truly be. She never realized monsters lived under the dream.

The rage acted on it soon. Phoenix bolted forward as it tore loose inside of her like a hunting animal. The creature, the beast, Chimera... it had to die. She had to destroy it—

Master knocked her legs out from under her and she felt the pavement strike her on the cheek. “Control,” he said.

She picked herself up and slunk backward so she was hiding behind his legs, afraid, hating Chimera, hating herself...

Control.

“I like her,” said Chimera in Lilly’s little-girl voice. He licked his lips. “I want her, Michael.”

“So do I,” Michael agreed magnanimously. He eyed Master. “She’s a pretty little whelp. Can I have her? I will take her in exchange for Dante. Then we’ll be even. What do you say, old son?”

“Go to hell,” Master whispered.

Michael sighed and looked theatrically disappointed. “Then I guess it’s back to the old plan.”

“Stop shitting around. You want us to meet,” Master said. “Where?”

“The old Clairborne Institute. Midnight. Do you know where it is?”

“I’ll find it.”

There was a long breathy pause. Then Michael said: “I told you I would hunt you down and tear your heart out. Do you believe me?”

Then they were gone, both of them, creature and creator like predatory animals over the stone wall.

## 27

Alek returned to the bedroom and changed into his street clothes. He reached for his leather greatcoat and shrugged into it, watching Phoenix watch him from the doorway. “Get dressed,” he said, freeing his hair from the collar. “We have work to do.”

“I’m going with you?” She sounded surprised.

He nodded “I don’t suppose I could keep you from coming anyway, so it would be best if I at least know where you are.” He knotted his long mane of hair into a ponytail while he watched her expression. The pain was there in her face, the war lust, but there was fear there too. Terrible, childlike fear. It was one thing to plan for revenge, to train for it, to want it with all your being. Quite another to actually carry it out. Now that Phoenix was faced with its opportunity, she looked reluctant.

She sank down on the bed. “I can’t fight Chimera.”

“I taught you to fight.”

“I can’t fight him!” She buried her face in her hands. “I’m afraid.”

He went to her and knelt down. “Good,” he said.

She lowered her hands. “What?”

He ran his hands over her hair. “You learned to be afraid.”

“Another lesson?”

“Another lesson.”

He got up and went to the small jewelry case on the table beneath the large oval mirror. In it he kept several small precious items—letters bound with ribbon, sketches, the marbles he had played with as a child, an aging deck of Tarot cards, all the things he felt were powerful in their way. Beneath it all he found a simple gold ring. He turned it in his hands and watched the crimson light of evening playing over it. He looked up and Debra was there in the glass, nodding. He returned to where Phoenix was sitting patiently at the foot of his bed and knelt down and put it on her hand. She was so thin, he wound up putting it on her thumb.

“Were you married?” she asked, looking at the ring.

“It belonged to someone special to me,” he said. “She’ll look after you if you wear it.”

Phoenix bowed her head. “I can’t do this.”

“Let me do it for you.”

Phoenix nodded. “Are you afraid?”

He kissed her gently. “All the time.”

## 28

The Clairborne Institute. It was located on the South Side, almost on the river. Once a grande dame Victorian sanitarium, it just looked bleak and derelict now, fit only for river rats and crackheads. An old rambling house more shell than substance, like a giant carved-out cockroach. Alek knew the analogy was preposterous, but that’s what it made him think of. The windows were broken or boarded up, appendages of wood sticking out at random angles, the stone of the house shiny-damp with black moss, the wood warped and weak, and anything that was worth anything had been hocked or stolen a long time ago. Even parts of the wrought iron fence had been pulled from the ground and taken to some other filthy place in the city for only God knew what reason.

At the gate of the arcade, he stopped. It was open, hanging by one hinge, yet he could not pass. He stopped and took a deep breath, looking around. The fear of the place was like a stink. It made him want to see everywhere at once, as if at any moment he might be taken from behind. A vampire’s dwelling. He checked his true feelings—the physical ones that told him if a vampire was near—but found those still. So it was Michael’s protective barrier then. No different than what Michael himself had probably felt an hour ago sitting atop the stone wall of Alek’s dwelling, wanting to enter... but too afraid.

Something cracked behind him and he turned sharply, his sword fully extended.

Wind. Dry leaves.

Alek let out his breath, searching the night for enemies. Nothing. Again he checked his feelings. Nothing... yet. Frustrated by the manipulation, he made himself push through the squealing gate and into the arcade where once the sick had sat at tall windows—now broken—and gazed out on the world that no longer wanted their kind. Little was left of it. The tiled floors were broken and weedy, the walls blackened with age, glass and boards and the splinters of furniture scattered throughout. Beside one long window sat a lone wicker wheelchair, unoccupied. It gave Alek a chill to see.

But not nearly as much as the building itself. Yes, this was most definitely Michael's haunt. And he had been occupying it for some time for the fear to be so strong in it. The place even stank of him—hospital oils and ammonia and old blood.

Alek walked soundlessly over the cracked tiles, keeping to the shadows where he could, though he knew it would do him little good against an enemy like Michael. No wonder he had chosen this place. It was more than a derelict building to house their confrontation; it was his stomping ground full of a smell, a cold and wicked smell, he knew would put Alek off his game plan. Michael did nothing without purpose.

Alek stopped, cocking his head to listen to the silence that seemed to close in around him like the darkness and the dank and putrid dungeon-odor of the place. Get out of here, he thought. Get out get out get out...

He closed his eyes, forcing the terror down his emotional reserve-hole.

*Click.*

He opened his eyes and focused on the darkness ahead where the sound had come from.

*Clack.*

Tile breaking underfoot?

He started to move forward, then stopped when the feeling he hated most in the world trickled down his back. Vampires. He turned, half expecting Michael to be there, behind him, pouncing, but the arcade was empty but for the checkerboard of shadows and streetlights shining in painfully thin banners through the tall windows. He shivered and reassured his hold on the sword.

*Clack clack clack...*

His ears pricked. Now he heard it quite clearly, but instead of footfalls, he was hearing... the squeal of wheels? He listened. Yes.

Something emerged briefly into the light, then was lost again as it rolled toward him, weaving its way across the arcade.

Alek backed up, his heart suddenly in his throat.

Something—a huddled figure in the wicker wheelchair—was moving toward him across the vast expanse of the chessboard floor, cracking tiles under the creaking wheels of its wheelchair. He saw it

now. And at first he was certain it must be Michael playing some perverse game. Then he recognized the white, emaciated face of the being heading toward him, the hollow, long-dead look, and found he had no will to move.

The figure, an old man dressed in a double-breasted suit coat and cravat, stopped wheeling himself forward and looked up. His face was so skullish it looked feral even in its weariness. "You," said Carfax. "Welcome to hell, whelp."

Alek was speechless.

"Surprised to see me, are you? You bloody well should be!"

"You're... dead," Alek said.

Carfax grinned. His eyes still held their cool burn. "The dead are immortal. Haven't you learned anything at all? All those books, and you don't know even that!"

Alek stumbled back, almost knocking into a bench that had been overturned in the middle of the arcade. He caught himself against it and steadied himself as best he could. No... this was some kind of nightmare. Some kind of horrible walking nightmare.

"Slayer," said Carfax, his skull-mouth forming the word like the worst possible profanity. "Look what they did to me, look!" Reaching up, Carfax grabbed a fistful of his dusty grey-blond hair and peeled it away. But instead of merely hair or scalp coming off, the entire top of his skull was torn away, revealing an empty, brainless cavity.

Alek closed his eyes and swayed as the terror washed over him, the weight of it almost driving him to his knees. Only the bench kept him upright. No... this was not real... *thiswas not real ... thisWAS NOT REAL...*

The fear was like a dagger in his throat. He swallowed it as painful as it was and opened his eyes.

The wheelchair sat there, empty. No Carfax.

No. Of course not. Carfax had been dead for over thirty years.

It was Michael. It was the Chimera.

"Michael," Alek whispered, knowing the vampire would hear him. In this place even the whispers echoed. "Is this how it's going to be? You can't even face me without your little friend playing games?" He kicked the wheelchair so it slammed into the far wall and shattered.

He waited.

Nothing.

Alek turned full circle. "Are you so afraid of me? Michael?" he said, his eyes tracing the flight of the shadows in the room, the flickering lights from outside.

"Of course I am," came Michael's voice, echoing everywhere and nowhere from around the room. Alek tried to track the sound, but it was impossible to pinpoint its exact location. "I can't fight you, Slayer."

“Then you should not have challenged me,” Alek answered.

Nothing.

Alek said, “You and me, Michael. Tell Chimera to crawl back into his little hole in the ground.”

Alek’s feeling flared.

A moment later, Michael dropped down from some unseen crevice in the ceiling, graceful, like a cat. Not even Michael’s boots stirred the dust at his feet. He stood up straight. He was dressed like someone prepared to attend the theatre or an expensive party aboard a yacht. Always thenancy boy of his once fearsome duo, he wore a pressed black suit and sandsilk shirt with an opera scarf swirled casually about his neck. Dante would have been dressed just the opposite, in the lowliest, most bizarre bondage-inspired street gear he could find and still be legal in. It was hard to believe the two of them were even related. Or had been. “Hello, old son,” he said, puffing on a long, thin cigarette.

Another feeling. Alek turned to face the way he had come.

Another Michael, dressed similarly, stepped out of the shadows, smoking. “Hello, old son,” said the second Michael. He smiled cheekily.

Alek looked back and forth between them, unable to determine or even feel which one was the vampire and which Chimera, the ghoul. They both felt alike to him.

“What a dilemma,” said the first Michael. He smiled.

Alek slid into a defensive stance. He watched them both.

“He’s no idea which is which, does he?” the second Michael asked the first.

“None,” agreed the first Michael. He smiled.

Alek said, “Would it surprise you to learn I don’t care? You’re both walking dead.” He eyed them both. “As dead as Dante.”

The second Michael lost his smile.

Alek nodded knowingly. “You and me.”

Michael stepped backward and raised his hand in summoning. “I don’t have time for this. Chimera.”

Chimera threw himself at Alek.

Alek saw it out of the corner of his eyes and moved fractionally to avoid Chimera’s assault. Not far enough. Chimera, his human strength redoubled by the gallons of vampire blood he had drunk over the years of his life, slammed into Alek’s shoulder, driving him to the floor of the arcade on his hip in a crackle of shattering tile. Cold pain shot down his Alek’s leg, fueling his fear, heating it into something more familiar, something that tasted like war in his mouth. Chimera snarled and snapped at Alek. Alek twisted sideways to protect his throat from Chimera’s biting jaws and rammed the hilt of his sword into his foe’s face.

The crack resounded through the arcade.

Chimera reeled backward, roaring in his rage and pain and blood. Then, recovering remarkably fast, the blood still on his face, he launched a second assault, clawing at Alek's throat like a wild animal.

The thing was like a machine, inhuman. Alek scrambled up onto one knee, turned his sword, and felt the blade sink deep into Chimera's belly as he fell upon it, impaling himself. "Fuck," he snarled. "How does it feel to be helpless? A fish on a hook?"

Chimera convulsed on the blade, flecking Alek with blood and spit, his voice a plaintive wail down the empty halls of the Institute, echoing perhaps the thousands of screams that had reverberated here over the last century. But surely none quite like this.

Alek smirked and withdrew his sword from the sucking cavity of Chimera's body. He expected the ghoul to go down. But instead he just swayed there, the hole in his gut already mending itself. So he punched Chimera in the face.

The force of the blow hurtled Chimera into the overturned bench. Chimera's body shattered the wood into splinters. Alek climbed to his feet and approached the creature. Picking him up by the lapels, Alek threw the creature against the guard on one of the broken windows. Chimera's body rattled the iron bars like the ringing of bells and he splattered the floor in dime-sized dots of purplish blood before slumping down into a bloody heap under the window.

Alek stared at the thing where it lay, its Glamour waning. It was a ghoul. Which meant, like himself, it was a weird commingling of human and vampire blood. But unlike himself, it had once been human through and through. It had started out as human. But over the years, the unnatural infusion of vampire blood had rotted its body and its mind. Now it was little better than the monster created by Carfax all those years earlier. As the Glamour faded, he saw the thing for what it was—a living skeleton with ropes of flayed, decaying flesh clinging to its bones and a face like a corpse and the madness of its own unending bloodlust in its eyes. A pathetic creature. A victim like all the rest. Alek supposed he should feel a measure of pity for it. Instead, he sank the toe of his boot into the wound in its stomach, making the thing curl up into a ball on the floor.

"Get up," Alek growled.

Chimera groaned and uncurled, then grabbed Alek's ankle, its broken teeth closing over the flesh and bone.

Alek kned it in the groin, then swung his sword and pinned the creature against the floor with the point of the blade. "You fuck." He pulled the sword out of its lower back and whipped around and kicked Chimera in the head, snapping the thing's head around and slamming him into the wall. Chimera's skull cracked against the tiled wall and a new fountain of blood jettied out of its mouth and nose.

Alek paced back and forth. "Get up. I'm waiting."

Chimera reached for the window, using the bars as leverage to get it to its feet. And there it stood, weaving uncertainly, one hand over the two dripping wounds in its stomach, one hand over its right eye where its skull had been split against the wall. Its one-eyed gaze roved all over Alek, feral and hateful, but seemingly imbued with the knowledge that it had lost its advantage and quite possibly its life. As Alek watched, its image seemed to splinter uncertainly, then went from its true ghoul form to its Michael-form.

“Still trying, are you?” Alek asked, still pacing.

Chimera’s image blurred.

“Why did you hurt Phoenix and Lilly?” Alek asked.

Chimera grimaced. “I was hungry.” Its image reshaped itself into a close proximity of Phoenix, bloodied and torn. Its eyes narrowed tearfully. “Master...”

Alek punched it into the wall.

Chimera bounced once, twice. Its image blurred, returned to that of Michael. It spat blood and teeth onto the broken floor of the Institute.

“Try again,” Alek said.

“Michael...” it whined. Weaving a moment more, Chimera dropped to the floor again, its head knocking against the wall as it slumped bonelessly at Alek’s feet.

Alek slammed his foot into Chimera’s solar plexus, holding it against the wall. “Michael what? Do you really think your creator is going to save you?”

Chimera blurred, became Debra. “Michael!” Chimera screamed. “Save me! Michaaaaael!”

Michael did not answer.

Alek didn’t think he would. Alek kicked Chimera in the mouth so it spat out more blood and teeth and began to wheeze asthmatically.

Alek started to pace again. “You hurt them. You raped them. I felt it.”

Chimera blurred, became himself. Alek had no idea what that was supposed to accomplish. He didn’t love himself that much. He swung his blade around so it came to a halt just under Chimera’s chin, a hair’s breadth from the skin of its throat.

“You hurt *me*,” Alek said.

Chimera swallowed, its throat working against the blade. With its barely-focused brown eyes clotted with blood and its clumped black hair and trembling hands it sought Alek through the haze of its pain. “No more...” it whispered as if it were grating bones through the blood on its mouth. “Please... no more...”

Alek grabbed Chimera by the throat, holding it against the wall. Chimera’s eyes rounded in fear as Alek raised the sword. Using the butt end of it, Alek bashed the hard ivory against Chimera’s mouth, the mouth that had bit and drunk from Phoenix. The mouth that had ended the life of an innocent little girl. Bone cracked and broke like porcelain. Like tile. Chimera gasped through the bloody syrup of its mouth, its rabid eyes flickering. “End... this pain,” he said.

“Maybe. Why did you hurt them?” Alek said, raising the sword again.



Chimera shook all over from the pain and the fear. It said, through the mush its mouth had become. "Michael needed... suspect in Ladykiller murders."

"And you—or rather, Mr. Bellerophone—was the suspect. Someone the cops could chase. Someone who doesn't exist."

Chimera nodded.

Alek bashed Chimera's head against the wall, leaving a new crimson splatter against the white-tiled wall. "*You're protecting Michael after what he did to you? Why?*"

Chimera's eyes fluttered closed. "Kill me? Please..."

"He can't help himself," came a voice from behind him. "And I needed him."

Alek turned around.

Michael put his hands together, prayerful. Looking past Alek at his ally lying unconscious against the tiles like a big broken doll, he said, "Chimera was the experiment Dante and I came here to study. Unfortunately, Dante wanted to collect specimens whilst here and I let him. My first mistake. We stayed here too long, and after the police started to close in on the Ladykiller, I knew I had to protect my brother from discovery, so I sent Chimera to Jean Paul's club to prey on one of his girls. It's a high-end club and gets rather a lot of attention. The police would be chasing down this Mr. Bellerophone for a long time whilst I managed to abscond with my brother. I didn't want to endanger Chimera that way, but it was much better than risking my brother's life."

"Still protecting Dante," Alek said.

Michael's eyes darkened. "It was supposed to be a perfect plan, as always. But then you had to interfere, didn't you?" Again Michael looked at Chimera. "Are you going to kill him?"

"No."

Michael looked surprised. "I thought you killed all your enemies."

"This enemy belongs to someone else."

"Ah. The little whelp."

Alek stalked forward.

Michael backed up. "Right then. I told you I can't fight you."

Alek swung his sword up under his arm. "You'd better learn."

"Don't you want to know why this all happened? Don't you want to know what it all means?"

Alek kicked Michael in the head.

The vampire flew backward onto the tiled floor, then skidded to a halt on his back some ten feet away. He sat up uncertainly. "I dare say, that wasn't very sporting."

“Neither is cutting up prostitutes for your ungodly experiments.”

“It’s for a good cause, I assure you... a noble one...!”

Alek stepped on the vampire’s chest, pinning him to the floor on his back. “Really.” He pointed his sword at Michael’s head. “Impress me.”

“It’s the Elixir,” said Michael. “Everything we did was for that! Everything we did was to preserve those ungrateful mortals you protect!”

Alek increased the pressure on Michael’s chest. So it was this Elixir thing again. “What is the Elixir? Some kind of drug...?”

“More.” Michael’s eyes gleamed. “Immortality. Immortality for the human race. The ghouls are useless, unstable. But we’ve found a way to make the humans truly immortal. No more madness. No more flesh-eaters.”

A sharp jab made Alek wince and jump away from Michael.

Michael held up a syringe. “Demerol. Getting sloppy, old son.”

Demerol. Alek narrowed his eyes.

Without getting up, Michael idly turned the empty syringe in his hands. His eyes smiled. No... his entire *being* smiled. “Do you know what the amazing thing about Demerol is? It is an old lumbering dinosaur, basically inadequate to stop pain in humans. And highly toxic, I should add. Yet... do you know what it does to non-humans?”

Alek took another step back and felt the floor give away. He went down on one knee.

“It does that.”

He groaned as a sudden headache hammered his skull into bits. He felt sick to his stomach. Sick to death. The sword felt so heavy in his rubberlike hands it just slipped right through his fingers and dropped to the floor.

“Relax. It’s the drug taking effect.” Michael’s voice echoed, wavering between a howl and a whisper. “We’re cold-blooded creatures, you and I. But the toxicity in Demerol raises our temperatures almost immediately. Basically, you’re running a fever.”

Alek shook his head to clear his hearing. The action intensified the pain a dozen fold and took the floor out from under his other foot. He half-closed his blurring eyes and tried to shove off the pain and the sickness. He was cold. He was in trouble. He needed his sword. His hand found the hilt of the katana, but he found to his utter dismay that he didn’t have the strength to pick it up. His big unfeeling fingers couldn’t grasp the hilt at all.

Michael strolled over and picked it up for him, making it seem very easy.

Alek reached for it, but the pain was too great and in the end he gave it up and concentrated on not shivering to death on the spot.

“You don’t need this anymore,” Michael said.

“Mine.”

“Really? Then take it.” Michael held it out for him.

Alek tried to swipe the sword but wound up falling on his face instead and cutting his cheek on the broken tile of the floor. He pushed against the floor but the crushing headache together with the cold kept him on his knees. Sweat ran in rivulets off his nose and plinked to the floor under his chin. He watched the commingling of blood and sweat, mesmerized by the spreading pool. He touched it with his hand and it was hot to his touch.

But he was freezing to death.

“Now you belong to me,” Michael said.

Then he hit Alek across the back with his own sword and darkness took him.

## 29

He was dreaming. And even in his dream he was surprised, because it was such a human dream, so wonderfully normal. It was daytime and he was sitting out in the garden, the sun shining down on his hair as he read a Baron Blood novel. How silly, he thought, turning the pages.

The self-appointed king of all vampires had just gorged himself on a young girl’s blood and had thoroughly enjoyed himself. Blood oozed down the corners of his mouth as his face took on the mask of humanity. Then he changed into a giant vampire bat and flew off into the night to seek new disciples. How silly, Alek thought again. Yet there was something horribly unsettling about the whole thing. As if he had read this book before. He shifted uncomfortably and blinked against the bright daylight.

As his memory returned, so did the power of the sun. The once-comfortable warmth began to bake his skin and he wondered why he had ever come outside like this with no protection. Because he thought he could win? Because he thought he was human? He ran for the shadows as his skin began to blister in the harshness of the light. But he fell, pinned on his back by the sun, the relentless sun. And as he writhed in its brilliance he found a man was talking to him in a low voice, seductive and sweet and corrupted.

It’s Baron Blood, he thought. And if I can just wake up it will all be over.

But the whispering voice continued to drone on and he realized he *was* awake. And the man talking wasn’t part of the dream at all. The man was real. And he could not move. He was bound by ankles and wrists to a flat cold platform he could just feel through the layers of his street clothes. The room around him was dark save for one bright focal point of light high overhead. Not the sun, but a light that scorched him nonetheless.

He struggled instinctively against the bounds, his wrists twisting and turning in the metal cuffs, but he simply could not break free. He was too weak against the bonds that held him. He was helpless against them. He sought his sword but he sensed it was somewhere beyond these walls—and anyway, it was a useless trick when he had no hands to wield it with. He had been captured and the pain from the metal handcuffs was as real as the fear starting to seep into his body and mind.

“Where am I?” Alek whispered, hoarse.

The man standing over him stopped talking to himself. He moved to bend over Alek, but because of the blinding light, Alek could not see his face. All he could see was a tall, thin silhouette “You’re awake,” Michael said. He sounded pleased. “Good. Good!”

“Where...?”

“You’re in the operating theatre of the institute.”

The institute. Slowly the battle came back to him. The Chimera. Michael...

“Yes. You remember.”

Michael. Michael and his games. Michael and himself alone. Michael trying to make him afraid. “You don’t frighten me,” Alek said, trying to keep his mind under control. But when he realized this was all real and not some Glamour-induced nightmare created by Chimera, the fear was there, hard within him. It was real and the fear made his voice break. “Let me go.”

But the only answer was the clink of metal. The sound of tools being laid out on the gurney beside him. Then Michael appeared, grinning, as he laid out yet another tool. Alek recognized the glints of steel there—forceps, a bone cutter, scalpels of various sizes and shapes, scissors, razors—every instrument as sharp as steel and ready to cut a body apart.

He shuddered at the sight.

Michael noticed. “Afraid of sharp instruments? You? I’m surprised.” Then he moved back and flipped a switch so that a moody circumference of small lights came on around the inside of the theatre dome, illuminating the room and reflecting off the glass panels high up in the walls where once studying doctors had watched surgeries literally unfold. And as the room became lit, Alek realized they weren’t quite as alone as he had assumed.

A second operating table sat just beside the one he was bound to. But this one had a body under a sheet, amorphous but clearly human. Alek turned his head to see it better. “So... this is where you do it,” he said.

“The experiments? Yes, this is where Dante and I did all our experiments. Would you like to see the latest? I think you should. It was very successful—though, sadly, I was forced to do it alone.”

He moved to the second operating table and unsheeted the body.

It had once been human, but so much of it had been cut and smashed apart, it was difficult to tell who it had once been, or which gender. The body, what remained of it, lay naked on its stomach on the operating table, the skull cut open and the brain and spinal column carved out, leaving only a ragged,

shell-like carcass that looked more like a smashed insect than anything that had ever moved around and once been alive. Once been human. Alek felt his gorge rise despite himself. He closed his eyes. "Who was it?"

"I forget his name. That little man who was giving you such trouble of late."

Brett Edelman.

Alek hissed through his teeth. Now that the dead body had a face and a name, he felt an overwhelming desire to tear Michael limb from limb. He looked at the ruined body, the ruined human, then at the shackles holding him to the table like the next in a long assembly line of death. Brett Edelman had been a fool and had played far out of his league, but he had not deserved this. No one did. Again Alek strained against the binds. Useless.

"Titanium alloy," Michael informed him as he chose one of the larger scalpels from the collection. "Even at full strength with your belly full of blood you could not break free. Please stop trying."

Michael lowered the scalpel and Alek felt his entire body go as rigid as a corpse as the vampire began cutting away his shirt, the leather separating like a piece of soft bread under Michael's flashing instrument. Michael said, as he worked, "While you were out, I was sorely tempted to add you to my collection, except... well, you're a special case, aren't you? I made a promise to you about your heart. About what I would do to you if you ever hurt Dante. I can't very well take that back, now, can I?" He looked up. His eyes were dead. "That wouldn't be sporting."

"You're insane," Alek said.

The horror was still there, but now the volume of it had gone from a scream to a low whisper inside of him. Fear. It was always Michael's currency. Because Michael could not fight without it any more than Chimera could fight without his many-changing disguises. "What do you want me to do, Michael?" Alek asked. His voice was soft and strong and remarkably steady despite his surging panic. "Beg you to stop? Bring Dante back? Die of fright for you?"

Michael ran his hand over the muscles of Alek's exposed chest. The muscles clenched of their own volition. Michael lowered his head and put his ear to Alek's heart, listening to it beat for some moments. Then he stood up, his eyes halved. "I miss my brother."

"Your brother was a worthless piece of shit," Alek said. "Just like you. And like me."

"Slayers..." said Michael and slammed his scalpel into Alek's left shoulder in a gout of purple blood that painted his face like a mask. The explosion of pain made Alek arch as far off the table as his binds would allow. "... all of us."

Alek fell back onto the table with a grunt of anguish, his shoulder on fire.

Michael licked the blood off his lips and reached for another scalpel.

Alek groaned, the pain so great he felt the edges of unconsciousness try to close themselves over his face. Yet through the haze of pain and fear, he saw something move in the loft above, little more than a motion in the dark. A figure. Checking his feelings, what he could feel past the volcanic pain in his shoulder, he realized it was most certainly not another vampire. An idea clicked away inside his head, a way out of this. But only if he played things right. Keeping his eyes averted from their voyeur, he said,

panted, “If you want to put sharp instruments into me, Michael... fight me like a slayer, then.”

Michael laughed. “You know I can’t fight you or your enchanted sword.”

“You don’t... have to fight me...*and* the sword... just me.” Alek narrowed his eyes to mere slits and waited for the pain to subside to a low scream. Then he said as he recovered, “You and me. No weapons. No cuffs and chains. Just the two of us. Man to man.” He rattled the titanium chains. “Even Dante chose to fight me squarely.”

“My brother was a fool.”

“Dante at least had his pride.”

Michael lowered the scalpel to make the first incision.

“No taste for real bloodshed, Michael? For war?” Alek asked. “You just want to carve me up like every other victim? That’s not very sporting.”

Michael hesitated and showed Alek his teeth in a grimace. “You are not sport, old boy,” he said, his breathy meaty as he leaned in close. “You are *prey* —”

Alek head-butted the vampire with all his might.

For a moment it seemed to have no effect. Michael dropped the scalpel and cradled his forehead with a low whine in his throat. Then all at once he went down hard, clunking the back of his head against the second stainless steel operating table. What Alek’s head-butt had not done, the fall had. Michael lay still on the cold tile, bleeding into the drain built into the center of the floor.

Alek let out his breath and looked up.

The figure watched him a moment, then disappeared, only to reappear a few moments later with something large and bulky. A second later the glass window of the operating theatre exploded outward in a glinting rain of glass, followed by the clattering old steel folding chair the figure had used to break the window. Phoenix leaped the ten feet to the floor of the theater in a swirl of dusty leather and long hair and legs.

She straightened up and tossed her long ponytail of hair off her shoulder. She looked just beautiful in her ragged street wear and black leather jacket with the embroidery of skulls and red roses along the collar and back. Her gear, a close approximation of his own, looked cobbled together out of his closet and hers—a sling-backed tank top and faded denim cutoffs and tall leather boots with steel toes. Even the jacket, which had once belonged to Debra, was becoming on her. “I came,” she said.

An odd thing to say. He expected something far more mundane.

“Did I call you?” Alek asked, tilting his head on the table so he could watch her approach in her tall leather boots. It was a sincere question.

“You were in trouble,” Phoenix said with a scowl. She rubbed at the ring on her thumb. His ring. Debra’s ring. “So I came.”

“Thank you.”

She ran a hand over his unmarred chest, then studied his shackles. “What did he do to you, Master? Did he hurt you?”

“No. Nothing... yet.” He rattled the chains.

“Where are the keys?”

Alek glanced at the floor beside him. “Michael has them. Look in his jacket.”

Phoenix turned to stare at the defiled body on the next table.

“No, don’t look. Control. There is nothing you can do for him.”

Phoenix nodded, then turned her attention on Michael. She approached the creature on the floor with a terrible wariness, almost a fear. She knelt down, reached for Michael’s pocket, then stopped to wrap her arms about herself and shiver violently. She looked up, miserable. “Is he doing something to me?”

“No,” Alek said. “It’s your blood responding to a pureblood. Nothing more.”

“Another lesson,” she answered as she started rifling through Michael’s pockets.

As she worked, Alek said, “Did you see anybody else in the institute? Anyone at all?”

Phoenix shook her head of blood-red hair. “Only a lot of blood. Like someone had been dragging themselves through it.”

“Chimera.”

She bit her lip and her head bobbed up. “Is he here?”

“He was. But not anymore.”

She nodded as she pulled loose a ring of keys from Michael’s trouser pocket. She fished through the various ones until she found one that looked like it fit the lock, a new one with no notches, rather like handcuff keys. A few moments later she had all the cuffs unlocked and removed. She put the keys on the table.

But Alek didn’t move to rise just yet.

She stood over him, anxious. “Master...”

He closed his eyes as he summoned what strength he had left. “Just weak.”

Phoenix put her arms under his shoulders and helped him to sit up. The room spun with light and shadows and he clung to her a moment and waited until the dizziness lessened. Her smell was beautiful and wild, like the night. Her entire being was. He buried his face in her shoulder a moment like she had on the night she revealed her weakness to him. He was so happy she had come for him. Her being there seemed to soothe and invigorate him. He only wished he wasn’t so needy, so hungry, so much a danger to her.

Phoenix touched the wound in his shoulder, then tilted his head back and unlaced her shirt.

“No... ” he whispered.

“It’s your blood too.”

“Right now... I might hurt you.”

“You won’t.” She stroked his sweat-dampened hair and invited him to take. “Let me help you.”

He kissed her skin but did not break it. “My beloved one,” he said. “Help me up.”

## 30

She did. Her master could stand, but his weakness was terrible, making his entire body feel like a big rag doll she was trying to holding up almost entirely by her own strength. He was so lank and thin yet his weight was considerable enough to nearly throw her off balance as she helped him get his balance. She wished he were not so stubborn. Better he take a little of her blood and stand on his own than abstain out of his foolish fear of harming her and make her bear his entire weight. But one look at his hard vermilion eyes—feverish, needy eyes like red amber burning through the dark, yet eyes as unyielding at the earth itself—told her she was fighting a losing battle. He had too much Control. So gathering her strength, Phoenix walked him to the door of the theatre, then leaned him against the wall as she crouched down to study the old-fashioned latch.

“Locked,” she said. And she had left the keys on the table.

She went to get them.

Her master was too weak to do little more than say her name and try and take her by the arm.

But he missed.

She spotted the flutter of motion on the floor from the corner of her eye. “What...?” But before she had time to even register it as the awakening vampire, it was on her—ravaging her like something inhuman and in pain. It did not seem that it had even moved from its spot on the floor, yet there it was, all around her, all claws and feral power, pushing her to the floor under its tremendous force, consuming her with its sheer bulk, covering her in foaming spit and blood.

Phoenix screamed going down, her voice a low snarling sound like an animal taken unaware by a bigger predator, a sound she scarcely recognized as coming out of her own mouth. Fear wracked her and stopped her thinking. Fear and hate. It was a raw, sore hate, like a wound reopened. She was pulled to the floor under the power of her own fear as much as by the power of the vampire. She gritted her teeth until the blood ran over her mouth.



Then she lashed out at it, not thinking. Reacting.

Her hand encountered its face. It bit her like a rabid dog, again and again, snarling her own blood up through its nose, holding on, trying to tear her apart. Its hands went everywhere on her, destroying. Phoenix screamed again and again in utter pain and defiance but it did nothing, nothing to stop the monster, to change their destiny. Her destiny. Her destiny was to be a bloodied and battered victim, pressed down into the hard asphalt somewhere in a lonely place while a vile, blood-seeking beast violated her again and again, its raw, stinking hands on her face, in her mouth, its body grating against her own with evil energy, stealing everything that was inherently hers, her life, her identity, her power, reducing her to the unwanted piece of garbage she always feared she was. Knew she was. And that was bad and terrible and sad and tragic, but she could live with that. She could live with being a victim. She could live failing herself. But that body beside her—the small, ravaged blonde one who should have been protected by her and by nature and by God and whatever Powers there might be, the innocent body of the little mortal girl smashed, a white, dead, blood-spattered lily—that Phoenix could not live with. She could not live with that failure.

She could not live with the sorrow.

She could not live with it any longer.

Reaching, she put her hands up on the face of the vampire killing her and gave her sorrow to him instead.

The vampire stopped killing her and stiffened, its mouth full of her blood and flesh. It looked up at her. It wasn't human and never had been. It belonged to some dark corner of hell. And that's exactly where she wanted it to go.

And it did, in a mighty *whoosh* of air and blue flames that lit the theatre like a supernova, like midday, like hell, like the sun it could not tolerate. The fire consumed it, ate it like it had meant to eat her, bursting it like a toy, like something not real, something made all of glass and wood and air and dreams. And when the holocaust of fire passed, leaving spots of light and darkness on her eyes and her face raw and singed and her hair crackling and her clothing all but crisped on her tortured frame, there was nothing left of the vampire, the monster, but a rain of blackened bones and soot.

And as the ashes fell upon her face, the sorrow was still.

Like the darkness, like her world, it was still.

## 31

Extraordinary," Jean Paul said, when the tale had been told.

They were sitting together in the garden in the middle of the night, an odd twosome, to be sure. Alek turned to the Parisian and raised one eyebrow. Almost a month had passed since the events of that night at the institute. And neither he nor Phoenix had made mention of it since. It seemed unnecessary. Life

goes on. And it paid to look ahead, not back. So this was the first time he found himself recounting the events to anyone.

It had been a little after three in the morning when he found JP on his stoop. He was surprised. He had never encountered the man outside of Club Bauhaus. Yet there he was, dapper as always in his customary white suit, as immaculate as the Pope, silver-headed walking stick in hand. He might have resembled any gentleman on a tryst through New York City, except that he looked as if he belonged in a black and white photograph from the turn of the century.

Alek didn't quite know what to do with him, so he invited JP inside. But JP, being JP, decided the study was too stuffy for his liking. Alek assumed it was the Colonial-English décor that had rubbed JP the wrong way. JP found anything English appalling and cretinous. The Parisian asked if they might retire to the garden instead. And Alek saw no reason why they could not.

It was an odd hour to be entertaining company, but at least he brought his own wine.

"Wine?" Alek asked somewhat suspiciously in the moments before JP uncorked the bottle.

"Not the house blend, I assure you," JP said rather drolly. "Pascal Bouchard Bouquet Chardon 1897." His eyes halved like those of a playful cat. "And what did you expect?"

"I never know what to expect from you," Alek answered honestly.

JP toasted him, then put his wineglass down, untouched.

Alek sipped his wine, savoring the taste. "You can't have her back."

JP looked innocent.

Alek smirked knowingly in return. "You don't want her back, JP. She's not your type."

"You realize she would have been a wonderful addition to my stables."

"I don't think so, JP."

Jean Paul fell silent, and together they watched the moon fade in the night sky.

In time, perhaps a half hour before true dawn began to break, JP stood up with a sigh and took up his stick and put on his traveling hat—a white derby to go with the natty white suit—and gave Alek a gentlemanly bow. "Another night ends, so I shall bid you good day. Rest well, Slayer."

"Rest well, Hivemaster," Alek said, standing.

"Please," said JP, "I know the way."

Alek sipped his wine and watched the Parisian amble down the garden path to the gate. But as JP opened the gate, he suddenly turned back to Alek and tilted his head. "Tell me, Slayer, how can you say such a gorgeous and talented creature as the Phoenix would not enhance my demimonde?" He smiled wryly.

Alek returned the smile with one just as wry. "Because, Hivemaster, there is nothing in this world

thatPhoenix hates more than vampires.”

## 32

Two days later Alek read the news in the Times. On his way to a private meeting with someone from one of the bigger networks at the Skytop Café, his usual haunt for such rendezvous, bestselling author J. Stephan Paul was broadsided by a semi turning off onto Broadway at well above the speed limit.

There were no survivors and the driver of the truck was unaccounted for. It was being considered a hit and run and the police were investigating the vehicle and driver, but so far they were unable to acquire any witnesses to the crime.

Alek placed the newspaper in the fireplace and hadPhoenix cinder it very slowly, her Control so powerful nothing else in the room was affected.

The Church takes care of its own.

## 33

*Immortal Beloved* was the name of the cargo ship. That much Sam Kelly knew when he signed on. But in the two weeks since he'd been aboard the rusty, run-down ship, *The Beloved*, as they called her, had not docked at any ports. And strange for a cargo ship, the hold was nearly empty. It contained only five large, unmarked wooden boxes. That was all Kelly knew until today, when *The Beloved* glided to port along the coast of Rome and the harbormaster began ringing the bell which heralded the workers down to the pier to unload the ship.

A man came with them. He wore red robes with a small red cap on the bald dome of his head. So it was Vatican cargo then.

A storm had been brewing off the coast all day, making the men nervous about a squall, and in their haste, the workers managed to snag one of the crates on the cargo crane while trying to transfer it to the tossing deck of the patrol boat. Wood splintered and sent the contents of the crate rolling everywhere across the deck of the *Immortal Beloved*. Luckily, the smaller cargo crates inside the larger one were well padded and experienced little damage in the impact. Only one small crate actually broke, releasing a large stainless steel canister that reminded Kelly of a decanter for Margarita mixes. That or some kind of space-age canoptic jar. The canister rolled down the sloping deck of *The Beloved* and came to a halt almost at his feet where Kelly was dutifully mopping the deck.

The canister clinked as the contents settled, then clinked again.

And then a third time.

The cardinal came to collect the canister himself. “This is archival material. Very fragile and important. Don’t let your men damage anything further!” he shouted in Italian to the harbormaster.

The harbormaster muttered many apologies and excuses.

Kelly, still mopping, caught the eye of the cardinal as the man in his imposing robes and rings turned back to observe the rest of the cargo being unloaded from the hold. Then he looked at the canister the cardinal held. And again he heard it clink.

Like someone knocking.

The cardinal looked at him with his shrewd, knowing eyes.

And then Sam Kelly looked away. For reasons he could not explain, the sight of the canister left him dead cold.

**The End**