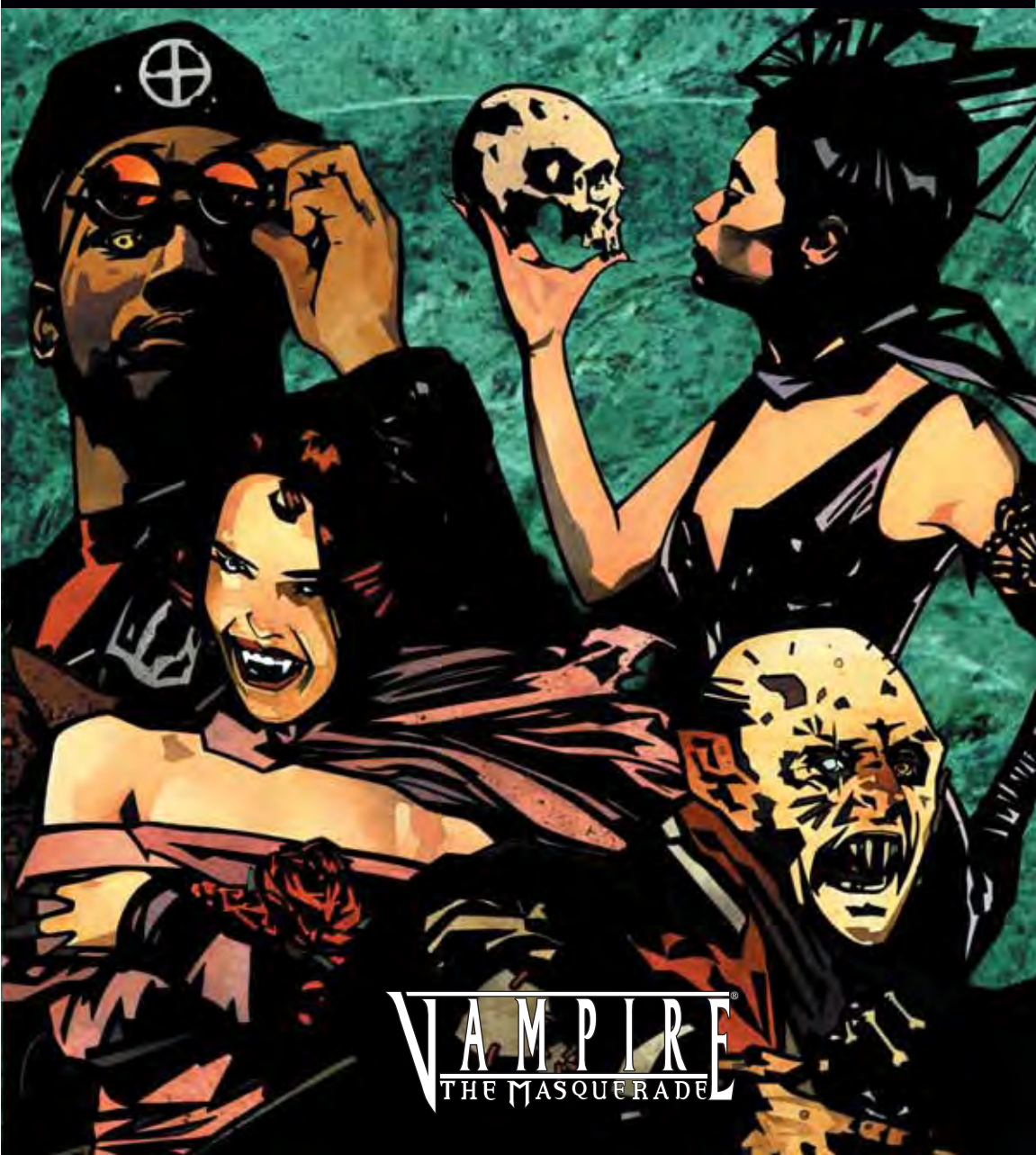


CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: VOLUME FOUR

# END GAMES™

wieck, Fleming, Griffin, et al.



VAMPIRE®  
THE MASQUERADE

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# praise for the clan novel saga!

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“... a magnificent compilation and reorganization of the thirteen original Clan Novels and thirteen short stories that appeared in the **Clan Novel Anthology**. [...] If you love vampire fiction, if you love ripping good fiction, you’ll want to embark on this epic vampire tale from White Wolf. [My] highest recommendation.”

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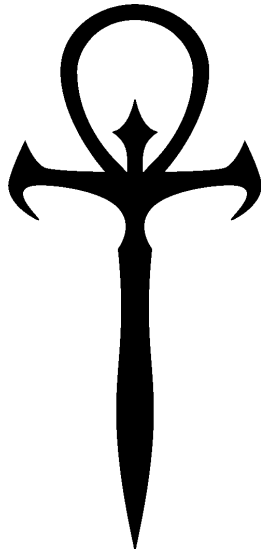
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clan novel saga™: volume four

# END GAMES™

*Friday, 24 September 1999 to the Time of Judgment*

BOOK FOUR of FOUR



by  
stewart wieck, gherbod Fleming and Eric Griffin  
with Justin Achilli, Bruce Baugh, Richard Danksy and Robert Hatch  
and additional contributions by Janet Trautvetter and Philippe Bouffe

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## OUR STORY SO FAR

It is the autumn of 1999 and newspapers and television reports are full of stories of a rash of violence, rioting and gruesome murders up and down the East Coast of the United States. Behind these headlines lies the hidden truth that a war is afoot among the unliving vampires—called Kindred by some, Cainites by others—who have preyed on humanity since the dawn of time. Facing off in this war are the two major sects among the undead: on one side, the utterly inhuman and zealous **Sabbat**, dedicated to the principles of vampiric supremacy and the freedom to feed as they would; on the other, the genteel, haughty **Camarilla**, dedicated to remaining hidden from human eyes so as to prey in peace.

The Sabbat assault began in mid-June and quickly took Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and most points in between. The Sabbat generals of this mad war are **Sascha Vykos**, now vampiric Archbishop of Washington, and **Francisco Polonia**, Archbishop of New York. Vykos has been especially effective, thanks to the help of **Parmenides**, an Assamite assassin she has enthralled to her dark ways, and **Lucius**, an enigmatic spy in the Camarilla camp. The Camarilla is currently centering its defense on Baltimore, where the Dutch vampire **Jan Pieterzoon**—who holds great status in the sect—has arrived to coordinate the defense. His host in Baltimore is prince **Alexander Garlotte**, and together they have formed a war council including **Marcus Vitel** (the refugee Prince of Washington), **Theo Bell** (a sect enforcer of great repute), and **Victoria Ash** (the most prominent refugee of the Sabbat assault on Atlanta).

Since June, other cities have fallen. Buffalo, New York and Hartford, Connecticut have both come under Sabbat sway after only token defense by the Camarilla. In the former, the weakness of the Sabbat attack proved once and for all that the so-called Sword of Caine had a spy among the Camarilla worthies in Baltimore—one who would know that Buffalo's defense would be light indeed. That mole's identity, however, has yet to be revealed. In Hartford, the Sabbat victory was only slightly marred by the destruction of **Borges**, once Archbishop of Miami, at the hands of the vampiric assassin **Lucita**. Lucita's actions were observed, however, by a fellow killer—and sometimes friend—**Fatima al-Faqadi**. An elder of the mysterious Assamite clan, Fatima has been ordered to murder Lucita's dreaded sire, **Cardinal Monçada**—the architect of the Sabbat's war on the Eastern Seaboard. Baltimore continues to hold, but barely, and the presence of a spy behind the barricades leaves little hope for survival.

The vagaries of warfare have claimed other casualties as well. In New York—a city divided between Sabbat and Camarilla—the local regent of the sorcerous Tremere order, **Aisling Sturbridge**, has faced treachery and intrigue in her own house. Ultimately, she found her favorite apprentice to be a spy for her rivals in the Tremere hierarchy, but only after several others had been murdered.

Two other vampires, **Isabel Giovanni** and **Chas Tello Giovanni** have also been following a trail of lies and murder behind the scenes of the war. Serving their undead family, they have been tracking the disappearance of **Benito Giovanni**, a powerful clanmate kidnapped on the very night the current war began. Stuck negotiating with representatives of the warring sides while they search for their missing kinsman, Isabel and Chas have also stumbled onto evidence of the so-called "Old Clan," the vampires from whom the Giovanni stole the secrets of undeath—and who may now want it back.

Benito Giovanni is actually in the dubious care of members of Clan Nosferatu, one of the groups of vampires aligned with the Camarilla. **Calebros**, an information-hungry

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elder of that clan, arranged for the capture of Benito in order to uncover the truth of the murder, two years before, of a respected Nosferatu. Timing the capture to coincide with the beginning of the renewed Sabbat assault, Calebros hoped to hide the deed. He also arranged for—at that same time—the sale of an ancient artifact called the **Eye of Hazimel**, as further distraction.

Unfortunately, the Eye fell out of the hands it was intended for in the midst of the initial Sabbat assault. **Leopold**, a young vampire in Atlanta, when grievously wounded fell under the spell of the powerful Eye and actually replaced one of his own eyes with the thing. Terrible power to shape both flesh and stone flowed into him then, along with a maddening voice he calls his muse. Much of his sanity eroded by it, Leopold followed this muse's call to upstate New York where he would create a fiendish masterpiece. **Ramona Tanner-Childe**, an even younger vampire of Clan Gangrel, there crossed paths with Leopold and saw her friends either destroyed or fused into the terrible masterwork. She returned in the company of **Xaviar**, a Gangrel elder, and an entire war-party, only to see the warriors destroyed and to have to pull Xaviar away against his will to save his unlife. Later, Xaviar called Leopold a sign of Gehenna, the vampiric End Times, and pulled his clan out of the Camarilla when the war council in Baltimore refused to support his assertion.

The Eye's intended recipient—**Hesha Ruhadze**, an unliving scholar and Follower of Set—did not give up the search, however. He tracked the Eye's origins to Calcutta. There, with the dubious assistance of a local vampire and scallywag named **Khalil Ravana**, Hesha uncovered what might have been the tomb of Hazimel himself. Dodging assassins, treason and an apocalyptic supernatural event that destroyed almost all the other vampires in the region, Hesha and his team proceeded to upstate New York and toward their ultimate goal. Others were on the trail as well, however. Among them was **Johnston Foley**, a powerful blood sorcerer among the Tremere of New York City (now destroyed), and **Nickolai**, the last surviving member of the offshoot of Clan Tremere aligned with the Sabbat (and an old contact of Benito Giovanni's). Hesha briefly recovered the Eye, but Leopold was almost impossible to stop and wounded the Follower of Set terribly.

Calebros, clearly understanding that he had set in motion more than he expected, has been trying to gather as much information as possible. When **Anatole**, the so-called Prophet of Gehenna, arrived in America, he assigned the Nosferatu **Jeremiah**—also a scholar of the vampiric End Times—to observe him and see if he could draw out any secrets from the observations. Anatole took to wandering, first at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, but then to Chicago and the old studio of **Gary Pennington**, an artist involved in the death of Calebros's elder clansman. From there, the Prophet headed to Atlanta where he encountered Victoria Ash who had, herself, come at the behest of Jan Pieterzoon. There he seemed to tell Victoria that the twisted and mad Leopold was her own vampiric childe, but to Jeremiah's ears he identified another as the wretch's sire. Anatole then traveled to Upstate New York to the cave where Leopold had murdered the Gangrel. There, Anatole entered a trance before the semi-petrified forms of the murdered Gangrel and a reformed statue of **Hannah**, the destroyed Tremere regent of Atlanta, whom Leopold had known before he the war began.

There, Anatole waits for enlightenment, and to come face-to-face with the dragon he has chased for centuries....

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Foreword  
Exit Interview

by John Steele & Gherbod Fleming



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**Sunday, 18 May 2003; 10:39 PM**  
**Chapel Hill, North Carolina**

*Recently our White Wolf staff writer caught up with John Steele, co-editor of the Clan Novel series, and Gherbod Fleming, author of five of the novels.*

**White Wolf:** Gentlemen, you spent the better part of two years of your lives working on the Clan Novel series.

**John Steele:** It was quite an experience.

**Gherbod Fleming:** That it was. Of course, the therapy has done wonders.

**WW:** So was it that traumatic of an experience?

**Fleming:** Intense, at times. More often than traumatic.

**Steele:** And intensive.

**WW:** Let's go back to the beginning. John, you had written one World of Darkness novel—**Tower of Babel**, the first Mage book.

**Steele:** Right. That and a related short story in the Mage anthology, **Truth Until Paradox**. And a couple of Wraith short stories in other anthologies.

**WW:** So you had already worked with Stewart Wieck, co-creator of the World of Darkness.

**Steele:** Yes. We had a good working relationship, so when he needed someone to handle many of the day-to-day editing duties on this huge series he was thinking of doing, he came to me.

**WW:** Were you worried by the scope and complexity of the project, thirteen interrelated novels?

**Steele:** I don't think I knew enough to be worried. Being asked to work on that type of project was an honor, and Stewart's enthusiasm was infectious. He's a visionary—

**Fleming:** Which is to say that he's crazy. Not ha-ha crazy. Insane crazy.

**WW:** So what did he ask you to do?

**Steele:** Well, we worked together on the initial planning... forming the structure, the skeleton plot that would hold the books together but leave the individual authors room for creativity as well. Then we divided duties on reading drafts and developing, working with the authors. And we conferred on major plot developments throughout.

**WW:** So the plot evolved as the series progressed?

**Steele:** Right. For each book, for each clan, we came up with points of contact with the unifying plot thread.

**WW:** The Eye of Hazimel.

**Steele:** That and more. The Eye of Hazimel, the Camarilla-Sabbat War, maneuvering of the elders—they were all interconnected. And then, yes, the plot evolved as the series progressed. With each book that was written, authors would come up with ideas that then the rest of us would latch onto and run with. So a catchy character or storyline that wasn't originally included sometimes ended up playing a major role.

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**WW:** So, Gherbod, you had written the **Trilogy of the Blood Curse** when Stewart Wieck brought you onboard, and one of the story lines from those books became a premise for the Clan Novels.

**Fleming:** Yes. The idea with the Blood Curse was that it had decimated the vampire population in the World of Darkness, and so we tried to carry through the repercussions, the instability in the existing vampiric power structures that would have resulted, and the Camarilla-Sabbat war was one of the results.

**WW:** But the Blood Curse wasn't game studio canon, correct?

**Fleming:** Canon, ecclesiastic decree from above? No. Hobgoblins and small minds and all that.

**Steele:** That was an interesting interaction all along, between the game material and the fiction, a real crosspollination. In the core rule books, there are passages about, "If story and rules conflict, story wins," or something to that effect. Justin Achilli, the Vampire developer, was very supportive of this view from the start. We had meetings and he'd say, "If you need so-and-so to use three dots of a Discipline and he's only got one dot in a rule book, go for it. Make it work for the story." Beyond that, with the plotlines, we took many of our cues from the game books, but many of our ideas were incorporated into game books as well. What made it difficult sometimes, too, was that relevant game material was not always available as we were working on the novels, or it changed. For example, in **Clan Novel: Tzimisce**, which was the second book in the series, Eric Griffin portrayed Sascha Vykos as female, because that's what Justin had told us the character was when we were doing the preliminary planning. When the game book **Children of the Night** comes out, Vykos was more asexual, but **Clan Novel: Tzimisce** has already gone to press.

**WW:** Did readers have a problem with that sort of discrepancy?

**Steele:** Some did. I think some people wanted a sourcebook for the game that they could plug into their ongoing campaign, and that's not what we were going for. We wanted to tell an exciting, interesting story set in the World of Darkness, using a cast of characters the readers were familiar with as the backbone. We were writing for readers and for gamers, quite often those being one and the same. We did our research but at the same time assumed the audience could exercise independent thought and use or not use whatever they liked or disliked in their personal game settings. Not to mention the antecedent confusion of writing a character referred to as "it." Every "it" would be like, "Is he talking about Vykos or the chair?"

**WW:** How much interaction did you have with the readers and fans? Did you pay attention to online forums, say?

**Fleming:** Occasionally. It's interesting, and to some degree helpful, to get feedback during the process. Since my books stretched over the course of the series from number three to number thirteen, when I saw constructive and reasoned criticism, I would take it into account. And there were many insightful posts. There was some vociferous discourtesy (from a small but loud minority of posters), but that comes with the territory.

**WW:** Did you respond to posts you saw online?

**Fleming:** No. I respect anyone's right to like or dislike anything I've written, and I felt like the author weighing in, especially if he's being criticized, is kind of heavy handed, or trying to impose my view.

**Steele:** I think the only post I responded to was one personally attacking another author and berating any readers who held opinions different from that of the poster. Sad.

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Most of the posts were appreciative of the novels though, and there were some well-written reviews. Rpg.net had a series of reviews by Michael Williams, for example, and he was evenhanded and thoughtful.

**WW:** What were the biggest challenges for each of you?

**Fleming:** Deadlines.

**Steele:** Deadlines were monstrous, no pun intended. We started out trying to publish one book a month. That quickly fell by the wayside. Keeping track of the chronology was a chore, tedious but fun in a sick kind of way. I kept a spreadsheet, scene by scene, day by day — or night by night — including all of the books. And massaging each different book so they fit — figuratively and literally — within the series was a challenge. Kathy Ryan, a wonderful writer, brought her rough draft for **Clan Novel: Setite** in around at 120,000 words, about 30,000 too many, and we had to fit into a predetermined page count. She did a great job revising, and Anna Branscome, the copyeditor, and I put in a lot of work editing. Kathy's writing is very vivid and detailed, so we concentrated on keeping the most pertinent details and making sure the transitions were smooth. Everyone put in a lot of time and effort, and the finished product was very strong. Kathy is the consummate professional.

**WW:** What was the most rewarding book for each of you personally?

**Steele:** I don't think I can pick one. I think just the fact of completing such a monumental project, the sheer volume and audacity of the series by the time it was done. And, again, most of the credit goes to Stewart Wieck.

**Fleming:** I enjoyed adding details that highlighted the monstrosity of some of the so-called "heroes," Jan Pieterzoon and Calebros, not losing sight of the fact that on some fundamental level they are corrupt, evil, vampires for God's sake. But for a whole book, I think I'd have to pick **Clan Novel: Brujah**. I felt very at ease with Theo Bell, very comfortable.

**WW:** Any final thoughts? This is for the foreword of the omnibus edition of the Clan Novels that will collect the thirteen books and the follow-up anthology in scene-by-scene chronological order.

**Steele:** The idea of an omnibus was something that Stewart and I talked about early on. I'm glad the series has been received warmly enough to make it possible.

**Fleming:** I'd like to express my appreciation to the readers for their support and encouragement throughout this project. It's fitting, I suppose, that vampirism has turned out to be such an enduring bond.





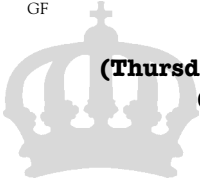
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part one:  
queens, knights  
and bishops

from friday, 24 september 1999  
to wednesday, 6 october 1999







**Friday, 24 September 1999, 1:31 AM**  
**(Thursday, 23 September 1999, 7:31 PM; Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Outside the Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**

The old church tower loomed more ominously than should a place of worship. For mortals, the building might be where they came to be closer to God. For Lucita, it was a portal not to heaven but to torment. Yet she was here. She paused, delaying for a few more minutes the inevitable, that which she had held at bay for close to a century. She had sworn that she would never set foot inside the place again. Yet she was here. In her agitation at Talley and at the two different employers who had hired her to destroy Borges, she had convinced herself that she would return on her own terms. Now she was not so sure. And that infuriated her even more than the fact that she had broken her vow. So she waited, and grew angrier.

The brickwork of the church and the horseshoe arches, as throughout the entire city, spoke of Moorish influence, which reminded Lucita of another sore point. *Fatima*. How dare the Assamite tell Lucita face to face that her sire was a target, as if Lucita could do nothing about it? Why warn her, if not as a taunt? No, Lucita corrected herself. That was not *Fatima's* way. She wasn't one of the blowhards from the Camarilla, or even a Sabbat sociopath. *Fatima* was Assamite. Her way was arrogance. In her mind, *Monçada* was already as good as dead, because she had decided he should be. It was a done deal. So what was the harm of telling Lucita?

“Cocky bitch,” Lucita muttered to herself.

That was what bothered Lucita more than anything—the lack of respect. She'd bested *Fatima* before; she could do it again. The thought of *Monçada's* bloated body hacked to bits and smoldering away in the noonday sun did not distress Lucita. To the contrary. She found the image exhilarating, almost erotically so. Many were the times that she had imagined her own hands wrapped around his throat, squeezing until the corpulent folds of flesh bulged between her fingers, then twisting, wringing his neck, feeling the bones snap and twisting still....

Lucita found herself sweating a light sheen of blood. Her fingertips rested gently on her own neck. She lowered her hands self-consciously to her sides. The streets were deserted, but who knew what spies of her sire's lurked nearby? There was no point in waiting any longer, she decided. If she stood there all night, she'd still have to go in when the sun rose.

“Well, goddammit,” she muttered again, then changed her mind. “No. God damn *me*.”

She pushed the door open and entered the church. Toward the front of the sanctuary, candles burned. Three elderly types, heads bowed, lips moving in silent prayer, knelt among the wooden pews. Lucita was glad that she'd never grow old, not physically. She didn't think that she could abide needing someone else to help her around, or the indignity of waiting for her body to gradually stop working. She wondered for a moment for whom the old folks were praying: themselves, asking God to ease their infirmity? Or were they praying for the souls of loved ones already passed?

---

Lucita snorted quietly in disgust. She knew damn well there was no one worth missing.

She moved along the edge of the sanctuary to a row of confessional booths and stepped into the third from the end. Instead of sitting, she stood and drummed her fingers against the screen that separated her from her confessor. The entire mortal charade had suddenly grown quite irritating.

“Welcome, my child,” came the priest’s voice.

“Let’s cut the shit, padre. I’ve got places to be.”

There was a pause, and then the panel behind Lucita slid aside revealing a passageway leading into total shadow. She hesitated for the briefest instant before stepping into the lair of her sire.



**Friday, 24 September 1999, 2:17 AM**  
**(Thursday, 23 September 1999, 8:17 PM; Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**

Nib down into red ink, then tapped lightly to disembody excess. Pen raised carefully yet confidently, then placed to parchment:

*10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*

With the last word and punctuation, the pen was dry, and another perfect verse was rendered. Monçada dipped the pen again:

*11 For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.*

The cardinal blew lightly on his handiwork, then blotted the page. He reached for a fresh sheet of parchment, but as he continued with the next verse, a faint sound of footsteps made its way to him—two sets of footsteps. A droplet of red ink dripped from the nib and splashed onto the new page. Monçada barely noticed. His hand began to quiver. By the time the door opened, he again was master of himself.

Cristobal was hesitant opening the door. He knew that his master did not like to be interrupted; he also knew that, in this case, he would be flogged within an inch of his pitiful life if he delayed. Cristobal moved to the side and offered a prolonged genuflection, but Monçada hardly noticed his ghoul. In the doorway stood Lucita. Her enduring beauty, that which had led Monçada to bring her within the fold so that she might never wither, struck him mute. The thin fabrics she wore hugged her slender body closely. Her raven-black hair shone in the candlelight of the scriptorium. Monçada returned the pen to its holder, lest his trembling return and the utensil give him away.

“My daughter,” he whispered. “Please,” he indicated the shadowy interior of the scriptorium, “enter.”

Hesitantly, Lucita stepped forward. Cristobal, eyes still averted and back bent, shuffled backward out of the room and pulled the door closed. The sound of the heavy wooden door pulling to, the click of the latch, comforted Monçada, convinced him that the vision of beauty before him was his child, not an ephemeral spirit that might dissolve into the ether. And she had come back to him.

“My daughter,” he said again.

“This is going to be an incredibly short visit if you insist on calling me that,” Lucita said, raising a finger. Monçada almost flinched at her rebuke. He’d let himself forget the little games she liked to play. She nodded toward the parchment before him. “I can come back when you’re done finger painting.”

Monçada smiled. Despite her disrespect, her voice to him was the nightingale’s song. “I am transcribing the scriptures,” he told her, as if his appointed task could be mistaken. “I have come to an interesting verse: ‘A foolish woman is noisy; she is wanton and knows no shame.’ The Proverbs can be most instructive.”

Lucita clenched her jaw, and Monçada’s smile widened. “What news do you bring from the New World? I hear it is very...beautiful.” As he spoke the last word, Monçada inspected Lucita from head to toe.

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“It’d be a lot better off without your Sabbath flunkies running all over the place.” A certain coyness crept into her voice. “There’s not quite as many of them now,” she said, looking at the ceiling.

“Yes,” Monçada said, “I have heard that you’ve been busy, for whatever your efforts are worth. Still, you never were one for idleness. I like to believe that is my influence. ‘A child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame.’”

Lucita rolled her eyes. “Solomon is probably moaning in his grave—if he’s *in* his grave. Or do you keep him around here somewhere to play tennis on the weekends?”

Monçada let his smile slip away, and with it some of his patience. After all, he’d been patient already for many years. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent.”

Lucita nodded, mockingly impressed. “You’re quite good. A verse for every occasion. We could rent you out for parties. But I’ll tell you what, here’s a tidbit from the New World for you: Your stooge Vykos is playing both sides against the middle.”

“Indeed?” said Monçada, eyebrows raised.

“Indeed. While she was pretending to run around being your lap dog, she was also busy hiring me to destroy Borges. Anonymously, of course. But the information I was fed was all from the inside, and her war ghouls crashed in on Talley just a bit too conveniently. Talley must have figured it out, unless he was too busy sulking about being second best.” Lucita rocked triumphantly on her heels.

“First, as for Talley,” said Monçada, “he did come to that same conclusion. And second, as for Vykos hiring you to destroy Borges...*of course* it did. I instructed it to do so!” Monçada could not help laughing at Lucita’s obvious shock. “Why do you think it chose you? For a reason as petty as to cause me embarrassment? Come now. You value yourself much too highly, but perhaps that is because I have spoiled you. No, I had Vykos seek you out, and you performed magnificently.”

Monçada again let his gaze wash over her. “You are beautiful, my daughter. I must admit that the immodest modern fashions agree with you.”

Lucita broke away from his gaze and looked at herself, suddenly growing self-conscious as well as angry at having been duped. Then she looked back at him, her face flushed and twisted into a scowl. She raised her finger again to instruct her sire. “Listen. I’m only going to say this once: I...am...not...your...fucking...daughter.”

Monçada pursed his lips, nodded slowly. His mirth drained away until completely vanished. “You are absolutely correct—you are only going to say that once.” He stepped from behind the workbench and opened his arms. “Now, come to me...my daughter.”

She resisted him as long as she could. She stood stiff-legged, hands clenched into fists, jaw set. Monçada waited, arms outstretched. After a few seconds, her right foot, as if pried physically from the ground, moved forward. And then the left. She was an awkward infant taking her first steps, coming to the welcoming arms of her father.

Still she fought, though there was no hope of victory, of overcoming his indomitable will. She forced a word out with each step: “*God...damn...you!*”

Monçada ignored the obvious repartee that he was already quite damned, and instead searched his memory for the appropriate Proverb: “‘Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.’ I forgive you, my daughter.”

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A few more pained steps and she was in his arms. Monçada crushed her against his girth. So many nights, so many years, he had waited to feel her embrace. She had come home to him, and she would take her rightful place at his side as he embarked upon the greatest calling of his long existence.

He pressed her head against his chest and, drifting into bliss as he was, only belatedly heard her curses and insults: "...will kill you."

"Hush, hush, my childe."

"Miserable... fucking... bastard."

"The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but the perverse tongue will be cut off."

"Son... of... a..."

"The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short!"

"Fuck you... fuck you... fuck you..."

"He who guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin!" The tremors were returning to his hands. Monçada held his daughter more tightly, but that helped little. This was not how he'd imagined their reunion.

"Fucking sonuva..."

Monçada was shaking, trembling with fury. He took Lucita's shoulders roughly in his meaty hands and lifted her from the ground. "Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion!"

Lucita spat in his face. He squeezed until he heard bones snap, then threw her to the floor. Her head bounced violently on the stones. Monçada turned to his sturdy workbench, ripped it apart with his bare hands, found a long piece of solid wood.

"A rod is for the back of him who lacks sense!"

He slammed the makeshift club across her spine.

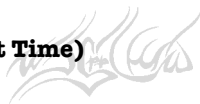
"By insolence the heedless make strife!"

Again and again he beat her. Long after her insults had ceased, he crushed the sneer from her face, pounded her back and head. His body vented the fury of years, the pain of abandonment, and all the while he quoted words of righteousness to her: "The mouths of fools feed on folly! 'There is severe discipline for him who forsakes the way!'" He beat her until her insolent clothes were shredded and lay about her in tatters. "...That one may avoid the snares of death!"

He beat her until, finally, he raised his club into the air but held the next blow. It was over. Monçada stood above her, staring vacantly, spent, stunned by the divine peace that swept over him. The fury was purged from his being. He dropped the remnant of the workbench to the floor beside his bloodied childe. Her eyes were closed, mouth agape, blood draining from it.

For a moment, Monçada savored the sensation of having hugged her to him. He stared at her bruised body. Cristobal would need to see that she was made comfortable, provided new clothes. Absently, he turned from her. He picked up his most recent sheet of parchment and tsked at the spilled drop of ink. Then, still vaguely distracted, he walked from the chamber and pulled closed behind him the door of the scriptorium.

**Saturday, 25 September 1999, 2:47 AM**  
**(Friday, 24 September 1999, 8:47 PM; Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle del Barquillo**  
**Madrid, Spain**



“You are sure it was her...?”

The narrow alley was a dead nerve to light and sound. No voice would travel beyond its confines; no one walking past would see the two-headed apparition—actually two dark figures standing merely inches apart.

“Or are you merely sure it looked like her?” Mahmud asked in a voice softer than a whisper.

Anwar saw the wisdom of the question at once. “Her face matched exactly the pictures I have seen... the picture Fatima provided.” Anwar, not pleased about deferring to Mahmud, mentioned Fatima intentionally. True, she was Mahmud’s mentor, but Mahmud was not held in as high esteem by the elders as was she. He was stolid, reliable. But he was not *Fatima*. There were those who whispered that she had taken him as protégé for just that reason, so as not to be outshone by her understudy. Anwar did not know the truth of that, but he vastly preferred functioning independently in the field.

“Then it was her face,” Mahmud said by way of placation, but then landed his own barb, “but who knows what tricks of shadow were at work, or what Tzimisce fiend might have copied her likeness?”

Anwar could not see his clanmate’s eyes; so close were they standing that he viewed only the curve of Mahmud’s cheek, the motion of jaw, lips, and tongue as he spoke.

“The fiends are not so precise,” Anwar said. “Their works are grotesque.”

“Have you ever faced a Tzimisce elder?” Mahmud asked. “One that has been sculpting flesh since before you were at your mother’s teat?”

“It was *Lucita*,” Anwar said with all the fierceness whispering could generate. “She stood there before the church, just... just looking, just *waiting to be destroyed*. And I could have.”

“Perhaps. And you could have alerted her sire that all is not as it should be, that wolves are gathering.”

Anwar could not rightfully argue with that. Though he ached for her, for her blood.

“We are here to observe, to gather intelligence,” Mahmud said. “Pilar’s spies cover much ground; we cover the rest.”

Anwar nodded. His face brushed against Mahmud’s. “Yes,” Anwar said. He was close enough in station to be unhappy about taking direction from Mahmud, but to challenge him further, when Fatima had lent him authority, would not do. “Of course.”

The two assassins parted, each going to perform his appointed duties.

**Friday, 24 September 1999, 10:00 PM**  
**The underground lake**  
**New York City, New York**



The taste of salt. Water puffing up his atrophied lungs. The quiet whispering of the earth. Calebros floated several feet below the surface. He let words float in and out of his mind like gentle swells in a tidal pool: *One in a minute, and one in an hour. Walk a mile in but seconds to deliver my letter. Tell me, oh wise one, which way do I go?*

He hoped the earth would whisper an answer to him, but it was not to be. Calebros allowed the words to wash from him again. Surely the Prophet of Gehenna could have been more dignified than to have left them a silly children's riddle. Or perhaps the Nosferatu was merely irritated because he had not solved a silly children's riddle.

The taste of salt. Water puffing up his atrophied lungs. The quiet whispering of the earth.

He must relax. The riddle, if it was part of the puzzle, would fall into place. Eventually. Or it would not. Even if it did not, as those surrounding it did so, the truth of what the missing piece contained would become evident. So many of the pieces had already come together, yet still there were many holes.

Emmett had provided many of the pieces and helped Calebros to place them. The younger broodmate would be back soon. He was nearly done with his work in the West, nearly finished with Benito. Although Emmett was not the most patient of Kindred, his presence would ease Calebros's mind.

Other matters, more concrete and immediate than a riddle, remained up in the air. The Sabbat were growing restive to the south. They grew increasingly aggressive toward Baltimore each and every night. Soon they would pounce, which was why Pieterzoon and Bell had set in motion a desperate plan. They had reached an uneasy alliance with Prince Michaela of New York—*prince of Wall Street, perhaps*, Calebros had scoffed, *but not of the rest of the city, God knows*—and would attempt to shift the Camarilla forces north when opportunity presented itself. Calebros estimated their chances for success at fifty percent, and that because he was feeling charitable.

On other fronts, there was no word from Jeremiah since Syracuse. Had he come to harm? After confronting Victoria in Atlanta, Anatole had fallen upon his clansman, Prince Benison, and slain him. Had he done the same to Jeremiah once the Nosferatu had led the Prophet to the cave that both Ramona and Heshha had described? There was no way to know. At what point, Calebros debated, should he send someone to find out? The uncertainty gnawed at him like rats after the last sliver of flesh upon a bone.

The taste of salt. Water puffing up his atrophied lungs. The quiet whispering of the earth.

At least Heshha was doing well. The turmeric root was working its magic, though the going was slow and painful. Each night, Pauline burned Heshha, cleansed with fire and root the corruption of the Eye, allowing the blood to do its work. And Ruhadze needed much blood. He was growing stronger, and that, too, was a cause of concern for Calebros. Would the Setite, once he was no longer dependent, remain loyal?

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Ramona was proving a pleasant surprise. She seemed to sense, finally, that Heshu and the Nosferatu meant her no harm. She was not such an unpleasantly feral creature as she had first appeared. Once it had become undeniably clear that Khalil was a rake and a cad, she had seemed almost relieved to have the company of the Setite and his underling, and even several of the brethren.

Khalil was another loose end to be knotted some night. He'd proven as good as his word—which was not at all. *Poor Mouse*, Calebros thought. For a childe of the kennels, existence could be short and cruel. The Ravnos had fled, but it would do him no good. He had stopped in Chicago for the time being, and Calebros had his sources there. There would be a reckoning. The Nosferatu did not forget.

But those were harsh thoughts, and Calebros wished to relax his mind. The taste of salt. Water puffing up his atrophied lungs. The quiet whispering of the earth.

*One in a minute, and one in an hour...*





**Friday, 24 September 1999, 11:20 PM**  
**The Presidential Hotel**  
**Washington, D.C.**

All was silent in the sixth-floor penthouse suite until Ravenna/Parmenides whirled and flung his oaken cane. He whipped the throw so that, instead of spiraling like a spear, the brass ferrule and handle tumbled end over end with deceptive accuracy. The irregular flight would confuse the typical *kafir* and prevent him from blocking the attack. In the same motion as the throw, Parmenides triggered the latch that released the spike to protrude from the ferrule.

The spiked tip thudded into the center of an armchair's back, running the piece through and knocking it over. The next sweeping motion of Parmenides's arm sent a dagger toward a landscape print on the opposite wall. Before that weapon had even struck its target, he lashed out at two marble busts with a weighted length of razor wire that, the instant before, had been concealed in the hem of his pullover.

The heads of both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony toppled to the floor. The pedestals upon which they'd rested, upper torsos still attached, tottered but remained upright.

Parmenides surveyed his handiwork. If only he had one more chance at Marcus Vitel, the deposed prince of Washington would not escape. But Vykos had sent her faux-ghoul against the venerable Ventrue before Parmenides had fully healed from the experiments she had conducted and the transformation she had wrought. How could she have hoped for him to succeed? She had overestimated his recovery.

In other ways, she had underestimated him. Tonight, for instance, his hands were idle, and why? Because Councilor Vykos had relieved him of his duties with the Tremere siege. She said that she didn't want to dull his senses with such tedium. Did she not realize that a child of Haqim could observe a potential target for countless nights, for years if necessary, and remain every bit as alert and diligent as he had been the first night? Was this another of her subtly barbed taunts, or did she have some grand scheme in mind?

"Maids will have their work cut out for them," said the voice that Parmenides had come to recognize almost as well as his own. Parmenides cocked his head. All summer this voice had acted as messenger, from the first night that Parmenides was just remembering, when he'd failed to destroy Vitel, till the present time. The voice was soft and kindly like whispering moonlight. "I bring a message," it said.

Parmenides listened carefully. With the exception of that first night that seemed so long ago, the voice had always sought news to take back to those whom it called Parmenides's masters. Unusual as the voice's announcement was, Parmenides was more intent upon the very sound of the voice itself, the tones that caused his ear to prick up. So closely did he listen, that he could almost feel the rippling of the air as the sound passed.

"You *bring* news?" Parmenides asked. "Are you not confused?"

"I am not confused, young Assamite," said the voice, the slightest trace of humor apparent.

"And I am not so young," said Parmenides. He moved slowly away from the center of the suite toward the pierced landscape print. He paused, changed direction. "Are you so old?"

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“Old enough to know when a hunter tracks the sound of my voice.”

Parmenides halted. He was indeed trying to follow the voice, to trace its direction, but each way he turned it sounded no closer. Parmenides laughed. “Old enough to play your voice like a huntsman’s whistle, while the young pup chases his tail in circles.”

“Would you have me show myself, young Assamite? Do you wish me to grow no older?”

“I do wish you to show yourself,” Parmenides said to the empty room. “I have no reason to harm you.”

“My blood is not reason enough, young pup?”

Parmenides shrugged. “Our masters wish us to work in concert. I would not defy them. And if that is not enough guarantee of your safety, I give you my word.”

There was a long pause before the voice responded: “I pity you—you who have been given over to fiends. I will face you. Come into the lavatory.”

Pity? Parmenides wondered at that, but he moved toward the closest bathroom. As he stood in the doorway, scanning the spacious facilities, he couldn’t help glancing in rapt fascination at the porcelain fixtures. He’d heard so many stories about the comings and goings of the monstrous Nosferatu, of their warped proclivities. They lived in the sewers. Could the messenger take that route?

But then a quiet scrabbling caught his notice, not from the toilet but from the tiny fan recessed in the ceiling. The cover of the fan shook just a little. A moment later, it was detached from the ceiling and suspended two or three inches below. Slowly the fan unit lowered, and Parmenides could see that it was held by... a hand? But the fingers, if fingers they were, were too few, as well as elongated. The long, painfully thin hand emerged, then a wrist no thicker than a single bone, and a forearm.

Parmenides could not fathom what he saw. The opening where the fan had been attached was no more than six inches square. Was the messenger going to unlatch a larger, secret portal? Surely it couldn’t hope to...

The rest of a long, emaciated arm followed. In the light, Parmenides could see that the skin was scaly in patches and dark, dark green. Then the surreal scene grew stranger still. A misshapen, bulbous joint—a shoulder—wriggled through the opening. And then the head began. It seemed to fill the opening, but then somehow contracted like a deflated ball. The wrinkled crown crossed the threshold and expanded again, filling out somewhat. The rest of the head passed similarly, slowly rippling. Parmenides steadied himself against the doorframe. He wondered if perhaps the message needn’t be delivered in person after all.

Even when the head was through, Parmenides wasn’t sure exactly how the chest fit. The ribcage seemed to compress, to fold in on itself. He kept expecting to hear bones grating or the pop of joints dislocating, but the passing occurred in virtual silence.

After the torso, it went much more quickly; though in truth, much less time had passed than Parmenides at first believed, so engrossed was he in that which was literally unfolding before him. At last, with one dexterous foot still grasping the edge of the opening, the messenger was able to stretch all the way to the floor. He seemed a long string of body parts only inadvertently connected—drawn-out limbs and over-sized joints. His eyes were small and black and almost lost among the splotchiness of his irregularly bulging cranium; his nose and mouth would have been delicate on a beautiful woman, but seemed disconcertingly out of place on this misaligned, cadaverous heap.

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A few seconds more and the messenger was squatting on the floor, his spindly arms hugging his folded legs to his chest. Those parts of his body not covered with scales were darkened by severe bruising.

“Greetings, young Assamite,” said the same kindly voice, now somehow originating from the creature before Parmenides. “I am Jon Courier.”

“Well named and well met,” the Assamite said stiffly. “You may call me Parmenides.” The creature already knew that. His kind supposedly knew everything. And though the voice was still gentle, the eyes watched Parmenides as if he were a predator.

“Vykos is away for the evening,” Parmenides said, hoping to ease the beast’s agitation. “We are alone.”

Courier nodded. He looked as if his spine and neck had trouble holding his head aloft. Perhaps he was more at home in the tight crawl spaces of city and sewer. Indeed, he appeared at a loss sitting there, huddled in the middle of the cold bathroom floor. Then, just as Parmenides had these thoughts, Courier reached out a hand. Parmenides’s instinct was to step back; he checked his response and held his ground. He was too far away for the creature to reach him.

But Courier did reach him. The hand kept coming, the arm stretching out to the doorway. The assassin froze, gripped by a revulsion as deep as that he’d felt upon awaking mid-experiment and finding Vykos tinkering with his internal physiology. The hand came closer—mottled green, purple, and black; thick, shingled skin and deep bruises. Finally, it came to rest on his forearm. Thumb and three fingers, one half as long as it should have been, stroked the hair on Parmenides’s arm. Courier seemed slightly bemused. Then, more quickly than he’d reached out, the Nosferatu withdrew its hand, and a crinkled piece of paper rested on Parmenides’s arm.

He took and unfolded the paper. It was a soup label peeled from a can, but on the back were scrawled the names of two streets, an intersection not too far from the hotel.

“Go there,” Courier said. He seemed calmer for having touched Parmenides, or maybe the fact that the message was now delivered comforted the creature. Without waiting for a reply, Courier uncoiled his body and easily reached the opening in the ceiling. He thrust a hand through first and pulled himself upward. Not until his skull had collapsed and slipped through the hole did his second foot leave the floor. In the other foot he held the fan unit. In a matter of seconds, the cover was reattached, and Parmenides stood alone in the bathroom. There was no sign of the creature’s brief visit; none, at least, other than the goosebumps still standing on Parmenides’s skin. He gave another look at the sink and toilet—those receptacles that Vykos only used to dispose of liquefied flesh that she no longer had a purpose for—then closed the door.

**Friday, 24 September 1999, 11:42 PM**  
**The corner of 20th Street and I Street**  
**Washington, D.C.**



The gray Land Cruiser pulled to the curb within seconds of Parmenides reaching the intersection. A flurry of thoughts rushed through his mind as he stepped deliberately toward the vehicle. He had little reason to suspect treachery. If Vykos desired him destroyed, there were simpler ways. That did not rule out the possibility of betrayal from Vykos's putative Sabbat allies, if one wished to move against the new archbishop of Washington. But why go to such trouble to eliminate a mere ghoul? Parmenides felt confident that none had seen through the Ravenna charade.

Unless Courier was not what he professed to be. Or not who he claimed, at least. There was no doubt *what* he was. Nosferatu. But it was he who had contacted Parmenides; it was he also who had asserted his role as go-between for the Assamite and his masters. There were Nosferatu that served the Sabbat. Had Courier duped him?

Parmenides watched as Ravenna's hand reached for the door handle. No interior light shone when he opened the door.

"Get in," said the driver, obscured by darkness.

Parmenides did so and pulled the door shut. The car was in motion immediately, pulling away from the curb quickly but not recklessly, nor with so much haste as to draw attention.

"Your sire sends his greetings," said the driver, still obscured by darkness though Parmenides was only a meter away.

"My sire...? *She* went to her Final Death nearly two hundred years ago." It was the type of test of non-confirmation that Parmenides would expect, but which, in the end, proved nothing. The Tzimisce were capable of replacing a contact with a credible doppelganger, or of uncovering many secrets through torture. This driver could be a forgery—and if truly a child of Haqim, undoubtedly was skeptical of Parmenides's identity.

But then the darkness faded away within the car, and sitting across from him was... "Fatima." Fatima al-Faqadi. Parmenides, though he hated to admit so even to himself, was surprised. That Fatima, most highly regarded of the brotherhood, assassin without peer, should be here could only mean that he had been chosen for great deeds.

"It is strange..." she said, "to see you with this other face, and voice."

Parmenides nodded. "And not altogether pleasant, even for myself."

In those first seconds, his trained eye took in every detail of Fatima. She wore a loose, long-sleeved shirt over close-fitting pants, with her dark hair pulled back. She had been sitting with only one hand on the steering wheel, but now she casually raised her left hand to the wheel as well. Her eyes were in constant motion, not jerking about nervously but scanning calmly like a bird of prey, watching—the road before them, other cars, the scattered pedestrians, the side and rearview mirrors. The rearview mirror, Parmenides noted, was not oriented to show her the scene behind the car. He suspected it was trained on his hands, which rested easily in his lap.

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He noticed, too, her voice. He had not recognized it at first; he had not even realized that it was a woman who spoke. It was not some crude disguise, merely a complete failure to register. Just as she had shielded her image from him, she had masked the true nature of her voice. These were stratagems Parmenides well knew, that he could perform himself; but she was strong enough in the blood to employ them against him.

Fatima offered no further conversation, and that being the case, it was not Parmenides's place to do so. They rode along in relative silence. Even the sound of pavement under the tires and the jostling of the heavy vehicle over potholes seemed muted and distant.

Parmenides was reassured that this was indeed Fatima and not an imposter. The Tzimisce might be able to duplicate her physical form, but he had met her in person on several occasions before, and she had made a lasting impression on him—her quiet grace and severe dignity. She was of the blood, and her nature shone through in a way that he felt no doppelganger could imitate.

With that realization, a wave of relief washed over him. For the first time since the beginning of this ordeal, he was in the presence of a clansman. Never before had he craved such contact; never before had he needed it. But the indignities he had suffered at the hands of Vykos, the despair and isolation that had welled up within him upon learning that he'd been abandoned by his elders to the foulest of fiends, and the guilt at how he'd begun to feel toward Vykos when he was in her presence... It was all nearly too much to bear.

He had clung to the connection that the Nosferatu had offered, yet even in that, Parmenides had not been sure. Until now. Until the message the hideous creature brought had proved to reunite Parmenides with the children of Haqim. Courier had been true to his word.

*I pity you—you who have been given over to fiends.* The words that the Nosferatu had spoken had struck Parmenides as odd, and did doubly so now that he had actually seen Courier. How could that wretched being pity anyone else? Parmenides's appearance had been altered, yes. Maybe permanently so. But strength returned to his body. He was no outcast. He was not pariah to eyes mortal and undead. His befuddlement began to give way to indignation. How dare that creature pity him!

The sensation of pain reached him slowly. He became aware of his own fingers digging into his legs. He purposefully did not look at Fatima as he gradually relaxed his hands. No doubt she had seen. Why was he so nervous, so out of sorts? He couldn't understand. This reunion with his clanmate should have been a balm to his soul after all he'd endured.

But in the presence of elders, he realized, there was always judgment. Had Fatima been sent to reward him, to offer him opportunity for glory and honor? Or had she come to judge? Had Parmenides somehow offended or disappointed his elders?

These were worries that had never plagued him before... before Vykos....

Parmenides reached for the button to lower his window—the night air would do him good. Fatima casually lifted her left hand from the steering wheel again and rested that arm at her side. Realizing that he'd moved more quickly than was perhaps advisable under the circumstances, Parmenides left his hand on the button for a long moment. He watched Fatima's reflected silhouette in the lowering glass of the window, then slowly and deliberately returned his hand to his lap. Shortly, Fatima's hand returned to the wheel.

She drove them out of the city proper and on through the sprawling subdivisions that spread outward, encircling the diseased city like so many vultures. A glance at the

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stars confirmed what the road signs told Parmenides: They were heading west. He knew the disposition of many of the Sabbath defenses around the city—though the majority were to the north, toward Baltimore—and considered offering Fatima guidance. But through intuition or reconnaissance, she chose the routes that would not bring them into conflict with patrols or static defensive positions.

Within an hour, the sights and smells of tightly packed humanity gave way to more open spaces and larger runs of trees. Fatima kept them heading generally westward. When at last she turned from the highway, she seemed to know exactly the path she wished to take. There was no hesitation as she turned onto this two-lane road and then a few miles later onto a gravel track. City and subdivision had both given way completely to rolling countryside, and when she pulled the Land Cruiser off the gravel road and came to a stop in a sloped, grassy field, there were no signs of civilization other than the road itself and a barbed-wire fence in disrepair about a kilometer distant.

Parmenides had grown used to the gentle growling of the large engine. When Fatima turned off the car, the absence of that sound was deafening. The night was full of other noises: crickets and tree frogs in the distance but loud nonetheless, moths fluttering wings before the headlights, other insects that were unfamiliar to Parmenides, the mechanical pop of Fatima's door opening, and the quiet pinging to remind her she had left the key in the ignition. Parmenides joined her in standing beside the vehicle. The headlights, still shining across the field, threw the rest of the night into dark relief.

He wondered briefly what this place was, how she had come to choose it. Perhaps this property was owned by some mortal owing allegiance to the clan, or perhaps by an actual member of the brotherhood. Parmenides wondered also *why* she had brought him here. Did she merely need a place to speak uninterrupted? Or perhaps she was taking him away from that city, from Vykos, for good.

Parmenides felt sudden elation at the thought, but there was a twinge of regret as well that caught him quite off guard.

"We have received your reports," Fatima said curtly before Parmenides could examine his own mixed emotions. "You have served admirably... and in trying circumstances."

Parmenides bowed respectfully. These words were the first words of praise Fatima had ever offered him. There was satisfaction in that, but at the moment, he was more interested in what else she had to say, what other purpose she had in mind, for surely Fatima al-Faqadi had not summoned him merely to speak kind words to him. He stood patiently with his arms crossed, keeping his hands in view. He couldn't shake the feeling he'd had during the drive that judgment hung over him. Fatima's left hand never strayed far from her side.

"Do you think there is value in your remaining where you are, with Vykos?" Fatima asked.

Again, pride swelled up in Parmenides's breast, but he promptly held that in check and answered deferentially: "The elders know far better than I the value of the information I am able to gain."

Fatima frowned, as if Parmenides's answer was problematic, or as if perhaps she had not asked exactly the right question. "Do you have Vykos's trust?" she asked.

"I doubt any creature on earth has—or would *want*—Vykos's trust. She does confide in me... at times," he said, but then thought to correct himself: "Or if not *confides*, I think I am conveniently at hand sometimes when she talks. I think her mind is always in action,

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and if she did not speak to someone...” Parmenides stopped. He realized that, at that moment, he was describing himself as well as Vykos. He was running on with pure supposition, wasting an elder’s time. He scrambled for a succinct way to complete his thought—“She would speak to a pet, or to a chair, if I were not there”—but did not care, after the fact, for the implied belittlement of his own role. He was not so insignificant as a pet, and he could not believe that Vykos would think of him so.

For a long while, Fatima stood silently pondering, exactly what Parmenides did not know. But he was more greatly confused by himself than by Fatima. He was confused by what he was feeling for Vykos, his torturer; by the sense of regret that tugged at him when he thought of being taken away from her. At times, it was true, he had feigned affection toward her, but that was all part of the act, all part of the effort to gain her confidence—or at least to allay her suspicion. She could not know that he was passing information, via the Nosferatu and therefore the Camarilla, to his own elders. His attentions toward her were purely subterfuge, yet now he felt her loss keenly before he was even taken from her. That fact disturbed him—no, more than that, *frightened* him—and caused him to cast a wary glance at Fatima. How canny was she at reading him? How much of this was she aware of?

Fatima stood with her hands clasped before her. Her stare bore into Parmenides. He felt suddenly weak, as if he had not fed recently, which was not the case. A small muscle behind his left knee began to twitch uncontrollably. He shifted his weight.

“We have decided,” Fatima said at last, evenly and without emotion, “that the arrangement with Vykos cannot continue. You will be allowed to destroy her when the opportunity presents itself.”

The twitch in Parmenides’s leg turned to cramp and spread to other muscles. For a split second he thought he might be forced to drop to his knees, but he maintained his balance. He closed his eyes, rubbed at one as if a flying insect had gotten in it. He felt blood on his palm; he must have inadvertently dug his nails into flesh.

“Before that time, there is something else you must learn,” Fatima continued.

Parmenides could barely hear her. A strange roaring had sprung up in his ears to match the roaring pain in his leg. His leg reminded him of all the wrong that had been done to it—that Vykos had done to it! She had melded flesh and bone, forming one limb of two, and that one joined to the floor, and then put it all back eventually, when it suited her. The roaring in his ears became a pounding at his temples.

“I must learn...” he heard himself say. Fatima was so far away. He couldn’t see her. The headlights were shining directly in his face—but they were not; they still shone across the field.

“Has Vykos spoken to you of Monçada?”

Monçada. Monçada. The name rattled around in Parmenides’s brain and only slowly came to hold any meaning. “Monçada,” his voice said. Parmenides reached a hand—slowly—behind him until he felt the car. He eased his weight against it. The support seemed to help his leg. His vision began to clear, the pounding at his temples to lessen slightly. “Monçada. She mentions him occasionally... in passing mostly. She had certain... *unflattering* things to say about the templar he sent to oppose Lucita. And she mentions that Vallejo’s true loyalty lies with the cardinal and not her.” Parmenides smoothed back his hair, trying unobtrusively to massage his temples while he also stretched his leg slightly.

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“She told me,” Parmenides remembered, “that I needed to be the one to destroy Prince Vitel, so the glory would be hers and not the cardinal’s. She answers to Monçada, but there seems to be something of a rivalry between them—friendly or otherwise.” Certainly it was coincidence that speaking of Vykos seemed to ease the pain in his leg and head.

*You will be allowed to destroy her....*

Parmenides fought those words down, tried to ignore them for the time being. He had to keep the pounding at bay, had to impress Fatima favorably. He could see her clearly again now. She was staring at the ground, measuring what he told her.

“You need to learn more about Monçada?” Parmenides said.

“Yes. And his haven in Madrid—defenses, bodyguards, and so forth. You can do this?”

Parmenides nodded, perhaps a bit more eagerly than he would have liked. It was unbecoming to appear too eager. “I can.”

Fatima regarded him for a long moment. Her eyes narrowed and Parmenides felt the weight of her gaze. Finally, she nodded decisively. “Do so. Then destroy her.”

With that, the matter was resolved to Fatima’s satisfaction. She turned from Parmenides, climbed back into the Land Cruiser, and cranked the engine. The vibrating car against his back brought Parmenides back to the here and now.

*Do so. Then destroy her.*

He moved around the rear of the car and to the passenger’s door, trying to keep the pounding down, trying to concentrate on his most immediate concerns: to find out what he could about Monçada, about his haven and defenses. Fatima, or someone equally deserving, was going after Monçada, and Parmenides was to be a part of it. That was what he had to think about: the honor granted him by the elders. This would be but the beginning. He would prove himself. His name soon would be whispered in awe throughout the clan.

*Then destroy her.*

The rest would come later. No need to worry now. He settled into the seat beside Fatima as she steered the car back onto the gravel road.





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**Saturday, 25 September 1999, 12:12 AM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**

Calebros yanked the sheet of paper from his Smith Corona and examined his notes in the light of the candelabra. The base of his former desk lamp protruded upside down from a trashcan by his desk.

Rereading the words he'd typed, he was dismayed—but not surprised—by his unfounded assumptions. Little wonder. Merely thinking about Assamites unnerved him. He'd thought that Fatima might become involved eventually, but that didn't mean he had to like it now.

He reached for his red pen.

25 September 1999

Re: Fatima

FILE COPY

Courier reports---helped Fatima contact Ravenna/Parmenides; unable to learn what passed between them.

Our people aided Fatima in Hartford as well---quite a list of favors accumulating; remind her of that if necessary. Our ploy to lure her out seems to have worked.

More help for her than I would have liked, but how do you turn down an Assamite - esp. Fatima?

file action update: Fatima al-Faqadi

→ Not necessarily. Other possible factors - increased Assamite activity worldwide. What is their agenda?



**Saturday, 25 September 1999, 2:23 AM**  
**The corner of 22nd Street and R Street**  
**Washington, D.C.**

Fatima let Parmenides out within two miles of the hotel that Vykos had co-opted from Marcus Vitel. She turned the Land Cruiser south toward the private airport and the plane that would carry her to Spain. Reaching under her shirt, she removed the P 226 Sig that she'd been wearing on her left hip. She had given Parmenides enough not-so-subtle indications that it was there, and he had responded accordingly, measuring his movements carefully. He probably had assumed that she doubted his identity, especially considering his completely altered appearance, but that hadn't been the case. He was her clansman. At Fatima's age, the blood knew.

There had still existed the very real chance that she would destroy him, and if she'd moved against him, he would have guarded against the weapon in her left hand, more so than the dagger from the wrist-sheath on her right arm—the dagger that would have slit his throat and sent paralyzing poison coursing through his undead body. Then the 9mm explosive shell from the Sig would have finished the matter.

It had not come to that, however. Fatima was not boundless in her confidence that Parmenides could destroy Vykos. That devious and venerable creature harbored more deceits than the desert had granules of sand. Under most circumstances, Fatima would have ordered her charge back to Alamut rather than return him to the fiend, but there was the chance that he might uncover some detail that would aid her own quest for Monçada. For that chance, she was rightfully willing to risk Parmenides. No child of Haqim would shirk such duty. In a way, Fatima thought, Parmenides, in accepting his lot without question, was more steadfast in his loyalty than was she, doubting al-Ashrad's word that the Way of Allah and the Path of Blood must one night diverge; than was she, still doubting in the back of her mind the elders' pronouncement about the Kurd who had attacked her just two months before; than was she, possibly having endangered her mission by needing to see Lucita; than was she, still trying to ignore the fact that Lucita, like her sire, must be destroyed.

Again, she fought down such thoughts. They did not further her mission, and she had much traveling still to do this night.

**Sunday, 26 September 1999, 12:50 AM**  
**(Saturday, 25 September 1999, 6:50 PM; Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**



The hours were hopelessly tangled with the darkness. The black tendrils twisted time, picked it apart and rearranged it into different forms. Lucita herself was a master of shadow, but there was too much of her sire here. His soul had seeped into the very earth over the centuries, infused the walls, the floors, the black air, with his will. Lucita's feet moved forward in weak, shuffling steps. The passageways confounded her. Ever so often, something she saw sparked memories: tunnels of oppressive stone closing in to crush her; chambers with every inch of every wall covered by holy icons, small wooden plaques, the colors as faded as any memory of the hands, long dead and forgotten, that had painted them; rough-hewn passages leading down to hell; massive iron gates embedded in bedrock; halls of statues and carvings, the crucified Christ in his passion, the Virgin Mother prepared to intervene on behalf of the sinner; Pontius Pilate, his hands washed not of blood but in it, a fountain and basin full of thick burbling.

Here there was a mounted firebrand that burned but gave no light, there another torch, burned out for centuries. Amidst the darkness, Lucita was not sure which memories were of the present, which from years ago. She had blocked them out so well—so well that she'd thought she could come back to this place without revisiting them. The tunnels led onward, and she followed, unsure what was new ground, what she had seen before.

The darkness parted for a moment. She saw Monçada, stripped naked to the waist, and herself drinking from a deep gash in his breast, suckling greedily of the blood. The wiry, gray hair on his chest tickled her face, caught between her teeth. His moans of ecstasy covered his silent psalms of praise to heaven. Lucita felt the darkness flowing within her, making her stronger, tying her to this place, closing in about her, parting again. She awoke to bliss, gentle fingers, a fine-toothed comb passing through her hair. Her hair had always been beautiful. Silky, flowing. But the path she had chosen was narrow, solitary. Neither time nor safety for servants, and since the night of her Embrace she could not see. Silver-backed glass denied her. She was dead to it, and to herself. For so many years, she knew her beautiful hair only by touch. She lay naked, beneath silken sheets, and a woman stroked her hair, spread it out across pillows and tenderly ministered to every tangle, smoothed the rough ways. The woman stroked a thousand times, and a thousand more. Lucita could almost imagine, *could almost remember*, the sensation of warm sunshine upon her face, upon her closed eyes.

When next she opened her eyes, the woman was gone. The room was small, perhaps a monk's cell at some point. But the cold stone was covered by bright tapestries, and a thick Persian rug awaited Lucita's feet. She pulled back the blankets and stood despite the vertigo. She saw the white gown hanging on the door and then looked at her own bare body, forever young. The gown, though modest, was a bit too elegant, not what she would have chosen. She nearly chose the shock value of going about naked but shuddered at the idea of her sire laying eyes upon her. She took the gown and raised her arms, letting

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the folds of cloth slide down around her. She opened the door and stepped from the safe comfort of her cell into the swirling shadows.

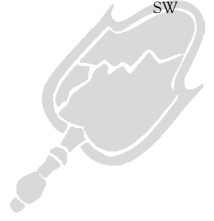
Her feet were coated with the dirt and dust of countless years. Her fingers too, for she had leaned against the stonework and the frescoes for support as she wandered. For as long as she could remember, she had been fueled by hatred, but now that cold fire was covered. She was too tired for hatred, for anger, and all that was left was emptiness. Monçada had beaten her, but it was not her body he coveted most highly, she knew. He needn't have hit her a single time. She wouldn't have held out long against his will. But he wanted her to come to him freely, uncompelled.

As Lucita walked, fingers trailing along the stone that was hidden from her eyes, she came to another of the colossal gates that, at intervals along different routes, had blocked her way. She sensed its presence before she saw it, as one might sense the great void of a chasm before stepping into it. With both hands she was unable to grasp completely around a single bar. The iron was cold like a winter gravestone, immovable as the earth. Beyond, the passage curved to the left and upward. There was also a tunnel branching off to the right. From the left, Lucita smelled air that was not quite so stale, not so totally saturated with the blackness from the soul of her jailer. From the side tunnel came a rumbling growl and movement of shadow like a slowly rising tide. Neither path was open to Lucita, just as neither of the paths that she or her sire would follow could ever be opened: She would never surrender willingly to him, and he would never leave off trying to see that she did. They had come to an impassable portal, had reached it hundreds of years ago, and never would they cross the threshold. Yet they were bound together by blood.

The only possible escape for Lucita lay elsewhere, in Final Death or insanity. As she stumbled away from the gate, despair clutching at her heart, the darkness rushed after her.

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**Sunday, 26 September 1999, 6:45 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**



By Anatole's twenty-first day in the cave, he could not move.



**Sunday, 26 September 1999, 8:07 PM (2:07 PM; Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**

**Madrid, Spain**

Monçada was at his prayers, kneeling in the chapel, when he heard the door open behind him. Her footsteps had been silent. Had she come thinking to destroy him, as she had on several occasions in the past? He did not raise his bowed head or turn to face her.

“Join me in prayer, my daughter?”

Lucita did not speak. She walked past him to the altar, to the single candle that burned there. She wore the simple white gown that Cristobal had provided for her—classic lines, peerless craftsmanship. She hated it, of course.

Monçada was acutely aware of her silence. No profane rebuke to his invitation; she neither spat at him nor suggested he defile himself with the crucifix. This was progress. She stood with her back to him, facing instead the altar, the candle, the crucified Christ.

“I cannot stay here,” Lucita said.

Monçada sighed. “But you have been away for so long.”

She placed her hands flat upon the altar and leaned forward until her lovely hair dangled dangerously close to the candle flame. Fatigue was apparent in the angle of her shoulders, her neck, her hanging head. Monçada had given enough blood to revive her, not to make her strong.

“If you keep me here,” she said, “I will destroy myself.”

Monçada found himself surprised both by her words and by his capacity to be surprised. Defiance he expected from his childe, but self-destructiveness? That type of behavior, he’d always suspected, would be merely a phase she would outgrow, but to think of her destruction coming at her own hands.... Monçada suppressed laughter. She shared his blood; she was too strong to succumb to despair for long. No, this was a gambit she’d dreamed up to force his hand.

“And how would you do that, my daughter?” he asked. “Are we not a hardy lot? Cut off your own head? Difficult. Do you gaze at that flame wistfully? Do you think any fire could long burn in my haven without being smothered by shadow? Do you think that were I to keep you under lock and key you would ever escape to meet the sun?”

Now she turned to face him, and Monçada saw the grimy smudges on the white of her gown and across the perfect curves of her face. “I will find a way,” she said. “I will destroy us both.”

This time Monçada did laugh, though out of care for her feelings he choked the guffaw off short. “Melodrama suits you even less than cynicism, my dear childe. But I will prove to you that I hold only your best interests to heart.

“You are a childe of the modern nights, my daughter. I know, I know,” he waved away her protest, “you were born and Embraced long ago. Of all people, I should know that. Yet the ideals of the modern age were alive in you long before they infused the rest of the world—independence no matter the price or folly involved, self-aggrandizement at the expense of all others. Those were the qualities that drew me to

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you originally, though even I did not fully understand at the time. Ah, the Lord works in mysterious ways.

“I will allow you your freedom,” he said, reaching out a hand to her. She hesitated, but then came to him this time. “But you mustn’t go far.” He closed his fingers around her wrist and held firmly against her weak opposition. “You must remain in the city. I will have Cristobal arrange a suitable house, but you must not leave the city. Will you promise me that?”

“That is not freedom. It’s just a longer chain,” Lucita said.

There. Monçada smiled inwardly at her defiance. That was the daughter he knew and loved above all others. “It may be as you say, but I have been without you for so long. But,” he began to rise and turn away from her, “if you do not wish the choice of a longer chain...”

“I will stay in the city,” she said grudgingly.

Monçada settled back down onto his haunches. “I know you will... until you regain your strength. But we will discuss the matter in more detail before then.” He reached to brush the hair back from her face, but Lucita turned from him. Already her spirit was growing strong again. It would be interesting to see how long his hold of blood held her near this time.



**Monday, 27 September 1999, 4:04 AM**  
**(Sunday, 26 September 1999, 10:04 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Plaza Morería**  
**Madrid, Spain**

The unmarked delivery truck, though it took up almost the entire street, barreled along Calle de la Redondilla heedless of stray dogs, trash cans, or young lovers. The intimate whispers of the couples suddenly became curses hurled at the passing driver. The crowded buildings in this part of the city were relatively young, sprung up in the last one or two hundred years, but the steep and twisting streets were no more suited for motor traffic than they would have been centuries ago when the old Arab *medina* had occupied this section. Still, for the driver to have proceeded at a safe speed would have been completely out of character and would have aroused suspicion, rather than merely the consternation of his victims.

Just beyond the plaza, the truck came to a sudden stop with much creaking of metal and shifting of cargo. Within a tiny shop, Anwar threw on a shirt. The night was cool, and there was no need for curious neighbors, who might have been awakened by the truck's arrival, to see a bare-chested stranger assisting with the unloading.

"Rafael!" screeched Pilar, the tiny rug vendor, rushing out into the street in her nightgown. "You are supposed to deliver in the morning!" Her shrill voice echoed from the cobbles and cement, achieving such a pitch as to pierce the deep rumblings of the truck's engine easily and destroy all hopes of her neighbors for a peaceful night's sleep. "Is it dark or is it light?" she berated the driver, raising her hands to the sky.

"It is morning," said Rafael, not the least discomfited by her scolding. He kicked the inside of his door, and it whipped open and slammed against the side of the cab with a resounding crash. "May God and the saints watch over imbeciles—it is the middle of the night!" Pilar lamented. "And why don't you fix that door?"

"It is better that it doesn't open while I am driving," Rafael said.

"*Ai, caramba.*" She clutched her head in her hands. "Get down from there and help unload these rugs. But do not breathe on my boys—*estúpido* might be contagious."

Anwar, Mahmud, and three other men hurried out of the shop and began unloading the rolled rugs, Pilar chiding them and Rafael all the while. By the time Rafael in his truck roared off into the night—or morning, depending on one's perspective—the rugs were neatly stacked in a crowded storage room. All the rugs save one, which was carried down to a basement room. Pilar's three "boys" returned to the streets of Madrid and certain duties that awaited them. Anwar and Mahmud unrolled the final rug while Pilar expertly removed the fabric plugs at each end that protected the center, and its occupant, from accidental exposure to sunlight.

Fatima lay perfectly still until she was completely unrolled, and then remained on her back until Mahmud and Anwar each offered her a hand and helped her to her feet.

"Ah, Fatima," Pilar crooned, brushing the two men aside to hug the new arrival. The old woman came up to Fatima's shoulders, and Fatima was not tall.

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Fatima lifted her arms and accepted the old ghoul's greeting in a stiff but not unfriendly way. "It has been many years," Fatima said.

"Too many years," the wrinkled old woman said, stepping back and wagging her finger. But then she shrugged, and all reproach vanished from her voice and manner. "But I understand why you do not visit often. It is enough that you are here now. You are hungry after your travels?"

Anwar was almost affronted that Pilar had offered nourishment to neither he nor Mahmud upon their arrivals; but they were not her favorite, and taking offense would serve no purpose at any rate. The old woman ruled the roost here. If the master of Alamut was the Old Man of the Mountain, in Madrid Pilar was the Old Woman of the Hill. She had served faithfully, maintaining operations for the children of Haqim for hundreds of years in this city, despite the overwhelming Sabbat presence. Her "boys," ghouls to a man, were expert at picking off the stray Sabbat Cainite and reclaiming his blood before the victim knew he was surrounded. They never took Cainites of consequence, or dignitaries in the city to pay respects to Cardinal Monçada, who sat weaving malice from the center of his web. Madrid, like any Sabbat city, was always full of strays, most of whom were never missed. But there was always vitae on hand for *important* visitors to Pilar's shop.

"Thank you, but no," Fatima said. "My hunger drives me."

Anwar puzzled at this, which couldn't be true. Since the curse of the vile Tremere had been broken and the children of Haqim made able again to take Cainite vitae, feeding had merely served to *heighten* rather than sate his hunger. The taste of blood long denied was compelling. No longer were he or his brethren forced to feed on mortals or the contrived elixir of the *amr*. Cainite blood drove the assassin to seek more Cainite blood—so much so that, more than in the past, stories were circulating of *rafiq* surrendering to the inner Beast, to the corruption of Caine. Was Fatima so strong that she felt none of this? Or did she prefer a clear head to passion? Did she fear that she might do her job too well?

Pilar did not appear offended at Fatima's refusal. The old woman nodded deferentially, and turned to Anwar. "You," she smacked the back of his hand lightly, "bring that rug up when you come." Then she was gone, back up the stairs.

"Come," said Fatima, not wasting any time. She led them to a smaller room where she seemed to know that the maps would be spread out. Anwar followed dutifully. The frustration he'd felt with Mahmud was drowned beneath the wash of expectation now that Fatima had arrived. The time of attack must be close. Pilar's personnel could have performed routine surveillance. Fatima would not have brought Mahmud and himself to Madrid without reason.

Fatima studied the maps intently. Anwar watched as her eyes took in every detail, every note that he and Mahmud had made. He could almost see her forming a strategy, sorting the plethora of disparate facts: points of access to Monçada's lair, building locations, hours of use, occupants, verified defenses....

The target, Anwar decided, must be Monçada. Why else would Fatima be here herself? There was no other mortal or get of Khayyin of sufficient standing—unless she were going after Lucita. But when Anwar and Fatima had spoken in New York, he had formed the impression that she did not expect Lucita to be in Madrid. Fatima certainly had not hinted that the cardinal's childe would be present.

"What is this location?" Fatima asked.

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It was the question Anwar had been awaiting. He glanced deferentially at Mahmud, but Mahmud merely nodded. “That is the house where Lucita went tonight,” Anwar said.

Fatima’s hands, which had been tracing different streets and routes across the maps, were suddenly very still.

“I saw her enter the church three nights ago, San Nicolás de las Servitas,” Anwar explained. “Tonight, she walked out the front door and went to this place. She took no pains to disguise herself or stay out of sight.”

“She would have no fear of the Sabbat in the city,” Mahmud said, “if under the protection of her sire.”

“I think she wouldn’t fear the Sabbat regardless,” Anwar said. Lucita was *antitribu*, she had turned against her clan—disloyalty, another failing in Anwar’s eyes. But there were few among her erstwhile clanmates, or the entire Sabbat for that matter, that would pose her serious threat. This week was the first that Anwar had laid eyes upon her, but she didn’t strike him as the type to be compelled by fear to hide. “She strolled along the street in plain view. I don’t understand how she has survived so long.”

Fatima still leaned over the table and looked at the maps, but she did not actively see them. Rather, they happened to be there before her, and she had not moved. “She did not realize you followed her?” Fatima asked, still not looking up.

“I did nothing that let my presence be known,” Anwar said.

The three assassins stood silently for several minutes. Anwar did not take his eyes from Fatima, and she in turn did not shift her gaze from the maps. From upstairs came the slidings and thuds of Pilar arranging the new rugs.

“Make sure that she is watched,” Fatima said at last.

“Do you object to having one of Pilar’s teams watch her?” Mahmud asked. “Or would you prefer one of us do it?”

“Pilar’s people are our people. They will suffice,” Fatima said.

That was the answer Anwar had expected. Unless Lucita actually were the target, there was little reason to busy one of them keeping track of her. So his impression that Fatima had not expected Lucita to be in Madrid, that Fatima had not come here to destroy Monçada’s childe, seemed to be confirmed.

Mahmud quietly turned and left the small room and made his way upstairs to see that the arrangements were made for Lucita to be watched. Anwar stayed. He stood and watched Fatima staring at the maps. He did not look away even when she finally looked up and met his gaze. He wanted to know what was going on in her mind. What was the great Fatima thinking? Her intellect, her killer’s instinct, was completely engaged. Anwar could see that much, but as in New York, exactly what was taking place behind those dark eyes was hidden from him. How were her preparations different from—superior to—his own?

“Monçada,” Fatima said without preamble, interrupting Anwar’s thought.

“The target?”

Fatima nodded.

Anwar’s mind shifted at once to the details of the cardinal’s lair, to the information that Fatima had presented him and that which he had gathered additionally over the past few nights. Of the half-dozen entrances they knew about, which would be the most accessible without raising an alarm? The Alfonso V was not a strong possibility. The

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hotel often hosted Monçada's guests, and security there would no doubt be tight. The opera was more promising, with the number of people coming and going at all times of the night and day. There was always the church itself...

The problem, Anwar knew, was that even their most current knowledge was limited to externals. Easy and secret access did not necessarily combine with lax security once an assassin entered Monçada's lair. On the contrary, if the cardinal were worth his salt—and he would not have survived this long in the dog-eat-dog Sabbat if he weren't—the most accessible entrances would also possess the most impenetrable internal defenses.

All of these factors, which Anwar began to comb through, were underscored by the pleasant surprise that Fatima had revealed to him the target. She had confided in him. It was a detail he did not yet necessarily need to know in order to perform his duties. Obviously, she thought that he might provide some insight—that he was worthy to possess that all-important knowledge. Or, he thought with a bit less self-congratulation, she might have assumed that he had already guessed the identity of the target, which he had, and she sought to sharpen his mind by removing the vagaries of speculation.

Either way, Fatima had confided in him. She had displayed her confidence in him. Anwar did his best not to puff up too broadly, not to play the part of the appreciative, awed novice.

"Mahmud speaks highly of you," said Fatima.

Anwar nodded sharply in acknowledgement and returned his attention the maps, more dedicated than ever to helping this woman who had paid him such tribute, and whose success would bring him boundless glory.

**Thursday, 30 September 1999, 1:42 AM**  
**(Wednesday, 29 September 1999, 7:42 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Cava de San Miguel**  
**Madrid, Spain**

Madrid was an old city wearing young clothes. Fatima stood below the Plaza Mayor. She was near but apart from the vibrant humanity that filled the row of tapas bars. Mortals made their way from one establishment to another, drawn by the lure of food, drink, and music. Of the obvious tourists, young Europeans were predominant. The older Americans and Japanese, all awkwardness and blinding flashbulbs, had retreated to the safety of their rooms hours ago. Many native Madrileños graced the night as well. They sauntered joyfully along the sloped avenue.

For Fatima, however, the ripples of celebration did not conceal an undercurrent of struggle and death. The bars themselves, so gaily acquitted, spoke to that past. The storefronts were built into the retaining wall of the plaza above. The weathered stones were the same that had looked out over the street centuries ago when Christian had killed Moor, and Moor Christian. The modern trappings, like the newer sections of the city, belied the tragedy of the past. Humanity's memory was short, lest conscience smother life altogether.

And mixed among humanity were the monstrous and inhuman. Some better than others upheld the charade, pretending that they were like the mortals they hunted. For although they disavowed the Masquerade of the impotent Camarilla, the Sabbat followed similar tenets—granted, loosely at times—out of sheer necessity. Cainites of the Sabbat might consider mortals no better than cattle, yet the fact remained that mortals alarmed *en masse* would destroy the undead. Thus even among the ravers, a *de facto* Masquerade was enforced, despite the excesses of the young and impulsive. Ironically enough, in Sabbat cities where a powerful elder held sway, as did Monçada in Madrid, the undead population was kept in check and the neonates monitored closely. The distance between Camarilla and Sabbat was less than many in each sect liked to believe. To Fatima, they were interchangeable. In the end, all Cainite blood would be reclaimed by Haqim, he who was made immortal by his own hand.

Fatima was thankful that there was much to occupy her. She'd spent much of the evening re-verifying information that Mahmud and Anwar had already confirmed. Mahmud she had long known to be dependable. Anwar was also proving his worth. Fatima had not needed to correct any of the observations made by the two assassins or by Pilar's experienced team of ghouls. Not that Fatima had expected to need to do so. Her following behind the others was a redundancy, a safeguard that, were speed more vital, she would abandon. She moved the mission forward at such a deliberate pace for one overriding reason: Despite the cache of knowledge the Assamites had gathered about what obstructed entrance to Cardinal Monçada's haven, neither she nor the others knew exactly what to expect once past the outermost defenses.

Three options for dealing with this deficiency availed themselves to Fatima. The first involved spies. Parmenides was not the only member of the brotherhood who might come across such privy information. Al-Ashrad had approved Fatima's suggestion that

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word go out for those with Lasombra or Sabbat connections to press ahead with the most delicate of inquiries. It wouldn't do to have her target widely known, but the children of Haqim were expert in finding answers without anyone being aware that the questions had been asked.

The second, and to Fatima's thinking preferable, option was torture. Here again, the children of Haqim were no strangers to learning what they must. Where a spy's report must be judged second- or third-hand, a Cainite feeling the first pinprick burns of the morning sun often spoke with authority regarding matters with which he or she was intimately familiar. The difficulty was finding a suitable subject who would not too soon be missed. There were Cainites who had visited with Monçada in his lair, though not many. The cardinal was an insular soul. He took little risk with guests. Here again, Assamites across the world were investigating possibilities.

The final option, which was all that would be left Fatima if the other two failed to produce results, was blind infiltration. Though she needn't move against Monçada this night or perhaps for several more following, al-Ashrad had made it absolutely clear that the cardinal must be destroyed soon. It was one of the few points on which the *amr* had been absolutely clear.

Fatima would wait as long as she felt she could, but if no more of Monçada's secrets were forthcoming, she would proceed nonetheless. Over the years, she had penetrated the fortresses of warlocks and wizards; she had bypassed the defenses of kings and queens and other leaders of state. She had destroyed Cainite elders from every clan, princes and archbishops, in their deadly lairs. But none of them had been a cardinal of the Sabbat. Not one had been Ambrosio Luis Monçada. No one else was Lucita's sire.

Fatima shook her head. She'd been keeping busy, not thinking about Lucita—thinking, in fact, about anything else *but* Lucita. But there was a practical question the Dark Rose's presence raised. Had Lucita compromised the mission? Fatima had faced Lucita, had told her of the upcoming attempt on her sire, out of emotional need—out of weakness. Pragmatism had not entered into the decision. Did Lucita hate her sire enough to help? Was her fundamental loyalty to him such that she would warn him? Fatima had known the possibilities existed, yet she had ignored them. They seemed so remote. Exactly how she had expected Lucita to respond, Fatima wasn't sure. Probably to head off pursuing some agenda of the Lasombra assassin's own—as she had always done—and ignore the matter completely.

What Fatima had *not* expected was for Lucita to journey to Madrid, to visit her sire for, as far as Fatima knew, the first time in nearly a century. Which was exactly what Lucita had done.

Thus Lucita became the final piece of the puzzle, the final clue to the riddle beyond what spies or torture uncovered. Before the attempt could be made, Fatima would have to learn whether or not Lucita had warned her sire. Against her will, Fatima found the thought of another meeting tantalizing. It was, above all else, what she most wanted, what she least wanted.

As Fatima crushed these feelings into a small, tight ball, the tide of humanity swept in and out and through the tapas bars across the street. None of the mortals passed near her. Those that started in her direction happened to turn aside to take a

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circuitous route around the spot where Fatima leaned against a building in shadow. None of the mortals noticed her, nor, she was certain, did any of the weak-minded Sabbat who moved among them.

But Fatima noticed someone.

She noticed motion. A body, there and then not there, among the throng of people. Space that a moment before was occupied, now empty. Fatima's attention shot fully back to the here and now. She scanned the fluid crowd but saw nothing unusual. Then movement again, off to her right. Did someone weave through the crowd out of sight, or had she imagined it?

Now Fatima was instantly in motion—she was not one to imagine things.

She brushed past the nearby humans, none of whom seemed to have noticed what she thought she saw, and none of whom took undue notice of her. The tourists and bar patrons seemed to sense where each of Fatima's next steps was about to take her, and without realizing it, they made way for her. Not parting in huge waves like the Red Sea before Musa, but each going his or her own way, individual rivulets making their separate ways down a pane of glass. Fatima darted through the spaces they vacated, soon clearing the thickest concentration of mortals and increasing her pace to a near-sprint.

She stopped at the next corner. Wherever she looked, mortals strolled in small groups, unconcerned. There was no flash of motion to lead her on, no phantom in her peripheral vision. There was, however, something she could feel, something she could almost smell—a disturbance in the air, the small wake of someone that had just passed that way, and quickly. But no one was close enough to have created that ephemeral trail. No one mortal.

Fatima turned to her left and continued along that long, twisting block. She made her way among the clumps of people, which were growing less frequent away from the tapas bars. The path, the trick of the air, was still there. It too wove through the mortals as if they were stationary obstacles. If Fatima could keep pace, if she could follow the breath of the passing before it dissipated and smoothed back into the calm Madrid night, then she could find whomever—or whatever—had unwittingly caught her attention.

Or perhaps not so unwittingly.

She continued northward across a large avenue. The names of the streets no longer held any meaning. The mortals were little more than blurs. Fatima no longer concealed herself from their minds. They would not know what shot past, and she was completely focused on the shifting eddies of air that wouldn't last more than seconds. She had to be close. Very close.

The necessary speed of her advance created a great danger. Ambush. Whatever she followed could be leading her into a trap, but Fatima was confident that she could deal with even the most lethal of traps. And she could not turn her back on this thing, this presence. It was certainly not mortal, nor of the rabble Sabbat. It didn't have the feel of something to do with the cardinal or his shadowmaster minions. Not even Lucita was capable of such rapid and stealthy movement. Few of Fatima's brethren could have followed this trail. Fatima could not ignore this threat. Not knowing what it was would be too great a risk to her mission. So she followed. Trap or no trap. The blood of Haqim would prevail.

The presence—whether it was hunter or prey—led her along a twisting route through narrow, cobbled alleys. It turned back southward, down streets parallel to those it had just

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traversed. Then it veered again and took her westward. Each step of the way, with each corner she turned, Fatima felt that she was about to catch up. But always it was just beyond her, just out of sight, out of reach. The air swirled as if someone had, a second before, passed. Someone *had* passed. Yet there was no one.

And then the trail was no more.

Fatima thought she'd merely missed it for a second, but as she reached out with all her senses, the eddies were gone. The air was not completely still, but the particular telltale stirrings had evaporated.

It took Fatima a few seconds to recognize her immediate surroundings, for her concentration—which had been so totally focused on minute environmental stimuli—to draw back to awareness of the buildings, the streets, the handful of automobiles. She was standing on the wide Calle de Bailén, directly across from the Sabatini Gardens, not far from the grand Palacio Real.

She wasn't sure whether she had lost the trail or if it had simply ended. She suspected the latter, but even if she'd misstepped somehow, it was too late to reorient. The trail had only existed in any one place for seconds. She had been so close.

Was it possible, she wondered, that her prey had suddenly disguised its passing? Or perhaps it sped up and increased the distance between them? For a single individual, the air would settle just as quickly. The wake was more a function of mass than speed. If her target had intentionally thrown her off that way—if it had been able to all along, but had led her this far—that did suggest a trap. But as Fatima scanned up and down the street, she couldn't see that this brightly lit main thoroughfare was a good spot for an ambush.

A few cars darted here and there; none of them appeared suspicious. Fatima seemed to be the only pedestrian within blocks, but she couldn't quite believe that. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she grew that she'd been led here—but by whom and why?

Calle de Bailén not offering any answers, Fatima strode purposefully across the street and, without breaking stride, hurdled the iron fence and juniper bushes that enclosed the Jardines Sabatini. She landed and took up a defensive crouch. In the darkness, the mingled scents of the various flowers, trees, and shrubs were more pronounced than the muted colors. After just a few seconds of observation, however, the most noticeable aspects of the gardens were the intermittent flurries of movement among the plants, and the chilling sounds—drawn-out wails as of infants in lingering pain, being tortured.

Cats. The gardens, home to perhaps a hundred strays, were full of them, each deathly jealous of its territory, which of course overlapped with that of several others. Their nocturnal battles transformed this place meant as a serene refuge into a cauldron of churning, howling blood and disfigurement. Where Fatima knelt, she could smell the blood. She could track by smell this feline with ragged ear, or another with its eye practically gouged out.

The gardens and their special brand of carnage did not disturb Fatima. She had been here before. She had brought *fida'i* to places like this to train. Stalking and catching a feral cat was infinitely more difficult than hunting a mere mortal, and a few strays were never missed. There was, as well, the added benefit that even a successful hunter, if not careful, could end up with a painful gouge or bite to sharpen his concentration for the next hunt.



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Alert to every sound and movement, Fatima carefully moved more deeply into the gardens. She didn't alarm the cats. They continued with their nightly stalkings completely unaware of her presence. She stayed low, edging silently forward along the path. Just as the cats were blind to her, Fatima was blind to that which she'd been tracking. There was no sign of it, yet Fatima felt in her bones that it was here, that it was waiting for her. She had survived long enough to know to trust her instincts; she had survived so long because, often, she *had* trusted her instincts.

Again, her instincts proved correct.

Ahead in the path lay one of the scrawny cats—head stretched back and neck laid open. A tuft of white and brown fur floated in the still-expanding pool of blood beneath and around it. Fresh kill. Fatima could smell the blood from many yards away.

Instead of continuing on the path, she slid through the hedges to her right and circled wide of the unfortunate cat. If Fatima were being led into an ambush, the dead animal would be the final bait. Whoever was after her wanted her to inspect it more closely. Did they really underestimate her that badly?

As Fatima circled around, the continuing cat sounds were farther off in the distance. Those nearby sensed what had happened to their neighbor and scattered. Instinct and fear. They were one and the same for the felines; for Fatima there was only the former.

She was alert for any other signs of disturbance: anything moving, plants bent or trodden upon, footprints in the rich soil, twigs snapping. The scent of the cat's blood overpowered any other smells. Fatima's arc became a half-circle. She stood on the far side of the path from where she'd begun, and still nothing. No sign of who or what had led her here and slaughtered the hapless stray.

Strange. Fatima thought she'd followed a single individual from Plaza Mayor, but if anyone wished to take her, they'd most likely need the advantages of both surprise and numbers. Yet she could find no trace of *anyone*.

She continued around, slowly making her way along the opposite half of a broad circle, back to her original position. No one. Nothing. She stood where she had several minutes ago, the smell of blood thick in her nostrils. Above all else, she knew that she must discover who was responsible for all this. She must make sure they were not a threat to her mission.

And so she moved ahead on the path toward the cat's carcass. Carefully. As hyper-alert as she'd been following the wake to this place. The blood of Haqim revealed for her every sound; her eyes took in the gentle bobbing of every leaf. The smell of blood washed over her as if there were gallons poured out at her feet.

She reached the carcass, stood over it—then whirled about, jambia instantly in hand. There stood her prey-turned-pursuer in the spot where she'd first paused.

His arms were relaxed at his sides; the hands, nimble and deadly, empty. Strangely enough, he wore modern clothing, though not suited to the coolness of the evening: a sleeveless white shirt, jeans, bare feet. His chin, as Fatima remembered, seemed too narrow and sharp to go with the rest of his wide face. His sloped forehead and broad cheeks were smeared with blood—cat's blood. The red was incredibly dark against his skin, blackened as it was after so many years from its original Egyptian hues.

"Thetmes," Fatima spoke his name. After the initial shock of seeing him, she was again alert for any type of trick.

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He nodded to her, almost reverentially. "It is I."

Fatima edged closer, regarding him warily. This person before her had the manner of her sire. If this was a disguise of some sort, it lacked any visible failing. Posture, expression, tone and inflection of voice—all perfect. And the blood. Beneath the vulgar odor of cat's blood, already she could sense it. The blood of Haqim. The blood of her sire.

Fatima stepped toward him, sure now of his identity. This was indeed the elder who, so long ago, had ushered her into the brotherhood. She sheathed her blade, placed her hands together. "*Salaam*."

Thetmes nodded again. His body was lean and hard. His shoulders and elbows were like knots on an old gnarled tree—one that was tested by time, surviving flood and fire and drought. There was strength untold in those arms, in that body.

"I did not know you had returned to us," Fatima said.

"I never left you," Thetmes said. His eyes were black as night.

Fatima didn't know what to make of this. He had surrendered to torpor, withdrawing into that numb sleep as elders sometimes did. "Each of the brethren is with us always." Fatima voiced the mantra, but something was not right. The barest hint of a smile crossed her sire's lips. "You were not speaking of the scriptures," she said.

"No." That was all he said, as he stood there. Watching her.

"Then what?"

"I did not give myself to the sleep," Thetmes said.

His voice rang in her ears as if some strange echo had suddenly taken hold in the gardens. Only slowly did the words settle and their meaning came. But even then, they raised more questions than they answered.

"But you..." Fatima stumbled, searching for her own words to counter his, which made no sense. "You were caliph. You stepped down."

"I was. I did." Again the answers that did not answer.

"Why?"

"It was necessary." The hint of a smile was gone now. Fatima's confusion apparently had amused him for only a short time. "I have been busy these past few years." His expression hardened somewhat as Fatima still stared at him in disbelief. "Do you question your elders?" he asked with an edge of harshness.

"I trust them," Fatima said. "I do not always understand them."

"Do the *fiḍa'i* always understand you?"

Fatima nodded, granting his point.

"You know what you must," Thetmes said. "You know what you need to know."

Fatima nodded again. The words were as familiar to her as those of the *salah*. How many times had she reproached an inquisitive *fiḍa'i* for asking that which he did not need to know? Still, she had always found it easier to question her sire than any other elder, and in subtle ways he had encouraged her independence. Perhaps he indulged her. Or perhaps, considering her achievements, such was her due. Just as the *amr* granted her some leeway that he would not extend to others, even other elders senior to Fatima.

Thought of al-Ashrad brought to mind Elijah Ahmed, who had taken Thetmes's place as caliph.

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“Does Elijah Ahmed know?” she asked directly. This subterfuge that Thetmes had undertaken was unheard of. The caliph of Alamut did not simply step down. What could have caused such a thing? Surely the current caliph must have known, and the *amr*....

“Elijah Ahmed is no more,” said Thetmes.

For a moment, to Fatima’s ears, her sire’s voice blended with the distant mewing and wailing of cats until the sounds were indistinguishable—noise intended to convey meaning, but unintelligible to her. She could not respond. What he said was too greatly at odds with what she knew was, with what she *believed* was.

“You did not know,” Thetmes said. It was not a question. And his statement carried an unspoken conclusion: *You did not know. You had no need to know.*

“Elijah Ahmed... destroyed?” Fatima’s words drifted weakly into the night. She couldn’t have been sure that she’d actually spoken them aloud if not for Thetmes nodding silently in response. “How?”

“The road of the *hijra* is long,” said Thetmes, “but we approach its end. Mighty Alamut was but the first castle of three along the road. The herald has returned to us, and by his hand the second castle is ours.”

“*Tajdid*,” said Fatima. Revival of the blood, the breaking of the Tremere curse. “But al-Ashrad—”

“Labored for hundreds of years so that the curse might be broken,” Thetmes finished her thought. “Yes. And great sorcerer though he is, he could not defeat the might of the warlocks in that to which the children of Haqim submitted willingly. Great sorcerer though he is, what he attempted for centuries the herald completed in hours.”

“Ur-Shulgi.” The herald. To Fatima, his was a name from legend. But if the second child of Haqim and not al-Ashrad had indeed been the one to break the Tremere curse, why the pretense? Why did the brotherhood not know this? Fatima did not bother to ask the question, for she already knew too well the answer: *You did not know. You had no need to know.*

But Thetmes was telling her now. Whatever his reasons, he was telling her. Fatima felt her moorings pulled from beneath her. She was no longer elder *rafiq* but ignorant *fida’i*, and her sire was imparting knowledge to her. Every word revealed secrets that had been hidden from her, and with each secret she learned, she became increasingly and painfully aware of how much she did *not* know. Even now.

“Then, it was... ur-Shulgi...?”

“That reclaimed the caliph’s blood for Haqim,” Thetmes said.

“But why?” Fatima had known Elijah Ahmed almost as long as she’d known Thetmes. She was trying to fight her unbelief, to draw on faith that did not require understanding, but she could see no reason. No reason that Elijah Ahmed should have perished, no reason that she, an elder, should feel so ignorant. How could she ably serve Haqim when so much was hidden from her?

“Why?” Thetmes repeated. He gestured to the lifeless cat behind Fatima. “Why was that creature forfeit?”

“Because its life served your purpose,” Fatima said. “Because the smell of its blood masked your presence.”

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Thetmes nodded appreciatively. “Well spoken. Its life served my purpose. Each of our lives serves the purposes of Haqim—as long as he suffers us to serve. The time has come for the faithful to prepare themselves, to make themselves worthy—”

“So that they might endure,” Fatima said. They were al-Ashrad’s words that he had spoken to her.

“Yes,” said Thetmes. He stepped toward Fatima, reached out his hand and placed it on her shoulder, touched her for the first time in years. “So that the faithful might endure.”

“And Elijah Ahmed was not faithful?” Fatima’s question had a bite to it. Never before had she spoken in such a tone to her sire, to any elder.

Thetmes drew his hand back from her shoulder, not as if he were stung, but slowly. It was a cautious gesture. “Elijah Ahmed’s faith was... misplaced.”

Fatima choked down harsh words. She knew that to be untrue—at least as she considered faith and as she defined misplaced. The caliph—the *destroyed* caliph, by Thetmes’s account—was as loyal as she was. His existence was devoted to Haqim.

“Elijah Ahmed placed too much stock in the teachings of Muhammad,” Thetmes said. “As did Jamal, as do...”

*Jamal.* Fatima did not think that she could be shocked so many times in one night. Jamal. Master of Alamut. The Old Man of the Mountain. Jamal found lacking in faith? Jamal destroyed, his blood reclaimed for the Eldest? Impossible. As impossible as Fatima being attacked within the hallowed chambers of Alamut by a maddened Kurd.

Fatima’s gaze latched onto Thetmes’s mouth, the movement of his lips, his tongue. Her mind took his words and raced ahead on the path he was following. “As do I,” she challenged him.

Thetmes watched her evenly, expressionless. His hands, again, hung relaxed at his side. “Others, I was going to say. I am sure that you are strong of heart and unwavering in your faith. The Final Nights are at hand, Fatima. There is no longer room for Muhammadans among—”

“We are not Muhammadans,” Fatima said sharply. “Muhammad is the last prophet. We revere the prophets. We do not worship them. We worship God.”

“Do you try to lecture me, childe?”

“Do you try to insult me?” Fatima shot back. “Leading me here and telling me such rubbish—that there is no longer—”

“*Fatima.*”

The sharp tone of his voice brought her up short; that and the cold fire suddenly visible in his dark eyes. They were standing only feet apart, and Fatima’s stance was as intentionally casual as that of her sire. Among the children of Haqim, however, the line between casual and violent was thin indeed. But Thetmes’s face softened just as suddenly as it had grown hard, and his voice took on a more sympathetic tone. “The faith of your fathers is a mortal crutch, but you are mortal no longer. This wishful thinking that God is in His paradise—it is time to set it aside. The herald is among us. The Eldest of our blood is not long behind.”

“*La ilaha illa 'l-Lah,*” Fatima closed her eyes and muttered. “*Wa Muhammadan rasula 'l-Lah.*”

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“I am not here to insult you,” Thetmes insisted. “I am here to instruct you. I have always been here to instruct you.”

“Some night I may no longer need instruction.”

“Then you knew already all that I have told you tonight?”

Fatima forced herself not to dig her fingernails into her palms, not to flinch. She could not rebuke her sire, could not contest him on this point. She did not know what he knew. Though she had walked the earth for nearly a millennium, Thetmes had existed easily twice as long. He was stronger in the blood.

As if to drive home the point, Thetmes was on her. From those few feet away, he was suddenly in her face, his strong fingers clutching her shoulders like a tree clinging to the slopes of a rocky mountain since the beginning of time.

Fatima’s instincts took over. She began to slap upward with her hands—but she could not. His grip kept her arms pinned at her sides. The shock of his strength jarred her from her battle instincts. Not severely, but enough that her conscious mind took over. Enough that she did not attack her sire, did not smash her forehead into his face, or crush his kneecap or pelvis with her own knee.

She froze.

She froze and saw the anger in her sire’s eyes—the anger that almost concealed his imploring pain. This being, his strength and knowledge so much greater than her own, his blood so close to Haqim’s, wanted desperately to save her. He squeezed until her bones were about to snap, until her arms almost wrenched free of their sockets. His face was inches from hers. His spittle landed on her cheek.

“Do you think any of the others had this chance, girl? Do you think anyone warned them before the dreams came?”

“*Then why?*” Fatima spat the words at him. She was cowed for only a second, then her rage took hold. She struggled in her sire’s grip, but restrained herself from striking him.

Thetmes shoved his face against hers, bellowed at her with their foreheads and noses touching: “Because I’ll not see a childe of mine prove unworthy! I will not!”

Then he thrust her away. Fatima stumbled but caught herself, and they again stood several yards apart. The blood of Haqim was rushing through her. Her body was more ready for attack than she was. She fought down the impulse, did not lash out, did not draw her blade. Who knew what the outcome might be if her sire desired violence? Had he not already proven his mastery over her? But sheer strength was not combat; raw power was not life and death.

“Are you here to test me, then?” she asked.

Her question cracked Thetmes’s solemn mask, and he laughed a dry, mirthless laugh. “I do not need to test you.” He thought on that idea a moment, then scoffed openly. “Ha! If only I *dared* test you... but I would prove too lenient. The task is not mine. I am not the herald, to visit dreams upon you, to look into your heart.”

Dreams.

But must the roads diverge?

*That is a question to be answered in dreams.*

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The Way of Allah. The Path of Blood. Thetmes spoke openly of what the *amr* had merely hinted at. Al-Ashrad had asked her questions. Thetmes handed to her the answers, though they be answers she did not want to believe.

The spreading silence of the gardens struck Fatima all at once, though undoubtedly it had begun with Thetmes's outburst. The hungry, feral cats sensed that death—and the bringers of death—was at hand. They were silent, probably fled. All save the one whose life had served her sire.

"We must go," Thetmes said, also aware of the attention having shouted might bring.

"Why?" Fatima whispered, and her sire did not mistake her question. They both knew that any mortals or Cainites that happened upon them would pose little enough threat against one of the assassins, much less both. But she and her sire might be forced to destroy someone who would be missed sooner rather than later. They could not endanger her mission. The mission was, of course, above all else.

But why they must leave was not what Fatima asked. Her question was of the roads that must eventually diverge, and Thetmes knew this. He knew his childe.

"Why," he said, "do the water and the wind tear away at the strongest mountain? Why does the sun sear the flesh from our bones? Because it is so. Do you rail against the sun in the morning, or do you hide yourself away and survive? Would you deny the Eldest that which is rightfully his?"

"Would he deny Allah that which is rightfully His?" Fatima asked.

"Mine is not to judge."

"You have already judged."

Thetmes shook his head violently back and forth. "Insolent childe! What do you gain by defying the Eldest? What except certain death? He is like a god among us!"

"Just as we are like gods among the mortals," Fatima said. "And though he be the Eldest of the blood, and though he be a god among us, he is not Allah. He is not God."

Thetmes tossed up his hands. He paced several steps back and forth, then stopped. Fatima had never before seen in him such displays of anger and agitation as he'd shown tonight. Now he seemed focused elsewhere. He listened as if to sounds in the distance. If there was something he heard, Fatima did not hear it.

"Come. We must go," he said again.

"Yes. But answer me this."

He stopped after just a few steps. "What, childe?"

"The dreams... they have come to you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me of them. Of the herald."

Thetmes shook his head slowly. "What they were to me will mean little to you, I fear. They are a calling, an undeniable summons. I traveled to the land of our ancestors and faced the herald. He is dark and terrible—the fury of your heaven and the fire of your hell. Black and impenetrable as darkest night."

Thetmes held his hands open before him and stared at his palms, as if he held something that he was powerless to set down and helpless to comprehend. Then the glassiness of his eyes cleared, and his mind came back from that faraway place.

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“They will come when they come,” he said. “Many of the elders have been called—some proved worthy, others...” Thetmes shrugged, but Fatima saw the sadness in his black eyes, the fear that had driven him to warn her. “Some of the *fida’i* have even heard the call, but I know of none who... The dreams overpower their young blood, destroy their minds. The *fida’i* are not meant to be so tested. They are not ready. The great fire is not meant for them, but its heat touches them.”

“They go mad?” Fatima asked, remembering the Kurd, the insanity of his eyes, the impossible feats of his young, mangled body.

“Yes,” said Thetmes, knowing her thoughts. “You came across one.” He reached out again, slowly this time, and took her right hand, traced the gin-gin scar along her forearm. “Your *fida’i* seemed more willful than the others, or so I’ve heard. The *amr* believes that the herald sent madness to that one—madness and cunning—as a warning. A warning to you.”

“A warning.”

“So al-Ashrad believes. And who am I to doubt the *amr* in such matters?”

“He would not speak of it to me.”

“He did not feel it proper. His blood is that of the herald, but you are of my blood. Now come.”

**Thursday, 30 September 1999, 3:22 AM**  
**(Wednesday, 29 September 1999, 9:22 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle Luis Garcia**  
**Madrid, Spain**



*Four hundred fifty-eight, four hundred fifty-nine, four hundred sixty...*

Lucita had found a sort of rhythmic oblivion by surrendering herself to the luxurious sensation of the brush pulled through her hair. And Consuela had nothing better to do. What task could be more useful than pleasing her master's daughter?

*Childe.* Not daughter.

From full repose to fury in but a second, Lucita snatched the brush from the ghoul and began pounding her with the silver back. Consuela flung herself from the bed and covered in a ball on the floor. Lucita's upraised hand paused. The villa was entirely quiet except for Consuela's whimpering.

Lucita dropped the brush onto the bed, leaving a small, bloody smudge on the white spread. How frustrating that tranquility could be stolen from her so easily, and by a slip of her own thoughts, no less.

Consuela dared not look up from where she lay on the floor. The woman, Cristobal's daughter, appeared to be forty or fifty years old, though she had served Monçada for centuries.

"Go away!" Lucita told her. "You *sicken* me."

Consuela scampered on hands and knees to the door and crawled from the room. Lucita shuffled a few steps, then sighed and let herself drop onto the large armchair in the corner. The exquisite fabric disturbed her. It was from a different world than the leather pants and tight, sleeveless sweater she'd had Consuela purchase for her. Lucita dug her fingernails deeply into the offending fabric and rent long gashes along the chair's arms. That made her feel a little better. But only a little.

The villa was too luxurious. Lucita was accustomed to nights on the run, to bedding down in a bathtub with duct tape and towels blocking the cracks around the door. Not that she didn't treat herself to stays at fine resorts and inns when a job was completed, but that was luxury resultant from the sweat of her brow, not the largesse of her fat sire.

*Sire.* Not father. No matter what the bloated bastard had in mind.

Lucita reached for her boots, allowed herself a certain violence in pulling them on, pretending with each foot that she was crushing the face of a certain cardinal. She continued indulging herself as she left the room and ripped the door from its hinges. She listened for the sounds of crying from Consuela's room, but the ghoul, wisely, was silent. Wouldn't *that* have annoyed Monçada, Lucita thought, if she'd kicked to death one of his favorite elder ghouls.

Lucita stomped down the stairs, rebelling against the silence of the villa itself. She threw open the front door and strode purposefully across the tiled courtyard. At the front gate, however, she stopped. She stared at the latch, visualized her hand unhooking it. In her mind's eye, she saw herself fleeing into the night, running frantically from the city, from the country. And the only thing more galling than the thought of flight was the knowledge that she could not bring herself to it.



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She knew with dead certainty that if she lifted that latch, if she left that courtyard, she would go back to her sire. She grasped the iron bars of the gate in her hands. The villa was both her fortress and her prison. She'd told her sire that she would remain in the city. He wanted her to come to him often. She could defy him only so far. She could hide in this house, wear her leather, spurn his gifts, abuse his ghoul... but she could not leave the city. The call of the blood was too strong. She could not break it.

The damnable blood. Blood of the damned. If only she could take its gifts on her own terms. She could turn her back on the sun; she could eschew a mirror and a pleasing brush through her hair. But the blood held her to her sire. She could not be rid of him. Not really.

But neither would she give in.

She turned from the gate, the marker of her weakness, and began back to the house but stopped again. She could feel their eyes. She knew that they watched her. Servants of her sire, no doubt, keeping tabs on her.

How might she shock them? she wondered. What juicy reports could she let them take back to her perverted yet laughably prudish sire? She could take a young man from the city, take him as a lover right here in the courtyard, then feast on him and leave his bloodless corpse in the street.

Monçada would take care of the mess. The body would disappear. The local constabulary would look the other way. All would go on as it had before. But her sire would know. He would know how much she loathed him, how much she wished it was his rotting carcass in the street.

Lucita fantasized her sire's destruction, and in doing so, her thoughts turned a familiar corner. They stumbled upon the other individual who drove reason from Lucita's mind as if with a bloody scourge.

*I wanted to see you.*

*Why? You supposed to kill me... again?*

*Not you. Yet. Your sire.*

Fucking bitch. Like Lucita was going to let someone else do him in. But Fatima wasn't one to bluff. Hell, she barely ever spoke. She didn't toss around words without reason. Sooner or later, the Assamite—a practiced assassin even back when Lucita was still playing court diplomat—was going to show up gunning for the cardinal. Lucita would just have to find the strength to do it herself first. *She* would destroy Monçada. That's all there was to it.

But not tonight. Soon, though.

Lucita reversed herself again, turned back toward the gate and scanned the darkness for her hidden observer. For tonight, let them watch.

**Thursday, 30 September 1999, 3:44 AM**  
**(Wednesday, 29 September 1999, 9:44 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Jardines Sabatini**  
**Madrid, Spain**

Thetmes led her from the gardens, and Fatima followed, neither willingly nor unwillingly. She was numb. And this was her sire. So much of what he had said matched that which the *amr* had suggested, what the *amr* had not quite said.

Ur-Shulgi, herald of Haqim. The Final Nights, when Haqim would rise, and before him and his childer all the get of Khayyin would fall, their blood reclaimed for the worthy.

The worthy. Fatima had always numbered herself among them, had thought that she had proven herself as such. But had Elijah Ahmed counted himself among the worthy? Had Jamal, the Old Man of the Mountain, he who had risen above all other children of Haqim?

Would the Eldest have her abandon the Way of Allah and follow solely the Path of Blood? Would he demand that? Fatima's legs grew weak at the thought. She feared she would stumble as she followed Thetmes away from the Jardines Sabatini, away from the center of the old city. He took her from the remnants of the old to the sprawling vulgarity of the new. Modern buildings, high-rises, gas stations, icons of the West that surrounded the old city like a scab, that encroached upon the very heart of Madrid like a cancer.

Fatima barely felt her legs carrying her forward. She thought that perhaps her legs had been cut off, that her soul had been harvested, that she had at last reaped the death that for so long she had sown.

*This wishful thinking that God is in His paradise—it is time to set it aside. The herald is among us. The Eldest of our blood is not long behind.*

Her sire's words rang in her ears. Thetmes had always taught her faithfully. Never had he led her astray. Even now, warning her, he was doing that which al-Ashrad did not dare.

Fatima did not disregard her sire's warning. She did not underestimate the risks he took for her sake. Yet when she considered that which he urged, the world no longer made sense. Concrete, plaster, tarmac surrounded her. If she cast away her faith—thinking just for an instant that she *could* commit such a base act—then the secular and the vulgar were all that remained. Gone was all that tied her to her beginnings, to the world of the day. Already life was a faint memory, something distant that she saw but did not feel. Night and darkness were not one and the same. She had given herself to an existence of night; but remove memory of the day, and only darkness remained.

How could even the Eldest expect this of her? If she abandoned her faith, then it was no faith at all, and every day and every night that her feet touched God's earth was but a lie. If she tore down the foundations of her soul, could she long stand upon the highest battlements?

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No. She realized at last that there was no longer confusion, only terrible choice. There was no relief, however, as the confusion parted before her. Only despair. For if the Eldest demanded that which she could not give, then she must refuse. And there could be only destruction.

“There is another matter that brings me to you,” Thetmes said.

The sound of his voice was jarring to Fatima. She felt as if many years had passed since she’d heard a voice, her sire’s or any other. She was almost surprised to see him walking beside her through this strange, soulless city. Her sire, who had walked away from the clan, who had given in to the sleep that calls elders, yet he had not; her sire, who knew of the destruction of Elijah Ahmed and of Jamal; her sire, who conferred secretly with al-Ashrad and ur-Shulgi, herald of Haqim.

“We are here,” Thetmes said.

They stood before a squat, dirty building. A motel, haven of virtueless women and drugmongers. Over the years, the vices remained the same. Only the environs changed. *Same shit, different century*, Lucita had once said. Fatima barely recognized this part of the city; they were north of central Madrid and a good bit west of the river.

“This way.” Thetmes and Fatima passed in clear sight of the front lobby. The desk attendant glanced up at them, looked directly at them, but did not seem to care. “Our man,” said Thetmes. They continued past the small, empty swimming pool with grass growing through the cracks in the bottom, and around to the back of the building. The tight, crumbling parking lot was bordered by a chain-link fence which separated the property from a well-traveled road just on the other side.

Thetmes knocked on a door that had no number. The door opened, and he led Fatima inside by the arm. As soon as the door closed behind them, the sound of traffic from outside was completely absent, as if the road and automobiles had suddenly ceased to exist. Soundproofed. Wise indeed, considering the low moan drifting from the Cainite chained to the bed. Two men in black hoods stood over him, and the room, though clean and stripped bare except for the bed, reeked of blood—the sugary sweetness of mortal blood, but very weak blood, watery.

Two sets of eyes looked out at Fatima from behind the hoods, but the torturers did not seem alarmed by her presence. They wore black from head to toe, literally. The Cainite on the bed was too far gone to notice anyone’s arrival. His wrists and ankles, chafed raw, were bound in bone-tight manacles. His skin sagged like worn draperies on his blood-deprived carcass. Hair lay in clumps on the mattress. His orbital sockets seemed too large for his partially shriveled eyes. His gums were drawn back, exposing bone, and teeth hung only loosely in place. A towel across his middle reserved for him some small vestige of dignity.

“You seek knowledge of Monçada and his lair,” Thetmes said.

One of the hooded figures produced a notepad and handed it to Fatima. She met his gaze, and there was something familiar about his eyes, something she might possibly recognize from long ago—but she could not quite place it. After glancing at the notepad, however, she was completely absorbed by what she found there and not by eyes beneath a hood. Her inner turmoil, though far from resolved, gave way to her ingrained dedication to the mission. The notepad pages were full of scribbling and tiny drawings—maps and diagrams.

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Monçada's haven. Traps, defenses.

Fatima flipped through the pages. The church and opera entrances were heavily guarded by ghouls and the cardinal's legionnaires. The tunnels also were trapped—giant stone slabs that would fall at intervals and trap an intruder so that she might be easily dealt with when Monçada was ready. Fatima saw one entrance that had not been sniffed out by Mahmud, Anwar, and Pilar's teams.

The maps wound from one sheet of paper to another. The tunnels seemed to meander without reason. Some areas were more detailed than others. Not all the portions were linked. Faulty memory? The blame certainly did not lie with a lack of zeal on the part of the interrogators. Fatima suspected they were of the blood; she sensed that of them, though she could not place them, and the children of Haqim took pride in the fact that they convened fairly often. There should be none of the brotherhood that were strange to her. Yet she did not know them. She could not place the familiar eyes. The strangeness of their anonymity gnawed at her.

Fatima glanced at the Cainite on the bed. The information on these pages was remarkable—if it was accurate. The Cainite's features were distorted by lack of blood. He had been drained, and then fed only enough to tantalize him into speech. How many nights this had been going on, Fatima could only guess. Still, like the one Assamite beneath the hood, the victim was vaguely familiar to her. She imagined him fuller of face and body—and suddenly she realized.

"The Black Hand had been considering moving against Ibrahim for quite some time," Thetmes said.

Don Ibrahim. Archbishop of the Sabbat but in life a Muslim cleric, long-time rival-turned-associate to Monçada, the Christian priest. Fatima recognized the slight remaining similarity to the pre-op pictures she had studied. She wondered if he still served Allah faithfully—did his masters permit it?—or if he were corrupted completely by the blood of Khayyin. She imagined for an instant that, were the circumstances different, she could ask him. But she knew that was not true. Though ostensibly a follower of the Prophet, Ibrahim was *kafir*. He was the enemy, and to be destroyed.

Fatima's surprise at recognizing Ibrahim, however, was less than at what else Thetmes had said: *The Black Hand had been considering...*

The Black Hand. Fatima looked at the two hooded brethren, the two children of Haqim whom she should know but did not. The Black Hand. Elite killers among the Sabbat. They answered to the regent, titular leader of that factious sect. Many of them were reportedly Assamite *antitribu*—children of Haqim gone rogue, not for traitorous reasons like the *antitribu* of other clans, but because, in defiance of the elders, they had refused to submit to the curse of the vile Tremere. Though there were elders, too, among their number. Fatima had seen them go. She had been prepared to go with them, but her sire had counseled her otherwise: *If all of the best refuse the decree, then the munafiqun will hunt us down*. Fatima had listened to him. Those had been the nights of weakness, the darkest time of the clan.

She turned toward Thetmes. If he had contacts among the Black Hand...

"I am not of the *manus nigrum*," Thetmes said, as always seemingly two steps ahead of Fatima. "But there are those among them who share our sympathies."

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Fatima's thoughts were racing. She, like all of the brethren who had remained obedient to the clan, had never borne any enmity toward those who had chosen the route of defiance. Quite the opposite. Though she had attempted to secure the survival of the clan and followed the letter of the decree, she accorded the *antitribu* a grudging respect and admiration. None could imagine Haqim subordinating himself to another—not even to God, it now seemed. But to discover that there existed not just tolerance but cooperation between the highest echelons of the children of Haqim—those within the clan and those of the Black Hand—was simply amazing.

“The time you have been away...?” she began to ask her sire.

“Not spent in torpor, but arranging that which must come,” he said. “We have achieved Alamut and *Tajdid*. The third castle of three along the road of the *hijra* is *Umma*.”

*Umma*. Community. That the brotherhood should again be one and undivided.

“The beasts of the Sabbath cannot stand before us,” Thetmes said. “Many of the brethren among them see that, and in time, they all will see it.” His eyes narrowed. Though his tone was harsh for the benefit of other ears, the imploring pain was again in his eyes, that his child should prove worthy. “And not all of the prophets of Allah will keep us from the Final Nights and Haqim's will.”

Fatima ignored Thetmes's jibe, lest she grow disturbed again and lose her focus on the mission. It was not the insult to her faith that bothered her, but the obvious concern for her wellbeing—obvious to her, concealed from the others.

She concentrated instead on the revelations of this room. It was not all of the Black Hand, then, in league with the powers of Alamut. Fatima found this a slight relief in a way, for though she was amazed to learn of Thetmes's deceit of the past years, as well as of his true activities as liaison with sympathizers of the Black Hand, her pride was wounded that the secret had been kept from her. That it was a smaller secret—and not that the entire Black Hand was a puppet of Alamut—made it bearable at least.

*You did not know. You had no need to know.*

Still, Fatima was among the eldest and the most respected of the children of Haqim. How many other great secrets were kept from her? At what point could she expect to know, would she *need* to know?

The two hooded interrogators, not interested in Thetmes and Fatima's conversation, returned to their task. The one Fatima did not recognize—perhaps he had been Embraced since the division of the clan—went briefly into the bathroom. Fatima heard him scoop liquid from the bathtub. He returned with a glass of blood, lighter colored and less viscous than it should be. Watered down. But the scent was unmistakable. Mortal blood.

Don Ibrahim caught the scent as well. His nostrils began to flare, and he roused quickly from his stupor. He tried to speak, but his jaw hung slack, and his tongue was shriveled and useless—except for wagging at the air, seeking that for which he so desperately hungered.

Fatima returned the notepad to the familiar Assamite, as his partner dribbled the weakened blood onto Ibrahim's face. The captured Lasombra opened his mouth wide,

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invested all his strength in flinging his face from side to side, capturing as much of the sustaining liquid as he could. Satisfied that he was at least temporarily returning to his senses, Ibrahim's tormentors poured more of the glass's contents into his mouth. Ibrahim bucked against his chain. He grunted for more, like an idiot child, but no more was forthcoming. What he was given gurgled in his throat as he tried to gulp it down while lying on his back.

Just that small amount of diluted blood returned a semblance of awareness to Ibrahim. As he licked at the tiny splatters on the bare mattress, his shriveled tongue took on a more natural aspect. His eyes filled out the slightest bit in their sockets, though his gaze remained obviously unfocused. He would stay blind unless he was given more blood and was able to heal more satisfactorily. Fatima doubted that would happen. The Black Hand would not move against an ally of Cardinal Monçada and then suffer that person to survive. No, poor Ibrahim had most likely worn out his existence, or, if he were lucky, they might hide his staked, torpid body and save it for some future need.

"The black portal," the first Assamite said to Ibrahim. "What is beyond it?"

"There is one last area we are convinced he knows more of," the partner with the glass explained to Thetmes and Fatima.

"The portal," the first said again. "The portcullis. What is on the other side?" He signaled to his partner, who dripped a few more drops of blood on Ibrahim's face.

Ibrahim began a labored wheezing in his effort to reach the blood with his tongue. He licked frantically at his lips, which were little more than thin, drawn husks of skin.

"The portal..."

"Never been beyond..." Ibrahim rasped. "Uh... uh... uh..."

Fatima had seen greater men than this humbled by torture. She felt neither pity nor joy at the unfortunate necessity, at the passing of this proud, Old World Lasombra.

"But you *know* what is beyond." The first Assamite, the chief examiner, dipped his finger into the glass, then held his hand over Ibrahim's face. A single drop of blood hung tantalizingly from his finger. Ibrahim strained at it, but he could not hold his head aloft for more than a few seconds. He made noises that could have been growling, or desperate sobbing. "You know."

"Never been... beyond."

"You know!" The examiner lowered his finger, then yanked it back up as Ibrahim lunged but didn't come close. The single drop of blood quivered, seemed to pulse from the beat of some secret heart.

"Portal is sealed... always sealed," Ibrahim cried softly. His eyes rolled up, but his eyelids were shriveled away to nothing, so the sagging orbs rolled against the bony ridge of his brow.

"You approached the gate from within," the examiner said in calm, soothing tones. "You could not pass it. I understand. What was *beyond* the gate? What was on the other side?"

A piteous whimper escaped Ibrahim's gaunt frame. His bobbling eyes cast about, though he could not see. "Tunnel..." he said. "Dark tunnel."

"A tunnel," the examiner coaxed.

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“Two,” Ibrahim said weakly.

The examiner wiped the drop of blood from his finger onto Ibrahim’s face, making sure to pull back his hand quickly. Instantly, Ibrahim’s body contorted violently. Fatima thought he might break his own neck trying to get the single drop of blood. His throat was choked with guttural panting. Finally, his tongue found the object of his desire, but elation gave way quickly to despair once the drop of blood was gone.

“Two tunnels,” said the examiner. “Where do they lead?” His partner was dragging a large box from the bathroom. The box’s contents clanked one against another. Fatima could see spikes, thumbscrews, flaying knives.... The examiner waved his partner away. The second Assamite was obviously younger, less experienced, overly eager. For a Cainite in Ibrahim’s condition, physical torture would be nothing next to starvation, to the smell of denied blood, to the maddening nearness of sustenance just beyond reach.

“Where do they lead?”

“Never been...”

“Where?”

Ibrahim could not go on for several minutes. His body was racked with sobs. Eventually, the examiner fed him another drop of blood, and when Ibrahim lay panting asked again: “Where do they lead?”

Ibrahim let out a deep sigh, like a mortal drawing and expelling his final breath. “Out... one leads out. Don’t know where.”

The examiner, having grown familiar with when Ibrahim was or was not withholding information, seemed satisfied with this. He made sure his assistant took down the proper notes. “And the second tunnel? Where does the second tunnel lead?”

“Leviathan,” Ibrahim whispered. “Leviathan... darkness...”

Ibrahim’s mutterings quickly lost any coherence. His mind withdrew from his torturers to that place where they could not touch him—to torpor or to madness. The examiner gave him several more drops of blood, and though Ibrahim lapped greedily at the droplets, he did not respond to questions or even to a thin spike through his wrist.

“Time will bring him back to us,” the examiner said. “Tomorrow night.”

Shortly thereafter, Fatima and Thetmes left the room of torture, Fatima with the notes that had been taken thus far. They walked silently for some time through the modern parts of the city, through what could be the underbelly of any modern city.

“I understand the hoods,” Fatima said eventually. “I am about to venture into the lair of one of the most powerful of the Sabbat, and if I fail, I will not be able to give them away specifically. But why let me know of them at all? Now if I fail, the regent might learn that her loyal shock troops are both more and less than she thought. You could have brought these notes to me. I would have trusted you without knowing the source.”

“You cannot give us away,” Thetmes said. “If the regent discovers that some among the Black Hand serve two masters, it will merely confirm the suspicions she already holds. If she persecutes the Hand, she’ll drive more of them to us.”

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“So you benefit whether I succeed or fail.”

“We benefit,” Thetmes corrected her. “Yes, whether you succeed or fail. Distrust among the *kafir* serves our purposes. Regardless, Don Ibrahim will be missed before long. Fingers will be pointed.”

It all fit so well. If Fatima succeeded in destroying Monçada, much of the Sabbat would be thrown into chaos—more so than usual. If she failed, was captured and tortured, they might learn of the duplicity within the Black Hand, and a different sort of chaos would ensue. In the worst case, if Fatima failed and was destroyed, escaping torture, Ibrahim’s disappearance would lead to the Hand, according to Thetmes.

“There is another reason,” Thetmes said. “Another reason that you have seen what you have seen, that I have told you what I have.” He stopped there in the street and took hold of Fatima’s arm. “We have risked the wrath of ur-Shulgi.”

“Then why?” Fatima didn’t feel that she’d been done any favors. She didn’t expect to be. She had long served without question, but now it was her faithfulness that was being called into question—and she was supposed to be grateful?

“Because we feel that your destruction would be a great loss to the clan,” Thetmes said. “The *fida’i*, even the *rafiq*, among them your deeds are legend. For you to fail this way—”

“You mean it would be an embarrassment to you if your childe proves unworthy,” she snarled.

“I am not alone in this,” Thetmes said, restraining agitation. “Al-Ashrad shares my feelings. There are others.”

“Perhaps Monçada will save them the trouble—”

“Monçada is *nothing* compared to the herald!” Thetmes nearly crushed her arm in his grip again, but let her pull away. “Ur-Shulgi will know your heart. To perish serving the clan is honorable, but to be struck down by the herald...”

“I have betrayed neither Allah nor Haqim!”

“The herald will not see it so.”

“Then the herald is wrong!”

Thetmes took a step back. He looked at Fatima for a long moment, his own eyes showing the confusion that she had felt earlier. But then all agitation left him. He stood relaxed, blank-faced. He turned and continued walking. Fatima joined him.

“You know Lucita is in the city,” Thetmes said, as if the conversation up to that point had not occurred.

“Yes.”

“She might know more than Ibrahim. She also is on the Black Hand’s list.”

“I will find out what she knows,” Fatima said. Nothing more. She wanted to yell at her sire, to tell him to keep his butchers away from Lucita. But Fatima was just as much a butcher, a killer.

“As you will,” Thetmes said. “I will inform you of whatever else we learn from Ibrahim. When this is over, I will return to Alamut and again be caliph. Prove yourself.”

With that, Fatima’s sire was gone—as completely as if he had never returned, as if he really were in torpor, gone for years upon years. But he had not succumbed to the sleep.



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He served the Eldest yet, though secretly for a short while still. Then he was to join al-Ashrad in Alamut.

*Prove yourself.*

All they had done, all the torment, was so that she might prove herself, as she thought she had done for hundreds of years.

*Prove yourself.*

Fatima only wished that she could.

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**Saturday, 2 October 1999, 2:20 AM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



“Try again, Leopold. And *concentrate* this time.”

“She was here? Before?” Leopold was so crestfallen that Nickolai thought the boy might break into tears. That in itself, of course, was potentially quite interesting.

“Yes, she was here,” Nickolai lied. “We tried to rouse you, but you would not wake.”

Leopold dug his fingernails into his scalp and muttered to the floor. His right eye was squeezed tightly shut in consternation, yet his other Eye stared ahead. It was almost always open these nights. Watching. Secreting its pungent discharge.

*Surely it knows I'm lying*, Nickolai thought. It must know that the Muse had not been present, that, in the weeks they'd been secluded in the hotel, no one other than Nickolai had set foot in the suite of rooms. Nickolai had seen to their isolation. No employees of the hotel were allowed on this floor, and the warlock had set powerful wards to keep him and his charge hidden from sorcerous eyes. *It must know*. Nickolai could sense a brooding sentience about the Eye. He had no way to be sure, no empirical evidence, yet somehow he knew.

Whatever the Eye might or might not be able to discern, none of the information in question had dawned on Leopold. The neonate did as he was told, if grudgingly, as if his will had been eroded away. At times, gazing at the unblinking Eye, Nickolai fancied that he and it were, in a sense, co-conspirators, the truth known to them but unseen by Leopold. Nickolai believed that the Eye must have come to the same conclusion that he had: namely, that Leopold's time was running out.

The boy was a candle that had burned too bright and too hot. The Eye had pushed him far beyond what he was capable of, and now he was little more than a clump of wax awaiting the last dying flicker of its wick. Many nights he did not achieve consciousness, or he did so for merely a handful of hours. Perchance he would soon slip completely into torpor, never to return. Nickolai detected no sense of loss or regret from the Eye. At times he decided that he was only imagining signs of higher sentience from the orb, but other times...

For Nickolai, Leopold's demise would prove troublesome. It was a cruel Fate that had brought Leopold back to him for the end, so that the circle might be complete.

“Try again,” Nickolai said. Leopold, beyond solace, reluctantly turned to the blocks of stone that Nickolai had provided. “*She* said that if you do well with these, she will return. Soon.”

“What shall I do with them?” Leopold asked, his hesitancy and despair draining away, down the deep well that had already claimed his resolve. He held the blocks, one of granite and one of marble, in his hands.

“Perhaps a nice flower.”

Leopold nodded glumly. He lifted the two blocks, neither larger than half a loaf of bread. Almost instantly, his fingers began to dig into both marble and granite as if they

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were no harder than wet clay. The rectangular blocks elongated in his grasp, and, when he pressed them together, the light and dark stones flowed one into the other.

But Leopold paused. He sighed and set the now single, irregular block of fused marble and granite on the table before him.

“It is done,” he said weakly.

Nickolai touched the stone. It was cold and solid. He rotated it on the table, noting the interwoven channels of stone toward the center. Top and bottom were still separate, unmarred marble and granite, so that the entirety formed a sort of X

“This is not a flower,” Nickolai pointed out.

“It is done,” said Leopold, not looking at the stone.

“You must concentrate, Leopold. *She* will be very displeased with this.”

“It is done,” Leopold repeated. “Will she come?”

“Not if this is the best you can do. Finish the flower.”

“Will she come?” Leopold asked again, as if Nickolai had not answered him. There was, perhaps, a trace of desperation in Leopold’s right eye. The Eye looked on dispassionately.

“Are you tired?” Nickolai asked, but Leopold did not respond. He was watching, with his right eye, some faraway scene. “Yes, she will come, Leopold. Soon.”

The boy’s attention slowly returned to the here and now, his pupil contracting and struggling to focus. “Good,” he said. “I am tired, I think?”

*Are you?* Nickolai wondered. *Or did my suggestion make it so?*

“Rest, then,” Nickolai said. “I have other matters to attend to.”

Almost before the words were completely spoken, Leopold had retreated to that faraway place. His eye and the Eye both remained open. A dollop of ichor dripped onto the stone and sizzled away to nothing, but Leopold took no notice.

Nickolai returned the stare of the Eye. *And what will I do with you once our Leopold is gone? I wonder*, he thought. There was the rub. Leopold had outlasted his usefulness—the moment the foul Nosferatu had seized Benito, Leopold could no longer serve any purpose for Nickolai. But now, with the Eye that Leopold had somehow come upon, the boy was handy, if only as a glorified pot holder. What *would* Nickolai do with the Eye if Leopold continued to deteriorate? *I certainly won’t use it myself.*

He thought for a moment that he saw a gleam in the Eye, almost like laughter, or a dare. His imagination, surely.

Nickolai lifted from the table the x-stone. It was dense and heavy. Leopold offered no response, gave no indication that he was any longer cognizant of Nickolai’s presence or anything else. Nickolai lugged the stone into the next room and placed it on a table beside four other sculptures.

The first sculpture, the oldest, was a perfect orchid. The stem was flawlessly woven strands of white and mottled gray-black, and each petal alternately one of those colors, marble and granite. The leaves curved gracefully, each so thin that it seemed it should fall of its own weight. But the orchid stood, the composition balanced precisely.

The second sculpture was an orchid as well. Although where the first was a perfect flower that happenstance had seen rendered in stone, the second was a crude facsimile. The stem was a bit thick and too rigidly straight. Seams were readily visible where marble

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and granite met. One of the leaves was proportioned poorly and cracked. The petals, rather than distinctly separated, were a single structure with little detail.

The third sculpture lay on its side, too top-heavy to stand. It might have been a daffodil, or a rose, with thick awkward leaves. The fourth was a vaguely pyramid-shaped clump. The half-fused x-stone was the fifth.

Nickolai stared at the strange collection, each piece commissioned, as it were, within the past two months. Had Leopold merely lost interest? Did an orchid no longer hold the slightest wonder for him? Nickolai thought that was not the case. The deterioration of Leopold's skills mirrored quite closely the deterioration of his grip on reality. Not that he had ever, since the night Nickolai had found him wandering north of Central Park, been the model of lucidity, but Leopold was spending increasing time in that faraway place of his mind.

More disturbing to Nickolai, however, was Leopold's decreasing potency in utilizing the powers the Eye seemed to confer upon him. Nickolai remembered the great sculpture in the cave. The warlock, upon learning that Benito had gone missing, had immediately begun to seek out Leopold. The bond between them assured him that he would find the boy, and Nickolai, reaching out with his mind and spirit, had indeed found Leopold. He'd found him at the cave, waist deep in living rock and mangled Gangrel. Nickolai was not the one to critique the boy's artistic vision, but the warlock had marveled at his *power*—at how the very earth had responded to Leopold's merest whim. And when Nickolai had brought him to the city, Leopold had, *without possessing the Eye*, laid waste to several blocks' worth of city streets and much of the gardens at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Since then, however, he'd been fading fast. Nickolai feared that the row of orchid sculptures illustrated, not a wandering of interest, but a dwindling of vigor. It confirmed his thoughts about the candle: too bright and too hot. And now time was running out.

*Damn him! How dare he?* Especially when he was to be Nickolai's defense against the foul sewer dwellers! They would be coming for him. The only question was when.

Strangely enough, despite Leopold's slide, the Eye itself appeared completely undiminished. It seemed vigorous, almost—and Nickolai suspected this was but his imagination—*cheerful*. It was quite possible, the warlock surmised, that Leopold had passed some threshold, that the Eye had taken him to a certain point and the boy was capable of going no further. But neither could he maintain that existence, and so he'd begun this long descent into madness—or not that long, perhaps.

Yes, that was possible. But remembering Leopold's great masterwork at the cave, Nickolai considered other possibilities as well. He did not sense within the Eye power of the magnitude that had created that living statue and tomb of the Gangrel, nor in the scope of destruction surrounding the cathedral gardens. Perhaps it was merely the wiles of the orb—it wished to be underestimated, so that a potential user might believe himself capable of controlling it.

Or there was something else. Something greater than the Eye, something augmenting it, or something that had seized upon it as a focus for its own power—something that had seized Leopold. The boy had exhibited considerable acumen for the mystical arts, even when he was without the Eye. He had performed at a

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level that should never have been possible for him, even were he some night to discover his true heritage.

Nickolai studied the five sculptures before him, from the sublime to the mundane, and shook his head. He could not be sure of the forces at work... not without the proper experimentation. Almost immediately, new plans began to take shape in his mind. *It might work... it could work.* He might yet bend Leopold to his designs once again. If he was allowed the time.

**Saturday, 2 October 1999, 2:30 AM**  
**The Presidential Hotel**  
**Washington, D.C.**



Parmenides retrieved his three blades and replaced them in their hidden sheaths. He had increasingly taken to sharpening his skills at the expense of the hotel's decor, and now that he took a step back and examined it, the sixth-floor penthouse suite was showing signs of wear. Lamps had been early casualties, as ceramic fragments of all sizes tidied into various corners attested. A few units of out-of-the-way track lights still managed to illuminate portions of the rooms. The furniture—stabbed, sliced, and in one case set on fire—had seen better nights. Most of the pictures that had graced the walls lay along the baseboard amidst piles of glass and fragments of what had been frames.

It was the sound of the elevator rising which had jarred him from his training mindset and prompted him to take stock of the rooms as someone else might see them. Parmenides had been practically alone for the past week—not that long for an immortal—since the night he'd spoken with Courier and Fatima. Vykos had not been back, and though Parmenides knew that she had established other havens across her new city, he couldn't help resenting her avoidance of him. Instead of seeing him, she had ordered him to await further instructions. He wasn't even accorded the distracting tedium of the Tremere chantry siege.

The elevator rose past the fourth floor, past the fifth.

The lights of Washington were no longer visible from the penthouse suite. Vykos had had large shutters installed to cover the tall windows. The black shutters were hinged, but only for show. Neither sun nor moon graced the interior of the suite. Only the remaining track lights and the glowing numbers above the elevator.

The door opened with a gentle *bing*, and Vykos entered. Lady Sascha Vykos, Archbishop of Washington. She wore long, flowing fur. Her blouse, constrictive skirt, and heels accentuated the fragile verticality of her body. Parmenides had often felt that he could merely reach out and snap her in two.

She took three steps into the foyer, stopped, surveyed the tattered, ramshackle decor. "Have we been bored?"

"You instructed me to wait," Parmenides said. "I waited."

Vykos shrugged noncommittally and walked past him, handing him her coat. Parmenides felt at once that the silky fur was not mink or rabbit or even synthetic. It was human hair, and the adjoining fabric was as supple as a second skin. Incredibly so.

Unaffected by the garment but loath to play valet, Parmenides tossed the coat over the nearest collection of chair pieces. Vykos found a love seat that was fairly intact and let herself fall languidly onto it.

"I trust our little friend has received her final payment?" she asked.

Parmenides nodded. Lucita, despite what he considered a lack of professionalism, had done her job. Borges was destroyed. Parmenides had seen that the contract was completed from Vykos's end as well.

"Good," said Vykos. "Bring me a snack. Warm it."

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Parmenides stayed put, but Vykos seemed unaware of his recalcitrance. She appeared distracted, weary. Often she would add a mocking, playful “please” to her instructions, as if to remind Parmenides that she could do anything she wanted to him. Not tonight. Parmenides moved toward the kitchenette, hating himself for every step but not willing to defy Vykos. He shouldn’t rouse her suspicions, he told himself. There were secrets he must learn from her. And then...

*Then destroy her.*

He opened the refrigerator, took one of the forearms with hand and a few fingers still attached, and placed it in the microwave.

“Do Cainites of your clan underestimate women so, my *philosophe*?” Vykos called to him across the room. *Cainite* was not a moniker the children of Haqim applied to themselves, but Parmenides did not have a chance to address that, as Vykos continued from her apparently rhetorical question. “The keepers certainly do, and even my own Tzimisce. I must admit to that prejudice myself, I’m afraid. Not *now*, of course,” she added, suddenly remembering that Parmenides was in the room. “No, this form has been... enlightening.”

Parmenides took the hand from the microwave and brought it to her. She sniffed half-heartedly at it for a moment but seemed unable to kindle any true desire.

“Did you know,” she asked, “that some of the newly Embraced have supposedly given birth? Actual birth.”

“I am aware of the rumors.”

“Fascinating.” Vykos held finger to chin, realized the finger was not her own, and set the hand aside. “This politicking grows so tiresome,” she sighed. “Monçada promised me that I could remake the city as I wished, but it’s not like that at all. So many details, and even with Borges retired and his followers carving the spoils into bite-size morsels...” She tossed up her hands in frustration. “And Polonia is growing very tiresome. It’s always, ‘Baltimore’ this, or ‘New York’ that. There’s so little time for my studies. I’m afraid that I’m just not a people person.”

Vykos, suddenly concerned, looked up at Parmenides as if she might have offended him. “Oh, but *you* don’t have to worry about that.” She reached for his hand and had him sit next to her.

Parmenides felt adrift, as he nearly always did in her presence. He didn’t want to fetch her snacks. He didn’t want to sit beside her. Yet here he was.

“Actual birth,” she said to herself. “Fascinating.”

The room was closing in around Parmenides. Had the track lighting given out? Did the glow from the elevator numbers really fill the entire suite with a strange, translucent fog? The great shutters were barred. Parmenides grew dizzy as a storm raged around him. The love seat was suddenly incredibly long. Vykos was miles away, but her voice was in his ear, in his mind.

“It brings out that maternal instinct in me....”

Parmenides could not tear his gaze from Vykos’s impossibly long and slender fingers as she worked the buttons of her blouse. Then her chest was bared, two rounded breasts, firm and perfect... except the nipples, Despite her light skin, they were unnaturally dark, the color of moist dung.

“Come...”

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Parmenides watched his body move closer. He could not see Vykos's face but heard her voice.

"My young romantic."

The storm was a tempest in his ears but could not drown out her voice. Now, instead of two firm breasts, there was one large teat with a rough, hardened nipple. Parmenides put his mouth to it, suckled the obscenity that was Vykos. His mouth was flooded with liquid—not milk, not blood, though there was blood mixed with it. A black substance, thick and vile.

"Fascinating," said the voice.

Parmenides could not pull away, though his mouth and eyes burned. He drank greedily, gnawed at the leathery nipple, and felt the black ichor run down his face. The smell of corruption was all about him; it filled his nostrils.

"I must have one of those thin-bloods," the voice said. "I must have one and discover... Ah, but that is for another time. That is my passion. Fascinating."

The voice held Parmenides, else he would have been thrown about by the raging, dizzying storm. A wave of nausea rose up within him, but still he drank, though his body was ready to explode from the fiend's searing, bloody emulsion.

"You have tasted my passion, my hungry childe," said the voice. "What, tell me, is your passion?" Parmenides was lost. Adrift upon a churning, black ocean. So far beyond any familiar shore. "What is your passion?"

He felt the urge then to kill. To destroy. But his hands, his artist's hands, were not his own. He could not feel them. They were beneath the surface of the hungry, black ocean.

*Then destroy... then destroy...*

The blackness took over, covered his face, pulled him under. Pain replaced time as he floated, immersed in hunger.





**Saturday, 2 October 1999, 3:15 AM**  
**The Presidential Hotel**  
**Washington, D.C.**

“Who would you destroy?” asked the voice. How much later—minutes, hours, years?  
*Then destroy...*

“Monçada,” said the voice—no; it was *his* voice that spoke. “Monçada.”

“Hmm. You’re an ambitious young one,” said the voice. Said Vykos. Parmenides connected her to the voice again, but it was different, less feminine.

And then he remembered the large, sagging breast, the hardened nipple, the black ocean. Not an ocean—a pool; he was on his hands and knees vomiting it forth. Convulsive hacking wracked his body. He felt that he’d said more than he should have, but Vykos’s assumptions seemed wrong to him somehow.

“Ah, but Monçada is clever,” she said. “If you were to destroy him, you would have to start in the right place, wouldn’t you? At the beginning. With the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

“The tree...” Parmenides heard and felt his lips form the words. But he was so weak, so confused, and the bile and blood still drained from his mouth.

“Oh, yes. Very typical of him, no? And the sun never sets over the tree. Another bane for our kind. Not that we *need* knowledge of good and evil. I like to think we’re not so subjective anymore, but it keeps the cardinal happy. So where’s the harm?”

Parmenides was helpless to respond. His strength was failing him, and he was too busy trying to make sense of her words. Fruit and tree... His arms could hold him no longer. He was sinking lower, closer to the black pool beneath him. His face struck the wet floor.

“And then there’s the Leviathan.” Vykos shuddered; Parmenides could hear it in her voice. “It knows the blood.” And then she said it again, quietly, almost in awe. “It knows the blood.”

Parmenides wondered if he had heard her properly. Her voice was so far away now. The acrid burning of the blackness was filling his senses again, crowding out all else.

“Are you still there, my young *philosophe*...?”

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**Saturday, 2 October 1999, 3:17 AM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



Leopold dipped his cupped hands into the river. The landscape was not so bleak now, not so foreign. The river wound among edifices of rock, headstones the size of buildings. The water flowed red here in the dragon's graveyard. There had been strange splotches of white and mottled gray-black, but those were long gone, carried downstream by the ever-flowing current. Leopold could not see his hands beneath the water. His arms ended at the wrists. The blood of the river was his own lifeblood, flowing out of him and drifting away. For a moment he panicked—his hands, his precious hands, the most perfect artist's tools, as his Muse had shown him.

He withdrew his hands from the blood river and went giddy with relief. His precious fingers were unharmed. Dark water seeped out between them. Leopold lifted his hands to his lips and drank. *She* was here. He could smell and taste her. The dragon's graveyard was her playground. And the teacher said that she would be back. Soon.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 12:19 AM**  
**(Monday, 4 October 1999, 6:19 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle de Paja**  
**Madrid, Spain**

“Just ahead.”

As soon as he spoke, Anwar knew he needn't have. When he and Fatima had first left Pilar's shop, he had looked around every few blocks to make sure that his elder was still with him. Invariably, she had been a step and a half behind him. No more, no less. Anwar quit looking. He couldn't have lost Fatima if he'd wanted to do so. He had always seen her as focused, whatever task was at hand, but never had she seemed so totally driven. Events were moving quickly since the arrival of the message earlier.

In the basement room of the rug shop, Fatima had held the note and studied it with furrowed brow. “The Leviathan.” She nodded gravely. That seemed to fit with other information that she had discovered earlier in the week—how she had secured the notes and rough maps Anwar had no idea, nor what if any plan she had to deal with the rumored “Leviathan,” but then he had no need to know. The rest of this latest message's meaning had been less clear to her. She had stared at the note for some time before handing it to Mahmud.

“Fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” he read. The Biblical reference was obvious, but of little help. “Is there an orchard near the city?” He tried to remember, as he handed the paper to Anwar. “Or fruit trees in the city? There are bound to be. I'll have Pilar's people compile a list of—”

“I know.” Anwar said. The words had practically jumped off the page at him: “The sun never sets over the tree.” Anwar, unable quite to conceal the surprise in his voice, looked at the other two assassins, his elders. “I know this place.”

“Show me,” was all that Fatima had said.

And so they had made their way through the ancient streets that were reborn for each era. Madrid for Anwar was an old city wearing a young mask. Beneath rough pavement were cobbles; beneath the facade of mortal youths who frequented the night was an ecclesiastical beast that truly ruled the shadows. Anwar led Fatima along the steep, twisting lanes. The two did not take extraordinary measures to hide themselves from the eyes of midnight strollers, but brushed past little-noticed nonetheless.

A great sense of pride was rising within Anwar. He refused to entertain the thought that he could be mistaken. He had spent his nights studying this city, learning its streets and plazas. Now his diligence would be rewarded. Fatima's glory would be his glory.

*The sun never sets over the tree.*

Anwar led her along the Arab Wall to *Mayrit*, once the water source for the original Arab fortress. Tiny huts and wooden stalls were erected haphazardly throughout this area, as doubtless had been the similar structures of the first inhabitants long ago. Anwar halted. Fatima stopped one and a half steps behind.

“There,” he said.

She regarded the decrepit stall he pointed out. A vegetable-and-fruit stand, the plank door chained for the night. On the pediment above the door, a scene was carved into the

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woodwork: a man and a woman, both naked, standing before a tree; among the branches was twined a snake; in the woman's hand rested an apple; and behind all the figures was a large, radiant sun. A carved sun that never set.

Fatima placed a hand on Anwar's shoulder. In the slight pressure of her fingers, he senses approval and expectancy. His pride swelled in the face of his elder's display.

"Return to Pilar's shop," Fatima said in a low, calm voice. "Tell Mahmud to have everything prepared for tomorrow nightfall."

"Should we be prepared to move against Lucita as well?" Anwar asked. He was convinced that the brotherhood would be served by the destruction of this assassin-pretender. She had seemed to have abandoned her flamboyant ways since arriving in Madrid—at least she had until a few nights ago. Anwar had questioned Pilar's surveillance team personally, so strange and disturbing was their report. The cardinal's daughter had summoned a mortal, a common male prostitute, to her villa. There, in the open-air courtyard, she had fornicated with him, fed on him, and finally left his gutted body in the street.

Anwar understood that some of the get of Khayyin still indulged carnal desires—though he could not understand why—but to leave a dead mortal so close to one's resting place seemed folly without reason. Of course, the cardinal's followers had taken care of matters, disposing of the body quickly and making sure the *policía* did not take an interest. Still, this woman through her transgressions seemed to beg that the blood be reclaimed from her body.

At Anwar's question, Fatima's grip tightened slightly on his shoulder.

"I will see to the cardinal's childe," she said.

He nodded sharply, and without question left to complete the task assigned him.



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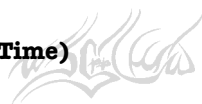
**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 6:56 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

With the coming of Anatole's thirtieth day in the cave, he could barely remember the passing of time.

And with the coming of the next night, or day, or perhaps just his next thought, he knew his thinking was gone. Swallowed, like everything else, by the incredible structure around him.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 12:58 AM**  
**(Monday, 4 October 1999, 6:58 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Calle Luis Garcia**  
**Madrid, Spain**



Climbing the stairs to the second floor, Fatima was not surprised that the interior of the villa was scarred. Ragged claw marks ascended the walls beside her. Practically each piece of furniture downstairs, though in perfect array, was marred by deep gouges—as if a very fastidious, and very angry, animal were being kept here. From what she knew of Lucita’s relationship with her sire—and of Lucita herself—something along those lines was quite likely the case.

Fatima, having sent away Pilar’s watchers and entered the house, treaded silently along the upstairs hall toward the interior room. The gracefulness of her body was too ingrained to require her attention. She thought instead of that which she had tried to ignore for so many nights. She hadn’t expected Lucita to come to Madrid, hadn’t thought she would need to face her again so soon.

As Fatima reached for the doorknob with her left hand, she took her jambia in the right. Fatima’s presence absorbed the sound of the knob and the catch turning, of the recently repaired hinge that would have creaked ever so slightly.

Lucita lay half on the bed, her feet hanging off and resting on the floor. Despite her lackadaisical pose, she held a sword aloft, pointed at Fatima.

“I guess it’s a good thing I had this out,” Lucita said.

Fatima stepped into the room.

“You’d better close that.” Lucita used the tip of the sword to indicate the open door. “We wouldn’t want to disturb Consuela.”

“Nothing will disturb the old woman,” Fatima said matter-of-factly.

Lucita shrugged, as much as she could while lying down. “Do I need this?” she asked, waving the sword a bit.

“Do you?” Fatima asked. She sheathed her jambia.

That seemed to satisfy Lucita, and she propped her own blade next to the bed. Fatima had no illusions that Lucita needed the blade to be deadly; surely Lucita knew the same of her.

“You know,” Lucita said, “after a few hundred years, I can tell when a door opens even if I can’t hear it.”

“If I’d wanted to surprise you, I wouldn’t have used the door, knowing you were waiting on the other side.”

Lucita seemed listless, despite the fact that she was in the same room with one of the few assassins in the world who could give her a run for her money. She struggled to sit up, but Fatima knew that the lethargy would vanish in an instant if need be. “Monçada’s going to be upset about Consuela,” Lucita said.

“Her blood is put to better use now,” said Fatima. Not boast but fact.

“You came all this way to ‘reclaim’ the blood of a little old lady ghoul?”

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“No.” Fatima was not completely decided why she was there. She should have been there to find a way through Monçada’s defenses, or to destroy Lucita outright. Fatima tried to concentrate on the hard realities of the instant instead of those murkier questions. She ticked off a quick mental list of her concealed blades, looked for clues as to where Lucita was undoubtedly hiding her own.

Fatima’s near-silence infuriated Lucita—as it always did. The Dark Rose balled up handfuls of bedspread. She kept the anger pent up, fueling her more surely than blood. Watching Lucita’s hands, Fatima saw a small bloodstain on the spread. Having seen it, she could not help notice the faint scent. The scent of Consuela’s blood.

“You said you were after both me and my sire,” Lucita snarled contemptuously. Whether the contempt was for her or Monçada, Fatima could not tell. “So, is it my turn yet?”

Fatima was acutely aware of Lucita’s hands, visible but within reach of numerous potential weapons—vase, pointed finial, chair that could quickly be broken—and those just the ones Fatima had spotted offhand. She remained perfectly still, arms and hands relaxed—as Thetmes had been five nights earlier—and did nothing that might set Lucita off. Except doing nothing might very well set Lucita off.

“No.”

“Not yet?” Lucita asked. “That’s what you said before.”

Fatima started to take a calm step forward, but Lucita was on her feet at once, prepared to meet violence in kind. Very slowly, Fatima raised her hands until she held them, palm open, before her. She knew there was nothing she could hope to do that would ease Lucita’s mind; the best possible tactic was to avoid the triggers.

“I have come to Madrid for your sire,” Fatima said. “I did not know you would be here.”

Lucita laughed scornfully. “That’s not why you told me in Hartford? So I’d come, and you could take us both—*try* to take us both?”

Fatima shook her head. “No.” Her hands were still raised before her.

“You expect me to believe you? You’d lie about anything to serve your clan.” The contempt again. Fatima could read the confusion beneath it. Lucita did not understand her, could not understand her, her loyalty. But Fatima understood Lucita only too well. That was what the prostitute was all about. Open rebellion. Raw defiance. All that Fatima had never been able to be, that she’d never had reason to be. Her own transgressions were subtle, insidious, but would be just as real in the eyes of ur-Shulgi, herald of Haqim, and more harshly punished than Lucita’s most flagrant sin.

“I do not lie to you,” Fatima said. Now she did take a step closer, hands raised. Lucita did not stop her, but there were still a few feet separating them. Fatima could be within Lucita’s guard too quickly for the sword to be of any use, but the other weapons... and Fatima’s raised hands would be a split second slowed.

“I do not lie to you,” Fatima said again. But neither did she dare tell the full truth.

Lucita hesitated. The two hovered, the feet between them a vast gulf.

“You think I’ll just let you destroy him, even if you are able?” Lucita asked. “You don’t think I’ll stop you?”

Fatima heard the challenge, held her ground, spoke in an even tone: “Do you want to stop me?”

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“I could.”

“Perhaps.”

Lucita bristled at that, but did not attack. Her hands quivered the slightest bit, but did not streak toward a hidden blade.

Fatima took another step. Calm. “Do you want to stop me?” There was so much more she wanted to say, so much that she could not bring herself to utter. Perhaps Monçada would destroy her, and Lucita would be safe... until another assassin came, and then another. Or perhaps Fatima would destroy the cardinal, and Lucita would be free. Free to go into hiding from Fatima. But Lucita would never do that. There was no good answer.

“Do you want to stop me?” Fatima said a third time, but now her words were hard, full of challenge. Her voice struck Lucita like a blow.

Their eyes met, each sure that the other was not so much stronger in the blood that she could take control with her gaze. They hovered on the brink. Two killers.

Now it was Lucita who stepped forward. Inches apart. Slowly, she raised her hands, palms out, and placed them against Fatima’s.

“I do not lie to you,” Fatima whispered.

And then their lips met. Droplets of Consuela’s blood, still fresh in Fatima’s mouth, passed as their tongues mingled. Slowly, ever so slowly, Fatima raised a hand to Lucita’s cheek. Lucita’s palm, free of its opposite, pressed forward against Fatima’s breast. Every movement was gradual, intended to arouse no suspicion—for desire did not easily translate to trust.

Fatima tried to keep her wits about her. She could not afford to surrender to the kiss of this woman she must kill. But freedom so long denied was difficult to resist. Her left hand still pressed against Lucita’s right. Their fingers interlocked, shared the strength and awkward tenderness of hands untrained in the gentle caress. Fatima could not escape the danger of abandonment, but how much worse could destruction in a lover’s arms be than that which awaited her at the hand of her elders? If the herald would destroy Fatima for her faith, then let him add lust and love to the offenses.

Lucita crushed herself against Fatima, and Fatima responded in kind. Blood rose with passion. Tongues slid across canines. They nipped at each other—lips, tongues—and then their own blood mingled in their mouths. The heady aroma of elder blood filled Fatima’s senses. Her body was quivering. Or was it Lucita shaking? Fatima couldn’t tell, didn’t care. She forced them toward the exquisite, bloodstained bedding. As they toppled over, both tensed for a moment—but all hands were accounted for; no weapons, no attack disguised as titillation.

With blood came heat. Fatima pulled her mouth away long enough to strip off her overshirt. Lucita’s hands, seeking flesh, tugged at the long-sleeved tights beneath. A rivulet of blood ran down Lucita’s face. Fatima followed the trail with her tongue down cheek, neck. She tore at Lucita’s collar. The cloth gave way. Fatima found a speckle of rich blood in the hollow of Lucita’s breasts, drank it in, then licked at the small rose tattoo just to the left. For a moment Fatima listened, as if for a beating heart, but even the silence could not hide the presence of Cainite blood.

At the same instant that Fatima drank and felt her mouth filled with the blood of her lover, she felt too the ecstatic pain in her arm, Lucita entering where once the poison



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had entered, the scar that would not heal. There was no retreat, had been no retreat for so long, it seemed. They rushed headlong down the road of destruction.

Fatima felt the draw of her own blood, flowing from her body. But she could not tear herself from the wound at Lucita's breast. Again after so many years, so many centuries, the circle was complete, and Fatima had never known such hunger, such fullness.

For a moment, the hunger rushed forth. The Beast roared to claim that which belonged to it—all of that which was its own—and Fatima tore into the wound, ripped aside flesh so that she might have more blood. Lucita winced, and bit more deeply into Fatima's arm. The pain strengthened Fatima, hardened her against the Beast. She had long ago mastered it, but now with each taste of the blood that had so long been denied her, her mastery slipped. The strength was still hers, however. To give in would mean destruction—destruction of Lucita, destruction of the very discipline that was Fatima's essence. And if Lucita had anything to say about it, destruction of Fatima herself.

Fatima forced the Beast back down, and she and Lucita continued their enraptured dance, two entwined vipers, all fangs and blood and venom. The blood of one was the blood of the other. Fatima feasted on Lucita's defiance, on her own defiance, until finally, exultation gave way to exhaustion. They withdrew as they had entered, as one. Fatima left a lingering kiss, and the flesh of Lucita's breast joined together again, leaving only the renewed dark rose. Lucita's warm, moist sigh healed Fatima's arm, though the scar remained.

"I must go," Fatima said. She traced with her finger the path that blood had run. Chin, neck, breast. "Your sire awaits," she said softly, a harsh reminder to herself, to both of them, that no matter the comfort they found in each other's arms, this could not last.

Lucita tensed, but only for a moment. She returned to stroking Fatima's hair. "It's day outside."

As soon as the words were spoken, Fatima realized it was true. The hours of pleasure, unlike those of pain and guilt and despair, came far too seldom and passed far too quickly. "Then we have failed to destroy each other again," Fatima said morbidly, wistfully.

"For the time being," Lucita said. "For a few more hours."

And then the day took them.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 7:38 PM (1:38 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Calle Luis Garcia**

**Madrid, Spain**



For several minutes, Fatima sat testing the sharpness of her jambia against her fingers, watching the unmoving form of Lucita. The Dark Rose's breasts did not rise and fall with breath; her face was set in a peacefulness that, in waking, she never knew; the retreated sun held her still in thrall.

The night was not yet old for Fatima, but already she felt awash with failure. She knew that she should take her blade to Lucita, but knew also that she would not. Fatima should have been performing the *salah* but, guiltily, she felt there was not time enough. Nor was there water at hand for her ablutions, and tonight she had need of absolution from defilements great and small, of thought and of deed.

Lacking water, there was still blood. Fatima, seeking the pain that purified, pressed the tip of her jambia into her right arm below the elbow. *Allahu akbar. All praise be to Allah, Lord of all the worlds...* She did not utter the words aloud nor assume the prescribed postures; she relied upon the grace and mercy of Allah. *Most beneficent, ever-merciful, king of the day of judgment.*

Mimicking the slashes in the chair beneath her, Fatima drew the blade along her arm, from elbow to wrist.

You alone we worship, and to You alone turn for help. Guide us to the path that is straight, the path of those You have blessed, not of those who have gone astray.

Somewhere along the line, she had surely gone astray. Was it in following Haqim? For it was he who forced her to choose that which she could not. Yet the blood that made her what she was, was his, and it was his bidding that she did tonight. It was as well his bidding that she neglected.

Fatima closed her eyes so that her gaze would not be drawn to the beauty of her lover. Where were the peace and concentration that prayer normally brought?

*La ilaha illa 'l-Lah.* There is no god but God.

*Wa Muhammadan rasula 'l-Lah.* And Muhammad is the messenger of God.

The words did not calm Fatima. Even the pain, as she drew the blade along her arm again and again and again, did not bring discipline of thought. The only certainty that remained to Fatima was that of her own fraudulence. She did not serve Haqim fully but denied him that which he demanded. She did not love Lucita wholeheartedly but plotted her destruction. Could Fatima trust herself to keep faith with God after cheating her other bonds?

*Salla-'l-Lahu 'ala sayyidina Muhammad.* May Allah cause His prayers to descend on our lord Muhammad.

*Al-salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatu 'l-Lah.* May peace and the mercy of God be with you. God only knew.

Fatima dug more deeply with the blade. The metal tip scraped against bone. But even her penance was futile. She didn't dare sever hand or arm, or carve out her eye, lest

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she endanger her mission—a mission she'd be as happy as not to fail. And just as her flesh would heal and again be whole, the doubts she hoped to purge would return to dog her to the end of her nights.

At last, still not looking at Lucita, Fatima forced herself from the chair and, leaving only a trail of dripping blood, ventured into the night.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 8:49 PM (2:49 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Calle de la Redondilla**

**Madrid, Spain**



The basement of the rug vendor's shop was silent except for the solid metallic click of Anwar reattaching the final piece of the Spectre M4 submachine gun firmly in place. The firearm—not his weapon of choice—was cleaned, reassembled, and ready for use, if such became necessary. As the state of transcendent calm that accompanied the beginning of a mission took hold, Anwar, his mind completely focused and his fingers moving with the speed of the blood, began disassembling and reassembling the gun again. For practice. The task required nearly twenty seconds.

Mahmud was out finalizing the deployment of the teams. Even little, wrinkled Pilar was taking the field tonight. Only Anwar remained behind, waiting for...

There. Fatima's footsteps coming down the basement steps. She was not concerned with masking her approach, else he would not have heard her.

"*Salaam*," Anwar bowed respectfully when she joined him.

"*Salaam*. All is in place?" Fatima's countenance was neutral, almost guarded.

Anwar had thought perhaps to sense her enthusiasm at the prospect of an approaching kill, to feel the intensity and pride that he had known when she squeezed his shoulder the night before. But she was too long-practiced for that, he realized, suddenly embarrassed at his own expectation.

"All is in place," he said.

Fatima walked past him to a stack of crates against the wall. She ignored a convenient crowbar leaning nearby and pried open one of the crates with her hands. Scraping aside the packing material, she removed two hinged wooden boxes, one roughly the size of a shoe box, the other slightly wider and several feet longer. The first box contained a pistol as well as a silencer and laser sight, the latter two which she left. She opened the larger box to reveal a fine damascene scimitar, the curved blade blackened to keep it from reflecting the light. Fatima placed the gun in a specially crafted pocket within her pullover and secured the scimitar to her belt.

"There is one change to the plans," she said when that was done. "You must go to the villa where Lucita is staying and watch for her."

This struck Anwar as odd. He'd assumed last night when the watch, on Fatima's orders, had returned from the villa, that she had decided to deal with Lucita once and for all. Perhaps Fatima had gone merely for information, or to clarify something from the notes, such as the Leviathan business. But surely Lucita would not have been suffered to survive such an encounter. Unless some bargain had been struck—perhaps Lucita was spared in exchange for divulging information and swearing not to leave the villa. The elders did often work in mysterious ways.

"Destroy her if she ventures out?" Anwar asked.

He was surprised how quickly Fatima spun to face him and grab his shoulder, even more forcefully this time. "No." Fatima stared at Anwar's face, but he could tell that it was not he who occupied her thoughts.

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“She will not leave,” Fatima said after a moment, then paused again.

From Fatima’s certainty, Anwar thought that perhaps Lucita was destroyed after all.

“If she does...” Fatima said after a few seconds, proving Anwar wrong, “if she does, then you must follow her. She must not see you, or *feel* that you are there. She knows such things.” Fatima increased the pressure on his shoulder. “If she leaves the city, fine. If she goes to Monçada’s haven...”

“Yes?”

“If she goes to Monçada’s haven, wait five minutes after she enters, signal me, and begin the diversions.” As she said this, Fatima took a direct-signal pager from a work table and made sure the device was set to vibrate rather than beep. “Under no circumstances are you to approach her,” Fatima added. “You understand.”

Anwar nodded. He understood the instructions, if not the sentiment behind them. Surely they would deal with Lucita at some point. Why not now? Fatima could not believe that a hedonistic Lasombra child of privilege was more than a match for him.

“That is all,” Fatima said.

“May the Eldest smile upon you,” Anwar intoned.

“And may your back be strong,” Fatima answered.

Then the basement was empty.

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**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 9:51 PM (3:51 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Calle de Paja  
Madrid, Spain**



Fatima watched the vegetable seller's stall and the street from the shadows. The city was still very active with mortals, and the scimitar hanging from her belt was not the easiest weapon to conceal. She would wait. Calle de Paja was not a street of bars and clubs. The stalls were already closed and boarded for the night. With patience, the proper moment would present itself.

Waiting in the darkness, Fatima could still hear Anwar's voice in her mind, his question about Lucita: *Destroy her if she ventures out?* He was a zealot, much as she had been, and for whatever reason, he craved Lucita's blood. He was right to believe that such an accomplishment would bring him to the notice of the elders. A few nights ago, Fatima had distracted him with praise. She had revealed to him the identity of her target, and his pride and self-satisfaction had driven thoughts of Lucita from his mind—for a while. But he was ever ambitious. As Fatima had been. He had nothing and no one to pull him in different directions.

As mortal passersby continued to move about on the street, Fatima could not help but think of Lucita, of the strength and allure of her blood. Fatima had wakened before Lucita, had stood above her half-naked body with the perfect opportunity to destroy her. Yet Fatima had slipped silently from the room. She had left the villa hoping that they might never need meet again. At the very least, Lucita could survive this trip to Madrid. If she stayed put tonight, Fatima and the others would be fairly rushed to leave the city after completing their mission. Or if Lucita left the city, Fatima would be able to delay the inevitable, to coast along on her achievement tonight. Or, if she failed...

Fatima tried to crowd such useless thoughts from her mind by concentrating on the information gained from Don Ibrahim—the *Leviathan*—and corroborated by Vykos. Either one of those sources by him- or itself would have been suspect. It was still possible that Vykos was wrong about the location of the entrance, or that she and Anwar had misconstrued the fiend's meaning, but an assassin seldom enjoyed the luxury of surety. Fatima was accustomed to relying on instinct and intuition, and tonight they pointed her toward the unassuming vegetable stall. She felt confident, also, that in the most disastrous of instances, she could avoid capture. The worst she would face was an honorable Final Death—and in a way, she even hoped for that end. It would save her from other decisions that were being forced upon her, other decisions that she could not make. She would no longer need to face her own hypocrisy. And so she approached her mission unprepared, as good as blind. She knew less than her brethren assumed of defeating the Leviathan. She courted Final Death, and it was not a discriminating suitor.

Again, she forced such thoughts away. She was aided in this, at last, by the pesky mortals, who had thinned out considerably. It was time. Fatima stepped from the shadows. She drew on the power of the blood. The few mortals scattered along the street did not see her, did not notice the blade hanging from her waist.

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She approached the wooden stall, stood beneath the carving of Adam and Eve, the tree and the serpent, the apple, the sun that never set. A chain was looped through holes in the door and in the wall next to it. The lock was on the inside. Whoever had fastened the lock must be within as well.

The chain did not rattle as Fatima took a link in her fingers and snapped it. Nor was there a sound as the chain fell to the floor just inside the door. Fatima opened the door, stepped over the chain, pulled the door closed behind her.

The crowded stall was two rooms. The front room, which would be open to the street during the day, was almost completely filled with tables and boxes full of vegetables and fruit. The second, much smaller room was through an open doorway to the back. Fatima moved silently past a crate of apples. Fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

No footsteps sounded to wake the old man on the cot in the back room. Fatima slit his throat with her jambia, held his mouth until he stopped thrashing. He was mortal, or a ghoul of weak blood. The spreading blood did not entice Fatima. She let it soak into the aged bedding and the dusty rug on the floor. Then she cast the rug aside to reveal the trap door beneath.

She inspected the door visually for several minutes before deciding to touch it. Neither Ibrahim nor Vykos had mentioned traps, but Vykos, in Parmenides's report, had been rather cryptic and sparse on details, while Ibrahim didn't even know where the entrance was. Still, the way that both had spoken of the Leviathan led her to believe that only one memorable obstacle blocked this route. But caution was never wasted. For several minutes more, she laid her hands on the wooden door, moved her fingers only fractions of an inch at a time. She cleared her mind of all except the wood—its texture, the run of the grain, the granules of dirt and dust filling the crevices, the space between the fibers of the wood itself, the space beyond the door....

Finally, she pulled at the recessed latch. The door was not even locked. A shaft led straight down. Rough hand- and footholds were carved into the stone walls. No sound or light emerged from the opening. Fatima lowered herself in and began the descent into darkness.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 11:03 PM (5:03 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Calle Luis Garcia**

**Madrid, Spain**



Tonight. It would happen tonight. Lucita was sure of that. Fatima was going after Monçada. Why else would she have shown up, except as a kind of cryptic warning to stay away?

Lucita continued her pacing. She'd been pacing for several hours now.

Not that Fatima had said as much. Oh, no. She wouldn't come right out and fucking say much of anything. Ever. Instead, she hid behind her veil of quiet invincibility. Of course she would think that if she let Lucita know what was going on, then Lucita would obediently stay away.

Fat chance. A hell of a lot fatter than Lucita's sire.

Lucita rubbed absently at an itch on her chest. It was the freshly healed skin around her rose tattoo. She'd pretended still to be under the spell of the sun when Fatima left. It had seemed easier that way. Now she wasn't so sure.

She wanted to kick herself for not having said more last night—but they'd been so intent on killing one another, and then *not* killing one another, consuming each other. Lucita sucked in a deep breath and tried to pretend her lungs were still good for something. It always happened that way: a hundred years or more of stalking and anticipation, then a few heated hours, and then hard feelings.

It didn't have to be that way. Not if Fatima wouldn't be such a close-mouthed bitch (Lucita was not one to let emotions build up inside). Not if Fatima wasn't trying to kill Lucita's sire; Lucita had dibs on the loathsome bastard. She just hadn't followed through yet. She was biding her time. Her big plans had a way of seeming very small once she was back in his company. Never mind that she'd be just as rid of him if Fatima cacked him. That wasn't the point. The point was that Monçada, as he himself might put it, was Lucita's cross to bear. How dare Fatima interfere with that? Not to mention that Fatima had made it very clear that after she was done with him, she was coming after Lucita.

"Cocky bitch."

But Lucita couldn't deny with curses her more tender feelings for Fatima—not after last night, and not after she'd feigned sleep while Fatima carved deep gashes into her arm. Lucita had stolen surreptitious glances. She'd felt the impulse to go to Fatima, to take the dagger and lay it aside, to lick the wounds until they healed. But there were, Lucita knew, more and deeper wounds than she could tend. Still, at times she felt she could try. She could comfort Fatima and be comforted in return....

But, luckily, Lucita always came to her senses.

Dependency. She spat on the floor, smeared with her foot the droplets of Fatima's blood on the floor.

Lucita was tired of pacing. She was tired of this game that she and Fatima played throughout eternity. Whatever it was that drew them together, Fatima was still just a tool for her raghead masters in Iran or wherever the hell they were.



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Lucita grabbed her sword. She looked around for a sheath—she had one somewhere, though she didn't really wear the sword anymore; it just wasn't the same kind of fashion statement in the late twentieth century that it used to be—but couldn't track it down.

“Hell with it.”

Moving toward the door, she ran a hand through her tangled hair. That was another thing Fatima had to answer for. Monçada's ghoul or not, Lucita had gotten accustomed to Consuela brushing her hair in the evenings. Lucita had found the woman downstairs earlier that evening, throat slit. She wouldn't have felt much pain, but Lucita was less concerned with the ghoul's final minutes than with the inconvenience her death caused.

Not until she reached the courtyard did Lucita hesitate. How was Monçada going to react if she warned him? He was liable to think she'd gone soft. Then he'd get all touchy-feely. She'd say something completely justified but likely rude, and he would beat the crap out of her, or lock her in a closet for three years, or something like that. Thinking of it in those terms, she wondered if maybe Fatima wasn't welcome to him. But then how could Lucita ever face the Assamite again? How much more smug and superior could Fatima get? Maybe Monçada could handle Fatima on his own.

Lucita wasn't sure.

While she pondered these revolving questions, Lucita couldn't help thinking back to a few nights ago, to the male prostitute she'd killed on almost the exact spot she was now standing. That business had been slow going at first, but she'd found that blood—his blood—was as good a lubricant as any.

In the end, it was that thought that tipped the scales and sent her on toward the Iglesia de San Nicolás. She hadn't decided if she wanted to warn Monçada about Fatima, now that the threat was more imminent. As angry as she was at Fatima, she wasn't even sure that she wanted the Assamite to fail. But Lucita hadn't seen her sire since she'd fucked the prostitute and left him sprawled in the street like the mortal garbage he was.

That was reason enough to visit her sire.

**Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 11:27 PM (5:27 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**



The darkness in the tunnels was more than an absence of light. It was a fog of inky moisture that seemed to coat Fatima, the stone walls, the floor, the air itself. The darkness clung to Fatima's body, seeped into her spirit, leaching away her strength of will. With each step, the darkness grew deeper ahead and behind. She could see just enough to keep moving forward. There were no side tunnels, no alternative paths.

She wondered how Lucita could ever have entered this oppressive place without going instantly mad. Even Fatima, not completely averse to dour solitude, felt the weight of the earth pressing down upon her, crushing her. And what did it say about Monçada, that he would choose this black labyrinth in which to spend eternity?

The darkness was a crèche of doubts, and as Fatima continued along the passageway, uncertainties assailed her and gained force. She questioned the veracity of the sources that had brought her to this place. Who could read the alien mind of a foul Tzimisce? And perhaps it was not Thetmes and the children of Haqim who manipulated the Black Hand but the other way around. Perhaps Monçada had been warned, and had sent Ibrahim forth as a sacrifice, a decoy, to lure Fatima to this place devoid of hope.

Even if her scant knowledge proved accurate, ahead in the darkness a guardian lay in wait. The Leviathan. With every mission, of course, there was the risk of failure, of Final Death. Tonight was no different in that sense. She would destroy Monçada, or she would not. She would survive, or she would not. Only once before, however, had she felt that perhaps failure was the best outcome for a mission, that defeat and Final Death were what she deserved. That time, risking disloyalty, she had made sure that word of her target's identity preceded her—and Lucita, completely prepared, had defeated her.

Times had changed.

*The herald is among us. The Eldest of our blood is not long behind.* The children of Haqim, ever dutiful, ever uncompromising, were being drawn toward a narrow path indeed.

*Prove yourself,* Thetmes had said. Prove herself worthy. By destroying Monçada. And then Lucita. If that were what worthiness entailed, Fatima thought she might be able to do it. She might be able to cut out her own heart, if that were what Haqim required. Though she had failed before, she would destroy Lucita, sacrifice the bond between them.

But even that would not be enough. She could do all that, but still the dreams would come eventually. Still the herald would call her to task for her faith—for that she could not and would not discard. Jamal and Elijah Ahmed had not proven worthy. How could she hope to do so?

There was a wrongness here. A wrongness as palpable as the darkness that surrounded her.

But who, Fatima wondered, was she to judge Haqim? The blood was his blood. If he reclaimed it for whatever reason, just or unjust, such was his right. Just as Musa never stepped into the promised land, perhaps Fatima would conclude her years of service before the Final Nights had passed, all told.

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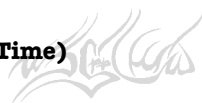
She would not abandon Allah.

She would not abandon Haqim, though he abandon her. For justice or injustice did not change one fact—that the get of Khayyin were a blight upon the earth. Of this she was certain, even amidst the stifling darkness. Even more so amidst the stifling darkness, where Monçada's foul corruption was given release.

Ahead through the gloom, Fatima's eyes could make out bars across the tunnel, a different shade of black upon black. The impenetrable portcullis of which Ibrahim had spoken. But before she could approach the grate, she felt the wind from a side tunnel. It was not a wind of air currents, but of shadow. And the shadow, which was everywhere, enveloped her, took hold of her. It was as solid, one hundredfold, as the black air through which she had already waded.

Fatima's arms were pinned at her side, her hands unable to reach a single weapon, as she was drawn into the maw of the Leviathan.

**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 12:03 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 6:03 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**



*She will not leave.* That's what Fatima had said about Monçada's obscene childe. Even at the time, the words had sounded to Anwar less prediction than wishful thinking. None of this, he pondered as he stood before the stone church, would have been a problem if Fatima had allowed him to destroy Lucita. Fatima must have her reasons, although Anwar could not see how Lucita's destruction at this point would endanger the mission against Monçada any more than letting her return to his lair.

At any rate, Lucita *had* left the villa. She had walked boldly through the streets, even carrying a sword. The mortals she passed assumed it was one of the many blades made for sale to tourists. Anwar knew better. He had followed Fatima's instructions and followed Lucita from a very safe distance as she'd returned to her sire's lair, walking in the front doors of the church among a crowd of unsuspecting mortals just as the midnight mass was about to begin. There would be quite a diversion, indeed.

Anwar did not waste time. He adjusted his grip on the submachine gun beneath his jacket, made sure the weapon was set for bursts, clicked off the safety. Then he pressed the button on the device that would alert Fatima, Mahmud, and the others that he was beginning. Without further hesitation, he strode up the steps and through the doors that Lucita had passed just a few minutes before. Music from the venerable pipe organ swelled to greet him.

The sanctuary was relatively full. Anwar went unnoticed among the stragglers who crossed themselves as they crossed the threshold, perhaps seeking divine forbearance for their belated arrival. Most of the worshippers were darkly complected. Anwar was merely a few shades darker still. He could pass for a laborer from the fields, his skin baked by the sun, hour after hour through countless days, though it was not the sun but the blood that had affected him.

As the last notes of the introit faded to silence, Anwar pulled back his jacket and opened fire.

The bedlam was instantaneous. He fired high, shattering stained-glass windows, one after another. Screams and shards of leaded glass filled the air. Worshippers dove to the floor. Choir robes fluttered like an army of retreating angels.

Anwar continued to fire high. Lights exploded with staccato pops of fire and glass. Candles and crucifixes flew into the air. Sparks rained down on the cowering parishioners as bullets ricocheted off stone. There was no need for Anwar to actually shoot mortals. They were merely a convenient source of chaos and did not deserve to suffer unduly. Terrified worshippers fled toward every exit away from Anwar. When he paused to slap a new clip into the Spectre, one brave though foolhardy young man tried to tackle Anwar. Anwar dissuaded him with a stiff-arm to the face that broke the man's nose and sent him collapsing to the floor.

Anwar spaced his bursts at longer intervals now. A few shots ever so often served to prolong the panic as well as constant fire could have. His time was almost up. He didn't

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expect a strong show of force from Monçada's defenders, not here in so public a forum. This display would not endanger the cardinal. The entrances here would be impossible to breach, so the legionnaires and ghouls could afford to stand back and wait.

But they would be angered. They would not take this lightly. And that was the idea.

With a few final bursts, Anwar rushed out through the doors and onto the streets of Madrid. None of the mortals from the church would be able to identify him. None would even be able to give an accurate description. He disappeared into the night as completely as if he'd never been there.

**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 12:16 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 6 October 1999, 6:16 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**



“The cardinal is in the bathing chamber,” Cristobal had said as he led Lucita through the series of locked doors and gates that made entering Monçada’s haven almost as laborious as navigating the Panama Canal.

“Dusting off the old bullwhip?” Lucita asked. Cristobal was too gray and proper for her taste. Just watching him dutifully and methodically unlocking and relocking each of the numerous doors was enough to raise her ire. The somber ghoul also obviously disapproved that she had brought her sword along, though he would never be so *rude* as to say so. Lucita shook her head. It wasn’t like she’d cut off somebody’s head in the sanctuary up above. And she’d been discreet enough not to disappear into the confessional in front of the worshippers arriving for the midnight mass. She’d used the other entrance, off the nave, instead. Cristobal, she decided, was way too tight-assed for his own good.

“By the way,” Lucita said, “Consuela is dead.”

Consuela. In mortal life, Cristobal’s daughter.

The ghoul paused for a moment at the stubborn bolt he was trying to work. But only for a moment. Then the bolt ceased resisting him and slammed home. As he turned and moved to the next door, his expression was maddeningly blank.

Lucita grabbed him by the arm, stopped him. He regarded her with some curiosity—she was impeding his work—but no anger, no sadness, no resentment.

Damn. Lucita knew that if she were him and had received such backhanded news, she would have kicked her ass. Cristobal waited until she let go of his arm and then attended to the next door.

That was when the shooting began. She and the ghoul both started. The sound came from above them, from the sanctuary, she thought. Cristobal promptly returned to his task, this time working the locks a bit more speedily.

Once in the haven proper, the ghoul took up a brisk pace through the shadowed corridors. The sound of gunfire grew fainter as he led Lucita down sloped hallways and steep, hewn staircases. The shooting must have something to do with Fatima, Lucita assumed, but unless the Assamites had brought a small army—or maybe a large army—she couldn’t imagine a threat resulting from a frontal assault. A diversion, then. But why? Why not try to get at Monçada while his guard was down?

Lucita knew the answer almost before the question had formed in her mind: because she was there. Fatima assumed that Monçada would be warned. Lucita dug her fingernails into her palms. So, Fatima thought she knew her that well. That irritated Lucita enough that she suddenly decided she *would* warn her sire of exactly who was after his sorry, expansive hide. But just as suddenly, she was gripped by indecision. Fatima, with her arrogance and effrontery, deserved to be thwarted. But the thwarting would benefit Monçada, and that wasn’t something Lucita was anxious to do. On the other hand, the thought of someone else—especially if that someone was Fatima—destroying Monçada raised Lucita’s hackles....

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She had almost come to the conclusion that she should just kill *everyone* and be done with all of it, when they turned the corner into the corridor leading to the bath chamber. The sound of gunfire, if it was still going on, did not penetrate this deeply, though there were signs of activity. Alfonzo, leader of Monçada's legionnaires while Vallejo was off gallivanting in the New World, was just leaving the bath chamber. He nodded curtly as he passed. The door was still open. Cristobal led Lucita inside.

Thankfully, Monçada had his priest's robes on. He wasn't naked in the pool, though he had been—the water was clouded red, and fresh blood glistened on the glass slivers of the whip hanging on the wall.

"Ah, my daughter!" he said effusively, seemingly unconcerned that someone was shooting up the church a few hundred feet above his head. He opened his arms wide.

Lucita did not rush to greet him. She stood just inside the door.

"Thank you, Cristobal," Monçada said to the ghoul who was waiting expectantly, still a bit nervous about the gunfire. "Everything is well in hand."

That evidently was enough for Cristobal, who bowed and backed from the room, closing the door as he went.

"I am pleased that you've come back to me, my beautiful childe," Monçada said. "The city may not be completely safe at present, but you needn't worry yourself. Here, you are beyond harm."

"Oh, *I'm* not worried," Lucita said. Her words were still full of fire, but her belly felt suddenly hollow. The sword in her hand, her badge of defiance, now seemed to her a child's toy.

"Good," Monçada said, missing—intentionally or otherwise—the dire implication of her sarcasm. "Come," he said, and led her to another room just down the corridor. For a man his size, his movements were surprisingly deft.

Lucita followed reluctantly. This room, like most of the others, was sparsely furnished with a few sturdy wooden chairs and small tables. At the center of each wall was an icon, a large painted plaque depicting a Christian martyr: Saint Lawrence on the gridiron; Santa Lucia, her eyes displayed on a plate in her hand; Stephen beneath a pile of stones; Eustace being cooked within a hollow, bronze bull. Lucita had always suspected that Monçada fancied himself a candidate for martyrdom, and looking again at the unpleasant ends the martyrs met, she would have been more than happy to help him along that road.

But tonight, as always when she was in his presence, when opportunity presented itself to do him actual harm, she found that her will dwindled away to nothing, as if withering on the vine. She looked again at the sword that she held in her hand. She pictured the blade lopping off her sire's head and imagined him as Saint Denis, picking up his head and walking away. Standing before him, she could not smite him, not even in fantasy. Dejected, she leaned the sword against the wall.

Monçada lowered his bulk into one of two chairs on either side of a table. Atop the table rested a chess set, pieces arranged for a game in progress. White was reduced to a few pawns and a bishop, while black retained a bishop, a knight, and its queen. He gestured toward the other chair. Lucita came closer but did not sit. Monçada ignored her feeble show of rebellion.

"Don Ibrahim has not been by of late," he said, "so I make do testing myself. Do not pity me. It is not such a hardship," he fended off the protest she had not been about to offer. "I have finally found an opponent whom I will never overestimate," he added smugly.

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“Fatima is here to kill you,” Lucita said. She had not meant to say it, had not yet decided to warn her sire. The words had simply... happened. And now it was too late to do anything else. She had squandered the power she had over him, had let slip through her fingers one of the last decisions left to her. Lucita burned with rage.

Monçada’s eyebrows rose briefly, stretching taut the upper portion of his face. But even surprise, so foreign to those features, could not lift his sagging jowls. Then he smiled.

“I would prefer that Vallejo were here,” he said matter-of-factly, “but Alfonso will suffice. There is no danger.”

Lucita, despite her death wish for him, could not help but believe him. She, with all her hatred, had never been able truly to threaten him. How could Fatima, cold and professional, hope for better?

“I have been making plans,” Monçada said, apparently satisfied that the topic of Fatima had been exhausted. “Now that you have returned to me, all is nearly ready.” Monçada casually reached out his fleshy hand and placed a finger atop the black queen—the likeness of Lucita that Vykos had crafted that horrible night years ago.

“You have done your part,” he continued, “and Vykos has done its. Vykos has done remarkably well, in fact. I’d expected its attention to wander long before now.”

Lucita listened but only partially comprehended. She was still too horrified by her betrayal of herself to offer any critique of her sire’s ramblings. For his part, Monçada seemed to enjoy the novelty of pontificating before a properly subservient child.

“Borges is gone,” he said, “as you so cleverly saw to, and the princes in the American South are destroyed or chased away. They were so insular,” he shook his head in mock-shame. “Each one a petty ruler, so jealous of his city. No arrangements for mutual defense. Even when a warning went out, each prince thought the previous city would be the last to fall.” He contemptuously brushed the captured white pieces from the side of the table onto the floor.

“There has been the strength to do this for quite some time, but not the *will*,” he said, grinding the pieces on the floor beneath his large sandal. “The archbishops and the nomads merely needed a firm hand to guide them. And heaven knows the regent wasn’t about to lead. Why should she start now?”

Lucita wanted to shrink back from his increasing fervor. She wanted nothing to do with his plans. She could not see that they had anything to do with her—but she feared that they did.

“The Camarilla strength in Washington is broken,” Monçada said. “Those that remain huddle in Baltimore but are not yet defeated. And then there is Polonia, the remaining archbishop of stature. Once the Camarilla fools have done their part...”

The moment that Lucita had feared came to pass, as Monçada’s gaze fell upon her. She wanted desperately to attack him and at the same time to flee from his presence, but she could do neither. She didn’t so much as protest as he reached out and took her hand.

“Once they have bloodied Polonia’s nose, then the New World will be ready,” Monçada said. He gazed at Lucita, but his vision was of a transformed world. “Ready for me to stand at the fore... with you at my side.”

He stroked a finger along Lucita’s arm—wrist to elbow to shoulder. She shuddered but did not pull away. His hands were quivering with excitement. His eyes bulged.

“In time, my daughter, our power will rival that of the regent. Where she lords over wild dogs, I will bend them to my will. And all that is mine will be yours.”



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Lucita felt the sudden urge to run, to flee from her sire's madness. But Monçada held her by the arm. She strangled a whimper. She'd not allow herself that, nor to cry. She'd not give him the satisfaction. She might have accepted Final Death, but to remain at his side and do his bidding... All that was left was laughter. Cold, hollow, maniacal laughter.

The sound of Lucita's cruel despair slapped Monçada across the face, disturbed him from his triumphant reverie. He shook her roughly, but the laughter did not cease. Instead it grew louder, more forceful. It wracked her body and brought forth tears of blood from her eyes.

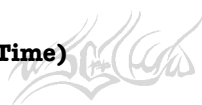
Monçada shook her again. They jostled the table and upset the board. The black queen tumbled to the floor and landed amidst the dust and the rubble of white.

Lucita could not stop the laughter. Her sire's madness ripped it from her barren womb like a mangled, unborn child. He twisted her arm. The bone snapped, but still she could not stop. Not releasing her broken body, Monçada raised his hand against her, and the first blow fell.

The first, but not the last.

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**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 12:20 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 6 October 1999, 6:20 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle del Sapo**  
**Madrid, Spain**



Anwar lunged away from a wisp of movement that might have been nothing at all. Or it might have been one of the streaks of shadow. From the corner of his eye, he saw the flash that was Mahmud, saw the silent snap of the whip and the patch of darkness ripped apart like shredded paper.

Now Anwar whirled and slashed with his katar at another shadow. The blade met resistance. The darkness jerked away from him momentarily. He followed Mahmud's example and set himself in motion. The bodies were not a great obstacle. Anwar danced over and around them without losing even half a step. The shadows could not surround what they could not catch. But the darkness was everywhere.

The shooting in the church had gone so easily, as had the bombing that Mahmud had undertaken to gut one particular storage room at the opera. But when the two had met at the next point of diversion, as Fatima had instructed, the resistance had been swift and intense. The ghouls poured from the bar waving clubs and knives, firing guns. It was a less scenic portion of the city, where drunken street brawls were not uncommon, where the *policía* would not rush to intervene.

Anwar had felt some small relief after he and Mahmud had quickly dispatched the score of ghouls and the rest of the crowd had dispersed in panic.

Then the shadows had closed in.

The battle now was one of survival. Feeling that their diversionary task was done, he and Mahmud had attempted to withdraw from the field, but the shadows were everywhere. Supposedly only a half-dozen of Monçada's legionnaires were in the city, but Anwar would have sworn it was a hundred. Every way he turned, darkness exercised will—lashed out at him, grabbed at his legs, his weapon, attempted to smother him from all sides. Ever so often, a solid figure appeared, only long enough to attack, and then was gone when Anwar's blade sang in the night.

His wounds so far were superficial, but they required attention, they required blood to heal. Mahmud was fighting as a man possessed. His whip, denied sound, still possessed its sting.

Anwar needed only a single opening to steal away through the night, but at every turn the shadows blocked him. Though the fight was not yet lost, neither was it won. Time and numbers would eventually tell the tale.

**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 12:22 AM**

**(Tuesday, 6 October 1999, 6:22 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**

**Madrid, Spain**

Fatima surrendered herself to helplessness. Darkness held her. Tendrils of shadow coiled around her, pinned her legs together and her arms to her body. A few minutes of struggle had proven the futility of that route. The darkness carried the weight of the earth, the force of stone. It surrounded her and bound her with inescapable malevolence.

The Leviathan.

Darkness was its strength, and as it pulled Fatima along the passage, the darkness was complete. Cold seeped into even her undead flesh. Screams sounded in her ears—trapped echoes of despair voiced long ago by tortured penitents. The shadow, so complete was its stranglehold on this place, kept the shrieks alive long after flesh and bone had crumbled to dust and faded from memory. Inquisition and confession were still here, and tears offered as final rite.

Surrounded by darkness, by shadows of memory, Fatima knew her own quiet despair. Not because she had gambled and failed, but because she had gambled wanting to fail. She was Fatima al-Faqadi, assassin among assassins. There had been a small chance, and she had deceived herself as to how small it was. Mahmud, Pilar, not even Anwar had questioned her. Perhaps they should have. To question her would have proven them not weak but wise.

But they had taken her word on faith. They had assumed she knew more than they did about this dark path, about the Leviathan. All she knew was speculation; all she had was a guess—enough so that she could leave them all and come here to perish in darkness, to have the sword removed from her hand. She had hoped to relinquish all and be left with Allah, but now—now that it was too late—she saw her error. Allah called her to faithfulness in all that she held dear. Consequences were not the shapers of faith—not for the worthy. Yet consequences had shaped her in this, and she had broken faith with her brethren, with Lucita. She had given in to despair and given up on all of them.

Had Fatima even really tried to avoid capture, to escape from this creature she'd known lurked somewhere? She couldn't be sure. She couldn't manage to trust herself. It was too late now. Her doubts had led her here, and now they would drown her in darkness. She had expected, at the very least, relief from the gnawing guilt, but in this, too, she had been wrong. Now that action was beyond her, now that there was no longer any chance to make amends, regret was not banished. It was all that remained.

Perhaps the best she could hope for was oblivion. Once the Leviathan destroyed her, there would be peace. Even if the beast merely imprisoned her, there would be the pain and insanity of hunger, but eventually torpor and peace. And for no more a price than abandoning all she'd ever held dear.

The bargain stuck in Fatima's throat. She thought of Lucita, of how she would reject such a compromise in no uncertain terms. Fatima felt that defiance in her blood—in Lucita's blood that flowed in her own body. Fatima lashed out at the darkness, but she could barely move. Her will was not enough to part the darkness. The darkness welcomed

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Fatima. It pulled her in more completely, held her firmly. The Leviathan was all around—touching, smelling, tasting.

And then it was gone. The shadows were not so all-encompassing, and Fatima stood again on her own two feet. The screams faded into the past, and with them despair.

*It knows the blood.*

In Fatima's veins flowed the blood of Haqim—and that of Lucita. Monçada's blood once-removed.

*It knows the blood.*

Fatima had taken advantage of her lover, had fallen into her arms under false pretense. And now the false lover was given leave to make amends. The bargain was undone, and regret with it. Fatima moved quickly on into the lair of shadows, lest her reprieve prove fragile and the full weight of darkness return.

**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 12:41 AM**

**(Tuesday, 6 October 1999, 6:16 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**

**Madrid, Spain**

The tunnel of the Leviathan soon gave way to the labyrinthine passages of Monçada's haven proper. Fatima pressed onward. At each turn and in every corridor, statues and Christian iconography confronted her. She could feel the faith, corrupted by shadow, that permeated Monçada's lair. But Fatima, too, was a creature of faith. She feared neither heaven nor angels.

She found the twists and turns of the corridors themselves almost familiar. Never before had she set foot in the cardinal's lair, but the Black Hand's interrogation of Ibrahim had been thorough. The maps were burned into her memory. Thus far, they had proven accurate. She had not lost her way. Nor had anyone or anything else challenged her.

The cardinal jealously maintained his privacy. According to Ibrahim, few servants were allowed beneath the uppermost reaches of his lair, and tonight ghouls and legionnaires alike would be guarding the entrances, responding to the attacks in those places. Fatima felt the vibrations from her pocket, now that she was free of the smothering presence of the Leviathan. It was the signal that the diversions were underway... and that Lucita had returned to her sire.

There would not be merely Monçada to deal with.

In the end, Fatima's search was much easier than she'd expected. Tracing in her mind the diagrams of winding corridors, she had thought to search room by room. But her ears discerned a familiar sound in the distance: the dull reverberation of flesh striking flesh.

Fatima hurried toward the sounds of strife, knowing that there she would find Lucita. She rushed through corridors that she knew but did not know, past the chapel, around a corner, past the scriptorium. She did not pause in the bathing chamber but continued through it, down the hall. She stepped through an open door.

Monçada was larger even than she'd imagined, powerful beyond what his girth would imply. He wore simple robes and sandals, and Fatima could smell the blood of his sweat. She watched his fist as it struck Lucita. Fatima flinched as if the blow landed on her own body.

He held Lucita aloft by a mangled arm. She was conscious, and a weak sound that might have once been laughter emanated from her beaten form.

Fatima, reaching for her scimitar, moved silently toward sire and childe. Whether Lucita glanced in her direction or Monçada was too attuned to the shadows of his haven, Fatima did not know, but he sensed her presence somehow, turned to face her. She decided against sword and drew the 226 Sig instead and pulled three quick shots.

Monçada twisted with amazing speed, and the rounds that would have taken off his head slammed instead into his shoulder and exploded. The large man staggered backward. He dropped Lucita and clutched the bloody tangle of flesh that had been his shoulder. His left arm hung useless at his side.

Suddenly his rage that had been focused against Lucita and her defiant, insane cackle shifted to Fatima. "Cease!" he commanded.

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The shockwave of his voice filled the room like a tidal wave. Fatima's finger trembled against the trigger—twelve explosive rounds remained to blow him into a bloody mass—but she could not pull it. She hesitated only an instant, but tendrils of shadow grabbed the weapon. She pulled the trigger. A portion of the ceiling exploded. Fragments of stone rained down upon them.

Rather than mire herself in a tug-of-war, Fatima abandoned the gun to the tendrils and sprang forward with her scimitar. But the shadows were rising against her. She slashed at them and dodged, but they forced her wide of Monçada. As she maneuvered, she took her jambia into her other hand with but a flick of her wrist. With one fluid motion, she slit her own arm so that she bled freely, and flung the blade.

A tendril of shadow blocked the path of flight, but the jambia, bathed in the blood of Haqim, rent the darkness and thudded into the chest of the surprised cardinal.

Monçada bellowed in pain.

Nearby, Lucita was crawling to her knees. Fatima ignored her and advanced against the sire.

But now truly all the shadows of hell answered Monçada's call. The darkness converged from every corner and crevice of the room. Fatima could as well have turned night to day as avoided the onslaught, and as the blanket of tendrils entangled her legs, Fatima felt again the presence of the Leviathan, not bound to one distant tunnel but alive and spread throughout this underground deathtrap. The beast had spared her once—had recognized her blood—but now it obeyed the command of its master.

Fatima slashed at the shadow creature, but as the room became a lake of darkness, there was nowhere for her to elude its grasp. Her speed was useless as the darkness rose everywhere. It took hold of her again, and though this time she struggled unceasingly, the result was no more satisfactory. The tendrils squeezed her, not crushing her but giving her no opening to escape. Perhaps the Leviathan was too confused by the familiar blood to destroy her; perhaps Monçada's wish was that she be a captive.

The cardinal was tending to his wounds. His shoulder was healed slightly. He had pulled the jambia from his chest and was pawing at the gash that would not respond to his blood, would not heal.

Moving through the shadow was Lucita, her dark hair like so many flowing tendrils. She'd climbed to her feet and retrieved a sword from some place. The Dark Rose of Aragon stood between Fatima and Monçada. Her arm, too, was partially recovered, though it obviously pained her still and she held the sword in her left hand.

Monçada smiled through his own pain. "You were quite right, my beautiful daughter. We seem to have captured one of the heathen Assamites." His expression of triumph shifted to concern. "We must find out how she got this far," he said, his confidence returning as he spoke. "But we will not be remaining in these halls much longer, regardless. We will make an even more wondrous—"

Monçada seemed surprised when Lucita's sword slammed into his neck. The blade sliced muscle and tendon and dug into bone. Lucita had used her off hand, and her strength was failing. She swayed on her feet. Monçada looked quizzically from the sword protruding from his neck to his childe. His mouth remained open, but he seemed at a loss for words.

"My daughter..." he managed at last, but still the words to express his obvious shock eluded him. With a pained look, he wrenched the embedded sword, now chipped, from

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his body and tossed it away. The clatter of steel against stone seemed to revive him, or at least to release the great rage that welled up within him. Within seconds, his face was dark red, his hands balled tightly into large fists.

He lashed out at Lucita and the back of his hand sent her airborne across the room. Self control was a distant memory for the cardinal. He stood trembling with rage, eyes squeezed shut.

“May the gates of hell swing wide for you!” he shouted at last, and with that pronouncement, the shadows swarmed over Lucita.

The Leviathan still held Fatima tightly. The creature was more than massive enough to overwhelm two people. As tendrils of darkness snaked around the cardinal’s child, however, Fatima could feel the indecision of the shadow beast. For Monçada ordered it not to incapacitate Lucita, not to bind her but to destroy her, to crush her body until there was nothing left. Fatima felt this through the shadow, or perhaps it was the common blood—from her to Lucita to Monçada—that gained her insight.

*It knows the blood.*

The black tide of the Leviathan washed Lucita before it like helpless driftwood. Great tentacles rose from the pool to encircle her. They constricted with the force of ages. Joints popped. Bones began to snap.

But still the Leviathan hesitated to crush her completely, to destroy the vessel of the blood. Fatima, so familiar with despair, felt that of the creature—ordered now to destroy the blood that it was created to protect.

*It knows the blood.*

For a few seconds, the shadow beast’s resolve wavered... and then it decided.

The bands of darkness that imprisoned Fatima began to squeeze more forcefully; the tentacles holding Lucita tightened once again—and great snakes of shadow sprang forth to ensnare Monçada himself.

If the Leviathan was to destroy the blood, then destroy the blood it would.

Monçada’s protests were quickly crushed from him. He could not draw enough air to speak. Lucita had ceased to struggle, and Fatima, sensing that the creature’s grip was less intense if she did not resist, lay still as well.

Monçada, however, thrashed and sputtered as much as he was able. His rage was beyond him. First his daughter and now his guardian beast had attacked him. The tendrils swarmed over him like a pack of desert jackals on a fresh carcass. They wrapped his legs, his torso and his arms. His entire head now was dark crimson with rage.

As the tendrils began to crack his bones, Monçada finally mastered his pique and turned the force of his will rather than that of his body against the beast. The Leviathan, Monçada’s creation, faltered. The tide of blackness receded ever so slightly. The legion of tendrils lost an ounce of their determination.

It was all the opening Fatima needed. In the instant the tentacles eased their grip, she was free. Scimitar flying in a broad arc, she leapt at Monçada.

The aged Lasombra, however, had wrested his good arm free of the shadow as well. He blocked the sword. The blow sliced off his hand—but he kept his head.

At close quarters now, Fatima fainted with the scimitar but produced another hidden dagger from her belt. Monçada could not avoid the blade. The dagger dug deep into his

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girth, but in taking the wound he was able, even lacking the hand, to wrap his good arm around Fatima. He began crushing her in his powerful grip, much as the Leviathan had moments before.

The tendrils of the shadow beast sprang forward again and wrapped Monçada and Fatima together, crushing them in a lovers' embrace. Under the pressure, Fatima felt a rib give way, and then another. She worked at the dagger. The double bear hug of Monçada and the Leviathan did more than she could to drive the blade home. Monçada grimaced as the gin-gin began to take effect.

She knew the burning pain that made his belly an inferno. She twisted the blade, spreading the poison. But Monçada's eventual destruction would not save her. At the edge of her vision, bright lights began to dance among the shadow. One of her broken ribs pierced skin.

As consciousness fled, Fatima called on the blood one final time, and it answered her. Her face was pressed against Monçada's chest. She looked up and for an instant, squeezed together in the Leviathan's crushing grip, their gazes met. Monçada's eyes revealed exhilaration. Through the pain of his innards being eaten away, he was joyous. Joyous that Fatima would meet her end with him, and something else—something that Fatima could only read as fulfillment.

But then the blood answered her truly. It welled up in her throat and spewed out her mouth into Monçada's face. And where the blood of Haqim touched the *kafir*, it burned. This time, Monçada found air enough to scream.

His skin peeled away before the blood. His eyes shriveled away. Only smoldering holes remained. Still the blood flowed. Fatima disgorged a forceful spray until her strength was no more. She slumped to the floor, only slowly remembering to be surprised at her freedom. The Leviathan was shriveling. The tentacles drew back and were nothing. The pool of blackness retreated to separate patches in the corners of the rooms.

Monçada gave one last garbled scream, then his head was gone, the blood eating away flesh and bone from without as did the poison from within. Fatima was too weak to roll far out of the way as what remained of his bloated form collapsed into a smoldering heap on the floor. As she lay staring numbly at the ceiling, cracks spread through the stones, and tiny pieces of rock and mortar began falling like the first drops of an approaching storm.





**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 1:10 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 7:10 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle del Sapo**  
**Madrid, Spain**

Anwar and Mahmud stood back to back. Their strength was spent. Each bled from wounds he could no longer heal. Anwar held his katar down at his side, unable to raise the blade above his waist.

The circling darkness crept nearer. The shadow warriors moved closer for the kill.

“Quickly,” Mahmud said, thrusting his forearm at Anwar, “take my blood so you can escape when they pounce on me.”

Anwar had too little strength for debate, but with a gentle touch, he pushed Mahmud’s arm away. Anwar would not be the sole survivor of this battle. The success of the mission did not depend upon one of them escaping this place. Glory would rise or fall with Fatima. Anwar would walk away with Mahmud or not at all.

Monçada’s legionnaires circled more closely. The darkness approached that would claim Anwar. Weakness overcame him and he stumbled. No. He realized at once that it was not he who moved but the ground itself.

As if to confirm his belief, another tremor shook the earth beneath him. The shockwaves were noticeable but not overly violent. Judging by the reaction of the legionnaires, however, Anwar would have thought the world itself was split asunder.

Cries of anguish came from the shadows, and then the darkness itself was swirling and churning. All around the two assassins, the cries turned to high-pitched screams. The shadows broke into distinct, black cyclones, each no larger than a man. As suddenly as the cyclones had formed, the earth seemed to suck them down through tiny holes, and the frantic wails were no more.

**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 1:13 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 7:13 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Catacombs, Iglesia de San Nicolás de las Servitas**  
**Madrid, Spain**

The dust and bits of stone falling from the ceiling seemed to float leisurely to the floor. Fatima lay on her back watching them, thinking how peaceful it seemed. Part of her mind recognized the seductive lure of torpor. Her body was battered. She had sacrificed much of her blood for the mission. Monçada was destroyed. Now that will had fled his form, his smoldering remains had crumbled away to nothing.

The Leviathan, too, was gone. Fatima felt its absence keenly. After falling twice under its sway, she realized how its sprawling malevolence, an extension of Monçada's will given life, had spread into every crevice of the cardinal's haven. The shadow beast had been the foundation of this place more so than any amount of stone or mortar.

And now that it was gone, stone and mortar were giving way. Floor and wall were trembling. A hand took hold of Fatima's arm. She looked up to see Lucita, bleeding from the mouth. "Are you here to kill me too?" Lucita asked.

Fatima almost laughed. For once, she couldn't tell if Lucita was being sarcastic or not. Probably she was, Fatima decided. Fatima barely possessed the strength to struggle up to a sitting position. On the other hand, Lucita wasn't in much better shape.

In way of a response, Fatima leaned over and kissed Lucita gently, licked the blood from her lips. Fatima was too weak even to act upon the hunger that the tantalizing taste of blood stirred within her. She was thankful for the weakness, for the ordeal they had just endured. It removed from her shoulders the need for decision—though she knew well what the decision would be.

The two helped each other to their feet. Fatima took an agonizing few moments to pull at her side, to slide the skin back over the protruding rib. Together, they made what haste they could, as larger chunks of stone crashed to the floor around them.

They worked their way in silence through the darkness. Fatima led them back along the tunnel she had taken, and Lucita seemed content to go along. The shadows seemed shallower than before. The darkness was not so overpowering.



**Wednesday, 6 October 1999, 2:07 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 5 October 1999, 8:07 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Calle de Paja**  
**Madrid, Spain**

Lucita climbed up first into the fresh air of the vegetable stall. From below on the crudely hewn ladder, Fatima heard Lucita's muttered curses. When Fatima's head rose above ground, she saw the reason: Standing not far from Lucita was Anwar. He was covered with gashes and bruises and looked as if he might fall over from exhaustion any moment. But he held a submachine gun trained on Lucita. Once Fatima joined them, all three stood teetering, remaining upright by will alone.

Tired as he was, Anwar's glare was hard and triumphant. He didn't take his eyes from Lucita, though he spoke to his brethren: "I thought you would come out this way."

Fatima knew what was in his mind and heart. Seeing her again meant that Monçada was destroyed, that their mission was successful. He was rightfully filled with pride and satisfaction. And here was the cardinal's child. There was no longer any chance of jeopardizing the mission, no longer any reason not to destroy her.

Fatima stepped toward him. She placed a hand on the muzzle of the gun and calmly pushed it away. Now he did look at her. He shot her a challenging glance. Fatima held his stare until he looked away.

She stayed there, with her hand on the gun, until she could hear that Lucita had walked away. Until Lucita was gone.

Anwar did not question. It would not be proper. But Fatima knew the resentment she had planted in his heart.

"She is mine," Fatima said.

This made some sense to Anwar but did not answer all of his unspoken questions. Why not destroy Lucita now, while the opportunity presented itself? There would be no shame for Fatima in accepting assistance. The will of the clan outweighed matters of individual pride.

But Fatima felt that she had proven herself worthy. She would deal with Lucita at some point. And if the dreams visited her before that time, if she came to face the judgment of the herald... then maybe Anwar would have his chance.





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part two:  
HANGMAN

From Thursday, 7 October 1999  
to Sunday, 31 October 1999





**Thursday, 7 October 1999, 1:22 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

The companion had never seen Anatole like this. The prophet had never, in his experience, been in torpor. Never been even close. Anatole had never been ensorcelled. Never slumbered more than a night at a time. Never chosen to.

Yes, he had meditated for great lengths of time. The companion could recall a time when the demon Kupala—the demon whose notice had fallen upon Anatole when he had gained the power of Octavio's blood—had harassed him for seemingly endless days and nights, so that the prophet entered a deep meditation to put his mind and thoughts beyond the reach of the demon. That trance had lasted for nearly three months, which was much longer than the thirty or so days that had passed here in this cave, but it was not nearly the same.

In that meditative state, Anatole had put himself beyond the reach of all those but himself and those closest to him. The companion had still communicated with him. But this time...

This time Anatole seemed truly dead. It had happened the previous night. The last flickers of his consciousness were simply extinguished. Without a struggle, without warning, Anatole had gone gentle into the night.

And this night, the companion felt inexplicably tired too. As if all the weight of Anatole's dreams and responsibilities had somehow shifted to him. The companion already had so much to do—keeping track of the intruder, for one; that voice, which spoke to Anatole but did not acknowledge his companion.

But he could not manage it. Even so, the companion felt as if he were not so much failing Anatole as joining him.

Blackness closed in and then snapped quickly upon him.

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**Wednesday, 6 October, 1999, 11:47 PM**  
**(Thursday, 7 October, 1999, 2:47 AM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Si Redd's Resort Hotel & Casino**  
**Mesquite, Nevada**



Dan Nussbaum bellied up to the bar. The bartender noticed that he had “that look” about him—the look that signified he was about to hear some kind of story. Maybe a divorce story, maybe some other hard-luck story. Or maybe something *really* weird, which you sometimes heard from a freak who’s too strange to be seen under the bright lights of the bigger gambling towns.

Dan ordered a draft.

“Something on your mind, friend?” prodded the bartender. Best to get it over with.

“Yeah, I guess I see a lot of things. Every once in a while, though, some things stick out. I mean, I suppose I’m jaded; Pop says I am. I think he’s just old, though. I’ve seen junkies and drag queens and kids who stole their parents’ cars. Pop must have seen it all dozens of times more than I have, but it still shocks him. That’s his generation, I reckon.

“The family has a gas station and convenience stop up U.S. 95, outside of the city—Vegas—up by the Air Force range. By ‘family’ I mean me and Pop. Ma died of cancer six years ago or so. Darlene lives in Los Angeles; she never calls or writes.

“So anyways, that’s how I see the stuff I do—it just comes to me. Middle of the night, before the slots get hot, after breakfast, whenever. It comes in from all over.

“Like this one time, I’m behind the counter, looking over the baseball magazine—I’ve got a bookie in Vegas—when this real strange fella comes in. It’s night, but he’s wearing sunglasses. He comes in the front door and his long hair flutters behind him—he even has to stoop a bit to make it under the doorway. I could smell the leather and marijuana on him like he ain’t had a shower in a good day or two.

“He nods as he comes in; no sense not being friendly, I suppose. I look past him, out into the lot, smiling at him like ‘welcome.’ Out there, under the neon lights of the metal awning, parked amid a cloud of bugs and road dust is a Cutlass, front passenger side missing a hubcap. There’s a woman in the front seat, but she’s asleep or preoccupied, looking forward, or maybe sleeping.

“The guy shuffles around the store a bit and I don’t pay him any mind. If he needs something he’ll holler. Most people on that road just want to settle their business and get back to the highway.

“He comes up to the counter out of the snack-food aisle and puts his items in front of me: a box of black garbage bags, a roll of duct tape and a pack of Twinkies.

“‘Eighty-sixty-three,’ I says. ‘You a hitman?’ I kidded him.

“He digs a couple of bills out of his greasy pocket and drops them on the countertop.

“‘Vampires. Keep the change. You got a john?’ is what he says in response.

“‘Yes, sir, right around the corner.’ I hand him the ’64 Impala steering wheel with a key dangling from it.

“He leaves, opens his trunk, throws in his stuff—hard—and yells something. The girl doesn’t move, so I guess he wasn’t talking to her. He slams the trunk shut, but it



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bounces open, and he slams it down again. Must've been something in the way. Like a vampire." Dan Nussbaum laughed into his beer.

"The fella lumbers around the side of the building and returns two minutes later. He comes inside, puts the steering wheel on the counter and leaves.

"I blink, and he's gone, nothing but taillights and dust clouds. But that's none of my affair."

The bartender washed a few mugs, unfazed. All the good stories had at least a dead ex-girlfriend. But maybe that's what was in the trunk....

**Saturday, 9 October 1999, 1:45 PM**  
**Anodyne Corporation Offices**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Even before the phone call, Derek Joiner's day had seemed cursed. Not that he was thinking about such things—at least not consciously—but the morning had already been filled with angry clients, unreturned e-mails, and the necessity of signing off on paperwork that his subordinates should have finished months ago. He picked up the phone, expecting an important call from the folks in Marketing Support.

Instead, it was Melanie, his wife. Melanie, who rarely called him at work except to deliver some kind of bad news. Over the years, Derek had learned to gauge the different types of tension in Melanie's voice as though he were a musician listening for different chords. There was the "I-know-you're-fucking-other-women" tension and the "Jeremy's-brought-home-a-bad-progress-report" tension and the "I-just-got-off-the-phone-with-Mother" tension, among countless other notes in the symphony they'd composed together over the years. When he picked up the receiver and said "Hello," she said "Derek"—not "Hi, Derek" or "Hey there" or "Hi, sweetie"—and he recognized the distinctive strains of "crisis" tension. His gut knotted around his Whopper Jr. as he waited for the blow....

"What do you mean, bounced?"

"I mean that the bank is telling us we don't have *anything* in our checking account and—"

"Did you get the checkbook? A statement? Did you—"

"Derek, please! I went to the bank, talked to the branch manager. She called up the records.... It's not even like somebody got our PIN number and has been stealing from us. It's just—there's no money in there, and the records going back show this decline or something and—"

"But we've got statements from last year, right? Years before that?"

"I... The manager said she'd call the main branch, talk to the folks there, have a meeting with us. She said something about FICA, except that... it's just that it looks like the money was never there, and she gave off this vibe like I was lying or insane for saying it was in the first place!" The panic in her voice certainly confirmed that. "And that's not all... then I called the mutual fund service people to check on that, and... all that money's gone, too. I spent more than an hour on the phone with somebody in Customer Service—"

"Fuck Customer Service," Derek growled. "I want the number of the goddamn VP! Look, Melanie, that's impossible! Money doesn't just up and disappear. We had nearly 10K in the checking account, 40K in the mutual fund, now where the fuck is it?"

He spent the rest of the afternoon trying to pry something reasonable out of Melanie, the bank manager, the mutual-fund people, his voice getting progressively louder and more hoarse. Then, while on his fourth phone call with Melanie, Kincaid came to him. Said Jim Phelan wanted to see him, "just for a minute." No, it couldn't wait. He made some excuse, told Melanie he'd take care of it, because this had to be just a glitch or some kind of computer virus or something like that. This kind of thing didn't just happen. Families' money didn't just evaporate like water on hot asphalt.

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Once off the phone, he went up a flight of stairs and through the Anodyne cubicle farm into Jim's big executive window office, and there was a feeling in the air like he was being called to the principal's. Jim was sitting behind that obnoxious mahogany power desk, and Kincaid, who didn't like Derek and hadn't for years, was standing, tension ever so slightly tautening his skinny frame. They invited Derek to sit down.

Kincaid shut the door behind them. John Phelan did not typically like his office door to be shut.

"Is something wrong?" Derek asked.

As it turned out, yes, there was.

The new position just wasn't working out the way they'd anticipated in Derek's performance review last year. Derek had always been a good production-level person, but success in this position required a more strategic mindset and, frankly, the numbers just weren't what the company had hoped for.

Derek, listening to them, felt as though he were at the center of a thunderclap. He tried to protest. Yes, Derek's division had increased profits by only four percent, but the company as a whole had lost eleven percent over the last fiscal year. Derek had met or exceeded all the goals listed in the job description Phelan himself had written upon Derek's promotion. How could there possibly be a problem of this magnitude?

And they understood that, surely they did, and no doubt Derek had given his best effort, but the goals that were acceptable for someone coming new into a position just weren't sufficient for someone who'd been on the job for nearly nine months now. Management felt that he wasn't enough of a self-starter, he wasn't aggressive enough, he wasn't displaying enough initiative. And then that electric-chair switch of a phrase: It just wasn't a good fit.

It wasn't a good fit. After a whole fucking decade of "4" and "5" performance reviews, they'd suddenly come to the conclusion that Derek wasn't good at his job anymore. "It wasn't a good fit" meant that that cocksucker Kincaid had finally planted enough poison in Phelan's ear to get Derek canned. Still, he tried; he asked for goals, for measurable performance criteria. In the end, fueled by the thought of the kids, he begged. Phelan was as benign but implacable as a granite statue of a dead president. Of course, having been with the company for so long, he'd receive a generous severance package, as well as whatever letters of recommendation he needed. They were sure he'd land on his feet quickly.

Derek was sure of something, too, concerning their ancestry and morals, and the stress of the day came bubbling out of his mouth like vapor from a tar pit. His voice carried through the door; heads popped over the cubicle walls like those silly clown-heads people whack with a mallet at the carnival. Phelan and Kincaid listened to his tirade impassively—with maybe just a shade of another emotion in Kincaid's case—and said that, while they understood his frustration, it would be better for all concerned if he simply cleared out his desk and left. The implication was plain, and Joiner would be damned if he'd be dragged out of his fucking company by rent-a-cops.

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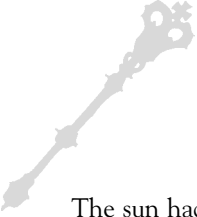
**Saturday, 9 October 1999, 6:13 PM**  
**Merging off Interstate 95**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Derek Joiner was now driving southbound along the connector, from a ruined career to a hysterical wife and a gutted savings portfolio. He handled the Saab as though a cop were behind him. Everything was very clear, very mechanical. It might have interested a casual observer how situations of absolute serenity and absolute chaos sometimes led to the same superficial reactions: autonomic, Zenlike response.

He would go home. He would talk to Melanie and find out what the hell was happening with the finances. He would file a complaint of wrongful dismissal. He would simply go home, and what happened next would just have to happen.

Get off the freeway. Stop at the light. Turn left, then left again. Then right, along the seedy road of Western Unions and adult emporiums that he avoided whenever he had the kids in the car. Then left, and through mazy strings of apartment complexes rented to students whose parents had some money but not so very much. Another right, and it was as though suburbia suddenly flashed up in PowerPoint precision all around him, split-level houses and trimmed, leaf-strewn lawns and Volvos in the driveways. The streetlights made the neighborhood seem ghostly, more a movie set than anything real; a fall breeze rattled the depilated trees as he drove past the familiar vista and into a particular driveway on a particular street.

Home.



**Saturday, 9 October 1999, 7:15 PM**  
**Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

The sun had set, but the midtown skyscrapers blazed like torches against the night sky, turning the surrounding blackness to an ashy gray. For the most part, the towers remained ablaze for the sake of “civic pride,” which is to say ostentation, but a few lights were on for more practical reasons: to accommodate the cleaning crews, or ambitious marketers hoping to barter long hours for promotions, or the true shareholders and powerbrokers who could not attend the 2 PM meetings, but who issued the most important policies and directives by night.

In his suite, Jan Pieterzoon sat straight, hands folded, and listened to the report of his underling, a spy who had long been in the service of one of Pieterzoon’s multitudinous minor foes. Such foes clung like barnacles to all who would swim the seas of Jyhad, and every significant player in the great game had his or her share; still, it was at times necessary to scrape them clean—particularly when the barnacles became overly heavy or cumbersome.

Now, Pieterzoon felt a specific itch, an itch from one especially loathsome parasite who had outlived Jan’s indulgence. This week, the parasite had interfered in the operations of the Anodyne Corporation, one of Pieterzoon’s holdings, as well as the securities of one to whom Pieterzoon owed a favor. The meddling was nothing major in and of itself, but it was part of a recurring pattern. This lowly scavenger who skulked from era to era like a tick in the fur of a higher animal, had scratched at the surface of Pieterzoon’s power base on previous occasions. There had been the cultivation of the d’Ibervilles, ruined a decade previous to the Terror; there had been the ruination of the Miller & Joiner Trading Company, key to Pieterzoon’s drive East, during Victoria’s zenith. No mortal blow to a being of Jan’s years and cunning—but scrapes, erosions, persistent penetrations of the political and economic armor Pieterzoon had patiently calcified around himself, like a coral polyp, against the ravages of Jyhad.

It reflected poorly on Jan to allow such a creature to trouble him or his allies further. Particularly when, according to his minion’s intelligence, the creature would be scuttling into view very soon indeed. Right at the proper time, as it had done for centuries.

No longer.

“So,” Pieterzoon replied, after his retainer had ceased to speak, “Gaston moves tonight?”

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**Saturday, 9 October 1999, 7:22 PM**  
**Oak Terrace Subdivision**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

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Derek parked the car at the bottom of the driveway, just like he did on other nights when his life wasn't ruined. The light was on out front, like a false beacon beckoning a ship to crash on reefs. The light was on in the living room. What was he going to say? What was she going to say to him? Incomplete, kaleidoscopic fragments of thought whirled randomly in Derek's head; he began subvocalizing strings of hastily juxtaposed phrases that didn't amount to anything coherent at all.

He came in through the kitchen. No lights were on here; no smell of food greeted him. *Jesus, Melanie, couldn't you have at least picked up some Chinese takeout?* He started to call out to his wife, then decided he'd just find her. He stopped, took a breath, and passed through the kitchen—which was an oddly uncharacteristic mess, papers scattered everywhere, the knife holder tipped over and the knives lying strewn on the floor where Amanda could step on them—and into the familiar beige-and-brown panorama of the living room, with its 36-inch TV and catalog-purchased accessories.

And there was Melanie, lolling on the sofa, in a blue housedress, hair down, her mouth (one of her most attractive features when it was shut or at least engaged in activities other than talking) red and full and open. And Melanie had another open mouth as well: this one lower, wider, redder, fuller, a jagged clown's mouth of smeared makeup across her throat.

Again, it was like coming into the principal's office. Melanie remained sprawling on the sofa, did not rise to shriek at him about the events of the day, did not acknowledge his entry at all. "Melanie?" he said, his voice suddenly hollow. "Melanie? What's wrong?" Melanie did not burst into tears, did not speak, did not move. Derek felt as though he was being gripped and shaken by a vast, invisible hand.

It was like taking in a painting. Derek had never really noticed the details of his living room in close to eight years of residency. Now, expanding into his consciousness, came the beige plush carpet, curiously spattered with red stains; the sofa, light brown to complement the carpet, also spattered with stains; the coffee table, topped with glass, purchased from Pier 1 as a Christmas present for Melanie, marbled with crimson smears.

"Melanie?" His voice rose as he advanced. Melanie's blue dress, seen in the light of the Tiffany lamp, was maculated with dark mottlings. Melanie's eyes were wide open, staring like those of trout pulled from a lake. Her throat was a mass of ragged meat.

"Omigod!" Derek breathed. He knelt before his mangled wife, gripping her shoulders, frantically and inexpertly flailing at her to rouse signs of life. Derek had been in the same room with death before, on banal occasions like funerals of relatives whom he'd known mainly from the checks they sent him at birthdays and Christmas. He had never felt death so close, so palpable in the air around him.

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And then, like a scalpel, an all-consuming thought sliced through the webs tightening about his consciousness. *The children!*

Jeremy... He remembered a fragment of conversation Melanie had tossed to him with his cereal, something about Jeremy staying the night with his friend Brian.... *Jeremy out of house, Amanda...*

"Amanda!" Amanda was their two-year-old. Was she in the house?

He shot to his feet, spinning toward the corridor to the upstairs area and Amanda's room.

"Amanda!" he shrieked, but the cry caught in his throat as he saw what was standing in the living-room door.

A man, tall and clad in shapeless dark garments, leaned insouciantly against the frame. Derek registered long brown hair, three days' growth of beard, skin of shocking pallor in the glow from the Tiffany lamp, a black coat. Most of all he registered the fact that the man held the white-bundled form of his daughter.

"Let my daughter... what do you want—"

"Sit down," the stranger snarled. And instantly, with shocking suddenness, Derek crumpled onto the sofa next to the corpse of his wife, as though he'd just had the wind knocked out of him. His muscles, which a moment ago had been humming with adrenaline, now felt as though they were balloons that had had the air let out of them.

"Let her go," Derek repeated as, despite his sudden weakness, he rose again.

"I said sit down. And stop talking," the stranger hissed.

Once more, Derek collapsed onto the sofa. As if to reinforce his point, the stranger delicately raised the cradled form of Amanda, who mercifully seemed to be asleep.

That gesture took the fight out of Derek. The entire room, the scene, reeled before him—but he had to act correctly now, more than when he was fighting for his job, had to react in the right way to save his daughter. "Who are you?" Derek breathed. "What do you want?"

"Well," the stranger drawled, "I'm the person—well, not *person* exactly, but first things first—who's just ruined your life. Your paltry little hoard of savings? Gone, courtesy of me. Your yoke of a career? Plucked from you like the wing of a fly, courtesy of me. Your toothsome wife? Even colder and more bloodless than in life... again, compliments of yours truly." The stranger made a mocking bow, dipping Amanda in front of him as he did so.

This was, of course, impossible: that this lunatic, whom he'd never seen before, could crash into his life like a tidal wave to wash away most of the foundation of his existence. This was all some sort of... prank, gag? Melanie would stand up and wash away the greasepaint blood from her neck, and Phelan would call, and everybody would laugh about the whole tasteless and morbid but forgivable joke. He could forgive this; he'd go to sleep and delete the whole thing from his world as though it were an annoying spreadsheet entry at work.

Instead, he blurted, "Why are you doing this?" Watching the stranger holding Amanda... watching Melanie staring at him in death more accusingly than ever she had in life... More than anger or grief or anything (except fear for his Amanda), he

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wanted to comprehend, to understand this... thing enough to react to it before his daughter was hurt.

“Well, Mr. Joiner, that’s a very sensible question,” came the stranger’s reply. “And to answer it, we have to turn our mind’s eye across the Atlantic, to a little province in the Midi, in the south of the land you now call France, and we have to stretch our memory back, oh, about six hundred years...”

“Just answer the fucking question! What do you want?” The words rasped out of Derek’s mouth, nearly cracking as they did so.

In response, the stranger simply picked up Amanda, and then he opened his mouth.

In the lamp’s glow, long, impossibly sharp teeth gleamed, in menacing juxtaposition to Amanda’s smooth skin.

“Stop Jesus, stop! Just stop! Okay... okay... okay... don’t hurt her... okay...” The words were tumbling out of his mouth like tokens from a slot machine, and about as randomly.

The stranger pouted, as though offended, and slowly lowered Amanda, holding her before him in a gesture of obvious significance. “Ahem. Well, then. Let us cast our mind’s eye back to the lands of the *Sieur de Joinville*, hereditary ruler of a small fiefdom in the area during the late Middle Ages. Not so very important—kind of middle-management, I suppose, much like you were until today—though, like many petty rulers, full of an overweening pride. But, as mentioned, this description could apply to so many persons of the age, and this weary age as well... and the *Sieur de Joinville* was, for me, a very special tyrant. Tell me, Mr. Joiner... do you know who the *Sieur de Joinville* was?”

Derek simply stared blankly at the babbler. He was focusing on the words the way a driver in dangerous congestion absently listens to the traffic report, the better part of his brain seeking any conceivable way to get his daughter from this madman. The stranger, seemingly nonplussed by the lack of response, nonetheless continued.

“You are as ill-mannered as the rest of your line, and as hopelessly unskilled at repartee. Hmph. Well, he—the *sieur*—was a very wicked man, a brute even by the standards of the age, and his serfs and hirelings loathed him even more than you do your Mr. Kincaid.” The stranger paused, looked crookedly at Derek. “Of more relevance to you, of course, is the fact that the *Sieur de Joinville* was your ancestor.” The stranger paused again for effect, got no response. “Your great-great-great-et cetera grandfather, twenty-three generations removed. Exactly twenty-three generations. I know; I have counted them most meticulously.” At that, the stranger chuckled, a grating, guttural noise.

Derek had to focus—for his daughter’s sake, had to respond to this craziness rationally. “I don’t know anything about my family history. Look, you don’t want to be doing this; we need to get my wife to a hospital and—”

“Don’t tell me what I want and don’t want!” the stranger screamed. As if in answer, Amanda woke with a cry, began to kick and shriek. The stranger held up his wriggling burden, looked into the toddler’s face, and whispered, “Sleep. *Sleep.*” The child quieted as though she’d been given a tranquilizer.



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“Now look what’s happened, Mr. Joiner. You made me upset the child! The situation before you, Mr. Joiner, is this: I have a story to tell you, and if you wish to escape this... incident with anything of you and yours left intact, you are going to listen to me. Otherwise...” The stranger lifted Amanda to his lips, began to kiss her cheek.

“Okay! Okay!” Derek raised his hands in a pleading gesture. “Tell me your story, tell me what you want, just don’t hurt her...”

“Excellent. Now, we were speaking of the *Sieur de Joinville*. As I said, your departed ancestor was a tyrant of no mean reputation in an age of monsters. Of birth as lowly as one could be and still be adjudged *noble*, the *sieur* sought to assuage his multitudinous insecurities by administering his turnip patch of a fiefdom like a bloody-handed Saracen. Hard was the lot of the serfs who need must labor in the *sieur*’s fields; the soil was as stony as the *sieur*’s heart, and the taxes nearly double those of the more prosperous surrounding fiefdoms. Indeed, the sole grace standing between the people and abject starvation was the *sieur*’s propensity to hang men on the slightest pretext, which served to reduce the fief’s population of hungry mouths.

“Such troubles continued for many a weary year—but not forever. For of course, even in that fatalistic age, conduct as monstrous as the *sieur*’s bred resentment, desperation... ultimately, rebellion. It came to pass that grumbling arose among the stony fields, in the hovels after sunset, in the filthy church where filthy serfs prayed for deliverance; and certain of the bolder or more desperate among the young village men swore that they would bring down the *sieur*, or die trying.

“I remember when it began—late autumn it was, as I and the other young men defied the *sieur*’s curfew, meeting in my crude dwelling to hammer out such crude plots as farmers fashion. We had no skill at arms, but we had numbers, and hate, and the *sieur*’s forces were little more than brigands and poorly paid to boot.

“I suppose the others looked to me because I had once been an involuntary conscript when the *sieur* had been forced to send troops to fulfill an obligation to the neighboring count. I had spent over a month brandishing a pole-lashed knife that was supposed to pass for a spear, and staying as far from the fray of battle as possible; the fact that I’d survived the struggle at all, I suppose, made me the veriest hero in my village.” The stranger coughed.

“I approached a particular lieutenant among the guards, a villainous ruffian and habitual drunkard who was no friend of either the *sieur* or his own captain. To him I proposed a bargain: If he could persuade a few men to lower the *sieur*’s drawbridge to our invading band while simultaneously causing chaos among the ranks of the guards, we would allow the lieutenant and his men to loot the manse, taking what they could carry. The mutiny of a few guards would be overlooked in the general rebellion, and we would subsequently swear that the rapine was the work of the bandits that roamed like wolves between the provinces.

“The deal was struck and the night set. All through the next month we labored in the evening, lashing and beating farm implements into crude weapons of war. Finally the night came, and our band stole to the manse—only to scatter as arrows buzzed among us like angry wasps. Someone—almost certainly the lieutenant—had betrayed the plot to the *sieur*, and his men-at-arms lay in wait for our band. We were farmers,

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not soldiers, and our resolve melted like ice in spring. Fools that we were, to trust any among the jackals who would serve the sieur!

“Many among us were captured; seeing my chance early, I escaped into the forest on the outskirts of the sieur’s lands. I had grown up among those groves, and I knew enough of woodcraft to evade the initial pursuit of the guards, though once the sieur’s huntsmen were deployed, things looked ill for me. Even so, little did I reckon the vengeance of the sieur! A captive disclosed the genesis of the conspiracy, doubtless under the sieur’s irons. From my vantage point, close at hand yet concealed as only a fearful peasant could hide, I saw a plume of smoke rising from a flaming shell where my hovel had been. I saw the antlike figures of my wife and children as they were dragged to the sieur.

“I crept closer, sick to my soul, yet afraid and helpless to act. The sieur’s men dragged my wife and children in front of the castle walls. A public assembly had been called, over which the sieur himself presided from the battlements. The Sieur ordered my family stripped naked and flogged with bridle straps until the bones lay bare. My daughters and youngest son did not survive such punishment. My wife and eldest son, alas, did.

“He next had their hands and feet amputated and the wounds cauterized so they would not immediately die. He then ordered them blinded with heated pokers. Then he forced them to crawl from the castle to the village square, where waited, at last, the mercy of the gallows. The sieur had them hang in the square for days, where his guards flung urine and offal on them as an object lesson. Finally, when the stench threatened to invite plague, he had their bodies cut down and tossed in the rubbish heap, to be fought over by the dogs.” The stranger said this last in a monotone, as though it was a litany that he’d rehearsed and repeated again and again.

“And God had decreed that I watch all this from hiding, yet my heart prove too cowardly to make an attempt at rescue! Sick to my soul, I turned from my home. I was alone and bereaved in the darksome forest. If the sieur’s huntsmen did not find me—a near inevitability—surely I would be prey for brigands, the filthy rabble that swarmed between fiefdoms like aphids in those nights. Or perhaps—perhaps, Mr. Joiner, I would be prey for something worse. You know, folk were superstitious in those nights, and all manner of the Devil’s children were reputed to haunt the depths of the forests.

“I cared not. I stumbled uncaring through the dark, little heeding whether my path would take me to the sieur’s vengeance or to safety or to Hell itself. I think, in retrospect, my destination was indeed the lattermost of my choices. You see, that night, a... thing found me, Mr. Joiner.

“Oh, the sieur was a foul and wicked beast, and by day he was the fat tick that batted on the people’s lifeblood. By night, though, other monsters rose from hidden places, and they also sought to rob the people of their lifeblood in far more... literal... fashion than the sieur. And so, as I heedlessly stumbled through the undergrowth, something came for me from the dark deep woods, something that sought to lay open my veins and suck the blood from my body until I was empty and cold.

“But it did not immediately drag me into death, despite its ravening hunger. My action—or lack thereof—had piqued its curiosity. For you see, this thing was most frightful

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in appearance and disposition, and most of its victims tried to run, to struggle, at least to cry and plead for their lives. But I... I cared little, even for a tryst with a night-thing on a lonely forest road. When it came for me, I simply waited passively, for no fiend could do more to me than the sieur had already done. And so, this being a most unusual behavior, as it gripped me and pulled me to it, it queried me as to why I would so uncaringly give myself to its embrace.

“Inspired, perhaps, by a sense of irony, I told my story to the fiend as though it were a priest at confessional. And the monster listened with interest, and something—sport or mockery or perhaps even pity—stayed its fangs. As it told me later, even among its kind there were estates, and lords and chattel, oppressors and oppressed, tyrants and those who would be free. The monster I had encountered was called *autarkis*, anarch, a renegade from its own parliament of monsters. Evidently, something of my story... moved it.

“The grinning monster made a devil’s bargain with me that night. In exchange for becoming its vassal, I was to die, my blood sucked from my veins. But as I passed from this world, I would take its blood into my body, and I would become reborn as a monster like itself. For eternity I would be a damned, night-stalking thing like it, forever shunning the sun and any sustenance save the blood of mortals. But in return I would gain life eternal—life of a sort, anyway—and, more importantly, sufficient strength to revenge myself on the sieur. Severed from my ties to life and to God, I would gain the strength of five mortal men, and neither flesh nor steel could do me any abiding harm.

“I made the bargain, and for weeks thereafter I learned how to hunt, and feed, and how to call upon the Devil for unholy power. Then, my apprenticeship completed, I went back to the sieur’s miserable castle. Gaining entry was as naught for a wielder of Hell’s power. I had not learned the ways of subtlety, nor sought to use them. As the sieur cowered in his bedchamber, I rent his treacherous guards limb from limb. Ever calling the sieur’s name, I dragged his lady and children into the sieur’s own dining hall, slaying them outright or binding them for later as the mood took me. Then I smashed down the oaken door behind which the sieur cowered. He swung at me with his ancestral blade; the impact was as meaningless as the bite of a marsh-fly. I dragged the wretch howling through gore-stained corridors and down into his own dungeons, where I bound him with iron chains. Would that I had time to enact a proper revenge... ah, but word of the attack would spread, so I had but a night. One night!

“Oh, but for the sieur, every second of that night felt like a thousand years in Hell. I was no expert torturer, but hate more than compensated for lack of skill. On him I employed the blade, the bastinado, the lash, the hot iron; and I also practiced certain gifts that had been given to me with my rebirth. I made him watch as I slew his wife and children, and when the sieur’s death threatened to interrupt my vengeance, I made him whole again with a miraculous draught of my devil’s blood, only to break him anew!

“Finally, certain pains and fatigue peculiar to my... new form heralded the coming morning, and the hateful sun that I could not endure. Alas! I would have to depart. I could hardly repose at the estate; even in that benighted age, word of the sieur’s downfall

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would swiftly spread. After all he had done to me, I would be forced to grant the sieur his mercy blow.

“I turned to him, prepared to orchestrate his ordeal to one final agonizing crescendo—and do you know what happened then? The Sieur no longer had a tongue with which to plead or curse, but what was left of his face bore an expression, not of hate or fear or desperation, but of *resignation*. Resignation! Can you believe the temerity of the man? ‘Just get it over with,’ his expression seemed to say, superciliously mocking me the entire time!

“I could not send him to Hell then, for in so doing I had not yet made him suffer as I had. But what more could I do to him? I had ruined his estate, violated his body in innumerable ways, destroyed his family....

“And then the thought came to me! His family... You see, in those days, naught mattered so much to the nobility as the continuation of their family line. I was now immortal, forever suspended outside Time’s clutches, unlike the sieur and his sons and his sons thereafter, who would be born and age and die. And then I realized the bitterness of the weapon, the dagger that I could drive into the sieur’s soul!

“So, Mr. Joiner, do you know what I told the sieur?”

“What?” Derek’s voice seemed to well up from a vast, weary distance. “What did you tell him?”

“I told him that I had destroyed him and his estate and such kin as I could immediately reach. But I told him that I would let one scion—little Henri—live until the age of maturity. You see, Henri was not present at the castle. He was currently a page in a neighboring noble’s court, and so would know only that his lands and family had been the victims of a ‘rebellion’ or ‘bandit uprising.’ Yes, little Henri would grow up, and marry and start a family of his own, and in this was the seed of the sieur’s final calm. But—I told the sieur—once Henri himself had offspring, I would come for him, and I would destroy Henri in the same manner that I had destroyed the sieur, allowing but a sole family member to escape the ruin. And every generation hence—every two at most—I would reenact my vengeance, taking revenge on child after child after child after puking bastard child for the sins of the sieur! And as that curse descended like a hammer-blow on the countenance of the now-pleading wretch, I sent the sieur to Hell.

“Aye, for centuries a great curse descended on the House of Joinville! Their name became blighted by tragedy and misfortune. They became pariahs among the aristocracy, and by the time of the Terror their fortune and name had long since withered. Only I remembered! I, who am a truer relative than many who have borne your accursed name.

“If you had the time before you, I would invite you to go back into the Joiner familial records. Even a cursory study of your line reveals a litany of tragic deaths, reversals of fortune, and similar incidents. Was not your paternal grandfather the sole survivor of a mysterious accident in the early part of the twentieth century? Alas, I have had much... nocturnal business to attend to this century, and so too many of your immediate forbears have escaped for the nonce. But your death should give your father and grandfather great anguish, and so my revenge will continue on and on and on!”

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Derek stared blankly at the gloating creature before him. The man was obviously insane, some kind of psycho from an asylum. And yet, there were those eyes, that sapped him of strength... and those fangs with which he threatened his little girl.... "And so now it's my turn?" Derek asked.

"Of course. You see, Mr. Joiner, for over six centuries I have cultivated your line as a gardener nurtures a shrub, ever ready with his pruning shears. Sometimes my wrath is great, or a particular descendant very much reminds me of the *sieur*, and I strike twice within a few decades of each other. Sometimes I have other business to attend to, and so your family gains respite for two, perhaps three generations. But always—always! I return to batten on the filthy spawn of the *sieur*.

"And so—if it's any comfort to you, which it won't be—sweet Jeremy will survive this night. You, of course, will join your wife in Hell very shortly. But Jeremy I shall let live and grow, after a fashion, as a fowl grows in a wire cage to be slaughtered at a time of its owner's choosing."

"Amanda?" said Derek. "Look... if your goal was to ruin my life, you've... you've done a hell of a job. If what you say is... I mean, you've trashed my career, you've... my wife," he choked. He couldn't bring himself to say the word, or to look at the husk sprawled next to him on the sofa. "But for God's sake," he pleaded, nearly gagging on every word, "if you've got to kill me, if that's the only thing that'll make you happy, can't you leave my daughter out of this? Sweet Jesus, she's only two! She's innocent—"

"As were my children," the stranger hissed.

"Then you know what it feels like! You know what it feels like to see a little child hurt!" Derek leaned forward, every muscle taut, even as another part of his numbed brain gauged the chances of somehow, even with Amanda held hostage, making one desperate lunge. The stranger didn't appear to be carrying a gun. If he knocked the stranger back... the carpet was plush; Amanda could take a fall; if it was the only way.... "Whatever it is... whatever happened to you... it shouldn't involve a little girl! Please, show some pity!" This was going to be it, Derek knew; he had to at least try to get his daughter out of the killer's hands.

"Well..." The stranger looked down at the bundled toddler, and his face momentarily seemed to—soften? "She is a sweet child, for a Joinville. Would you bargain your life for hers?"

Derek leaned forward, hands formed into claws. "Look, do what you want to me. Kill me... kill me slowly if that's what makes you feel good. We'll go to a neighbor's house, I won't say a word, we can drop off Amanda, you can take me back here and... do your worst." Incongruously, a laugh forced itself from Derek's throat. "I won't fight it. I won't fight it."

"Very well. Perhaps I shall let her live as well...."

Derek released a sharp exhalation, still terrorized but grateful beyond words. As he reached tremblingly towards his child, the stranger's smile widened cruelly. "Hope is such a pathetic thing, is it not, Mr. Joiner? No, I think I'll rip your little bitch daughter's head off and drink from her neck right in front of you."

With those words, the lethargy that had gripped Derek was lifted as though it were a veil. Roaring, Derek launched himself at the stranger's torso. He heard his daughter shriek

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into wakefulness as he tackled the stranger, flailing at any part of him he could hit, driving him into the wood-paneled wall with a thud.

The stranger's flesh was as chill as an ice sculpture. Though Derek had played rugby in college and stood an even six feet, his assault seemed as futile as though his target were made of wood. The stranger never even lost his grip on the girl. With a hiss of disgust, the stranger swung his left forearm like a club; Derek's head reeled and knees buckled as the blow drove him to the ground. Dimly, his tongue registered shredded lips, the salty taste of his own blood filling his mouth. The thought of Amanda pistoned him up to clutch at the stranger's knees; this time, a kick propelled him into the sofa, his back snapping into the wood with a sharp crack. The impact dislodged the corpse of Melanie; the body slumped prone, and Melanie's dead hand flopped onto Derek's face and shoulder, like a spider descending on a line.

Stunned into immobility, with a former athlete's certain knowledge of his opponent's physical superiority, Derek nonetheless sought to muster what feeble reserves he had left; Amanda's screaming demanded that he try. The stranger observed Derek's writhing as though evaluating a future project, clutching the toddler above his head with one arm.

"You are as stubborn and strong-willed as all your line," the stranger muttered. "Know this: The pain you feel now is but the merest inkling of what I will do to you once I drag you and your daughter to your basement. You've been a good little yuppie, Mr. Joiner: electrical tape and cordage and power tools, all hanging neat and orderly on the wall. I am old, but I can imagine the caress of your power sander on little Amanda's dainty skin, and—"

"Gaston." The interrupting voice came from the kitchen entrance. Another man stood there, having evidently let himself in through the garage. Derek registered a man of middle height and youngish middle years, blond, paler perhaps than the stranger himself, dressed in a charcoal Armani suit and with an expression of calm resolve.

At the sight of the newcomer, the stranger hissed like a feral cat, his expression twisting into a rictus of rage. "Pieterzoon!" the stranger snarled. "What are you doing here? My business here is of no concern to you, nor our rivalry—"

"'Rivalry' is perhaps too... generous a term, Gaston," the newcomer retorted. "I reserve the term *rival* for those opponents of mine who are sufficiently clever not to creep into the living word every few decades, like a slug from under a rock, to befoul the environs with their peculiar slime. I believe the word... *annoyance* might suit you better. Nonetheless, I find your recent financial chicanery against the resources of Anodyne Corporation, a company in which I have holdings... intolerable. Moreover, your ridiculous vendetta—absurdly irresponsible even in times before the police had their fingerprints and computers and DNA tests—is unacceptable in these nights.

"It is over, Gaston. Your dalliance in the lives of these kine ends tonight."

The newcomer advanced; the stranger tried to stand his ground, but took an indecisive step back. Derek, trying to shut out the pain and rise, heard the newcomer's monologue as though his ears were packed with cotton; all that stood out to him were Amanda's struggles and heart-wrenching shrieks. The newcomer continued. "I have spoken to the prince, and the blood hunt your sloppy obsession has brought down on you in two

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continents is in force in this domain as well. I will not deign to remind you of the shocking breach of the Masquerade which... *this...*” Pieterzoon gestured contemptuously at the entire scene, “constitutes. Nonetheless, I give you the option to surrender yourself, *autarkis*. You may come before the prince and the other officials who have assembled to judge you, and perhaps they will show mercy.

“First, though,” the newcomer ordered, “give me the girl, Gaston.” The newcomer’s stare transfixed the stranger. Mechanically, Gaston delivered the whimpering child into Pieterzoon’s hands. Keeping his gaze firmly affixed on his foe’s eyes, Pieterzoon handed Amanda into Derek’s trembling, nerveless grip. In his eagerness, Derek nearly dropped the child. For the briefest of instants, Pieterzoon had had to turn away. Gaston leaped forward at that moment, arms splayed to grapple and fangs exposed in a fearful snarl. Pivoting with seemingly effortless grace, Pieterzoon sidestepped the monster’s rush, then, with seeming effortlessness, gripped Gaston in a practiced hold. Freeing one arm, Pieterzoon torqued back Gaston’s head, exposing his neck. Pieterzoon’s lips darted to that neck, and a deep-rooted instinct told Derek it would be best to look away. Derek buried Amanda’s sobbing face in his shoulder, then shut his eyes, pressed on two sides by the limp weights of his living daughter and dead wife.

For a time, perhaps several seconds, the world was a black symphony of sobs, heartbeats, and wet sucking noises. Derek cradled Amanda to him as though the world were about to end.

The noise ceased. Derek opened his eyes. The newcomer, Pieterzoon, stood above him. His pristine suit was stained with what appeared to be dirt or soot of some sort. At his feet was a pile of filthy, soot-covered rags. Of the stranger, Gaston, there was no sign. Derek gripped his daughter and clenched his fists to hurl himself at the stranger if need be.

Pieterzoon sighed contemptuously at the pile of ash on the floor, then turned his attention to the kine and his daughter. The tiny pale thing was clinging to her father’s shoulder, sobbing. He was clutching her to him. The man’s eyes were as glazed as those of a salmon; there was little left behind them. Moreover, the kine was clearly in pain, and nigh delirious. “Sleep,” Pieterzoon whispered. He picked up father and child and laid them on the sofa, then, from his pocket, pulled a small knife. It would not do to have the kine sent to a hospital, so Pieterzoon would be forced to use other means to heal his injuries. He jabbed the blade into his own wrist, then set to work repairing the mess Gaston had made....

Pieterzoon’s gaze enveloped Derek, his eyes widening to orbs the size of the moon, and the room and Melanie and even Amanda seemed to float away like a distant dream. As though from a great distance above him, these words reverberated down: “You will forget the events of this day. You will have memories of a tragedy, of your wife dying at the hands of an intruder. You will take a suitable sabbatical to grieve, following which you will apply for a position at the San Francisco branch of the Anodyne Company. For now, you will leave your home and take your family to the Downtown Hyatt Regency, where suite 1814 has been prepared for you. You may return to your home in a week’s time.”

As Derek’s car pulled away from the ruined home, Pieterzoon reflected on the wasteful scene around him. Jan was far from sentimental, but the senselessness of

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this incident made him feel... hollow, somehow. The idea—of carrying the pettiest of vengeance down through an immortal's centuries, until one's own doom was ensured thereby.

Then again, Pieterzoon reflected, was Gaston so very different from the rest of us who played the game? Or simply less skilled, and more honest?

The thought stayed with him as he finished his tasks, shut out the lights, and left the silent house to the night and the dead.





**Saturday, 9 October 1999, 10:15 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

Jeremiah knew that Anatole was not truly destroyed. He had dared approach closely enough to ascertain this as the truth. He could sense life in Anatole from afar, but only proximity allowed him to accept it.

For several nights now, Anatole had simply remained motionless, prostrate on the ground in the midst of the bizarre and gruesome sculpture and at the feet of the oddly feminine outcropping over which Anatole had draped the soiled robe the first night they arrived.

Jeremiah had not filed any reports since he arrived. Though the sheaf of his notes was growing thick, no one came to collect them as they had planned even while he was within the cave—*especially* when within the cave. But Jeremiah didn't dare stray for even a moment to investigate that matter. Anatole might revive at any moment and a revelation might be missed. Or perhaps the prophet would mutter in this death-like sleep.

In addition, Jeremiah had long ago given up attempting to draw the intricate sculpture of this cave. Plus, he had no interest in attempting to communicate with the seemingly half-living Kindred who had been made part of the overall design of the piece. He did sketch these Kindred, but that was soon completed.

He only waited, and still soured by that night in the townhouse in Atlanta, Jeremiah's eyes did not waver from Anatole despite the overwhelming lethargy and boredom that threatened him.

**Tuesday, 12 October 1999, 3:25 AM (4:25 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**O'Hare Airport**  
**Chicago, Illinois**



"Go get the bags."

Sarat cheerfully did as he was told.

Mouth tightly closed, Khalil took in a deep breath and savored the smells of the city that was his new home—or at least the smells of the airport of the city that was his new home. He tried to ignore the fact that there really weren't many distinctive scents about. One American airport smelled much like another—disinfectant not quite covering the odor of stale grease in the closed food court, sweat of other passengers disembarking from the red-eye...

Red-eye—Khalil had taken that as a good omen, not that there was any question about his wanting to leave New York. Especially after more than a month holed up in the basement of a friend of Sarat's cousin's grocer. That city was... a little too hot.

*And why might that be?* asked the ancient in Khalil's head.

"Hey, talk to me nice and I might just do you a favor once in a while," Khalil said, much to the puzzlement of a bleary-eyed businessman standing nearby.

As Sarat hurried back with their three suitcases—one of his own and both of Khalil's—the *shilmulo* was awash in self-satisfaction, not the least reason for which being that he wasn't stuffed into a cramped little trunk this time through Chicago. He'd come to America with nothing, a slave, and by the sweat of his brow, he'd bettered his lot. Instinctively, he clutched his carry-on bag to his side. The upscale duffel was full of cash—cash that he'd earned, despite the attempt of the Nosferatu to steal it back, despite Hessa's little appearance.

"Hmph. I should have killed him and drunk his blood while I had the chance," Khalil said to himself.

The bleary-eyed businessman began noticeably to edge away. Khalil looked at him and smiled. The man froze and smiled back unconvincingly.

"Where to now, boss?" Sarat asked, also watching the businessman who, as soon as Khalil's attention was diverted, scurried away down the concourse.

"Where to? To find us a hotel. And tomorrow night, we start exploring the city. Think your cousin will like it here?"

"You said the winters are milder here than in New York?"

"Oh yeah," Khalil said. "Balmy."

Sarat grinned enthusiastically. "Then Prasad will like it. He has always said that New York is too cold."

"That's what I like to hear. We'll have your whole family here and shop set up within a week. I know they love curry here more than anything. Go find us a cab." Sarat hurried off as quickly as he could without dropping the luggage, and Khalil followed along at a more leisurely pace.

Like Chicago or not, what Sarat's family would not like was what they'd find when they pried up the floor in Sarat's room to pack Elder Brother Ghose. Instead of a vampire beaten into dormancy, there would be merely an old woven rug full of dust.

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But it had been for a good cause, Khalil told himself. He licked his lips.

*And, said the voice inside, he didn't put up nearly the struggle that Heshu would have.*

"I couldn't stay in that basement all night *every* night. And I got hungry. Besides, the snake had already lost his girlfriend. I was just giving him a break. I've got a big heart."

*I'll keep that in mind.*

"Yeah, you do that."

Khalil was a family man now. He'd made Ghose's family—like the former Ravnos's blood—his own, and as long as Khalil's blood flowed in their veins, they wouldn't complain too loudly about dear departed Ghose.

Ahead, at curbside just beyond the glass-faced terminal, Sarat had secured a cab. Still clutching his duffel bag tightly, Khalil climbed in and prepared to enjoy his new city, his new wealth, his new freedom.

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**Tuesday, 12 October 1999, 2:22 PM (4:52 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**An unmarked tomb, far underground**  
**Calcutta, West Bengal, India**



Fingertips that were little more than bone covered with a thin veneer of skin tapped against one another. Hazimel, were he given to physical displays of emotion, might have smiled in the darkness, there upon his throne of hewn rock.

The maggot Khalil had performed admirably. The woman with the temper, the Gangrel, might still lead Heshu to the Eye. It had only been a matter of time before Khalil, with his bluster and deception, had alienated her, had driven her to the service of the snake. So predictable. There was no longer any need for the young *shilmulo* to remain in that city.

*Enjoy the nights of your youth, Khalil, Hazimel thought. Let yourself believe that you could break my hold so easily—for that is what you want to believe. Hoard the treasures of the flesh, if that is what makes you feel safe.*

Then Hazimel did, at last, smile. And he laughed—but he remembered little of laughter. The sound that emanated from perhaps the eldest surviving Ravnos, to mortal ears, would have resembled more closely the fruits of torture than mirth. But to him, the sound was sweet.



**Thursday, 14 October 1999, 1:47 AM**  
**Dockside, U.S.S. Apollo, the Inner Harbor**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

*He'll never go for it.*

As he walked along the waterfront, Theo had no illusions that his current task was anything but doomed to failure. There was little chance for gain, and presumably much risk of loss. The feeble breeze blowing in off the Northwest Branch of the Patapsco River shared Theo's lack of enthusiasm. The night was unseasonably warm, but the Brujah archon still wore his heavy leather jacket, as well as the omnipresent black baseball cap.

*The Sabbat's breathing down our necks, and I'm playing diplomat,* he thought, shaking his head.

The Inner Harbor area was quiet. The museums, shops, restaurants, the aquarium—all of them catered to the tourist dollar, and tourists generally went to bed early. This “revitalized” part of the city was Prince Garlotte's pride and joy.

Theo didn't understand it. He could only take so much “quaint” before he gagged. He preferred other parts of the city, *real* parts of the city, where real honest-to-God people lived and died. The trickle-down economics of the uptown developers didn't ever seem to trickle that far. But those real neighborhoods weren't where the prince and his refined, financier buddies spent their time, so what did they care? They were already the kings of the mountain. They had everything they wanted at the top, and not much was left for anybody else. It didn't have to be that way. Money and influence were like water—left to themselves, they flowed downhill. Problem was, they never were left to themselves. Some greedy, button-down motherfucker was always building a dam, so the thirsty bastards at the bottom of the hill were left with jack shit.

What the world needed was somebody to bust some fucking dams.

But Theo couldn't honestly say that he lived up to that philosophy. Not all the time, anyway. Not most of the time. Times like tonight, he felt more like a damned houseboy. *Yes, sir. No, sir.* The pisser was that he could run roughshod over Garlotte. Theo could *make* the prince see things his way—or at least agree to go along. But nothing was ever that simple. Too heavy a hand now caused more problems later. Restraint was the difference between an archon and a thug.

*Maybe a thug has the better deal,* Theo thought. Bust heads now, ask questions later, if at all. The idea wasn't completely foreign to an archon's job description, but it wasn't the way to go when a prince was involved. Especially a Ventrue prince. The blue bloods were just too damn tight. Too many friends, or if not friends, flunkies, in high places. Threaten a Ventrue and he might give in rather than take a punch, but the next thing you knew, Interpol was on your ass, and your haven was condemned by the local housing authority and bulldozed, and all your credit cards were cancelled. Bad mistake. So on went the kid gloves.

*Like I got time for it.*

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It wouldn't matter whose feelings were hurt when the Sabbath rolled into town. But Theo played the game anyway.

He stopped about a hundred yards from Garlotte's boat—Garlotte's fucking *schooner*, rather. A sterile reproduction of a nineteenth-century merchant ship. The thing reminded Theo of a slave ship. The period was off by at least several decades, but that was the first thought that came to his mind every time he saw it. Lord knew that Garlotte got his kicks from playing lord and master. But what prince didn't?

Theo had it on good authority that, before the prince's Embrace, Garlotte had been nothing more than a bankrupt petty noble in England, that unlife had treated him a hell of a lot better than real life. Still, Garlotte was prince of Baltimore, had been for a couple of centuries. That said something about the man. He might be an impulsive and arrogant son of a bitch, but he had something going for him. Even if that something was only luck.

"I'd take luck over brains any night," Theo muttered to himself.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a pack of unfiltered cigarettes and a small box of matches. Cancer wasn't too big a worry, all things considered. He struck a match on his jacket zipper, lit up, and drew in a big carcinogenic breath. The smoke crept along the back of his throat until he breathed two swirling gray pillars from his nose. Some Kindred—those who went in for things coy—played at smoking in the winter, so mortals wouldn't notice their lack of breath in the cold air. Theo just liked the taste. He liked old burnt coffee too, and on occasion a sip of blood from a week-dead body.

A gray cloud trailing along behind him, Theo continued on toward the prince's play ship.

*He'll never go for it*, Theo thought again. He knew it; Jan knew it. But they had at least to make a polite attempt to convince the prince that Jan's plan would work. Garlotte would balk, then they'd play hardball. That was what it was going to come down to. No doubt about it. Political cover bullshit. That's all this visit was about. Ass-Covering 101. Theo hated it, and he hated even more the fact that he played along with it. But here he was. Never mind that the Sabbath were snaking their way north from Washington. Never mind that there were a hundred thousand more productive things that he should be doing. This visit, the whole plan, Theo reminded himself, did have something to do with the Sabbath, but that thought did little to lighten his mood.

As he approached the prince's ship, a dark silhouette appeared at the top of the gangplank. The figure paused for only a second before stepping out of the darkest shadows. Katrina, childe of Prince Garlotte, moved smoothly and confidently with a feline predatory grace as she disembarked from the ship. She, too, wore a black leather jacket and a black baseball cap, although with a short pony tail sticking out the back.

Theo almost smiled as he and his shapelier double met near the edge of the dock. With their similar dress, he could have been looking in a mirror—a funhouse mirror, where the reflection was a foot and at least a hundred pounds smaller, and pale white instead of dark brown. "Your mama always dress you that funny?" he asked in a deep, serious rumble.

"You gotta appointment?" Katrina asked in return.

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Now Theo did smile slightly. He folded his arms. "I think he'll see me."

Katrina folded her arms also. "I wouldn't go in just yet."

"And why's that?"

The sudden explosion that answered Theo's question blasted him and Katrina off their feet. For a drawn-out instant as he sailed airborne away from the water, Theo caught sight of the giant fireball that, seconds before, had been Prince Garlotte's ship. Then the Brujah archon landed with all the concussive force of the explosion that had launched him. The impact sent the world spinning.

When he finally came to rest, Theo lay on his back for a few more seconds. A smaller eruption of fire and lumber sent another tremor through the dock and sprayed him with a shower of flaming debris. Instinctively he covered his face, his only exposed skin other than his hands.

When most of the fragments of the *U.S.S. Apollo* had stopped landing all around him, Theo sat up. He was a dozen yards from where he'd been standing. A large section of the ship's hull was sinking beneath the water with an impressive hiss of smoke, and then the ship—aside from the smoldering pieces that lay scattered on the dock or floating on the water—was gone.

"Shit." Theo climbed to his feet, not bothering to brush himself off. He sighed deeply. Garlotte had—or *had had*—enough clout with the city fathers that the cops left him alone. But this... this was going to draw attention.

Theo spared a few more seconds to survey the wreckage—and saw Katrina lying not far away on the dock. He shook his head. "Shit."

As he ambled over toward Katrina, she groaned and raised up on her elbow. Her hat was gone, her hair and clothes disheveled. The pale, once-perfect skin of her face was abraded, although her blood had already begun to repair the worst damage. She looked at Theo but seemed too dazed to flee.

He stood above her and planted his fists squarely on his hips. "Get up."

Katrina just nodded at first. Then the words seemed to sink in. Favoring one leg, she climbed painfully to her feet. Theo still glowered down at her. Sirens were sounding, in the distance but drawing closer.

"You know," he said, "if I'd seen you here, I'd have to break your fuckin' head."

Katrina stared at him, blinked, twice. Some of the fog of confusion began to clear from her eyes. She regarded him warily. She wasn't foolish enough to try to run away, or maybe she was just too shaken by the explosion. "Yeah?" She was skeptical, not hopeful.

"Yeah." There was no question that he could do it—he could reach out and snap her in two. There was no question that he *should* do it. "This city ain't where you want to be," he said instead.

Katrina nodded again, only slowly catching his meaning. She seemed to become aware of the approaching sirens now too and began to edge away from Theo, cautiously testing her weight on her injured leg at first, but more obviously hurrying after the first few steps.

"Hey," Theo called.

She cringed at the sound of his voice, but stopped and turned back to face him.

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“There’s two of the prince’s lookouts on those two buildings back there,” Theo said, pointing back over his shoulder like he was thumbing a ride. “Unless you want witnesses.”

“Yeah. I know,” Katrina said. “I’ll take care of it.” She limped away from that charred portion of the dock as quickly as she could.

Theo shook his head. “Shit,” he muttered to himself again. By the time the fire trucks and ambulances showed up, he was long gone.





**Thursday, 14 October 1999, 2:51 AM**  
**Babcox Industrial Park**  
**Green Haven, Maryland**

“Do you see them?”

“No, I don’t see them. Just shut up,” Clyde said testily.

“I don’t know how you can lose a *Chevette*, for God’s sake,” Maurice said anyway.

“Just *shut up*.” Clyde gripped the steering wheel tightly. He made a hard turn between two old warehouses. Beyond the throw of the headlights, the night seemed ominously quiet and empty.

Tense silence—for a moment, then, “It’s not even a real car.”

“*Look*,” Clyde strained to keep from yelling, “they hung a U-turn, they were coming right at us... What’d you want me to do, plow right into them?”

“Don’t yell at *me* about it,” said Maurice.

“I’m not yelling!” Clyde yelled.

“*Sounds* a lot like yelling,” Maurice said, growing angrier himself.

“Maybe Reggie and Eustace have found them.”

“I doubt it,” Maurice said. “And how come *they* get the pick-up? I bet nobody in a *Chevette* would’ve run us off the road if we’d been in the pick-up.”

“Will you *please* forget about the pick-up!”

“You’re yelling again.”

“I am not ye... Look. Did you see how many there were?”

“It was a *Chevette*, for God’s sake. There couldn’t have been more than two or three.”

“Maybe Reggie and Eustace have found them,” Clyde said again without much hope.

“I doubt it.”

The various warehouses, especially in the dark, were indistinguishable from one another. Clyde spurred their own car past a long row of bay doors and aluminum siding. He turned left between two buildings.

“Haven’t we been this way already?” Maurice asked.

“No,” said Clyde. He wasn’t sure if they’d been that way already or not, but he wasn’t going to give Maurice the satisfaction.

“Where are Reggie and Eustace when we need them? They ought to be here. Not that they’d be much help. But they’ve got the truck.”

“A-ha!”

Clyde jerked the car to a stop, killed the headlights. Ahead, pulled up to one of the warehouse doors, was an unoccupied *Chevette*. Clyde and Maurice both sat and stared at it for a moment. Clyde’s mouth was suddenly very dry. He could feel his fangs sliding down like they did when he was excited or nervous. He looked over at Maurice, but Maurice was still staring at the empty *Chevette*.

“You got your gun?” Clyde asked.

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“Yeah. For whatever good it might do.”

“Right.” Clyde reached behind the seat. He had a baseball bat. He wasn’t a very good shot, and he liked the feel and weight of the bat anyway.

The car doors creaked when they got out. The two Kindred eased closer to the Chevette, bent down, looked underneath. They peeked through the side windows, through the hatchback window. There was blood on the carpet in the back. Clyde licked his lips, wasn’t sure if it was in response to the blood or just to wet his parched lips.

As they edged toward the warehouse, Clyde started to have second thoughts, and third thoughts, and fourth.... Maybe those hadn’t been Sabbat vampires that had run him off the road. Maybe he’d just *thought* he’d seen a red-eyed, fang-baring maniac behind the wheel of the Chevette. Maybe the blood in the back of that car was there for some perfectly ordinary reason, like... like...

Maurice tapped him on the shoulder and whispered, “You go first.”

“Thanks.”

Clyde reached for the doorknob with his left hand, shifted the bat in his right. The door was unlocked. Inside was black. Lasombra black, Clyde thought. Just inside the door, he smelled blood—just a few drops, a dribble on the cement floor. Slowly, his eyes started to adjust and Clyde could make out tall metal racks full of large boxes on wooden pallets filling the dark space. There was a light switch near the door, but maybe the Sabbat—or whoever it was—didn’t yet know he and Maurice were there. Clyde found a piece of broken wood and, as quietly as possible, propped open the door. Maurice followed him more deeply into the darkness.

They kept to the aisle along the wall, glancing down each perpendicular row between the racks that extended beyond vision. The blood kept to that aisle also. Every few yards, Clyde’s nose would twitch, and he would smell the droplets on the floor. He thought that maybe he could just make them out as he tried to step over them, but he wasn’t sure. He and Maurice had moved beyond the scant light from the propped door, and the gloom deepened with every step. All was silent, except for the shuffling of their feet along the cement.

One of the next rows—the center row?—was wider, and Clyde could see the far wall of the warehouse, maybe fifty yards distant. A bay door was open there, and although it was dark outside, it wasn’t as dark, and a long, distorted rectangle of the warehouse was slightly illuminated. Near the center of that patch lay a woman, a girl really. She was hog-tied, and gray duct tape covered her mouth. Even from that distance, Clyde thought he could smell the bloody abrasions on her wrists and ankles, where she’d struggled against the rope. Or maybe it was the gash on the side of her face, or the smeared blood she lay in, or the intermittent trail that led from her to Clyde’s feet.

“Oh, Jesus...” Maurice whispered; then, “It’s a trap.”

Clyde nodded. It probably was a trap. But the girl’s eyes were open. She didn’t see Clyde and Maurice, but she was still alive, conscious, struggling weakly.

In all his years of feeding, Clyde had never had to beat someone. He’d never so much as left an open wound... but these monsters of the Sabbat seemed to revel in pain and torment. So even if it was a trap, he was seized by a sense of resolution. He gripped the baseball bat more tightly.

“Come on.”

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“Um... don’t you mean this way? Clyde?” Maurice faltered, but fell in behind before Clyde got too far down the center row.

Clyde couldn’t take his eyes from the girl. She was alive. She was bleeding, but he could see now that she was aware, that the wounds seemed largely superficial. Facial lacerations tended to bleed freely. He and Maurice could scoop her up and make a break for it out the bay door. They could save her.

Except that was when Clyde heard the muffled sounds of struggle behind him. He turned just as a big, muscled figure, wrestling with Maurice from behind, slit Maurice’s throat. That wasn’t going to finish Maurice, but the natural instinct when one’s throat is slit is to freak out. And Maurice did. His attacker ripped away Maurice’s pistol, held it to Maurice’s temple, pulled the trigger.

Clyde flinched. The gunshot didn’t seem real, couldn’t be real. The contents of Maurice’s skull, spread out for all to see, couldn’t be real. The blood-splattered grin of his attacker couldn’t be real.

Maurice’s limp body slid down to the floor. His killer was covered from neck to toe in skin-tight black rubber, interrupted here and there by zippers and metal studs. His head was shaved and tattooed. In one hand, he held Maurice’s gun; in a second, a knife; in a third, a machete.

Clyde blinked, horrified. *Third hand?*

He—*it*—had a third arm attached near the center of his chest.

Clyde turned and ran. *Get the girl. Get out.* That was all he could think. He couldn’t acknowledge the madness he was fleeing, couldn’t think about it right now. *Get the girl. Get out.*

But the girl wasn’t alone anymore. Two more of the bondage-clad Sabbat were standing over her, both grinning like the other. But something else was wrong... unnatural. Clyde glanced behind him. The three-armed, tattooed thing that had killed Maurice was coming closer. The third hand waved daintily. Clyde looked back at the girl, at the two rubber bodysuits. The two thugs were the same as the first one. They didn’t just *look* the same—same clothes, same shave, same tattoos—they had the same *face*, like they were made from the same mold. Clyde looked back and forth again. He stumbled. The darkness seemed to close in. He wondered what kind of hellish nightmare he’d fallen into.

But, no, there was a difference among the three, he realized. Arms. The two Sabbat ahead by the girl didn’t have three—or they *did* have three arms, but only between them. One had two arms, the other only had one. Clyde looked at his own hands, his own two. That *was* the right number, yes? The image of the three-armed monstrosity slitting Maurice’s throat was so indelibly seared into Clyde’s mind, three somehow seemed right.

No matter. The demons must have read his mind and were willing to accommodate him somewhat. As Clyde looked on in disbelief, the one’s only arm began to wither away, and a third arm sprouted from the chest of his compatriot, bulging and then bursting through the taut rubber of his bodysuit.

In that instant, Clyde was overcome by a revulsion for these creatures that dwarfed the most severe loathing he’d ever felt for himself, for what he’d become. His own petty angst was a sign of awareness, a milepost of humanity that these creatures had left far behind. He stepped forward and raised the bat—

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—And it was snatched from his grasp from behind. A flurry of blows forced him to his knees as the three-armed beasts converged on him. At the feet of the armless Sabbat, the girl's desperate, bulging eyes beseeched Clyde, asked the impossible of him.

The no-arm literally danced, jumping gleefully. "Here kitty, kitty," it said in a high twittery voice, the words interrupted by squeaking giggles. "Some milk for kitty, kitty..." it said, and then began kicking the girl, stomping her head, smashing its boot into her face.

Clyde could not help her. He cowered under the blows of the demons, his own bat turned against him, fists, the machete. He was relieved slightly when one of the first kicks to the girl's head drove consciousness from her. It was a small mercy. Clyde hoped to escape the madness as well. He wished for a quick end.

He was not to be so lucky.



**Thursday, 14 October 1999, 11:48 PM**  
**Telegraph Road**  
**South of Baltimore, Maryland**

Something about the delivery truck caught Theo's eye. There was no specific giveaway, no telltale sign that he could put his finger on. The truck was unmarked, but it wasn't unusually old, dirty or beaten up. There were plenty of places a delivery truck might be going. The real estate between Baltimore and D.C. was a continuous stretch of suburb, office and commercial space, after all. And a lot of these guys worked at night—to beat the traffic. The truck was going just a few miles per hour over the speed limit. Maybe that was what got Theo's attention.

*These guys usually drive like NASCAR on crack.*

Whatever the reason, Mr. Maryland State Trooper evidently had a similar idea. Theo was hanging well back from the truck when he noticed the cop car easing up behind him. At first he assumed the cop was interested in him—racial profiling, black guy on a motorcycle. Police, to Theo's thinking, weren't an out-and-out threat, but they were a complication to be avoided. Business tended to be ugly enough as it was, without adding gun-toting mortal paramilitaries to the mix. Sure, the local prince had some of the middle and maybe upper command wrapped around his little finger, but that often didn't translate to shit with the patrolman who stopped you on the street. This particular trooper caught up and began pacing Theo.

Theo was already going slow enough not to gain on the delivery truck. He eased off the gas even more—slowed to the speed limit, three miles per hour under, five under. The cop was riding his tailpipe now. The cop pulled left, cruised on past, and caught up with the truck in just a few seconds. Theo maintained his distance.

The trooper paced the delivery truck for maybe half a mile before the lights atop the patrol car flashed to life and added whirling blue patterns to the monochromatic yellow of the street lamps. Theo slowed and dropped farther behind.

The driver of the truck slowed too, then turned into the next office-park side street. The patrol car followed. Theo turned the corner just as the police cruiser disappeared around another turn to the left. The blue lights were still visible and came to rest in what Theo could just make out as a parking lot on the other side of a row of landscaped trees and shrubbery.

The Brujah pulled up to the curb and killed his engine. As he stepped over the foot-wide strip of manicured turf and into the cover of the shrubs and trees, shadows stretched out to greet him. No twig, leaf, or pine needle snapped or made any sound at all beneath his size-thirteen boots.

Theo watched from the shadows as the trooper, out of his car, approached the truck from behind. The cops were bound to be on edge. There had been so much "gang violence" over the past few months. Drug warfare, the papers and TV news called it. A violent realignment as King Crack lost its novelty and newer, deadlier forms of cocaine and heroin—and their dealers—vied for ascendancy. All bullshit, of course. But that didn't change the basic fact that a lot of shots were being fired—by somebody, for some reason—

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and innocent bystanders were paying a heavy price. The cops knew that much only too well. This trooper approached the truck with a hand on his gun.

Theo waited. If it turned out to be a routine traffic stop, he was back on his bike and nobody knew he was ever here. That's what he was thinking when the hand that offered a license to the trooper also took hold of the cop's wrist and yanked him up off the ground and through the open window into the truck.

"Shit."

Theo stepped out of the brush and jogged toward the truck, keeping out of the lines of sight of the driver's window, the side-view mirror, and the video camera on the inside of the trooper's windshield. *The dead trooper*, Theo thought.

As he got into position, Theo reached under his jacket and unclipped his baby: a Franchi SPAS 12, twelve-gauge combat shotgun. With familiar ease, he unfolded and secured the metal stock, then clicked off the double safeties. He was in single-shot, which was fine with him.

The delivery truck's engine rumbled to life. Not wasting any time, Theo pumped and fired. The nearly simultaneous blasts of the shotgun and of the front left tire exploding shook the night.

The driver, leaning out the window to look at the tire, realized too late the cause of the blowout. Theo was already switched over to semi-automatic. From closer than twenty yards, his first burst caught the driver square in the face, neck, and shoulder. Four shells, forty-eight lead slugs, tore through flesh and bone. The driver's head was gone. His left arm fell to the pavement.

Before the report of the shots had faded to silence, Theo had circled wide behind the police car and come around to the passenger's side of the truck—just as the passenger, splattered with blood, jumped down from that door. He wore a generic deliveryman uniform—tan, with a green-trimmed patch that read "Wallace." To Theo's eyes, though, there was no disguising the lifeless flesh, lifeless as his own, running only on borrowed blood.

Wallace was anxiously watching back in the direction of Theo's first two shots and never knew, even when the next burst hit and ripped his chest open, what happened.

Theo stepped closer to the bloody mess that had been Wallace and took a quick glance in the cab of the truck. The state trooper, covered with more blood and bodily matter than Wallace had been, was crumpled into a heap. His neck was broken—with the angle of his head to his body, it had to be—but his eyes were open. Perhaps he still clung to life.

No time for sympathy. Theo didn't know if the trooper had called for backup, but more importantly, the Brujah heard movement from the back of the truck. Less than a minute had passed since he'd blown out the tire. In the space of a few more seconds, he reached into a pocket, took seven more shells—solid tungsten slugs this time—and reloaded. His long and nimble fingers, given the speed of blood, were a blur even to him.

Theo took a few steps away from the truck. He loosed a burst at the side wall of the cargo section. The slugs, designed to penetrate light armor, ripped through the thin metal. Alarmed screams rang out from within. Theo could hear bodies diving for cover. He slid around to the rear of the truck and plugged another burst through the cargo door. More shouts of pain and panic.

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*That should keep 'em on the floor for a second.*

With that extra bit of time, Theo reloaded again. The shells were in before he finished pulling back another ten yards. As one member of the Sabbat cargo crew grew brave and threw open the rear door, and as Theo backed quickly away, he fired two bursts at the fuel tank.

The cacophonous roar of flame and metal rattled the windows of the nearby office buildings. The explosion spun the patrol car back several feet. Theo stood and surveyed his handiwork for just a few seconds. The truck chassis was blackened and burning. Plumes of black, acrid smoke billowed into the night sky. No more Sabbat. Not much in the way of bodies for anyone to find—some dust among the ashes, and an unfortunate state trooper.

Theo wondered for a moment if the officer had already been dead or if the explosion had finished him. Not much difference really, at this point. Finally, Theo went to the patrol car, opened the door. He ripped the video camera from the windshield, cracked open the casing with his hands, and tossed the device into the fire.

That was that. He was little more than a breeze through the darkness. Weapon holstered, back to his motorcycle. He'd been away from his bike fewer than ten minutes. He was gone before the cleaning crew in one of the offices was able to report the explosion.

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**Friday, 15 October 1999, 3:01 AM**  
**Little Patuxent Parkway**  
**Near Columbia, Maryland**

GF



*Holy shit!*

Octavia swung the hatchet—there was hardly enough room; the steering wheel seemed to press right up in her face—and somebody's hand flopped into the passenger's seat next to her. The rest of the arm jerked back out the window damn fast. She didn't have time to gloat.

Something hard—a fist—smashed the window just a few inches from her face. She lunged over, cheek against the severed hand in the seat, to get away from the grasping fingers from the other direction. She swung the hatchet across her body, smashed her forearm against the steering wheel, but the blade still managed to slip between fingers and separate knuckles. Another bloody hand jerked back.

She and Jenkins had stopped to check out an abandoned auto. Like they were supposed to do. Fuck if these *things* didn't swarm their car as soon as she'd cut the engine. And fast too. One of them had slammed a metal rod *through* the fucking engine block. That was before the things had pulled Jenkins, kicking and screaming, through the window.

Now everything was all hands and flying glass and blood. The back window was gone. They were squirming in that way. Others were beating the windshield. That'd be gone in a few seconds, and then they'd be coming that way too.

Octavia swung again. The hatchet lodged in somebody's forehead but then was wrenched from her grasp. She heard screams and laughter.

*Crash!*

There went the front windshield. And the impact set off the fucking air bag, knocking her senseless, pinning her to the seat. Hands grasping, and then her own hatchet...





**Friday, 15 October 1999, 3:27 AM**  
**Pendulum Avenue**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

“Right this way, sir,” said the butler, when it became apparent that the guest was not about to give up his jacket.

Despite the open, spacious foyer, Theo felt hemmed in. The impeccable decor, the precise placement of every vase, every bauble, contributed flawlessly to the design and conveyed an impression of restrained elegance. Not gaudy or ostentatious. Rather tasteful, cultured. Theo could recognize all this. After all, Don Cerro had spent a good portion of the late nineteenth century escorting him around from one of the finest Kindred courts of Europe to another. Theo was well acquainted with the refinement of patrician tastes. He just didn’t like it.

A younger Brujah might have made a point of tracking mud in on the sparkling tile and the Oriental runner, or of knocking something over, or slapping the butler on the back and breaking his ribs. Theo still felt the destructive urges—just not those coy, little, petty ones. Why spit in the man’s face when you could break his nose instead? No, the anger was never far below the surface. That came with the blood. Maybe Theo had just acted on enough of his anger and seen enough over the years to know that Robert Gainesmil was not the enemy. He was just a symptom.

So Theo followed the butler through the wide halls with their high ceilings. Normally, the Brujah archon would have ignored this invitation from Gainesmil. But tonight wasn’t normal—because last night Theo had seen the former prince of Baltimore blown to bits. Theo had seen it, he’d seen who’d done it, and he’d let her go. It was worth his while to keep an ear to the ground when normally he wouldn’t care what the locals thought. So when he’d gotten back from his sweep south of the city—and reamed out the perimeter patrol that had missed the delivery truck, even though there was no real way they could’ve known—and received a message from Gainesmil, Theo had decided to respond.

They reached the study—or whatever the hell the room was—after a few minutes. It was far enough from the front door to give an impression of the size of the estate, but not so far as to belabor the point. The butler turned the knobs and, with a gentle push, the double doors swung open quietly and easily.

“Mr. Theo Bell.”

“Thank you, Langford,” said the Toreador host.

Gainesmil sat in a straight-backed chair, his posture perfectly erect, knees together, slippers flat on the deep brown carpet. He wore a smoking jacket, red with ermine trim, and beneath it a silk shirt with his signature frilled jabot. Behind him burned a small fire. Gas logs, Theo noticed. A gas line into a Kindred’s haven could be a bad idea.

*Ballsy to keep it on,* Theo thought, *after last night.*

“Refreshment?” Gainesmil asked, gesturing toward a decanter on a table nearby.

“No thanks,” said Theo. *Bottled blood. No thanks.*

“That will be all, Langford.”

“Yes, sir.” The butler backed out of the room, pulling the doors closed as he went.

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“Please, sit.” Gainesmil indicated the matching chair across from his own. Theo sat and folded his arms.

“I appreciate your agreeing to see me, Archon Bell,” Gainesmil began. “I know you keep a busy schedule.”

“Not a problem... as long as the Sabbat don’t attack.”

Gainesmil laughed politely at the presumed joke, then realized that Theo’s expression was, as very nearly always, unchanged. The Toreador elder cleared his throat. “Well, then. Let me be brief.” As if not fully resigned to his declared brevity, Gainesmil paused for a long moment. He was obviously choosing his words carefully, approaching, perhaps, a subject about which he didn’t wish to be completely forthright.

“Sheriff Goldwin,” Gainesmil said, “has suggested that last night’s attack upon the prince... upon the *late* prince, was most likely the first phase of the Sabbat offensive against our city.” He paused, as if expecting comment from his guest, but Theo said nothing.

“Prince Garlotte, of course, is no longer with us...” Gainesmil said, but then he faltered slightly, the slightest tremor of emotion evident in his voice.

Theo noticed but did not react. Genuine regret at the loss of a long-time friend and ally, or merely a display to imply such tender feelings? Gainesmil had not done the deed himself, but had he contributed? Theo turned that possibility over in his mind. Had Gainesmil goaded Katrina into the Kindred equivalent of patricide?

“Several members of the prince’s security detail were lost in the explosion,” Gainesmil went on. “And two sentries on buildings near the ship were found dead. More importantly than the ghouls, however,” he dismissed the ghouls’ deaths with a wave of his hand, “Malachi and Katrina are unaccounted for.” He paused again, but Theo still only looked at him. “They are presumed destroyed.”

Theo waited. *Whatever you’ve got to say, go ahead and say it.*

“You arrived at the scene ten or fifteen minutes after the explosion.”

Theo nodded.

“You were patrolling in the area.”

“Coming back from patrolling farther out,” Theo said evenly. “The Inner Harbor’s been pretty safe.”

“‘Pretty safe,’ as you say,” Gainesmil agreed. He raised a finger and tapped his lips, slowly, three times. “There was, however, an instance... oh, three months back, when the Inner Harbor was not so safe.”

Again, Theo waited impassively. He could see where this was headed, but wasn’t about to help Gainesmil along. *Spit it out.*

“The attack on Mr. Pieterzoon. I believe you are aware that it occurred?”

Theo nodded. This could be ticklish. He’d followed Pieterzoon that night because he didn’t trust the bastard and wanted to find out a little more about how the Ventrue spent his nights. Dumb luck that that Sabbat hit squad had wandered in that night—bad luck for them, good luck for Jan, and for the Camarilla, Theo had come to decide.

But if Gainesmil knew Theo was around for the attack on Pieterzoon *and* was closer than he’d claimed when the *U.S.S. Apollo* went sky high... Even though there was no real connection, it wouldn’t look good. It might be enough to stir up trouble, if that’s what the Toreador was after.

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“Why did you keep silent about the attack on Mr. Pieterzoon?” Gainesmil asked.

“Same reason Prince Garlotte and Mr. Pieterzoon kept quiet about it,” Theo responded. “Same reason you kept quiet about it, I ’spect. Kind of embarrassing for the prince to have a guest attacked in the heart of the city. I didn’t have any reason to embarrass Garlotte.”

Gainesmil contemplated this. He seemed to accept it. Or maybe it just wasn’t what he was most interested in. “At the scene of the attack... of the explosion,” he asked, “did you notice anything... anything that would lead you to question Sheriff Goldwin’s supposition that the Sabbat were behind it?”

“Watcha got in mind?”

“Anything at all. Anything that might point toward... *other* involvement.”

Theo stared at him flatly. “I ain’t a detective, you know. I didn’t go over the crime scene for clues.”

“Of course not. Of course not. But you still might have noticed something... something amiss?”

Theo thought on that for a minute. He tapped his lip three times for good measure. Then, “Nope.”

Gainesmil’s expectant expression drooped noticeably. “I don’t mean to hurry you. Take your time to—”

“Nope. Didn’t notice nothing.”

Several seconds passed before Gainesmil realized that his mouth was still open. He closed it. “You see,” he continued in somewhat strained but still pleasant tones, “certain associates of Sheriff Goldwin did inspect the scene, and—”

“And you don’t trust ’em,” Theo said.

Gainesmil again consciously closed his mouth and spoke with a viper’s smile: “It is always worthwhile, as I’m sure you would agree, Archon Bell, to solicit as many perspectives as possible.”

“I generally stick to my own perspective,” Theo said. “That is, unless Jaroslav tells me different. Then I usually go with his perspective.”

“I see.” Mention of the Brujah justicar seemed to unnerve Gainesmil slightly.

*Remember who you’re talkin’ to, Toady-boy.* Theo didn’t mind being underestimated. Let them think he was big and dumb if they wanted. But he had little patience for being patronized. Amazing what a little name-dropping could do—just a not-so-subtle reminder that Theo had been hand-picked as archon by one of the most ruthless, fanatical, and just plain mean sons-of-bitches to come down the Camarilla pike in a fucking long time.

“I see.”

“So you think Goldwin’s people fucked up, or that he’s shading what he really found,” Theo said.

“It certainly is reasonable to suspect that the Sabbat are responsible,” said Gainesmil, backpedaling as fast as his little semantic legs would carry him from his intimation of a moment before. “But the sheriff produced little if any hard evidence, and there are... other possibilities.”

“What evidence do you want—other than a lot of fuckin’ little pieces of boat all over the harbor?”

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“Well... of course we may never find definitive proof. But other possibilities should not be ruled out, not yet, even if they can't be proven. After all, Sabbat involvement, though not unlikely, is merely supposition as well.”

“Other possibilities,” said Theo. “Like what?”

“As I said, Malachi and Katrina are *presumed* destroyed.”

“*Garlotte* is just *presumed* destroyed,” Theo pointed out.

“I met with the prince—*on the ship*—just less than an hour before the explosion. He did not have plans to go elsewhere.”

“Would he have told you?”

“There were few secrets between Prince *Garlotte* and myself.”

“Few that you know of.”

Gainesmil shot a fierce glare, but then his expression softened. “True enough.”

“You think Malachi and Katrina were involved,” Theo said.

Gainesmil frowned. He rose from his chair and began to walk slowly around the room.

*If this is brief*, Theo thought, *I'd hate to get the long version*.

“No doubt it *was* the Sabbat...” said Gainesmil, “*but*,” he raised a finger in emphasis, “without proof to that effect, speculation that parties unaccounted for could have been involved, and with nefarious intent, is not particularly wild or outlandish.”

“Wild or not,” said Theo, “it's speculation. I don't see the difference.”

“It is *possible*,” Gainesmil insisted.

“Look,” Theo said. “Do you, without any proof, want to go tell Xaviar that the only Gangrel on *Garlotte's* payroll is who you *think* blew him up?”

“This has nothing to do with Xaviar!”

“It's got everything to do with Xaviar, or somebody like him. You go casting aspersions like that, and some offended Gangrel is going to come looking for you. He's not gonna want to discuss what you *think*, and he's not just going to piss on your mailbox. No. He's gonna make your insides your outsides.”

Gainesmil was still pacing—until the mention of rearranging his anatomy. The thought did not play well with him, apparently. He pursed his lips, retook his seat.

“Besides,” Theo added, “do you think explosives were Malachi's style? I mean, the guy was happy if you tossed him a raw bone.”

Gainesmil chuckled wryly at that, but he was only momentarily cheered.

“Katrina?” Theo mused aloud. “I never thought she had enough...”

“Direction?” Gainesmil offered.

“Yeah,” Theo agreed. “That works.” It was true, as far as it went.

“But she was spiteful. Heavens was she spiteful.”

“Show me a chick that ain't.”

Gainesmil laughed quietly again, but mostly he was absorbed in his own thoughts.

“Anyway,” said Theo, rising, “whoever the hell it was, if they blew themselves up, it don't really matter. If we find out somebody's still kickin', then we got something to talk about. Until then, I got things to do.”

“Of course. Of course.” Gainesmil was jolted from his reverie. He stood with Theo, then reached and pulled a nearby tassel. Not too far away, Theo heard a bell ring—a

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bell that mortal ears would not have noticed. Within seconds, the butler was opening the study doors.

“Langford,” said Gainesmil.

“Sir?”

“Archon Bell has been more than gracious. Kindly see him to the door.”

“Yes, sir.”

Theo nodded in parting to Gainesmil and then followed the butler back through the hallways of the Toreador’s haven. On the way, Theo smoked half a cigarette and tossed the butt into a flower vase near the front door. Sometimes, he decided, the little things were enough.

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**Friday, 15 October 1999, 4:11 AM**  
**Little Patuxent Parkway**  
**Near Columbia, Maryland**



The Dodge pickup eased onto the shoulder and stopped a full twenty yards behind the trashed Crown Victoria. The truck's engine kept running. The headlights washed over the dents and shattered windows ahead.

"That Octavia's car?" Reggie asked.

Eustace studied the other vehicle for a long minute. He rolled down his window and spat onto the gravel. "Fuck, yeah."

"Thought so."

They sat and watched the car. Eustace reached forward and changed the station on the radio. There was a pleasant breeze coming through the window.

"Think anybody's still in it?" Reggie asked.

"Dunno," Eustace said. He reached behind his seat, retrieved his sawed-off, double-barreled, twelve-gauge shotgun and double checked that it was loaded. "I let you know." He spat again before getting out, wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

As Eustace approached the other car, Reggie watched carefully, only looking away for a second to change the radio back. Eustace stopped by the Crown Victoria and studied it carefully. He scratched his head and spat. Before too long, he walked back to the truck.

"Somebody done fucked it up," Eustace said.

"Don't say."

"Best call Slick. We don't want the po-lice tripping over this one."

"Well all right then."

Reggie reached for the cell phone, while Eustace changed the radio station.

**Friday, 15 October 1999, 11:45 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**



None of the joy or honor remained to Jeremiah. Even in the darkness of the cave, he felt the shadow of the monstrous sculpture. The eyes of the Gangrel stared, but they did not see him. The creatures moaned in agony, but went unanswered by the Prophet.

Anatole's mind had floated somewhere that Jeremiah could not follow, away from this place of darkness, away from the sculpture of madness and torture. The Prophet lay unmoving. He did not wander about, he did not rub his sandals together this way and that. Jeremiah was alone with the bitter taste of his memories. His bemusement at how Anatole had figuratively stricken Victoria had been subsumed by horror at the literal strike against Prince Benison. Anatole had destroyed his clansman after Benison had retrieved for him the Robe of Nessus, after the prince had seemed, for a brief instant, to be aware of Jeremiah's presence.

*Could he have been?* Jeremiah wondered. If that were indeed the case, the Nosferatu should be thankful that Anatole, so seldom violent, had struck down the prince, and by doing so inadvertently preserved the watcher's charade. But Jeremiah could feel none of that. He felt remorse, as if the slaying had been his deed, his responsibility, his fault.

Beneath the obscuration of the twisted shadow, he felt the darkness that he had felt before, in the tunnel, before the rats, the infernal creatures whose thoughts had, as if of single mind, called out, *Flesh*. And now Jeremiah tried not to look upon a giant sculpture of flesh and stone. He watched Anatole every second. Although the Prophet had lain apparently comatose for weeks now, who was to say when he might leap up—leap up and strike, like he had at Prince Benison.

*I have been with the Prophet for months!* Jeremiah bemoaned his fate. *But he will not tell me the answers I know he has! What darkness is it that eats away at the heart of the earth? I have felt it. Tell me, damn you! But he will not speak. He will only strike me down.*

But the Prophet did speak. Without warning he opened his eyes and sat upright. "Forty nights and forty days," he said.

And then he looked at Jeremiah. *And saw.*

Jeremiah felt it. He felt the Prophet's gaze. *Dear God. No!* It could not be so. "How...?" "Begone," Anatole said, no more concerned than if he were brushing a fly from the ceremonial loaf.

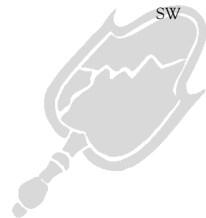
Jeremiah staggered backward, away from the Prophet. "Not now! Not now when I know you have the answers! Tell me, I beg you, tell me before I am gone!" the watcher cried.

Anatole simply shook his head, dolefully. "No. I must save all our lives."

And then Jeremiah was fleeing. Away from the Prophet. Away from the sculpture of darkness and the hole into the heart of the earth. Through what he thought was but could not be a graveyard of monoliths and desolation. Through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. His screams from hell on earth echoed into the darkened heavens.

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**Friday, 15 October 1999, 11:52 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**



The companion felt as if the universe were imploding. A great blackness, of which he became aware only as it began to move, surged inward. A halo of light surrounding it became a cirlet, became a thick crown, and finally became a sphere. And he awoke.

How much time had passed, the companion did not know. Perhaps none, for it seemed like only a moment before that he had been watching his friend Anatole for signs of movement and life. He remembered fading away.

This awakening felt like an instantaneous continuation of that time, but then the companion understood the exact passage of time they had endured. He told Anatole, who seemed pleased.

“Forty nights and forty days,” Anatole commented.

There was something lively in his voice.

Suddenly, the companion’s friend turned to regard a Kindred in their midst.

Anatole’s eyes might have burned a hole in the chest of the little ugly thing. To its credit, this Kindred noticed immediately that it had been spotted, though it thought itself beyond the sense of anything that walked the earth.

“How...” the Kindred began.

But Anatole did not pay heed to the small concerns of the Kindred. He merely leveled his gaze and ordered, “Begone.”

The little Kindred tried to resist. The companion knew it was futile, but the little Kindred did not. It thought a simple word could hold no power over it. It was wrong, for the word was Anatole’s and something of the divine remained within him. The little monster, like the rats that attempted to scrutinize the Prophet and companion in the Cathedral of St. John, shrank from Anatole’s power.

His face contorted, and he screamed, “Not now! Not now when I know you have the answers! Tell me, I beg you, tell me before I am gone!”

Anatole, usually given to ignoring such outbursts, honored this Kindred with another look. “No. I must save all our lives.”

And then the little Kindred was gone. Its whimpers echoed in the cavern for a moment, and when they faded, so too did the grating rumblings of the voice in Anatole’s mind.

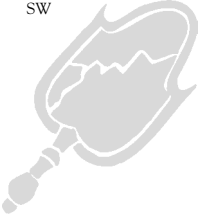
The companion smiled. The intruder was gone.

Then Anatole regarded the companion himself. His eyes were sad. Filled with the self-loathing the companion had seen in them after Anatole struck Benison down. The companion’s heart sank.

“Must I go also?” he cried.

Anatole nodded, and the companion melted, merging back to his origins. As an independent entity, he vanished.





**Friday, 16 October 1999, 12:02 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

Anatole felt full and fat, as he had not in a very long time. Parts of himself had merged with the rest of him again. There were a few large pieces he'd tasked with specific responsibilities and a plethora of smaller fragments, both those no longer useful so they had atrophied and those he'd simply forgotten existed.

Shortly after his liberation from belief in the Judeo-Christian God, Anatole had encountered Zen thinking and one dream he had had born near-exact correspondence with a famous Zen story. In his dream he was a student, filled with questions for a master who served him tea. As he sung his questions in rapid succession, the master continued to pour tea until it overflowed.

The master said, "If your mind is already so full, how can you learn anything more?"

That was when Anatole had divested himself of much that was—and was now again—himself. So he could learn. So he could see with clear eyes.

And because he could see, he was able to grasp the mighty work before him and see what he had to do. And because he had now regained his knowledgeable companion, he understood how he might do it.

He approached Hannah. She had given him good advice, and she would live within this thing and gain great renown for it eventually, but she was only a fraction of herself. She was all there, but too much else was there as well, and the artist had not been able to use all of her.

Anatole lifted the robe from her shoulders. The blood that had stained it was gone. Whether he had sucked it from the fabric while he emptied my mind, or whether Hannah had drunk it to regain something more of herself did not matter. He cast it from the sculpture. It was useless now, he thought, but perhaps someone wise in the ways of objects of power would find need of it. One such would be there soon, but only after Anatole allowed it.

He walked deeper into the maze of the work. In his explorations of spirit, he had found the spot; now he had to locate it in this world. It was no great trouble. He saw the formation after a little time and moved toward it.

It was a slender spire of molten rock now hardened and perfectly smooth. Around it was a moat of sorts, a circular channel of black stone in which nine springs bubbled and wept. The ichor of the earth flowed from them. There was a yellowish miasma. At Anatole's feet were a green and purple effluvium and a pinkish-gray bile.

Anatole's knowledge of mathematics was extensive, although this was a simple problem and made no great demands. Hundreds of years ago he had read works by Pythagoras now forgotten and lost. Mortals had so little understanding of the circles in which they ran. And perhaps the Kindred suffered from the same delusions, though their orbit may be greater. But it may be longer as well.

Finding a means of maintaining perfection within this masterpiece, as Hannah had suggested, had been no easy matter, for there were countless permutations of its elements

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to consider. Fulfilling the requirements of that perfection would be much less complicated, though no less monumental. After all, one's life is one's greatest monument.

Anatole looked at his arms. Right or left? Did it matter?

No.

But he chose his left. For many mortal years he had considered its terminus the devil's hand, and as he was hoping to make the acquaintance of a devil, it seemed reasonable to choose it.

He walked several paces from the spire, to the point where he knew the edge he required inclined. It was a thin layer of compressed quartz. Compressed and impossibly hardened. Tapered along an entire edge to a sharpness no swordsman in his mortal years could have produced or even imagined.

Anatole kneeled beside it.

And he thrust his right arm away from his body, like a bird's wing. He threw himself forward, and the crystalline structure bit deeply into his age-hardened flesh. Once, twice, three times, and the deed was done. His skin's resistance was nearly too great even when he desired otherwise. But right at the edge of his shoulder, his right arm fell away. Blood sprayed and splashed the sublime work nearby, but it was only surface material; it would not affect the work itself.

Anatole shivered from the pain. Once anyway. Or maybe it was a shiver for the loss. It was disturbing to him, seeing part of himself unattached to the remainder. He leaned and with his left arm, picked up the right. He hurled it away, and saw that it skittered near to Hannah's robe. Perhaps those digits could be the fingers of a saint, kept in wooden boxes, prayed over and revered.

He laughed.

Blood ran in thick rivulets down Anatole's torso, but only for a moment. His blood was a part of him that responded as surely as the five remaining fingers, and it sealed the wound. Soon, he would have no need for the blood, but until the deed was done, he had to retain it.

But in a flash of apprehension, he realized he was not yet quite ready to mount that spire. That would be the end of him, and what if he were to fail?

He did not yet know all the answers. He did not even fully understand how to express the answers he did know in a manner that was anything more than a riddle to a mind not full of the connections and permutations and associations he had stored over the centuries. But he had to try. He had to leave something, lest his possible, perhaps imminent, failure cause his whole existence to be nothing.

That was something he did not so much fear for himself as he feared for the sake of those he would leave behind.

He hoped so, at least. He hoped he'd divorced himself from ego.

He could not spare much blood, though. So he navigated the contours of the sculpture and retrieved his spurned arm. The blood within it was thick and strong. It could paint miles, and that was exactly what he required of it.

With his knees, Anatole held his broken self at the elbow while he dipped the fingers of the left hand into the wound at the top of his right arm. His blood had sealed that wound too, so not much had been lost. He tapped gently and pushed the scab away. The ruby red fluid danced to his fingertips. He controlled it still.

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Anatole motioned toward the wall, making precise gestures, crafting a message in a tongue meant for those who might best utilize the knowledge.

His blood did the rest.

Some great hours passed, and Anatole was done. He hoped he was not too weary to complete his real work. He dropped the depleted and withered arm once again near the robe.

Then he returned to the spire.

One spire to nine springs. There was no pattern there. The field was too small, so any pattern could be there, which is the same as none. But he would create a pattern of squares. One squared. His addition of two squared to the springs that were three squared.

He clambered up to the spire. Its base was set within a mound of rock on which his feet found purchase. From that height Anatole regained the vantage of the work he had had in his mind's eye as he slept. Impressive.

The spire itself was too smooth to climb. Anatole knew this, so he did not even attempt it. Instead, he hauled himself up by the first means that came to mind. He could reach the top of it, so he pounded his open palm upon the point, and the spire pierced his flesh and impaled his hand. The work was probably strong enough to endure many hardships, purposeful and of time.

Then Anatole flexed his arm and hauled himself toward the top. There was so little friction on the spire that his hand slipped deeper down the polished shaft, and he was afraid for a moment that the hole in his palm would simply widen beyond the expanse of his hand and he would fall, his hand utterly shattered and worthless. He did not now have a second hand with which he might try again.

But the integrity of Anatole's ancient bones prevailed, and he pulled himself bodily to the top. Then, like an acrobat or gymnast, he lifted himself over the spire in a sort of one-armed push-up. There, balancing between life and death, between the past and the future, between despair and hope, he plummeted to the latter of all the pairs.

Anatole heard his own agonized cry rattle and echo through the chambers as the spire impaled him. Blood seeped from his body, and this time he did not stop it.

He pulled at the spire with his hand, and with some effort he wrestled it free, though a gaping tear in it now separated thumb from index finger by a wide expanse.

That limb was free and extended, and he raised his head and two legs to join it. The pattern of squares was created, and as Anatole's blood ran down the spire and melded with the substance of the statue below, so did he feel his consciousness flowing and blending.

He had been close before. Never before was he closer than when the dragon's shadow had protected him from the sun, but never before so close as now. Never before had he so *direct* a connection. It had always been a matter of hiding. Winding his way secretly in through doors unknown to them both. It had not always been the dragon Anatole approached, but his involvement in affairs this century had made him so...so accessible.

A crust of rock began to spread over Anatole's body. This living host had at least not rejected him. He had managed to add perfection to the unblemished.

Anatole thanked God—and why not thank him now?—that one of his—His?—tools was so single-minded. So strong within his heart and his soul that a desire to create had outweighed all other purposes for a handful of nights. Had the young wizard spurned the dragon? Bent *it* to *his* will for some nights? Could Anatole accomplish the same? But on a greater scale? And not create but preserve?

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His body shuddered, and he watched it. He watched one last bead of blood, the final globule of fluid from his old body, go skating down the conduit created by the flood before it.

His eyes began to glaze, but instead of impending darkness, Anatole hoped for light. He thought he was ready. He was not.

It was a shattering epiphany. Fire lanced through Anatole's body, but now his body was the world. Pain struck where he thought he never could feel it. In reaches so removed he could barely comprehend the distance.

It was the epiphany of the fragility of life a young father has staring into his dead child's eyes.

It was the epiphany of a new mother holding a life connected to her by a fleshy cord.

It was everything singing in his head at once.

And the ability, the destiny, the clarity to understand it.

And speak to it.

And perhaps...

Perhaps to direct it—



**Saturday, 16 October 1999, 11:20 PM**  
**McHenry Auditorium, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

“Theo! Thank God...” Lydia met him in the hallway leading to the auditorium. From behind her came the sounds of heated shouting. The corridor, expensively carpeted, was lined with impassive ghouls—those of Garlotte’s security team that hadn’t been on the ship three nights ago and gotten themselves blown to Kingdom Come. Malachi, the Gangrel scourge and usual guardian of the conference room, was conspicuously absent as well.

The shouting from the auditorium continued unabated. Theo instantly recognized one of the voices—the loudest—that kept shouting down those that rose in opposition.

“Lladislas,” Theo said.

“Yep,” Lydia said. She had rushed forward to meet Theo, but he’d kept on walking, so she was forced to change directions and head back toward the double doors to keep up with her elder. “He wants to be the new prince. He’s demanding a vote of support.”

Theo stopped in his tracks. Lydia kept going, realized he’d stopped, and reversed direction again. “Vote?” Theo growled. “What does he want to be—prince or fuckin’ prom queen?” The archon started forward again without warning, just as Lydia got to his side, and left her behind. She scrambled after him.

He didn’t slam the double doors open. He wasn’t angry or disgruntled, not any more so than he usually was; he didn’t need to make a dramatic entrance. The showmanship he left to others. Yet the instant he entered the auditorium and began down the side aisle, the debate died away. The Kindred at the head of the sloped room didn’t regard him with fear or awe, at least not all of them did; the argument didn’t end so much as pause. Theo was not their arbiter extraordinaire. Yet his presence cast the previous “discussion” in a whole new light.

He could feel the change in those first few seconds—not a lessening of tension, but more the tension coming to a head. He sensed something else as well, something Theo suspected was a direct result of Garlotte’s destruction—a dangerous lack of restraint in the argument.

*Then again, he thought, maybe that’s just Lladislas.*

“*Theo Bell.*” Lladislas’s voice boomed and filled the entire auditorium. “Just the man we needed to see.”

No one else spoke. The others—Jan, Vitel, Gainesmil, Isaac among them—watched in silence as Theo continued down the aisle toward the conference table—a *new* conference table, he noticed. Somebody had replaced the one that Xaviar had dug his claws into. That had been a touch-and-go night. Garlotte and the Gangrel justicar both had egos big enough that they’d barely fit in this room. How things changed. Garlotte was fish food, and Xaviar, his pride wounded, was supposedly leading his clan out of the Camarilla. Theo shook his head and frowned.

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Lladislas apparently thought the gesture was directed at him. His brow furrowed deeply beneath his slightly receding hairline. “This city is under siege, for God’s sake,” the exiled prince of Buffalo continued. “It needs a new prince, and it needs a new prince *now*. I’m a man of experience. I’ve run a city. Actually run it—not played second fiddle.” He shot a pointed glare at Isaac and at Robert Gainesmil. Each leveled a cold stare at Lladislas in return. “I’ve made the tough calls, the life and death decisions,” he added.

“And the latest entry on your résumé,” spoke Marcus Vitel, formerly of Washington, D.C., “is that your city fell to the Sabbat.”

Lladislas’s eyes slowly grew wide. His face, always ruddy-cheeked—quite unnatural for a vampire—darkened noticeably.

“Your city fell to the Sabbat,” Vitel went on, suddenly seeming very weary, “as did mine.” He held his hands, palms raised, out to his side, as if to disavow any malicious intent in his words.

The conciliatory gesture may have given Lladislas brief pause and served to prevent him from springing to violent attack, but he was far from soothed. Vitel’s barb struck deeply and took hold.

“I wouldn’t expect you, of all Kindred, a rival and a *Ventru*e, to support me,” Lladislas snarled.

Vitel maintained his calm demeanor and even allowed a slightly bemused smile to creep onto his face. “I am certainly *Ventru*e... but rival?” His eyebrows rose inquisitively. “You have nothing that I want, Lladislas, and I without my city possess nothing for you to covet.” Then Vitel’s smile faded. His manner turned hard, perhaps pained. “As for *this* city, it is nothing more to me than refuge. Consider yourself suitor without rival. Busy yourself with trinkets, if you will. I shall content myself with nothing less than recovering the pearl that is trodden under the cloven hooves of swine.”

Lladislas, like everyone else around the table, remained silent. Theo found that he had stopped short of the table to listen to Vitel and the words that resonated with such a deep sense of loss. The Brujah archon now took his place, and Lydia sat beside him.

This brief oratory was the most that Theo could remember Vitel saying publicly since the deposed prince had fled Washington. Vitel had attended most of the leadership conferences and offered his opinion, occasionally. He had even used his contacts in the nation’s capital to help bring about a temporary curfew in that city—admittedly not a cure-all, but an obstacle for the Sabbat to work around at a crucial time while the Camarilla refugees streaming into Baltimore were being molded into a passable defensive force. Vitel had contributed to the cause, but he had spent most of the past months in seclusion. Whatever games he was playing—he was *Ventru*e; he had to be up to *something*—were behind the scenes. Pieterzoon had attempted several times to break through the wall of solitude, and Victoria, before she was shipped off to Atlanta, had undoubtedly tried to co-opt Vitel. Jan had even mentioned to Theo that Vitel seemed a broken man, that the loss of his city and his childer were a millstone around his neck.

*Like I give a rat’s ass*, Theo thought. The blue bloods’ little personal dramas weren’t going to keep the Sabbat from rolling into the city. And at the moment, Lladislas, even though he was a Brujah himself, wasn’t helping matters by agitating to become prince.

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“If you’ve gotta ask permission,” Theo said, breaking the silence, “you’re not the prince.” He folded his arms and stared directly at Lladislas, daring his clanmate to cross him.

To his credit, Lladislas held his peace—just barely. His face reddened again, and his hands curled into white-knuckled fists, but he kept his mouth shut. Theo took this as a hopeful sign for Lladislas’s future. Evidently Lladislas also recognized what was obvious to Theo and probably to several of the others, certainly to Jan and Vitel: Lladislas had no constituency in Baltimore. He had few loyal supporters, there were too many Kindred of age present for him to bully his way to the top, and, unlike in his own city, there was nobody who owed him favors.

Even so, Lladislas wasn’t a fool—blunt, yes; foolish, no. In normal circumstances, he never would have made his bid. But these were not normal circumstances, not with Garlotte destroyed and the Sabbat edging northward from Washington every night. Conventional politics were thrown on their head. Even lacking a power base, Lladislas still could have become prince—if this council of elders had supported him. And that likely would have happened if Theo had pushed for his clanmate. But Theo knew things that Lladislas did not.

So Lladislas fumed, but he said nothing. There was no case to press without Theo’s endorsement.

“It is absolutely true,” said Jan Pieterzoon, filling the awkward silence, “that every city needs a prince. Our sense of order is what separates us from those monsters to the south.”

Pieterzoon, slight of build, with wire-rimmed glasses and short, spiky blond hair, was unassuming—in a dangerous way. He brought to the table a canniness born of centuries of practice and a pedigree that caused many Kindred to blanch at the mention of his name. If after the fall of Hartford to the Sabbat others held him in lesser regard, that was because they, like Lladislas, were not privy to details that Theo was.

Now that Theo had cowed Lladislas, the archon could tell that this was a turn of events for which Jan was quite prepared.

“Considering that Prince Garlotte himself named this body as an *ad hoc* council of primogen, of sorts, in addition to its role coordinating the regional defense efforts against the Sabbat,” Jan continued, “it is entirely appropriate for us to propose a candidate to assume the responsibilities of prince.”

Theo gave no sign of approval or disapproval, although he suspected where Jan was going. *Good move*, Theo thought. *Just suggesting somebody. Not claiming too much authority, even though nobody in the city is gonna buck the folks in this room. Now he’s gonna pick a local....*

“I’m sure we would all agree,” Pieterzoon said, “that in such perilous times, stability among our own leadership is beneficial, even crucial. The way we can ensure the stability and skilled leadership that Baltimore enjoyed under the stewardship of Prince Garlotte is to set forth an individual who is intimately familiar with the city.”

Theo didn’t have to look around the table to know the two possible candidates, one of which Jan undoubtedly had in mind. Process of elimination: Lydia, though a bright kid, was present only as a placeholder until Theo had arrived. Lladislas had shot his wad and come up short. Vitel had opted out. Marston Colchester, the Nosferatu liaison, wasn’t

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even here—at least not officially. Neither of the Malkavians, Roughneck and Quaker, were of the stature, not to mention temperament, to command a city.

That left only Robert Gainesmil, Garlotte's confidant of many years, and Isaac Goldwin, the former prince's sheriff and childe.

But the Malkavian, Roughneck, had a different idea. "What you say is all well and good, Mr. Pieterzoon. I'm not arguing, mind you..." His hair and long beard were wild and unkempt. As he spoke, Roughneck constantly pulled his fingers through his thick whiskers. His eyes gazed fixedly at some indeterminate spot on the table. "But Theo would make a hell of a prince. Nobody gonna fuss with him in a time of trouble. Any other time, for that matter."

"Hell of a prince," echoed Quaker, who spent his nights among the homeless and looked the part.

Theo felt all eyes in the room shift toward him. When he looked, fiercely, at the two Malkavians, Roughneck seemed to wilt under Theo's gaze, even though the Malkavian himself hadn't looked up from the table. Meanwhile Quaker, true to his name, began to tremble ever so slightly and cast shifty, worried glances at everyone else around the table—except Theo.

"I already got a job," Theo said at last.

"Indeed," Jan chimed in, reclaiming the agenda, much to the relief of the Malkavians. "Although the suggestion is well taken." Theo turned humorlessly toward Jan, but the Ventrue merely smiled politely in return and added, "Justicar Pascek would never willingly part with the services of his most esteemed archon." Jan paused. "That would leave Mr. Gainesmil and Sheriff Goldwin as the most likely successors to Prince Garlotte. Would you care to comment, Archon Bell?"

Theo held in a sigh. Was Jan for some reason enjoying this? He had to know damn well that Theo didn't give a shit about these political charades. This stuff wasn't supposed to be done by committee. King-making was a diversion for the backroom crowd. This stuff was all show anyway. Theo turned to look at them: Goldwin the Ventrue and Gainesmil the Toreador. He regarded them coolly for a long moment, then turned away.

"Flip a coin or whatever."

Isaac bristled slightly at the comment. Gainesmil took it more stoically. The Toreador, in speaking with Theo the night after Garlotte's demise, had certainly been trying to seed doubt in the Brujah's mind about Isaac's credibility—and loyalty, despite the fact that Gainesmil had not directly tried to link the sheriff to the explosion. Theo hadn't given Gainesmil any reason to expect support, so the less-than-shining non-endorsement, though a disappointment, had come as no surprise. An uncomfortable silence again fell over the auditorium.

"As I was saying," Jan said, picking up where he'd left off before the Malkavian's interruption and not allowing Theo's caustic words to linger too long, "to ensure a smooth transition of power..."

Theo tuned out much of Jan's spiel. Like most members of that clan, Pieterzoon had a way of using a hundred words to say what could easily be said with one. Some Kindred assumed that, by talking more, they asserted their importance. Jan probably didn't buy into that shtick, but even if the flowery language was just a cover for whatever he really had going on, at times like these, Theo still had to sit through it all.



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“...the late prince’s own childe and long-serving sheriff, Isaac Goldwin, would serve ably as the new prince of Baltimore,” Jan wound down at last.

During the verbose ramble, Theo had shifted in his seat slightly so that he could see the reactions of both Isaac and Gainesmil. That way, once Jan finally got to his point, the archon didn’t obviously have to show the least interest, not even so much as to turn or raise his head. Isaac or Gainesmil, whichever wasn’t chosen, would be the one likely to protest.

Isaac, flattered and more than a little relieved, attempted to cast his grin in a magnanimous light and sat noticeably taller in his seat. Gainesmil, interestingly enough, merely nodded in agreement with Jan’s pronouncement.

*I wonder what Pieterzoon promised him?* Theo mused. It was telling that Jan, unlike Lladislas, had lined up support for his horse *before* the meeting that would decide the matter. Then again, Lladislas had not been forced to deal with much difference of opinion while ruling over Buffalo—not that people hadn’t disagreed with him, and probably often, but they hadn’t ever said so to his face.

“I’m honored,” Isaac began, “to be supported by such an august group....”

Theo’s thoughts again drifted away. Now it was Isaac’s turn to run his mouth, to pucker up to the elders who, for all practical purposes, had just made him prince. Nobody was going to make too much noise about what was decided by the childe of Hardestadt the Elder, the last Camarilla princes of Washington and Buffalo, and a Brujah archon. Gainesmil and the Malkavians, as well as the choice of Goldwin, gave the decision a veneer of provincial legitimacy. Anyway, who else was going to be prince? Nobody else—if Gainesmil gave in, as he seemed to have—was available. None of the out-of-towners was going to support another, and Garlotte had spent a good deal of energy discouraging competition to his rule, so none of the other locals were politically connected enough to stand on their own. Theo sure as hell didn’t want the job. There was, of course, a lot of Kindred manpower in and around the city these nights, but most of it was devoted to preparing for the seemingly inevitable assault that the Sabbat was going to launch sooner or later.

“...And I plan to continue the tradition of tough but fair governance practiced for so long by my sire....”

The Sabbat. Now *that* was something worth worrying about. *That* was something deserving of a lot of attention. The raids north were coming more frequently and in greater force. The bastards were testing the defenses, getting ready for the big push. Theo had, over the past two nights, already pulled most of his patrols from the outer perimeter near Fort Mead and strengthened the second line at the airport. It was a ploy he’d known for some time that he’d undertake. He and Jan had talked about it months ago, back in August when Buffalo had fallen and they had made their plans. Jan didn’t have his head stuck as far up his own ass as it seemed sometimes, but the time and energy wasted with these councils was still aggravating. If it weren’t for the fact that every once in a while—a very long while—something important happened at these stuffed-shirt gatherings, Theo wouldn’t bother with them at all.

“...Because Baltimore has become a city of hope for the Kindred....”

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But of course, since Theo himself had taken such a personal interest in securing the city, that left Jan and now Isaac, and Garlotte and Victoria before them, free to play their parlor games. Just leave it to the Brujah to do the heavy lifting.

*That's the only way the real work ever gets done,* Theo thought. *Speaking of which...*

As Isaac droned on about a prince's obligations to his fellow Kindred, Theo reached into his pocket and took out his pager. He gave it a good long look, stuck it back into his pocket, and stood to leave.

"Gotta go," he said without further explanation when Isaac paused in his oration. Theo tapped Lydia on the shoulder. She followed him from the auditorium and past the security ghouls. Theo didn't bother waiting for the elevator. He used the stairs instead. He wasn't rushing, but he was so much taller than Lydia that she had to hurry to keep up as they made their way across the ornate lobby.

"Sabbat raid?" Lydia asked, almost expectantly.

"Uh-uh."

"Problem with one of the patrols?"

"Nope."

She continued along beside him as they left the Lord Baltimore Inn. "Then who the hell paged you?"

"Nobody," Theo said. "I just had to get out of there."

"So you're not in a hurry to get somewhere?" Lydia asked.

"Not right at the moment."

"Give me a ride up to Slick's? I don't feel like stealing another car just now."

"Sure," Theo said. "Where's your boys?"

"Probably there already."

Theo wasn't parked far from the inn. He waited until Lydia climbed onto the bike behind him and then cranked the engine. "Hold on."

"I *am* holding on."

Theo looked down, and damned if she wasn't. Her arms didn't reach all the way around his torso, but her white hands were latched onto folds of his jacket. Any jacket that fit Theo was bulky. This one was thicker than regular leather would have been—reinforced to deflect at least small-caliber fire or a glancing blade. The little bit of blood required to heal a pesky wound could make a big difference in a close fight. Theo knew.

Even after they'd started off crosstown, Theo wouldn't have felt Lydia sitting behind him if he hadn't know she was there. She was small and light like a feather, but Theo had seen the effect that her words and actions had on her peers—the anarch crowd. Many of them were Brujah. The majority were also among the youngest of Kindred. An anarch's relative youth was both a cause and an effect of his or her being an anarch: a cause because he was low man on the totem pole and had no patience for the powers that be; an effect because only rarely did an anarch, without the protection of some prince or other influential patron, outlive his own era. There were few old anarchists.

Theo himself had been fortunate enough to be Embraced by a sire who was willing to spend many years instructing and educating his protégé. For whatever reason, few sires

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were so patient in the modern nights. Either that or the childer, independent in mortal life, demanded the same independence in unlife. The anarch wanted freedom, and he wanted it *now*, if not before. That didn't sit well with a sire who considered "the Curse of Caine" to be, in fact, a gift, and who also expected slavish devotion from his new charge. A lot of Kindred never survived a sire's discipline.

Theo glanced over his shoulder at Lydia. The archon didn't normally play taxi for his foot soldiers, but this one had potential. She seemed the more reasonable sort, the pragmatist. She might avoid the pitfalls and make it somewhere. Or not. Time would tell for sure. Best not to get too attached.

She noticed him looking back and leaned forward, closer to his ear so that she could shout and be heard over the engine. "Before you got there, to the meeting," she said into the wind, "they were talking about Garlotte, about the explosion."

"Is that so?" Theo said evenly.

"They said it couldn't have been an accident. Too big."

Theo nodded. He kept his face turned partially to the side and watched the road out of the corner of his eye.

"Must've been Sabbat," Lydia continued. "Assamites wouldn't have been so sloppy."

Theo nodded again and turned away from her. Lydia wasn't going to say anything that he didn't know, and with her few comments, she'd already communicated to him what he'd wanted to find out. She was a good gauge of the anarchists' mood, of sentiment on the street. Lydia believed what she was telling him. That the Sabbat would have sneaked into the city and blown up the prince seemed perfectly reasonable to her. And why not? That was the explanation that Theo had helped sell.

After the explosion, he'd gotten the hell away from the docks, circled to the west, and returned ten minutes later to watch with concern as the mortal authorities cordoned the scene of the "accident." That's what it was being called in the mortal press. Gainesmil, even if he was unhappy with Isaac's handling of the matter, was familiar with Garlotte's connections in the city government and in the media. He'd seen to it that the investigation went no further than that. Gainesmil might not believe that Garlotte's destruction was the work of the Sabbat, but the Toreador was toeing the party line.

*Good for him*, Theo thought. The whole Garlotte thing was just a distraction anyway. Theo avoided considering the fact that he'd had the opportunity to put an end to the matter, but had not.

The two Brujah rumbled northward, the motorcycle tearing a ragged swath through the relative quiet of the night. It didn't take them long to leave behind the sanitized Inner Harbor. The blocks beyond were a mix of offices, antique stores, restaurants, and gentrified row houses. The street parking was an unbroken line of luxury cars: BMW, Mercedes, SUV, SUV, SUV... Theo half wondered if these people had convinced themselves that they needed four-wheel drive to navigate the potholes of the city streets.

These enclaves of privilege soon gave way to areas of less polish. The paint wasn't fresh. Not every remnant of graffiti had been washed away. The shops and homes had bars over the windows. More of the cars had dents, or mismatched panels, or a missing hubcap.

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As Theo rode, he now thought not about Lydia but about another pale, female Kindred: Katrina. A troubling question kept bubbling up in his mind, a question about her, and about what he had done—or not done. Over the past few nights, as he'd ridden on patrol, even as he'd tried to make sure that Gainsmil didn't have any real idea of what had happened, Theo, as was his habit, had ignored the question. There were just too many niggling details that arose over the course of eternity. Theo had decided that much after not quite two hundred years. Too many details to pay attention to them all. He liked to let them sit for a while, percolate. Most of them simmered away of their own accord until there was nothing left. Time and inattention worked at them, caused them to deteriorate and then disappear altogether. The important details, on the other hand, stood the test of time. They held solid. Those were the questions that demanded a decision, that required action.

Three nights was not long enough to determine anything. Not really. But events were moving quickly these nights. The world was a completely different place now than it had been when Theo had joined the ranks of the undead. Computer technology and communications advancements were doing all over and exponentially what the Industrial Revolution had done. Life was growing faster and faster every night. And so was death.

Theo had adjusted better than some; better than a lot, in fact. He'd never closed himself away from the world like so many Kindred had. He had contact of some sort with somebody, Kindred or kine or both, most nights. A lot of the crusty old-timers he had business with might go years without speaking to another soul. Theo shook his head. Too much time for thinking, that way. Too much introspection.

"Something wrong?" Lydia yelled at him over the roar of the engine.

"Nah."

*Too much thinking*, Theo thought. *Maybe that's what's happening to me. Maybe I'm getting too old.*

But whether he was getting too old or not, and whether three nights was too short a period of time to ignore the niggling thought, the question about Katrina was still hovering close enough to distract him—and distraction, especially in the face of Sabbath raids practically every night, could get his ass blown apart.

The sound of the engine surrounded Theo. He was not dangerously removed from the city around him—he stopped at a red light, he wove his way around potholes—but the bike's purr enveloped him in his own world of inner truth and consequences. It was a world with which he still was not completely comfortable, a world where fists and blood were not always the right answer. He had existed all his years as a mortal and many as Kindred without knowing of this place. Don Cerro had needed many years to teach him of it. Theo's first inclination had always been anger, violence.

But he hadn't reacted that way to Katrina. He could see her, in his mind's eye. She stood atop the gangplank, first in the shadows, then stepping out. She was dressed very similarly to him. Amusing but inconsequential enough. In Baltimore, overpopulated with Kindred as it was at the moment, it was difficult to throw a brick without hitting a vampire wearing black leather. What else?

She had stopped him from going onto the ship. She could just as easily have slipped away, and he would have climbed on board and—boom, archon fish food. But she'd warned

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him away and almost gotten herself blown up in the process. Was that why he'd let her go? Because that was what was bothering him—not what she'd done, but what he'd done. Letting her walk away was stupid. It was a complication he didn't need, one that still might come back to bite him on the ass. Was that why he'd spared her, because she'd spared him?

*Not bloody likely*, he decided at once. He might have cooled a degree or two from the firebrand of his youth, but sentimental he was not. He wasn't going to so much as sniffle if somebody snuffed Garlotte's kid—yet *something* had kept him from breaking her skull, even though that was what the situation and his office had demanded of him. What, then?

Self-interest? In a way, Katrina had made Theo's job easier. Considering what he and Jan had planned, Garlotte would have been a major pain in the ass. Now Isaac was prince, and it just didn't seem possible that he could kick up as much of a fuss as his predecessor could have.

This, too, Theo dismissed almost out of hand. He was well used to dealing with obstacles. That was his job. Plus, no matter how aggravating Garlotte might have been, the Camarilla, in the long run, was worse off without him. He was a figure of stability, and that above all else was what the Camarilla stood for.

*What the hell?* Theo wondered in disgust. He hadn't calculated algorithms when he'd decided to let Katrina go. He hadn't even really *decided* to do it. He'd just done it. It was instinct. Like knowing that something wasn't quite right about that damned delivery truck that was doubling as a Sabbath transport. That was what his gut told him. That was what he *did*, and he did a damn good job of it. He'd tried countless times to explain to Don Cerro that trusting his gut was what he did best.

*Trusting instinct uncritically*, Don Cerro had always responded, *is the first step toward conquest for the Beast*.

"Yeah, whatever."

"*What?*" Lydia yelled over the engine.

"Nothin'."

Theo scowled and accelerated suddenly through a yellow light. Lydia had to grab tightly to stay on. The archon didn't want to think about Katrina. He sure as hell didn't want to talk about her. A few more blocks and they were at Slick's, and Theo had more immediate concerns to occupy his mind. He pulled over to the curb.

In this part of the city, graffiti was the norm, the rule, not the exception. Some of it was colorful and artistic, some profane and violent, but it was ever-present. The row houses, those that weren't abandoned and boarded up, had chipped and peeling paint, if any at all. Pawn shops outnumbered groceries two to one. The few cars parked on the street were either junkers or new SUVs—the drug dealers liked to have lots of room for their stash and for weapons.

Slick's place, from the outside, was nothing more than one battered row house among many. A scruffy white guy in a jean jacket, with a black skullcap, sat on the stoop. He watched Theo and Lydia as they approached.

"Watch my bike, Jeb," said Theo.

"Sure thing," Jeb said, then, "Hey there, sweet thing," to Lydia.

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She gave him the finger. "Watch the bike, hot shot."

Inside was both less and more than it appeared from the street. The front room was a wreck of old furniture with torn plaid upholstery. Crumpled newspapers littered the floor as well as the couches and chairs. Around the room were a handful of makeshift ashtrays—plastic cups, bottle lids, a sardine can with a few sardines in it—all overflowing with ashes and cigarette butts. Beyond the front room—there was no more house. Same with the two houses to the right, and the three to the left. The very end units on the block were intact, but the six inner houses were basically one-room facades.

The central portion of the block, surrounded by the facades to the front, the two full-length houses to the sides, and a tall brick wall with two large gates to the rear, was crammed full of cars in various stages of repair and transformation. To the right, a makeshift grease pit had been constructed. In the center of the workspace, ten cars were parked very closely together. Most sported sizeable dents. Some were riddled with bullet holes. Windshields were cracked or completely shattered. To the left of the work area, several men were attending to bodywork and spray-painting. Theo stood for a moment and watched the assortment of Kindred and ghouls at work.

With so many patrols on the street every night, and with so many clashes against the Sabbat—all violent and most involving gunfire—a quick change of wheels was more than a mere convenience. In the first weeks, when the Sabbat had just rolled up the East Coast from Atlanta to D.C., Theo and his troops had been running south every night, probing the disorganized Sabbat forces in the nation's capital, often striking deep within the Beltway. Getting in as far as possible meant not driving the same car every damned time. A little paint and a new license plate went a long way, but sometimes the vehicle was shot up a bit too. Bullet holes were a dead giveaway, and were a red flag for the cops as well as the enemy. There were always more cars to steal, of course, and the Camarilla was constantly augmenting its "gunship fleet" to replace vehicles that were just too badly damaged, but the grand theft auto rate had already tripled in the past months. Something as mundane as stolen cars, on that large of a scale, could still be a threat to the Masquerade. So Theo's boys recycled, and Slick was the master.

"Theo, my man!" The old black man grinned beneath his upraised welder's mask. The hissing blowtorch he held cast blue-orange reflections from his gold tooth. "You here to tell me I ain't going fast enough?" His grin just got bigger, revealing several empty spaces around his glowing tooth. "Try not bustin' up so many cars!"

"I was just in the neighborhood," Theo said.

"Buuuullshe-it."

Theo walked slowly toward the grease monkey. Slick was hunched over slightly. He always was. He had a large knot on his back—crooked spine, injury, something like that. Theo didn't know for sure, and he'd never had a reason to ask. He had, however, been around once when a stupid son of a bitch had called Slick "Nossie." Word got around of Slick's reaction, and as far as Theo knew that was the only time anybody had commented on the hump—which reminded Theo...

"You mind turning that thing off," Theo said, not a question.

Slick grinned even bigger and cut the gas to the torch.

"What kinda stupid sombitch Kindred uses a blowtorch?" Theo asked shaking his head.

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“You know you love me for it,” Slick said. He pulled off the welder’s mask and smoothed back his thin, greasy hair.

“Yeah, whatever.” Theo put his arm around the much shorter man and led him away from prying ears. As they walked, Theo took note of the various cars that were being repaired and matched them to the incidents that had precipitated that need: Reggie and Eustace had driven the Dodge pickup into a cement barrier; the Camaro had taken a few hits in a firefight in Sandy Spring; Lydia had gotten the Pontiac shot up; the Pinto—*Jesus fucking God, why?*—was Roughneck’s baby. Of the nearly twenty cars in the workshop, there was only one that Theo was unfamiliar with.

“You are both idiots,” Theo heard Lydia’s voice over the running engines and clang of hammering. Some of her gang were hanging out and watching the Grand Am get finished. The reunion seemed less than tearful.

“You and your boys are doing good,” Theo told Slick and squeezed his shoulder until the older man grimaced. “How are things looking?”

Theo listened without comment as Slick gave him the rundown of which cars were ready to roll, which still had what to be repaired, and which were hopeless, good for nothing but spare parts. When the mechanic was done, Theo asked a few questions—about horsepower, about which Kindred were bringing in the cars in the worst shape—just to confirm what he already knew.

“By the way,” Theo added once they’d covered the relevant details, “who the hell drives a Lexus?” He was staring at the one car that didn’t fit. There was a tarp draped over it, but Theo could read the shape. Maybe somebody had stolen it for kicks, or maybe...

Slick hesitated. “Nobody. One of the fat cats.”

“Who?”

“You know... hush, hush. One of them.”

Theo put his arm around Slick again but didn’t squeeze at all. “Who?”

Slick hesitated again, but then quickly decided that hush hush did not apply to Theo Bell, not if he wanted to know. “Pieterzoon.”

“Pieterzoon? He’s already got wheels. He imported a couple of his own.”

Slick shrugged. “Couldn’t tell you.” He felt Theo’s glare turn hard. “I mean... I mean don’t *know*,” the mechanic clarified. “Maybe he just likes pullin’ rank. You know, ’cause he can. He’s getting the works: self-sealin’ tires, armor, bulletproof glass...”

“When’s he pickin’ it up?”

“Not quite done yet. A few nights still,” Slick said. “Get this. I don’t call them. His man’s gonna get in touch with me. Wants us to deliver the thing to *them*.”

“Who’d you talk to?”

Slick ran his fingers through his hair and managed to get more grease on his scalp. “One of his asshole cronies. I don’t know.”

“Van Pel?”

“Yeah, I guess. That sounds right.”

Theo wasn’t sure what to make of this, and he wasn’t sure why it bothered him. After being attacked and almost done in, Jan had imported a couple of souped-up cars of his own from Amsterdam. Why have Slick provide another now, and why try to keep it quiet?

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“I tell you what,” Theo said. “When you get that call, you let me know—and I mean right when you get it. Understood?”

“Sure.”

“Good.” Theo patted Slick on the back and started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. “Oh, one other thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Up front.” He pointed back over his shoulder. “Cigarettes and shit all over the place. If I hear on the local news that there was a fire, and cops and fire trucks are all over this place, I’m gonna kick your fuckin’ ass.” Theo turned and left.





**Sunday, 17 October 1999, 1:02 AM**  
**Slick's**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Lydia followed Theo into Slick's. Jeb, out front, was an asshole, as usual. Lydia almost expected Theo to smack the jerk, or to buckle his knees with just that cold stare. But Theo ignored Jeb. Not that she minded. Jeb wasn't worth Theo's time. It was just that she got tired of not being able to predict what Theo would or would not do a lot of the time. Sometimes he was protective of her. Other times, like this one, he left her on her own. Lydia just wished she could predict his reactions a little better.

Being around the archon almost always made her feel like she talked too much. Like on the ride over. She never felt that way with anybody else. She was definitely not the chatty type, but somehow Theo managed to make her feel like her mouth was working overtime. Maybe it was because he seldom bothered to grunt a complete sentence. But sometimes he did. He was hard to predict that way too.

On the way over, she'd just wanted to be helpful. He'd told her to go to the damned meeting because he was going to be late. She'd figured he'd be interested to know what went on. But he wasn't, or maybe he just didn't hear her at all over the motorcycle.

*Whatever.*

Inside Slick's, Lydia saw her gang at once. They were the only ones not working. Slick ran a pretty tight damned ship. His guys were good at what they did, and they kept at it. Lydia's guys were morons. Two of the three, anyway. While Theo sidled off with Slick, Lydia headed for the Grand Am, which looked like it was almost done. The paint looked good. The panels were smooth. It just needed the windshield replaced and new plates.

Frankie started singing when he saw her, "Lydia, oh Lydia. She gave me chlamydia..." His partner in pricckdom, Baldur, laughed hysterically.

"You are both idiots," Lydia said. "Which one of you assholes gets the brain today, or let me guess—you left it at home."

Frankie clutched at his chest and staggered back against the wall. "Oh! You *wound* me!"

"Wound this." Lydia presented the appropriate finger and stepped past them to the fourth member of her team, Christoph. His tangled red hair was pulled back. He was sitting on a crate against the wall, and his trench coat was spread out around him almost like a tent. Lydia could see that he was depressed—as always. He stared pensively at one of the Pontiac's hubcaps.

"What?" Lydia asked. "Did they get paint on it?"

Christoph nodded silent greeting, expression unchanged. Lydia waited with her hands on her hips, but he merely returned to his moping.

"Yeah, whatever," she said. "Why don't you sharpen your sword or something."

"Hey, Lydia," Baldur called, recovered from his fit of hilarity. "Why we gotta keep goin' out when nobody else does?"

"What the hell you talkin' about? Who ain't goin' out?"

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“Everybody. I mean nobody. Nobody ain’t goin’ out.” Baldur paused and scratched his head, having confused himself.

Lydia sighed and spoke very slowly. “Who... the hell... isn’t... going... on patrol?”

“Well... Jasmine says we oughta quit.”

“Jasmine says lots of things.”

“Yeah, but... I mean, what’s the Camarilla ever done for us anyway?”

Frankie muttered agreement with his friend.

Lydia regarded them incredulously. “Fine. Theo’s right over there. You wanna go tell him?”

Baldur opened his mouth but couldn’t think of anything to say.

Lydia winked at him. “That’s what I thought.”

“Hey, we don’t owe the Camarilla nothin’,” Frankie said indignantly.

“Frankie, what the hell you think’s gonna happen if we don’t patrol? You gonna go have a party? Find some little boys to suck? What about *after* the Sabbath rolls into town—and hangs you from a meat hook like the ugliest fuckin’ I.V. bag in the world?”

“I ain’t ugly.”

“He’s more the douche-bag type,” Baldur said.

“You two *did* leave the brain at home, didn’t you?” Lydia sighed and turned back to Christoph.

Frankie and Baldur grumbled quietly behind her. “Huh. Made sense when Jasmine said it.”

“You better watch out, Christoph,” said Lydia. “These two think too hard, they’re gonna hurt somebody.”

Christoph ignored her just as he’d ignored the entire conversation. Lydia picked up a grease-stained rag and threw it in his face. “Hey, you!” she yelled at him. “What the fuck? Jesus. What a waste of fuckin’ blood.”

“Hey, you four slack-ass bastards,” came Slick’s voice from across the yard. Lydia turned around and saw Theo heading out the way they’d come in. “Get your asses up front,” said Slick, “and clean up all that shit. Dump the ashtrays out on the street or something.”

“I look like your maid?” Frankie asked.

“Oh, excuse me,” said Slick. “Robbie, go ahead and leave that Grand Am for later. We got about fifty other cars to work on first. Better yet, just clean out the goddamn ashtray, ’cause that’s where this motherfucker’s gonna end up.”

Lydia smacked Frankie on top of the head. “We’re on it, Slick.” Then she turned to Frankie and smacked him again. “You feel like walkin’ to Fort Meade and back, or what? Come on. Take us two minutes to pick up, you lazy bastard. That worth pissin’ off the man?”

Frankie and Baldur—and even Christoph—followed with only minimal grumbling.



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**Sunday, 17 October 1999, 1:12 AM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**

The pieces were beginning to fall together, but that fact gave Calebros very little in the way of comfort. Years of work nearing fulfillment, yet he sensed extraneous factors hurtling toward him as well, needlessly, hopelessly complicating matters. Thank goodness Emmett would return soon. His task with Benito was nearly done. Perhaps the presence of Calebros's broodmate would alleviate the pressure bearing down upon him like the tons of earth above his head.

In the meantime, Calebros busied himself by easing the tension the best way he knew how—he shredded fashion magazines. Dull scissors, a razor blade, his own claws, sometimes he even pressed his face to the page and left a fang mark in a woman's shiny face or perfect, taut belly. He ignored, for the moment, the fresh batch of reports from his clanmates.

**FILE COPY**

17 October 1999

re: the Prophet of Gehenna

10/16 Jeremiah reports—after weeks of guiding Anatole, the prophet saw Jeremiah (for who he was?) and sent him away; Jeremiah unable to resist.  
Anatole left at cave.

→ NOT surprising

Tone of report fairly frantic; does J. need a vacation?

→ Don't we all, dammit?!

Anatole follow-up necessary.

→ Ramona talking about going back to cave; perhaps Hesha could accompany?



**Sunday, 17 October 1999, 10:43 PM**  
**Nosferatu warren**  
**New York City, New York**

The tunnels didn't *always* seem to be closing in on her now. Ramona supposed she should be thankful for that. But she wasn't. Not really. *Why the hell can't these guys just rent an apartment building or something?* she wondered. *I mean, they can put on a normal face when they want. Wouldn't nobody know. They could all just have their own building and keep out of sight and be ugly together.*

But Ramona also remembered how she and her friends had hidden in out-of-the-way places and abandoned buildings: the garage uptown, that old elementary school upstate. Hell, she'd slept in the trunk of a car in a junkyard. There was something about the kine that made it hard to blend in so closely—at least for her. And she looked mostly normal. She *looked* like most of the meat, but she knew she didn't belong in that world anymore. It was like sneaking into the boys' bathroom—she could do it, but she'd be waiting to get caught the whole time, and anybody that got a close look... She could imagine how much worse it would be for the Nosferatu, who so obviously didn't belong out there with the kine. It couldn't be that easy for the Nossies to keep up their disguises all the time, so they had a safe place where they didn't have to pretend.

It just so happened that safe place was underground, in tunnels and sewers and crawl spaces. *Don't get too sentimental about it*, Ramona told herself. She sniffed at the air—that seemed to have become a habit down here. "I'll have to get them a nice needlepoint," she mocked herself. "Home is where the shit is."

She made her way along the uncomfortably cramped tunnel. She'd finally learned her way to Hesha's room. Pauline had helped her figure it out. The woman was a bit too much Steppin Fetchit for Ramona's taste, but Hesha's retainer—that's what he called Pauline, his "retainer"—had just enough of a fuck-you attitude that she and Ramona got along okay. The rest of the warren was a loss to Ramona. Down here, she couldn't have found her way to water if her ass was on fire. Then again, she didn't have any inclination to figure out what was where. If it hadn't been for Hesha having been so laid up for so long, she would have made him meet her somewhere upstairs—out on the street. But his recovery from the ass-kickin' that Leopold had given him had been a slow process. Finally, he seemed to be near the end of that road.

His room had a door on it now. Probably the Nosferatu had gotten sick of the stink of his burning flesh. Smoldering turmeric root wasn't exactly Chanel No. Five either. Then again, the Nossies didn't have a whole helluva lot of room to complain. But it was a funny thought.

Ramona knocked. Pauline opened the door. "Ramona, come on in."

Hesha was dressing. He had on crisp gray slacks and was buttoning his starched white shirt. There was some kind of incense burning in the room. Ramona didn't like that smell either, but she guessed it was better than burning skin and Nosferatu stink, if just barely.

"Good evening, Ramona," Heshha said. As he finished buttoning his shirt, Ramona couldn't help but notice how built he was. Expensive clothes covered rippling muscles.

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Now that he wasn't all festering sores and dribbling pus, he was a good-looking son of a bitch, like a walking advertisement out of *Essence* or *Esquire*. But Ramona wasn't taken in. She knew that just made him more dangerous. She remembered what Liz had said the night Ramona had given her the key to her chains: *Whatever he told you was a lie.... He doesn't care about anyone. He just uses... people, things.... He always gets what he wants.... Don't let him control you.*

Harsh words, and probably true. But Ramona had known the type before—guys who wanted what they wanted, no matter what, whether that was drugs or money or to get down her pants. Just because Heshia might be better at it than those others didn't scare Ramona. She knew what she wanted too. She'd made sure that Liz had gotten away. Heshia hadn't been too happy about that, but tough shit. Now they were going to find the Eye and make sure nobody else got hurt—like her people had, like Heshia had. As long as they were after the same thing, they were on the same team. That was all Ramona worried about.

"Pauline," Heshia said, "See to that list, and that Janet knows to make the necessary arrangements."

"Yes, sir." Pauline headed for the door. "Take it easy," she said to Ramona with a wink, and then was gone.

"You look like you're feelin' better," Ramona said to Heshia after the door closed.

"Yes, I am, thank you. My treatment is almost completed."

His *treatment*. Ramona shuddered. She'd had burning turmeric root stuffed in one hole in her face, and that had been bad enough. All of Heshia's visible scars were healed, but she couldn't help wondering about some of his more... *sensitive* areas. She'd have to remember to ask Pauline about that. Not exactly a turn-on—to burn your man's privates off with damn flaming produce.

"So you want to go with me," Ramona said.

"Yes," Heshia said. "To the cave. Back to the cave."

"Okay." Ramona had been planning to go for some time now, but somehow she hadn't managed to leave the city yet. She *had* to go back. There was no two ways about that. After the horrible battle against the Eye, she had seen her dead, so many of them—Eddie, Jen, and Darnell, Stalker-in-the-Woods, Brant Edmonson, Ratface, and all the others. But not Tanner. Not her sire. She had to find out why. He'd gone into the cave with the first of the Gangrel and never come out. She had to go back to the cave. If Heshia wanted to come too, that would just push her to do what she should have done already. "If we drive most of the way," she said, "we should be able to make it in two nights."

"We'll take a helicopter," Heshia said. "There and back in a night."

"Oh... okay." For a moment, Ramona had the uncomfortable feeling that Heshia was turning her journey into his own. That was fine—to a point. She wasn't about to start letting him boss her around like he did Pauline. But if he happened to have a helicopter handy... that was different. "I forgot that you were Señor Dinero Grande. When you be ready to go?"

"Within a very few nights," he said. "I still have details to catch up on from my convalescence. Even a good staff cannot run itself perpetually."

"Oh, yeah," Ramona said knowingly. "Gotta watch those staffs. Hey," she added, catching sight of red and black gem on a table near Heshia's bed, "maybe you can get your

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money back for that. Or I bet you could sell it on Fifth Avenue. That and your Rolex would get you a hundred bucks easy. That pay for gas for the chopper?”

Hesha did not grow angry, but neither did he seem amused. He had told Ramona that he could use that gem to find the Eye, to trace its whereabouts, but she had yet to see any results. She mostly believed him when he told her that, for some inexplicable reason, the gem simply was not functioning as it should. *Maybe it needs new batteries*, she’d suggested, and been met with an equally stoic response. She didn’t really believe that he’d conned her—she didn’t *want* to believe that—but she did enjoy getting a rise out of him by questioning his honor or telling him that he was full of shit.

“You know how to fly a chopper?” she asked.

“Yes, actually,” Hesha said, “but I have a pilot.”

“Oh, good. My license isn’t current. I’ll check back tomorrow night.”

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**Sunday, 17 October 1999, 10:48 PM**  
**Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



“Say again?”

“Monçada is destroyed.”

Yep. Jan *had* said what Theo thought he’d said, and the words were no less shocking the second time for being less unexpected.

“How?”

“Assamites. Fatima.”

“Shit.” Theo sat down in the chair across from Jan’s desk.

This suite of rooms on the seventh floor had, until recently, belonged to Prince Garlotte. He had put up Jan here in favor of the restored ship for himself—a decision that had not stood him in good stead. Jan had settled into these accommodations quite comfortably and, with Garlotte’s demise, could probably stay as long as he pleased. Theo guessed that would not be much longer.

“Have you ever met her? Fatima?” Theo asked.

Jan shook his head.

“Me neither,” said Theo. “And you know what? I don’t know that I want to.”

“I quite agree.”

“Shit,” Theo said again. “She did Monçada. You’re sure?”

“As sure as I can be.” Jan took off his glasses and set them on the desk before him. “Details are sketchy. We’re not sure exactly when it happened, but the sources are reliable. Assamites don’t brag about jobs they didn’t really do—bad for business in the long run.”

“Shit.”

The name Ambrosio Luis Monçada might not mean anything to a Kindred on the street, at least not in the States, but the cardinal went back a long way in European circles. Way before Theo’s time. A real badass. Monçada was probably one of the most powerful members of the Sabbat in Western Europe—or he had been, if what Jan said was true.

Theo pulled out a cigarette, struck a match and lit up. “You know who Fatima was working for?”

“No.”

“Not for us?”

“I doubt we could pay her enough.”

“You’re probably right,” Theo said. The Assamites worked for blood, the older and more potent the better. To hire somebody as top of the line as Fatima to go after a target as high profile as Monçada would take Caine’s left nut. Maybe the right one too. “I guess she did it out of the goodness of her heart.”

Theo couldn’t tell from watching Jan if the Ventrue knew more than he was letting on. Maybe, maybe not. Jan didn’t fluster easily. In facing down a hostile mob of refugee



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Kindred and eventually winning their acquiescence, if not their trust, he had kept his cool. In maneuvering events so that Victoria, a rival for leadership and a pain in the butt, had been hustled off to look for clues in a Sabbat city, he'd appeared collected. He'd even held together when the Sabbat hit squad had shot him all to hell and he was a heartbeat away—so to speak—from Final Death.

“Good season for assassins,” said Theo. “Fatima cacks Monçada. Somebody in the Sabbat sent those bastards after you. And it wasn't even a month ago Lucita put the squeeze on Borges.”

Jan's eyebrows raised, then he shrugged off the comment. “War is like that.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” Theo just laughed to himself. Jan wasn't about to tell him if he had or hadn't hired Lucita. Those two had some history, not all of it good. The woman, a killer whose name and reputation evoked as much fear as Fatima's, had reportedly been sighted dozens of times over the past couple of months, up and down the East Coast from Miami to Boston. Who knew which accounts were true and which were the result of overactive imaginations? She had, however, waxed several Sabbat thugs, including the former archbishop of Miami, Borges. That had put the fear of God into much of the rest of the Sabbat. Theo had been able to tell that the Sabbat he ran into were jumpy once the rumors of Lucita's activities had begun to spread. It sounded like the kind of misdirection—the “maximization of resources,” as Jan sometimes said—that the Ventrue might have been behind. Jan wasn't about to say, and Theo wasn't about to ask. But there was something else that Theo wondered about, since Jan had brought up the subject.

“Monçada goin' down have any effect on us?” Theo asked.

“It might. It can only help.”

Theo nodded. So Jan had some reason to believe that Monçada had had his fingers in affairs in North America. Why else would the Ventrue mention something like this when Theo would find out about it on his own eventually? Monçada dabbling in North America. That wasn't typical.

*Becoming cardinal must've given that fat bastard a helluva hard-on,* Theo thought.

And Monçada's involvement might go a long way toward explaining why Vykos was slumming in the States. That Tzimisce thing by itself wouldn't have the political clout to broker a cease fire, much less an alliance, between Polonia and Borges, but if Monçada had put his weight behind the deal...

“Hmph.” Theo rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Yeah. It might help us. Can't hurt.”

“Are they still pushing north just as hard?” Jan asked.

“Harder.”

“How long before they're pressuring the second perimeter enough to justify our pulling back farther?”

Theo shrugged. “A week, maybe.”

Jan thought about that for a moment, compared it to his own calculations, and finally nodded.

“After that,” Theo continued, “I'd guess... another week. Maybe two. Gonna be enough?”

Jan rose from the desk and moved distractedly toward a nearby table with a crystal decanter. Strangely enough, the decanter was not full of blood. Jan removed the stopper

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and almost instantly Theo could smell the aroma of strong whiskey, scotch. Jan poured himself a glass, then raised it to his mouth, just enough to wet his lips. Still holding the glass before his face and gently swishing the liquid, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Two weeks,” he said, eyes still closed. “I need two weeks from that point. Can you guarantee me that?”

Theo paused before speaking. He wasn't one for promises and guarantees, but the plan he and Jan were attempting to see through to its conclusion did require certain absolutes. Timing was important. Theo was walking a thin line between holding back the Sabbath and leading them on. Jan had other responsibilities that were just as vital and was undoubtedly the best judge of how much time he needed.

“You need two weeks, you got two weeks,” Theo said.

Seeming reassured, Jan returned to his seat. He took another small sip of whiskey and then placed the glass on the desk. “How about Isaac? Is he proving easy to work with?”

“Easy enough. Him and Gainesmil don't try to interfere with the defenses, really, since we included them in the original planning. And I know about as much about the city as they do now. They got suggestions now and then. I listen and nod and then do whatever the hell I was going to.”

“So becoming prince hasn't gone to Isaac's head?” Jan asked.

“Oh, sure it has. But it don't bother me. He likes to walk around and look like the prince. You know, mix with the poor refugees once in a while, give the troops a pep talk. That kinda bullshit.”

Theo leaned forward in his seat. “So tell me. Just out of curiosity, what scraps did you toss Gainesmil to get him to lay off? 'Cause I know you had him lined up before you suggested Goldwin.”

“I merely impressed upon him the importance of unity of command in these trying times,” Jan said with a straight face.

“And...”

“And I assured him that he would have my full support when the time came for a successor to Prince Goldwin.”

Theo nodded and sat back in his seat again. Betting against the longevity of Isaac seemed reasonable enough, and it would be easier to follow on the heels of a weak prince than someone like Garlotte. *Sounded* like a good deal, all right. That was the beauty of it. Theo decided he'd have to make a point of being around when Gainesmil realized just how completely he'd been out-manuevered by Pieterzoon.

“You know,” Jan said, raising his glass and dipping it slightly toward Theo as if in a toast, “the title of prince was yours for the taking.”

“Hmph. Like I needed that pain in my ass. *And* if I ever did want to be a prince—and I don't—I don't plan on having myself nominated by a Malkavian. Jesus fuckin' Christ.” They both laughed quietly at that. “Anything else?” Theo asked.

“Just one thing. I've heard about some grumbling among the rank and file.”

Theo stood. He stretched, popped his knuckles. “Let 'em grumble.”

“Fair enough.”

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“Fair enough,” Theo echoed, and headed for the door. He stopped just before leaving and turned back to Jan. “Oh yeah. With our perimeter shrinking, there’s gonna be more of a chance that some fuckin’ Sabbat asshole might get farther into the city and come gunnin’ for somebody. I should assign a team to you for more security.”

“Don’t bother,” Jan said. “They’re better spent on patrol. Besides, I’m not planning on going anywhere, and Anton and Isaac’s men have the inn sealed tight.”

Theo frowned. “Whatever you say.” He shut the door behind him.

**Sunday, 17 October 1999, 11:37 PM**  
**Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



Theo only vaguely noticed the chimes as the elevator passed each floor on the way down. What he kept hearing instead was one of the last things that he'd heard on the seventh floor, one of the last things that Jan had said: *I'm not planning on going anywhere.*

That statement might be completely true. But then again, Theo had known a lot of Ventrue over the years. He'd also worked closely with Jan for several weeks now and seen the childe of Hardestadt in action. Pieterzoon had coopted, for the most part, a jealous and defensive Garlotte, and basically done the same with Gainesmil, a Toreador of some standing. Jan had maneuvered Victoria out of the limelight and then out of the state. And what about Theo himself? He wasn't giving the Ventrue any grief. Instead, he was just playing along.

*But that's 'cause what the man's doin' makes sense,* Theo thought. He wasn't conflicted about how to do his job, even if, this time at least, it meant giving a Ventrue a free ride. What it came down to was this: Theo was here to blunt the gains of the Sabbat however he could. Jan was basically in Baltimore for the same reason, and the two seemed to be on the same wavelength most of the time. Seeing eye to eye was not the same as selling out.

*No,* Theo thought. *If I sold out, it was when I stayed on as archon when Pascek became justicar.* But that was something else altogether. What concerned Theo the most at the moment was Jan.

*I'm not planning on going anywhere,* he'd said.

*Then why,* Theo wondered, *is Slick fixing up a Lexus for you on the sly?*

Probably there was a perfectly normal and legitimate reason. That's why Theo had brought it up in a roundabout way—to let Jan tell him in the course of normal conversation. Theo wasn't hoping to catch Jan in a lie. He was hoping *not* to. It was still possible that Jan wasn't lying, that the car really was incidental. But if Theo had asked outright and there *was* something underhanded going on, then Theo would never have found out—until it was too late, maybe. Jan would have covered it up, changed his plans, whatever. This way at least Theo could keep his eyes open. Because a working relationship, which is what he currently had with Jan, was not the same as trust. There was too much potential of getting screwed to turn a blind eye.

*We're Kindred. We drink blood. We fuck people.*

It was that simple. And Theo was accustomed to making sure that he was not the one who got fucked.

The elevator dipped and binged and the “L” above the door lit up. Theo ignored the staff in their colonial garb as he tromped across the lobby. In front of the inn, chatting up a cute little female valet parking attendant, was Lladislas. The former prince of Buffalo evidently wasn't bringing any of his Kindred charm to bear, because the girl, still a teenager, clearly didn't know what to make of this apparently middle-aged guy who might or might not be hitting on her. She was being polite and noncommittal. Lladislas was standing just

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close enough to violate her personal space and make her feel uncomfortable without being too obvious about it.

“Yes, indeed,” Lladislas told her, with that same enthusiasm that he always seemed to exude, no matter what he was talking about. “The internal combustion engine has changed the world. So many ways. So *many* ways.”

“You don’t say,” said the girl. Her valet partner was keeping his distance. She was on her own as far as he was concerned. The girl’s eyes, searching for any excuse to slip away or busy herself, fell on Theo as he exited the hotel, and in that split second when he was about to slip away himself, Lladislas followed her gaze and turned around.

“Theo Bell!”

Theo sighed but didn’t stop walking. Lladislas abandoned the valet and fell in beside the Brujah archon.

“Hi, Lladi. You know the hotel staff are off limits? We’ve had too many go missin’ already.”

“I was just *talking* to the girl. She seems intelligent enough.” Almost instantly, Lladislas’s casual manner fell away. He grabbed Theo’s arm and the two Brujah came to a halt. “We could’ve been ruling this city together, Bell. You know that, don’t you? All I needed was your support. Pieterzoon wouldn’t have bucked you, and Vitel just wants Washington back.”

Theo jerked his arm away. “You don’t want this city.”

Lladislas’s face screwed up, as if Theo had just said something incomprehensible. “You seem to have strange ideas about what I do and don’t want. First you think that I *want* to abandon my own city. Now you think I want to remain a wandering mendicant for the rest of eternity. Well, let me tell you,” Lladislas grabbed Theo’s arm again, “I got kind of used to having a city to call my own. Buffalo might not have been Paris or Rome, but it was *mine*—until I listened to you!”

Theo glared down at the smaller man and spoke in an even, obviously restrained tone: “We both know why Buffalo had to go. I’m not gonna go into that again. And I know what you’re used to. But let me tell you what *I* am *not* used to. First of all, I’m not used to a white man grabbin’ my arm. Second of all, I’m not used to the same white man grabbin’ my arm *twice*.”

As Theo continued to glare, Lladislas slowly eased the pressure of his fingers and then just as slowly pulled back his hand. “Sorry. But none of that changes the fact that—”

“Listen,” Theo cut him off. “I’m not gonna say this again. I’m not gonna argue, and I’m not gonna answer any questions or listen to you bitch. You don’t want this city. Trust me. Stick with me on this. I won’t forget about you.”

Lladislas’s skepticism was plain to see, but, for once, he didn’t argue. He took a step back, never taking his eyes from Theo. “Don’t sell me out on this, Theo.”

The archon didn’t say anything to that. He turned and continued on to his bike, which was parked about a block and a half from the Lord Baltimore Inn. “Shit,” he muttered as he cranked the engine and pulled away from the curb, wondering if he’d said too much to Lladislas.

The former prince of Buffalo was a straight talker. He’d never been anything but up front with Theo. Theo couldn’t say as much in return. Sure, he’d had a good reason to lie

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to Lladislas in Buffalo. It was part of the plan. Llad never would have given up his city and brought quite a few of his people here to Baltimore, where they could be more effectively used, if he hadn't thought an overwhelming attack was on the way. And, hell, an attack *had* come. A lot sooner than Theo had expected. So it wasn't really a lie at all if it turned out to be true, right?

*Hell yes it was*, Theo thought. *That's what I get for hangin' out with a Ventrue.*

Still, they'd had a reason for lying, just like Theo had reasons now for warning off Lladislas, even though he probably shouldn't have. One deception necessarily created another, and that one another, and another.... The lies about Buffalo had led to lies about Hartford—and more deaths. But that couldn't be helped. Just like in Buffalo. Part of the plan, a plan in three parts.

Buffalo and Hartford had been part one of the plan.

Part two was up to Jan. That bothered Theo as much as anything. Part two was out of his hands. He had to trust Jan. And he couldn't quite bring himself to do it.

That night in August after Buffalo had fallen, the two of them had talked. They'd worked out many of the details of the plan. First, though, they'd arrived independently at the same conclusion about the debacle in Lladislas's city and what the Sabbat must have known.

"They didn't divert forces from Washington," Jan had said.

"They didn't need to," Theo had pointed out. "Those were babies with fangs they were facing."

"But they shouldn't have known that."

"I know."

They'd both been reluctant to suggest what they each had already decided.

"Could it have been a raid that got lucky?" Jan had asked.

"Too big for a raid. Too small for an all-out assault—unless they knew what to expect." It's what Theo had already decided, when he'd learned of the attack during his trip back to Baltimore, had to be the case. And Jan agreed.

A spy. The Sabbat had to have known exactly what to expect in Buffalo. And so Hartford had been sacrificed, for three reasons: to concentrate more Kindred in Baltimore, to confirm Theo and Jan's suspicion about inside information getting out, and to convince the spy that he or she was still undiscovered.

That led to part two of the plan: While Theo made sure that Baltimore held firm against the Sabbat, Jan, by whatever means he could employ, had to find out who the spy was. If he didn't, then part three was going to be the biggest cluster fuck since the Bay of Pigs.

That same night in August, Theo and Jan had discussed who the spy could be. Victoria? She'd been captured by the Sabbat and then had conveniently escaped. Jan had since arranged for her to be sent elsewhere—back to Sabbat-controlled Atlanta. Garlotte? If he were the spy, that matter had very neatly taken care of itself—unless the explosion was a decoy and he'd faked his own destruction, but it seemed unlikely that Katrina would play along, unless she too were duped.... Malachi, the Gangrel? Ditto as for Garlotte. Gainesmil? Theo thought that the Toreador had been too genuinely disturbed by the initial reports of the Sabbat's early victories for it to be him. Vitel? Isaac? Colchester? Roughneck? Hell, anybody with fangs might have motivation, and too many people had

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access to news of what was going on. That was the big problem—one of the big problems—with rule by committee, and that was the reason that Theo and Jan had undertaken the plan secretly. That narrowed the field considerably, as far as opportunity for a spy to get his or her hands on damaging information.

But it didn't necessarily solve the problem.

Theo pulled his motorcycle to the side of the road and cut the engine. He was still on the waterfront. Without really meaning to, he'd driven to within a few blocks—to within sight of—the scarred portion of dock where Garlotte's ship used to be secured. The explosion, just four short nights ago, was one of several things—probably unrelated things—that were bothering Theo.

He kept playing the events over in his mind: seeing Katrina coming off the ship, talking to her, being blown through the air, letting her go. He still didn't have a good explanation for why he'd spared her. Just a gut reaction. But what bothered him more than that was the basic facts of what he'd seen: Katrina had blown up the prince.

"She blew his ass up," Theo said to himself, trying to convince himself of what he'd seen—but he couldn't. Not quite. He'd practically said as much to Gainesmil the night after. Katrina didn't seem like the demolitions-expert type. Theo had seen what he'd seen, but that didn't mean he'd seen everything. Katrina might have blown Garlotte up, but the more Theo thought about it, the less he believed that she'd managed to pull it off by herself.

So maybe it was a good thing that he hadn't ripped her head off. She might lead him to whomever else was involved—if somebody else really was involved; if Theo ever found her again. Surely she'd taken his warning seriously and gotten out of the city.

For quite a few minutes, Theo sat on his bike and stared at the blackened portion of the dock where the ship used to be tethered. The debris had all been cleared away, but Theo could almost feel the smoking detritus landing all around him—the small pieces fell in slow motion, gently, as naturally as snow or a gentle rain. He saw Katrina lying on her back in the street, and there was a light rain falling all around her too, falling on her, changing her skin from pale white to dark red. The rain was not water but blood—blood of a Kindred centuries old, blood spilled in the gutter.

Theo squeezed his eyes closed hard, and when he opened them, there were only the deserted street and the damaged dock. Gone was the image of a young woman manipulated, the panorama of murder and injustice.

"Shit happens," Theo said to himself. He started up the bike again. He didn't have time—or the stomach—for sentimentality, for idealism. His was the world of the street and realpolitik. He pulled away from that place, but the strands of thought that bound him were twining themselves together into a cord he couldn't long ignore.

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**Monday, 18 October 1999, 12:22 AM**  
**Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



Lladislas was angry, and that was never a good thing.

Being shown up by that blue-blooded prig Vitel and then wrist-slapped by Theo Bell—who should by all rights be backing his play—had not sat right. Bell telling him to back off that hotel valet was just adding insult to injury. As if he, who'd run herd over Buffalo for decades, couldn't be trusted with a little morsel in a hotel uniform. As if he didn't understand what the *rules* were. *Archon* Bell had a lot of gall to pull rank on him—

But that was the thing, of course. Bell could pull rank because Bell had rank. Don Cerro's favorite childe has convinced Lladislas to retreat from Buffalo, and *snap*—just like that—Prince Lladislas, once paragon of the Great Lakes Brujah and prince in good standing, was plain old “Lladi,” another rabble chump there to man the fortifications in more important cities. As Bell would put it, *mother-fuck*.

Lladislas paced the suite he'd been given—no one ever said “earned”—here at the Lord Baltimore. It was nice enough, but it wasn't any coincidence that Vitel, Pieterzoon, and the rest of the high-and-mighty had suites a few floors up. Bell's was up there too, the bastard, although at least he had the decency not to use it much. He didn't have the decency to back off as Lladislas played with that cute little valet, though, no—even though she wasn't technically in the hotel with its no-feeding rule.

He continued to pace, the litany of injustices building to a fever pitch in his mind. An end table had the temerity to get in the way, so he kicked it across the room to splinter against a heavy oak dresser. He was about to see how said insolent dresser might like existence as kindling when a knock sounded at the door.

Lladislas crossed the suite again and yanked open the door without bothering to check the peephole. If this was a Sabbath assassin, he'd chosen the wrong lowly Brujah to annoy this night!

It wasn't a Sabbath assassin, but instead the valet from downstairs.

“Um, sir, did you need to see me?” She still wore the same green vest and jacket, with black slacks. Her hair was a deep brown that matched her eyes, which were open and perhaps a little glazed. The key-and-alarm fob to some high-end vehicle was still in her right hand. The black and silver nameplate on her lapel said CHRISTINE.

Lladislas smiled, mostly to himself. He'd thought of the girl and here she was, called by the sheer power of his blood and personality. “Yes,” he said, “I do need you.”

She almost fainted from the power of his gaze.





**Monday, 18 October 1999, 1:44 AM**  
**Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Christine's corpse was slipping onto the floor. When Lladislas had dropped her, when the rush of blood from her neck had subsided, she'd fallen on the king-sized bed, but she'd landed awkwardly and now was going over the side head-first. Her neck was raw and open, the twin gashes brutal but bloodless. As he'd clenched her to himself, Lladislas had torn her jacket and that only added to the tawdriness of the whole scene. He stood transfixed until, like a bag of potatoes falling off a market stand, she flowed off the bed. Her head made a dull *thud* when it hit the carpeted floor, but the rest of her followed with little sound.

He'd lost control. He'd only meant to take enough to slake his thirst. He'd wanted to keep the girl charmed and happy.

Lies. He'd wanted her blood and he'd taken all of it. That was the truth.

Lladislas turned away from the crumpled and unstrung marionette that had once been Christine.

"Damn Bell," he said aloud. If the archon hadn't been so bullheaded, so disrespectful...

More lies. Bell hadn't killed this girl, he had. Mere minutes after raging that he should be trusted, the same night in which he'd tried to claim the throne of Baltimore, he'd murdered a woman out of sheer gluttony.

Lladislas fell back onto the bed and felt Christine's blood in his system. It tasted bitter now, but had been sweet going down.

The phone rang. Lladislas picked it up. Surely anything was better than listening to his own regrets at this point.

"It's Bell," said the voice on the other line.

Lladislas glanced at Christine's body and a memory of her confused look on the threshold passed through him. He turned away. "Yes, Theo?"

"I'm not going to apologize, Llad, but I know you've gotten a bum deal out of this."

Lladislas made a noncommittal grunt.

"Look. You know what the game is like," Bell continued. "It's all fucking bullshit but you still gotta play it. That don't mean any of us have gotta be Vitel's or the Dutchman's lackeys. They're playing games too."

"Of course."

"I want to know what they're up to. And I need some help with Vitel. The Brujah from your neck of the woods have got the best libraries this side of the pond. I need access."

Lladislas wanted to tell the self-righteous archon to look for help at an east-facing window at dawn, but he didn't. Christine's body was cooling on the carpet beside him and her blood felt heavy in his gut. He closed his eyes. "I'll make a call."

**Tuesday, 19 October 1999, 1:05 AM**  
**Patti's All-Nite Kitchen & Truck Stop**  
**Outside Columbus, Ohio**



By the time Theo pulled off the interstate, he'd imagined a hundred different ways in which Baltimore had promptly fallen into sheer chaos as soon as he'd left. The damn prince was ash, the Sabbath was at the gates and every blue blood for miles was hungry for the now vacant throne. Maybe he should just keep heading west and see what the Great Plains had to offer for a monster like him. Theo shook off that fantasy with the image of his superior, Justicar Pascek, and the sheer joy that prig would take from any evidence that Theo was treasonous or cowardly.

Theo's bike growled its way into the parking lot of the truck stop. A half-dozen eighteen-wheelers were already there, along with an assortment of minivans, sedans and SUVs. The "troubles" along the Eastern Seaboard—media whitewash or no—had kept a lot of folks from traveling, but the great arteries of interstate commerce still ran, it seemed, and people still thought it safe enough to stop at a truck stop at one in the morning.

The door to the diner made a jingly noise when Theo opened it, but he paid that no mind. He scanned the dingy counter and cracked-Naugahyde booths until he saw her. She was sitting at the furthest booth, nursing a cup of coffee. Her brown hair was tied back and her dark eyes were framed in wire-rim glasses. A red file folder was on the table next to her coffee cup. She was looking right at Theo.

"Another two hours to Buffalo," Theo said as he sat down opposite her. Theo hated code phrases and the rest of spy game bullshit, but it came with the territory.

She just nodded and took a sip of her coffee.

Theo sat back and squinted a bit, trying to focus just past her. Colors and shades seemed to leak from her, betraying secrets and impressions. She was nervous, but not overly so. She was also alive.

Theo reached over for the folder and the brown-haired woman didn't stop him. Atop the stack of papers was type-written note, on the letterhead of Indiana University—Perdue University Indianapolis, or IUPUI. It read:

*A thorough search of relevant records from the reign of Commodus reveals only three mentions of Centurion Marcus Vitellius. None of those mentions occur in our private records. This may be a sign of falsification.*

—Caelana Mari

The other papers were, Theo could only assume, copies of old Roman records. Lladislas had been very clear that his clanmates kept a very extensive private library of the Roman past—Brujah kept grudges like no other vampires.

"Vitel used to make quite a spectacle of his Roman past," Theo said. "Before he was chased from D.C. they say he kept a lot of archives around about his illustrious mortal career. You saying that was all fake?"

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The girl reached to the bench at her side and took out a small pad and pen. She held up a hand for a second—begging patience—and scribbled for a minute. She passed the pad to Bell. The writing was clear.

*Vitellius is all over Ventrue records, but doesn't appear in ours at all.  
Please also forgive this scribbling. I am mute.*

A mute ghoul as contact? Lladislas had warned him the Brujah scholars were an odd bunch and he'd been right. Still, if Vitel were a fake of some sort...

"If this pans out," Theo said, "I owe you one, Ms. Mari."

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**Tuesday, 19 October 1999, 2:10 AM**  
**Patti's All-Nite Kitchen & Truck Stop**  
**Outside Columbus, Ohio**

PB



"Your debt is with me, Archon."

Theo was in the parking lot, halfway to his bike. Up until that voice had spoke, he'd also been fairly certain he was alone. Blood surged through his system as he fought a flash of anger and frustration. He kept it out of his voice, for the most part.

"I don't have debts with strangers," he said and turned around.

Standing a few yards back was a short white man in a finely tailored suit. He had black hair just a little too long for current fashion. "We are not strangers, Mr. Bell."

Theo felt his own hackles rising, and his fist tightened into a ball. "Devon."

Theo had dealt with the Kindred Sheriff of Indianapolis once before. The man was a clanmate of his, but had developed an infamous disdain for the anarch motif so common to the clan in these last ten years. Where other Brujah favored leather and the fashion of the street, Devon wore Saville Row suits. What's more, he had a cruel streak a mile wide and had been known to make Masquerade-threatening examples of his rivals. Theo's last visit to Indianapolis had been on the subject of just such an example.

"Eviscerated any neonates recently, Devon?"

"Only those who deserved it."

"Masquerade be damned, then?"

"You'd be surprised how much the herd's fear of serial killers and vagrants can be used to our advantage Bell. It's not in Indianapolis that the Masquerade is fraying these nights."

Theo took an unnecessary swallow and tasted bloody bile. Devon was right. Baltimore, Boston, Washington, New York, Atlanta—in all these places the Kindred were on the edge of being revealed. He didn't have time to argue about Devon's methods in Indianapolis.

"The mute. She's yours then?"

"Yes. This was her last test. Tonight she joins our ranks."

"With the prince's approval?" Theo asked.

"The prince has gone missing, Archon. Soon he will be replaced."

"Will he now?" Theo asked.

"The city will hold against any Sabbat foolishness, archon," Devon said. "And it will do so under my rule. With support from the archons of my clan. And without interference from the displaced Prince of Buffalo. That will fulfill your debt to me."

The folder in Theo's hand weighed almost nothing, but the information it held could make all the difference in the nights to come. Was it worth tolerating an inhumane and possibly unhinged prince? He thought of Xaviar and his dire warnings. He thought of the explosion at the Baltimore docks.

"Fine," Theo said and turned away, sure he'd survive to regret that. Devon was nowhere to be seen by the time he pulled back onto the interstate.

"Lladislas is going to love this," he said into the wind.



**Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 3:12 AM**  
**The Presidential Hotel**  
**Washington, D.C.**

The chambers of Lady Sascha Vykos had ceased to look anything like the luxury suite she had appropriated from Marcus Vitel, the deposed prince of Washington, just four short months before. Or perhaps the months were not so short. Parmenides was not sure. In many ways, he felt as if he had always resided with his Tzimisce mistress. The being he now was, Parmenides/Ravenna, had of course always dwelt with Vykos. She had created him. His nights among the children of Haqim seemed so long ago, though it was the blood of that clan that claimed his allegiance still. Parmenides allowed himself to hide behind Ravenna, behind the face and the body of the ghoul he had killed and then replaced. At times, like now, Parmenides felt very close to the surface. The hands, the face, though their appearance was altered, did his bidding; they responded to his will. Other times, however, he seemed to be submerged beneath an ocean of blackness. The eyes were those of the departed ghoul; the hands were but clumsy, useless things. Not the magnificent tools of an artist. Parmenides held the hands before his face. He moved each finger in turn, trying to trace the impulse for each motion from brain, along nerve, to muscle, trying to tie will to action, soul to body.

“Bring me blood!” Vykos called from the other room.

The iciness of her voice churned the black waters; Parmenides suddenly was not sure if he was above or beneath the surface. But he was moving to obey.

The largest room of the suite, what had been the living room, was more or less converted to storage. Most of the furniture was pushed to one side, where what wasn't reduced to kindling-sized pieces was stacked so as to take up less space. Tables had been erected and were crowded with Vykos's notebooks, various sets of surgical tools, and the occasional spare body part—the fresher ones. Parmenides wove among the tables and made his way to the kitchenette. He opened the refrigerator and removed a pitcher full almost to the rim with blood. At times when he anticipated that Vykos would desire blood, he had been removing the pitcher in advance and allowing it to warm on the counter, but he could not always out-guess her, and thus far she had expressed no preference for her blood to be served either chilled or at room temperature.

Parmenides took the pitcher, careful not to slosh onto the floor, and moved quickly past the door to the suite's smaller bedroom—storage area for the not-so-fresh parts. Vykos would dispose of the gallimaufry when the mood struck her, but for several weeks now she'd been completely absorbed by her experiments and unwilling to divide her attention.

He stepped within the master bedroom, noticing instantly the incredibly strong odor of vitae—not the pleasant tang of merely mortal blood, but rather the enticing aroma of fragrant Kindred vitae, Vykos's own blood.

Parmenides's concentration wavered momentarily. He stopped where he stood and locked his knees, so as to keep them from buckling.

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*Destroy her.* That was his mission now. Fatima had ordered him... or had it been that creature that lowered itself down from the ceiling? Parmenides's thoughts grew foggy; the various relationships grew suddenly confusing. *No*, he told himself, *the thing from the ceiling was Nosferatu*. It wouldn't give him orders. It hadn't shown its disgusting face again. Fatima had been the one to tell him...

*Destroy her.*

Destroy Vykos. Parmenides had to concentrate very intently for the idea to make sense. He was Assamite, hiding behind Ravenna the ghoul. Vykos had made him this. She knew of his charade but thought herself immune from his wrath. But he would wait, would bide his time, and would strike.

*Destroy her.*

Parmenides felt himself sinking back beneath the blackness, but the fog was receding. He was distant, submerged, but he could see through the eyes of the ghoul.

To his right was a small couch, and on the couch lay a body, bloodied, naked, cut and splayed open from sternum to pelvis. This most recent of the thin-bloods, the third so far, was not strong enough to heal herself. She lay uncomprehending, eyes wide, mouth lolled open. Now she was oblivious to her surroundings, though she had been aware enough when Vykos had opened her, had hollowed out the belly that had been so full. The girl smelled of her own blood; she was covered in it, as were her clothes that were cut away, the couch, the carpet. This was not the odor that first struck Parmenides, however.

The bed, too, was a bloody, king-sized monstrosity. Spread, blanket, and sheets were twisted and saturated. Tacky puddles of vitae pooled in every depression. Tangled among the bedclothes was Vykos, and she reeked of the Curse of Caine.

"Blood!" she called again.

Parmenides stepped closer. The feet that were but were not his own moved him to stand over her. Like the thin-blood, Vykos was naked. Her skin, where it was not streaked with blood, was the purest alabaster. Her legs were bent at the knees, spread apart, her feet secured in leather stirrups. Parmenides looked upon her hairless, sexless body. Her small breasts were a remnant of the feminine she had affected—those and the writhing fetus in her own open belly.

"Give it to me!" She strained for the pitcher with both hands.

Parmenides gave it to her and she drank, greedily. Trails of blood ran down both sides of her face and onto her pillow, where they splattered new patterns atop the already encrusted layers.

She finished the entire pitcher and cast it aside. Blood pulsed through exposed arteries into the child within her. She clenched her teeth against pain, twisted the sheets in her fists, pressed outward against the stirrups. Parmenides stood above her, in all her vulnerability.

*Destroy her*, a voice commanded him. But he was far away; he could not fight his way to the surface. He could only watch through the eyes of the ghoul that was not him.

A strangled moan escaped Vykos's lips. It was not a cry of pain but of anger. As blood pumped into the tiny semblance of a child, its partially formed limbs jerked spasmodically, splashing some of the liquid pooled about it within Vykos's open bowl of a belly. The

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unborn child struggled, like a fish out of water, despite—or perhaps because of—the life that Vykos tried to force into the small body.

Then as suddenly as the thrashing had begun, there was stillness. Vykos lay still, though her every muscle was taut. The babe, torn from the womb of its undead mother and fed upon more powerfully cursed vitae, lay still.

Vykos's lingering moan gained strength, grew into a primal roar of undeniable rage. She grasped at her belly. Her fingers, long and sharp, dug into the soft, fleshy cranium, as she ripped the offending child from her body, paying no attention to the arteries and organic cords she ripped asunder. With the crescendo of her scream, she cast the tiny body to the floor and raked her bloody claws across her smooth, white scalp.

It was at that moment that Parmenides heard the distant sound of a bell. The elevator, beginning to ascend. Vykos heard it too.

“No!” she screamed, jerking upright in her naked, bloodied glory.

For the briefest instant, Parmenides stood transfixed by the sight of a single drop of blood sliding slowly across the perfect curve of one of Vykos's exposed ribs—but then Ravenna sprang into action.

He hurried from the master bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him. The arrow above the elevator door tracked the progress of the car from the second floor to the third. The management of the hotel, once loyal to Vitel but easily won over, had long since been ordered to suspend any and all services to the penthouse suite. No employee was to set foot on the sixth floor except to respond to a specific request from Vykos or her retainer, Ravenna.

Yet the elevator was now at the fifth floor and ascending still.

Parmenides stood patiently in the foyer. He quickly checked the various blades hidden on his person. By the time the doors slid open, he was leaning casually on the cane he no longer required to get around. As the retainer of Lady Sascha Vykos, archbishop of Washington, he was prepared to berate whoever was so foolish as to violate her privacy. As an assassin, trained and disguised, he was ready for violence should an attack be forthcoming.

Even so, he was surprised when Francisco Domingo de Polonia, Archbishop of New York, flanked on either side by Lasombra lackeys, stepped from the elevator.

“I wish to speak with Her Excellency, Archbishop Vykos,” Polonia said forcefully, his words tinged with the Spanish accent of his mortal days. He was tall and held himself with the graceful bearing of a fighter confident of winning. From beneath the black ocean, Parmenides wanted to test him, to challenge him, but this was not the time. Polonia wrinkled his nose only slightly at the stench of decaying flesh to which Parmenides had grown accustomed over the past weeks. Polonia's companions were less discreet.

“Jesus *Christ!*” said Costello, a lieutenant of the Polonia faction, a middle man from New York. “I've been in Nossie shit holes that smelled better than this.”

To Polonia's other side stood Joseph Hardin, a Lasombra hatchet man—or knifeman, more accurately—who'd made a name for himself during the early blitzkrieg from Atlanta to Washington. He'd become noted for his casual brutality, against the Camarilla as well as among his own subordinates. “The maid is definitely gonna be pissed,” he said.

“Her Excellency,” Parmenides said calmly, “is indisposed.”

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The humor instantly drained out of Hardin and Costello; they grew tense, edgy. Polonia, on the other hand, who had been all business thus far, smiled. It was a cold smile, a crocodile's smile. "I am not asking your permission," he said.

Polonia was not, Parmenides noticed, wearing a sword, reportedly his favorite weapon. The faux ghoulish instinctively took in such martial details because there was a palpable tension in the room, despite the fact that Polonia and Vykos were both part of the Sabbat high command; both, in theory, on the same team.

Costello moved to step past Parmenides. Parmenides raised his cane, blocking the way. Costello's eyes bulged; he puffed up with indignation. "What the fuck do you think—"

"Ravenna," came Vykos's cool voice from behind him. "Do fetch a few chairs for our guests." Costello's gaze shifted over Parmenides's shoulder; the Lasombra's anger evaporated. "I'm afraid the decor simply has not held up well," Vykos added.

She stood before the closed door to the master bedroom. A dark silk robe hid most of her body and made her face, hands, and feet seem to glow white in contrast. No blood was visible. Her skin was freshly scrubbed, and small ridges streaked front to back over her head, as if she had been running her fingers through hair that, tonight, was nonexistent. She held her robe tightly closed at the neck. Parmenides wondered if, beneath, her abdomen was still laid open, an exposed, barren womb. Without comment, he moved to obey her.

"We do not need chairs," said Polonia, no longer smiling. "I do not intend to stay long."

"Such the pity," Vykos intoned.

Parmenides watched her closely for signs of weakness. He knew the physical stress she'd been inflicting upon herself, the amount of blood that she'd both consumed and expended. But as always seemed to be the case, Vykos showed no weakness, physical or otherwise.

"I'm sure," Polonia said, "that you are aware of the latest news from Madrid, Archbishop."

Vykos regarded her rival from behind emotionless, alien eyes. In that instant, she seemed to Parmenides not an aristocrat of the Sabbat, not female, not *human*, but rather a god, a being completely detached from the slaughter and infighting that swirled around her. He felt himself rising to the surface of that black ocean. Impulses of his blood, of violence, filled him, but absent was his own detachment, that fruit of his professional training. Visceral hatred—for his master, for his mistress—filled him. And a love just as powerful.

"There is always *some* news from Madrid," Vykos said, and the illusion of her otherness vanished—or perhaps the illusion of her humanity reasserted itself. Her gaze enveloped Polonia and his underlings, dissected them where they stood.

Parmenides stepped aside, allowing access to the suite, but none of the Lasombra moved. Costello and Hardin could not help but look back and forth between Polonia and Vykos.

"The reports are confirmed," Polonia said. "Cardinal Monçada, your benefactor, is destroyed." The words hung in the air, overpowering even the stench of rotting flesh. Costello and Hardin, who clearly had already heard the news, seemed cowed by what



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Polonia said nonetheless. They watched Vykos sharply for any reaction—and were rewarded not at all.

Vykos stood perfectly still and silent, not frozen but centered, not shocked but aloof. “And...?” she asked finally.

“And,” Polonia responded, “I am now cardinal. I claim the title, and the regent concurs.”

Vykos, still expressionless, bowed deeply from the waist. One hand rested easily against the door behind her (Parmenides suspected she needed the support to remain upright, yet there was no indication of weakness). The other hand traced an elegant flourish in the air. She rose and regarded her guest exactly as dispassionately as she had before, paying no attention whatsoever to Costello and Hardin, who were trying, mostly successfully, not to fidget.

Polonia nodded, acknowledging her gesture. “Without Monçada’s aid—”

“His interference, you mean,” Vykos suggested.

“A firm hand is needed,” Polonia continued, ignoring the interruption. “I’m sure you understand.” The crocodile smile again, but this time only in his eyes. “Vallejo and his legionnaires have returned to Madrid. The poor soldier was badly shaken, though he put on a good show of sternness. The Little Tailor has departed as well, but he and Commander Bolon have... reconstituted our supply of war ghouls somewhat. The commander has, of course, sworn loyalty to my person.”

Slowly, Vykos bowed a second time, this time not holding on to the door, and performing smaller flourishes with both hands. “My felicitations and,” she added, rising, “of course, my loyalty. Let us drink to the cardinal of the United States.”

Polonia laughed knowingly. “*Eastern* United States. You flatter me, Archbishop.”

“Hardly.”

They stood there for a long, uncomfortable moment, the four Cainites and the Assamite in their midst. “Any new word from your spy?” Polonia asked at last. “Or have you been too preoccupied?”

“There are so few new words,” Vykos said cryptically. The response was obviously inadequate, and another strained silence deepened between cardinal and archbishop. “Nothing of consequence from my contact, Your Eminence.”

“Contact me at once with anything you receive,” Polonia said. “The attack will fall soon. Very soon.”

“As you wish, my Cardinal.”

Polonia, grudgingly satisfied, nodded and turned to leave. Costello, relieved enough to sneer, and Hardin followed, but then their cardinal stopped and turned back toward Vykos. “Do look in on your city once in a while, Archbishop,” he said. “My people have been distracted from planning the attack on Baltimore by the need to settle disputes—hunting grounds and the like—that should have been your province.”

“As you wish, my Cardinal.”

Now, slightly more satisfied, Polonia and his underlings turned and left, leaving Parmenides again to look upon those cold, alien eyes that stared after.

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**Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 10:35 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

GF&SW



From the helicopter, the meadow was how Ramona knew it would be—burned, pock-marked, scarred by dried flows of molten rock. She didn't even signal out at first, it was so obvious. Then she realized that Heshu didn't see it, the pilot didn't see it. Even after she pointed out the swath of destruction amidst the pristine forest, they didn't see. They *couldn't* see.

"Just fuckin' land!" she yelled over the roar of the helicopter.

They put down south of the meadow—the opposite direction from Table Rock, from Zhavon. But from the ground, everything was wrong—or right. Normal.

She spun in a slow circle as she examined the surrounding terrain. It was dark, but that didn't bother her at all. And even if it did, she could use the pair of high-powered infrared binoculars Heshu had provided, which were hanging from a thick band around her neck.

But all she saw was what Heshu saw. A winter forest, foothills, nothing more, nothing less.

She looked over the hillside and the meadow before them, then began circling, as if she were searching for something. "Yeah, this is definitely the place, but fuck if it looks anything like..."

Her ghost sight, the vision that Edward Blackfeather in all his strangeness had imparted to her, deserted her. Or else something more powerful was fucking with her mind, hiding what was there, what she *knew* had to be there. But, still, she couldn't see it.

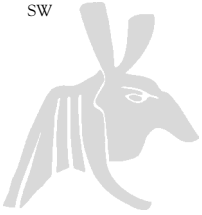
"It's... it's healed."

Heshu nodded. The moon reflected off his naked pate as he in turn considered his surroundings.

"Well," he said, "if you're wrong, the helicopter is only a few minutes away. We can search all night if necessary, although I believe we agree that we are both anxious to be done with this business and this locale."

"I'm *not* wrong," Ramona snapped. "I could see it from above... like it was before. But now it's normal. It *looks* normal. I'm not wrong."

She stopped circling and pointed to a rise. "That's the entrance, I think. The angle looks right, even if... this meadow, it should be... destroyed. Burned."



**Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 11:10 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

To Hesha's eyes, the meadow looked much as it had the last time he'd been here, but he knew something of what the Eye could do. And it was Ramona who had seen *something* from the air and had brought them back to this place again.

So they gathered their equipment and their wits and prepared to enter the den of the demon that had slain a war party of Gangrel before the young woman's own eyes. She took the lead, causing Hesha to falter a bit in his step in order to give ground to the girl. His nostrils flared and he seemed ready to make a comment, but instead he calmed himself.

He did not need to be in charge now, and he knew Ramona's mission here was a very personal one. Hesha sought clues, perhaps even answers, but Ramona had a blood-debt. Not one she expected to be able to repay this night, but one she could partly alleviate, if indeed her sire still lived within the cave before them.

They climbed a steep slope and approached the entrance to the cave. When they neared it, Ramona paused. She rolled her neck and shook out her limbs in an attempt to calm herself. She didn't look at Hesha before she continued. For his part, he did not hesitate. His centuries' long searching was rarely if ever interrupted by indecision.

Inside the cavern, the limestone was wet, and drips of water from the ceiling created the only noise. Both Kindred moved perfectly quietly, though they hoped there was no one present who might hear their footsteps in any case.

Hesha, despite his desire to possess the Eye, had not yet fully recovered from his last meeting with the matchstick creature once known as Leopold. The Setite wasn't yet enthusiastic at the prospect of again meeting the monstrosity that had nearly killed him in New York City and then disappeared. Let it stay disappeared for the time being.

The lush scent of the mountain forest gradually gave way to the moist odor of wet earth and stone.

Ramona said, "I don't think the cave was this deep before."

Hesha whispered, "The thing that destroyed your war party played with rock and earth as if it were a rain puddle. Surely, if a deeper cave suited his desire, then he could fashion one."

Ramona nodded and pressed on.

Neither of them was prepared for the awesome sight that suddenly confronted them after they snaked through a U-turn tunnel.

Ramona audibly gasped. Her years upon the earth were only a few more than her apparent age, so such a reaction was understandable. However, Hesha was a veteran of centuries, and a collector of curios and items of power beyond the wildest imagination, and even he was stunned into motionlessness.

Lit by a subtle yet persistent luminescent glow, a gargantuan sculpture stretched in every direction at every angle to almost fill a very sizable cavern. Ramona shivered and looked away. The work was ghastly, on the verge of personifying madness. Struts and

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columns and walls and other formations of a hundred other varieties all merged and separated in a collage of fancy that was also nearly genius incarnate.

Ramona flinched, but Heshu did not. His eyes drank in the sight and recognized that “nearly genius” did not adequately describe this work. This was masterful beyond the most complex of forgotten magics. Ornate beyond the skill of most ancient masters. Incredible beyond the dreams of the most revered prophets.

Revered prophets?

Heshu took a slow step forward.

He saw that the work was not only of stone. Flesh and bone adorned the sculpture, were incorporated into the work. Without pity or regret for those so entombed, the Setite saw limbs, bodies—perhaps a dozen or more, few completely intact, some still moving. These were Kindred, Gangrel, and Heshu expected the one Ramona sought would be among them. He knew she would lessen the magnificence of the work by the tampering she was bound to perform, and he nearly decided he couldn’t allow that. However, his prudence, and his self-interest, won out. He still needed the young one, and little good would come from denying her her goal.

Heshu’s motion gave some courage to Ramona. She slowly turned to face the monstrosity as well, but she only examined the periphery, concentrating on isolated details. She could not bear and perhaps could not even grasp the larger work all at once.

“Revered prophets?” Heshu whispered it aloud to himself this time. One of the figures incorporated into the unnerving sculpture was the Malkavian prophet Anatole. Heshu was certain of the man’s identity, even though the corpse was missing an arm and was covered with dried blood. The Setite knew thousands of faces, and this one was one of the most recognizable of Kindred. It *was* Anatole, the Prophet of Gehenna!

Gradually, Heshu’s other senses were able to overcome the tremendous visual stimulus of the work, and he smelled blood. Above him, behind him.

And from the severed arm on the stone floor some three dozen paces away, lying near a garment of some kind. Keeping his eye on the motionless figure of the prophet, Heshu made his way toward the limb.



**Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 11:29 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

Ramona moved more fully into the luminescence of the sculpture and wished she hadn't found the cave. No, that wasn't true. She had a responsibility, a duty. But that didn't change the fact that now she felt bile or blood or whatever the hell was in her stomach churning and churning.

There were ghosts here, among the spires. And she could hear them, moaning from the bodies merged into this monstrous statuary. None of them, none of the Gangrel, were whole of body, and only one was whole of mind.

She wouldn't have recognized Tanner if not for the ghosts. Like the others, he was part of the statue, but unlike the others, he'd recognized her. When she found them, she saw the torture in his tired, desperate eyes.

After a moment, she hoarsely whispered, "He's here. Oh God, he's here and he's still alive."

Hesha's concentration was now fixed elsewhere, and he responded with haste "Kill him, then," he snapped. "Be done with it, and put it behind you."

Ramona didn't give herself a chance to stop. Her claws slashed at Tanner's throat. Her sharp talons at first sent sparks skittering across the stone, but soon enough found blood. She tore away flesh and bone until the ghost disappeared.

Then she moved on to the other, fainter ghosts. The remaining Gangrel moaned and struggled weakly as Ramona crawled among the spires, but whatever imitation of life remained was just that, an imitation, pale and pathetic. She did what she could for them, not stopping until fresh blood trickled down through the crevices of the grand sculpture. No moans, no feebly waving arms. Silence. Stillness.

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**Wednesday, 20 October 1999, 11:33 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

SW



Hesha turned his attention back to the arm. There was dried blood upon it. He glanced back at Anatole's corpse, impaled on a slender spire within the heart of the sculpture. Hesha grinned. There was no telling to what purpose he could put that blood, even such a small amount of it.

He sniffed at the blood, and then he realized its remarkable bouquet was the one that permeated the air around him.

Hesha heard Ramona's claws tatter another fleshy portion of the sculpture. And then another, and another, and then he stopped listening. In fact, all sound faded from his ears.

Because at this moment unflappable Setite did know something of fear and awe. Suddenly aware of something before he could even fix in his mind his discovery, Hesha slowly rose to his feet with his back toward the wondrous sculpture. What he saw nearly caused his chin to drop.

Scribed in blood along the entire length of the wall and across much of the adjacent ceiling was a series of complex symbols. The master of countless languages, Hesha knew immediately this was writing. The master of countless languages, Hesha could only shake in frustration at his inability to translate it, or even to recognize the language.

Hesha also instinctively understood that secrets unparalleled were laid bare in that bloody script before and above him, set there surely by none other than Anatole.

How Hesha could conclude immense secrets were within the script, he could not pinpoint. Perhaps he was subconsciously able to translate portions of the text simply because he *did* know so many languages. More likely, these words radiated power because they were the *truth*. They held a power like some of the artifacts Hesha possessed. Like the ever-growing copy of *The Book of Nod* he owned. Could these words supplant that revered text?

Unbelievably, Hesha thought it possible.

He set to work immediately, allowing his backpack to slip from his shoulders to the ground. From it he withdrew a digital camera and a portable printer. He connected a battery pack to the printer and switched them both on.

Then he began to snap pictures. He left no room for error, and grossly overlapped the edges of the pictures he took. He worried about the lighting, but he viewed a couple of the early pictures and decided it was sufficient to make out the dark blood script on light stone walls.

The transcribing required over a hundred pictures, which Hesha downloaded into the printer.

Ramona, finished with her crimes of mercy, approached him. "What are you doing?" Hesha looked up at her and asked, "Are you all right?"

Ramona nodded.

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Hesha said, “I think there’s an important message in that text. I’ve photographed it all, but I’m also going to print hard copies before we leave. Sometimes things as magical as this cannot be long recorded by technology, so I cannot leave until I’m certain every single word is printed.”

Ramona nodded again and took a few steps away from Hesha. Blood still dripped from her claws.

The Setite completed prepping the printer and then loaded it with film paper. He activated it, and the printer began to output those one hundred plus pictures. Meanwhile, Hesha photographed the sculpture. He photographed merely to record the work, but so amazing were the lines of the work and the skill with which it was crafted that virtually every photo he completed seemed a masterwork of composition.

Eventually, he finished that work and printed those photos as well.

The Setite carefully flipped through the printed pictures of the blood script as the printer processed the second batch of work. Everything seemed to be recorded, but he would keep the digital files of the photographs as well.

As the pictures of the sculpture continued to process, Hesha watched Ramona. He was impressed with the girl. How she remained so composed. How she displayed little need or desire to make a spectacle of what she had come here to do. She had found her sire. Found him alive. And she had killed him. Spared him—and others too—a long, long time of torment. And probably set herself up to inherit it.

Ramona turned his way as he was watching her. “I’m done,” he managed to say.

Ramona glanced toward the shattered frame of bone and flesh some distance away from her. Her voice tense and driven, she said, “I’ve only just begun.”

Hesha nodded.

They hurried out of the caverns. When a red light on his radio indicated a reconnection, Hesha called for his pilot.

A few minutes later, as the helicopter floated down from the night sky, Hesha wondered if he should return and deface the blood script. After all, he appreciated his possessions more when he alone possessed them. In this case, though, he relented. He pulled himself into the helicopter and fastened his seat belt while the purpose of the Egyptian Book of the Dead came to his mind. He wondered if the blood script was to serve the same purpose for Anatole.

Perhaps the prophet’s work wasn’t yet complete.

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**Thursday, 21 October 1999, 2:45 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

GF



In the helicopter, the ghosts were silent, maybe even at rest. The earth itself pretended that nothing was wrong, that nothing had ever happened. The scar was hidden. Trees, hillside, quiet nighttime forest.

Now Ramona wanted to talk. She didn't like being in the helicopter, so far above the ground, and the whirling rotors were too close. They sounded too much like the thunder of exploding monoliths, of fire and death. The ghosts were silent, but the memories were not.

"You were here before," she said to Heshu, nearly shouting to be heard over the din. She had to think about something other than the night of that slaughter, *anything* else.

Heshu nodded. He'd told her a little about his previous trip to the cave, about possessing the Eye, about losing it again. He'd grudgingly and cryptically mentioned Leopold, the crazed being who had reclaimed the Eye, who had very nearly destroyed Heshu, who *had* destroyed so many of Ramona's clanmates. It had to have been Leopold also, Ramona realized, who created the sculpture, who had bent the stone to his will and tormented those he'd already defeated. How had Heshu *not* seen it?

"You didn't see that... in the cave before?" Ramona asked. *That*. The sculpture.

Heshu shook his head. No, he had not. If he was telling her the truth. But why would he lie? Ramona wondered if a better question might be, why wouldn't he? After spending time with Khalil, she didn't know if any Kindred ever needed something so basic as a *reason* to lie. She herself had lied to Jen and Darnell different times. Liz had been emphatic about not trusting Heshu. *Whatever he told you was a lie*, she'd said.

It was hard. In a way, Ramona wanted to trust Heshu, wanted to believe the things he told her. But Liz had been such a nice, smart woman, and although Khalil had fucked her over royally, she'd seemed more upset, more worried and bitter, about Heshu. He was a Setite; he'd made Liz a Setite, a monster like Ramona, just a different flavor. Ramona had sensed that it was Heshu, more than Khalil, that Liz had needed to escape.

Ramona gave Heshu a long, hard look. He'd taught her a lot in the past weeks—things that would hurt their kind, things that wouldn't. Lord knew that he'd been much more forthcoming than Tanner had been, and there was no point in even beginning to compare him to Khalil. Still, Ramona did feel that Heshu wasn't helping her out of the goodness of his heart. He had his reasons. If he didn't lie to her, it was because he wanted something, wanted to gain her trust—but Ramona wasn't sure if anyone would ever gain her trust again.

So maybe he'd seen the sculpture before and thought to bring his camera this time, or maybe he hadn't seen it and he was just prepared. He hadn't seen the bleeding scar that was the meadow, after all, just like Ramona could no longer see it. Either way, they were helping each other find the Eye, and that was the most important thing. For the time being..



**Thursday, 21 October 1999, 2:17 AM**  
**An isolated burrow**  
**New York City, New York**



Calebros bent low to squeeze beneath the low-hanging shelf of rock. It wasn't enough. Muttering curses, he got down onto his knees. Still not enough. He sprawled, not at all gracefully, on his belly and chest and began to slide forward inches at a time. The tight squeeze would have been no problem this way if he'd been able to lie truly flat, but the dramatic kink in his spine jutted upward and grated against the stone. Calebros shifted his weight and wriggled. Only with great difficulty did he make it through.

*How many more of these blasted crevices and hairpins must I negotiate?* he wondered.

"Stop... right there!" said a nervous voice, not far away.

"Jeremiah," Calebros said soothingly. His grossly dilated eyes could barely make out the other Nosferatu now that his voice had drawn attention.

"Stop!" Jeremiah said again.

"Might I at least stand?" Calebros asked reasonably. "After all, it was you who sent for me." Jeremiah seemed unsure, but he didn't object, so Calebros climbed painfully to his knees. The ceiling was too low to stand upright. Calebros inspected Jeremiah in the darkness. The Kindred who had so confidently and capably shadowed the Prophet of Gehenna was cowering in the farthest, tightest, darkest corner of this dead-end tunnel. He clutched his knees to his chin with one arm. The other was wrapped over the top of his head, as if holding it on.

"The Final Nights are at hand," Jeremiah said.

"I see." Calebros had heard this before from Jeremiah, if not so frantically. It was the same tired prophecy, the same rote words. Yet Calebros had felt the twinge of terror when he'd first read the reports of Xaviar's claim that he'd battled an Antediluvian. But what the Gangrel justicar had seen was no Antediluvian—just an insane Toreador wielding powers long hidden from the world. *Just!* Calebros chided himself. It had *just* destroyed a small army of Gangrel, and the powers loosed upon the world had been loosed by the Nosferatu, by he and Rolph.

"He knows," Jeremiah insisted, as if someone had contradicted him. "He knows, but he would not tell me! But I saw." He closed his eyes tightly; whatever he saw was too much to bear, and he wished to see it no longer. "I *felt*. He descended into the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome him. He faced the dragon. I could *feel*..." Jeremiah was wracked by uncontrollable sobs. Bloody tears ran down his cheeks. He squeezed his knees and head more closely to his body.

*My God.* Calebros watched in horror as one of his most intelligent, if rash, clanmates unraveled before him. *No, the unraveling was already done,* he corrected himself.

"He saw, but he would not tell me," Jeremiah whimpered. "He sent me away." More sobs.

"Come back with me, Jeremiah. To the warren. You'll be safe there."

Jeremiah's eyes sprang open at that. His feet scabbled against the floor as he tried to push himself farther back into the corner, but he could go no farther. "*Nowhere*

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is safe!” he screamed, then fell back into the piteous whimpering. “Least of all there, least of all...”

Calebros didn't like the thought of leaving him there. There was safety in numbers; that was why the warren was so vital to their existence. The Nosferatu were masters of the dark places only in comparison to other Kindred. There were still unknown dangers... *Nictuku*, he thought. Jeremiah had once studied under Augustin. *Superstitions!* Calebros told himself, angry that he'd even entertained the thought, angry that Jeremiah had pushed his thoughts in that direction and disrupted the routine of the warren.

“I'll send Pug to check on you,” Calebros said, bending down to creep back out of the cubbyhole. “Don't hurt him, do you hear me?” If Jeremiah heard, he gave no indication. But Calebros supposed Pug could take of himself. *I used to think Jeremiah could take of himself.*

Calebros slithered on his chest and belly away from that place. He had seen and heard enough.



**Thursday, 21 October 1999, 11:14 PM**  
**Broadway East**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

The storefront blended in with the other buildings on the block: old brick, narrow, no exposed glass, just plywood painted black, a red neon sign that read just plain “bar.” Lydia liked the sign. No cute play on words for the name, and the establishment followed the same no-nonsense suit. No bouncer, no line of beautiful people waiting to get in. Sometimes the random kine wandered in. That was okay. There was a bar stocked with liquor and beer for the minority of customers who could still drink that stuff. Everybody up front, either at the bar or at one of the few tables, knew to be on their best behavior if a “live one” was in the room. If nobody was too hungry, the kine might even wander back out after a few drinks. If somebody took a shining to him, however, he might be delayed in the back room for a few hours and wake up the next morning a few quarts low and with a hell of a hangover. Either way, none the wiser. So far, no mortals tonight.

Lydia had heard stories about Sabbat hangouts where kine, still barely alive, were kept hanging around—literally, on hooks—and the night crowd just dug in whenever they wanted. The idea repulsed Lydia. It seemed to her as bad as a gang bang, or taking a shit in front of somebody. Feeding was a private thing. She wouldn’t go as far as to say spiritual, but she’d never had much appetite for feeding, or even hunting, in packs. Was it, she wondered, something about a Sabbat vampire’s blood that led it to act like a fucking animal? That was tricky, because there were some Camarilla folks just as bad, or who would be just as bad if it weren’t for the higher-ups threatening to kick their deviant asses. Was it just the social conventions, then, that set apart the Camarilla and the Sabbat? Most of the clans in the Camarilla, after all, had members that had bolted to the other side, *antitribu*, and vice versa for the Sabbat. Couldn’t be the blood, at least not absolutely. Maybe bloodline set a general pattern, and some individuals strayed from that pattern.

Too bad Christoph wasn’t around instead of doing whatever it was he did by himself. He’d probably have an interesting take on the question. But this was their first time off from patrol in four nights, since they’d gotten the car back from Slick’s, which was just a few blocks away. Those four nights for her and her boys hadn’t been boring either: five firefights, two confirmed Sabbat kills, three high-speed chases, one after Sabbat, one from Sabbat, one from cops. She’d taken a bullet through the face, damned painful, teeth splintered, took a chunk of her tongue. That had taken some blood to fix. Frankie had had his left hand cut off and still hadn’t regrown all of his fingers yet.

Frankie was at the table with Lydia, as was Baldur. So instead of the chance to have a serious philosophical conversation with Christoph, she was sitting with the two members of her gang who were endlessly fascinated by questions like why do you drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?

“Hey, Frankie,” said Baldur, “wanna go find a piano bar? You could play Chopsticks.”

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Frankie was less than amused. “Shut the fuck up, you ignorant fuckin’ bastard.”

“Was you givin’ me the finger? I couldn’t tell!” Baldur slapped the table at his own wit.

“Why don’t you *both* shut the fuck up?” Lydia suggested. She wanted nothing more than to sip her drink—served in a dark glass, a small enough concession to the occasional mortal patron—and to ignore everyone else in the bar. “I can’t even hear myself think.”

“You must not be thinkin’ loud enough,” Baldur said, apparently finding something about his comment funny and laughing hysterically.

Lydia glared. Frankie glared. And Baldur, not as dumb as he seemed, shut the fuck up.

*What was I thinkin’?* Lydia wondered, deciding it was her own fault. If she’d wanted privacy, she should have gone someplace private. Any place with Frankie and Baldur was not private. And even with the two of them piped down, there were other people in the bar to aggravate her. People in general didn’t aggravate Lydia; she wasn’t one of the great loners, like Theo. But of the four Kindred in the bar other than herself, Frankie and Baldur, and the bartender, one of them was Jasmine. And that was a real pisser.

Jasmine herself was harmless enough. She was some hippie throwback chick: long, straight hair parted in the middle; bell bottoms; cowboy boots; tight shirt and boobs perkier than they had a right to be. She was a powder puff as far as getting her own hands dirty, but she talked a mean game—mean, loud, and constant—and that’s what she was doing now at the table in the corner.

“We shouldn’t be doing *their* dirty work,” Jasmine said to her small crowd of admirers. She jabbed her finger at the air at least two times every sentence to emphasize her points. Maybe she was trying to hypnotize her audience. It seemed to be working. The three Kindred listening to her were all guys—Lydia knew the type. They looked like jerks. In life, they would’ve been the kind to follow their dicks around, and now that those particular appendages didn’t carry the same drive, the owners were pretty much without direction and susceptible to forceful speech, and it didn’t hurt that it was attached to a pretty face and erect nipples.

“If those *big shots* over at the Lord Baltimore Inn are so worried about the Sabbat,” Jasmine was saying, “*they* should be the ones riding up and down the highways keeping watch.”

Lydia took another sip from the opaque highball glass half-filled with blood that she held in her hands. She’d heard Jasmine’s rants before, directly and second-hand from Baldur and Frankie, but this time it bothered Lydia more. This time she had to restrain the urge to pull her .38 out of her jacket pocket and plug Jasmine one right in the forehead.

“They aren’t taking any risks. They aren’t putting their privileged asses on the line.”

*Let it go,* Lydia told herself. *Everybody knows she’s all talk.*

“They just sit up there and just sit up there and *talk*, talk, talk. We are the ones who do the *dirty work*.”

*Let it go. Nobody’s listening.* But they were listening. The three rebels without a clue were listening. Frankie and Baldur had listened, although they were oblivious to what was being said at the moment. Frankie was too busy brooding, and Baldur was occupied with making a tower out of salt and pepper shakers.

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“What time is it, Frankie?” Lydia asked. Maybe there was a late movie they could go catch or something. Anything but staying and listening to flower child shoot her mouth off.

“About 11:30.”

Baldur started laughing, tried to keep it in, unsuccessfully.

“What?” Lydia, against her better judgment, asked him.

Baldur forced a straight face. “You can ask him what time it is... but don’t ask him to tie his shoe!” He couldn’t control himself any longer and burst out laughing. He also ducked the angry swipe that Frankie sent his way.

Lydia’s vision clouded over red. “Okay. That’s it.” She reached into her jacket pocket.

“It’s not worth it to them,” Jasmine said, “to risk *their* sorry hides. No, *we* are the ones they call—”

The wall right above Jasmine’s head exploded in brick and mortar dust. The crack of the gunshot rocked the small room like a sudden clap of thunder. Jasmine flattened her face and arms across the table. Her admirers were on the floor. The bartender was out of sight. Frankie and Baldur just stared in dumbfounded disbelief as Lydia swaggered toward the other table, her smoking .38 held casually at her side.

“You talk a lot,” she said.

Jasmine, her cheek still pressed against the table, slowly peeked over her own forearm. Lydia stood by the table with her gun in hand but not raised, so Jasmine cautiously sat upright in her chair. “There’s a lot to be said,” she responded, not, Lydia noticed, jabbing her finger at the air any more. One by one, each member of Jasmine’s audience began raising his head above the table and glancing around furtively.

Lydia ignored them. “There’s a lot of people busting their asses to make sure the Sabbat don’t just run right over this place,” she said.

“You’re right,” Jasmine agreed, some of her fire returning, “and those fat cats at the Lord Baltimore Inn ought to be *with* us.”

“What do you think Theo Bell does every night?”

“He’s a Ventrue lap dog,” Jasmine said, jabbing toward Lydia.

Lydia pulled back the hammer on her .38. “Say that again.” The three heads that had been rising above the table slowly sank out of view again.

Jasmine opened her mouth, paused, placed her palms flat against the table top. “He risks his ass,” she agreed reluctantly, “but he’s still just taking orders.”

“You don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“And you do?”

“More than you.” Lydia eased the hammer back into place. As if on cue, the three heads slowly peered up over the table again. “What do you want us to do?” she asked. “Just give Baltimore to the Sabbat?”

Jasmine shook her head, said, “Of course not. All I’m saying is there’s no equality. Pieterzoon and that crowd decide what’s best for *them*. They don’t give a rat’s ass about us, but *we* are the ones who get cut to shreds every night when the Sabbat come creeping this way.”

“How many of us have *you* seen get shredded?” Lydia asked. Jasmine didn’t answer, didn’t meet her eyes. “That’s what I thought. Too damn busy bitchin’ to get your hands dirty.”

“That’s not true!” Jasmine objected. “I go out. I patrol. I don’t think it’s as bad as they say.”

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Lydia crossed her arms, tucking the revolver under her armpit. “Why don’t you make up your mind? Are we gettin’ cut to shreds, or is it not as bad as they say? You can’t have it both ways.”

Encouraged by the lack of further gunfire, Jasmine’s admirers eased back into their seats. The first and boldest of the three, a punk with a nose ring, dusted off his shirt and smiled at Lydia. “I ain’t seen that many Sabbat,” he said.

“Then you been in the wrong damn place,” Lydia said, gesticulating and inadvertently waving her gun about.

The punk shrank back. “Why don’t you put that thing away, babe. You can’t finish all of us with it.”

Before anybody could move, Lydia had the .38 pressed up against the punk’s nose. “No, but it sure would hurt a fuckin’ lot, don’t you think? Wanna give it a try? You want one more big fuckin’ nose ring?” She cocked the hammer again.

The punk’s hands were in his lap. He didn’t move a muscle. Lydia backed away slowly, let down the hammer, and then casually slipped the gun back into her pocket. She opened her mouth to call Frankie and Baldur over, then realized that they were right behind her already, both ready to back her up if there was trouble.

“Frankie,” she said, “show this dumb-ass, peacenik bitch how safe it is out there.”

Without a word, Frankie raised his left hand and started unwrapping the loose bandage that covered it. When he was done, they could all see the skinny, still-growing hand, muscles and tissue not yet fully formed, fingers only about a third as long as they should have been.

“Don’t you tell me it’s not that bad out there,” Lydia said quietly, threateningly. “Don’t you tell him that. You just like to hear yourself talk and then blame other people for—”

A shrill chirping sound interrupted her. Lydia reached into her other jacket pocket—Jasmine and her admirers involuntarily tensed just the slightest—and pulled out a cell phone. She clicked it on. “Yeah.”

“I need you to come over here,” Theo’s voice, still deep and strong if faint, said over the line into her ear. He gave her the address. “Don’t bring your boys. Got that?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“Good.” The line went dead.

Lydia almost took the phone away from her ear but then had a better idea. “Oh, yeah, Theo,” she said to the phone, “You got a second? I got somebody here that has something to tell you.” Lydia held out the phone to Jasmine. “Here you go. Your chance to tell it straight to the top....”

Jasmine stared coldly at the phone but did not reach out to take it.

“No?” Lydia shrugged. She put the phone back to her face. “Guess I was wrong. I’ll be right there.” Lydia clicked off the phone and stuffed it back into her pocket.

“I gotta go. You fellas mind keeping Jasmine and her boys company?” Lydia asked Frankie and Baldur.

“Sure.”

“No problem.”

“Good,” Lydia said. “Tell her some war stories. Maybe tomorrow night we’ll take her on patrol with us.”



**Friday, 22 October 1999, 12:20 AM**  
**Front Street**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Theo was waiting in the parking lot of a convenience store when Lydia drove up. “Took you long enough,” he said. “I catch you in the middle of something?”

“Nah,” she shrugged off his question. “You keep me south of the city most of the time. I don’t know my way around downtown as much. Got here as fast as I could.”

Theo nodded. “Anyway, I got something for you to do. It’s gonna be boring as shit, but it’s not something I’d ask just anybody.” Lydia didn’t protest, and he could tell she was hooked. He wasn’t just blowing smoke up her ass. He did trust her—as much as he trusted any Kindred. “I’ll have Slick send your boys another car. You can’t tell them—or anybody—about this. Okay?” Lydia nodded.

“You see that beige Lexus over there?” Theo pointed toward a parking lot just down the block on the other side of the street. The lot was next to a local playhouse. There was no show tonight and just a few cars in the lot.

“Third from the end?” Lydia asked.

“Yeah.”

“You sure that’s beige? Looks gray to me.”

Theo shrugged. “Maybe it’s dirty. But you see the car.”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“I need you to keep an eye on it—all night, every night, until somebody comes and gets it. I got somebody else watchin’ during the day. But if somebody comes to take it, you call me, and you stay on ’em until I catch up. Got that?”

“Yeah. No problem. Gonna be anybody that would recognize me?”

Theo thought about that for a second. “Probably not, but maybe. So don’t be too obvious.”  
“Gotcha.”

They stood there for a minute, both staring at the car like it might move without anybody there to drive it. “What you packin’?” Theo asked.

Lydia pulled her .38 Special partially out of her pocket.

Theo frowned. “Let me see that.”

Lydia glanced around to make sure they weren’t attracting any attention, then slid Theo the gun. He held it flat on his open palm, evidently unconcerned that anybody else would see it, and tested the weight.

“Smith ’n’ Wesson. What’s it made of, paper?”

“Don’t be talkin’ about my piece,” Lydia flared.

Theo handed it to her. “It’s very cute. Put that back in your little pocket. Here...” He reached under his jacket behind his back, pulled out a massive handgun—three times as heavy and the barrel twice as long—and handed it to her.

Lydia’s hand dipped several inches. “Jesus. All I gotta do is hit somebody over the head with this.”

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“Desert Eagle,” Theo said. “.44 Magnum, seven-round clip. Little more range, lot more stopping power.”

“Shit. I’ll walk lopsided if I carry this damn thing.”

“Happy birthday,” Theo said without a smile. “I hate to think of a friend of mine walking around with that little pea-shooter.” He gestured toward her pocket. “Here’s an extra clip.”

“Shit. Thanks, man. But I hate to think of you all defenseless.”

Pause. “I’ll manage.” He turned and started to leave, then stopped. “Oh, yeah. Where are your boys? So I can send somebody to get ’em.”

“You know the little rat-ass bar a few blocks from Slick’s?”

“Yeah. I know it.” He turned and started to leave again.

“Hey, Theo.”

He stopped, turned back to her.

“I gotta ask you about something,” Lydia said, not sheepishly exactly, but Theo could tell she didn’t want to waste his time. He liked that.

“Shoot.”

“You know Jasmine?” Lydia asked.

Theo frowned, nodded, folded his arms.

“Yeah, yeah. I know she’s full of shit,” Lydia continued rapidly, “but she was at the bar, and she was sayin’ that she’s not seein’ heavy action.”

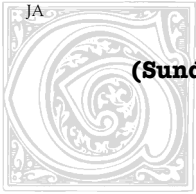
“What’s it got to do with you?” Theo asked, stone-faced.

“Well, I... you know...” Lydia shifted her weight uneasily back and forth from one foot to the other. “Shit. I feel like an asshole, a fuckin’ tattletale, but I’m not... I mean, I figure, she’s not seein’ action, she must not be goin’ out, and somebody’s not patrolin’, we got a hole to look out for. I mean, we’re seein’ shit *every night*.”

Theo didn’t like the sound of that. Somebody not pulling his or her weight was a problem, even if Jasmine was no more than another body, a speed bump in the road when the shit came down and bodies were what Theo needed. Just went to prove that nice tits didn’t count for much.

“I’ll check it out,” Theo said simply. “You just watch that damn car.”





**Monday, 25 October 1999, 12:15 AM**  
**(Sunday, 24 October 1999, 6:15 PM Eastern Daylight Town)**  
**The Mausoleum loggia**  
**Venice, Italy**

“My Uncle Martino sends his regards.”

Isabel Giovanni stood in her dressing gown, a half-smile gracing her fair skin, the door to her chamber open to receive this guest. Young Kwei della Passaglia, “nephew” to one of the most prominent Giovanni vampires of that family, stood before her. In his hands, he held a small, wrapped box: a gift.

“Welcome, Kwei. Please, come in. May I offer you anything?” A test, thought Isabel. If Martino has his nephew—practically a boy!—ghouled, he would perhaps ask for a draught of vitae. Isabel closed her gown around her and pulled a heavy robe over her shoulders.

Kwei placed the gift box on the vanity table and looked around the room. Like a few of the other rooms he had seen in the loggia, Isabel’s seemed more like a temporary apartment or a guest house than a true bedroom. Isabel had a few personal effects scattered around, but the room certainly didn’t look lived-in. He noted a decanter on a cart on the far side of the room. “I’ll take a brandy, if you don’t mind. It’s uncommonly cool tonight.”

“Help yourself. And how is your uncle?” Isabel smiled. Martino had been Kindred for at least two centuries and probably more. Unless Kwei was a very well-preserved ghoul, Martino was more likely his great uncle ten times over, if they were related at all.

“Fine, very well, thank you. This season has given a very good bounty of the silk.” Kwei’s Italian was obviously more scholastic than conversational. “He knows you are very fond of silk, so he sent you the present. I hope I haven’t spoiled the surprise. Forgive my ignorance, but you are his sister?”

“Something like that.” Isabel brushed her hair as Kwei poured a shallow glass of brandy. Martino was an acquaintance of her sire, actually. Long ago, he had married his way into the Giovanni family and shortly thereafter become a member of the Giovanni clan. He and Isabel had no love lost between them—she considered him a yellow-fevered pimp and he thought she was a symbol of everything that was wrong with the clan, from vice to indulgence and everything in between. “It’s... hard to keep track of. The family is very old.”

Kwei smiled, sipping from his snifter.

“But please, Kwei, take a seat.” Isabel took a dress from the back of a chair and hung it, making a place for her guest to relax. “Did your Uncle Martino have anything else he wished me to know? I heard about the unfortunate demise of his father.” She could practically hear the quotation marks around this last. If Kwei knew anything about the unnatural aspects of the family, this would be his opportunity to impart that graciously.

“It is the greatest tragedy, thank you for your condolences,” Kwei replied. Probably not even a ghoul, Isabel reasoned. “Such is the danger of my uncle’s occupation. Many from the East would have him fail.”

“Yes, well, many in the West would have him fail, too. Your uncle is a bold man, Kwei, as I’m sure you know.”

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Kwei raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by this?” He inflected the question incorrectly, the emphasis falling on *this* and not *mean*.

“Surely you know that he and I are not the most cordial of relations?” Isabel replied. “He would have told you that in preparation for the journey.”

“No, he did not. I am sorry to hear this.”

“It’s not your fault. I won’t punish you unless he goes out of his way to offend me. Now let me see that gift.” Isabel’s smile was barbed.

With a nervous look, Kwei handed Isabel the package. It was heavy. Isabel wondered to herself if Martino was unhappy with Kwei, or whether the boy had done something to upset his “uncle.” The gift inside would tell the truth of the tale. Certainly, the trip itself would have been exciting for the boy, who had probably never left Hong Kong. Martino knew, however, that he and Isabel had an unsettled score between them. Years ago, she had sent one of her own ghouls to deliver a wedding gift to one of the members of his mortal family. Martino considered the gift, delivered by proxy, to be a great slight—not only had Isabel refused to deliver the gift in person, she had sent a censer stoked with an incense to which the bride was terribly allergic. The poor girl had taken a great whiff and immediately fallen into a reactive coma. Martino dismissed the embarrassed ghoul, only to have the young man’s throat slit several hours later. A terse note in della Passaglia’s hand informed Isabel of her gaffe. Not that she had ever liked him anyway, or would have considered attending the wedding. Still, it looked either spiteful or amateur on Isabel’s part, depending upon which way one viewed the accident.

With this on her mind, Isabel opened the box. Inside rested a dense, rectangular object wrapped in an opaque tissue paper. A piece of folded rice paper sat atop the gift. Isabel opened the note and read:

J.—

*Enclosed find something that I hope will help you with your current charge. I hope turning the pages doesn’t irritate your delicate skin.*

—M.

She unwrapped the gift: a book bound in a silk cover. Martino knew Isabel hated his silks. She considered them as coarse as him and marred by numerous flaws. This was his revenge for the incense—a subtle yet unmistakable flouting of Isabel’s tastes. In the world of the Kindred, such subtleties carried great weight; it was how the race of Caine balanced their intricate scores of status, how they tallied points at various stages of the game of Jyhad. Martino had, from his point of view, evened the score by murdering Isabel’s ghoul so many years ago. Now that he had the opportunity, Isabel saw, he took the chance to place himself in the lead by not only acknowledging her tastes, but forcing her to put them aside for the sake of his assistance.

Still, she had recourse. Martino’s “gift” no doubt related to the ancient vampire she tracked—perhaps a geomancer’s matrix that revealed the location of its crypt or an Eastern necromantic ritual that could counter one of its potent abilities.

On this, Isabel gambled. The journal Marcia had found pointed out the likely location—or at least a *recent* location—of the creature she sought. By returning Martino’s

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gift to him, she could prevent him from achieving his petty victory over her. Such was the nature of the gamble. Could she afford to turn away this information, knowing that it might possibly forfeit whatever advantage she could glean from it? Or should she avoid allowing Martino to take the lead in their private war, a war that paled in comparison to the larger stakes at hand concerning the matter of the old clan's return?

In the end, though, Kindred are proud creatures. Isabel had made her decision as immediately as it had been presented to her.

"Why, Kwei, I'm afraid your uncle's distance from the loggia has put him regrettably out of touch. This isn't the book I was looking for. I couldn't possibly allow him to give it to me—it belongs in his own library, where someone might be able to make better use of it than I." She carefully handed the book back to him, making an elaborate production out of not opening it at all. "Please, return it to him and let him know that I appreciate the gesture, but that I just can't allow him to sacrifice his own resources so greatly for my benefit."

With that, she hurried Kwei della Passaglia from her chamber and into the hallway, smiling good night to him as she closed the door.

Kwei, no fool, had some inkling of what had just occurred. Many times, he had seen the Byzantine and decidedly Western minutiae of this social drama unfold before him, as it related to his uncle or one of the other Europeans or Americans in his uncle's employ. He breathed a sigh of relief, knowing as he was excused from Isabel Giovanni's room that, for a brief moment, his life had been at stake. With another sigh, he turned and walked to his own guestroom, knowing that when he returned to deliver the news to his uncle, his life would once again be on the line.

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**Tuesday, 26 October 1999, 4:02 AM**  
**(Monday, 25 October 1999, 10:02 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**The Mausoleum loggia**  
**Venice, Italy**



"This doesn't make any sense." Chas furrowed his brow and looked at the other Kindred in the room.

"An unfortunate fact, but one to which I can offer no better answer. This is simply how things *are*, and I can't give you any better rationale without delving into the finer details of our spirit magic, which I'm not sure you'd want anyway," replied Ambrogino Giovanni. "Isabel understands as much as she does only because she has a grounding in our necromantic practice. To be honest, it shouldn't really matter to you anyway. You're just muscle."

Chas didn't know whether that was an insult or a simple declaration. Sometimes these old vampires hadn't had contact with others in so long, their graces atrophied.

"Don't worry, Chas. Here's how it works." Isabel reclined in her chair rubbing her eyes, seemingly grateful for the chance to step back from what had been an intense conversation with Ambrogino. "We talked before about the ghosts, remember? Well, as it turns out, a huge shockwave of spiritual energy just devastated their world. Think of it like a hurricane, blowing through a city and destroying everything it touches. In the aftermath of this spiritual storm, the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead blurred a bit. In some places they were so weak, any spirit could force its way through. In other places, they didn't have to force their way through—the storm left gaping holes in the veil between the worlds."

Chas chimed in, wanting to make sure he understood. "Okay, so, that means what? There are ghosts out and about? Wandering through the world? What the fuck does that mean? Unless we have something specific to do with them, why should that matter at all?"

"It matters because of the consequences," Ambrogino added. "Know primarily that necromantic magic is a science, not an art. When creating the effects of death magic, quantifiable results are almost always reliably produced. If the desired result does not occur, something has failed somewhere in the chain of events required to bring it about. This may be something uncontrollable, such as great force of will on the part of a given ghost. It may have been a formulaic step the necromancer has omitted. It may have been something so minor as a brief lapse of concentration, or a mispronunciation of a spoken word. Whatever the case, some requirement has not been satisfied."

"Okay," Chas said, incredulous again, his eyes becoming slits.

"All that, we've established. In the case of the spirit storm's aftermath, however, something *else* has become a part of the equation—something unquantifiable. It might be a very potent Kindred, or an unthinkable powerful spirit," Ambrogino continued.

"Or, as some Kindred have guessed," Isabel interrupted, "it might be the hand of God Himself."

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Chas snorted. “God? You think God came down from heaven and started slapping vampires and ghosts around? Wouldn’t it have been a bit more... oh, I don’t know... fucking obvious? Wouldn’t He just cast lightning bolts down from the heavens or make the sun shine all day and night?”

Ambrogino stood, directing a scornful finger at Chas. “Do not presume to understand God, whelp. Before Him, you are nothing but a mote of dust in the cloud that circles the world. You’ve heard it before: ‘He works in mysterious ways.’ The simple fact that we can’t empirically find a cause for the storm or its results suggests something far beyond our capacity to understand, let alone master. Something more powerful than our magic, or indeed, the magic of anyone else who has come forth to offer a less mystical reason.”

Isabel cut in, hoping to defuse Ambrogino’s ire and bring them back to the subject. “But the situation with the ghosts is not the gravest matter, even though it does present us with the most immediate inconvenience. I mentioned God because it seems that the storm was not His intention. In fact, He seems to have taken steps to clean up the detritus left by the storm. The agents of God now want to take back the night—they want to destroy the ghosts who have forced their way back from their rightful deaths. Sometimes, they run afoul of vampires, whom they also consider monsters to be exterminated. This is what you ran into after your inexperienced handling of the Camarilla negotiation in Boston.”

Chas blushed inadvertently and felt a quick flash of red anger.

“The death of your attendant Victor also matches the *modus operandi* of these new hunters. A team of them has made its home in Las Vegas. We think they believed *he* was a vampire—you were sleeping in the bathroom to avoid the sun, and it didn’t even occur to them to check there. Uncertain of the best way to destroy a ‘vampire,’ they experimented and poisoned him. That was the almond smell you remember—don’t look so shocked; you know I can perceive your thoughts. Cyanide.”

“Okay,” Chas found his way back into the conversation, “then how does that relate to the other two things we’ve been chasing around? What does it have to do with the ‘old clan’ or whatever, and how does Benito fit into the picture?”

“Well, Chas, to be honest, Benito doesn’t directly fit into the immediate crisis. His disappearance those four months ago just coincidentally took place at the same time that we found out about the problem in the Underworld. Now, I’m sure Benito *knew* about what was going on, at least in some capacity, because he practices the black art himself, but he’s not an instrumental player in that particular chapter of the Giovanni drama,” Isabel confided. “I’m the first to admit that I’ve not pursued his disappearance with my full attentions because one missing Giovanni isn’t as important to the wellbeing of the entire clan as is the return of the clan we thought we’d exterminated in the past.”

Ambrogino interjected, “Which leads us to the second part of your question: the old clan itself. When the Giovanni first claimed the mantle of clanship, we had to make sure that no threat to our claim would surface. The Kindred who Embraced us had become an obstacle to us, rather than a benefactor. We destroyed his brood to the best of our abilities. I myself hunted what we thought to be the last surviving member of that bloodline to a castle in Eastern Europe, where I discussed the ethics of the matter with the legendary Dracula.

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“It would seem, however, that our efforts were incomplete. We underestimated our progenitors—they had learned much from the necromancy we taught them. Several of the more potent childer of Ashur managed to escape into the Underworld, where they could easily hide from us as they had not become true ghosts—we had no power over them while they cowered in the lands of the dead. We could not compel them to heed our call; we could not force them to serve us as they were still Kindred, albeit Kindred trapped in the world of spirits.

“After centuries, we became overconfident. We hadn’t heard anything from these Kindred for a very long time, and we just assumed that the Underworld had overwhelmed them, as it is an inhospitable place for any Kindred who stays there for a protracted period.

“We were wrong. The truth of the matter is that the old clan Kindred who escaped thrived in that hellish realm. They practiced their *nigromancy* unimpeded by the boundary between the worlds. The same veil that trapped them on the far side of the spirit world no longer separated them from the place where their mystic powers originated. Although the Giovanni created the magic that became the Kindred practice of necromancy, the old clan mastered it in the hundreds of years they spent beyond the Shroud.

“Finally, when the spirit storm withered the veil, the old clan took the chance to burst back through to the realm of the living—this world. Now, there aren’t many of these Kindred. I estimate perhaps twenty of them in all. But the old clan who managed to escape and grow are very powerful. The childe of the Kindred who Embraced Augustus Giovanni may even be among them. Only the most skilled at the time of our purge could have managed to flee to the Underworld, and they have since grown tremendously stronger.”

“So, just kicking their asses is out of the question,” Chas commented.

“Well, yes, to put it bluntly,” Ambrogino replied. “With creatures of that age and wile, the only hope one has is trickery. Something so old might be cunning indeed, but a physical confrontation is suicide. Some magical recourse must exist—such are the ends to which the foremost Giovanni necromancers have been researching.”

“Um, can I ask a question, then?” Chas ventured.

“Of course.”

“If we can’t beat this thing, and it’s far more powerful than us magically, why the fuck is Isabel chasing it? No offense, Isabel, I know you’re good at what you do, but you’re not as old as these things are and they’re probably a damn sight better with the death magic, too. I mean, I know I don’t have to go along with you, but I’m choosing to, at this point, but if it’s just going to get me killed, I’d like to know so I can seek some other opportunities, you know?”

Isabel smiled. “Ah, Chas; always able to add a sense of levity. What Ambrogino’s talking about is just conjecture. No one from our clan has verifiably seen one of these creatures and survived. Even Martino in Hong Kong saw only the briefest blur, which could have been anything, before fleeing his sire’s demise. We need to see this, to know it exists and to take from it what we can. If it doesn’t perceive me as a threat, I might be able to report back on the matter. Intelligence is a valuable resource.”

“But if it’s killing Giovanni...” Chas trailed off, unable to reason through the thought.

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“Not all Giovanni—the old clan seem to be starting with the ones personally responsible for their decimation, and then moving down the bloodlines,” Isabel added.

“So then why haven’t any of them come after you, Ambrogino?”

Ambrogino looked at Isabel, then back at Chas. “I’m not sure. My own abilities are quite potent, and perhaps they want to remove the lesser threats before focusing on a greater one such as myself.”

“I still don’t get it,” Chas spoke to the world in general.

“No one does, except the old clan,” Isabel confided in him. “Until we find out exactly what they want to do, all we can do is cover ourselves.”

“And I have a Kindred who can help you do just that,” Ambrogino added.

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**Monday, 25 October 1999, 10:53 PM**  
**Interstate 95**  
**Near Halethorpe, Maryland**

GF



The call from Lydia came on the fourth night after Theo had set her watching the Lexus. "He picked up the car," she said over the crackling line of the cell phone.

"Who?"

"Van Pel."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you now?"

"Just leaving the lot."

"Stay with him." Theo was several minutes south of the city and turned north immediately. "Keep me posted."

*Damn bastard*, he thought of Jan. They'd talked just last night, made the risky decision to pull back the second defensive line, except for the salient of the airport itself, and Jan had not said a damned thing to ease Theo's mind. In fact, the Ventrue had only made Theo more suspicious.

"Still seein' some packs gettin' into the city," Theo had said. "Might be another hit squad. Sure you don't want more security?"

"I'm fine here," Jan had assured him, then added, "and I'm not planning on leaving the inn until this is all resolved."

*Lyin' bastard*, Theo had thought then, as he did now. He leaned on the gas and shot northward, closer to the city. He wasn't looking for reassurance about the change in the defenses; that was, if dangerous, still all part of the plan. What concerned Theo was another part of the plan they had decided on back in August and not talked much about since: the spy, the high-level mole they both had decided had to be operating. That was Jan's job, to uncover the turncoat. God knew Theo had enough on his plate already. But as far as the Brujah archon knew, the spy was still operating. And they were getting very close to the point in the plan when a breach of secrecy would mean the failure of the whole undertaking. *And now Jan was lying to Theo. Maybe it was all unrelated... but Theo couldn't help instinctively connecting the dots, even if the shape of things they suggested was the last thing he wanted to see.*

Theo's thoughts were interrupted by the chirping of the phone in his pocket. "Yeah."

"Van Pel just picked up somebody at the Lord Baltimore Inn, out back, real quiet like."

*Lyin', fuckin' bastard.* "Who?"

"Couldn't tell. Just one, though."

"You still on 'em?"

"Yeah. Headin' back toward downtown."



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Theo could see the city proper ahead. He was inside the city limits now. He sped up even more. “Call back in three minutes.”

“Gotcha.” The line went dead.

*Pieterzoon, you lyin', fuckin' bastard. Don't make me kick your ass.* For a Ventrue—hell, any Kindred—to lie was not a big deal in and of itself. Theo had lied himself when he'd suggested that another hit squad might make it deep into Baltimore. No Sabbat was getting anywhere near the Inner Harbor. But Theo and Jan had established a fairly effective working relationship, and Theo was pretty sure that the Ventrue had been straight with him since that night in August when they'd found out about Buffalo. Now Jan was lying, and Theo couldn't help but suspect the worst. Could going rogue be Jan's best shot at upward mobility? After all, the old boys like Hardestadt weren't going anywhere, fast or otherwise, and that meant that nobody under them was going anywhere either. Theo hoped that he was wrong, but if he wasn't, the Camarilla here in the U.S. was sunk. And that would reflect poorly on him, as the archon of Clan Brujah present on the scene. And *that* made him mad.

Three minutes. The phone rang again.

“Turned away from downtown,” Lydia said. “Headin' north on Charles. Just passed... Saratoga.”

Theo was near Charles Street, but farther south. He stuffed the phone back into a pocket and pressed on northward as quickly as he could without waving a red flag for the cops. There wasn't too much traffic. The lights were the problem. He caught one red, took a quick right, left at the next two green lights, then right back onto Charles.

The phone again. “Turnin' left onto Franklin.”

“I see you,” Theo said. He put away the phone, shot forward to the intersection with Franklin Street and left through a yellow. He saw Lydia in the Pontiac ahead and made sure he had a bead on the Lexus before he waved her off. She'd done her part. He would handle it from here. She made eye contact, hesitated, gave him that questioning look: *Are you sure?* He waved her off again, and she turned down a side street.

Theo turned his full attention to the Lexus. It was about a block and a half ahead of him. He dropped back a little farther—a motorcycle was not the most inconspicuous way to follow someone—but kept a close eye on the traffic signals. He didn't want to lose sight of the beige car. A forced detour around the block to avoid a red light was no longer a good option.

As Theo followed along behind, he felt a fire rising in his gut, a cold fire, one that he knew if he didn't hold down would grow red hot, and then would open the way for hunger, the uncontrollable hunger. He felt the fire more keenly than the rumble of his bike or the wind against his face. His anger, which was never far away, was stoked by frustration, resentment. Kindred like Lydia, he knew, were trying to do their part, to do what was right, to keep the Sabbat from taking everything. Because as depraved and deceitful as the Camarilla was, the Sabbat was ten times worse, a hundred times. But so many of the Kindred were in it only for themselves, for their own personal agendas. Damn the Camarilla, and the city, and everyone else in the world for that matter.

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Theo had his own long laundry list of damnables, and it was growing more extensive every night: Damn all the dead weight that Theo was compelled to move around. Jasmine and others like her might be good for a debate society or a campus protest, but on the street, once bullets started flying, they weren't worth shit. Damn Pieterzoon for lying and for his ambition, for whatever angle it was that he was playing. Damn Hardestadt and all the other old-timers. If they weren't so hell-bent on keeping all the younger Kindred in their places, then Jan and his type might not be driven to scheme and *seize* power, giving the elders that much more reason to be paranoid. Damn all of Clan Ventrue for always being such lying, conniving pricks, for forcing Theo to be suspicious of them. There was no way that he could come right out and ask Jan about the spy, or about why he was lying about the car. The Ventrue would lie and lie again, and Theo would never find out the truth. The only way was to confront Pieterzoon once there was no turning back.

Basic decency was too much to ask for; it was too lofty a goal. Mutual self-interest, if you were lucky, was the closest you were going to get. That was the way of the world, Kindred or kine. The best you could do was stake out your own moral ground, draw that line in the sand, and then fucking bust the head of anybody that stepped over.

Those were Theo's sentiments as the Lexus turned off Franklin Street and he followed. They were soon cruising through a portion of Baltimore reserved for the old-money families. Majestic homes on walled estates spoke of wealth and luxury—and of isolation from the real world. The Lexus was easing along at thirty-five, and there were few other cars on the road here. Theo dropped farther behind. He killed his headlight. He toyed with the idea of ditching his bike altogether—he could easily keep up with the Lexus on foot at this speed—but there was always the chance that van Pel was only cutting through the ritzy neighborhood and would get back on a highway, so Theo watched from as far away as the gentle curves allowed. All the while, the fire in his belly was growing more intense, gaining strength and heat.

It was the red fire, the hunger, that over a hundred years ago had taken hold of him the night he had rid the world of Master Bell, plantation owner, slave holder, violator of Theo's family. It was the red fire, the hunger, that had not let Theo stop at that. He'd come to his senses amidst flames and carnage, the plantation house an inferno, and at the slaves' quarters, the ground littered with bodies. Bodies he recognized, too many of them actually members of his mortal family. It was not the last atrocity Theo would commit over the years, but like all the other times, he had been driven to it. Circumstances, injustice, cruelty, and then the anger, always the anger and the fire.

He was holding it down tonight. Mostly. Still, he wasn't completely in control. Tonight he wasn't the same calm and collected man who regularly tracked down Sabbat interlopers and splattered them all over the pavement. He was aware of that. He was also aware that tonight's dealings were a bit touchier than the usual search-and-destroy outings. He was aware—but he wasn't feeling inclined toward finesse.

And so, when he saw the Lexus start to pull into a gated drive, Theo felt almost as if he were merely a spectator. His rational mind watched as he gunned the engine and his motorcycle shot forward, as he flicked the headlight back on and barreled

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toward the passenger's side of the Lexus. He closed the distance to the car before the large, electronic gates had swung halfway open. As the motorcycle slid and screeched to a halt just at the front bumper of the Lexus, two armed guards, ghouls both, were rushing forward. Theo had his shotgun unhooked from within his jacket, in hand, and cocked before the guards could get off a shot. He didn't level the SPAS at them, and they somehow sensed his restraint and held their own fire, avoiding for the moment a certain bloodbath. For a long, tense moment, they all faced one another. The Lexus idled quietly, Theo's bike less so, and the gate, with a slight rattle, swung open.

Then the rear passenger's window on the Lexus rolled down with a calm hum. The tinted glass gave way to the shadows of the interior, and a thin, unnaturally pale face. The paleness was not a result of fright or agitation. The face was fairly expressionless, in fact. A streetlight reflected off Jan Pieterzoon's glasses. He straightened his tie ever so slightly.

"It's all right, guards," Pieterzoon said. "He's with us."

The guards hesitated, but holstered their weapons. Theo hooked the SPAS back in his jacket and backed up his bike a few feet. The tinted window hummed closed again, and the Lexus moved forward slowly up the sloped drive. Theo followed.

As they drove up the hill, Theo was glad at least that Jan had faced him. Maybe the Brujah's suspicions were totally baseless—at least about the spy business. Or maybe that's what Pieterzoon wanted him to think. Could Jan have faced him that calmly if there was something going on here that the Brujah couldn't find out about? Maybe. Pieterzoon had balls. Theo had to give him that. He'd watched the Ventrue, alone, outgunned, and seriously injured, outmaneuver a Sabbat hit squad. That as much as anything had convinced Theo that Jan was worth helping and had allowed them to put into effect a plan that might just salvage Camarilla prestige, if not all of the cities that were already gone. Still, though, Theo only trusted a Ventrue about as far as he could throw him. Hell, not even that far.

"Good evening, Theo," Jan said as he and van Pel were getting out of the Lexus.

Van Pel handed the keys to one of two waiting ghouls playing valet. Theo didn't offer his bike keys, and the second ghoul didn't ask. Hans van Pel, Jan's executive assistant, or some bullshit like that, was tougher looking than his boss: taller, burlier, chin and jaw more squared, he looked older too. He looked, Theo thought, like a Nazi, but maybe that was just Theo's Brujah showing. Van Pel opened the door for the two Kindred and managed to look at the same time both respectful of Jan and discreetly disdainful of Theo. Theo let it slide. He'd found over the years that he could get a lot of mileage out of other clans' snobbery. He welcomed being underestimated. It was made easier to take by the knowledge that he could, any time he wanted, reach out and break van Pel's goddamned neck, and Jan wouldn't so much as blink. Nobody was going to jeopardize their relationship with an archon over a ghoul. Apparently van Pel hadn't thought that matter all the way through to its logical conclusion. He couldn't know how close he'd come to catching Theo on the wrong night for that kind of shit.

Because the fire wasn't gone. The confrontation at the gate had only tempered it slightly. Theo was completely in control again. He was glad that Jan had faced him. If the Ventrue had tried to cut and run, Theo knew what could have happened. The

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two ghouls would have been no problem—the three ghouls, make that, because van Pel would have found himself stuffed through the windshield and with his dick for a hood ornament. The trouble would have come after the fact, after Theo had broken Jan in half. Probably the Brujah wouldn't have killed Jan permanently, because Theo still had questions about the spy, and the plan hadn't yet run its course. He would have gotten an earful later from Pascek, though. But, hell, it wouldn't have been the first time. And probably not the last.

But Jan had rolled down the window instead of making a break for it, and now they were playing nice. For the moment. So Theo held the fire down.

As they made their way across the main entry hall, Jan, not looking at Theo, said, "Your company is an unexpected pleasure." It was the kind of smart-ass Ventrue bullshit that Theo had no use for.

"Yeah," Theo said. "Imagine my surprise, meetin' you out here when you weren't leavin' the inn until all this was resolved."

They began to ascend a large curving staircase. This mansion, despite being architecturally different, reminded Theo of the Bell plantation house. It reminded him also of so many of the halls of power he had gained access to as a representative of Clan Brujah—as an archon he'd gained that access, but not a taste for the surroundings. They were always so similar. No matter what city or continent; whether the estate was in the wide spaces of the countryside or tucked in among others of its kind in town; no matter last century or this; classical, neo-classical, art deco, southwestern; it just didn't matter. The elders, just like Master Bell, were part of the privileged class, the haves who wanted both to flaunt their status and to hide away in safety from the have-nots who made up most of the world.

And this, the insular world of privilege, was the world that Jan Pieterzoon belonged to, that he felt comfortable in. Theo knew that instinctively, and tonight only served to prove him right. Whatever gains he and Jan achieved, whatever level of success they reached against the Sabbat, it was still just a marriage of convenience. Theo wanted to stop the Sabbat because the world would be fucked if he didn't. Jan wanted to stop the Sabbat because his sire told him to.

Climbing the steps, Theo still wasn't sure what exactly he'd busted in on. Jan wasn't about to say. He enjoyed too much knowing more than anybody else; he liked to lord it over people, kind of like the Nosferatu, except they weren't generally so arrogant about it. Maybe because a lot of their so-called secrets were worthless bullshit. Small return for spending eternity going through people's garbage. At least when the Ventrue held out on you, it was usually important—which wasn't necessarily a good thing.

So Theo tromped along with Jan and his flunkie. The Dutchman seemed to know where he was going. At least there wasn't a fucking butler, although van Pel had enough of a stick up his ass to make up for the fact. Theo was ready for anything—

Anything except what he saw when van Pel opened a set of double doors for the Kindred, and they walked into some kind of sitting room. There was the small fire in the fireplace—always the damned fire, never mind the idiocy of it; it was a status thing—and the giant mirror and the grandfather clock and the fucking

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satin upholstery, but what shocked Theo, *surprised the shit out of him*, was not what but *who*.

Occupying two of three ornate, straight-back chairs were two other Kindred. Two whom Theo recognized. Two who by all rights should not have been there.

The first was a very young woman—*appeared* to be a very young woman—delicate, almost frail, but Theo knew better than to trust that impression of her. He knew that a better, more accurate gauge of her capabilities was to be found in her eyes. For the brief instant that he met her gaze, her eyes shone with an intensity that had borne her through more centuries than Theo had seen. For a moment, the intensity bordered on hostility, irritation—she hadn't expected him—but then it was as if a shield descended over her face. Emotion and human sentiment vanished, but not activity; she took in and assessed every detail, formed conclusions and convictions in mere seconds, asserted her superiority over the circumstances before the first word was spoken.

"Archon Bell," said Justicar Lucinde of Clan Ventrue, "what an unexpected pleasure."

*An unexpected pleasure.* Exactly what Jan had said. Nothing, Theo noticed, was ever a *surprise*, even when it was. Never, *What the fuck are you doing here?* which was what Theo thought but didn't say. *An unexpected pleasure.* That must be what it said in the Ventrue Handbook under: "What to say when some asshole barges in where you don't want him."

The other Kindred did not speak. His presence was, if less astounding—he was known to operate in Baltimore, after all—potentially more troublesome in its implications. Heshu Ruhadze's right hand rested easily atop the sterling-silver handle of his cane. His skin, his handsomely bald head, was slightly lighter, a richer brown, than Theo's skin. If Theo had not recognized Heshu, the Setite would not have seemed out of place. He was completely at ease amidst the trappings of wealth, sitting straight in his pressed suit. The firelight sparkled against his cane and against the monocle partially tucked within his crisp shirt's breast pocket.

"Jan," Lucinde's voice was pleasant, but formal and curt, "have your man bring another chair."

As van Pel hastened to obey, a series of competing thoughts were running through Theo's mind: Lucinde was in town. How long had she been here? Why keep her presence secret when that knowledge could easily prop up the morale of the city's Camarilla defenders? What the hell was she doing meeting with Ruhadze? Sure, the Setite might be able to help the cause, but those arrangements could be handled at lower levels. Pieterzoon was enough of a luminary in the clan that Heshu would be shown appropriate respect meeting with him instead of a justicar. There had to be something else going on, something bigger than this city, bigger than the plan—the plan as Theo knew it.

Jan waited to claim the third chair until van Pel returned with a fourth.

"Do join us, Archon, Mr. Pieterzoon," Lucinde said.

Theo sat. She wasn't going to kick him out. Theoretically she could; she out-ranked him, even though Pascek was his boss and Theo didn't owe the Ventrue justicar any personal allegiance. But it would be messy if she tried and Theo wanted to kick up a fuss. He was the highest-ranking official on the ground, had been from the start. If Lucinde didn't want to rangle him too badly, which seemed to be the case so far, either it was

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simply more useful for her purposes to keep Theo on board, or there was some agreement between her and Pascek behind the scenes. Not that Pascek, the fanatical, paranoid bastard, would bother to tell his own archon. So Theo was left to puzzle it out.

“Archon,” said Lucinde, her eyes maintaining the hard shield of formality, “I believe you might be familiar with Mr. Ruhadze?”

Theo nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“We have met,” said Hesha.

The Setite’s presence complicated matters for Theo. Even with a justicar, he would have tended toward the blunt confrontation; he had already committed himself to that path, barging in uninvited and unannounced. Lucinde and Jan would have told him something, and he would have set about confirming or disproving their story. With Hesha there, however, Theo was reluctant to air any dirty laundry. Suspicion among members of the Camarilla, especially among key players, was not something to vent in front of a Setite, especially this Setite. Not that anybody denied the distrust, but it just wasn’t smart to give a snake an opening to slither into.

“And, Jan Pieterzoon,” Lucinde continued, “I believe you know Mr. Ruhadze.”

“Only by reputation,” said Jan, self-consciously ambiguous, disarmingly making light of the tension between the clans. Hesha nodded appreciatively.

“I believe, Mr. Pieterzoon,” Lucinde said, “that we should attend to the archon’s business first, so as not to waste his valuable time.”

“I agree. Archon Bell,” Jan said, adopting Lucinde’s formal parlance, “As we have discussed before, Mr. Ruhadze had various and long-standing interests in Baltimore, and naturally the recent passing of Prince Garlotte is of great concern to him.”

Theo’s mind shifted back to that whole matter. He hadn’t really considered Hesha as a possibility. Did the Setite have his fangs in Katrina somehow? Did he see an opening to slide in and take the city that might slip through the cracks between Camarilla and Sabbat?

“As a gesture of goodwill and mutual concern,” Jan continued, “Mr. Ruhadze has brought to our attention certain information that might be relevant.”

*Goodwill, my ass,* Theo thought.

Jan removed his wire-rimmed glasses and cleaned them with a silk handkerchief as he spoke. “Apparently, the prince’s childe, Katrina, did not in fact go down with the ship, so to speak.”

Theo leaned back slowly, pressed his back against the back of his chair, and folded his arms. “And...?”

“The fact that she survives is perhaps less significant than the fact that she has been in hiding since the explosion.” Jan replaced his glasses.

“You think she had something to do with it?” Theo asked.

“Perhaps,” said Jan.

Theo scratched the rough stubble of his chin. He stared for nearly a full thirty seconds at the small flames dancing above the gas logs, as if he were considering the possibility that Katrina had blown up her sire. What the Brujah actually wondered was why, if they knew Katrina was still around and they thought she’d done it, hadn’t they just taken her

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down? It wouldn't be that hard. Maybe they planned to, and with him showing up unexpectedly, this was the easiest bone to toss him. It was possible, the Brujah knew, that they had already found the girl, that they knew he had let her go that night. Or, he knew, it was possible that Hesha, or *all of them* for that matter, had been the impetus behind Katrina's revenge. If they wanted him to finish her, that would be a nice, tidy little end to the affair.

"You think somebody put her up to it?" Theo asked. He looked from Jan to Lucinde to Hesha. He wasn't accusing them, not explicitly, but he wanted to expand the area of questioning. He didn't want to give them too easy an out.

"It is... possible," Jan said.

Theo sat silently again. He didn't bother to look more at the other three. They were too practiced at deceit for him to learn anything from their expressions or body language. He was the same way, he knew. On the street sometimes lying was required. The farther from the street, the higher up the ladder, the more it was required. Except these three would call it "dissembling." They couldn't even be honest about lying.

"Archon," said Lucinde, her confidence belying her youthful appearance, "could you look into this matter? Prince Goldwin has yet to name a new sheriff, and I fear there would be a certain conflict of interests, regardless."

*Yeah, he might conflict with your interests,* Theo thought, then said flatly, "I can do it."

"Good." Lucinde's smile seemed amazingly devoid of ruthlessness. "Good."

"Hans," said Jan, lifting a hand toward the ghoul but not looking. Van Pel produced a small pad of paper, which he handed to his master. Jan uncapped a fountain pen and made a brief notation. He tore loose the sheet of paper and handed it to Theo. "Here is the address where she is staying."

Theo looked at the address; he knew the area. He stuffed the paper into his pocket. The other three Kindred were watching him, waiting, but Theo didn't have anything else to say. He couldn't very well address his real concerns, not with Hesha there, but there would be time later. Theo would make sure of that.

For now, he stood, grimly, nodded to each of the personages, "Lucinde, Jan, Hesha," and left.

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**Tuesday, 26 October 1999, 2:41 AM**  
**Cherry Hill**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



Theo didn't like it at all. Not one bit.

Lucinde was in Baltimore. He didn't know how long she'd been in the city. He still wouldn't have known she was there at all if he hadn't decided something was fishy about the car that Pieterzoon was having fixed up on the sly.

Even knowing, Theo still wasn't happy. Far from it. But he felt a little better now that he was tearing through the night on his motorcycle. The roar of the engine was very like the Brujah's style, much more than the quiet machinations of the Ventrue, the deceivers. Deceive your enemies—that Theo understood. Work with your friends. Work for a common goal. That's how it should be.

*Fuck them*, Theo thought. He knew it didn't work that way. But it should. The problem was, there were no friends, only allies. Allies of convenience; allies while you were within earshot, if that.

It wasn't even that Jan and Lucinde had done anything really horrible. Hell, Theo knew that. He would even count the two of them among the "decent" Kindred, which wasn't saying too much. They were barely in Pascek's league as far as conniving, fuck-you, bend-over-and-take-it-up-the-ass politics went. Still, they pissed Theo off.

Lucinde, of course, could go wherever the hell she wanted to go. Theo could have quibbled protocol, the fact that she didn't bother to let him know she was around—how was he supposed to defend the damned city when he didn't know the true extent of his resources?—but he would be on shaky ground. Besides—protocol. When the hell had Theo ever argued points of protocol?

It wasn't some silly Toreador thing either, like he had his feelings hurt, or thought that he'd been snubbed. Those were sensibilities that Theo hadn't known during life—a slave doesn't have feelings, not like that; he's too busy surviving—and he hadn't developed them during unlife. The truth of the matter was that, by pulling this stunt, Lucinde was undercutting what confidence Theo had in Jan, confidence that they could work together, that they could carry out the plan—or that Jan could or would carry out his part of it. If Jan had kept this from Theo, what other important details were hidden? Lucinde was making Theo's job harder, and that was making it less likely that the Camarilla would hold out on the East Coast, and *that*, promoting the interests of the Camarilla, was supposed to be her number-one fucking job.

But maybe her sneaking around had more to do with Heshia. Theo didn't buy for a second that shit about a gesture of goodwill. The Setite might actually have had information about Katrina, but no way in hell was that the only thing he was there to talk about with Lucinde. The more Theo thought about it, the less it made sense for Heshia to have orchestrated Garlotte's destruction. The former prince and Ruhadze had more or less coexisted for many years—unless some major disagreement had come up in the recent past that Theo didn't know about. Possible. Besides that, though, it was not the most auspicious time to take over a city, with the Sabbath closing in—unless the Setite had a deal with the Sabbath. Again, possible.



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*Shit*, Theo thought. Too many possibilities, and none of them as urgent as what he was doing at the moment. Unlike the ritzy part of town where Lucinde was hanging out, the Cherry Hill neighborhood was not asleep and quiet. Here, at night, the dregs rose to the surface. Pimps and prostitutes. Open-air drug markets. Young men, mostly black, who'd be lucky to live beyond twenty or twenty-five. Overdose. Violence. AIDS. They either thought they were indestructible, immortal, or else they just didn't care. Fatalism led to fatalities. Theo didn't seem out of place. Nobody bothered him. Maybe it was the touch of death that rode with him. Somewhere in their gut, those people on the street recognized him, knew him for what he was, kept their distance.

The address that Jan had given Theo, the address where Katrina was supposedly hiding out, was not far from the house that had been her haven before she blew her sire to bits. Not very smart, staying so close to home, and apparently some flunky of Ruhadze's had spotted her and followed her. Then again, this particular child of Garlotte's was not exactly noted for her subtlety and misdirection. Blowing up the prince and his entire ship in the middle of his city was a lot of things, but subtle was not one of them.

Theo parked down the block and made his way along the cracked sidewalk. The house was a broken-down shack, flimsy, maybe forty years old, without much hope of making it to be much older. The front door had even less hope. Theo kicked it in, sending splintered wood from door and door frame cascading into the living room.

Before the black girl Katrina was sitting beside could open her mouth to scream, Katrina was off the couch and away in a blur. Theo was ready for that. The mortal was opening her mouth but still had not screamed when Theo cut Katrina off at the kitchen door. He gave her an elbow to the jaw, and she sprawled into the kitchen table. The lone chair clattered across the room.

Finally, the scream.

Theo looked back at the black girl, maybe eighteen years old. He pointed toward the front door—what *had* been the front door. "Get the fuck out. Now."

The girl's scream died away instantly, but her mouth stayed open. She almost fell over herself scrambling out the door. Theo turned back to Katrina. She was about to jump up and bolt again.

"Don't," Theo said, "or it'll be the last fuckin' thing you do."

Katrina froze. Then, slowly, she picked herself up from the floor. She rubbed her jaw. It didn't seem to be broken, although Theo's blow could have broken a mortal's neck.

"Your friend gonna bring help?" Theo asked.

"Like who? Who the fuck's gonna help me?"

"I feel real sorry for you," Theo said. "I thought I told you to get outta town."

Katrina crossed her arms, set her hip defiantly. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"I look like a travel agent?"

They stood staring each other down for several seconds. "So you here to finish me?" Katrina asked finally.

"If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead by now."

"That's what I figured. What do you want then, or are you just slummin' tonight?"

"Sit down and shut the fuck up."

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Katrina glared but righted the chair and sat. She brushed off her jeans and the tight, sleeveless T-shirt she was wearing. “Havin’ second thoughts about lettin’ me go?”

“More every minute.” Theo eased back against the chipped, dirty counter. “Listen good. Two things. First, I’ve got a question for you.”

“Then you’re gonna finish me.”

“I *might* if you don’t shut the fuck up. Where’d you get the explosives? I don’t figure you for the type to have a chemistry set in the basement.”

“Some guy. He offered. I took him up on it.”

“This guy have a name?”

Katrina shrugged. “Probably. He didn’t say. I didn’t ask.”

“So let me get this straight. This guy you don’t know, don’t know his name, comes up to you for no reason at all and offers to sell you a case of dynamite.”

“Plastic explosives. Showed me how to use ’em too. And he gave ’em to me, didn’t sell ’em.”

“Kindred?”

“Yeah, I think.”

“Who’d he work for?” Theo held up his hands. “No, let me guess. He didn’t say. You didn’t ask.”

“You’re pretty damn smart for a Brujah.”

“You’re gonna be pretty damn flat for a Ventrue, you don’t watch it.” The threat was not made in jest, and Katrina, still defiant but not quite as confrontational, sank back into her chair. “How did you meet him?”

“He found me. Said he had something I might want. Just went on from there.”

“It happen around here, this neighborhood?”

“Yeah. I’m not hard to find.”

“Yeah, and that better change if you wanna keep on wakin’ up.” Theo ignored Katrina’s sneer. “He give you the stuff right then, or come back?”

“He told me to get in touch with him if I was interested. I was supposed to go to this bar up at Park Heights called Dewey’s Sweatshop.”

“Sounds classy.”

“Tell me about it. I ain’t picky, but this was a real lowball joint. But I went, like he said. I asked the bartender if Johnny was around—”

“That the guy’s name?” Theo interrupted. “Johnny?”

“I don’t know. I think it was more like a password, you know? Anyhow, I ask if Johnny’s around. Bartender says no, but I give him a piece of paper with a time written on it. Then I meet the guy the next night at that time.”

“What about the bartender?”

“Fat guy with a beard. Not one of us. Too sweaty. Must be Dewey.”

“And you didn’t even try to find out who this Johnny guy was workin’ for?”

“Why the fuck should I care?” Katrina asked.

“So you’d know who was settin’ you up to kill Garlotte and then let you take the fall.”

“Look, man...” Katrina stood up and knocked the chair back against the counter. She started pacing, agitated, not nervous, back and forth in the tiny space of the kitchen,

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like a rat in a cage. “Maybe it’s different for you, being such a big badass and all, but anything I do, *somebody’s* gonna be yankin’ my chain. I got what I wanted out of this, and that’s all that mattered. Garlotte’s history. *He’s* not yankin’ my chain anymore. If somebody else got what they wanted too, fine. If I get fucked before it’s all over, well that’s just too fuckin’ bad for me. You can send me a sympathy card, you Brujah archon asshole. But I tell you one thing, it won’t be Garlotte tellin’ me what to do. Not anymore.”

Theo just watched her, watched her get herself all worked up, watched herself blow off steam, this little white girl who wasn’t going to play by anybody’s rules. Her type was a dime a dozen. Maybe cheaper than that. She just happened to have had access to a prince, to a careless prince, and she’d made the most of her opportunities. But there was something else. Otherwise, Theo would have crushed her that night on the dock. She sounded more like a Brujah than a Ventruer; there was enough anger. But that was true of any number of anarchs or, of the occasional Ventruer who jumped to the Sabbat, *antitribu*. As Theo watched her, he finally, after two weeks of wondering about it on and off, realized what it was that had prompted him to spare her: She just didn’t care.

It wasn’t that she didn’t care about what she was doing. In fact, she cared so much about whatever she had set her mind on—revenge against Garlotte, standing up to Theo—that she didn’t care about the consequences. That night on the dock, she hadn’t run. Sure, after the explosion she’d been knocked senseless, but she hadn’t run before, when Theo wouldn’t have known to chase her. And tonight she wasn’t cowed by facing an archon who could, quite justifiably, put her down. Confidence? Fatalism? Stupidity? Balls? Whatever exactly it was, it could take her a long way... or it could get her killed. Really soon.

“Is there anything else you can tell me about the guy?” Theo asked when Katrina realized that he was watching her, studying her.

She glowered at him for a long moment, then sighed. “Yeah. He’s ugly. Not Nossie ugly, but ugly. When I saw him, he needed a shave and a shower. Receding hairline. And he couldn’t keep his fuckin’ hands to himself.”

“What?”

Katrina seemed to grow angry at the thought. “He kept, like... not feelin’ me up or anything, but touchin’ my arm when he was talkin’ to me. Gave me the creeps. I went home and took a shower.” Theo waited, but Katrina just smiled sarcastically and shrugged. “That’s it, cowboy. You know what I know. Now what? Lights out?”

Theo laughed, and enjoyed the fact that that seemed to make her angry all over again. “You must be the luckiest damn person in the world for nobody to have killed you already.”

“We’re all—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Theo cut her off. “We’re all dead already. Save it, sister. Look. I told you once to get the hell out of Baltimore, and I guess it turned out okay that you didn’t. But you’re damn lucky that whoever set you up for this didn’t decide to clean up afterward. Why, I don’t know. Unless he figured you were stupid enough to get yourself killed without his help—which ain’t too far from the truth.”

“Well, you can—”

Theo pointed a beefy finger at Katrina, and she stopped mid-protest.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want, that’s what I can do,” Theo said. “And this is what I want to do.” He stood there for a few seconds, finger stretched toward Katrina like a dagger. The slightest signs of hesitance crept into her face, her posture. Then Theo took

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an old newspaper, a half-finished crossword, from the counter, and a pen that was lying nearby. He tore a small strip from the paper and jotted down a name. He held the strip of paper toward Katrina. Very cautiously, she took it from him.

“This is what you do,” Theo said. “You get that girl that was here... what’s her name?”

“Angela.”

“You get Angela. You steal a car if you have to, and you drive. West. You drive at night. She drives during the day. You ride in the damn trunk. You change your name, and you stay the hell away from here, away from the East Coast. Go to San Francisco. Ask around till you find that guy,” Theo pointed at the slip of paper he’d handed her. “You should be able to find him around the docks.”

Katrina looked at the name on the paper. “Friend of yours?”

“No. Matter of fact, don’t mention my name or he’ll kick your fuckin’ ass and dump you in the Bay. You don’t know me. Leave me out of it, he’ll probably help you get set up out there. Got it?”

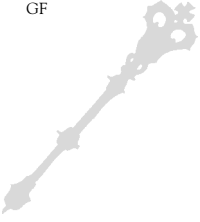
“Uh... yeah.”

“And I mean *tonight*. I mean you’re gone in the next hour, the next half fuckin’ hour. You don’t listen to me this time...”

“Right. All right.”

Theo waited, glared at her long enough to make sure that she was taking him seriously, then he turned and walked past the splintered pieces of door and door frame that littered the living-room floor.

Outside, the drug dealers scattered at the sight of him. Fatalistic or not, they could see death walking, and, this time, they were smart enough to get away.



**Tuesday, 26 October 1999, 2:35 AM**  
**A private mansion**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

“Can you arrange the meeting?” Lucinde asked, perhaps an hour after Theo Bell had left.

“Certainly,” said Jan. “I don’t foresee any difficulties.”

“Other than the usual Malkavian proclivities,” Lucinde suggested.

Hesha smiled, politely, not genuinely amused. He, appropriately, did not wish to convey the impression that he was allying himself with the Camarilla, with the Ventrue, so he let slip occasional glimpses of his disdain for them. Lucinde took no offense. The Setite’s scorn was no more sincere than the thin veil of civility through which it glimmered. They were not all so very different, Jan mused.

“Of course,” Jan said. He too smiled politely at the handsome African. The younger Ventrue’s graciousness was slightly more forced than was his justicar’s, however, and intentionally so. He harbored considerably more reservations than did Lucinde concerning this agreement into which she had just entered. Undoubtedly because she merely made the agreement; it was Jan’s responsibility to carry it through. Better, then, he decided, not to appear too willing to cooperate; better to keep Hesha at an obvious arm’s length, to make sure the Setite fulfilled every letter of the agreement. There was no call for camaraderie with clans that didn’t claim their rightful place—and fulfill their obligations—among the Camarilla, but instead attempted to use the sect when it suited their purposes.

Why, Jan wondered, should he treat Ruhadze any better than they would someone like Bell, who had proved his worth, many times over, to the Camarilla? Jan considered the task, the test, that they had set before Theo. The Ventrue was troubled by the possibility that Theo’s services might be lost to the Camarilla. But, as Lucinde had pointed out, they had to be sure. Besides, one only went so far in arguing a point with a justicar, especially on someone else’s behalf. Add to that the fact that Pascek apparently agreed. One did not argue with two justicars. Period.

So Jan was left to deal with the Setite. And to hope that Theo passed the test.

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**Tuesday, 26 October 1999, 10:15 PM**  
**Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



“Tell Pieterzoon I’m here.”

Anton Baas, head of Jan’s security detail, regarded Theo for a moment with that aloof, European detachment that annoyed Theo so much. Then Baas nodded to one of the two men beside him—all three were ghouls—who slipped within the double doors to Jan’s suite and reappeared a few seconds later to nod back at Baas. Baas opened the door wide and stepped aside for Theo to pass.

Inside, Pieterzoon and van Pel were seated at a table that held a sizeable stack of leather-bound ledgers. Jan removed his glasses, folded them, and slipped them into his breast pocket. He closed the portfolio before him and placed it atop the stack of its mates.

“Theo, I was expecting you,” Jan said. “I imagine we have much to discuss.”

At least, Theo thought, the Ventrue wasn’t pretending that nothing had happened last night. “I imagine that too,” Theo said.

“That will be all for now, Hans,” Jan said. He and Theo watched each other closely, neither speaking or moving, as van Pel gathered together the ledgers and showed himself out.

“How long has she been here?” Theo asked as soon as the doors closed.

“Not long. Two weeks.”

“When were you gonna tell me?”

“There was no need.”

The answer seemed truthful enough to Theo, and that in itself was something. It would have been easy enough for Jan to dangle some assuaging lie about how they were going to let Theo in on the secret in just another night or two.

“Theo, I did not know more than a few nights in advance that she would be arriving, and I was given explicit instructions to say nothing. To anyone.”

Theo took the seat that van Pel had vacated. Jan’s explanation seemed likely enough—not that that meant it was true. The truth could just as easily be that this was a line to insulate Jan from the subterfuge, to keep Theo on board and happy.

“Two weeks,” Theo said. “So she got here just before Garlotte’s big bang. Her idea? Yours?”

Jan’s eyes narrowed, almost quizzically. He was not the least insulted by the suggestion. “Because he would never agree to the plan? No. Though that was actually one of the reasons for her coming. I did not have great hopes for your embassy to Garlotte that night. I also thought, as did the justicar, that I had perhaps expended as much of the prince’s favor as was wise and that a new, more highly and more officially placed voice was called for. No, we did not destroy Garlotte. We were quite surprised by that turn of events, in fact, and not greatly pleased. The justicar could have persuaded him to accept the plan.”

*Shit.* Theo kicked himself for not seeing that one. But it was so easy to assume the worst, most devious motivations after discovering deception—easy, and often correct.

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Not this time. Maybe. Theo had even suspected Jan of being the spy, and though he hadn't disproved it, the Brujah had to believe that Lucinde wouldn't be working closely with the bastard if there was any question of his passing on information to the Sabbat.

"I couldn't tell you any of this last night," Jan said. "Not with Heshia there. Not with Lucinde there too, really. She would prefer to play the hand closer to our vest."

"Then why are you tellin' me?" Theo challenged him.

"Why did you support me when it would have been easier to take Garlotte's side, or that of Lladislas, your clansman?"

Theo didn't answer at first. He sat back in his chair, crossed his arms, then said, "We needed somebody from outside, somebody with broader connections, somebody less provincial."

"My thoughts exactly. In short, you chose what you thought would be most effective for our cause, despite whatever you thought about me. I don't have illusions that we'll leave this city, this situation, and exchange postcards. I'm not speaking with you tonight out of any sense of friendship or altruism, and I know you'd never expect that. But no matter what our respective justicars may think, I think that you will be the most service to the Camarilla if you know the broader picture."

Theo's first impulse was anger. Who the fuck was this Ventrue to tell *him*, an archon, about the broader picture? But, Theo realized quickly, Lucinde seemed to have taken Jan into her confidence, and that might provide information from a circle that would otherwise be kept from even an archon. No point getting pissed off and being insulted.

"Okay then," Theo said. "You said talkin' to Garlotte was one reason she came. What were the others?"

"That was the primary reason she wanted to be physically present, but she's also been quite helpful in my negotiations with the Giovanni. Isabel and her folk proved resistant to my Boston gambit. I'm afraid that Jacques Gauthier was less than adequate as an envoy. At any rate, with Lucinde's backing, I was able to exact the concessions we require from the Giovanni—"

"How?" Theo was skeptical.

Jan, on the other hand, seemed to relish divulging the details of this particular scheme. He was proud of his accomplishment—that, Theo noted, might be something he could use against the Ventrue some night, if the need arose. "A few like-minded financiers can indeed produce miracles—provided they are the right financiers and are amenable to guidance." Jan rubbed his hands together. "Several strategic sell-offs were sufficient to spark a rapid devaluation of the Italian lira and, not coincidentally, to convince certain individuals within Clan Giovanni that it was in their best interests to agree to a few limited and reasonable requests. It wasn't even a risk to the Masquerade, really. The only thing that collapses in Italy more often than the exchange rate is the government."

"What about Heshia?" Theo pressed, less than interested in exchange rates. "A Setite doesn't offer a token of goodwill unless he's gonna get something out of it."

"Just like a Ventrue?" Jan asked with a wry grin.

"Same ballpark."

"Heshia actually approached us. He did bring the information regarding Garlotte's childe, but that was less significant than what he was able to offer about the Eye of Hazimel."

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“The Eye of what?”

“Not what, whom. Or perhaps what applies as well. Hazimel. According to legend, an ancient Ravnos, a stone mason by some accounts, who ruled much of India. Pre-history. He extended his domain by bestowing his Eye upon a succession of rulers in exchange for their loyalty.”

“And the Eye...”

“Quite powerful,” Jan assured him.

“Like what Xaviar was talkin’ about.”

“Quite possibly.”

“Shit. So that was his Antediluvian... and the Leopold guy that Victoria went lookin’ for...”

“Exactly. Heshu evidently knows a great deal about this Eye and... Lucinde has offered our cooperation in this matter.”

“She what?” Theo asked in measured tones. Jan studiously removed his glasses from his pocket and began to clean them. “What the hell is she thinkin’, workin’ with a Setite? I don’t like it.”

“Nor do I.” But resignation was obvious in Jan’s voice.

“She can offer *your* cooperation...”

“I don’t foresee that the matter will involve you at all.”

“Good,” Theo said, then shook his head and muttered, “Workin’ with a Setite...”

“There is something else about last night that we must discuss,” Jan said, putting his glasses back on.

Theo nodded. “Katrina. I found her. She told me—”

—“who gave her the explosives,” Jan finished the Brujah’s sentence. “A Kindred who may or may not be named Johnny. She told you how to contact him, and then you sent her to San Francisco. She followed your advice, by the way... this time.”

*This time.* That meant that Jan knew about the last time, on the dock, and about everything that Theo and Katrina had said last night. *This is a set-up,* Theo thought instantly. *Blackmail, maybe.* But then why, he wondered, would the Ventrue have gone to all the trouble of briefing Theo about Lucinde, or why would Jan have bothered fabricating such elaborate lies? Was it possible that Jan wasn’t after blackmail? It would be risky after all. Theo could simply bull his way through, argue jurisdiction and bullshit like that—but if Lucinde, a justicar, threw her support behind Jan’s accusations...

“Nossie followin’ me?” Theo asked.

“Not you, actually. Her.”

“Katrina? Since when?”

“Since she met with a local Sabbat operative.”

“Johnny.”

“He generally goes by Jack.”

Theo tried to absorb all that. The Nosferatu had been trailing the Sabbat who’d given Katrina the explosives. That meant that they would’ve been following her the night she blew up Garlotte. “They saw it all, didn’t they, the sewer rat fuckers.”

Jan nodded.



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“Why the hell didn’t you say anything before?” But as soon as Theo asked the question, he knew the answer—and it set the fire burning deep in his belly once again. “You thought I put her up to it.”

“The possibility existed,” Jan said evenly. “Why else would you let her walk away?”

*Good fucking question*, Theo thought. It was one that he’d just begun to come to grips with, and he didn’t think it would make much sense to someone in Jan’s position, an establishment man. Even if Theo felt inclined to explain, which he did not.

“Not my job to clean up city matters,” Theo said.

Jan frowned. “Is anything really just a ‘city matter’ in the middle of a war?”

“Hey, if Garlotte can’t keep his young’ns in line, fuck him. If Goldwin can’t straighten it out, then fuck him too.” The fire was growing. Theo didn’t show it externally, but he was wishing more and more that this was a problem he could beat into submission, that he could just rip Jan’s head off and be done with it. But it wasn’t that simple. It never was. Theo had thought Jan was the spy; Jan had thought Theo was the spy. How the fuck were they supposed to prevail over the Sabbath when nobody on their *own* side was ever above suspicion? What was it about the blood, about the curse of Caine, that made them all such arrogant, shifty, devious, deceitful bastards? Or was *that* the real curse, and the blood-drinking was just symptomatic?

Jan ran a hand through his spiky blond hair. He took his glasses off, tucked them back into his pocket again, and started massaging the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t doubt you, Theo. It was so unlikely... and after the success we’ve had...”

Theo held the fire in check, fought it back down, but not without effort. “So the whole thing with Katrina last night,” Theo said, “it was a... set-up. A test.”

“A test,” Jan acknowledged. “Yes.”

“If I did her in, then I was covering up. Turn her over to you and I’m okay. So tell me,” Theo leaned forward in his chair until only about two feet separated his face and Jan’s, “where do I stand after hustlin’ her off to the other side of the country?”

“You have our trust,” Jan said in measured tones. He seemed to sense that, if last night had been Theo’s test, tonight was his own. “Why else would I tell you what I’ve told you?”

“If what you’ve told me is true,” Theo said. Slowly, he eased back in his chair. It made sense. It would have been much easier for Jan to say nothing than to conceive such elaborate lies. Theo took a cigarette from his jacket, lit up, swallowed the smoke, didn’t let it back out.

For several minutes, the two Kindred sat in silence, Jan alternately cleaning his glasses and massaging the bridge of his nose, Theo staring at the floor, thinking, fuming. Jan wasn’t the enemy, not the real enemy, Theo kept reminding himself. It was all just part of this fucked-up world he inhabited where blood was food and sunlight was death. He and all his kind were monsters living on human blood—but there were worse monsters, those that had forgotten, *forsaken*, their distant humanity. The worst of them were among the Sabbath. They were the enemy. They were the ones who would treat mortals like they were slaves, like they were animals. Jan was not the real enemy.

Jan seemed to sense Theo’s gradual calming and spoke again. “After the explosion, Colchester came to Lucinde and me. He told us about your being there and letting the girl go free. I found it... odd. But not treacherous. Lucinde wasn’t so sure.”

“Because there’s a spy out there,” Theo said. “She thought I was the spy?”

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“No. We’d already determined the identity of the spy.”

Theo just nodded his head, more sickened than surprised—another secret, more information kept from him that could have been useful.

“Lucinde wanted to make sure that you weren’t in league with the spy,” Jan explained. “Just to cover every angle, she spoke with Pascek. He said to test you however we could, to make sure that you were completely loyal.”

*Pascek. Paranoid motherfucker.* Theo didn’t tense a single muscle; he didn’t scream or curse aloud. He just filed it all away, pushed it all down to be fuel for the fire when he needed it next.

“If you had wanted Katrina silenced,” Jan said, “you would have destroyed her. I held to that the night of the explosion. I hold to that now.”

“Okay,” said Theo. He laid his palms flat against the table. “So you stood up for me, and Lucinde and my boss, like most justicars, are paranoid bastards. So fuckin’ what? Where does that leave us now, if all the bullshit games are over?”



**Wednesday, 27 October 1999, 11:24 PM**  
**(Thursday, 28 October 1999, 2:24 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Highway 95**  
**Outside Las Vegas, Nevada**

Benito heard the thrum of an automobile's engine and felt the air vibrate around him. He could see nothing; the black bag over his head had been tied tightly around his neck and he found himself swallowing blindly, involuntarily. He could smell the dried blood caked on the side of his face, feel it crusted beneath his right eye. He could also smell the reek that had accompanied his captors for the past—God only knew how long. Nights? Weeks? Jesus; *months*? He had no idea. His odoriferous hijackers had fed him enough blood to keep him cognizant but not enough to risk his breaking free. They were as strong as he—perhaps they were Brujah, or maybe Nosferatu. They might even be rival Giovanni, but he couldn't imagine that overbearing Nickolai having enough sense to play two factions of Giovanni against each other.

No, all the evidence pointed to the Nosferatu. Benito imagined that plucked fiend Montrose being involved somehow, and he had certainly been pumped for information during his stay with his captors. But now it seemed they were done with him.

"What's going on?" Benito shouted to anyone who might be bothered to answer or might be sympathetic enough to reply. None of that here, though; his outburst only earned him a slap to the head and a gravelly, "Shut the fuck up."

Then the acoustics changed. Benito felt himself shoved upward and over, and the sound of the engine changed to a dull roar—he had been put into a vehicle of some sort. A sliding door slammed right next to his head.

*Keep calm, old boy*, Benito told himself. *If they needed you dead, they wouldn't bother taking you somewhere first.*

His captors were quiet from that point onward. Benito didn't even know if the plural was appropriate; it could have simply been one person charged with delivering this relatively passive cargo to wherever he was headed. Or, the group could have just been operating with the efficiency they had exhibited all along—these were professionals.

Now that he was close to the outside world again, Benito felt a coolness to the air. The air also felt relatively dry—this wasn't Boston, to be sure. He couldn't smell the faint tang of the salt on the breeze or hear the dim rush of traffic from the nearby city. No, Benito knew he was probably in the middle of nowhere, where whoever these fucks were who had him could do what they pleased even in disposing of him, and nobody would be any wiser.

The vehicle rumbled on for an indeterminate amount of time—Benito hadn't had access to his watch or even a calendar for so long that he was unable to gauge the period he had been on the road for this little jaunt. To his best guess, several hours.

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**Thursday, 28 October 1999, 1:25 AM (2:25 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**The French Quarter  
New Orleans, Louisiana**



“Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present to you... Natasia!”

The dull but heavy roar of the partygoers’ conversations briefly turned into a cheer before once again becoming a monotonous din. Not many people here even knew Natasia, but they had come to the dilapidated house just off the main drag because the party had been underway nonstop for the better part of a day. The abandoned townhouse was filled to capacity with party guests. People of all stripes had come, having heard through the grapevine that Jake Almerson was adopting a child or something, and, hey, why not help this Jake character celebrate. Of course, some people knew Jake—knew that he was indeed celebrating with his childe, but that the word had a terribly different meaning from the homonym that most of the guests assumed was intended.

Indeed, Jake Almerson had thrown quite a party to commemorate the release of his childe, a Kindred Embraced just over a year ago. Natasia’s Brujah sire had let every carouser in town hear about the impending bash—even at this very moment, some of Jake’s contacts were prowling Bourbon Street, directing drunken tourists and smarmy locals to the epic debauch taking place only a few blocks away.

Six hours ago, a pair of police cruisers had arrived. Two officers walked up the sidewalk to the house, shaking their heads and smiling at one another. After a cursory effort at finding someone—anyone—who was at all related to the organization of this thing, they gave up. Better to let the neighbors make a few complaints about the noise and let the party die down by itself than to turn this thing into a police riot. Besides, a few ambulances had already been called to cart away exhausted or intoxicated celebrants. The sight of one of those always served to briefly turn the excess down by a few notches. With a shrug, the police returned to their cars, with to-go cups, and went on their way.

Upstairs, someone had fallen through the floor of what was once a small library, but he was all right, having broken his fall on a pair of E-rolling teenagers groping each other in the rudely converted laundry room. The toilet resided as a transplanted throne in the middle of the living room, occupied currently by “King Bacchus,” a drunken Hell’s Angel of unknown origin. A fight had broken out briefly, but the winner had put down his foe by crashing his victim’s head through a window and raking the shattered glass across his forehead. For the most part, though, the party was just that—a celebration.

Chas escorted Isabel up the cracked pathway and stepped over the unconscious body of a visiting baseball player from the University of Texas.

“Nice place, but I wouldn’t think it was your sort of crowd,” Chas smirked at Isabel.

“I’ve known Jake for a long time,” Isabel replied lamely. “Everyone has their hobby. His is throwing parties.”

“You said he wasn’t the most amiable person in the world.”

“Look around. Does he need to be?”

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As they entered the house, a small group seemed to be hopping up and down in the corner. Chas grabbed an addled partygoer who just happened to be walking by.

“The fuck happened over there?”

The bloodshot eyes of the other guest briefly focused. “They put out the goddamn fire. It’s Natasia’s birthday, you know. Hey, do you know who Natasia is?”

“No.” Chas let the poor guy go. “Fire, huh? Sounds like one hell of a party!”

Isabel made no comment, instead taking Chas by the hand and beginning the arduous process of climbing the stairs, which entailed shoving a score of people out of the way.

The reek of marijuana hung over the hallway at the top of the stairs, as did a less prevalent but powerful chemical tang of cocaine smoke. The scents of mortal sweat and dry rot also clashed, flavored with the slightest hint of vomit.

Isabel pressed on, but Chas shook himself free from her grasp. The crowd had more than begun to get on his nerves. It was one thing to throw a party, but it was another altogether to corral a circus of freaks like this. Chas sucked in an unnecessary breath, hulking his body up and looking for any excuse to hammer one of these drunks in the face. To his surprise, the crowd seemed to swell around him, rolling over and off him as he passed, almost as if they felt the presence of his hostility on some subconscious level and equally subconsciously moved to avoid him.

A few hands brushed against him, the advances of women too drunk to feel his tangible menace, looking for a quick amorous relation with, well, anyone, but Chas ignored them. If he was going to get into a fight here, it wasn’t going to be with some drunk slut he could break in half by slapping her. Still, maybe one of these skanks had a boyfriend who’d be up for some freelance dental work....

The sight of Isabel in the hallway shook him from his violent fantasy. She closed one door, turned around, and saw him before opening the other door in front of her. She waved him forward.

“You wanna fuckin’ drink, man?” The guy Chas had stopped downstairs stood before him, having just climbed the stairs himself and seen a familiar face. “You don’ hafta go back downstairs. I think there’s some booze in the... I know there’s beers in the bathtub.”

“No, thanks.” Chas reined in the urge to snap this punk like a twig. Isabel was waving for him, which probably meant she’d found Jake and they could get the fuck out of here. “I, uh, I don’t like beer.”

“Suit yourself, brother. You looking for something more serious? I know a guy here’s got tabs, some rolls...”

“No, man, I’m just going over there to see my...” Chas walked past his new acquaintance and let the conversation drop. He didn’t know how he would have finished the sentence anyway.

He joined Isabel, who shook her head in mock disapproval and opened the door.

“Goddammit, that fucking door’s closed for a reason,” boomed a voice from within the darkness of the room, a solid baritone, with more than a hint that someone had interrupted its owner before. A heavy musk hung in the air.

“I’m sorry for interrupting, Jake, but we really should talk.”

Reclining bodies populated the room, perhaps a dozen in number. Some leaned haphazardly over the sides of broken chairs; others lay on the floor or on the tattered

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couch propped up against the wall. The room itself had its windows blocked, papered over with duct tape and stained sheets of corrugated cardboard. None of the light from the street made it into the room; only the tired glow of a single candle illuminated the place. The air was heavy with haze.

“Well, who’s fucking asking?” One of the forms, the darkest, moved, like a shadow becoming a solid man. “Oh. I fucking should have figured.”

“Such rude talk.” Isabel noticed that all of the other occupants in the room were women. “What is it this time? I don’t smell any dope in here. Are they drunk?”

“They’re fucked on absinthe. Make it myself.”

“Is that your idea of a joke?”

“Hey, pretty Isabel, this is New Orleans. It’s what Lestat would do,” Jake smiled. Isabel saw his eyes had become bloodshot—she hoped he was still sensible enough to help her.

“That’s lovely, Jake. Are any of them dead? I don’t want someone to remember me in the house when the police turn up a room full of dead hookers.”

“They’re not hookers. They’re Zetas from Georgia State, I think. Or maybe it was Sam Houston State. I don’t remember. Who the fuck cares?”

“That wasn’t the important part. I asked if they were dead.”

“This one’s dead,” Chas interjected, lifting one of the smaller girls, who hung like a broken doll from his arm.

“They’re not dead. Least I don’t think so. I think she’s just cold. Absinthe turns on you, man. Don’t trust it. Don’t fucking drink that shit.” Jake smiled. “Hey, have you met Natasia? She’s around here somewhere. My pride and joy, baby—a childe of my own.”

“Did she used to be a Zeta?” Isabel asked demurely, which came across as all the more grotesque as she pushed an unresisting girl aside to make room for herself on the ruined couch. Chas walked over to the door, putting his broad back against it.

“No, shit, Isabel. I think she was a... she was some kind of flight attendant. No, wait, she was... fuck, I don’t remember. But she’s mine now.” He turned to look at Chas. “What, motherfucker, you think someone’s goin’ to try bustin’ out of here?”

Chas looked down at Jake, who lay on his side on the floor, using one of the girls as a pillow, resting his head on her exposed belly. “No, I’m worried about someone else coming in. You I can take care of, but I don’t want to kill someone I don’t have to.”

“Fuck, Isabel, what you bring this punk motherfucker here for? Is he your toy?”

“He’s looking out for me, Jake. He’s helping me out with something. I need your help, too.”

“Fuck that shit. I can’t leave. I’m the fucking host of this little get-to-motherfucking-together. I don’t like your boy, anyway. We’d scrap.”

Chas laughed. “You don’t think I could waste some stoned nigger? Let’s see, huh? What is it you spooks say to each other? Let’s throw down, yo.”

Jake turned to Isabel. “Oh, you got a real winner here, baby.”

“Chas, can’t you please keep a handle on it?” Isabel looked to Chas, shaking her head and holding her hand up, hoping that Chas would take the cue and let it rest.

“Well, let’s hurry it up, Isabel. Get this fucking monkey to sing and let’s go.” Chas crossed his arms over his chest.

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Jake laughed aloud and raised his hand to rub his eyes. “What do you want, Isabel? What do you and Robert de Niro here want? Let me get back to my harem, huh?”

“We need to find Oliver Prudhomme,” Chas said. No sense in letting Isabel turn this into something even more protracted than it already was.

“Prudhomme? That motherfucker’s out of his mind. He don’t have nothing you need.”

Indeed, Ambrogino had warned Isabel about Prudhomme’s precarious state of mind. Apparently, the weight of being a Kindred bore heavily upon him. Still, Ambrogino was a better necromancer than Isabel was, and she had never been led astray by his information before. If Ambrogino said Prudhomme was key, nothing Jake knew was likely to convince her otherwise. “Let us decide that for ourselves, Jake,” she said.

“Well, fuck it anyway, because I don’t know where the motherfucker stays.”

“Oh, now Jake, that can’t be true. Are you telling me there’s something the would-be prince of New Orleans doesn’t know?”

“Fuck you, Isabel. I never claimed to be prince. And fuck you, too, bitch.” He waved a hand over his shoulder at Chas.

“So you *don’t* know then. You’re useless.” Isabel put her hands on the cushions at her side, as if to push herself up.

“Useless? I’m not the motherfucker who comes to a party and fucking sweats a brother who’s just trying to have a good time. You want to find Oliver fucking Prudhomme, you try looking in the dumpsters behind Emeril’s or maybe in the parking lot over at the Hotel Inter-Continental. He got a few problems.”

“That’s no good, Jake, and you know it. I guess you’ll have to pay me back that favor sometime when you’re actually capable of fulfilling it. I’m sure the Kindred of New Orleans will be able to sleep well during the day knowing that Jake Almerson can’t find them. They might even think it’s funny.”

“Oh, it’s like that now, is it? That’s fine,” Jake rolled onto his back again. “I just wanted to hear you say it. That just about makes us even, right? I mean, I’d hate for you to think you can’t trust old Jake to keep his word.”

Isabel shook her head. “That’s right, Jake. It’s all even.”

“Now *that’s* what the brother wants to hear. Your Oliver Prudhomme, he stays in an old school about twenty minutes up the state highway. It’s one of the old towns, been dried up for a while. You’ll know when you get there.”

“Thank you, Jake; you’ve been a very gracious host.”

“Oh, the pleasure was all mine. Make sure you come back and see me sometime. You can even bring your smart friend, there.”

“Fuck you, eggplant.”

“Bye, now.” Jake waved good-bye with the limp hand of the girl beneath him.

Isabel and Chas waded through the motley crowd of partygoers at the top of the stairs, stopping only to push aside a sailor stuffing a huge wad of weed into a pipe made from a fresh apple.

“Wanna take a hit off the apple?”

“No, that’s all right,” Chas brushed the sailor off.

In the front, on the lawn, the two Giovanni Kindred saw another pair of police cruisers pull up just as they made it to the gate that let them out on the street.

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“Pretty rowdy in there, no?” One of the police called to the pair as he climbed out of his vehicle and tucked his baton and flashlight into their loops at his belt. As if to punctuate the question, something on fire tumbled out of a hole in what must have been the house’s attic, and a bum leaning against the fence issued forth a gout of vomit.

“Yeah, it’s a circus in there,” Chas muttered offhandedly. “Oh, yeah, officer; one more thing. There are absolutely no drugs in the room on the left at the top of the stairs.”

Isabel slapped Chas and shot him a look that the cop and his tardy partner noticed.

“Mm-hmm. You two have a fine evening,” the officer replied, checking his holster and pepper spray.

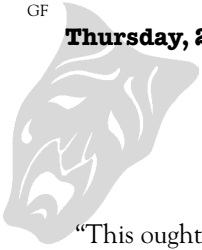
“Oh, we will, sir. You, too.” With that, Chas swung the Audi into the lane and through the darkness that pressed in from the edges of the city’s border.



**Thursday, 28 October 1999, 2:30 AM (5:30 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Highway 95**

**Outside Las Vegas, Nevada**



“This oughta be far enough,” Kragen said. Buttfacet said nothing.

The cargo area of the van was walled off from the cab and sealed so the cargo couldn't hear what the driver and passenger were talking about. But Kragen didn't really see that it mattered.

“I say instead of just dumping him, we rip his head off and then dump him,” Kragen suggested. “And then run over him maybe.” Buttfacet said nothing. “Who's gonna care? Who's gonna *know*?” Kragen asked. “*You ain't gonna tell nobody, are you?*”

Buttfacet shrugged.

“Hmph. Just what I thought,” Kragen said. “You're scared of that uppity little snout from back East. ‘Do this... do that.’ I'd like to stuff a boat hook up his nose and pull it out his ass.” Kragen glanced over at Buttfacet. “No offense.”

The desert and the starry night sky stretched on forever. The tires on pavement sounded a rhythmic hum.

“I mean, he said he was done with him,” Kragen said. “‘Get rid of him,’ he says. ‘Take him out in the desert and dump him.’ Sure he wants the other Giovanni fucks to hear about what happened, but he didn't say not to rip his fuckin' head off, not specifically. I mean, those fuckin' Giovanni fucks could probably talk to his ghost and find out what happened, right?”

Buttfacet shrugged.

“Yeah, you're right,” Kragen said. “But we could at least run over his leg or something. You know, not his head. It ain't nothing really. Barely feel it, not like a speed bump or nothing.”

There was silence for a tenth of a mile. “Okay, okay,” Kragen said. “We'll just dump him, like the guy said. Geez.”

Kragen slowed the van, then pulled off the side of the road onto the packed desert sand. He and Buttfacet climbed out of the cab. Before he opened the sliding door in the back, he turned to Buttfacet and raised a finger to his own lips. “Remember, shhh.”

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**Thursday, 28 October 1999, 2:42 AM (5:42 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Off Highway 95**  
**Outside Las Vegas, Nevada**



At last, the van slowed. It moved a bit laterally, and Benito's weight shifted greatly to the left and then overcompensated to the right. Finally it came to a stop. Two doors opened and closed, then the sliding door opened. Benito was jerked out of the back of the vehicle, where he once again felt the outside air—very cool.

The two unknown captors then hurled Benito to the ground. Delivered a few unavoidable and brutal kicks to his ribs, and drove away, the sound of the transport vehicle dopplering away into the distance.

Cool, still air. Cool, loose earth below him. Sand? A coyote howling in the distance. Coyotes? Sand? He was in the fucking desert?

Fine. Just fine and dandy. When he had waited a suitable time to make sure no one had stayed with him, to watch, for whatever reason, that he remained bound and motionless, Benito Giovanni summoned the last reserves of his fading strength to burst the bonds that held his hands. He stripped the bag from his head and looked over the vast expanse of the Nevada sandscape.

**Thursday, 28 October 1999, 11:15 PM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**



“...Tell me, oh wise one, which way do I go?”

There was a drawn-out silence, then, “Fuck if I know.” Ramona looked at Calebros as if he were crazy. She looked around the murky, cluttered cave-office and said, “Hey, you got another chair around here? You’re the one wanted me to wear these stupid boots. Well, you know what? They don’t fit right, and they hurt. I don’t see *you* wearing no normal clothes, all wrapped up in your rags.”

Calebros sighed. “On the rare occasion that I am seen by kine,” he explained, “I do not draw attention to myself. If I were up there more often, *as you are*, and I could disguise my nature with a few simple garments, *as you can*, I would do so.”

He and Heshia, after repeated attempts, had convinced her to wear boots to hide her permanently clawed feet. It was a problem with some Gangrel. They tended to take on animalistic aspects over time—a sign of how close they were to the Beast, some said; others suggested it was merely proof that the outlanders were little more than wild beasts of the field. Calebros, as Ramona had so pointedly reminded him, had little room to quibble about physical deformities. He did not feel it was excessive, however, to demand that she uphold the Masquerade to the extent readily within her power. He’d noticed her ears too—tapered, like a wolf’s. But her hair tended to obscure them, and Calebros felt a need to choose his battles carefully if he was to convince the girl of anything.

Ramona considered his sage counsel. “Yeah, whatever you say.” She stared at him for several seconds. “A chair?”

Again Calebros sighed, lifting himself from his chair. He hoped the sound of his vertebrae popping evoked guilt in Ramona, but she showed no sign. He shuffled around his desk, past the candelabra—he’d grown weary of fighting the lamp and smashed it once too often; the base now protruded, upside down, from a bulging trashcan, and Calebros had resorted to more primitive technology—and to the doorway. “Umberto!” The younger Nosferatu arrived in short order. “Umberto, do kindly bring a chair for Ms. Salvador.”

Once that matter was resolved and Ramona and Calebros had both taken their seats, Ramona was still obviously displeased with her host. “I never told you my name... my whole name,” she said.

“Pilar Ramona Salvador,” Calebros intoned. “Formerly of Los Angeles, presumed dead by family and police.... It’s my job to know these things. Now, evidently the riddle means nothing to you? Fair enough. There is something else I would like to ask you about.”

“Ask away.”

“Thank you. First, please listen.” He reached for a small tape player on his desk and turned it on. A considerable racket ensued—the noise of a helicopter—then a voice, a female voice straining to be heard, that the cockpit recorder had captured.

“*There! There it is!*” said Ramona’s voice.

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“What? Where?” It was Heshia.

“What do you mean? Right there! Look!”

“I don’t see—”

“Are you fuckin’ blind? Look! Grass, and trees... all burned! And the rocks... like giant tombstones!”

“I don’t see!”

“Fuck!”

Calebros clicked off the tape player. “You remember, I’m sure.” Ramona nodded. She suddenly appeared very uncomfortable in her chair. “You told us about what you saw... about the horrible experience at the cave, in the meadow with Xaviar. What you were describing on the tape—that was what you were expecting to see, wasn’t it?”

Ramona shot up from her seat. “I know what you’re gonna say, and I didn’t *imagine* nothing,” she snarled, jabbing a finger at him. “That Leopold—if that’s really his name—him and the Eye, he was raising up these huge fuckin’ chunks of rock, and they’d fall over, or *explode*, like a fuckin’ volcano or something. I was fuckin’ there! I *saw* it. I didn’t *imagine* nothing.”

“I believe you,” Calebros said softly, calmly.

Ramona stood with her mouth open, her rant derailed. “You do?”

“I do. Let me tell you why.” Ramona sat, and Calebros continued. “You saw the meadow that way before, when you were with Xaviar, and you saw it that way from the helicopter. But not once you landed, correct?”

“Right.”

“When you went into the cave, with Heshia, you saw the sculpture. You both saw it.”

“Right.” Ramona’s teeth were clenched, her fingers becoming claws and digging into the chair.

*It enrages her merely to talk about it, to remember*, Calebros thought. *Best not go into too much detail.* “This was Heshia’s second trip to the cave, as well. The first time, he found Leopold—torpid, Heshia thought. He took the Eye and returned to the city.”

“Yeah, and then Leopold came after him and ripped him about five new assholes.”

“Um... yes, you could put it that way,” Calebros said. “But this is what is important: When Heshia was at the cave that first time, he didn’t see a sculpture.”

Ramona thought about that, then said, “So? It wasn’t built yet.”

Calebros reached for a folder on his desk. He brandished the notes that Jeremiah had taken during his observation of Anatole. “I have reports here that describe the statue as of early September.”

“But Heshia got his ass whupped... when, in August?” Ramona asked.

“July. July 31.”

Ramona reached for a calendar on Calebros’s desk, but tossed it back when she realized it was from 1972. “That’s still a whole month, and nobody knows where Leopold was that whole time. He could have gone back to the cave.”

*Smart girl*, Calebros thought. He was leading her along the same path of reconstructing events that he had followed. “Possible. The soonest he could have gotten back, if he did,

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would have been the first or second of August. That would have been approximately a week after your battle with the Eye.

“Now, you know Tanner. You know your other clanmates. Even injured, would they have waited around *an entire week* so that Leopold could come back and incorporate them into that statue? Don’t you think that *someone* would have been able to get out, to hunt, at the very least to find blood and bring it to the others?”

Ramona was nodding. “And Heshha didn’t find any Gangrel at the cave....”

“*Exactly.*” Calebros knew he had her. He wasn’t positive about what he was suggesting, he couldn’t be—but it was *possible*.

“So...” Ramona was still a few steps behind; she was putting the pieces together. “The statue was already there... and Heshha didn’t see it?” She seemed suddenly unsure. “That’s a *big fuckin’* statue.”

Calebros nodded. “And it’s a big—”

“Meadow.” Ramona had seen where he was going as soon as he’d opened his mouth. She was a quick study, a sharp mind.

“Exactly.” Calebros was heartened for several reasons. Not only was Ramona following the evolution of his suspicions, but he also felt a burgeoning connection with her. Not an attachment, nothing so maudlin, but an understanding. It would not do for Ruhadze alone to win her trust, and possibly use her against Calebros some night if the opportunity presented itself. Heshha had traveled to Baltimore to pursue the meaning of Anatole’s bloody scrawl in the cave, and the Setite’s absence pricked at Calebros’s paranoia. But that concern was for another time. Ramona was here now, and whatever slight satisfaction Calebros gained from this journey of the mind they had embarked upon, he could not ignore the implications of the destination.

“*Something* masked the statue, the meadow,” he said.

“But how?”

Calebros did not know. Theoretically it might be possible, of course, but the magnitude of power that would be required to pull it off.... There was more than the Eye at work here. That was Calebros’s belief. That was his fear.

“And why have we seen it sometimes but not others?” Ramona asked, still probing, still questioning.

Better to consider the *how* rather than the *what*, Calebros decided. That route was slightly less disconcerting; less terrifying, truth be told. “You have proved able to follow the Eye. You tracked it to the cathedral,” he pointed out. “Heshha tracked it to the cave with the aid of his gem. There seem to be ways of finding it....”

“Except for now,” Ramona said. “Not since Leopold—”

“Ripped Heshha five new assholes?” said Calebros.

“*Exactly,*” Ramona parroted him in return.

“Wherever Leopold and the Eye have gone,” Calebros said, “we are unable to find them. It could be that whatever shielded the cave is masking his whereabouts as well.”

Other words from Jeremiah’s reports came unbidden to Calebros’s mind: *The darkness in the earth, hungering for flesh.*

“Only time will tell,” Calebros said. *And it may be that we are out of time.*

**Friday, 29 October 1999, 1:23 AM**  
**Hemperhill Road**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



Theo stood by the mantelpiece staring into the huge, gold-framed mirror that dominated the study. The room was furnished with antiques, every piece. He couldn't name the style of the chairs or the exact period of the porcelain vases or even of the overall motif. The decor was old, older easily than Theo. Old and expensive. But Theo had seen older. He'd spent years traveling with Don Cerro in Europe, meeting many of the old and powerful Kindred to whom these antiques would be little better than patio furniture.

Those years of study—study of casual excess, of how stagnant Kindred society could become over time—had been good for him. They had shown him that injustice and cruelty existed everywhere, even beyond the slave plantations of the American South, even for whites. Oppression was not the exception, it was the norm. Those years had sparked the realization that the fire was not always enough, not even the fire fueled by hunger.

In the halls of power, creatures existed to whom years were playthings and the real world was a distant, dangerous thing. Yet the real world had a way, on occasion, of making its presence known, of asserting itself. Theo had not been around for the Anarch Revolt or for the first wars against the Sabbat, but reality had intruded upon the elders with a vengeance. Change, so long held at bay, had come crashing down upon them, an avalanche sweeping all before it. Perhaps another time like that was at hand. The Final Nights, Xaviar had said. And even though the Gangrel had been wrong about his supposed Antediluvian, events in these modern nights were moving at an accelerated, alarming pace. The world could not be kept at bay. Not forever.

Behind Theo, among the antiques, sat Marcus Vitel, deposed prince of Washington, D.C. He wore an expensively cut suit, more old-fashioned than the type Pieterzoon tended to wear, with a small golden eagle pinned to his lapel. Vitel had enough gray streaking his dark hair to make him look distinguished among a group of mortals—if he chose to consort with mortals any longer. He still appeared strong of body and mind, but the loss of his city and perhaps of his childer had left him visibly bitter. His dark blue eyes had a hard glint. As he had for much of his stay in Baltimore, he remained aloof from other Kindred, royalty tossed among the commoners. He often, but not always, attended the council meetings, which themselves had grown less frequent. Otherwise, however, Vitel kept to himself, creating an expanding circle of ghouls to meet his needs and wants.

“Do you feel it is wise,” Vitel asked, “to fall back so close to the city?”

Theo scratched the stubble on his chin as he answered, and continued to watch Vitel in the expanse of the mirror. “The shorter the lines we have to watch, the stronger our defenses can be. We stay spread wide, they slip through. We pull tight, nothin' gets through.”

“But if they do get through,” Vitel protested, “they are in the city proper. We must press our lines forward, not withdraw them so the enemy can strike swiftly at our heart.”

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Theo shook his head, patiently but firmly. “We can’t match them for manpower. We’re taking some losses every night. Others of our folks are kinda melting away. Not a lot, but it’s starting. They can see the writing on the wall. We’ve gotta concentrate our force, just like pulling folks in from Buffalo and Hartford.”

“But surely we must have contingencies, the airport—”

“We’ll keep a screen around the airport,” Theo said. “When the big push comes—and it’s looking sooner every night, judging by what they’re throwin’ at us—those who can afford it and have it set up ahead of time, yourself, Pieterzoon, Gainesmil, maybe a few others, you guys’ll jet out. Everybody else,” Theo shrugged, “this has gotta be it. We’ll never get this many Kindred together and more or less organized again. We’ve let slip talk about some escape routes to the north—ground runs to Pittsburgh and Philly—but that’s just to sooth some nerves. Those orders will never happen. We make our stand here. In Baltimore. But we wanted to keep you informed, ’case you wanted to line up a plane or anything.”

Vitel sat quietly, his hands and interlocked fingers resting in his lap. “If Baltimore falls, there is little chance of getting Washington back.”

Theo turned from the mirror, leaned back against the mantel, and crossed his arms. “I agree,” he said. “It would be a long shot, even with the Tremere chantry holdin’ out in D.C. But I think we can hold on here. We have to. We shorten the lines, make sure we’re not broken. Pieterzoon’s sources say the Sabbat high command is gettin’ antsy now that Monçada’s out of the picture. We figure time is on our side. We hold out long enough, those bastards’ll start slittin’ each other’s throats and forget all about us.”

Vitel pondered that, nodded thoughtfully. “The Sabbat is not known for its solidarity,” he agreed.

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**Friday, 29 October 1999, 2:02 AM (3:02 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**The Ponchartrain School  
Lac Blanc, Louisiana**



Chas parked the Audi curbside, where a decrepit staircase began its ascent and climbed upward for a good twenty feet. At the top of the stairs loomed an abandoned school. Because local government worked differently in Louisiana—the state had no counties, being instead divided into dioceses managed by the Church—the school had simply fallen into disuse after the community around it had been swallowed by the swamp over sixty years ago. The town had just vanished, leaving behind only a few legacies of its existence, which themselves now lay beneath layers and layers of vines and calcium deposits. The rain had left the six buildings that still stood streaked with mildew and rot. The whole area looked sick, like a pile of chalky bones slowly, inevitably crumbling into the ground where they had been left. Even the road had been overgrown, the dirt of its surface providing ample soil for malicious new vegetation to take root. The car's all-wheel drive had slipped a few times when Chas had guided the Audi too quickly into an easy curve.

It didn't help that the trees grew into an unnatural canopy, shielding much of the moon's light from the area and casting skeletal shadows where illumination managed to fight its way through the web of branches. Even the air was still, dead. Heavy and wet, like the still waters of the swamp itself, beneath the surface of which untold horrors slid effortlessly through the murk.

"How the fuck is anyone supposed to find this place, out here in the middle of fucking nowhere?" Chas wondered aloud.

"I think that's the point," Isabel replied. She shifted the shoulder bag she carried, which held the strange manuscript Marcia Gibbert had given her.

They climbed the stair, fumbling inelegantly in the darkness, but making it to the top without any grievous injury. Chas's small electric flashlight did little to light their environment. Its beam seemed to vanish into the gloom only a few feet before them, and faded completely by the time they stood before the front door of the building.

Isabel heard a wheezing, hissing sound as she reached toward the door. "Do you hear that, Chas?"

"Sorry. That's me," Chas answered, and Isabel could hear the smile on his face in his tone of voice.

"Is something funny?" She looked at him as best she could, the ivory of his teeth and his sunken eyes making his face a demonic apparition floating in the darkness before her.

"It's not really funny so much as it is strange," he said. "I've done this sort of thing a million times, but never in this sort of situation, you know? I've done whatever it was that Frankie Gee told me, walking into weird shit and talking to people who made their havens in fucked-up places. I've talked to Nosferatu who set up their nests beneath the fucking Chelsea Hotel. I've talked to Kindred in



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the basements of St. Mark's and spent the day hiding in access tunnels of the New York subway. It's not like this—that shit is all paved. No trees. No nothing, but concrete. Even Central Park feels, I don't know, *made* instead of natural. This shit—I'd never have thought you'd catch me out here. I don't even care that it's not the city. What bugs me is that it's not under control. It's basically just this fucked-up place that some Kindred found and decided to stay here. Like the rest of the world didn't want him. Like the other Kindred didn't have any use for him, and forced him to just go somewhere."

"Isn't that always the case, though?" Isabel asked, growing nervous that something was unsettling Chas this much. She had watched his decline dispassionately for several months now; it wasn't her place to steer him toward some moral end. Maybe it was a product of him becoming more Beast than man—perhaps he was growing more in tune with the nebulous stimuli that animals seemed to be able to feel, to which men and women were oblivious. "Don't we always have to go where we can? I have a feeling our friend here is more than a little unsettled, and this is as close as he can come to everyone else without them feeling completely overtaken by what he is. Come on, Chas; you know we're predators. You know we can only stay among the sheep for so long. This fellow probably can't do it for any length of time at all."

"I'm not pretending to know what the fuck it is, Isabel. It just feels... *dead*."

Isabel opened the door, which Chas held, motioning her inside. *He really has become an animal*, Isabel thought to herself. *It's not even unchivalrous—he just feels something dreadful inside and his instincts have him sending me in first*. Instinctively, she called upon her occult abilities to enable her to look through the veil between worlds. Sure enough, the halls of the school looked even more ghastly in the world of the dead. Thin layers of gossamer wafted in a sickly ghost-breeze and scores of tiny blackish handprints dotted the walls. All of the windows in the ghost-hall were broken, peering into vacant offices strewn with papers or classrooms in which spectral jackets hung from hooks on the walls.

A tinny music echoed down the empty hallways. Chas and Isabel shared a silent look before moving toward it. As they rounded a corner, the music grew louder and they both saw a flickering orange light emanating from one of the classrooms ahead. It must not have had any windows facing the front of the building; surely they would have seen even the faintest firelight from the outside.

At their approach, they discerned a voice just below the strains of the music, which had itself become clearer. The doleful music was Hank Williams, his lonely guitar notes traveling across the still air and sounding a million miles away. Over the lyrics of the song, the voice lectured.

"And what can we do when we can find no hope inside ourselves, children? What do we do when it seems that the world would be better off without us? We must not give in to the loss of our hope—the Lord says despair is a sin, for it denies the faith He wants us to have in Him. Trust in the Lord; He is our shepherd and our salvation. That's what we must do, children. We must ask God for His help. We must pray. He loves us, and asks only that we give ourselves to Him. Remember that His son, Jesus, died for all of us—he took all of our sins and made it possible for God to excuse them

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for us. God's love is infinite; God's love is unconditional. But we must allow Him to give it to us. He doesn't want us to have it if we must take it against our will—God allows us to choose.

“You children know better than I. You are with God. You *know*. I am still here—I don't yet know what you do, and all I have is faith. He has heard your prayers, and sent me to let you meet Him, hasn't He? It's not as complex as it sounds. I'm not a cruel man. Although there are some among you whose parents would say that I am a tool of the Devil—or even that I am the Devil himself—you know better than that. You know that God has His own designs and that I serve them, not the will of the Devil. Could it possibly be said that the Devil's tool has God in his heart? How can a man like me, who places his faith and fate in the hands of God, conceivably do the work of the Devil? Am I deluded, children? I don't think so. I pray. I have spoken to God and He has let me know that even one so far from Him as I am is still not outside the boundaries of His love.

“Pray, children. Pray to see another sunrise. Pray that all of God's creation remain open to you. Pray that God shows you how to avoid the jaws of Hell—Hell is this world, children, and I have saved you from it. I am in Hell, and I have delivered you unto the eaves of the Lord God's house. Children, listen! Don't hate me! I have given you the greatest gift of all! I have given you heaven! Were you to have done this yourself, you would reside here still, or on a circle below. Children! Answer me! Tell me that you have no hatred for me; that you have only the Lord's love! God! God, I have given these children back to You. I have returned them to Your table! They have died where their names do not matter. I have cut the thin, silver tether that bound them to this Hell. They are Yours once again!

“God?

“Children?”

Isabel knocked on the door frame. “Mr. Prudhomme?”

The man betrayed no sign of being startled. He looked to be of about fifty mortal years, a compact, white-haired man with a strangely clean-cut beard and mustache. He wore pleated pants, a white shirt and a cardigan sweater, all of which were curiously free of the vegetative filth of the forsaken swamp-town.

“Yes? I beg your pardon, children; I have a guest. It is Miss Isabel from the Father Superior's office. Say hello to Miss Isabel, children!”

Silence.

Isabel looked into the room, beyond the man she assumed to be Ambrogino's contact Oliver Prudhomme. Rows and columns of small, wooden desks occupied the center of the room, each occupied by the still body of a small child. Some had obviously been there longer than others, having decomposed to the point that the only thing human about them was their vague shape. Others had joined the class only recently, their cool skin and blue lips not yet showing any signs of putrefaction. All had their eyes closed, their tiny hands clasped in a rude approximation of the prayer pose. Boys and girls both occupied the class, roughly two dozen in number, some wearing blue jeans and T-shirts like modern children, others in more formal clothes and even uniforms that suggested decades long past.

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The Hank Williams songs twanged along softly, the only sound that broke the quiet.

“Mr. Prudhomme, I was referred to you by Ambrogino Giovanni,” Isabel began.

“I know, Isabel. I know you. I know what you want.” Prudhomme suddenly seemed very tired, as if being interrupted in his fervor had drained him. He removed a pair of pince-nez from the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes between pinched fingers. “Children, I beg your pardon. Please begin your prayers, and I shall return presently.” Prudhomme moved to step out of the room, looking expectantly to Isabel and Chas to precede him.

“What the fuck is this, anyway?” Chas reached out his hand, halting Prudhomme at the shoulder. “What the hell is up with these kids? Are you some kind of sick fuck?”

Prudhomme stepped back from Chas’s hand, aghast. “Miss Isabel, does this insolent youth travel with you?” He shrank from Chas’s gesture as if admonished rather than challenged.

For her part, Isabel was shocked, as well. “Chas, what do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s this guy, Isabel. He’s the one who’s responsible for the fucked-up *feel* this place has. Aren’t you, you freak? You know exactly where those kids are.”

“Chas, what are you—”

“Don’t fuck with me, Isabel. You know I’m right. I’m right, ain’t that so, Prudhomme? You’ve got all these fucking kids bottled up somewhere. You’re doing some of that death-magic shit to keep these fucking kids around.” Chas stepped forward, grabbing handfuls of Prudhomme’s sweater, lifting him up to his own snarling face. “You fucking pig.”

Isabel grabbed Chas by the shoulder and forced him to turn about, looking her in the face. “*Let him go, Chas. Now.*”

Chas’s eyes clouded over. He hissed and his eyes squinted as he dropped Prudhomme to the floor. Oliver crawled backward across the ground, away from his tormentor as Isabel looked upward at her companion.

“Don’t try that shit on me. Don’t fucking try it. I’ll break you in half, whore.” Chas loomed over Isabel, but she refused to shrink, placing one hand on his sternum to prevent him from leaning into her any more.

“Please, watch your mouth around the children,” Prudhomme protested.

Isabel reasserted herself, gently pressing Chas away from her and staring into his eyes unflinching. “*You will stand down.*”

And Chas did, unable to resist. He continued to snarl, a veil of crimson cast over his vision. Isabel saw him on the verge of frenzy and moved away from him herself. “Relax, Chas,” she whispered. “He’s not even one of us. One of the family. He can’t do that.”

Chas shook, waking from a dream. A scowl still lay etched across his face but the red rage subsided. “I... oh, fuck. I... I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“You’re not well, Chas. You’re too close to the Beast,” Isabel said.

“She’s right. You’ve spent too much time with the wrong half of you,” Prudhomme conjectured, rising to his feet. Still a bit tentative, he approached. “Let me see—look at me.” Prudhomme held his hands out before him to show Chas he had no ill intent. “Just let me look. Yes, you are not far at all. The Man has been overcome.”

“The fuck does that mean, old man? That I’m trouble? Fuck, yeah, I’m trouble. Trouble for someone like you.”

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“Chas, I’m warning you. Calm down,” Isabel’s voice rose.

It was Chas’s turn to be wearied. His posture slumped and he leaned back against the wall. “Oh, fuck. What’s wrong with me?” he asked no one in particular. He caught his head in his hands as it tilted forward. Isabel eased him down to sit on the floor. “What’s going on in there, Prudhomme? You’re the teacher?”

“I’m as much student as teacher, I’m afraid.”

“What was all that shit in there about God and returning the children to Him?”

“It’s as I spoke it. Those children have all died. Someone needs to take care of them.”

“You sent them all back to God? You killed them all?”

Oliver Prudhomme looked sheepishly at Isabel, who intervened. “Chas, would you wait in the car, please. Everything is all right here; thank you for making sure I arrived safely.”

Chas rose, giving a wary glance to Prudhomme before turning and taking his brooding leave. His shoes left cold echoes in the hall as he stalked away.

“I apologize for that. He’s not been the same since...” Isabel’s voice trailed off. She couldn’t make excuses for him. Not only was it not her place, she’d watched as Chas had slowly allowed the Beast to erode what had been left of him after the Embrace.

“Don’t mind it, my dear,” Oliver Prudhomme rubbed his forehead with the arch of his thumb and forefinger. “Please, just let me see the papers. I knew to expect you.”

Isabel looked skeptical. “Ambrogino told you?”

“Ambrogino? I don’t know who you’re talking about. I saw that you would come. The children were very excited; they’ve been whispering about you all night. Young Cleveland Thibodeaux has quite the crush on you. You have something you need me for.”

Isabel thought it best not to ask any unnecessary questions. She opened her bag and handed Oliver the journal. “I need your keen powers of memory, Mr. Prudhomme. You’ve been here for as long as Ambro—as long as the man who told me to seek you can remember. A while ago, an acquaintance of mine found this and I was hoping you could tell me anything about the place. Any strange occurrences, anything out of the ordinary you remember. We know where the place is, but it seems to have once held something decidedly unpleasant, and we though we should consult with an expert on the matter before opening it up ourselves.”

Prudhomme looked over the sheaf of paper, placing his pince-nez back on his nose and shuffling the individual sheets. Slowly, a look of recognition crossed his face, which gave way to a look of horror. In the darkness, he became even paler than his Cainite complexion normally allowed for. “Oh, my God,” he stammered.

“What? What? You remember something about this? You know what it’s talking about?”

“I certainly do. I know exactly what it’s talking about. I remember this as vividly as if it were last night. It’s talking about the monster that made its haven not far from here—the dead thing that slept beneath the cold water and ate everything it could lure down there.”

“Yes, yes!” Isabel grew excited as a tremor of excited terror ran through her. “You remember it! What do you know? What do you know for certain about this thing?”

“Why, I know everything about it. You see, over a century and a half ago, I wrote this.”



**Friday, 29 October 1999, 11:59 PM (5:59PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**The Mausoleum loggia  
Venice, Italy**

Ambrogino Giovanni laid out his implements before him: a solitary black candle, a length of rough rope knotted into a noose, a strip of burgundy velvet. Putting out the rest of the lights in the room, he struck a match, lit the candle, and waited for the taper to generate a thick column of smoke.

As the wick guttered and the smoke rose, Ambrogino raised the candle over the noose and spilled a few heavy drops of dark wax over it. He then passed the candle's flame under his left index finger, slowly moving it back and forth. The skin smoldered, caught fire, blackened, and finally split open, loosing a coarse spatter of blood over the rope, which Ambrogino, wincing in pain, blotted with the velvet.

Willing his deathless vitae to close the wound, Ambrogino spoke aloud. "By the ferryman's rede, by the song of Charon, I command thee, William Burke, to appear before me."

The candle's flame blew out as a gust of cold air wisped through the room. "Wot the bloody fuck is it, then?" came a hoarse voice that had no body. "Wot, another trip for me? You have another thing wot needs said?"

"I do indeed, my malicious lad," Ambrogino returned. "To the New World again—all the way across the sea."

"That's a load of rot. Oi won't do it, oi won't. Yeh cain't tell Billy Burke wot to do. He's his own man, he is. Billy Burke takes to none but his own counsel, that's roight."

"Ah, Mr. Burke, I'm afraid you're mistaken. You will indeed do as I ask. You're no longer your own man, as you can see, and I am a master of your dead ilk." Ambrogino took great pleasure in summoning the ghosts of murderers, thieves and the like. He found it to be a great source of irony that he should send these selfish ghosts out to run his errands, deliver his messages, and bully his enemies. William Burke had been a resurrectionist in life, a grave robber who sold purloined corpses to doctors, anatomists and the like who needed fresh specimens upon which to experiment or study. Burke had done such brisk business in Scotland that he soon exhausted the natural supply of cadavers and had turned to murder in order to keep himself in goods.

"Toss off and the Devil kin tehk you. I've run moi last for you."

Ambrogino smiled. He sang out to his wraithly guest: "Up the cellar, down the stair; But and ben with Burke and Hare; Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief; Knox the boy what buys the beef."

"Cut that drivell out!" roared Burke's ghost. His partner, William Hare, had committed the grave-robberies and murders with him, in order to keep a doctor named Knox supplied with specimens during the first half of the nineteenth century. Before long, Hare confessed when questioned by police and gave up his accomplice. Burke hung and was publicly dissected, but his vengeful spirit refused to go to its final resting place. The whole incident had survived in infamy as a morbid children's song, which caused Burke's specter no end of anguish. "Yeh cocker, wot is it, then? Wot is it? I'll go an' do it jess to be away from you!"

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“That’s a good boy, Burke. I want you to talk to the same Kindred you talked to last time. He’s in the same place. You tell him the one who’s coming to see him—Isabel—she’s to survive the encounter and make it back to me. Let him know that if anything should happen to her, I’ll be quite upset. Understood, William Burke? Do you have it all clear?”

“This the one with the crown of skulls, then?”

“It is indeed, William Burke.”

“Ooh, he’s a cold one, roight. I don’ ken wot truck you have but if it keeps me away from you *an’* him, oi’ll do it and be off.”

“That’s a good lad, William Burke. Good for you.”



**Friday, 29 October 1999, 10:11 PM**  
**(Saturday, 30 October 1999, 1:11 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Highway 95**  
**Outside Las Vegas, Nevada**

Benito had spent the previous two days under an outcropping of rock. He slumbered fitfully, never sure whether the sun's movement through the sky would push the shadow of his makeshift haven back and expose him to its rays. Many times during the day he woke, amid a sweat of precious blood which he licked from his fingers, and sluggishly rearranged himself out of the reach of the encroaching light.

By the time Friday night fell, Benito had recovered as much as possible, given the circumstances. He had fed surreptitiously during the past two days as the opportunities presented themselves, a bit from a lizard at one time, the cold, thick blood of a snake at another. He remembered the lizard whipping its tail in pain, its body holding little more than a mortal's shot-glass worth of blood. Not enough to subsist on, granted, but enough to keep from starving utterly. He was hungry, that was true, but not so hungry that he needed to devote all his will and attention to fighting back the Beast. Benito had no doubt, however, that such would not be the case tomorrow night. He needed to feed as quickly as possible.

He walked for a while, and finally got his bearings. The Nosferatu (he assumed) had dumped him about thirty miles out of Las Vegas, so said the mile markers and highway signs. Traffic on the highway—U.S. 95—was still fairly heavy, but he didn't want to try to hitchhike just yet. Benito knew that he must look like all hell and didn't want to work some vacationing orthodontist into a berserk lather and find himself facing down highway patrolmen following an APB for the "madman of the desert!" Surely a gas station would come up before long, where he could use the bathroom to make himself presentable and maybe even catch a bus into the city. Benito knew the Vegas Rothsteins didn't like him much, but it wasn't like he planned to stay there and set up shop. Just one night, maybe two, and he could get his act together and head back to Boston, where he belonged.

Sure enough, just over the next dune, Benito could see the buggy white lights of a gas station. He double-timed as best as he could without exerting himself. It wouldn't do to show up having sweated out his last reserves of vitae and either frenzy or have those highway patrol cops looking this time for a blood-soaked "madman of the desert!" About a tenth of a mile away from the gas station, he slowed down and walked the rest of the distance.

It was one of those ramshackle affairs—an old single-proprietorship that was supposed to have vanished in the late '50s when all of the oil conglomerates either bought them or drove them into bankruptcy. The place looked like the guy who ran it—"Dan," his nametag said—probably lived there, sleeping in the office and watching Springer during the day while business was slow.

Benito made the store rounds quickly, picking up a bar of soap, a razor (he had been Embraced with a five-o'clock shadow and shaved each night after rising—that is, each

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night after rising when he wasn't detained by a thug squad of Nosferatu vampires), and a touristy T-shirt, which had the distinction of not being covered with who-knows-how-long's worth of desert grime and blood. Then he brought his bounty to the cashier, who eyed him with a kind of wary mirth.

"You a vampire or a hit man?" asked Dan from behind the counter.

"I beg your pardon?" Benito looked incredulously at the attendant.

"Vampire or hit man?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Aw, never mind. It's just that I get some weirdoes in here sometimes. You wouldn't believe the crazy crapola they tell me."

"Well, I can assure you, I am neither a vampire nor a hit man. I ran into some rough company and they dumped me in the desert, but with just a little attention to hygiene, I'll be on my way and better off without them."

"Hell, mister, you want I should call the cops?"

*Oh, no you don't. I am not the madman of the desert.* "No, that won't be necessary. I don't want to push my luck." Benito couldn't help but smile, however ironically.

"Okay, then. That'll be twenty-four ninety-seven."

*Shit.*

"Um..." Benito fumbled about himself. Money! Heaven forbid the goddamn Nosferatu should leave him in the desert with any semblance of dignity.

"Twenty-four ninety-seven," Dan repeated.

"Yes, I heard you. It's just that..." Benito cut himself off. No sense adding insult to injury.

"Oh, yeah; the 'rough company.' I forgot."

Benito winced.

"Look, pal. You got an honest face. I'll tell you what. You leave me your driver's license and I'll let you come back in the morning and pay me back."

"I, uh... They didn't even leave me with my driver's license."

"You wanna make a phone call? Have your wife or your buddies come out and give you a hand?"

Dan sure wanted this sale. Still, using the phone couldn't hurt. Not that he knew anyone's number in Las Vegas, but he could call back to Francis Giovanni in New York or even have his secretary, Ms. Windham, dig up one of the Rothsteins' numbers. "Er... okay." Dan handed the phone over to him and Benito dialed his Boston office.

"Good evening; Boston Financial; may I help you?" Ms. Windham, thank God.

"Ms Windham! A pleasure to hear your voice!"

"Mr. Giovanni?"

"The same! I apologize for my absence. Things must certainly have taken a turn for the strange there, am I correct?" Benito turned to "Dan," who wore a look of sympathy crossed with a shit-eating grin. He tucked the phone away from his mouth and asked, "Can I get Western Union here?" Dan nodded.



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“Oh, things have been just crazy since you were called away, sir! Mr. Lorenzo has been beside himself for the past four months and none of us knew if you were ever coming back.” *Four months? Jesus.* “Is everything all right?”

“I suppose, Ms. Windham, that everything is as all right as it can be, given the circumstances. Now, can you do me a favor?”

“Yes, Mr. Giovanni. What is it?”

“I need you to wire money to me. I’m at—say, ‘Dan,’ what is this place?”

“Nussbaum Fuel,” Dan beamed proudly.

“You hear that, Ms. Windham? Nussbaum Fuel outside Las Vegas. Please wire me one hundred twenty-four dollars and ninety-seven cents. Thank you.”

“Yes, Mr. Giovanni. I’ll take it out of petty cash and have it there in half an hour.”

“Thank you again, Ms. Windham.” That should get Benito cleaned up, into a cab, and into the city, where he could call upon either his credit-card company or local hospitality in order to procure a room.

True to her word, Ms. Windham had the money wired within thirty minutes. Benito paid Dan and borrowed the key to the restroom.

The entire trip from the storefront to the restroom on the side was a protracted affair—the key was attached to an enormous old steering wheel and Benito’s hands were otherwise occupied with the task of holding onto the toiletries he’d just purchased. After letting himself in, he checked the sole, dented stall to make sure he was alone.

Drawing the filthy sink full of tepid water, Benito looked at himself in the mirror. He was a mess. *First things first.* He took off his shirt and stuffed it into the trash receptacle. Lathered his hands with water and soap. Washed his face and the grime from his hands, arms and neck. Splashed a little water through his hair to loosen the blood and desert crud that had matted there.

*Jesus, if I worked at a gas station in the middle of the desert, I wouldn’t let me even come near the place.*

Before beginning the shaving ritual, Benito put his hands on both sides of the basin and shook his head. What had led him here? He vaguely remembered talking to the stinking unknowns who had kidnapped him, but they had given him precious little about themselves. At this point, he wasn’t even sure if they had been Nosferatu.

Bringing himself back into the present, Benito looked at the squalor around him. The door to the bathroom looked as if it had been bashed in and then bolted back into the frame. Someone had scrawled something on the inside surface of the door:

P.O.E.

O.P.E.

A greasy tin of mostly used pomade sat on the sill where the sink joined the wall. A half-smoked cigarillo had been discarded on the floor, looking so dry that it must be at least ten, twelve years old.

Even the lights carried a sense of misery and despair—two of the six that lit the linoleum room had burnt out and the rest were so yellowed that they changed Benito’s complexion from pale to jaundiced. Unwashed crusts of traveler’s and gasoline filth accumulated in corners, crawled up the stall walls and filled the creases between the tiles.

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The Formica sink counter had been scored, burned by cigarettes, spotted with other mystery gunk and streaked with half-assed trails of tile cleaner.

Still, Benito had about half an hour before his car arrived, and he'd rather spend it making himself look civilized than hearing whatever hard-luck story or cinematic yarn Dan had waiting for him. He lathered his face with the soap and dipped his razor into the rippled water, preparing to cleave away the stubble that adorned his face this and every night since his Embrace.

"...Terrible place to die...."

Benito looked around. He hadn't heard the door open, nor had he observed anyone in here when he had first entered. *Must be someone outside*. Still, what a strange thing to overhear.

"...Elodie, Hazimel, Nickolai..."

This string of gibberish unnerved the half-dressed Giovanni, though he recognized the last as a name with which he was uncomfortably familiar. He spun, hoping that he would be able to "see" where the voice had come from, whether via moving shadows under the door or, less possibly, someone who had hidden behind something in the restroom itself. But where?

"...Kiss like a spider..."

After this last strange pronouncement, Benito heard a *pop* and one of the four lit light bulbs in the restroom burst, showering him, the sink and the floor with a cascade of thin, jagged glass.

*What the hell is going on here?*

*Pop*. Another bulb shattered leaving the room illuminated only by a sickly half-light.

And then the door to the stall swung slowly open, creaking on its rusted hinge. Benito spun to watch it in disbelief—he had *checked* the stall to make sure no one had been inside.

From the tiny vestibule crept a form familiar but somehow different to Benito. What had once been smooth, swarthy skin had been crisscrossed by a lattice of livid keloid scars. The figure's eyes didn't match—one was the same as Benito had seen it before but the other looked as if it had been plucked out and returned rudely to its socket. The foreign eye veritably glowed red, brightening and dimming at seemingly random intervals. The clothes the figure wore were ragged, dirty, looking as if, since their owner had made the transition from his former self to this new... *thing*, he had forgotten all about personal upkeep. The hair was matted, the fingers longer and pronounced.

"*Leopold?*" Benito wondered, aghast.

"The same... same again and always. Leopold knows you. Leopold... So many nights wasted on you, Benito. So much time... your blood no longer cries out as it used to. Lost among the scum, Leopold—no! Benito! You traffic with those stinking rats?" Obviously, Leopold was rambling, probably maddened by whatever had wrought this hideous change upon him.

Benito took a step back, acutely aware of the strangeness of the situation. Here he was, in the middle of nowhere in a gas-station bathroom he had presumed—known!—to be empty, wearing no shirt, with his face partially shaven and some twisted Kindred staggering from a place it could not possibly have been only moments ago.

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“Leopold, what are you talking about?” Benito asked slowly, hoping not to incite the ravaged Cainite to any rash act.

“I told you, this is a terrible place to *die!*” Leopold spat, his good eye, if such could be said, pinched shut in anguish. “Don’t you listen? The names of the damned fall trippingly from the tongue!”

“This is nonsense, Leopold. What are you saying? Do you need me to understand you?”

“I don’t need anything!”

“All right; all right. You don’t need anything.” *Then what do you want?*

“What do I want? I want you to die, but this is a terrible place.”

Benito knew he hadn’t spoken his last question aloud—or had he? Leopold was eating the thoughts that spun from his mind, approaching him with more and more malice. What had looked wretched and defeated seconds ago now seemed poised and malignant, a monster feeding on the fear and worry that poured from Benito’s self.

“A terrible place? Why do I need to d—”

Quicker than Benito could see, Leopold lashed his arm forth, twisting it into a fleshy crescent crowned with a razored crust of bone. The tendril swiped across Benito’s midsection, opening the flesh of his abdomen and spilling the withered remains of his once-vitals. Blood sluiced from the wound, covering the floor in a sticky sheen. Benito’s eyes registered a horrid pain and shock, and he stumbled backward, willing what was left of the meager vitae in his system to close the wound. If Leopold intended to kill him, he had only little chance of overpowering the deranged Cainite.

The flight instinct took over. No matter Benito’s relatively advanced age, his hunger prodded the Beast to flee. He spun, bringing the full bore of his undead strength to bear against the door, shearing it from its hinges and sending it flying into the parking lot. And then he bolted—

—but slipped in the pool of his own precious fluid staining the bathroom floor.

Leopold wasted no time in closing on his prey. His ribs erupted from his torso, lengthening and piercing Benito, splaying and spreading and rending their victim apart. A quarter of Benito’s chest, the part attached to his neck, separated gruesomely from the trunk of his body. An arm tumbled to the ground, pried out of socket by Leopold’s intruding bone and severed as the rib-worm curved over itself to reenter Benito’s body. Within seconds, what had been Benito Giovanni was nothing more than scattered piles of gore defiling a Nevada restroom. Presently, after the Final Death overtook him, Benito’s remains crumbled to a greasy ash.

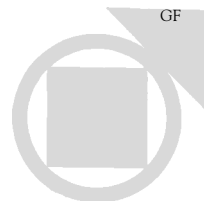
By the time the ash coated the floor, Leopold had vanished, but whether into the night or back to the realm of the unconscious from which he had surprised Benito, no one could say, for none saw.

Within the hour, Benito’s cab arrived. The driver, a ghoul from the Scottish branch of the Giovanni family, knew exactly what he was looking at. With a careful mien, he scooped up enough ash to hopefully allow one of the accomplished necromancers to investigate the death of Benito Giovanni, and sped off into the night.

Dan Nussbaum scratched his head and cursed whoever had knocked his door from its hinges. Goddamn vampire hit men.

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**Saturday, 30 October 1999, 5:12 AM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



Nickolai stood before the tall, quicksilver mirror, staring incredulously. The murder he had witnessed was not undesirable—in fact, he had ordered it—but the deed had not unfolded as he had anticipated.

He'd had some time to think about it—the temporal dislocation that accompanied the apportionment of another individual was far from an exact science—but had arrived at no firm conclusions. The implications of what he'd seen were problematic at best, potentially lethal at worst. He would make damn sure that the worst did not come to pass. Nickolai did not plan to become a victim of his own creation. He was the last of his line; he owed it to those whose banner he alone carried to survive. Yet the vagaries of undeath had time and again been thrown in his face: from the horrendous slaughter at Mexico City, to the transformed lackey he'd rediscovered and bent to his will.

One thing was certain, however. Benito Giovanni was, once and for all, dead.

Nickolai looked to the mirror. Within the circumference of the ornately rune-carved mahogany frame, quicksilver swirled and twisted. The viscous liquid began to take on a shape, and the glass surface, adhering to that shape, began to bubble and bulge. The shape was that of a man. Or what had once been a man.

Leopold stepped slowly from the mirror. His face, torso, and right leg pressed against the outer layer of glass, bowing it into the room. As the quicksilver gradually assumed his visage, the grotesque Eye was the first recognizable detail. While the rest of Leopold was still but a shadow, a hint of his true form, the Eye became real—wiry vessels, like so many gnarled tree roots in the earth, pulsed with blood along the surface of the white. Leopold followed the orb, pushing through the elastic glass until he stood, covered in blood and ichor, before Nickolai.

“You did well, Leopold. *She* will be very pleased.”

The Eye watched impassively. Leopold's other eye was wide and wild. He panted like a feral dog, but slowly, each exhalation several seconds after the last, in perfect synchronicity with the pulsing of one of the Eye's vessels. Nickolai approached him carefully. There seemed to be no antagonism from the boy, but after what the warlock had seen...

Leopold's clothes were foul and tattered. Nickolai had long since ceased trying to replace the neonate's garments after pus had seeped from the Eye and encased much of his body. It was all Nickolai could do each evening to chip away the congealing mess that threatened to crust over Leopold's face and other eye. After destroying two ceremonial daggers at the task, Nickolai had resorted to a sturdier hammer and a screwdriver wielded as chisel. There was the occasional slip, of course, but Leopold seemed hardly to notice.

The ragged tears in Leopold's clothes were more recent, and were part of what alarmed Nickolai. The silk cloth wetted with Benito's lifeblood lay beside the mirror. *I won't need his vitae again*, Nickolai thought. He would feast on the remaining liquid in the vial later.

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A relatively short while ago, he had wetted the cloth and attuned the mirror. The Nosferatu, it seemed, had learned all they needed to know from dear Benito. *All that he could tell them about me*, Nickolai knew. Rather than disposing of the Giovanni properly, however, the sewer dwellers had dumped him unceremoniously in the desert. So the tidying up had fallen to Nickolai—which was just as well, because the warlock desired to test his control over Leopold. The test had met with mixed results.

Benito was dead enough, but Nickolai had not expected to see the neonate fashion his very bones into a scythe and eviscerate Benito, nor to witness the boy's ribs flay the Giovanni and lay him open to the world. But that was exactly what had happened. And now Leopold was back. Nickolai watched him warily. Those strange, fierce manifestations had not been a direct result of any of the warlock's rituals.

But perhaps an indirect result.

For weeks now, Nickolai had been experimenting with, and on, his guest. Nickolai had grown increasingly convinced that something other than the Eye had been at work months ago in the cave. The Eye, formidable as it was, was not capable of carnage and sick creative brilliance on such a grand scale. Something else *had* to have been at work—during the nights of creation, and on the night that Leopold had reclaimed the Eye.

The Eye had played a part, certainly. Nickolai's experiments had confirmed that. The orb seemed to act as a lightning rod for mystic energies. When Nickolai directed a ritual of any sort at it, the Eye quivered, as if at the touch of a lover. The warlock had three tomes of detailed notes and calculations. He was certain. And tonight had been the test: Destroy Benito while Nickolai pumped energy into the Eye, energy that Leopold no longer possessed on his own. Left to himself, the boy was a babbling cretin, rarely managing a complete sentence or thought these nights. Yet with a bit of supernal aid, he was transformed into an atrocity waiting to happen. The manner in which he had dispatched Benito did not correspond to any of the manifestations of the Eye's powers over the past weeks, yet it had happened. It smacked more of the abattoir of the cave. Perhaps residual traces remained of whatever source had driven Leopold to those heights of depravity, and Nickolai's rituals, though directed at the Eye, had tapped into that source. Perhaps. So many question marks, so many unsubstantiated theories.

In this case, however, the practice carried more import than did theory. For Nickolai's enemies would surely come for him soon. Why else dispose of Benito, if they had not learned all that they needed to know?

But it seemed that they had indeed given Nickolai enough time. He might not comprehend the depths of Leopold's potential, of the Eye's potential, but the warlock now had a potent weapon to wield. And with every additional night allowed him, he learned more.

Turning from Leopold, Nickolai pulled back the cover from a tray of utensils both secular and arcane. He chose a large syringe. *A pint should be enough*, he decided, then turned back to Leopold.

"Hold still, my boy," Nickolai said as he raised the syringe to the Eye. "This will only hurt a bit." *Actually, it won't hurt me at all*, he thought, as he plunged the needle into the Eye.

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**Saturday, 30 October 1999, 5:37 AM**  
**The underground lake**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



“So you’re convinced?” Calebros asked.

The distant *plink plink plink* of dripping water sounded almost like thunder amidst the silence of the cavernous chamber. Calebros and Emmett sat by the edge of the lake, the younger of the two recently returned from his sojourn in parts west. Wide, deep-set eyes were accustomed to the dark. Numerous manila folders spread out around them. The slight, pallid illumination given off by the iridescent lichen on the shore rocks and on the walls and ceiling cast the two grotesques in a sickly hue.

“Benito was convinced,” Emmett said. “He’d gone to a lot of trouble to find out. So, yeah, I’m convinced. Gary Pennington is, was, Leopold. Anything that Jeremiah said make you think different?”

Calebros shook his head. “According to Anatole, it was the ‘young wizard’ in Pennington’s studio in Chicago, and the ‘young wizard’ in Leopold’s studio in Atlanta.”

“If you trust Jeremiah.”

“I do trust him,” Calebros said. “I trust his data. I’ve studied it closely. The conclusions he suggests... many of them seem warranted.”

“He sent you an encyclopedia’s worth of *crap*,” Emmett grumbled, flipping through one of the closest folders. “I mean, really: ‘Anatole begins his sandal rubbing. Four seconds, changes directions. One minute forty-four seconds, changes direction...’ What drive! Jeremiah is off his gourd.”

“He was recording the actions of a madman,” Calebros insisted. “Why should it seem sane? Regardless, the little we’ve been able to glean from Anatole seems to confirm what you learned from Benito. Do you disagree?”

“No,” Emmett admitted grudgingly. He tossed the folder back down. “I don’t disagree. Benito was definitely the man on the ground. He was an accomplice in the murder, but he wasn’t the brain. He was used. Just like Pennington, or Leopold or what the hell ever you want to call him, was used. Benito arranged for the sitting, Leopold sculpted—”

“But did Victoria Embrace him before or after he changed his identity and moved to Atlanta? Surely, as prominent as she is, if she’d been involved we would have come across her name before now.”

“There’s a lot we didn’t come across until now,” Emmett said.

“Could she have Embraced him after the fact, after he’d fled, and she didn’t know?”

“Don’t know.” Emmett shrugged. “We should check with Rolph again. He should have had an inkling that Leopold was Victoria’s child.”

Calebros was about to comment on that, but stopped. He cocked his head.

Emmett heard the telltale sound also. “Was that your freaking back popping or something?”  
“No.”

The two broodmates eased silently from their seats among the rocks. They zeroed in on the origin of the faint scraping sound—the tunnel, the one down from Calebros’s

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office. They edged closer. The sound was growing louder. Someone was scrabbling down to the lake. Emmett drew his claws back, ready to strike. Calebros picked up a rock that more than filled his hand.

Whoever it was coming down the tunnel was sliding feet first. The shoes appeared first from the darkness—saddle shoes, scuffed, torn, and worn within an inch of their lives, if not beyond. Then the bobby socks, the elastic long since gone slack, fallen down around puffy swollen ankles. The legs were hairy and white, all loose skin and sagging collections of fat. Because of the slide down the tunnel, the poodle skirt and its crinoline had ridden inside out above her waist. Calebros and Emmett profoundly wished that she'd felt the need for undergarments. Hilda scooted the rest of the way from the tunnel and landed on her more than ample posterior with a graceless *flump*.

"Look at you two," she said, flashing them an almost toothless grin. "I thought I might find you down here."

Calebros and Emmett stared at her, both speechless. Emmett lowered his hand, his claws melting back to fingers. Calebros dropped his rock.

Hilda struggled to her feet. "No, no, don't mind me. I can get up by myself," she said as she straightened her torn petticoat and threadbare skirt. "Care for some skinny dipping?" she asked, eyeing the lake.

As Calebros watched her, he had second thoughts about having dropped his rock. This creature had been nothing but grief since she'd arrived bearing the parcel from Rolph. Calebros found his tongue, just barely. "How...?"

"It seemed to me," Hilda said cheerfully, "that there just had to be something behind the bookshelf. Don't know why. Just call it a gift."

"You," Emmett said coldly, "are not welcome here, woman—and I do use that term loosely."

Hilda sidled up to him, raising her eyebrows in a way that made her jowls sway, and firmly grabbed his crotch. "You boys get so grumpy when you've got nobody to wax your beanpole." Emmett pulled away. "Hmm? No like the señorita? That why you two sneak off down here... *together*? Don't know what you're missing." She cupped her hands under her breasts and lifted them above where they sagged at her belt.

Emmett was not amused. "How did you *fit* down that tunnel, you fat heap of—"

"Hilda," Calebros interceded lest events grow too heated. "What Emmett is trying to say—"

"I'm not *trying* to say anything," Emmett said. "What I *am* saying is—"

"Have you ever heard of London Tommy?" Hilda asked, her flippant manner suddenly turned cold. The raw threat in her voice chilled Calebros. "London Tommy was rude to me too."

"Up yours, you fat fucking whore."

"Emmett!" Calebros gestured for silence. "Hilda!" He did the same to her as she opened her mouth again. The two names, intertwined, echoed through the chamber. "Hilda," he said again more quietly and calmly. "This is a... private place for me. I come here usually for solitude, to be alone with my thoughts; sometimes to speak of important matters with Emmett. Generally, I prefer to—"

"To keep out the fat fucking whores."

"I know where I'm not wanted!"

"Oh? Coulda fooled me! What gave it away?"

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Calebros's head was reeling as he felt the situation spinning horribly out of control. He was no good at this. Confrontation with strangers left him feeling weak, although Emmett seemed to make up doubly for the shortcoming. "Both of you, *stop!*"

A tense silence fell over the cavern. "Would you leave us please, Hilda?" Calebros asked.

"That's all you had to say," she sneered at Emmett. "I just wanted to see how you was coming with that ugly thing Rolph had me bring up."

"It's a worthless hunk of shit," Emmett said, smiling, "so thank you very much."

She glared, but Calebros stepped between them to avert further contention and possible bloodshed. "I would prefer," he said pointedly, "that you not mention this chamber or the passages leading to it to members of the warren. The few that know about it know enough to stay away. Can you agree to that, Hilda?" She was still glaring at Emmett over Calebros's shoulder. "Otherwise, I will be forced to see that you return to Atlanta at once."

That got her attention. "I like it well enough here," she said. "I'll not be telling anybody."

"Thank you. And now, if you would..." He gestured toward the way she'd come.

She paused long enough to spit once before crawling sullenly back into the tunnel, a sight from which both Calebros and Emmett averted their eyes.

"It doesn't do any good to provoke her, Emmett."

"Nothing else does any good either."

Calebros couldn't argue with that. Hilda was, in many ways, as repugnant as they came, but she was of the blood, and thus he felt obliged to provide her shelter. Over the years, he had winnowed away the more offensive elements in the warren—the child molesters, the uncontrollable killers and sociopaths, those who were likely to draw unwanted attention to the warren and thereby endanger all who resided there. Hilda might at some point require winnowing herself.

"She did bring this..." Calebros said, pulling from the folds of his cloak a Ziploc bag containing the pieces of a broken clay model and a photograph. "And, contrary to popular belief, it is not 'a worthless hunk of shit.'"

Emmett shrugged. "Poetic license. So sue me. Besides, Rolph could have mailed it. He just wanted to get rid of her—for obvious reasons."

"Mail it?" Calebros said. "Would you entrust proof of Petrodon's murder to the U.S. mail?"





**JA**  
**Saturday, 30 October 1999, 10:54 PM (11:54 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Outside New Orleans**  
**New Orleans, Louisiana**

"I have a question for you." Isabel came out of the blue with her statement. For almost fifteen minutes, neither she nor Chas had said anything, preoccupied as they were with the monumental task facing them. The time for planning was over—the two of them, sorely outmatched if things became anything other than observational or conversational, were knowingly, consciously headed into the lair of what might very well be a Methuselah. Few vampires would undertake such a thing lightly, and the gravity of the situation cast a pall over the mood in the car. Quite possibly, they were driving to their Final Deaths. Equally as possibly, the ancient Kindred, which had secreted itself in the ghostly Underworld that co-located to the desolate swamps of Louisiana (which might have still been unexplored territory at the time of its self-imposed exile), could have something utterly incomprehensible in mind for them. Would it bat them around as playthings? Turn them into pawns for one of its next maneuvers in the Jyhad? Destroy their bodies and enslave their souls? It was impossible to tell—until they arrived.

"I guess you'd better ask, then. Never know if you'll have a chance after this," Chas replied, his mood of fatalism evident in his voice.

"You've been having some trouble of late, no?"

"That's your fucking question?" Chas shot Isabel a cross look over his shoulder. She noticed his hands tensed around the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening and his arm twitching beneath his jacket.

"Don't be a bastard. You know you don't have to come along for this. As a matter of fact, I'm not exactly sure *why* you're coming along. Don't misunderstand me—I certainly appreciate your being here—but what is it?"

"Okay, is *that* your question?"

"No, but go ahead and answer it anyway. It might give me a little background when I finally get around to asking." Isabel smiled, hoping to set her companion at ease.

"Well, if this were a movie, now would be the part where I tell you I love you."

"Oh, Chas, don't—"

"Relax, relax; I'm just fucking kidding. It's all I can do anymore, freak out and screw around."

"Well, that's my second question. Or my first, really. What made you lose control back at Prudhomme's school?"

"Oh, that. Nothing. Just some fucked-up shit from when I was younger."

"Well...?"

Chas licked his lips and paused a bit before continuing. "It's this fucking family. When you're part of the Giovanni, some decisions get made for you. You don't always have the chance to control your own destiny. One night, some crazy guinea—no

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offense—on high gets a wild hair up his ass and someone completely uninvolved ends up paying for it.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying. Well, I have an idea, but what do you mean specifically?”

“Okay, but you have to keep this quiet. It’s not common knowledge.”

“Please,” Isabel rolled her eyes.

“All right. Back before they decided to Embrace me, I had already started a mortal family. Pretty wife, house in Jersey, everything I own registered in someone else’s name, church on Sundays, couple of kids—the regular Mafia-guy package, you know? Then, all of the sudden, Frankie Gee shows up—I’ve been working for him off and on, more cowboy shit than him being my *capo*. He says he wants to bring me in full-time, make me part of the crew. Now, I know I’ll never be made because I’m one-sixteenth Spanish or something and those Lagos want you to be one-hundred-percent Italian, but getting into a crew is getting close. It means I don’t have to do any day-job bullshit anymore—I’ll get a piece of any racket that comes up and I’ll be more than a mook. People will come to me when they have capers they need pulled and I’ll get to pull my own. It’s being with someone; it’s being protected from all the other motherfuckers out there who want to rip off the small guys, you know? I mean, I did some little bookie shit every now and then, back in the day, and if one of the connected guys, made or not, decides not to pay you for six grand he owes you, tough shit. He’s with the crew and someone like Frankie Gee will whack you if you get lippy about it—he’s got to protect *his* guys, see?

“So part of Frankie Gee’s pitch to me was sacrifice. You give up the security of your day job for the big scores. You give up the insurance unions and pension funds and all that old-school shit—I don’t even know if people in the modern world even get that shit anymore, it’s been so long. You sacrifice, and you live a better life for it, or you make a better unlife for it; whatever. In this case, since I was part of the family, they wanted to proxy me; make me a ghoul, you know? Give me a test to see if I was worth a damn, and then they could make me Kindred. So I pass that test with flying colors and all. It was something simple, some bullshit truck hijacking and then running around afterward making sure the goods went where they wouldn’t cause any trouble from the people who bought them, and getting paid on them. The heist was my trial for the mob shit as well as seeing if I deserved to be part of the Kindred. Pretty easy if you ask me.

“They turned me later that year. I don’t know how your Embrace went, but the first part of mine was fairly run-of-the-mill. They had one of the guys drain me—which was another tough-guy part of the test, because I’m sure you know how fucking bad it hurts when one of us drinks from some poor slob—and then finish the job with a splash of blood across my lips. I remember thinking it was a pretty strange situation because we were in the cellar of a butcher’s shop in New York. This is, like, about a hundred years ago, and it’s all very new to me—you know what I mean. It’s not like tonight, when every fucking punk who’s ever seen a movie or black-wearing spooky kid knows what to expect. I mean, our family keeps things kinda fucked-up intentionally, you know? I mean, the whole time I’m a ghoul and drinking blood, I’m thinking it’s some kind of Roman Catholic guinea communion

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thing, and that this is how everybody out there does it. I never read *Dracula* and I never had none of this Anne Rice shit to tell me what the whole vampire thing is about, you know? I mean, vampires fucking *get off* on all that sort of bent psychological shit—keeping you in the dark, never letting you know what they plan to do with you. I'm guilty of it, too. I guess it keeps you from being bored with fucking having to live forever. It's a nasty game."

"You're changing the subject a bit, aren't you, Chas?" Isabel interrupted.

This silenced him for a moment. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"What happened, then? You worked yourself off track after being Embraced."

"Well, that's it, you see. Fucking Frankie, and all that talk about sacrifice. He wasn't fucking talking about me having to sacrifice some bullshit attachment. He wanted me to fucking *make* a sacrifice—prove that what I was becoming was more important than what I had been. Those fucks—once they turned me, they left the cellar and locked the fucking door. I'm all freaking out in the hunger, running all over the room, looking for anything. I'm thinking maybe some blood has leaked through the floor from the butcher's above, or maybe rats or dogs or some shit come down here and I can go to town on them.

"Then I hear something banging around in the icebox. Remember, this is turn-of-the-century New York. We don't have big, metal, climate-controlled meat lockers, we have big, metal boxes kept cool with layer after layer of insulation and literal *ice* stacked in there to keep all the shit cool. I'm all out of my mind with hunger and it occurs to me that whatever's crashing around in there might well be alive, so I fucking dive in there like a man possessed.

"It's my fucking kids. It's fucking Ruth and Amanda.

"But what fucking choice did I have?" Blood-tears streamed down Chas's face. He glared at the road in the darkness ahead of him, as if he could just drive away from everything he had seen in the past.

"I'm sorry, Chas."

"Oh, that's not the end of it. See, they specifically *didn't* put my wife in there so that when I calmed down and they let me out, I'd have to go back to her. Well, I wouldn't *have* to, but they didn't want to make it easy or straightforward. If I killed my wife, too, I wouldn't have any choice but to move forward with my unlife. But they deliberately left her out there so I'd have to fucking tear myself up over what to do about it."

Silence hung over the car.

Minutes later, Isabel spoke. "And?"

Chas shook his head and sighed. "I had to kill her, too. I couldn't let her go on with something as fucked up as this completely changing her life. I mean, how the fuck do you *respond* to this sort of thing? Me, I've had to go on and come to grips with it, but that's because I fucking *did* it. When something like this just happens to you, what do you do? How the fuck can you even stand getting out of bed, knowing that something equally as fucked up or worse won't just arbitrarily happen to you the next day, you know? My fucking wife didn't do anything to deserve this—she married a Mafia guy. The worst thing that was going to happen to her was that I end up dead and she makes her own way or gets remarried. My goddamn kids—they didn't fucking choose to be born to Anna and I. They were just fucking born to the wrong guy at the wrong time and his fucking sick

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associates put them right in the path of totally wrong shit. Me, I fucking wake up with it every night for a hundred years—fucking get over it, you know?” More tears coursed down his cheeks.

“Yes, but you can’t—”

“And that’s basically why I’m following you around on this thing. Maybe it’s not the most altruistic cause, you know, helping a bunch of fucking vampires figure out the thing that’s coming after them, but it’s a start, eh? It’s making some kind of arguably positive difference. Frankie’s dead. Fucking Victor’s dead. It’s not like I have anything to go back to except who knows how many more nights of hurting people and taking their shit when I feel like it, and this at least lets me feel like I’m contributing *something*.

“And that’s what fucked me up the other night—seeing all those goddamn kids set up in neat little rows at Prudhomme’s fucking school. *He* killed those kids. He fucking chose to do it. He went out of his way, selected *individual fucking children* and drank them dry. When I go to sleep at the end of the night, it’s all I can do not to face the fucking sunrise for some shit that happened a hundred fucking years ago, that I had no power to control, and it’s something that he can do and rationalize and get up fucking happy as though it’s no concern in the world to him. My kids and my wife—I would have *destroyed* anyone who touched them. But it wasn’t enough. In his case, he doesn’t give it the least fucking bit of consideration.

“The son of a bitch.”

Isabel knew she could say nothing that would change Chas’s condition. This was his nightly demon. No doubt, when he saw the Beast, it wore his wife’s face, twisted into a mask of betrayal. It spoke in the stereo voices of his children, asking *Why, Daddy, why; what did we do?*

Just then, Isabel’s portable telephone rang. Chas jumped as the digital signal toned, jolted from his unpleasant reverie. Isabel answered quickly, “Hello?”

“Where?”

“Was he there the whole time?”

“From Las Vegas?” She spared a pointed look at Chas.

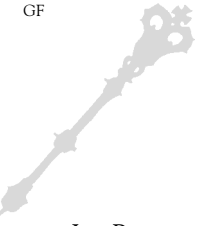
“Right. Last night. No, this morning?”

“All right. Thank you.”

Isabel turned off the phone and looked again at Chas. “Well, I have another reason for you to stick with me.”

“Oh, yeah? Great. What is it?” Sarcasm veritably dripped from Chas’s voice.

“Our man Benito—he’s dead.”



**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 1:00 AM**  
**Sub-basement, Baltimore Convention Center**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Jan Pieterzoon was not surprised to see Hans van Pel escorting Heshha Ruhadze along the concrete corridor precisely on time. The Setite had proven himself prompt, respectful, and professional—which was not to say that Jan trusted him the least little bit. But Lucinde had pronounced that they would deal with Ruhadze. Jan could see how, from her perspective, it might seem that keeping the Setite happy was the best way to forestall his interference in the plans that were now unfolding. From Jan’s view, however, accommodating Heshha was at best a distraction from far weightier matters; matters that, should they sour, the blame would undoubtedly fall squarely upon Jan. Not to mention the fact that he doubted Lucinde’s underlying assumption that *anything* they did would prevent the Setite from tampering. Could the Eye really mean that much to Ruhadze, that he would forego his natural proclivity, namely treachery?

The Eye of Hazimel. It had proved extremely potent, if Xaviar’s account of the Gangrel massacre was given credence. Why then, Jan wondered, hand the device—an actual eye; how macabre—to a Setite? Perhaps Lucinde merely wished to aid Heshha by hastening his journey to his own doom. Reasonable enough.

Whatever her reasons, though, Jan was left to play his part. He’d arranged the meeting that Ruhadze had requested. The Ventruel felt much more comfortable in this facility than he had three months ago in a sub-basement of the Wesleyan Building, where he had met with the Nosferatu underlings of Marston Colchester, who had arranged the employ of a certain Lasombra *antitribu*. That basement had been a maze of puddles, exposed pipes, and, Jan had gleaned, Nosferatu deathtraps. This non-public level of the Convention Center, on the other hand, was, if austere, at least dry, clean, and well lit. Colchester was here personally this time, in his guess of mild-mannered, well-dressed, African-American businessman.

Ruhadze, as usual, was tastefully and expensively dressed, black turtleneck and slacks, camel’s-hair jacket. The monocle, a thin chain trailing to his jacket pocket, was propped before his left eye. The syncopated tap of his silver-handled cane fell precisely between the clicks of his shoes, each of the three distinct sounds echoing slightly from the bare cement corridor. Van Pel’s footfalls, though louder, lacked the musical quality of the Setite’s. Heshha carried a leather attaché case in his left hand.

“Good evening, Mr. Ruhadze,” Jan said.

“Mr. Pieterzoon.” Heshha nodded to Jan and to Colchester, but no further introductions were extended.

“You won’t mind if we observe from the adjacent room?” asked Jan.

“By all means.”

Van Pel opened the door by which they were standing and gestured for Heshha to enter.

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**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 1:07 AM**  
**Sub-basement, Baltimore Convention Center**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



Hesha stepped inside the room and the door closed behind him. The only furnishings were a large metal table and three folding metal chairs, two of which were occupied. A wide mirror took up most of one wall. Behind it, in the next room, Jan Pieterzoon, Marston Colchester, and Pieterzoon's ghoul, van Pel, would be watching, listening, recording.

The two men seated at the table were the ones Hesha had asked to meet. He could have contacted them directly, of course, but the political circumstances were somewhat unsettled at present, and Calebros had suggested that Hesha go through what he called "proper channels." The advice had seemed reasonable enough—aside from which Hesha wanted to keep in the good graces of his Nosferatu allies—so the Setite consented. Little had he known that he would end up dealing with a justicar. Hesha was neither intimidated nor impressed by Lucinde's station—though impressed upon him were the implications of her very presence and the secrecy of it. Something unusual was definitely afoot, and Hesha would as always keep a sharp eye. For from war always arose opportunity for the prepared.

"Gentlemen," Hesha said to the two Kindred, "I thank you for agreeing to see me this evening."

Roughneck and Quaker looked on silently, suspiciously, perhaps from general distrust of Hesha's clan. He had checked with his brethren in the area—the two Malkavians had neither grudges nor indebtedness toward any Setites in the area. Had the latter been the case, then Hesha *would* have contacted the two directly, no matter what Calebros had recommended.

As Hesha moved closer and took his seat across from them, he became aware of a faint but distinct odor—that of dumpster refuse. It was not so pungent as the fecal odor that many Nosferatu, through preference or artifice, cultivated, and it suggested unlife spent not in the sewers but on the streets. Each man looked the part of the vagrant. Both wore over-sized, threadbare clothing, worn and dirty. Both were unshaven and unkempt. Roughneck's beard was long enough that he tucked the very bottom tip of it into his belt. The role of mendicant was one that Hesha had affected upon occasion when necessary, but these two Malkavians seemed to come by it honestly.

Hesha removed from his attaché case a folder and placed it before him on the table. "I have some pictures I would like to show you. I am willing to compensate you—in addition to what you'll receive for coming tonight, of course—for anything you might be able to tell me about them."

The Setite opened the folder. The pictures were from the cave in New York that he and Ramona had each visited twice. The girl was still in New York, in the city. She had been less than excited by the prospect of flying, and there would have been little reason for her to accompany Hesha at any rate. Of course, he had not suggested that to her. If he'd told her to stay where she was, she probably would have fought to come to Baltimore. The girl was not ignorant, but she was rash and headstrong—one might even say obstinate

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to a remarkable degree; Heshu had said that and much more to himself. Ramona possessed all the follies of her youth, her clan, and her temperament. She was a quick study, but Heshu wondered if she would survive long enough to learn what she needed to know.

He had not brought the pictures of the statue with which she had tampered. That work of perfection and genius had nothing to do with the Malkavians. There was madness amidst the sculpted rock, the fused bodies, but it was an insanity far darker and more pervasive even than that exhibited by the descendants of Malkav. The sculpture was an emanation of the mad Toreador Leopold, his tortured artist's soul physically rendered. There were implications for the Eye there, if Heshu could puzzle them out. Heshu would not risk revealing those photographs to these Kindred or, more importantly, to those beyond the mirror.

The pictures that he had brought, that were before him on the table, were rather the legacy of the Prophet of Gehenna. Much of the cave had been covered by the writing, the unintelligible scrawl, penned in Anatole's own blood. Heshu had taken a sample of the vitae, and he had taken the pictures of the bloodsigns, but he could no more translate the marks than unravel the mysteries of the Prophet's blood. A linguist—among many other skills—by trade, and fluent in or familiar with literally dozens of languages and dialects, Heshu could not read the scrawl. He could sense meaning, but he could not penetrate the seemingly random array of pictograms, runes, sigils, and—for the lack of any discernible paradigm—scribbles. Though he could not be certain, Heshu's instinct told him that Anatole had created the sanguinary panorama, had used his own arm as stylus and his own blood as ink. Who else could have so mutilated Anatole, if not himself? Leopold, with the Eye? Possible. But Heshu could not overcome the impression that the statue and the writing were fashioned by different hands, that the statue was the welling up of some great... malignancy, and that Anatole had found it, had imparted his own revelation—for those who could unravel it.

*Let those see who have eyes*, the Biblical prophets often said—the words more often than not spoken to the unfortunate masses, the predestined, the damned, who were doomed *not* to see.

Heshu slid the photographs across the table to those who shared, if not the prophet's power, at least Anatole's affliction. The Setite intended to watch carefully for any minute signs of recognition, for the slightest indication that either of the two Malkavians knew what it was they were viewing; he was ready to read the most subtle nuances of their reactions.

He was not prepared for the chaos that suddenly engulfed him.

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**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 1:07 AM**  
**Sub-basement, Baltimore Convention Center**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



“Hm. Two-way mirror. Nice,” Colchester said, as he, Jan, and van Pel filed into the observation room. “I used to have one of these.” The Nosferatu added, his demeanor, if not his visual disguise, reverting to its more usual, grotesque state. “My second wife liked to watch me bring other women home.”

Jan sighed audibly. Colchester heard and also seemed to realize that he was rubbing his hands together in reminiscent glee. The Nosferatu cleared his throat, resumed his serious manner.

“Gentlemen, I thank you for agreeing to see me this evening,” Heshia’s voice came to them over a speaker by the mirror. Roughneck and Quaker regarded him warily.

*They’re smarter than I thought*, Jan mused.

“I have some pictures I would like to show you,” Heshia said. “I am willing to compensate you....”

“Have you seen the pictures?” Colchester asked.

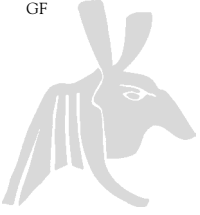
“No,” Jan said. That was not part of the agreement that Lucinde had arranged. She apparently had no interest in the photographs and therefore had decided that there was no reason for Jan to see them. Or perhaps she had merely assumed that Jan would install a recessed camera over the table, which he had. There was no need to try to read over Heshia’s shoulder. Everything would be reviewed in good time.

At that moment, however, everything went haywire.

“My God, *what’s happening?*” van Pel yelled in response to the sudden eruption of chairs, table, photographs and bodies on the other side of the mirror. The ghoul began at once for the door, but was stayed by Jan’s hand on his shoulder.

“We are here for observation only, Hans,” said Jan with rapt fascination, not once shifting his gaze from the room beyond the glass.





**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 1:11 AM**  
**Sub-basement, Baltimore Convention Center**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

There were one hundred forty-seven photographs. Quaker glanced at the first for maybe two seconds, then flung himself back from the table with the force of a hurricane. His chair crumpled beneath him; his legs whipped upward, striking the underside of the table.

Hesha leapt back out of the way as the table upended and a geyser of photographs erupted into the air. Quaker's gyrations knocked his friend to the floor as Quaker himself landed hard on his back and head. He convulsed, sharp violent spasms, and began to spit bloody, frothy drool.

"*What'd you do?*" Roughneck, climbing to his knees, yelled at Hesha. "*What'd you do to him?*"

Hesha prepared for violence. The bearded Malkavian started crawling toward him. Quaker was still writhing, his contortions growing more violent. He began vomiting vitae, his body heaving. He spewed a watery mix of blood and bile. It covered him, covered the floor and many of the pictures.

Roughneck, crawling toward Hesha, slipped on the mess. "*What'd you do?*" The Malkavian took one of the blood-splattered photographs, started to rip it apart in his hands, but stopped suddenly. He held it for a moment, staring, then slammed it down on the floor. He tried to smooth the folds and creases, to piece the ragged edges together; he pressed it compulsively against the floor, as if the blood there might hold the damaged paper together.

Hesha was trying to take it all in. After the first instant when Roughneck had started toward him, there seemed to be no immediate physical threat. But he could feel an energy in the air, an almost electrical charge. For an instant, the blood on the cold floor seemed to be boiling. Bubbling and spitting. But that had to be just Quaker's gurgling and coughing, spraying more droplets on what was already there. Had to be... didn't it?

Roughneck, Hesha saw, was smearing the blood on the floor... no, using his fingers to draw in it... to *write*. As the Malkavian's eyes rolled up in his head, his fingers traced paths and left figures that Hesha recognized—that Hesha recognized but could not translate. Roughneck was reproducing exactly, one after another, the symbols from the cave walls, from the pictures—from the pictures that Roughneck had not yet seen!

Hesha glanced at the mirror. Pieterzoon and the others didn't seem inclined to intervene, and with a similar detachment, the Setite watched Roughneck and Quaker. Quaker's eyes remained rolled upward, only the bloodshot whites visible as he blinked uncontrollably. His tongue flicked from side to side like a live snake, and his teeth clamped down as if trying to capture—or kill—the creature. His own blood mingled on the floor with that of his companion. Roughneck continued writing, recreating Anatole's symbols, at the same time sliding over what he'd already written and smearing it beyond recognition.

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While Roughneck scribbled in the blood, Quaker suddenly ceased convulsing. His body grew rigid, back arched. He hacked, expelling a clot of blood and phlegm from his throat, and then in a cracking, tortured voice he spoke:

*"The light... the last of the light... it fades, fades... high above, far far away. Night... the Final Night. Walls too slick... can't climb... surrounded by bulging eyes, blank, bloated faces... too slick... can't climb."*

Quaker began writhing again, scrabbling at the floor in terror. His fingers clawed at the bloody cement, nails digging into the floor, snapping, splintering.

Roughneck was now scooping into his arms all the photographs he could reach. They were torn and bloodstained, spread across the floor. He gathered together those he could, began tearing at them, stuffing the pieces into his mouth, swallowing, gagging, stuffing more into his mouth.

*"The children!"* Quaker shouted. *"Down the well... they point the way... beneath the children... they are not yet quick... they point the way."*

Hesha did not try to prevent Roughneck's destruction of the photographs. The Setite had copies. Neither did he attempt to unravel Quaker's ravings. Rather, Hesha depended on the tape recorder in his jacket, and the recordings that Pieterzoon was making.

Suddenly Quaker ceased thrashing; he grew perfectly still. *"The children fear their shadow, but the shadow fades with the last of the light,"* he intoned. As unheralded as it had come about, his respite from terror ended, and Quaker again clawed frantically at the cement floor. *"They show us the way!"* he cried frantically, the last of his strength seemingly spent. *"They show us... light fading... Final Night... the children."*

And then Quaker was silent, still; Roughneck with him. And as Hesha looked on, the two Malkavians crumbled to dust, their bodies sifting away amidst the pooled blood and photographs from the cave.



**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 12:21 AM (1:21 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**The Bourbon estate  
Outside New Orleans, Louisiana**

The remains of the Bourbon estate house—the home where Oliver Prudhomme had experienced his ordeal with Blind Tom and whatever it was that dwelt there—had fallen into disuse over a century ago. Terrorized by the monster that made its haven in the basement, the widow of the house and her servants had followed Oliver's example soon after he left, and abandoned the estate.

The swamp had since made every effort to reclaim the land that had once belonged to it solely. Creeping vines worked their way up the boggy hill toward the house, enveloping it in an organic cage of vegetative murk. Time and the elements had eroded the foundation and walls of the once-proud home, leaving breaches, rot and decrepitude in their wake. Although the air refused to move at ground level, some tremulous breeze passed through the shattered windows and splayed French doors of the house's upper level, moving the heavy burgundy drapes of the house so that they looked like lethargic black ghosts in the darkness of the night.

Isabel and Chas circumnavigated the enormous building, looking for whatever remained of the cellar Prudhomme had described in his letter or journal. Before long, they found it, a rude, rotten wooden affair laid over the gaping grotto that no doubt formed the cellar itself. No sooner had they found the entrance than the air came alive with a keening wail. Cold wisps of wind whipped across the grounds.

"The spirits of the restless dead," Isabel confided to Chas. "The thing inside has them bound to the house, serving as sentries or something. They're probably angry at its dependence upon them—I can feel that they don't serve it willingly."

"Can that help us?" Chas asked, with an uncharacteristic tone of hope. Since the latter half of the car trip he had been dour and withdrawn, affected by the ghosts that populated his own past and the death of the Kindred he had been initially responsible for finding, before everyone he knew who had been involved in the affair had turned up dead themselves.

"I doubt it," admitted Isabel. "The Kindred beneath the house is probably older than all of these spirits combined, and far more powerful. Even if they acted in unison, the monster could probably dissipate them with a wave of his hand or banish them into other realms. No, I'm afraid we're going to have to face this thing alone, and on its own terms."

"Well, fuck," Chas added. Isabel noted that at least this was in keeping with his personality.

Stepping carefully in the darkness, the two made their way to the wooden door that feebly shielded the world from the creature within. Chas pulled the door open on its rusted hinge, which gave a metallic shriek that sounded not unlike the voices of the unsettled ghosts wailing around them.

Beneath the house, the sedimentary rock of the Louisiana swamps formed a striated cavern. Here and there, great timbers or clusters of cypress wood spanned from the floor to the ceiling of the grotto, supports for the vast edifice above it. Wet vegetation crawled through various fissures in the ceiling, trailing slimy webs across the short protrusions

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that also roughened its surface. Pools of still water gathered in depressions that pocked the uneven floor and a still air suspended a subtle, cloying scent of decay. Chas's flashlight lit the darkness in a feeble cone, through which mist passed like the ephemeral bodies of the ghosts that had no doubt been barred from the ancient Kindred's haven proper.

Then the voice hit Isabel, resounding like a church bell through her head. It was neither male nor female, a heavy, uninflected boom through her mind. The Kindred taking its rest here knew that she and Chas had arrived, and it extended a telepathic tendril into her mind.

*Why have you come?* it asked.

Isabel replied aloud, so Chas would hopefully have some idea of what was transpiring. "We have come to ask your motives. We want to know why you have hunted down so many of our number."

*Insolent childer, the both of you. Its affairs are its own. It needs explain nothing to you. You and your kind, who drove it so far under the caul of night—it does what it wishes.*

"But, why? Is it revenge? Against the ones who hunted you in the past?"

Chas, regrettably, had failed to comprehend what was taking place. "The fuck are you talking about, Isabel?"

"It's the mon—the Kindred. It's talking to me through a mystic gift."

*Who is with you? It feels anger from the other. It sees a limn of scarlet. Do not bring an angry guest into its home! You have transgressed already; you have violated the sanctity of its haven. Presumptuous and insolent!*

"This is my companion, Chas. Chas protects me. We mean no threat to you, Old One; we know that you could destroy us at a whim. The both of us come only for knowledge. Without knowing the cause of your ire, we cannot end it."

"This is fucking creeping me out, Isabel."

"Please, Chas. I need to concentrate. You've dealt with this sort of thing before. Just let me talk to our host."

*Your protector is impetuous! How safe can he make you? It expected only one....*

"What do you mean, you expected one? You knew we were coming?"

*It knows. It knows. It knows the end and the dark. But some things still surprise it. Even the voices from the cold failed to tell of the arrival of another. It cannot grant the same immunity the cloaked man asked for. William Burke! Go back and tell your master that I shall follow his request to the letter!*

"William Burke? What do you mean, Venerable Elder?" Isabel was puzzled by the unseen presence's turn of words. "William Burke does not travel with me."

"Who the fuck is William Burke?" Chas demanded, a growl edging his voice. "Oh, now what the fuck is this?"

Isabel watched as the air around Chas grew hazy—dark and dense, a black whirlwind spun around him. A legion of otherworldly voices howled in chorus, sounding like the force of a gale wind outside. The air in the chamber was frightfully still, however, unsettling Isabel and Chas all the more; the storm overtaking him was unnatural, made up of a torrent of ghosts who did not disturb the world of the living in any temporal sense.

Still, it seemed that the ancient Kindred had sensed Chas's weakness, his proximity to the Beast. Isabel looked on as rage and anguish piqued Chas's face. His eyes sank in,

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growing dark, and his mouth gaped like a fish out of water, fangs exposed. His hands clenched into fists at his sides and then opened again, as if he was trying to grab hold of his wraithly tormentors, who eluded his grasp with ease.

The disembodied voice again resounded in Isabel's mind, a malicious tone with a tinge of mirth behind it. *The other has a short temper. We have sent it an offering to see how it reacts.*

As interminable seconds ticked by, Chas felt himself overcome by the emotional tide his attackers loosed upon him. The simple frustration of it ignited his ire, but the passion of the ghosts who whirled about him dragged him toward frenzy, an undertow of spectral turmoil and unleashed fury. *Get the fuck away from me*, he thought, and lashed out with his fist, striking nothing but a swath of cold air.

"Chas, keep calm. *Keep calm*," Isabel warned, but what the fuck did she know? The storm refused to break—Chas could see individual faces in the ghostly tempest, smiling, mocking and mouthing obscenities. Their shrieking echoed louder in his mind than his own thoughts. Again, he struck out, and then again, always failing to make contact. Chilling claws raked through his hair, lifted his jacket, tugged at his arms and battered him from beyond the veil of darkness between worlds. A torrent of individual words and curses rose from the cacophony—*cold, so cold, come, touch us join us be part of so warm, so much hate, so far from a man, can never truly, lost! too much black so away a little, hot black center.*

The swirl of bodies came together, converging to form... *something*. A face. Chas cast his hands out before him, hoping to disperse the forming face, but once again, his hands passed through the apparitions. The visage grew more distinct, a skeletal rictus stretched over prominent bones. It became more defined, and then the skull cracked, erupting into a laughing scowl, filling the dead air with its shrieking mirth—

—and then vanished. The cackling however, continued, becoming audible to Isabel, who covered her ears before it deafened her. The laughter faded into reality and dropped a bit, changing from the roar of the dispersed ghosts to the very real, very present laughter of something in the chamber itself. Chas's eyes narrowed to slits as he bristled. "What the fuck is so goddamn funny? What the fuck are you laughing at? You fucking... *coward!* Where the hell are you?" He lowered himself, looking as if he were about to pounce.

"Chas!" Isabel shouted. "Stay cal—"

Too late, too little.

Chas leaped forward into the heavy void of the grotto, followed closely by Isabel. A few yards deeper into the cavern, a vortex of darkness whirled, and the laughter took on a timbre that suggested it had dropped within. Chas seethed; Isabel leaped to restrain him, but he slapped her to the ground, lost in the throes of frenzy. From the floor, Isabel looked up at Chas, seeing the whipcord muscles of his thick neck bursting from his collar, his fangs jutting from his gaping maw, knowing that he was doomed. He sprang forward.

And stopped in midair, crashing to the floor.

From the vortex stepped a painfully thin figure, looking like nothing so much as an animated scarecrow, half again as tall as a man. It had no fingers, only long talons, and tatters of a shroud hung from it like the cowl of the Grim Reaper itself. The figure showed no face, wearing a cobwebbed black veil attached to a perfect cirlet of small, humanoid skulls, each missing the lower mandible. As it stepped forth, the vortex closed, fading into the featureless darkness of the cavern itself.

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The thing's head shook and the laughter continued. A bony finger pointed at Chas; the other hand waved capriciously. *It has walked with God. It has seen the sky rain blood. It has escaped a thousand-year hunt and then another. It has slept beneath the flesh of pharaohs and later beneath their lifeless bones. And one so young—this—thinks that he can destroy it. Not tonight. More laughter. Not tonight.*

Chas leaped from the ground, roaring, clutching hands outstretched—  
—and transformed into a cloud of dusty ash. A few seconds later, the ash settled in a streak on the grotto floor before the figure.

It continued laughing. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*

An anguished look crossed Isabel's face. Despairing, she sank to her knees, her hands leaving prints in the remains of Chas's body.

*This is the might of it. This is what it can do, and will do. You cannot stop it; none can. It gives you leave, though. It wants you to know, and take back to your others, and tell them. The cloaked man would have you return to him, and it would have you do the same.*

The dead figure stepped forward and stooped, grasping Isabel's slim neck in its infernally strong grip. It lifted her, bringing her up to where its face would be, cocking its head as if examining her. Then it dropped her to the floor.



*It has been here for centuries and none have found it outside a cursed few. And see what has come of them? Maddened, prowling through a swamp. Dead, nothing but a streak of dust. Gone, abating its thirst for a few nights. It does what it will. As shall it always. It is outside of time. But its memory is long.*

*Take that back to your masters.*

"But..." Isabel protested.

*No. No questions. Don't coax it to prove the cloaked man's weakness and have its way with you. Return.*

Isabel turned to look over her shoulder, back to the grotto's ingress. When she returned her gaze to where the figure had stood, all that remained was the still, black air and a feeble cascade of dust.



**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 1:25 AM**  
**Sub-basement, Baltimore Convention Center**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Jan stood perfectly still and stared at the aftermath. Van Pel and Colchester did the same. Several drops of blood had splattered against the mirror and now seemed suspended in time between the two rooms—the present on this side of the glass: quiet, orderly, following predictably from what had preceded; the future on that side: blood-soaked chaos, incomprehensible warnings of doom.

The children down the well.

*What in the bloody hell...?* Jan could not comprehend what he had seen, what he had heard. The room beyond the glass grew unfocused, the mangled photographs, the remains of the two Malkavians. Jan's gaze latched onto the suspended droplets of blood—the blood that would connect the present and the future.

In the end, it was Heshu who came to them. He opened the door to the observation room where they stood speechless.

"I would appreciate a copy of the tape," the Setite said.

Jan slowly turned his head, shifted his gaze from the suspended blood to look at him. Ruhadze appeared completely unfazed. Jan nodded. Satisfied, Heshu left them.

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**Sunday, 31 October 1999, 10:52 PM**  
**Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



“Do you think he believed you?” Jan asked.

Theo settled back into the plush couch. “How many times are you gonna ask me that?” he grumbled.

Jan didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. Theo hadn’t given anything away, not that they were aware of, but neither had Vitel. There was every indication that Vitel had believed Theo—he *had* to have. If Vitel had seen through Theo’s ruse, then they were doomed, and the Camarilla presence on the East Coast was a thing of the past. But if Vitel *was* convinced that Baltimore really was the last stand, then there might still be hope....

Jan found the digital video cassette he was looking for, slipped it into the player, and turned on the television. The picture that sprang to the screen was not of the best quality, but the image was clearly the exterior balcony of a hotel at night. The row of doors, aside from the sequential numbers, were identical. All of the curtains were drawn; some of the rooms behind the curtains were lighted, others not. The small white date in the corner of the screen indicated it had been filmed last night.

“This is one of Vitel’s havens in the city,” Jan said. “He alternates days among them. No apparent pattern. Colchester took these shots himself. We’re lucky there was no woman who forgot to pull her curtain in a room nearby, or he would have fogged up the lens.” Theo laughed under his nonexistent breath. “Vitel has a block of eight rooms reserved permanently,” Jan went on. “Ghouls stay in the others, but he...” Jan paused until a dark figure came into view, a tall man in a dark overcoat, his equally dark hair streaked with gray. “He stays in this one.” The picture zoomed in as Vitel entered room 337. The door closed, and a light came on behind the curtain.

“Now,” said Jan, picking up a remote control and fast forwarding through a couple of uneventful hours, then returning the tape to normal speed. As Theo and Jan watched, another figure moved into the picture, a disheveled man with dirty, receding hair.

“Look familiar?” Jan asked.

“I haven’t seen him before,” Theo said, “but he could be the guy Katrina described.”

From a shelf by the television Jan took a dossier and dropped it on the table in front of Theo. “He’s our man,” the Ventrue said. “Tzimisce. Active in the Sabbath around Baltimore and Washington for years. Leads a pack at times, but a bit of a loose cannon.”

Theo thumbed through the thick file, looked at the pictures, skimmed the text. “Helluva body count he’s racked up.”

“And those are the ones we know about. He’s the one that approached Katrina. He’d been flying under our radar until one of Colchester’s people recognized him coming out of a meet with Vitel. A meeting very much...” Jan aimed the remote control again, rewound the scene slightly to show Jack skulking up the last few stairs, and then played it forward at normal speed. Jack knocked on the door of room 337. The door opened. Jack stepped inside, and the door closed.



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Theo was not impressed. “Shit. You can’t even see if it was Vitel that let him in. That the best Colchester could do?”

“He’s the one,” Jan insisted. “I can show you the footage from later last night when Jack drops off his message to Sascha Vykos in Washington, and other messages too, from the past few weeks.”

Theo continued to flip through the dossier and scowled at the large TV screen. The seconds and minutes in the corner passed by. Jan stood silently and watched. After about twenty minutes, the door to 337 opened again, and Jack slipped out of the room and down the steps. He was carrying a large, folded envelope.

“How did Colchester’s guy just happen to catch Jack, or Johnny, or who the hell ever he is, meeting with Vitel?” Theo asked. “Not this time, the first time.”

Jan clicked off the television and moved with deliberate steps to a chair opposite Theo. “After Hartford,” Jan said, “we began a series of observations.”

“We,” Theo repeated. “You and Colchester.”

“Yes. Vitel was one of the subjects. We couldn’t be sure whom to watch, so we cast a wide net.”

“How wide?” Theo wanted to know. “Who else?”

Jan paused for a moment, but the hesitation removed any surprise from what Theo was about to hear. “All the principals,” Jan said. “Vitel, Garlotte, Goldwin, Gainesmil, Lladislas, Quaker and Roughneck, Malachi... yourself...”

It didn’t bother Theo to find out that he’d been spied upon like that. Why should it, after finding out about the test he’d been subjected to the other night, after finding out that his own boss, Pascek, had urged the Ventrue justicar to test him rather than standing up for him? Theo took it in stride. It all had the stink of Kindred politics, but he was the one who’d let himself wade so deep into the shit. It was one thing serving as archon for his sire while his sire was justicar. Theo hadn’t had to stay on when Jaroslav succeeded Cerro. The archon could have walked away, but he hadn’t. And all the maneuvering, which had never been pretty or nice under Cerro, had just gotten uglier and meaner with Pascek at the helm.

“Vitel is the one,” Jan said quietly at last, trying to keep the meeting focused. “I have records of the meets with Jack, dates, times, locations, pictures, transcripts of some. You can see whatever you want.”

Theo tossed the dossier back onto the table. “I want to see it,” Theo said. “All of it. Every fuckin’ thing you got.”





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part three:  
Blind Man's Bluff

FROM MONDAY, 1 NOVEMBER 1999  
TO TUESDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 1999





**Monday, 1 November 1999, 6:40 AM (12:40 AM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Hotel Vista del Castillo**

**Zaragoza, Spain**

Lucita stared again at the telegram. It had come through very secure channels from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and it said only this:

**ON RETREAT IN AL HEJAZ STOP COME WHEN ALLAH CALLS STOP**

There was no signature, and no need for one. Lucita did not believe that Allah had ever called her, or indeed that He ever would. Would she ever see Fatima al-Faqadi again? And after Madrid, did she ever want to?

She looked out the window, wondering, and watched the ghosts.

Sunrise was only four minutes away now, and the restless dead were leaving before All Hallows' Eve became All Saints' Day. Lucita turned her head occasionally to watch them fade out of the lands of living, but her attention was focused on the spires of the Aljafería, the capital of Aragon when it had been a kingdom and not just a Spanish province. Her hotel was almost a dozen miles west of the palace, on an uninteresting strip of commercial road. Its one redeeming feature was its height: tall enough that the upper stories looked out over the modern mass of Zaragoza and offered an unobstructed view of the hilltop crowned by the palace. Her suite occupied half the top floor, and she'd put the room's most massive wooden chair directly in front of the windows. Full sunlight wouldn't strike her, but light was already glaring off of the office and car windows catching dawn's first rays.

The palace's silhouette had changed in the nine hundred years since she drew her last breath there. Unfamiliar shadows fell across the palace's walls. There'd been no great civic towers, let alone skyscrapers, in the Aragon she'd known, and the new buildings surrounding the Aljafería loomed like conquering soldiers of a mightier empire.

But still...there was the window where she'd watched her father argue with her uncle about Uncle Ramiro's abbot. There was the battlement where she'd paced and said the orisons her confessor (*May he rot in Hell*, the thought intruded) assigned. There was the little shrine erected in the memory of her grandfather, a Moorish-embellished monument to the warrior who died fighting Moors.

It was still her home.

She felt the prickling across her skin from reflected sunlight. She wasn't burning yet, but it was just a matter of time. It took all her strength to hold herself in the chair. The curse within her made her tired. The bed looked so appealing. Day was no longer her element. Like Jacob of old, she wrestled with an angel of the Lord, but there'd be no blessing for her, no moment when the tormenter would say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," and depart. A few wisps of smoke wove through the layers of blanket, toward the smoke alarm she'd disabled during the night.

Ghosts had never been common in Lucita's experience, but even very rare events happen over the slow dark centuries. She knew a fair amount of the etiquette suitable for

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addressing the restless dead, modes of inquiry likely to draw out useful answers and modes of address unlikely to provoke attacks (or, worse yet, later vengeance). She knew that at times ghosts were frequent in the lands of the living, though not why, and therefore wasn't particularly surprised to find herself thronged on this All Hallows' Eve. She *was* surprised to find one of the ghosts both familiar to her and capable of making itself—himself—tangible long enough to hold a meaningful conversation.

He had been a retainer to her family only two generations after Lucita's time. He remembered the tales about "the poor lost one," the promising young lady who wasted away so tragically. They'd reminisced about the old ways—nothing consequential, just the routine of life in the lost age. Now he walked up to stand beside her, very carefully not obscuring her view, and pointed at her bare hands and face. "Milady, don't you think it a bit presumptuous to court stigmata this way? It isn't seemly for you to lay out your flesh so that the mark of Caine becomes the image of Christ's wounds, and that's what will happen if you don't put them under cover."

Lucita didn't turn to look at him. "These hands have spilled more blood than I can imagine in one place. These eyes have looked on countless sins. These teeth have drained the gift of life again and again. I told myself for a thousand years that I was all the things my sire wasn't. But I was just like him: I have preyed on others for my own ends. God won't take the curse away, but I must atone as I can. It's baptism, if you want to call that. I'm going to let fire strip off what water can't."

The ghost looked doubtful. "Milady, you were educated in the classical manner, and it's my duty as a tutor to point out that you are speaking in the absence of authority. Which of the blessed fathers tells you that cooking yourself removes sin? You're confusing an accident of your condition with its essence. This is a stunt, not genuine penance."

This time she did turn look at him, briefly. "Are you forgetting your place? You were a servant, and now you're just a ghost. Who, exactly, are you to judge me?"

"I am a servant, milady. I saved my masters from embarrassment with private wise words. Should I stop doing so now, when a daughter of the royal family is once again in need? You put on a martyr's appearance, but it's for your own guilt rather than the glory of God or a true witness. God is not mocked."

6:44 AM. Lucita's travel alarm clock chimed one second before direct sunlight struck the highest tower of the Aljafería. Her hands began to smoke, and she felt the skin of her face beginning to wrinkle and crack. Sunlight crept down the palace's red walls. With her inhuman eyes, Lucita could clearly see constantly shifting patterns of shadow in the courtyard as sunbeams shone through layered geometric lattices built when she was a child.

The outer layers of her skin now drifted around her as a fine ash. Smoke—some columns black with vitae, others white with vampiric flesh—filled more of the hotel room, and its haze obscured the topmost foot of the windows. The pain was unbearable, and her strength continued to fade. Soon, she feared, she would collapse into fearful frenzy and flee like any neonate coward to the safety of some dark corner. She started to cry, but stopped as soon as she felt the bloody tears sizzle and burn on her cheeks.

Lucita had seen sunlight less than a dozen times in the last nine hundred years, and the reflected glare made it nearly impossible to see. She willed blood to her face, strengthening the burning tissues and restoring some measure of supernatural clarity to

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her vision. After a few rapid blinks, she could make out people walking in front of the palace. Memory peopled the landscape with servants, messengers, farmers delivering food, soldiers on their way to battle. The men and women who actually moved along the familiar roads, though, were none of them. They were not servants. They were *employees*, bound to their superiors by contract and economics rather than by oath and faith.

Realization broke upon her with an almost physical pain—she actually did drag her focus in for a moment to see if the windows had shattered. The palace she had known was as dead as her family, as dead now as the darkling priest who'd made her a vampire. The shell remained, but its soul had gone wherever souls go. She remembered a particular hollow tree in which she and dead departed Anatole had sheltered, in their walks along the Danube road. The palace was like that. The mortals who went around and through it were as irrelevant to the old place as she and her mentor were to that tree. It served them, but only because it no longer lived the life intended for it.

The ghost was right: there was no point to this. Her pain would not bring back her lost Aragon. She might act the part of its lady, but nobody now would serve as they'd served then. This was a delusion.

As her eyes began to crack, Lucita's vision grew more and more impaired. Within just a few seconds it was no better than any living person's, and in a few more she was nearly blind. Her world now consisted of the window, a bright rectangle, and the pitch blackness of everything else around her. Her hands no longer held firm; her body trembled in the chair, and if she had her full strength, the arms of the chair would be splinters now. She couldn't see her hands, but she could hear the click of bony fingertips on wood.

Finally her resolve failed. She managed to avoid full-blown panicked flight, but she had to stand and walk with all the dignity she could muster toward the bed and darkness. Her last step ended in a stumble—she hadn't remembered the count just right, and she ran into the footboard. The mirror above the bed smashed with the force of her impact, and she felt pieces of glass drive into her burning skin and tinkle onto the bedspread and floor. She drew the blankets and bedspread around her, feeling the power inside her healing her wounds, knowing that in just a few nights no sign would remain of her act of self-mortification.

The ghost spoke from somewhere near the window. "I go, milady. You have made yourself hurt, and to what end? You are no wiser or better than you were. You are still yourself. As the prophet Jeremiah said, 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.'" With a whisper of inrushing air, it was gone. Lucita slept.

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**Monday, 1 November 1999, 3:02 AM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



“Has Ruhadze shown you the pictures of the sculpture?” Emmett asked.

“No,” Calebros said, shaking his head. A single candle struggled to illuminate the chamber of hewn rock. “The writing, Anatole’s legacy, is more important, I think. I respect Heshha enough—”

“Hmph,” Emmett snorted. “Respect a Setite. Augustin would puke in his grave.”

“Don’t speak of our sire in that tone. Or Heshha for that matter. In Bombay—”

“Bombay, shmombay. Give it a rest already.” Emmett rolled his eyes.

“Do you want to look at the pictures we *do* have?”

“Of the writing? The ones that turned the Malkavians into Shake ‘n’ Bake? No thanks.”

“I looked at them,” Calebros gently taunted him. “Heshha looked at them. Even the Gangrel whelp did.”

“Oh yeah? Well...good for you.”

“Stunning retort.”

“Up yours.”



**FILE COPY**

1 November 1999

re: legacy of Anatole

As usual, nothing straightforward about Prophet of Gehenna; as many perspectives as individuals involved.

Ramona claims hillside at cave scarred, ruined—would seem to fit with Xaviar's account. But neither Hesha nor Jeremiah able to confirm. In fact, contradictory accounts.

Two Malkavians in Baltimore destroyed after looking at pictures (barely!), yet others of us unscathed. Clan-specific response?

→ Sturbridge might have insight?

Jeremiah still somewhat troubled after his time with Anatole.

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**Monday, 1 November 1999, 3:47 AM**  
**Cherry Hill**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

GF



“Hey, big sugah, I give you the *ride* of your life.” That’s what had started it, the prostitute’s comment while Theo was pulled up to a stop sign.

He’d been riding through Katrina’s neighborhood—what *had been* her neighborhood. He wasn’t sure why exactly he was doing it. After leaving Pieterzoon, Theo had checked up on several patrols, which were going as well as could be expected with the Sabbat pressing northward a little more forcefully every week. One dumb-ass Kindred refugee from Charleston had tried to be a hero, tried to stop a drive-by single-handed and ended up half road kill, half hood ornament. Otherwise, things were relatively quiet. Theo had found Lydia and told her what he needed. Then he’d wandered for a little bit—and found himself here, in Katrina’s old ‘hood.

The prostitute wasn’t really different from any of the others. Younger than some, not haggard and used up, not yet. Older than some of the others, the ones that didn’t look old enough to be thinking about boys, much less pulling down their pants for them. She was heavier than a lot of them. Maybe she wasn’t a junkie, not yet.

“Hey, big sugah...”

Her voice cut through the rumble of the bike’s engine while Theo was idling at the stop sign. Without thinking, he reached over, grabbed her wrist, pulled her toward him.

“You wanna play rough, sugah?” she teased him.

He checked her arm. No tracks. Checked the other arm.

“I’m clean as a baby’s bottom,” she said.

“Babies shit all over the place. Get on,” Theo growled. He couldn’t stand to look at her there on the corner. She wore a tight, low-cut spandex top that slid down when she moved, giving a free preview of a large, dark nipple. Her skirt was short and hugged tightly against her bulging ass and thighs. Her spiked heels were tall enough to stake a Kindred. She stopped to hike up her stockings before sliding one leg expertly over the seat and climbing on the bike behind Theo.

“I’ll make you happy, sugah,” she purred in his ear.

“Shut the fuck up.” Theo found himself wanting to turn around and shake her, throttle her. *Is this the best you can do for yourself, sister?* he thought. *Is this why good people risked their lives and died? So you could sell yourself on the street corner, instead of somebody else selling you on the auction block?*

“You wanna know my name, sugah?”

“No.”

“Suit yourself.”

He didn’t want to know her name. He didn’t want to acknowledge that she existed. For a brief moment, as he pulled away from the curb, he wanted to fool himself, to pretend that that corner would remain free of anyone like her for more than just an hour or so. This was the real world, but it was the worst of the real world. At least when Master Bell

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had crept down to the slave quarters in the dark of night, Theo's mother and sisters had had no choice. They had been dependent on that man for their lives and the safety of their family. He had taken from them; they had not given.

But then, as Theo felt the prostitute's arms latching onto his broad chest, he saw again everything else that was around. Clusters of hopeless people, desperate people, selling drugs because there was nothing else to do, no opportunity, no jobs, not here.

*Then get the hell out of here*, Theo thought. *Or get on the damn bus and go find a job.* But he knew it was never that simple. Some of them *were* just evil, predators. Theo had known enough people, Kindred and kine, to know that. Eat food, drink blood, didn't really matter. Some individuals existed for no other reason than to prey on others. But some were just lost, overwhelmed by a world they didn't understand. In the city, these people couldn't just go out and work in the field; and without an education getting a job anywhere, bus or no bus, was next to a miracle. The only greater miracle was surviving long enough to get that education, surviving intellectually and morally in a culture that didn't encourage or reward that kind of achievement, in a world where decisions made so early in life so often led to jail time, pregnancy, death. Meanwhile Pieterzoon, and his mortal counterparts, flaunted their wealth, their connections, their power, like that was their birthright.

Theo kept driving. Knowing what he did still did not ease his resentment of the woman sitting behind him. *He* had been born in the lowest part of this sick world, but he had risen above it. He had refused to accept the status quo. He'd had injustice after injustice heaped upon him: his family split up when he was barely five years old, his mother, some of his brothers and sisters sold away from his father and other siblings; Theo's mother and sisters raped while he, chased from the slave quarters, shivered in the darkness outside. Theo could recollect every night that it had happened. Every single night. He remembered. He remembered being whipped as well. Some of the scars still marked his back. He could recall how many lashes he'd taken on each occasion and which overseer had administered the punishment. Theo had found them all, one at a time, years later, and evened that score. The memories had driven Theo; the offenses against his dignity had led him to led him to assert his right to determine, as much as possible, his own destiny.

But that was not the case with the broken individuals whom he saw around him on the streets of these modern nights. What the fuck was wrong with these people? How could the world acknowledge their humanity if they didn't acknowledge it themselves? Black men shooting black men. Impoverished families, shattered by drugs, living in filth. Self-respect, Theo had long ago decided, stemmed from empowerment, but empowerment thrived only with self-respect. That was the problem. To break out of the self-destructive cycle of hopelessness and victimization and into the self-sustaining cycle of empowerment and self-sufficiency. In his own mortal life, Theo had taken the initiative to break from one cycle to the other, and from that first step everything else had followed. He had escaped slavery, had returned time and again to the South to help others escape, and when Don Cerro had imparted the gift—what Theo had then considered a gift—of unimaginable power, Theo had broadened his activities from mere redemption of those in need to revenge against those in charge. He'd taken the whip to Master Bell, and worse. But seeking revenge, Theo found, was adding fuel to the fire that had always burned within him, the fire that mingled with his newfound hunger until they were one and the

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same. Old Master Bell was not the only one to pay for his crimes. Many of the Bell slaves did as well. Many members of Theo's family.

"Where you wanna go, sugah?"

Theo flinched at the sound of the voice so close to him. It took him a second to orient himself, to remember that he was riding the rough streets of Baltimore, not the hidden back roads of Mississippi. He turned down a dark, deserted side street, turned between two buildings and stopped the bike. The woman got off, smoothed her clothes.

Theo got off the motorcycle. "You got kids?"

She smiled, ran a finger down the sleeve of Theo's leather jacket. "You don't wanna talk 'bout kids." There was a small smudge of bright red lipstick on one of her front teeth.

Before he realized he was doing it, Theo grabbed her hand and squeezed, not breaking her fingers, but the woman cried out in pain. "*Do you have kids?*" he demanded.

"Yeah... yes!" Her fear caught up with her pain as she looked into his eyes. Tears started streaming down her cheeks.

"*How many?*"

"Two," she cried. She began trembling all over. Her teeth chattered together. Her lipstick was smeared somehow. The cool, damp air seemed suddenly to bite all the way to her bones, to sap her strength, but she was sweating. She tried to pull away but couldn't.

The fire rose up within Theo. He hated this woman who was both symptom and cause of evil. Still holding her, he turned her face roughly with his other hand, and then tore into the taut flesh at the base of her neck. Blood filled his mouth, her blood, her basic humanity, same as anyone else's. Her frantic scream died away to a pathetic whimper, but still her heart pumped spurt after spurt of fresh blood into Theo. He drew strength from she who lacked strength. He drank greedily to quench the fire, to extinguish the hate and pity he felt for her.

In the end, though he was full, he felt completely spent. He licked the wound closed and let go of her. She stumbled a few steps before her knees buckled and she landed hard on the ground. She sat, dazed, tears wet on her cheeks.

Theo stood over her. He still hated her for what she was, for her weakness. He hated himself for the compassion he couldn't find in his heart. These were his people, yet he was one of the predators. He knew he'd need the blood in the nights ahead, but he didn't like to feed like this. But she had spoken to him. She had asked him to make her a victim. He could not change her. He could not save her from herself. She would be back on the street, tomorrow night or the night after. If she pulled herself out somehow, there would be others.

Theo reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of twenty-dollar bills. He peeled off five, six, tossed them at her. They landed by her knee. Her stocking was torn. Angry but tired, Theo climbed back onto his bike and left her there.



**Monday, 1 November 1999, 11:44 PM**  
**Dewey's Sweatshop, Park Heights**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

Lydia stepped into the joint for the second time in two nights. Cigarette smoke hung thick, and the jukebox was cranked up loud playing ZZ Top. The bartender, busy enough with the six or so guys at the bar, didn't appear to notice her. He was fat and greasy. It wasn't hot in the room, but his shirt was stained with sweat on the chest, back, and armpits. Two of the patrons at the bar were familiar to Lydia: Frankie and Baldur. They were each nursing a beer, taking a sip every now and then and generally keeping busy not noticing Lydia, although they were sitting near the front door.

A couple of hard-up-looking types were sitting by themselves at two tables, but the other tables were empty. Lydia picked one and took a seat with her back to the wall. Almost before she'd touched ass to seat, one of the guys from the bar was sidling over to her table. He was the kind who seemed more cocky than successful with women. He wore a threadbare army jacket and had thinning red hair.

"Buy you a drink, beautiful?" He gave her a wink that he must have thought was suave.

Lydia sighed. "What do I look like, president of the Hair Club for Assholes?" He laughed. Lydia did not.

"That's good. That's good. Come on, gorgeous, let me buy you a drink. I'm just trying to be friendly." He pulled out the chair opposite Lydia and made himself at home.

"I don't need no more friends," Lydia said. She glanced at his couple of drinking buddies at the bar, who did piss-poor jobs of pretending that they weren't watching. "Besides," Lydia added, "I don't go for guys." She tried not to laugh as his smile drained away. The lesbian ploy was always good for some mileage, and her statement, as far as it went, was mostly true these nights. Sex just wasn't what it used to be.

Her visitor, after his initial surprise, managed a forced smile. "Don't go for guys? You just haven't met the right one." He winked again.

Lydia rolled her eyes. She took a second to look around the room at the other patrons. Aside from Frankie and Baldur, they all seemed to be mortal: coloring was right, they were drinking too much to be faking it. She turned back to her guest. "And you would be the right one?"

"You bet your little lacy panties."

Lydia sighed again. She looked at her watch and decided she didn't have time for this. "Okay, sport. Let's arm wrestle for it."

He was taken aback by the suggestion. "Huh?"

"Arm wrestle. You know...." She propped her right arm up on the table. "You win, you and your buddies can stretch me out on the bar and take turns fucking my brains out. I win, you piss off."

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He laughed, but his grin now was more suspicious than confident. He hesitated, gave a good hard look at the small, pale woman across from him, then laughed again. "Okay, baby. You're on, and you're in for the time of your life."

"Yeah, whatever."

He put his elbow on the table and made a big production of caressing her fingers when he took her hand.

"Whenever you're ready," Lydia said, "just say the word."

He took a deep breath and started pushing just before he said, "Go."

Lydia let him have about three inches, just to get his hopes up, then slammed his knuckles onto the table top.

"Ow! Shit!"

"Were you ready?" Lydia asked, full of concern. "I couldn't feel you pushing."

"How the hell did you—?"

"Tell you what, sport. Just to be fair, why don't we go left handed, double or nothing. You win, you and your boys can fuck me, then turn me over and fuck me in the ass. Sound good?"

He glared at her from across the table, spoke menacingly in a low growl, "You're gonna regret this, you fucking bitch."

Lydia shrugged. "Maybe. Put your money where your mouth would like to be." She propped her left arm up on the table.

His pause was longer this time. His friends at the bar no longer made any pretense of being disinterested. Some kind of trick, he had to figure. She'd tricked him somehow. But not twice. He pulled up his sleeve, put his left arm on the table, grasped her hand with a firm grip, no suggestive foreplay.

"Whenever you're ready, sport."

He didn't say go this time, just started pressing with all this strength. Lydia held him at straight vertical for five seconds... ten... fifteen. A vein was bulging at his temple. He gasped and sucked in air. Lydia grimaced, then all the strain left her face. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. Maybe you should try two hands," she said.

Surprised and totally crestfallen, he only had another second before she slammed his knuckles against the table. He was leaning in so hard that a joint or ligament or something made a loud popping noise. He roared in pain and frustration and grabbed his elbow.

"That didn't sound good, sport."

He glared threateningly at Lydia and started to stand.

"Think twice, sport," she said very quietly, and he stopped partway up. "That was just your elbow. You touch me again, I'll rip off your dick and stuff it up your fuckin' ass."

He paused for a few seconds, hovering between up and down, holding his elbow.

"That's better," Lydia said. "Now, why don't you go home to your wife or your girlfriend or your thirteen-year-old neighbor, whoever it is you fuck, and smack her around? You'll feel like a big man again. Everything'll be okay."

Without looking at his friends, he eased up out of his chair and hurried awkwardly out of the bar. His drinking buddies, with raised eyebrows, turned back to their drinks. Frankie and Baldur, less surprised, turned back to their drinks as well.

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Lydia glanced at her watch again. 11:56. She'd come here last night, after she'd talked to Theo, and asked the fat bartender if Johnny was around. When he wasn't, she'd handed the bartender a note that said simply, "11:45 pm." *So where the fuck is he?* she wondered. Frankie and Baldur had been here early to get a good spot. They would have let her know if he'd already shown up and left, or if something weird had happened. But there they were, sipping on their beers, arguing very quietly and reasonably about whether or not Cher could kick Madonna's ass.

Lydia didn't have to wait much longer. When the door opened a few minutes later, he came inside the bar—the guy whose picture Theo had showed her. He was dirty and unshaven with seriously receding hair. He shuffled more than walked and was kind of hunched over a little, not like some Nossie freak, just a normal, lowlife scumbag. He looked around and seemed puzzled, then ambled over to the bar, where he exchanged a few words with the bartender. The bartender pointed toward Lydia, and "Johnny" looked her way. Lydia met his gaze evenly, didn't smile, didn't blow him a kiss, didn't flick him off.

He shuffled over to the table with a sneer, much as Lydia's earlier suitor had. He stopped and stood over her, raised his palms on either side, said, "Here's Johnny."

Lydia turned her head and spit on the floor. "I heard your friends call you Jack."

"If I had friends," he said without missing a beat, "and if I did, you wouldn't be one of them, whoever the fuck you are."

"Oh, you're breakin' my heart." She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair.

He turned to make some smart-ass quip to the bartender, and in that instant of distraction, Lydia moved. More quickly than her target could react, she reached for the Desert Eagle that was tucked under her belt in the small of her back. Right as Jack looked back at her and his eyes grew wide, she fired. Three shots. They slammed into his chest, blew him backwards through the air into the bar.

The bar patrons dove for cover, all except Frankie and Baldur who were up, 9mms in hand, and blocking the door. Frankie plugged the bartender who was going for a gun. The fat man crashed into the counter behind the bar and sent bottles of liquor cascading to the floor. One bullet passed through him and shattered the mirror behind the counter.

Lydia looked at the Desert Eagle in her hand. She blew on the tip of the barrel. "Damn. Theo was right about this thing."

That was when Jack hit her. Despite the three gaping holes in his chest, his arms had transformed into long, muscled tentacles. One whipped across Lydia's face, knocking her off her seat, backwards into the wall. She was on her feet in mere seconds, but Frankie and Baldur were down beneath the blows of the second tentacle, and Jack was breaking for the back door. Lydia was off balance and her head was still ringing, but she squeezed off two quick shots. Her fire tore apart the door frame over Jack's head. His arms contracted to normal length as he ran. They looked like strings of sausages being sucked down a garbage disposal. He rushed headlong out the back door—and square into the arc of the fire axe.

Theo took the Tzimisce's head off with one clean blow—if a decapitation spewing blood and black ichor could be called clean. Jack's body ran a few more steps before tumbling to the ground. It was just momentum, but it looked like it took him a few seconds to figure out that his head was fucking gone.

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By the time Lydia, Baldur, and Frankie reached the back door, Jack's blood was dry and crystallized. Slowly, before their eyes, his body too began to harden, dry, and crumble.

"That's what we've got to look forward to," Frankie said solemnly. "Some night."

Theo wiped the handle of the axe and tossed it aside in the alley. The four Brujah ignored the few terrorized customers who scrambled frantically out the front door now that the way was clear.

Theo turned to Lydia. "Don't give up on a fight before it's over," he said. She nodded somewhat bashfully. "Let's get out of here," he added, and turned to do just that, but then stopped and turned back to Lydia again. "Arm wrestling?" She smiled sheepishly. "Showboating'll get you killed, kid."

Nobody argued, and they all left.





**Tuesday, 2 November 1999, 1:59 AM**  
**Hemperhill Road**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

The Lexus screeched to a halt at the curb. Almost before the car had stopped moving, Theo was out the front passenger's door and moving briskly toward the townhouse. He touched two of the eight steps and pounded uncharacteristically loudly on the front door. Waiting only a few seconds, he pounded again.

When a startled ghoul opened the door, Theo simply said, "Get Vitel now. *Hurry.*" Then he stepped inside.

The ghoul rushed to obey; this was the closest he'd ever seen the Brujah archon to a state of agitation. While Theo waited, he unclipped his SPAS 12 from inside his jacket and checked the ammo, then unfolded and secured the stock. Within a few moments of the ghoul's hasty exit, Vitel was coming down the stairs. He paused at sight of the shotgun in Theo's hands, the Ventrue's eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"We gotta go," Theo said at once. "They've broken through."

"The Sabbat?"

"They hit us heavy from the west, I-70 and National Pike. We got 'em bottled up 'round Leakin Park, but I don't know how long." Vitel hesitated, so Theo pressed his point, speaking rapidly. "They'll be hittin' from the south too. Or if they get past Leakin and down Mulberry, we'll be cut off from the airport. Pieterzoon's got a plane waiting, or if you've arranged one I can get you there, but we gotta go now."

Vitel hesitated a moment longer, then turned to his ghoul, who was rushing back down the steps. "Frederick, get the briefcase from the safe. *Now.*" Vitel turned to Theo. "You have a car waiting."

"Yeah. We'll change it on the way, just in case a pack has snuck in town and this one's marked."

"Very well."

Vitel followed Theo out the door and down the steps to the Lexus. Theo, out of habit, tucked his shotgun mostly under his jacket. He opened the back door for Vitel, then got in the front. He turned to Lydia, behind the wheel. "One more on the way." Theo scanned up and down the street. "All clear out here?"

"Yeah," said Lydia. The Desert Eagle was lying in her lap. Both her hands were on the wheel.

What seemed like forever passed before Frederick came out with the leather briefcase. He stopped only long enough to lock the door, then ran around the car and got in behind Lydia. He handed the briefcase to Vitel. Lydia pulled away from the curb with a jerk.

Within just a few minutes, three different police cars had rushed past heading westward, lights flashing, sirens blaring. Also to the west, Theo could see thick smoke rising from the horizon. The black billows were readily visible against the ambient pink of the night-time city sky.

"You have a plane standin' by?" Theo asked Vitel, who the Brujah noticed was also watching the distant smoke with some consternation.

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“No,” Vitel said. “Mr. Pieterzoon’s graciousness is appreciated. I wasn’t expecting anything like this. Nothing so soon.”

“Me neither,” Theo said. “They screened their movements pretty damn well. Everything came at once, whole fuckin’ convoy. They get in, we’ll never root ’em all out.”

“Yes, the Sabbath is like that,” Vitel agreed.

“You want me to call and have another car or two go by for your other ghouls?” Theo asked.

“There is no need.”

Suddenly all the passengers lurched to the right as Lydia took a left turn hard enough to squeal the tires and leave skid marks through the intersection.

“Damn, girl!” Theo braced himself against the door. “The cops are all headed the other way. You tryin’ to convince ’em to come back after us?”

“Sorry.”

Lydia sped on down the street. Her next turn, not noticeably more gentle than the preceding one, was through the open bay door of an old brick warehouse. The wide metal door rolled down quickly behind the car, blocking out the external light, and as Lydia screeched to a halt, the large, empty, cement-floored space of the warehouse fell into darkness.

“Where is the other car?” Vitel asked.

With those words barely spoken, Theo turned and fired a shotgun burst into Vitel’s face, dragonsbreath rounds. The white phosphorous charges tore through the head and torso of the former prince of Washington, burning through the seat and the rear windshield.

At the same instant that Theo fired, Lydia whirled with the Desert Eagle and blasted a .44 magnum slug between Frederick’s eyes. The top half of his head exploded. He bounced off the back seat and slumped forward against Lydia’s headrest.

Theo sprang from the smoke-filled car just as the warehouse lights flashed on. He threw open Vitel’s door and leveled the SPAS at the Ventrue’s body. What remained of the head leaned back, slack-jawed, against the smoldering seat. Large portions of Vitel’s tailored suit, not to mention his flesh and the melted globule of gold that had been a pin shaped like an imperial eagle, steamed and sputtered.

Frankie and Baldur rushed forward from their assigned positions at the breaker box and the door. Christoph approached more cautiously.

“Holy shit!” Frankie marveled. “You blew his head clean off!”

“Nah, it’s still attached, just fucked up,” Baldur pointed out.

Lydia was out of the car now also. She wiped splattered blood from her face and licked her hands. The four Brujah all turned as one as the bay door clanked suddenly upward and open. In marched Jan Pieterzoon with Anton Baas and a dozen other heavily armed ghouls.

“Shut the fuckin’ door!” Theo yelled at them. Several ghouls rushed to comply.

“Uh... Theo...?”

Theo turned back to Lydia, who was suddenly looking very perplexed. He followed her gaze, past the blood-soaked corpse of Frederick—to the empty, smoldering seat where, a moment before, Vitel’s body had been.

“Shit.” Theo took a step back from the car. “He’s gone. Heads up, everybody.”

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That was when Frankie went down. One second he was standing there next to them, the next he let out a startled yell and was yanked under the Lexus.

“Shit! Under the car!”

“Frankie!”

Everyone was yelling at once. Theo scrounged a few more dragonsbreath rounds from his pocket and slammed them into the magazine. He started to squeeze off a burst under the car, but stopped. Frankie was down there.

“Shit!” Theo said again. He should’ve known better. A Ventrue can take a pretty good shot and survive to heal himself if he’s got enough blood. But Vitel had to be way fucking old to hold together after what Theo had given him. And how the hell did he get past them out of the car? Frankie was going to have to take his chances, Theo decided. They couldn’t afford to let Vitel drain him.

“Watch out!” Theo squatted and fired a burst under the car.

Yells from all around, and then Vitel shot out from beneath the Lexus. He was a blur, knocking Lydia and Baldur aside. Then the prince was gone again. The warehouse was suddenly quiet, except for Baldur scrambling to pull Frankie from beneath the car and cursing as he burned himself on the steaming phosphorous.

“Baas, your men by that door and that one,” Theo shouted. “Nobody gets out. Lydia, Jan, you others, by the big door. *Keep it closed!*”

“He broke his neck,” Baldur was saying in disbelief. “He broke Frankie’s neck like a... like a...”

Theo shut out the sounds of Kindred and ghouls rushing to obey his orders. He scanned the interior of the warehouse. Vitel was there somewhere, and he was proving as tricky as any Nosferatu.... There. The slightest bit of movement, away from the ghouls and the other Kindred. *Can’t give him time to heal*, Theo thought. He fired another burst, emptying the magazine toward where he’d seen the motion. He saw Vitel, heard him cry out from the blast, but then everything went dark.

*What the...?*

Blackness. Living shadow. A cloud of it enveloped Theo, blocked out his vision, muffled sound. He heard gunfire, but it sounded far away. The inky blackness coated Theo like a second skin. Chills shot through his body, his muscles starting to spasm. The sensation was repulsive, unnatural, evil. Theo had seen this before, had fought his way free before—but what the hell was a Ventrue prince doing firing off this kind of shit?

Theo was disoriented by the shadow, but he dove hard to the side—what he hoped was away from the car. He felt the drag of the darkness clinging to him like a greedy lover, but the force of his lunge tore him free. He landed on the cement, rolled, and jumped to his feet. The gunfire was much closer now. Pieterzoon’s ghouls had opened on Vitel with their submachine guns. The cloud of darkness that had assaulted Theo was rapidly dissipating as Vitel took more and more hits from the ghouls.

Vitel was ragged. Much of his face was burned away, and his chest and clothes were in tatters. But the cursed blood that animated him was potent enough to hold him together, to pull him back from the brink of the abyss. And he was proving far from helpless, even after expending what must have been much blood.

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As Theo's head cleared, Vitel, with a simple gesture, sent tendrils of darkness hurtling toward the impertinent ghouls who were dogging him. The ghouls, in self-defense, shifted their fire. The bullets shredded one of the snaking black tentacles, but several others found their marks, knocking ghouls aside, crushing some against the solid brick walls.

*So much for a quiet hit*, Theo thought. The warehouse was full of smoke and gunfire, snake-like tentacles crushing the life out of ghouls, and if any of the phosphorous had splattered too close to the Lexus's gas tank, the car might go up in a fireball any second. And Theo still couldn't quite believe that a face full of dragonsbreath hadn't toasted Vitel. That should have done in most any Kindred. The Brujah had never fought a creature quite this old before. *And this ain't no Ventrue neither*. Not throwing around shadow magic like that.

In the short space of time it took one of the tentacles to pound a ghoul into pulp, Theo reloaded the shotgun and fired another burst. Vitel staggered back, and a couple of the shadowy tentacles frayed and faded out of existence. The dragonsbreath might not be finishing him off, but it was taking a toll.

Theo charged in behind the blast. He fired again, but Vitel jumped out of the way. No—not jumping, hovering. Vitel was just floating in the air, hanging there as if he were suspended by a cable. But just as this was sinking in for Theo, Vitel was coming down, claws flashing, right at him. That moment of unexpected floating was enough to throw Theo's timing off. He tried to dodge, but Vitel's claws raked across his face and chest. Vitel closed again. Theo clubbed at him ineffectually with the emptied shotgun, but it was a sword slicing through the air, just over Theo's head, that drove Vitel back. Given a second's reprieve, Theo glanced back to see Christoph, broadsword in hand, wading into the fray.

But then Christoph hesitated, and Theo saw why.

Vitel's hands were no longer claws. What confronted the two Brujah was worse. Balanced on Vitel's right palm was a ball of flame, fire conjured from thin air—or perhaps from hell itself. Theo and Christoph each dove as Vitel hurled the fire. It passed right over them, shot across the warehouse, and landed amidst the second group of ghouls. The fireball erupted into a true inferno. Theo rolled to his feet to the sound of shrieking, burning ghouls. The smoke in the warehouse was growing thicker every second, threatening to block out the dim light from the ceiling units.

As Theo rummaged through his pockets for more dragonsbreath shells, others were pressing the attack. Lydia and Baldur were advancing on Vitel, with Pieterzoon and Baas each flanked out to opposite sides, all four assailants' guns blazing. The bullets were striking Vitel, driving him back half a step every few seconds, but the entry holes were closing over as quickly as they appeared—and Vitel merely smiled.

Theo slipped his last handful of dragonsbreath rounds into the SPAS and looked up to see another ball of flame in Vitel's hand. The archon was instantly ready to dive clear, but Vitel launched the fiery sphere in another direction. Lydia flung herself to the side, but Baldur wasn't so quick. The flame struck him and burst into a great conflagration. He whipped around and flailed madly, but the fire raged, burning away clothes, hair, undead flesh.

Lydia launched herself again, this time at her friend, knocking him to the ground. But the fire was more than she could take. As soon as she landed, she jumped away from Baldur as if she herself were now burning. She screamed, a panicked, terror-filled sound,

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as if he had been thrown at her instead of the other way around. She slapped at her legs, her chest, her face, trying to put out flames that were not there.

That was all Theo saw of her. He was charging Vitel for a better shot. But Jan and Baas were moving in also, blasting away with their MP5s, and Christoph was edging closer with his sword. Theo didn't have a clear shot and held his fire as he moved forward.

Vitel, practically ignoring the hail of submachine-gun fire from the two Dutchmen, watched the several Kindred and ghouls approaching. The former prince had remained incredibly calm throughout the fight, despite the seemingly long odds he'd faced. Now that most of the ghouls and several Kindred were dispatched, he took on an almost demonically gleeful aspect. His eyes shone with delight in the destruction, in the bodies broken and burning. Far from thinking of escape, Vitel was preparing to finish the job. He was reveling in the slaughter.

And as Theo and the others moved closer, Vitel changed. Not merely his attitude, or his bearing. His form itself changed, grew taller, darker—as if the smoke and shadows now filling the warehouse were drawn to him, drawn *into* him. The warehouse was growing darker but, Theo realized, the darkness was spreading *from* Vitel, not the other way around. He was growing shadowy, pools of darkness seeping out from his many wounds, as if his body could no longer contain his black soul. Some of the bullets passed through him now; others seemed to disappear into the darkness without effect. At some point, his arms became, no longer arms, but spiraling black tentacles, four rather than two, obsidian cobras poised to strike. All this was shifting among the smoke and deepening shadows. Nothing remained clear except his eyes, glowing red and fierce.

Suddenly, as one, the tentacles shot out, the cobras striking. A whip of solid darkness struck Theo across the face, ripped open further the ragged claw wound. Baas went down, his knee shattered. A tentacle whipped around Christoph's sword arm and jerked him off his feet, shaking him like a rag doll until his screams and the sound of snapping bones filled the air. His broadsword clattered to the cement below. Pieterzoon was caught by a giant black constrictor, arms pinned to his side. His MP5 fired harmlessly into the floor until the ammunition was spent and the weapon fell silent.

Theo climbed to his feet, blood seeping from the rent in his face, the gash in his chest. As he gazed upon the beast of shadow before him, the archon's studied battle calm suddenly drained away. He saw standing ahead, thrashing his compatriots, not Marcus Vitel, Ventrue pretender of obviously Lasombra blood, but a creature purely of the Beast. The fiery red eyes, the pure darkness spilling over through a man-shaped portal from hell. This was the Sabbath. This was a demon that would subjugate them all.

And the Beast within Theo answered. The fire that was hatred and anger, violence and hunger, rose up within him, took hold of his limbs and gave them strength. Theo fought the Beast before him with the Beast within his own breast, the demon that would one night consume each and every one of them.

His allies down or immobilized, Theo charged. The first blast from his shotgun ripped apart the appendage that had struck him. The second blast, the last of his dragonsbreath, he poured into the heart of the creature that Vitel had become. The shadow demon staggered. Theo threw himself at it. He swung his gun again like a club. Vitel stumbled back farther. They were at the brick wall now, the rear of the warehouse that was transformed into one of the nine fire- and smoke-filled levels of hell.

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Then the remaining tentacles converged on Theo. They sprang back from their far-flung targets to strike him, hitting him from behind on the head, back, legs. His knees buckled, but he didn't fall. A black cord lashed him across the face. Another tentacle whipped at him—Theo caught it, stopped it in midair. He held it in both hands and, fueled by his blood and the fire of his belly, ripped it apart. The shadow demon Vitel roared in anguish. The tentacle that Theo had severed with his bare hands dissolved into nothingness.

Before Vitel's cry had completely left his gaping black maw, Theo scooped Christoph's broadsword from the floor. The archon swung, seeking blood but settling for viscous shadow. He cut away another tentacle, and then the last. Vitel, eyes burning with bright hatred, cursed in pain and fury. Darkness flooded out of his body and swept over Theo in a tidal wave of oblivion, but the Brujah would not be denied. He swung again. The sword clove through the shadow, through the trunk of the Vitel beast, the tip of the weapon scraping the brick wall behind and showering a spray of sparks into the darkness. Whether the terrible sound was the force of steel against brick and mortar or the bellow of Vitel, Theo couldn't tell. But as he raised the blade to strike again, the shadow began to break up. The darkness contracted, seemed to wither and crack, and a moment later, where the demon Vitel had stood, fine black powder floated to the ground, oily dust upon the cement.

**Tuesday, 2 November 1999, 2:40 AM**  
**Chantry of the Five Boroughs**  
**New York City, New York**



"I'm here to see Sturbridge," the rasping voice said. The hunched wretch leaned heavily against the great portal. The creature's chest heaved in great broken sobs as if it had grown unaccustomed to the effort of drawing breath for any purpose—much less for something as delicate and ephemeral as speech. Its oversized teeth scissored wetly as it spoke with a sound like knives sharpening.

Talbott's face betrayed no hint of the revulsion his guest had come to expect—to rely upon. In his forty-plus years of serving as the gatekeeper for the Chantry of Five Boroughs, Talbott had witnessed more than his fair share of the disturbing, the inexplicable, the macabre. One more disfigured immortal bloodsucker was not about to put him off his game.

"I will see if the lady of the house is available. Please, make yourself at ease." Talbott gestured the newcomer within. "May I assist you with your parcels?"

The Nosferatu clutched more tightly to the overstuffed bundle of loose-leaf paper, photographs and used envelopes peeking out from beneath one arm. The whole was rather ineffectually bound together in fish paper and bakery twine. A small avalanche of handwritten notes, crude sketches and used carbon paper followed closely on his heels as he dragged himself and his burden across the threshold. "No!" he snapped back and then as an afterthought added, "Thank you. No, thank you, Talbott. Your name's Talbott, right? Thought I saw that here somewhere." He began rummaging among various scraps of paper that stuck out of his bundle at odd angles.

"Talbott it is, and kind of you to remember. Who may I say is calling?"

Emmett looked up from his notes, irritated. "Emmett. She won't know me, though, so you'll have to tell her it's important. Do that, won't you, Talbott?"

"Have no fear on that account. Can I tell her what this is about, Emmett? Regent Sturbridge might ask *why* this is so important."

Emmett seemed to consider. He rifled through the tangle of papers and extracted a particularly grease-smearred specimen. Wiping it off on his pants leg, he held it out for Talbott to take. He gave the gatekeeper a conspiratorial nod.

To his credit, Talbott accepted the scrap unflinchingly. Glancing down at the paper, he saw it bore a crude, childlike drawing—a single, lidless yellow eye.

"I will return shortly. You may take your ease near the central fountain. There is refreshment to be had there as well. Please feel at home. The shadow of the pyramid is long; there is room enough for one more to shelter beneath it."

Emmett, looking more than slightly exasperated by these polite formalities, grunted, turned, and skulked off in the direction of the fountain.

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**Tuesday, 2 November 1999, 2:44 AM**  
**A disused warehouse**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



“Damnedest Ventrue I ever met,” Theo said laconically.

Jan attempted a smile, but the pained result was not particularly effective. “Yes... quite.”

The smoke still hung heavy in the warehouse. Opening the doors would only have attracted attention to the building—something they didn’t want—and there was no one inside in danger of succumbing to smoke inhalation. Jan’s few remaining ghouls were keeping watch outside. The warehouse walls were solid, but there had been a lot of gunfire, and nobody wanted the cops stumbling in.

“Don’t you guys have a secret handshake or something?” Theo asked. “Us, we don’t have to worry about that kinda thing. Nobody ever pretends to be a Brujah, especially a prince. Hell, there’s probably ten or twenty Brujah princes pretendin’ to be something else.”

Jan fidgeted a bit and tried to concentrate on the lock on Vitel’s briefcase. It had been a long time, Theo decided, since he’d enjoyed someone else’s discomfort this much, and it didn’t hurt that the enjoyment was at a Ventrue’s expense.

“How ’bout Lucinde?” Theo asked, leaning very close so no one else would overhear. “She know about this? About him?” He knew the answer to that, but he couldn’t resist asking. *God, I’d love to be there when Jan tells her about this*, Theo thought. He waited for some response, but Jan was pointedly not paying attention. He was thumbing combinations on the briefcase’s lock and listening for any sign of progress.

“The cop decoy worked fine,” Theo said. “The cop cars, the fire on the west side.”

“Hm?” Jan looked up for a moment. “Oh, good.” He returned his attention to the lock.

“You think it’s trapped?” Theo asked, tapping the briefcase.

“I doubt it.”

“Okay.” Theo took the briefcase from Jan, propped it against his own chest, and pressed with his fingers into the crease by the handle. They dug through the leather and into the metal beneath. Theo kept pressing, working his fingertips into the widening gap, and the briefcase popped open. “There you go.” He handed it back to Jan and left the Ventrue to sort through the contents.

Nearby, Lydia and Christoph sat dejectedly by Frankie, who was propped up against the side of the Lexus. The angle of his neck looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“Guess he fucked me up pretty good,” said Frankie, seeing Theo.

“Guess so,” Theo said.

“But we fucked him too, didn’t we? I’ll be fine. Just give me a little time, a little blood.”

“Yeah. Sure thing,” said Theo, but he wasn’t convinced. Sure, blood could heal broken bones, but they didn’t always heal straight, and spinal injuries could be a real bitch. Hard to figure what might happen with a broken neck. So he turned to Lydia and Christoph, who were considerably less upbeat than Frankie. Then again, Christoph was never upbeat. What was it Lydia had said about him once? *Moody as a damn girl*. Christoph was sharpening his sword.



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“Hope I didn’t hurt it,” Theo said. “I didn’t exactly mean to slice through a brick wall.”

“It’s a strong blade,” Christoph said. “I’m glad it finished the job, even if I wasn’t wielding it.”

Theo nodded. Christoph said stuff like that sometimes when he did decide to talk, but he was good enough in a fight.

“Man, I’m sorry,” Lydia said from where she sat next to Christoph.

“Don’t need to be,” Theo said. He started to walk away—he didn’t feel much like a confessional just now; his face and his chest hurt—but Lydia wasn’t done yet.

“It’s my fault,” she said. She gestured toward the pile of ash that had been Baldur, but she didn’t look at it. “I should’ve helped him. And Frankie too.”

“Wasn’t nothing you could do,” Frankie assured her.

“Didn’t nobody ask you nothin’,” she snapped at him. “He was on fire. I coulda put it out, coulda...” Her voice faltered as she remembered the uncontrollable terror that had overcome her. Her eyes welled up with blood as she relived those moments.

“Hey,” Theo said, “one of your people went down for good. It happens. It’ll happen again.” She shot him a challenging, bloody glare. “Get fuckin’ used to it.” Then he did walk away.

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**Tuesday, 2 November 1999, 3:02 AM**  
**Chantry of the Five Boroughs**  
**New York City, New York**

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"You must be Emmett." Aisling Sturbridge took her guest by both hands in welcome. Emmett stood, casting a helpless glance back at his parcel of papers still lying open and exposed on the bench near the fountain. Presiding over the scene, the severe Aztec faces carved into the fountain's step pyramid seemed to regard the clutter with mild distaste.

"You're Sturbridge." Emmett stared at her for an interval far too long to be considered polite. "He said I could trust you. Donatello, I mean. He said you helped him out of a jam, that you said he was..." Emmett broke off in discomfort.

Sturbridge suppressed a smile. "Beautiful, perhaps? Yes, I did tell him that. The first time we met. He is very dear to me, Emmett."

"He's an ugly little bugger," Emmett replied gruffly. "But he's all right. And he said you're all right. And that you'd know if anyone would. Calebros said you were the one at the council in Baltimore. And that you brought the sketch—the one with Leopold in it. And the Eye."

Sturbridge let him talk himself out, but she was no more enlightened than when he had begun. "I'll help you if I can. What is it you're trying to find out?"

A look of frustration flitted across his face. "That's what I've been telling you. Leopold, the Eye, the sculpture. I've got the pictures right here." He pointed back at the parcel.

"All right, then. Let's see what you've got."

Emmett held the packet out proudly at arm's length, as if presenting a trophy. Sturbridge took it carefully. The knotted twine unraveled at her touch. Cautiously, she pulled back the fish paper. The photo staring back at her from the top of the pile showed an unhewn cave wall, smeared in an unintelligible jumble of words, symbols and pictograms—all of them drawn in blood.

The photographer had been very thorough. Along the right-hand side of the picture, a yardstick stood to give the viewer a clear indication of scale. The macabre scrawl covered the wall to the height of about ten feet, as well as much of the ceiling above. Sturbridge whistled low, thumbing through the first dozen or so photos. More of the same. One would hardly believe so much blood was in a body.

"What am I looking at here, Emmett?" Sturbridge spread the photographs out upon the floor, slapping them down one at a time, like playing cards. There was a note of alarm in her voice that was picked up and echoed in the sharp flip of each new photo. Two dozen. Three dozen. She had hardly made a dent in the pile.

"That's the cave. The Gangrel, they are calling it the Cave of Lamentations. It's where... What's wrong?"

Sturbridge cursed, her arm checked abruptly midway through its downward swoop. The photo hung in the air like an accusation. She stared at the picture intently as if unable to let it drop. "That's them. This is where Xaviar's war band was massacred. But this? Christ, look at what he's done to them." She set the photo down tentatively, as if further rough handling might heap some new sufferings upon the unfortunates depicted there.

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Emmett did not have to look to know which photo she had come across. “Number forty-three. Leopold’s masterpiece. Catalog number, time and coordinates are listed on the reverse. That’s not the worst of them, I’m afraid. That one’s only the first of the long perspective shots on the sculpture. There’s some close-ups of the detail work a little later on.”

Sturbridge’s tone was distant. “It’s so vivid. It’s as if they were still...”

“Alive? I don’t know that I’d call that living. But some of them did stir. And moan. And some of them turned instinctively to the smell of fresh blood. Like sunflowers. You’ll see. It’s almost as if they’re mugging for the camera.”

Sturbridge’s mind barely registered his words. She had fallen victim to the steady rhythm of the ghastly parade of images, mesmerized. Slide, flip, slap. Slide, flip, slap. She had no choice but to carry the operation through to its inevitable conclusion.

By the time she had finished, there were hundreds of photographs spread out around her like a protective circle. She crouched at the very center of the diagramma, studying each card before her, its placement, its relationship to its neighbors, as if she were attempting some audaciously elaborate Tarot reading.

She sighed, coming back to herself. “Okay, this monstrosity, it’s definitely the remains of the Gangrel war band. Someone, presumably this Leopold, *arranged* them there. Within the sculpture. I don’t know what to make of this bloody scrawl. It’s all nonsense. No, literally. Linguistics isn’t my specialty, but you’ve got at least six distinct alphabets here. Maybe two dozen different languages all jumbled together. And that’s not counting the pictographic, numeric and purely abstract elements. I’d say whatever else this Leopold might be, we are dealing with a sharp intellect that has become dangerously, murderously insane.”

Emmett nodded, muttering under his breath, “And he’s not the only one. But can you decipher it? Any of it? I was kind of hoping that it might be, well, thaumaturgic. I mean, with all the blood, and the sacrificial victims, and the occult symbols...”

Sturbridge shook her head, her fingertips trailing across the rows of photographs. “That’s no blood ritual that I’ve ever seen before. And I do have more than a passing familiarity with that particular field of study.”

Emmett was deflated at having the ground cut out from under his pet theory so swiftly. “Nobody’s questioning your credentials, lady. If you say it ain’t blood magic, that’s good enough for me. It ain’t blood magic. Any chance it could be Koldunic?”

She took her time about answering. “No, I don’t think so. That’s one of the things that’s been bothering me, though, the whole time I’ve been flipping through these pictures. This entire macabre scene feels very ‘Tzimisce’. At first I thought it was just that damned sculpture. But it’s more than that.”

She searched out a particular photograph and handed it to Emmett. “This dragon motif, it’s repeated over and over again, as if it were chasing its own tail around the cavern. It is depicted several times in the crude drawings. And the word ‘dragon’ itself appears in at least five or six languages. And it’s one of the three major movements in the arrangement of this scrawl.”

“What do you mean, ‘movements’?”

“As I see it, there are three distinct movements here, like in a musical composition. The dragon is the second of the three patterns running throughout the scrawl. But these patterns are difficult to pick out, much less to keep your grip upon. Look, here.” She

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indicated a photo at her right hand and then proceeded to trace out the writhings of a great wyrm as it coiled its way through the litter of photographs.

“But what does it mean? And what are these other two movements you mentioned?”

“What does it mean? I certainly would not like to hazard anything so precise as a translation. The linguistic elements are a complete jumble. Offhand, I’d say you would be better off approaching these ramblings by way of the drawings. Although I must admit that there seems little enough of substance to go on there either. Let’s see what we can piece together.”

Emmett noted that she ignored his latter question. Sturbridge stretched and began to gather examples of the crude, finger-painted artwork. “You’ve got all your standard apocalyptic trappings—your dragons, lions, eagles, angels, demons, etc. So I would be surprised if your ‘text’ did not turn out to contain some prophetic announcement heralding the end of times. But then again, the imagistic content is diluted with rather typical cultist elements—your pentagrams, borrowed Tarot imagery, and band logos. It’s hard to tell what, if anything, may be significant. Did you think to bring me a sample of the blood? That might take some of the guesswork out of it. The blood harbors very few secrets from us.”

Emmett’s hand strayed unconsciously to the pocket of his shabby overcoat, as if to reassure himself that the vial he carried was still secure. But he did not produce it for her inspection. “Would it surprise you to learn,” he replied, “that the blood—all of it, so far as we can determine—is from a Malkavian?”

Sturbridge looked skeptical. “You’re saying this Leopold is a Malkavian? How does a Malkavian do *that*? It’s hard to credit. At the council meeting in Baltimore, Victoria Ash claimed that Leopold was a *Toreador* of her acquaintance from Atlanta.”

Emmett snorted. “How does a *Toreador* do that? So where does that leave us? It looks like we’re right back at square one. You’ve already shot down my best guess—that he was a Tremere. No offense. What about these other two patterns? These movements?”

Again, Sturbridge looked distracted. “None taken,” she muttered after a while. “Actually, that was one of the other things that was bothering me.”

“How do you mean?”

“I told you this wasn’t a thaumaturgic ritual. But just because it’s not blood magic does not mean that it has nothing to do with the Tremere. It’s those three movements again. The first one is the Eye. That’s what started all this. Musically, the Eye is the prelude to the entire composition. It’s what empowers Leopold to massacre the Gangrel. The Eye is what pushes Xaviar over the edge and nudges the Gangrel out of the Camarilla. It may well be generations before we see the full consequences of all that the Eye has set in motion.”

“Assuming we’ve got generations,” Emmett interjected.

Sturbridge let the pause stretch a bit too long for comfort. “In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the great god Horus is represented by a single unblinking eye. They say the universe exists only by the grace of Horus gazing upon it. Very soon now, he must surely blink and, when that all-seeing eye closes, all of creation will be snuffed out.”

“But you said the Eye was only the first movement, the prelude. The end of the universe is going to be a tough act to follow.”

Sturbridge smiled, a gesture without warmth. “The second movement is the dragon. It is a continuation of the initial energy, but a variation upon it, a complication. The Eye

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is devoured by the dragon, but it is not destroyed. Its influence over Leopold has become usurped, corrupted. Now we see the creation of Leopold's masterwork, his altar of living flesh. It is a perversion of the natural rhythms of both life and death. The music here is the stirring of something deep, something ominous, something forbidden."

Emmett was already making connections of his own, drawing out further meanings Sturbridge could not have intended. "But the serpent can't hold onto the Eye, can he?" he said excitedly. "It nearly kills him. It goes back to Leopold. And then Leopold disappears."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"That's okay. You just keep on doing what you're doing. Movement the third?"

Sturbridge looked uncomfortable. "That's where the Tremere come in. I don't know how much I can expound upon this. The third movement is the *Malum*. The apple. The forbidden fruit. It's the symbol of our temptation and fall from grace—of the price my people had to pay for their immortality. And, in particular, it is the symbol of the one who laid this double-edged gift before the founders. Goratrix."

"Are you telling me that the final theme of this bizarre composition has something to do with the Tremere renegades, the *antitribu*?"

"Look, Emmett. All I'm saying is that I've been to enclaves where the Fallen Ones had performed their dangerous travesty of the initiation rites. And those places didn't have half the ritual trappings of House Goratrix that these cave paintings of yours have."

"Shit. I thought those bastards were all... gone."

Sturbridge regarded him levelly. "So did I."

Emmett was talking to himself now. "So the worm devours the Eye and the apple devours the worm. Well, what could they do with it? I mean, if House Goratrix got hold of the Eye, or if they got some hold over Leopold, what could they do?"

Sturbridge didn't answer. "We need to find Leopold."

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**Wednesday, 3 November 1999, 1:30 AM**  
**Morehead Park, Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**



Hesha found Ramona on the park bench—the same park bench where Pauline had waited for the Gangrel just over two months ago. He noted that she was wearing the boots he and Calebros had insisted upon.

*Smart girl.*

She was defiant at times—most times—but not so much as to be stupid. She could be reasoned with, and she had proven quite useful thus far. Hesha doubted that he would ever have been likely to wring the *correct* knowledge of how to cure the Eye wounds from her former Ravnos companion. Ramona seemed to have some second sight where the Eye was involved, as well. She'd been reluctant to describe or explain it to him, but she had found the cave. She'd seen it from the helicopter when Hesha hadn't, despite the fact that he'd been there before and they'd been following his own directions, which should have been completely reliable.

"Any luck?" she asked when she saw him.

"With the gem? No. Still no sign."

"What about in Baltimore?"

"My meeting with the Malkavians was... interesting, but they were not able to tell me anything conclusive about the pictures." *My dealings with Lucinde were far more fruitful*, he thought, but there was no need to burden Ramona with such details.

"So we just keep doing nothing," Ramona grumbled. Her index finger, a long and lethal claw, was digging troughs into the park bench.

"We keep waiting," Hesha said. "The last we know of the Eye it was in the city—"

"Man!" Ramona slapped her legs. "If you coulda just held onto the damn thing..."

"Indeed. I would have preferred that myself. It would have saved me a great deal of discomfort."

"No shit."

"As you say. At any rate, here is where I can be reached." He handed her a card. "Since you are less easily contacted on short notice, I suggest you check in with me regularly. A phone call will suffice. And if you do not mind..." he produced a pager from his overcoat pocket and handed the device to her.

Ramona took it. "Probably a good idea." She glanced again at his card. "You not staying down below anymore?"

"I have made other arrangements, though I am in constant contact with Calebros as well," he said. *The creature knows too much to abandon. He, too, is useful.*

**Wednesday, 3 November 1999, 3:51 AM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**



*The storm is coming, he tells me,* Calebros thought. *Although this city has roiled for years with clashes of Sabbat and Camarilla under cover of darkness, all this has been as nothing compared to the firestorm that approaches.* The remaining power of the East Coast Camarilla, rather than drowning, would fling itself against the rocks. Pieterzoon and Bell would attempt to capture this greatest of cities, which both sects claimed. Generally the Sabbat held sway above ground, except in the heart of Manhattan, home to the Ventrue elite. The streets and most of the city however were Sabbat, if anything. Though the war to the south had drawn much of the riffraff, and the city was safer now than it had long been.

*That is how they might win,* Calebros's guest had said. *Pieterzoon and Bell might carry the night. It would be a close thing. And soon.* That much Cock Robin knew for certain.

Exactly *how* the Nosferatu justicar knew, Calebros could not say, and it was not his place to ask. But Cock Robin's news was not so different from rumblings Calebros had been receiving from sources both in Baltimore and here. Where his reports had produced merely guesstimates and possibilities, however, Cock Robin spoke of firm dates and times. The justicar brought other news as well.

He leaned close to Calebros and spoke, hardly above a whisper. "*Vitel... gk-girik... destroyed.*" Cock Robin's head was stretched and twisted, his pale lips irreversibly puckered and broken by clefts. He uttered words only with self-conscious difficulty, and that he chose to speak to Calebros at all was a badge of honor for the warren chief.

Vitel. Destroyed. Calebros nodded. He knew better than to look the justicar in the eye. Cock Robin was intensely sensitive, even among his own, and prone to violence. Calebros had seen what became of those who angered him, and did not wish to follow in those footsteps.

They had sniffed out the rat, and it was Vitel. Calebros knew many of the details—Colchester had been instrumental in discovering the traitor; Colchester was also a prolific source of information for Calebros—but he had not known that the deed had been done. "Last night?" It had to have been, or he would have known already. Cock Robin nodded. "Who?"

"Bell. *Piet-gk-gk-zoon.*"

Bell and Pieterzoon. Mostly Bell, no doubt. He was a bruiser, but not just a brute. If Colchester had ferreted Vitel out and Pieterzoon set him up, it would have been Bell who'd pulled the trigger.

Despite the wealth of information the justicar brought with him, he was not there as a messenger. It was news of Calebros's that had brought Cock Robin to the city, coincidentally with the Camarilla-Sabbat conflagration that was soon to erupt. "*Pet-gk-gk-don?*"

"Yes," Calebros said. "We have learned of three Kindred that were involved. One has been dealt with. A Giovanni. He will spread word among his clan and serve as a warning. We believe him to have been but a dupe. The second, Leopold, is more complicated. We

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are watching for him. He should lead us to the third, a Tremere. It seems this Leopold may have been kine still at the time. He was deceived as well, but he cannot be suffered to survive at this point; he's drawn too much attention."

*There may have been a fourth*, Calebros did not say. He did not have sufficient proof yet, even though Victoria was Leopold's sire, and to mention her to Cock Robin in this context would be tantamount to a sentence of Final Death.

"*Pet-ro-girik-gk-don... revenge.*" The justicar place a hand on Calebros's forearm and squeezed, hardly able to contain his anticipation. The final word, *revenge*, was so clearly spoken and with such intense satisfaction that a chill ran down Calebros's crooked spine. He prayed that the occasion never arose in which he might incite his justicar's displeasure.





**Thursday, 4 November 1999, 1:37 AM**  
**(Wednesday, 3 November, 1999, 10:37 PM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**British Airways Flight 2226**  
**Somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean**

Inside her rude pine box, Isabel opened her eyes and stared up at the veneer of wood that protected her from the attentions of the outside world.

Failure.

Utter failure.

Failure to resolve the fate of Benito Giovanni. Failure to take any hope back to the Giovanni concerning the ungodly potency of the cabal of ancient Kindred that would no doubt hunt them in the nights to come. Failure to prevent the sect war that would play out in the streets of Boston. Despite the fact that the Giovanni would maintain their supremacy in Boston, the conflict between the vampires of the Camarilla and the Sabbat would force the Giovanni underground for some time and necessitate that any action on their part be undertaken *very* carefully.

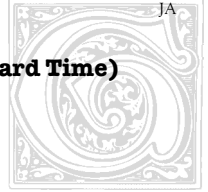
Still, Isabel comforted herself, wouldn't all of this have taken place with or without her? Could Benito not be replaced? Could Ambrogino really expect her to confound the actions of a Kindred who may well have walked in the shadow of the mythical Caine himself—assuming Caine had ever existed at all? Was survival in the Jyhad not itself the ultimate success? Didn't minor tragedies like these play out each night, winding through the unlives of the Kindred like the lines of incestuous ancestry in her own family tree?

After all, wasn't the entire, ages-old war a simple diversion from the unnatural act of rising, alone, from the day's rest to prey upon the mortals around the Kindred?

A single tear of blood trickled from Isabel's eye, staining the soft wood beneath her.

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**Thursday, 4 November 1999, 4:37 AM**  
**(Wednesday, 3 November, 1999, 10:37 PM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**The Mausoleum loggia**  
**Venice, Italy**



Ambrogino pushed the hood back from his head and lit a candle.

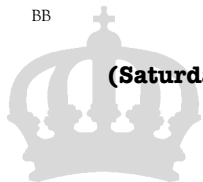
With a withered gray hand, he pulled two cards from the deck.

The Fool.

Death.

And then he looked to the mirror. No doubt someone—something—else saw the same reflection from the other side of the polished glass.

Tomorrow night, he would meet Isabel in London.



**Friday, 5 November 1999, 9:42 PM**  
**(Saturday, 6 November 1999, 12:42 AM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**Flag Pavilion, Seattle Center**  
**Seattle, Washington**

Lucita spoke to him on a whim.

“Excuse me,” she said as she raised a gloved hand to point at his guitar case. Just below the case’s top latch, a bumper sticker displayed a sunlit cathedral at the summit of a steep hill and the word “Zaragosa.” She shook a raindrop off her glove, then ran one finger along the word. “Have you been to Zaragosa?”

He pivoted on one boot, turning away from the Space Needle to look her up and down for a moment. Her face was unlined, but her eyes were cold and her jaw was set in a very determined way that reminded him of boxers he’d known. Her clothes looked custom-fitted, and while they were all in shades of gray, they all had elaborate designs in the weave—heraldry in the umbrella, geometric designs in the coat and boots. Everything was immaculately groomed, with just a few splashes of mud around her boot heels to mar the perfect image. She didn’t look like another society matron out to pick up an artistic boy-toy. He didn’t know what she was, and that might be interesting.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I spent a couple of years there. Worked in the studios for a couple of old students of Fernández and Ferrer.” She looked surprised, and he liked that. He figured that she’d pegged him as a typical music-making slacker. Her problem, if she didn’t think a really good luthier could feel comfortable in baggy jeans and army jacket. “I did an apprenticeship with the Manitos—” he was surprised back, as she nodded in an understanding way “—and they arranged it for me and another guy in my class.”

She’d looked up to watch him talk, then looked down again at the sticker. He couldn’t read her expression at all, and with this one he hated to guess. She spoke with a faint hint of an old-fashioned accent. “You make guitars, then.” It was a statement.

“Yeah.”

“Are you good?”

He was quiet again, thinking about his answer. It was a rude enough question, he wouldn’t feel bad if he gave her some smartass answer. But he didn’t feel like brushing her off, for some reason he couldn’t quite identify. “Yeah, I am. Not as good as I could be, I think. Getting better, and when people pay me good money I’m not ripping them off.”

She looked over his shoulder, down the twin rows of world flags toward the Space Needle. Its white columns gleamed even in the light evening rain showers, and the spotlight on top cast a glittering wake overhead. The Seattle Center monorail station loomed up from behind intervening buildings, but she found it vulgar with its multi-colored lights and recorded music.

The Space Needle’s towering whiteness, however, caught her fancy as a work in pristine isolation. The elevator rising between the tower’s three legs was wrapped in dark-tinted glass to repel daytime glare, and its incandescent lamps illuminated only shadowy forms. The tower stood apart even when humanity wrapped itself around and tried to climb. It would not mourn the passing of its architect, nor fear the loss of trusted counselors,

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nor dread that some older building might wake one day and seek to feast on it. It... She realized she'd grown maudlin, and scowled briefly.

He saw the frown and misunderstood it. "Look, you seem like you know what you're talking about. You're probably all busy and stuff, but let me get you one of my cards." He patted half a dozen coat pockets before finding the one he wanted. She stared blankly at his extended card folder, caught herself, and took the topmost card.

"Just a moment." She made a show of checking her watch. "Let's step inside." Gently, she tapped the sticker. "Do you have a specimen of your work I could see?" For the first time that evening, she showed a brief flash of pleasure. "I grew up in Aragon, you see, right in Zaragosa itself part of the time. Fine work reminds me of home."

As a come-on line, it wasn't bad, he thought. He was a little disappointed. She was apparently just an unusually knowledgeable society matron. Still, money was where you found it. He shrugged. "Sure. In fact, I was taking this over to the opera house for the assistant concertmaster to take a look at. C'mon and you can have a look there."

The wind picked up suddenly, and crevasses opened through the rain clouds. One last downpour washed away, its passage marked by a little wave rolling down the cobblestones and concrete paths. An arc of moonlight fell on the gigantic fountain where she'd been standing as he walked by. Its central dome, eight feet across, was brushed aluminum, and with its fresh coating of rainwater made a fine mirror. He set down the case and drew out a comb to primp a moment for her.

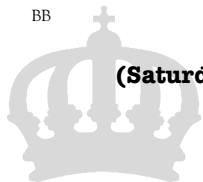
Then he realized that she cast no reflection.

"Um..." the syllable froze partway out of his mouth.

"Forget," she told him.

If she'd had breath to draw, she would have given a brief sigh. She chose not to waste the effort just at the moment, and simply walked into the nearest shadow. She folded the umbrella and propped it neatly near a doorway, hoping that someone who needed it might find it. Her coat, boots, and skin all faded into dusky intangibility, and she was gone.

He stood motionless until the clouds closed, the moonlight drifted away, and the showers resumed. He looked down at the dropped card and shrugged. As the rain fell more heavily, he stuffed the case partway under his jacket and sprinted from one awning to the next, toward the opera house. By the time he'd maneuvered around two courtyards, a construction site, and two parking lots, any trace from her gloves had washed off the sticker, leaving it as blank as she'd made his thoughts.



**Friday, 5 November 1999, 10:01 PM**  
**(Saturday, 6 November 1999, 1:01 AM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**Seattle Opera House**  
**Seattle, Washington**

Lucita did not smile as she stepped under the awnings proclaiming “Seattle Opera House Renovation: Newer, Better, For You.” Nonetheless, she was just as glad to be out from under the rain—she’d experienced far worse, but she didn’t *like* getting wet needlessly. She shook her coat (and regretted leaving her umbrella behind), closed her eyes, and listened to the spaces around her.

The encounter with the guitar maker had reinforced her melancholy. Seattle struck her as a beautiful city, though in a very modern sort of way. It had none of the grace that comes from a real historical legacy, but it had vigor, and many of its homes and offices were built in pleasing styles. She admired the rich greenery everywhere, remembering the dryness of her home and how gardens had been a sign of power and wealth. Here even commoners, the people who now thought of themselves as “labor” and “middle class,” filled their properties with plants of all sorts. She admired as well the energy of its inhabitants. For all the talk of “slackers” and the like, she saw tremendous industry at work, albeit in generally unproductive pursuits. There was much potential here.

But she had no one with whom to share her thoughts.

She thought of her lost sire and her lost companion of the ages. What would Monçada have thought? Something scheming, no doubt. He’d have identified half a dozen social weak points already and used his encounters with passersby to set some complex intrigue in motion, which would culminate a decade later with all the city’s major institutions in his hands. In the process he’d have blighted the city, driving wedges between communities, encouraging violence and dissolution as cover for his soldiers’ schemes, draining the vitality of the city to make it one more set of predictable pawns.

And Anatole? She never knew in advance what the seer might say, and couldn’t predict him in his absence. He would have seen signs, she knew, that she missed: warnings in the folds of coats and the patterns of birds pointing toward the evils that might stir nearby. Heaven and earth told him of impending calamities. She imagined the city in flames, while overhead deathly creations carried their unliving masters to survey their handiwork. Or perhaps the carnage might come in some form mortals wouldn’t recognize: volcano, or earthquake, or flood, or war. Were Seattle’s people even now marching ahead minute by minute toward another act in the tragic farce that was Gehenna? She didn’t know, and couldn’t ask.

Lucita had been to Seattle before, when this country had been at war with European and Asian powers. She could probably find some of her old contacts from that time. Many, perhaps most, of the vampires who dwelled in the city then still did, despite the chaos that sometimes spilled north out of the anarch cesspit. No doubt some of the young soldiers and their would-be sweethearts were still here too, albeit aging. But would any of them care to see her? She thought not. She’d been here on business, and in her experience very few clients wished to be reminded that, yes, they had in fact hired an assassin to settle their affairs. She recalled how the servants in her father’s castle had tried to fade into the walls as the royal family passed. That was what her clients wanted of her, not friendly conversation.

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The tide of her thoughts disturbed her; she opened her eyes and relaxed her concentration. For the moment, she surveyed the scene only with the senses in her own body. Her own eyes peered up the tree-lined street at the proliferating garages. (So many cars. What did the people *do* with them all?) Her own ears heard erratic winds rattle in the leafy branches overhead and the rain patter on the plastic tarpaulins spread over the torn-open opera-house roof. Her own nose smelled the cooling tar laid down during the day, while she'd slept in the cargo hold of a chartered jet parked at one end of Sea-Tac Airport. Her own fingers felt through her gloves, tracing the light coating of sandblasted grit over the opera house's brown brick sidings. She was aware of more than any mortal observer would have been, her body tuned as none that still lived could be, but she was in one place only and using senses that differed in degree rather than fundamental kind.

The exercise helped her calm. She worried about the distracting reminiscences, which came more and more frequently. Her mortal days were such a tiny fraction of her existence, but they loomed large in her thoughts and reactions. She knew too well that this was often a sign of impending self-destruction: She'd exploited that unwillingness to continue as a vampire in many of her targets over the centuries. If some young would-be rival were stalking her now, he'd find it disturbingly easy to sneak up on her when she was lost in this sort of reverie. She'd tell herself to save it for her haven, if there were any place that truly seemed like home to her.

Freshly aware of herself here and now, she closed her eyes again and reached out through shadow. She could feel the dull flickers of mortal minds. Tourists, many gathering for late dinners at the Space Needle or nearby restaurants. Janitors and custodians, toiling after hours to preserve the daytime illusion that properties maintained themselves and that there was no underclass to embarrass the latter-day merchants and financiers and clerks who occupied these offices. In the opera house itself, the performers and mechanics she'd expected, busily performing not for a real audience but for recording machinery.

There were faint traces that other vampires had passed nearby not long ago. At least two of the custodians released the faint but distinctive musk of vitae, and she wondered if they'd become ghouls willingly or otherwise. One of the mechanics (she caught the term "second camera operator" in the woman's thoughts) had also drunk of vitae, and more of it. This one was fully blood bound to one of Lucita's kind. And there, at the far side of the hall, was the stronger pulse of willpower that marked a vampire. She shifted her senses along paths of shadow inside the opera house to study it more closely.

She looked out from eight vantage points spread across the main concert hall, mostly in high corners and behind the gantries the mechanics called light bridges. Two of her chosen shadows proved to offer no useful view, thanks to intervening glare, and she drifted down to peer out from behind mid-row seats instead. She could look up at the back of the auditorium and see five places where the ceiling had been pierced to let mechanics work on the building's plumbing or some other hidden system, but subdued tapestries made of thick synthetic fabrics covered them all. Apart from that, there was no sign within the main hall of the work so visible from outside.

The stage itself was arrayed for a production of *The Magic Flute*. Lucita remembered when she had first heard about the opera and its villainous "Queen of the Night," sometime in the early nineteenth century. It must have been before 1848, since the young Lasombra who'd told her about it perished accidentally during the uprising in Paris that year. Lucita had been startled; she remembered the brood of aging anarchs she'd hunted down in

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Vienna in 1791, and wondered if she'd inspired the character. Most of a month later, she was finally satisfied that she hadn't, having established that the libretto was done well before she'd entered the city. She'd dismissed the coincidence as one more of the many twists of fate that confound the damned.

This production was, she gathered from conversations throughout the building, a "postmodern" production, whatever that might mean. The set consisted entirely of geometric shapes, each in a single flat color, except for highly detailed and supremely realistic Greek temple colonnades. The intended effect was lost on Lucita, but then she'd never quite grasped the Renaissance notions of theater, nor their successors. There was no regular audience, however, just a bouquet of cameras and microphones. Her target sat to one side in the front row, and occasionally spoke into a little microphone attached to his lapel, giving comments to the "director" who apparently oversaw the operation as with cinema. The crew was recording the performance; she caught a mention of "DVD" and "Webcast," and realized that this *was* cinema, cinema apparently intended to provide the audience the experience of a command performance. An aristocratic pleasure for so loudly egalitarian an age, she thought.

She gathered her consciousness behind the drawn-back curtain closest to her target, and whispered to him. "Havel Fedlos. I must speak with you."

**Private Correspondence**  
**From Her Excellency, Archbishop Sascha Vykos of Washington, D.C.**  
**To Lucius Aelius Sejanus, a.k.a. Marcus Vitel**



My dearest Lucius,

How anxiously I await your every missive, you whose name has so long been carved upon my heart; you whose thoughts I know better than the reflection of my own face in the mirror. My greatest fear—which, judging by your angry words and deeds of late, seems justified—is that you might mistake my intentions. You must know, though it seems you do not, that I value your messages purely as agents of verisimilitude, that through your words I might believe myself closer to your thoughts and, by extension, to your flesh. You must know, though you hurl your accusations at me, that it is the wolves at the door, not I, baying for more. They, even among your own esteemed lineage, are the ingrates, the feckless purveyors of incaution. You must know that I, above all others, wish to see you come to no harm at the hands of others.

Rest assured that I bear you no ill will despite the injuries inflicted upon me and mine. Doubtless they arose from misunderstanding, for does not jealousy flourish when kindred hearts are separated? Know that I forgive your every transgression, that I hold you still in as high esteem as any cherished friend or dear pet.

I find your city in good order and commend you for having left it so. There is no step I tread, no sight I behold, that does not usher thought of you to my mind. Fear not that you will lack reward for your sojourn among the infidels. No good deed goes unpunished, or so the wits are wont to say. For now, however, I languish in your absence, wishing only that I might lay hands upon you.

I remain your humble and gracious servant,  
—Vykos





**Friday, 5 November 1999, 11:24 PM**  
**Presidential Suite, Lord Baltimore Inn**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

“Hmph.” Theo handed the letter back to Jan. It was one of several in Vitel’s briefcase that seemed to confirm that the deposed prince of Washington was not what he had appeared to be—as if Theo had any doubts after the struggle in the warehouse earlier that week, and after the extensive proof that Jan and Colchester had assembled before that.

“Doesn’t look like he and Vykos get along very well—*got* along very well,” Theo said. All the letters were in that same mocking tone of love-letter parody. Only a fool would mistake them for true affection, for anything less than pure spite.

“Not surprising,” Jan said. “From all I know about Vykos, it doesn’t exactly inspire intimacy.”

“Neither did Vitel.”

“True. Apparently with good reason.” This was as close as Jan had come to verbally acknowledging that he and his entire clan had been duped, that a pretender had ruled the American capital for thirty years in the name of Clan Ventrue. Of course, none of the Camarilla powers-that-be had sniffed out the truth—in fact, it had been a veritable cotillion of archons and a justicar that had handed power to Vitel in the late ’60s. Such was the insular nature of princes and the “organization” of the Camarilla that in a city the sect “controlled” no one had suspected Vitel of treachery beyond the norm.

“How’d Lucinde take it?” Theo asked, unable to resist one more jibe.

“How are the defenses?” Jan quickly changed the subject.

Theo chuckled but didn’t torment the Ventrue further. Then the archon grew serious once again. “Lines are pulled back as tight as we can make ’em. I think we’re ready... ready as we can be. Sabbat’s hot on our heels. They’re shifting west and north. Looks like the push, when it comes—I’d guess in the next few nights—will be from the west, just like I told Vitel was happening. Except this time it’ll be for real.”

Jan was looking over some of Theo’s notes, a list of patrols. Several of the names were very recently crossed off. “What happened to these three?” Jan asked.

“Caught during the day. Ghouls.”

“Oh.”

Jan was studying the list more closely, obviously tallying the numerous crossed-off names, and counting the few defenders that remained. Many of those marked out, Theo knew, had already fallen to the Sabbat. Some had likely seen an opportunity to save their own skins and stolen off into the night. Had a Kindred who didn’t come back from patrol hightailed it out of the war zone, or been tagged by the Sabbat? It was impossible to know for sure. Take Clyde and Maurice, for instance. Last seen near Green Haven. They didn’t seem like the deserting type. But who knew if, in a few years, Theo might bump into them walking down the street somewhere. For their sakes, Theo hoped that the Sabbat *had* gotten them.

“It’s going to be tight, isn’t it,” Jan said, still looking at the list.

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“Yeah, well, we knew from the start that it would be.” Theo reached for a cigarette. “Not a whole lot of room for error.”

“You’d been planning on having Vitel available to help, hadn’t you?” Jan asked.

Theo lit up, took in a deep, unfiltered breath, then shrugged. “Plans change,” he said. “No Vitel, no Garlotte, no Victoria...” Victoria. They’d had not word from or about her since she’d left for Atlanta, and that had been months ago. There’d been vague rumors about something unfortunate happening to a Sabbat Bishop Sebastian down there, but even if true, the reports might or might not have anything at all to do with Victoria.

“We’ll do what we can,” Theo said. “It’s all about timing. How ’bout things on your end?”

Jan nodded. “Everything is prepared.”

Theo nodded solemnly. “Good.” Because if things *weren’t* ready... well, there wasn’t any point thinking about that.

**Friday, 5 November 1999, 11:30 PM**  
**(Saturday, 6 November 1999, 2:30 AM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**Seattle Opera House, Seattle Center**  
**Seattle, Washington**

For twenty years he'd been Harold Grushkin, immigrant from some vaguely identified Eastern European nation, cautious investor and lover of fine arts. In the early '80s he attracted some attention in the classical music scene for his sponsorship of videotaped concerts, far more carefully edited and mixed than most of his rivals. By the mid-'90s, the Grushkin Productions logo guaranteed a small but tremendously reliable volume of sales to connoisseurs. He established a cheap line aimed primarily at schools and libraries, and an elite imprint for customers to whom money was no object. For the last half decade, he'd scarcely needed to touch his original investments at all, and let his lawyers handle them while he managed the studio.

It was a fine existence, much better than his earlier experiments. Nobody was likely to connect a Viennese anarchist of most of a century ago with the genteel American video enthusiast. This time he didn't just have papers and a well-placed administrative cover, but plausible ancestry for two generations. That had cost him in favors, but now they were all paid off, thanks to desperate refugees from the East Coast struggle needing help at any cost. Those who might have embarrassed Havel were all fled, and in any event they had more pressing concerns. In time he might have some of them assassinated, but while removing loose ends was good, being beholden to assassins wasn't.

Havel's real passion was blood magic. Chance encounters in the 1930s had introduced him to the little communities of blood magicians outside the Tremere pyramid, and to his surprise he found himself an apt pupil. While Harold Grushkin maintained a scrupulously conservative routine, Havel was never more than a few contacts away from all the decadents and mortal occultists he could want, so that he never lacked for apprentices and fodder. Grushkin charitable donations gave him more access to local universities, where he could arrange for long-term experiments to unfold without interruption. Grushkin trips to sponsors, subscribers, and potential recording sites let Havel search for some of the countless lost troves all thaumaturges hoped to find. Occasionally the effort succeeded, and his lore grew quietly.

He thought sometimes about creating a child, but he had yet to find anyone he really wanted to spend indefinite years with, and it would complicate his existence. He had a fine crop of ghouls among his current crew, and they served his needs well. Some night, perhaps...

The shadows spoke to him. "Havel Fedlos. I must speak with you."

He thought about fleeing, but decided against it. He'd heard tales of vampires who could move through shadows and had no wish to find out how many of the stories were true. If the Sabbath had come for him, he could at least pass with dignity. "It's been some time since I used that name, sir or madam. May I help you?"

The curtain twitched briefly and revealed an elegantly dressed woman. She might have been Hispanic or Mediterranean in origin, though Havel knew that features could and usually did deceive among vampires. "I would like to speak with you privately, if I may."

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This was not the usual sort of Sabbat attack, though her powers marked her as the offspring of Antediluvian-destroyers. "Certainly. One moment." Havel turned on his microphone. "Jerri, please continue taping. I have to attend to a matter in my office, but should be back in..." He paused, and saw the woman raise her gloved fingers. "Ten minutes, no more." The label microphone came off with one tug, and he laid it on his theater seat. "Now, madam, I am at your disposal. This way." Trying not to tremble, he walked past the intruder, up the side stairs, around a corner, and up a second half-flight of stairs to his office. She followed with measured steps.

His companion shut the door after them and made a small gesture. Havel watched shadows flow out over the windows which looked down onto the orchestra pit and backstage. From outside, he supposed, it must look like drawn curtains, or simply the absence of light. To his continuing surprise, she did not attack him. She merely looked at him curiously.

Finally he couldn't bear to remain silent. "Are you here to destroy me?"

"Perhaps."

"An indecisive Sabbat? That must be one of the unspoken signs of Gehenna."

She smiled. "I am not of the Sabbat."

"But clearly you..."

"My clan would not speak well of me, any more than I do of them."

"Ah." Havel felt his palms become damp, and looked down to see blood sweat rising. "Then what would bring you to destroy me?"

"I often destroy others of our kind. For this I have been well paid."

The blood sweat thickened in Havel's palms, despite his efforts to nonchalantly wipe it away. "If it's a question of money..."

"Not money only. Rather, I have questions."

"An interrogation?"

"Of a sort." She paused, then sat in the chair closest to the office door. He sat in his desk chair. "Mr. Fedlos..."

"Grushkin, if you please. This is not just a mask I wear. It is the existence I have made for myself."

"Grushkin, then. Tell me about what sent you out of Prague."

He looked surprised. If she could read auras, he thought, she must surely sense the depth of his confusion. "Why do you want to know about that?"

"My purposes need not concern you. Tell me."

He gathered his thoughts. As best he could, he described the stagnation of his brood, of old imperial ways preserved even as modernity swirled around them. He recalled the ache of his lost life, tedious as it had been, and his yearning for art. Gradually his narrative spiraled back and forth from planning to execution, converging on that story of the giant bug. She sat motionless and took it all in.

"Thank you," she said at last. "You need fear no follow-up." She disappeared in what would have been a mortal's blink. Even with his acute perception, Havel could barely see her flatten out and merge with the shadows she'd laid over the windows. A blink later, they disappeared as well.

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**Monday, 8 November 1999, 6:51 AM (9:51 AM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Sheraton Hotel  
Seattle, Washington**



“No, Herr Wiscz, I haven’t yet found him. Mr. Grushkin wasn’t your lost childe any more than the previous three candidates were. You would perhaps save yourself and me some effort if you were to give me the rest of the list rather than doling out names one at a time.” Lucita returned the hotel phone to its cradle and watched the first early-morning tugs crawl out into the harbor.

She wasn’t quite sure why she’d lied to the arrogant ancilla that way. He was far from the most arrogant client she’d ever had, after all. It was something about Grushkin....

*This is not just a mask I wear.* That was it.

Lucita was aware that in her time she’d worn many masks. In recent years alone she’d gone from callous modern woman in her dealings with Fatima and that last encounter with her sire to this current guise, lady of Aragon out of time. None of them were *her*, she supposed, but was there anything at all underneath the mask?

Fedlos had found someone to be. He was doing what he wanted to. The quiet stench of blood magic filled his office and might someday get him into trouble, but then it wasn’t likely that many other vampires would ever be there. He wasn’t part of the “night society,” adhered to no sect. If he survived, he’d make a fine addition to the Inconnu, a rumor of music and magic for sires to threaten their childer with. If not, well, at least he’d had satisfactions on the way.

Lucita didn’t know who she wanted to be. It wasn’t enough to be the anti-Monçada anymore (if it had ever been, but she wasn’t ready for *that* thought yet). While being the lady of Aragon was comfortable, in truth it was an act. As a living woman, she’d yearned for some other role, and it was a slap at her own earlier self to pretend now that she was comfortable as a regal mistress.

She thought of the masks she’d seen actors in Greece wear while performing one of the ancient tragedies. At the time they hadn’t mattered much to her, just part of the background for her second hunt of 1955. Now they crowded in from all sides of her mind’s eye. Even these illusions had more complexity than her real soul, insofar as she could identify one. The masks showed the marks of years in scars and wrinkles—imagined years for made-up characters, but were her unlined face and empty heart so much better? She yearned for a mask into which she might grow, as Fedlos had grown into Grushkin.

The sky across Puget Sound was still dark, and no hint of dawn yet glimmered above the distant mountains. But she felt the sun’s approach in her bones. She suddenly imagined herself refusing to move, facing the sun, feeling the pure light, burning, crumbling....

No. Not yet, at least. Not until she knew who it was who’d perish in that final blaze. Not today. She drew the curtains, hung a blanket as additional protection, and stretched out on the bed to await another day’s sleep.

**Monday, 8 November 1999, 10:15 PM**  
**(Tuesday, 9 November 1999, 1:15 PM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**Sheraton Hotel**  
**Seattle, Washington**



Lucita sat bolt upright as she dialed. She'd sent a necessary fax, and now it was time to wrap up the last loose end of business. The client couldn't see her (unless he were much more adept at psychic affairs than she realized), but she preferred to conduct herself as if he could. So she wore one of the suits she'd bought at Sea-Tac Airport and had her notes arranged neatly on the hotel room's desk. Their tidy pattern shone back at her from the mirror, and she made sure to handle them carefully so that they seemed to rise and fall in an orderly manner rather than as if simply blown by the wind.

The phone rang three times. A man answered, speaking slightly bored-sounding German. "Bitte."

"Herr Wiscz, please."

The man switched over to English with a smoothly generic middle-class English accent. "Mr. Wiscz is unavailable to callers at this time. You may leave a message, and if it is a matter of business warranting his attention, he shall return your call when feasible."

"This is Katherine Scott." She gave the name she'd accepted this contract with. "Inform Mr. Wiscz that it is necessary to invoke the termination clause of our agreement. He may verify the return of funds with this number." She recited an access code for her Hamburg account. "Should he have any further questions, he may...."

"Excuse me, please," the man interrupted. His calm was gone. "Perhaps Mr. Wiscz is available after all. Please hold while I confirm."

Lucita waited. She'd hoped that the ghoul might simply set down the receiver so that she could listen to background sounds, but he retained enough presence of mind to actually put her on hold. So she reviewed her notes on the client and watched a late-night ferry cruising north up Puget Sound.

Two minutes and twenty seconds later, the client answered the phone. He sounded perfectly composed, with the arrogance of the elder who has been accustomed to obedience from others for four hundred years. "Miss Scott. My retainer informs me that you are canceling our contract. This is very disappointing."

"Mr. Wiscz, the world is full of disappointments. I am sure that you will be able to bear up under the grief of this loss."

"Miss Scott, I am not paying you for efforts at comedy. I am paying you to retrieve my missing child. Are you admitting your inability to do so?"

"I am declaring that the termination clause is now in effect. This means that I have not finished the assignment and that I will not be proceeding with the matter."

"I demand to know—"

"Our contract does not include any provision for you to demand any knowledge. There's a provision to notify you with evidence upon completion, and there's the termination clause. Review the document you signed."

"This is *extremely* disappointing. I shall—"

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“Take out a complaint with my sire? Best of luck finding him. Complain to your superiors in the order? I’m sure they’ll be very sympathetic to your plight. We both now how much they approve of hiring independent operatives. Take it up with the Sabbat, perhaps, or the Monitor of Prague.” She smiled at the silence on the other end. “If anything, Mr. Wiscz, I should bill you for the information you received.”

“What!” He raised his voice for the first time.

“You now know four suspected aliases your childe isn’t using. That information has value, since your next operative can proceed that much more quickly. Be appreciative that I don’t charge you for the service.”

Wiscz sputtered incoherently.

“Thank you, Mr. Wiscz, that’s all. Please, feel free to take your business elsewhere in the future.” Lucita put down the receiver and quickly replaced the scrambler attached to the phone jack with a different one. She didn’t really believe the stories of blood magic that could pick up on the sympathetic resonance of a completed circuit of hardware-and-user, but she did believe in not taking chances. Just to be on the safe side, she unplugged the receiver and set it across the room, making a note to herself to pick up a replacement from some other hotel phone later.

Lucita looked down at the rain-flecked streets and thought about strolling along them corporeally, but something inside her warned of trouble. She put on a coat and took along a new umbrella just in case, then turned off the room’s lights and stepped into a corner shadow.

The passage through the Abyss, the realm beyond shadow, was as free of sensation as always. No temperature, no wind, no motion, nothing to stimulate any of her senses. *Awareness* flooded in to her well-trained mind: of her location relative to the material world, and of the inhuman forces far away in the depths. She had never encountered any of the independent shadow-creatures spoken of in Lasombra folklore, only the unthinking entities conjured up by some vampire’s own force of will. Or at least that was true until that final encounter in Madrid, when *something* had risen in her sire’s lair and nearly destroyed them all.

Lucita did feel very sure that her sire was truly gone. She could find no trace of his influence in her mind or soul. There might be some still-embedded command, but she thought not. She’d demonstrated to her own satisfaction that her will was her own, at least for the present moment. His undead hand did not stop her from making the pilgrimage home, nor from then immersing herself in her calling.

On a whim, she stepped out of the shadows onto the roof of an apartment building somewhere north of downtown. The clouds lifted for a moment, showing her the dark waters of Puget Sound and a few lights in the distance. The neighborhood around her gave off a faint smell of blood; she suspected that some vampire had fed nearby. Sabbat? Camarilla? Independent? She wasn’t altogether certain of the state of affairs in Seattle, and decided not to risk a nuisance encounter. One step took her back into the shadows.

As she drifted, she laid out her recent actions as if she were someone else, treating herself as the target of one of her operations. Reason must prevail.

The target had recently lost her sire, with whom she’d had extremely hostile relationships. The target had then attempted to retreat into juvenilia with a return to the mortal home. After an unproductive act of masochism and an argument with resident

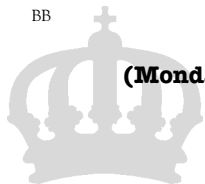
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ghosts, the target flung herself into a frenzy of very un-mortal activity, accepting the sort of routine job from an unpleasant client that she'd usually reject. Less than a week after *that*, she abruptly broke off the contract and put her primary point of contact on indefinite suspension.

The pattern was obvious. The target is in a state of panic, suffering from identify confusion. It is very likely that if she does not find a stable foundation, she will engage in increasingly self-destructive actions until she meets true death. It's an old story, one that the observer had often exploited to make assassination easier.

But where might stability lie now?





**Tuesday, 9 November 1999, 3:15 AM**  
**(Monday, 8 November 1999, 9:15 PM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**Museum der Arbeit**  
**Hamburg, Germany**

Willa Gebenstaler examined the fax on her desk for signs of hoaxing. While her communications links with Madame Scott were as fine as she could make them, nothing material could be totally secure against supernatural manipulation. If this was a hoax, it would be the...she paused to count. Yes, it would be the fourth since Willa took this position, and the second this century.

The fax itself was clear and simple. It had instructions for paying off the recent contract with Wiscz in Prague and the longer-term one with Kamedov in Istanbul, and a separate paragraph reading, "Accept no contracts. Take no messages. Inform all callers I am unavailable. Apply Reserve Fund B until further notice." The last part worried Willa: Reserve Fund B had been set up at the very beginning of her term for use in the event that her employer was destroyed or permanently incapacitated. If it was genuine, then Willa was at liberty to dive into three and a half centuries' accumulated interest and set-aside funding and occupy herself very comfortably indeed until such time as Madame Scott chose to resume their relationship. Fretfully, Willa held the fax front and back to her glass desktop, as if hoping to see a secret message reflected there.

Officially, Willa knew nothing of her employer's identity, and in point of fact Madame Scott had never let anything slip which could point to her identity. She'd always spoken a pure, accent-free German to Willa and avoided discussing anything specific about the past except with reference to a current assignment. Still, given time a careful observer notices things, and an intelligent office assistant puts the pieces together.

To begin with, the name was fake, and so were the facial features. Willa knew that the custom of disguise was pretty well universal among elders who didn't maintain permanent residences in affiliation with one of the big sects. (She hadn't known that in 1642, but then she hadn't known much of anything about Kindred society then.) The name wasn't particularly clever, though. "Scott" meant "Shadow," if you traced it back to Greek, and that immediately suggested either the Lasombra or someone deeply concerned with darkness. There weren't that many elder Lasombra known to be without permanent havens. "Katherine" suggested, among other things, one of the queens of Aragon, and that merely confirmed Willa's speculation.

She suspected that Madame Scott *wanted* people to figure it out, with just a little effort, and then feel that extra touch of awe at realizing who they dealt with. She'd never asked Madame Scott, of course. Nor had she ever mentioned her speculation to anyone else; she was fairly sure Madame Scott would be able to read the thoughts or emotions associated with such a betrayal, and in any event she enjoyed her position and wished to keep it.

Ever since those long-ago days of Protestant revolution, Willa had maintained an office somewhere in the Hamburg area and made it known discreetly that she was the

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contact for an experienced, unaligned vampire willing to perform potentially messy operations for suitable fees. For most of that time, the Camarilla court of Hamburg recognized Willa as a quiet, scholarly individual of unfortunately clanless origin—how she hated the sect's preferred term of Caitiff—who nonetheless earned her right to survival through timely research and administrative services. Unofficially, of course, the prince usually knew what she really did; every so often she even arranged a (completely deniable) contract on behalf of the court. As long as her visitors didn't create trouble, the court didn't care.

Thirty years ago Willa moved into a corner of the basement of the Museum of Labor and Technology. Madame Scott assisted her from time to time in applying mental leverage to the museum staff, and nobody ever, ever noticed Willa or her office. She tapped into the museum's communications, which now included permanent high-speed Internet connections, to retrieve messages from multi-layer cover and redirection systems. Deals with Hamburg's Tremere secured her network against most intrusions, but there was always someone out there with more raw power, skill, or both in a position to try something she and her consultants failed to anticipate.

Most of the time, Willa's work was very routine. Individuals would make tentative contact, following leads which suggested ways to get an assassin or fixer. There were apparently abandoned mailboxes in Berlin, formats for newspaper ads in Vienna and Zurich, phone numbers in Brussels which were re-routed through encrypted satellite systems—a whole constellation of avenues for approach, whose apparent geographical center was somewhere in the Rhineland in the far western reaches of Germany, just as another bit of misdirection. Willa would send back information on more securely anonymous channels, and from there negotiations would proceed. Madame Scott would take the case (or not), and the funds would move, and the work would be done, and Willa would deliver the proofs of completion.

Every so often, things got a bit livelier. Madame Scott sometimes went into seclusion, or into frenzies of activity. She had some pet projects which she'd pursue to the abandonment of normal assignments, making extra work for Willa and spreading bad rumors which could dim business for decades at a time.

These last few months had been strange, even for Madame Scott. There was the summer of furious activity when Willa could scarcely reach her employer. (Willa knew perfectly well that Madame Scott maintained other points of contact under other aliases, but preferred not to think about it. She was jealous of her employer's divided attention and felt distrusted when out of touch.) Suddenly Madame Scott was in Spain, Willa learned, and traveling mostly out of touch. Then came the almost frantic phone call from Zaragoza at the start of November. Madame craved work, *now*. Willa found the request from Wiscz at the top of her stack, and Madame accepted it without nearly her usual caution. Off to the New World to hunt a lost childe!

Now this.

Willa had worried before that Madame might be approaching the point of no return, where she'd either commit suicide directly or keep plunging into too-dangerous assignments until she was destroyed. In the past, Madame had managed to calm down with the help of colleagues and associates, whom Willa did not know how to reach. Madame was out there among the Western barbarians—for Willa, the New World

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remained a haven for savages and malcontents, many of whom no doubt went through life with tribal paints and tattoos—and out of touch. The punishment for Willa contacting her now would be extreme, perhaps even final. Reserve B threw Willa onto her own devices.

She very much hoped that some night she would hear from her mistress again, but she feared that the association had come to its end. Her pace, as she walked toward her prepared sleeping chamber in a large converted file locker, was slow and sad.

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**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 2:56 AM**  
**The west side**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



GF

Jasmine pressed her back against the side of the car. Her legs were cramping from squatting, but she wasn't about to get up. Not while she could remain out of sight—and maybe relatively safe—among the clunkers on this used-car lot.

Had Borris made it this far? She wasn't sure. The others she was sure about. She'd seen them go down, seen them ripped to shreds by... No. She wasn't going to think about that. She couldn't right now, not if she hoped to somehow get away.

*What was that?*

She almost jumped up and fled. She wanted to, even though it wouldn't be the smartest thing to do. But now that she'd stopped, she didn't know if she could make her legs do what she wanted anymore. She just wasn't sure. She wasn't sure about anything anymore. Had she heard something, something nearby? Nothing sounded right. There wasn't too much noise, she realized. There wasn't *enough*. The normal sounds were all out there: a car zipping by on the main road, the buzzing of the cheap street lamps that didn't really light the car lot that well. What was missing were the sounds that she should have made, that she would have made if she were still a normal human being: She wasn't breathing hard after running all that way; her heart wasn't pounding from exertion and fear. Not that she wasn't afraid—she *was*. Terrified. But none of her body's normal responses confirmed that anything unusual was happening to her.

She felt dead. And if the Sabbat had anything to do with it... No. She pushed that thought back where it came from, closed her mind to it.

*A normal patrol.* That's what Theo had said. *Bullshit!* Jasmine bit down on her lip to keep from cursing aloud at the arrogant, all-powerful archon. She was convinced that he'd done this all on purpose, intentionally put her in harm's way. *A normal patrol.* He'd said it in that deep, expressionless way he said everything, but she knew—she could feel the snide vibrations; she could tell he was sneering when she wasn't looking. He'd found out that she hadn't been going out every night; she hadn't given in to the oppression of the system—*like he had*. And he resented her. He hated her for it. She had the courage that he didn't, and he couldn't stand that.

It *hadn't* been a normal patrol. She and her three partners had run into at least five other patrols—that was way more than would usually be in one area. That was at least fifteen or twenty Kindred on the western edge of the city, and she had seen what had happened to many of them when the Sabbat struck....

Jasmine looked down at the gun that she clutched in her hand like salvation. They'd just thrust it upon her at the beginning of the night. A something centimeter or millimeter or something. She hadn't fired a shot. Not yet. As she looked down, she noticed for the first time that her bell bottoms were torn. Her mouth grew dry as she saw the blood along the tear—her blood. She became aware of the throbbing, of the gash along her left calf. A weak, mournful cry escaped her lips.

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“Jasmine?”

She flinched, banged her head against the car door, cursed silently at herself for the noise.

“Jasmine?”

Was it Borris’s voice? Could it be? Jasmine fought the idea of running again. She wasn’t sure how serious her injury was, how long her leg would hold up. She wasn’t sure what exactly was out there—

That wasn’t true. Not completely. She’d seen enough to guess. The Sabbat had swarmed into the city. They’d come speeding in what seemed like dozens of cars, jumping out when they saw anyone, Kindred or kine, doing awful things.... The patrols that hadn’t been swept away by the first wave had responded, and then the police had showed up. From then on, it had been a hundred different small running fights—for Jasmine, mostly running. She wasn’t sure exactly where she was now—just hiding among the cars.

“Jasmine?” Closer now. He sounded desperate, maybe hurt.

“Borris, is that you?” she whispered.

She heard movement, very close now, just on the other side of the car, at the rear of the car. And then he peeked around and over the trunk. Jasmine could tell from the pained expression on his face and the awkward way he held himself that Borris had to be injured.

“Borris...” she said quietly, relieved just the slightest bit for the first time this long, long night. Her relief was short-lived.

As he stepped around the car, Borris was not alone. He was not holding himself awkwardly, he was being held. And the sight of the creature holding him turned Jasmine’s blood to ice.

A bony ridge—once a nose?—ran down the center of its face from forehead to upper lip. On either side, the brow and cheeks fell away at a smooth, sharp angle. The jaw was recessed, not seeming to fit the rest of the sleek face, and instead of hair there were sickly white follicles of skin braided and draped over the creature’s shoulder.

Tzimisce. Fiend. The name fit only too well.

“Jasmine...” Borris said, his eyes almost rolling up into his head from pain. Edging around the car, he and the fiend turned just enough that Jasmine could see the Tzimisce was not, in fact, holding Borris up by the collar as she’d thought. The thing’s hand and forearm were plunged through Borris’s skin, into his back. It looked as if its fingers were gripping his very spine, manipulating him like some demonic puppet.

Jasmine couldn’t stand the sight of it. For a moment, her fear fled her. With a defiant cry, she stood, raised her pistol at the fiend, pulled the trigger—and nothing happened. Jasmine was not aware of what a safety did. No one had thought to tell her. And so her moment of fearlessness passed in futility. Borris and the fiend were not alone. The other Sabbat creatures swarmed over her, knocked her to the ground, tore the gun from her grasp....

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**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 4:07 AM**  
**Friendship Park**  
**Anne Arundel County, Maryland**

GF



*The hell with this*, Lydia decided. She stood from behind the trashcan, scanned the darkness for movement, saw it, and fired her last two shots. “Motherfuckers.” She knelt back down, ejected the empty clip from her Desert Eagle, and began refilling it and her two spares from the loose cartridges in her jacket pocket. The trashcan in its wooden container made good enough cover. The motherfuckers most likely wouldn’t have found her for several minutes more had she not given away her position by firing, but now they’d zero in on the muzzle flashes and head this way. But that was okay. Lydia was tired of playing hide and seek.

She glanced where she’d last seen Frankie and Christoph, but they were out of sight now. She and Frankie were pretty much in the same boat, except he wasn’t as fast as she was. For all the shit she’d given Christoph about his oversized switchblade, he seemed to be having the most luck. Hard to argue with good old-fashioned dismemberment.

So much for the *Friendship* in Friendship Park.

The park had seemed like the last chance to hold the line. The running battle in the car had gotten out of hand really fast. Just too damn many Sabbath swarming all over the fucking place. This was no raid. This was the shit, and Lydia and her boys were caught between it and the fan.

*Things might get a little hot*, Theo had said.

A little hot. “Kiss my ass, you black bastard,” Lydia muttered. *A little hot—yeah, and the sun might make me a little uncomfortable too.*

She slipped in a refilled clip and listened for the footsteps she knew she’d hear. The motherfuckers might be big and damn near invulnerable, but stealthy they were not. *There.* She heard the plodding footsteps. Maybe they were quick for being that big, but they weren’t going to keep up with her. She gauged the distance of the footsteps, then jumped up.

The thing was maybe twenty yards away, lumbering toward her. Tzimisce war ghou. Big, ugly, spiked, partially covered with chitinous bone armor. Lydia had heard lots of stories, but she’d never faced one of these things before tonight.

She unloaded on it. Seven .44 magnum slugs square in its chest from fifteen yards. Nothing. Maybe she cracked the armor a little. Maybe. She popped out the empty clip, slammed in a full one. She wasn’t sure if the war ghou actually could smile—the face seemed to be immutable armor too—but it looked to Lydia like it was smiling as it came closer.

“Oh yeah? Well, fuck you, buddy.”

She opened up on it again. Seven shots right in the face. This time it staggered, stumbled a step, hesitated, but kept coming. Lydia could see cracks in its hard face, patches where the armor had crumbled away, even if the thing didn’t have

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more than a headache. What bothered Lydia the most was that it still looked like it was smiling.

“You like that, motherfucker? You want some more?”

She held her ground, ejected that clip, and slammed in her last one. Seven more shots into the face from closer than ten yards. The head exploded. Bone and ragged flesh sprayed into the air and landed all around like grotesque rain on the heels of the Desert Eagle’s thunder. The war ghouls continued on for three more laborious steps, stopped as if thinking the matter over, then toppled forward like a fallen tree.

Lydia savored her success for a full three seconds before seeing the similarly mammoth shapes emerging from the darkness, from the same direction her smiling, headless war ghouls had just come.

“Motherfuckers.”

“Watch your mouth, kid.”

Lydia whirled and leveled her gun—at Theo. He wasn’t smiling—he almost never smiled—but just like with the war ghouls, there was something about him, his manner, that suggested a smile.

Theo tapped the Desert Eagle, still aimed at him. “I wouldn’t bother pointin’ that since you just fired all your shots.” He nodded toward the war ghouls’ disintegrating carcass, then added, “If you’re tryin’ to lure ’em all to you, you’re doin’ a good job.”

Lydia didn’t say anything to him; she didn’t know what to say. Not because she was in awe of him, though she was still to some extent, but because she was angry. Angry about how brusque he’d been about Baldur’s death. Theo had told her to get over it, and then hadn’t said anything else about it, just gone on like nothing had happened, like Baldur hadn’t been doing his job and standing up for all of them. *Well, then fuck Theo*, she’d decided.

And now here he was again, in his black leather jacket and Yankees cap, pretending nothing much was going on. It pissed off Lydia all over again, like they were all in the warehouse again and what used to be Baldur was lying just over there. But this wasn’t the place to bring it up. There wasn’t time, with the other war ghouls closing in, so Lydia said the first thing that came to her mind:

“Yankees suck shit, man.”

Theo cocked his head. “You lose money on the Braves or something?”

“Hey,” said Frankie who was jogging up with Christoph right then, “is it true that Greg Maddux is one of us?”

“How the hell would he pitch day games, you moron?” Lydia snapped.

“Sunblock?”

“Uh...” Christoph was perplexed by their conversation. “Does anyone else see what I see coming this way?”

Lydia looked back over her shoulder. The approaching war ghouls were indeed much closer now, their hulking silhouettes clearly visible despite the darkness. She started filling her clips again; she only had enough cartridges left to fill one and a half.

“They’re all *over* the place,” Frankie said, “like stink on—”

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“Yeah, we get the idea,” Theo said. “Look. You guys are the last patrol out. I came to bring you in myself. We don’t have much time.”

“Last patrol?” Lydia thought she’d heard him wrong. “What the fuck you talkin’ about?”

He glared at her—maybe there was a little impatience there, a little urgency, but it was hard to say. “I say we take out these three, then we’re outta here. You guys take the one off to the right. Got it?”

Lydia and Christoph nodded. Frankie couldn’t exactly nod anymore, just like he couldn’t quite stand up straight. Something to do with how his neck had healed, but Lydia guessed that having a permanent crick in his neck was better than being permanently dead.

“Their right or our right?” Frankie asked.

“Our right.”

“What about the other two?” Frankie wanted to know, but Theo was already gone, swinging around wide to the left. His left.

“Come on.” Lydia broke toward the war ghoulish that was separated from the other two. Christoph kept pace with her, Frankie lagged behind. When they got within a few yards, Lydia circled to the side while Christoph continued to close. The creature had no neck. Its jaw was embedded in its torso several inches below the top of its massive shoulders. Its arms weren’t elongated like those of many of the war ghouls... but it had six, which made up somewhat for the shorter reach. The arms were well-armed too. The ghoulish skillfully blocked Christoph’s slashes, one after another, and seemed about to grab the Brujah’s sword arm after every thrust, but Christoph managed to strike and then evade the grasping hands.

Lydia took up an angle to the side, clear of Christoph, and took potshots at the ghoulish’s head. She was conservative with her fire, not wanting to hit Christoph or use up all her ammo. Frankie caught up with her and joined in the target practice with his H&K 9mm.

Their shots didn’t do a lot of damage to the war ghoulish, but they did irritate it. More and more it used one of its hands to try to shield its face from their bullets, and that hurt its coordination against Christoph. He struck more telling blows, chipping away armor, and even drawing blood once or twice.

Finally the beast had enough of the harassment from afar—not that far really. It broke away from Christoph and charged Lydia and Frankie. They weren’t expecting the move, but it didn’t matter. Christoph, seeing what happened, swooped in behind the war ghoulish and struck tender flesh behind each knee. The ghoulish, hamstrung, screeched a surprisingly high-pitched wail, and dropped to its knees. It twisted from the waist, trying to fight off both Christoph and the bullets.

Christoph had the definite edge now. He worked quickly and relentlessly, taking advantage of every opening. His blade found chinks in the armor, ripped entire bone plates from the creature’s flesh. He began to pare down the number of limbs he had to contend against: One arm hung useless at the ghoulish’s side; two hands were sliced completely or mostly off, and then a third.

At last, Lydia and Frankie closed in. Christoph stepped back as those two poured enough concentrated firepower into the beast’s face that its exo-cranium cracked



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and shattered like an egg. The three Brujah stood in silent triumph around the monstrous carcass.

“Okay,” said Theo from very close behind them. “If you guys are finished, let’s get the hell outta here.”

The other three Brujah looked at him. There he was again, standing like nothing had happened, like the park, the *city*, wasn’t crawling with Sabbat war ghouls. Lydia thought for a moment. She couldn’t remember hearing his shotgun go off, but she’d been absorbed in her own fight.... Then she looked more closely and saw the blood on his hands. Not blood dripping. His own blood, around his knuckles, and white patches of his own bone showing through. In the darkness beyond him, she could just barely make out the two mounds that, a few minutes before, must have been war ghouls.

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**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 4:32 AM**  
**Lexington Street Metro stop**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**

GF



Cardinal Francisco Domingo de Polonia stood beneath the city that was the newest addition to his diocese. The Metro trains were still idle for the night. Their idleness would continue into the day and likely beyond. Some destructive band of vandals had demolished several portions of track, damage that would take the Metro authority quite some time to repair.

Surrounding Polonia was a small group of his hand-picked staff, each completely loyal—each to his own personal agenda of cruelty and ambition. They followed Polonia because he was strong. God had obviously smiled upon the newly anointed cardinal, unlike so many of the other Sabbat notables: Monçada, attempting to spread his reach across the broad Atlantic was destroyed; Borges, having prevailed in Miami after years of struggle, was slain; his protégé Sebastian was fallen in a bizarre combat. The conquest of the U.S. East Coast truly had become the glorious accomplishment of Polonia. He would install his own archbishops and bishops, removing the compromise candidates Borges or Vykos had earlier insisted upon. Vykos was another whose meteoric rise was checked; the Tzimisce's star was certainly descending, though the freakish archbishop seemed hardly to notice. Originally Monçada's legate in this matter, Vykos had been more intent on seizing power than on exercising it. Now, without Monçada's backing, the creature had grown distant and aloof, grossly ignoring the necessities of administration and politics entailed in ruling a city the magnitude of Washington, D.C. For reasons unexplained, Vykos had neither consolidated its power base, conducted the siege of the Tremere chantry with any energy, nor appointed bishops to oversee the affairs of the city in which the archbishop seemed so disinterested. The Tzimisce mind was a mystery to Polonia. If he could not fathom Vykos's motivations, he could—and would—at least soon deal with the shortcomings and be rid of the archbishop. Once Baltimore was completely in his grasp and the Camarilla defenders rounded up and staked for the sun, there would be no more need for Vykos's spy—the only factor that had stayed Polonia's hand thus far from moving against the Tzimisce.

And the city would be his very soon, was practically his already, if the reports streaming in were accurate—not always a safe assumption. But even if half the updates of strategic point after strategic point secured were true, the Sabbat had won a victory more sweeping and complete than even the sacking of Atlanta at the outset of the campaign. There had been minimal resistance on the western edge of the city, and heavier fighting to the south, south of the Baltimore-Washington International Airport. But the Sabbat column—in the loosest sense of the term—that had swept in from the west had quickly cut off the airport from the city itself. What difference did it make if the few Camarilla around the airport held out, if other Kindred from the city could not flee there to escape? According to Vykos's

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spy, some of the Camarilla dregs might try to flee northward on the ground, and so a significant force had circled to the north to prevent any mass escape in that direction. This would not be merely the capture of a city; it was to be the final scouring of the East Coast, the total annihilation of Camarilla resistance, and the establishment of Polonia's unquestioned dominance.

Waiting for more news, the cardinal surveyed the members of his surrounding staff: Costello, long-time lieutenant who had followed in Polonia's wake to the height of power; Hardin, nomad war chief who had swung securely into Polonia's camp once it was clear which way power was flowing in the Sabbat high command; Bolon, Tzimisce commander of war ghouls, as resolute as he was massive, most physically impressive of the bunch but the least dangerous to Polonia. Significant also were those who were absent. Vykos had not participated directly in the attack but would be along shortly, Polonia was sure, to bask in the glow of victory. Vallejo, too, was gone. The legionnaire had returned to Madrid after the news of Monçada's demise, and as far as Polonia was concerned it was good riddance. If Vykos was unpredictable, Vallejo was too disciplined, too unwavering in his loyalty to Monçada. It was a quality with which Polonia was uncomfortable, even in his own supporters. Armando Mendes, Polonia's ablest lieutenant, had remained in New York where, Polonia was quite aware, he had been maneuvering to usurp the rule of that fine city. That had been before Polonia had been elevated to the post of cardinal. Polonia planned to reward Armando by giving him the city—and then holding him to impossibly high standards of pacification, while at the same time shackling the new archbishop with debilitating tithe demands in both manpower and financial resources.

Yes, Polonia's underlings kept him on his toes, like a man walking upon a line of razors. It was his lieutenants, however, if they crossed him, who would find the blade at their own throats.

"Commander Bolon," Polonia said. "Your latest reports."

"Yes, Your Eminence." The Tzimisce knelt but even on one knee was almost as tall as Polonia. Large spikes of bone protruded from much of the commander: his shoulders, elbows, knuckles, knees, and along the crest of the bone helmet that, evidently, was actually part of his head. "The airport is secured. We've disabled the radar, so even if Cammies get in, they're not going anywhere. The losses we took earlier—"

"How heavy?" Polonia demanded.

"Significant, but not beyond the acceptable range."

Polonia was pleased by this. Those casualties south of the city were the only relatively heavy losses his forces had suffered all night. "Good. Continue."

"Those losses," Bolon stated, "were largely attributed to Theo Bell."

Bell. Damnable Brujah archons. First Julius in Atlanta cutting a swath through the battalion of war ghouls, now Bell blazing a path of destruction near Baltimore. *Shouldn't they be in North Africa trying to excavate Carthage or something?* Polonia wondered. But it didn't matter. The area was secure now.

"And Bell's destruction has been confirmed?"

Bolon paused. "No, Your Eminence. I have no such report."

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Polonia was not surprised; neither was he pleased. He turned to Hardin, the fellow Lasombra who had commanded the column from the west. The cardinal had accompanied Hardin's column on tonight's assault, so as to reach the center of the city more quickly and establish a strong presence and command center there. Polonia had forced himself merely to observe initially. How else to gauge Hardin's mettle? And Hardin had performed well, though resistance was light. The Sabbat forces had skillfully enveloped and destroyed the defenders on the western edge of the city, and then had struck decisively for the heart of Baltimore—where there was no resistance to speak of. Polonia, growing less patient with the disappointing enemy body count, ordered Hardin's force to disperse, to scour the city for pockets of resistance. There had been fear in those first hours of a breakout, but then encouraging word had filtered in from other quadrants: The airport was cut off from the city; Gregorio's flanking expedition was in place to the north, and was squeezing southward. There would be no breakout. Now all that was left for Polonia to do was receive word as the enemy was tracked down and destroyed. If he was fortunate, one or more of the Camarilla worthies might fall into his grasp: Bell, Pieterzoon, Vitel. At the very least, however, the city would be Polonia's.

"And your latest?" the cardinal asked Hardin.

"Southern half of the city's in good shape, little or no resistance. Inner Harbor's quiet, except for the Lord Baltimore Inn, which is burning to the ground as we speak. My people are spreadin' north. Most of the Camarilla must have taken off that way. They should run smack into Gregorio."

"Not so!" said a new voice, another opportunistic nomad war chief who'd risen from pack leader to prominence over the course of the war. Gregorio, newly arrived, wore a white smock that blended almost seamlessly with the albino's alabaster skin. His shiny pate was as smooth and pale as a porcelain doll. "My men have worked their way south to the city limits and not seen the first retreating defender. They are not fleeing that direction."

"Impossible," Polonia said.

Gregorio seemed genuinely saddened. Furrows of disappointment creased the Tzimisce's brow. "Yes, I was afraid Hardin would fill the harbor with heads before I'd seen the first Camarilla hair—but all seems quiet here as well."

That fact was far from lost upon Cardinal Polonia. No significant resistance within the city. Secure perimeters established. The airport sealed. No armada of ships escaping the harbor.

Decisive action, that was what these men, these treacherous lieutenants hovering like vultures, respected, and that was what Polonia would give them. This was what he most hated about high command, the fog of war. He was forced to rely upon information provided by his subordinates. They were his ears and eyes, he their mind. He much preferred to be leading the charge, observing everything firsthand, as he had for most of his existence; but leadership carried a price as well as reward. His commanders from all fronts needed to be able to find him; he had to learn what they knew, interpret the situation from the details they provided, even if they themselves did not fully understand the implications of what they said.

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“They’ve gone to ground,” Polonia said. “They’re hiding, waiting for us to grow overconfident, then they’ll counterattack.” That had to be the explanation. It had to be. “See that your men find shelter,” he said to his commanders as a whole. “It’s late. First thing tonight, we’ll root them out. We’ll find them if we have to burn the whole city.”

And Polonia was prepared to do exactly that.

**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 4:45 AM**  
**Eurofreight jet cargo hold**  
**Baltimore-Washington International Airport**



Theo was, relatively speaking, in a good mood, perhaps even approaching what, for him, passed as the zenith of his mood spectrum: guardedly optimistic. He was ignoring for the moment the fact that his boss had confided in a Ventrue rather than him. He didn't really care that Lydia was pissed at him. He wasn't even too bothered that the Sabbat was marching practically uncontested into Baltimore. That, at least, was part of the plan. He and Jan had lured the Sabbat for weeks, drawn them closer and closer to Baltimore, fed doctored information through Vitel about a non-existent last stand, and then hustled most of the Camarilla defenders out of the city. The Sabbat leaders would have thought that they'd cut off the airport from the rest of the city and denied that avenue of escape. In fact, two out of three Kindred in the city had been gathered there and many were already in the air *before* the attack fell.

Theo's sense of satisfaction was tempered by the reality of heavy—read: *total*—losses among the patrols on the western edge of the city. That fact that the casualties had been anticipated, like Buffalo, like Hartford, did little to ease the archon's mind. Neither did the knowledge that he'd chosen Kindred specifically for the suicide mission. He hadn't been willing to jeopardize secrecy by calling for volunteers, by willing other Kindred to determine their own fate. Instead, he'd purposefully winnowed the chaff, assigning to that part of the city most of those who hadn't been pulling their weight, those he wouldn't have been able to depend on in the nights ahead—because even the ambitious maneuver of extracting Camarilla personnel from Baltimore was merely part of the plan. More lay ahead, and it wasn't going to get easier.

So Theo's guarded optimism leaned heavily to the guarded, but the only immediate hurdle he faced was making sure the cargo plane got in the air. He'd already herded the last defenders south of the city, Lydia, Christoph, and Frankie, away from their increasingly hopeless stand at Friendship Park and to this last aircraft of Pieterzoon's that was waiting on the runway. They were on board and situated comfortably—again, relatively speaking—in the cargo hold. The engines were humming gently. After months of constant toil and strain, Theo was almost ready to relax, even if just for a few hours.

That was when the pilot buzzed the hold. "Radar's out at control," came the static-riddled voice over the intercom. "We're denied clearance from the tower. We can't take off."

Theo's fleeting optimism quickly reverted to his general rule number one—anything that can fuck up, and most things that "can't," will. He jabbed the intercom button. "Take off. Now."

"Sir?"

"Take... off... now."

"We don't have *clearance*."

"I heard you. That means nobody else will be landin', right?"

"Sir, there are other planes in holding patterns... circling, waiting to land."

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“If you don’t take off now, there will be people here, probably in less than two minutes, who will blow this whole plane—and you and me with it—to Kingdom Come.” There was a pause. “Don’t make me come up there,” Theo added.

But to add insult to potential injury, the pilot wasn’t listening to Theo. The Brujah in the hold heard the distracted pilot over the intercom, however: “What in the world? Who are those folks on the—? Hey!”

Theo heard the gunshots in stereo—over the intercom and outside the plane. So did the others.

“What the hell?” Lydia was shouting, ducking from reflex.

“Get this plane movin’!” Theo had to force himself not to punch the intercom button too hard and break it. There were no windows. He couldn’t see what was going on out there.

“*Mary, mother of God!*” the pilot was shrieking.

“Go! Go!” Theo yelled. If the Sabbath blocked the runway, he and the others were trapped. “Go!”

The plane lurched forward suddenly. Theo stumbled, slapped at the wall for support. Bullets punched through the fuselage just a few feet away. Were the Sabbath in cars? Were they blocking the runway? He couldn’t hear over the plane’s engines. He couldn’t see anything.

The pilot was gasping and sobbing over the intercom: “*Jesus-Jesus-Jesus...!*”

“Holy fuckin’ shit!” Lydia, Frankie, and Christoph dove for cover.

“*Get us up!*” Theo roared at the intercom as he regained his balance. “Go!”

For a few sickening seconds, the gunshots seemed to get louder. Theo kept expecting the plane to screech to a halt, or to hear the pilot get his head blown off. That would ground them just as effectively. Theo prayed the plane didn’t explode. He almost welcomed the thought of being boarded. At least then he could do something! He wouldn’t be completely dependent on the pilot getting them off the ground, on the plane holding together. He was jittering like crazy in this forced inaction.

But finally the gunfire began to grow more distant, and shortly it was drowned out completely by the engines. The plane’s speed pressed Theo back. He felt the instant when the wheels lost contact with the tarmac.

They were in the air.

“Secure cargo bay for take-off,” the pilot’s voice quavered belatedly over the intercom. He was obviously shaken, whimpering quietly to himself, seeking relief in checklists, protocol, routine.

The cargo plane didn’t hit any of the holding planes. The pilot kept to low altitude, probably breaking several hundred FAA regulations, until they were beyond the immediate periphery of the airport. Theo swallowed. His ears kept popping. He and the others settled in the best they could.

Christoph, now that the excitement was over, was trying not to let on that being in an airplane scared him shitless. As soon as the shooting had stopped, he’d strapped himself down, and every few minutes he unobtrusively added another knot to the nylon straps that held him down. He had enough slack left for two or three more knots. Theo wondered what Christoph would do after that. The archon had seen this kind of thing before; it

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wasn't that uncommon with Kindred who predated air travel. Christoph, one of those who preferred a sword to modern firearms, would seem to be a prime example.

Frankie was doing well enough—considering that he'd had his head nearly ripped off a week and a half ago. He'd recovered physically, more or less, but there had been some nerve or structural damage or something like that. Not too surprising since Theo and all the others, by all rights, shouldn't be walking around anyway. Undead physiology was not always predictable. For Frankie, though, the physical trauma of having his neck broken, or maybe the emotional blow of losing his friend Baldur, had left him scarred. In the past, he'd always been fairly even-tempered for a Brujah. He'd been predictable and reliable, if not the sharpest nail in the coffin. Now, however, in the cargo hold, he had squeezed himself between two stacks of crates and gone practically catatonic. He wasn't curled into fetal position or anything like that, but he was far from aware of anything that was going on around him. Theo figured he could shoot Frankie in the foot and the other Malkavian probably wouldn't notice for a few hours. It came and went, this detachment from reality. At times, Frankie was his old self, but at others...

*Another body*, Theo thought. That was all he could count on Frankie to be. Another of the walking dead. But then again, that was all of them. Maybe Frankie had just slipped one step closer to what was in store for all of them eventually. Less a person, more the walking dead.

And if that wasn't enough to make a cheerful bunch, there was Lydia. As the plane bumped through light turbulence, she was glaring daggers at Theo. She wasn't rattled by the shooting anymore, now that they were in the air. Just pissed. No big deal. Let her stare all she wanted. Didn't bother him. She'd either get over it, in which case she'd probably get along okay, or she wouldn't. If not, if she allowed herself to be distracted by things that she couldn't control, by things that happened all too often over the course of a century or two, then she would probably get her head blown off sooner or later. Theo would just have to make sure that she didn't do something that got *his* head blown off. But he had a lot of experience with that sort of thing. This takeoff excluded, it wasn't often that he put himself in a situation where his ass was on the line if somebody else fucked up.

Maybe that was what had bothered him about the whole thing with Jan—not knowing about the spy, not knowing if that other end of the plan was covered or if all of Theo's own work was going to go for nothing. In a way, it wasn't that different from what Lydia faced—that had been stuff that Theo could only affect so much, so he'd gone on with his own job, done it well, and things had mostly worked out. So far.

Theo glanced at his watch. A few hours. They should arrive just after dawn. Pieterzoon would take care of them—this was the type of thing that Theo more or less trusted Jan with, that the Ventrue was well-practiced with: logistics, receiving four roughly human-sized crates, and getting them to a safe haven. And then the real fun would start.

Theo closed his eyes and looked forward to an hour or two of relaxation—not having to think about anything—before he needed to climb into one of the crates.





**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 5:22 AM**  
**Eurofreight jet cargo hold**  
**Above rural Pennsylvania**

Lydia took it for as long as she could, but the droning, deafening hum of the engines didn't soothe her. If anything, the constant vibration served only to agitate her further. And there was Theo, sitting across the hold from her, ignoring her. He even closed his eyes and leaned his head back—like he was asleep, like he would ever sleep again... at night!

Almost before she realized, Lydia was on her feet, making her way across the hold. She was standing over Theo. This time, this one time, she was looking down at him. He knew she was there. She could feel that he did. But he didn't open his eyes, didn't do anything, didn't say anything.

Lydia stood there, looking down at him, feeling the engines through her feet and her legs. A few weeks ago, she'd been completely in awe of Theo—hell, she was still in awe of him. Even tonight, out there in the park, she'd seen what he could do, what he was capable of. But something had changed. Over those weeks of patrolling, of finding Sabbat vampires and blowing their fucking brains out, something had changed. It didn't seem to be Theo; he was as steady, as inflappable as ever. He never even had to raise his voice. He didn't have to shoot at Jasmine in some shithole bar. He didn't have to take crap from anybody. Maybe, Lydia decided, it was her that had changed.

She kicked Theo's foot. Hard.

Very slowly, he opened his eyes. He looked at her with that cool, not-pissed-but-not-happy-either look, his normal look, as if he'd just met her on the street, as if nobody had been shooting at them, as if she hadn't just kicked him. So she kicked him again.

"What?" was all he said. His voice was deep, barely audible above the engine noise, but that one word carried the obvious message: *Do that again and you'll wish you hadn't.*

So she did it again. She kicked him—kicked *at* him, at least. Theo caught her foot. Or Lydia, picking herself up after crashing against the far wall, figured he must have. She was back on her feet in a second—the ringing in her ears blended in with the engine noise quickly enough—ready for anything. Theo was still sitting in the same spot. He hadn't bothered to get up.

"Don't you do it!" she yelled at him. "Don't you pretend I'm not here, you fuckin' bastard! Don't you dare close your eyes again!"

Nearby, Frankie didn't stir from whatever he was experiencing in his own little world. Christoph, like a puzzled Houdini, looked on but didn't move. Theo, too, looked at her. He wasn't pissed, he wasn't amused. He was just... Theo. Grim, angry just below the surface. He was calm, and that enraged Lydia more than anything.

"Fuck you!" She spat in his direction. She was pacing now—she vaguely realized that she was—a few steps back and forth, like a caged animal. Her hands were shaking.

Theo watched her from where he sat. "What's on your mind?" he asked, his voice calm but not soothing, patient only in that he hadn't gotten up and bashed her head in.

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*What's on your mind?* As if he didn't damned well know. It was a simple enough question... *seemed* like a simple enough question, but Lydia couldn't quite form the words to answer him. Her thoughts wouldn't hold still. She couldn't grab them; they were swirling, violent, like the rushing air that buffeted the plane.

"You know," she said finally. "You been pretendin' it didn't happen, but it did!"

Baldur. He'd met his Final Death, crumbled to dust as Lydia had watched, and for more than a week, Theo had said nothing about it, had pretended that nothing had happened, just like he'd been pretending a minute ago that Lydia wasn't there. There was a reason, Lydia knew. He'd told her, told all of them, but she wasn't buying it.

*This never happened*, Theo had said before they left the warehouse that night. *Vitel disappeared, faded away. Far as anybody knows, he probably slipped out of the city. Just wanted to save his own ass. None of this*, he'd said in the smoke- and body-filled warehouse, *ever happened*.

And that meant that Baldur had just disappeared. Faded away. Without a trace. And that didn't sit well with Lydia.

"Tell me about it," Theo said, the droning of the engines almost drowning out the sound of his voice. "This once..." he said, pausing, leaving unsaid the last part of the sentence, *and then never again*. "Tell me."

Lydia stopped pacing. She was caught off guard. She hadn't been ready for that. She wasn't sure what she *was* ready for, but that wasn't it. Her thoughts were still churning, still angry, her every muscle, her blood, ready for conflict. She balled her fingers into fists to stop the shaking.

"I know we can't talk about Vitel," she started weakly. Words were so uncertain. They weren't what she'd wanted. What she'd wanted—and she knew it suddenly, saw it, now that the impulse crested, fell back—was blood. Her knees felt like they were going to give. She felt pale, cold, more aware of it than ever before. She felt more *dead* than she ever had, as if what she'd eventually accepted intellectually was finally coming home to her body.

"Jesus." She lowered herself to the floor, sat with her unsteady legs stretched out before her, black denim hiding cold, dead flesh.

"Baldur was always there for us," she said. "And now he's just gone, and we just let him go, like he never was here. I don't like it."

Theo crossed his arms. "What the hell d'you want me to do? Buy an ad in the paper?"

Lydia's anger started to rise again, tried to, but she was too tired. Her body seemed not to be hers; the cargo hold seemed very large and Theo very far away. Her thoughts, so violent and churning moments before, were dissipating, dissolving like a morning fog burned away by the sun. Maybe the sun was rising beyond the walls of the plane.

"Look," Theo said, "I'm not your momma, and I'm not your shrink. I'm not here to hold your hand. You don't pull your shit together, before long you won't be no good to me or to anybody else."

Lydia was sinking. Otherwise, she would've told him to fuck off. But Theo was very far away. Maybe it was the sun, but it felt different somehow, like it was her blood pulling her down for some other reason. She felt like she'd been climbing, climbing to the brink of... of something. She'd almost gone over, but now she was tumbling back down the hill.

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“Baldur’s gone,” she heard Theo say. “It was his time. Some night it’ll be yours, and some night it’ll be mine. And maybe somebody’ll cry, and maybe they won’t, but I don’t really give a shit. I got things to do while I’m here.”

He might have said more. Lydia wasn’t sure. Probably he hadn’t, she decided. Theo wasn’t one for speeches. Either way, Lydia was crawling into one of the long crates, forcing her body to go where she wanted it to go, pulling the top back on, not really feeling the splinters that dug into her fingers. She listened to the deep droning of the engines, felt the vibrations of her bones against wood, listened to the droning....

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**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 5:33 AM**  
**Eurofreight jet cargo hold**  
**Above rural Pennsylvania**

GF



“He’s right,” said the voice. “He’s right.” A faint French accent. Christoph. Lydia didn’t open her eyes. She wanted to, but not enough to force the issue. “We’ve all got things to do while we’re here, or else we’re not around very long. Fighting to be fighting isn’t enough.”

Lydia couldn’t absorb what the voice was saying, what Christoph was saying. He had opened her crate. She could feel the cold air. Or was that just her skin?

“You’ve got to find a reason, Lydia.”

What the hell was he talking about? She didn’t want to hear, didn’t want to think.

“Find a reason.”

*Yeah, whatever. Go the fuck away.*

“Hook the latches on the lid,” the voice said. The lid was back in place, the voice fainter. “Hook them!” A fierce pounding on the crate denied Lydia peace. She did what the voice said, fumbled at the latches, one at a time hooked them. The pounding was gone, and the voice. All that remained were, again, the plane’s engines gently rattling her skull.



**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 6:45 PM**  
**John F. Kennedy International Airport**  
**New York City, New York**

By the time the Eurofreight cargo jet had touched down and taxied to its assigned dock, Theo had already secured himself inside one of the crates and surrendered to the oblivion of day. Still, he resurfaced enough to know that he was being unloaded. He was not cognizant to the point that he could worry—which he would have if he'd been able.

Pieterzoon had made the arrangements for this part of the trip. That was tolerable, as far as it went. But Jan had been forced to deal with representatives of Clan Giovanni. The smuggling of an individual Camarilla member into New York, especially through JFK, was nothing irregular. It happened often enough to have prompted Sabbat leadership—most notably, Francisco de Polonia, who had assumed (reports indicated) the mantle of cardinal of the Eastern United States—to send roving packs through the airport periodically. But the airport bureaucracy was riddled with Camarilla agents and sympathizers of one sort or another, and the smuggling continued.

Now, however, practically every member of the Camarilla that had escaped Baltimore, including most of the refugees from the rest of the East Coast, was being ferried through JFK and LaGuardia over the course of forty-eight hours. A half-dozen obscure air-freight companies had directed flights to New York, many rerouted through various cities or with falsified itinerary and flight manifests, but all having passed through Baltimore. All of the companies were owned or controlled by one of three different holding companies, which in turn were subsidiaries of firms that, if someone wanted to spend the time and resources, could be traced back to Jan Pieterzoon. Not to Pieterzoon himself, of course, but to a dummy board to which he had no ostensible connection. If anyone *were* to dig that far, though, they would certainly attract the attention of Mr. Pieterzoon, and the investigation would be brought to a conclusion, by one means or another.

For an undertaking of this unprecedented scale, there was another faction which, through various mob and financial guises, had its fingers in almost as many union and bureaucratic pies as did the Ventrue, and could not be ignored: Clan Giovanni. Pieterzoon didn't need the necromancers' help, *per se*, as much as their acquiescence—and their silence. After abortive initial negotiations, a bit of hardball, Ventrue style, in the form of the Italian currency crisis, had convinced the relevant Giovanni that looking the other way in this case might not be such a bad thing. Thus the airlift had proceeded, and thus Theo found himself spending the day in a crate in a storage hangar at JFK.

The fact that the Brujah archon was too under the sway of the sun even to worry only made him that much more vulnerable. He'd known that that would be the case, and so he'd done his brooding ahead of time. Being among the very last to leave Baltimore as the Sabbat closed in, though dangerous, hadn't bothered him. That had been part of the plan—*his* part of the plan. This, he'd had to admit grudgingly, had been part of the plan too, but it was part where he had to depend on others, a Ventrue and—God help him—some faceless Giovanni who wasn't likely to be loyal to anybody who wasn't his cousin, if that. What did some greasy customs mole in the U.S. care if Italy's economy

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went in the tank? And it wasn't as if anything innately Italian spawned loyalty—Axis, Allies, Sabbat, Camarilla, whatever.

In the weeks leading up to the pullout from Baltimore, Theo had kept his mind on other parts of the plan, parts that were right then and there. There had always been the chance that they would never even get this far. But they had, and now here he was, and when Theo climbed out of the crate that night, someone was there waiting for him.

“Right this way, sir,” said Hans van Pel. Theo looked at Pieterzoon's ghoul and then at the other crates, those that contained Lydia, Frankie, and Christoph. Van Pel followed his glance. “They will be brought along separately.”

Theo and van Pel got into the back of one of two unmarked delivery vans. Within thirty minutes, the van pulled onto the grounds of Aqueduct Racetrack. The smell of horses was unmistakable in the air: sweat, grain, manure. The odors took Theo back—back to what he didn't care to be reminded of, his mortal years in Mississippi, the plantation years, the years when humans were bought and bred like horse or cattle stock. Theo was a product of that world, but he had rebelled against it, risked his life to overturn it, and in the end outlasted it. Now, looking over the van driver's shoulder, the Brujah watched the track facilities, deserted except for a few cleaning crews, pass by. The place was eerily quiet at night, empty other than the familiar horse smells, and other smells that he noticed now: stale cigarettes and beer, human sweat too. The scents mingled and formed what Theo could think of only as the smell of desperation.

Those earthy, plebian odors retreated as van Pel led Theo into the track offices, to a suite that was ostensibly an auxiliary office for the New York Racing Association. This was the turf of the modern high-rollers, dealing in horse flesh.

“Ah, here is Archon Bell now,” said Jan Pieterzoon warmly. He rose from his seat at a crowded conference table.

Van Pel took his place behind Jan, but Theo stopped in the doorway. He and Jan had carried their scheme this far, but looking at the other Kindred around the table, Theo wondered if all their planning had been shot to hell. Lucinde was there; that was no surprise—not this time. The Ventrue justicar had come from Baltimore with Jan. She'd helped him with convincing the Giovanni to cooperate; she'd done some kind of deal with Heshia; she'd consulted with Jan regarding the spy. Now she was here, in business suit and gloves, appearing deceptively young.

Neither was it a surprise to see Michaela, prince of New York. Jan had been in contact with her for some time. It was her city after all—at least nominally—that they were betting everything on. Michaela was very proud of having held on to the city for the Camarilla. She had long boasted of having kept the Sabbat out of Manhattan—mostly. To Theo, that meant that she had held on to the blue-blood financial district—like the Sabbat was going to try to waltz into the boardrooms anyway—and let everything else, the majority of the city, all the *real* parts of the city, go to hell. In addition to this limited—in his opinion—success, she'd managed to seriously piss off quite a few higher ups in the Camarilla by Embracing a considerable number of stuffed shirts—eight or nine by most counts. Even Lucinde had criticized her clanmate. What would happen, the justicar had asked, if Michaela came to an unfortunate end and left that many equally powerful childer behind, all of whom would certainly want their share of the inheritance? Internecine warfare, that's what. A civil war within the city that would

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claim much blood or, just as bad, balkanization. Either way, the “stronghold” that had been Manhattan would be compromised, and the Sabbath would be that much closer to traipsing in and taking over for real.

In recent years, though, the problem had begun to alleviate itself somewhat. Several of Michaela’s progeny had themselves met unfortunate ends, some ambushed in the city by Sabbath packs who seemed to know where to find them, others simply disappeared. There were those in the Camarilla who argued that the Sabbath was making a determined effort to undercut Michaela’s power base in preparation for storming Manhattan. Theo had other suspicions. He wasn’t one to cast aspersions or make unfounded accusations, but surely there were those in their own sect who would be more than pleased to see Michaela out of the way. Those kind of sentiments, if shared by a large enough number of Kindred, and at high enough a level, tended to be acted upon.

Only three of Michaela’s brood remained, and they were all seated at the table. Suit-and-tie business sort. They were, in Theo’s opinion, being treated above their station. Sure this was their home turf, but what the fuck did they all need to be here for? After all, Lladislas wasn’t here, neither was Goldwin, and he’d been a prince, in title at least, before they’d ditched Baltimore. Gainesmil wasn’t here. Hell, there weren’t *any* Toreador in the room. This was the kind of stunt—thumbing her nose at the other clans—that got Michaela in trouble.

There were two more Kindred at the crowded table. One was ruggedly handsome and wearing clothes that Theo considered dressy but the high-society types would call casual. This Kindred looked like the cover off a catalogue come to life—he might as well be. Theo had met Federico di Padua before and knew that the square chin and strong brow hid that bone-ugly that could only be Nosferatu. Federico was a decent sort, as far as Kindred went.

The other man at the table wore a suit, but he wasn’t one of Michaela’s stuffed shirts. A white orchid graced his lapel. “Archon Bell,” said Jaroslav Pascek briskly, “we’ve been waiting.”

*Sucks to be you*, Theo thought, but held his tongue. Taunting a justicar was generally not a bright idea. Besides, something big was going on here, something big enough to attract two justicars, whether Theo liked it or not. He glanced at Jan, but the Ventrué didn’t meet his eyes. Still something about Jan’s manner—the perfect, *practiced* normalcy of his manner—made Theo think that some of this, at least, was news to him as well. *Shit*, Theo thought, holding down his aggravation with the secrecy and fuck-you politics of the Camarilla higher-ups. *It could be worse*, he reminded himself.

Pascek watched Theo impatiently. The green specks in the justicar’s hazel eyes seemed to glow with an inner fire. “You and Mr. Pieterzoon have devised a passable plan,” he said to Theo. “We’ve made some changes.”

That was when Theo knew that it *was* worse. And he had a feeling in his gut that it always would be.

“There have been certain preparations that allow us a more aggressive stance, and the strike teams you’ve coordinated have been altered somewhat,” Pascek said. “Archon di Padua will be leading one, as will Prince Michaela, as will myself, in addition to you and those others you selected, such as Lladislas, et cetera, et cetera.” Though he spoke with a Slavic accent, Pascek’s words were crisp, terse. He was giving instructions, not seeking advice. “Today’s activities have been singularly successful,” he said, “and I trust tonight will be no different.”

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“Today’s activities...” Theo repeated.

“Yes. Our ghouls have been quite effective,” Pascek said quickly. “Law enforcement and city services have served us in good stead: known Sabbat ghouls arrested or executed; widespread destruction of Sabbat lairs. Our contacts among the local media are focusing attention nicely on the heroism of emergency workers. No one will have a chance to explore the possible relation among fires, industrial accidents, burst gas mains, demolitions, et cetera, et cetera, for several days, if at all—that ‘support our boys in the field’ mentality. Quite helpful of you Americans.”

There was no laughter, if indeed Pascek’s last comment had been an attempt at wry humor. The justicar was not known for his joviality. Next he launched into a machine-gun recitation of the strike teams: “Prince Michaela, you and yours will lead four teams and cover the Bronx. Here’s a list of addresses; those crossed off were seen to today. Archon Bell, you are familiar with Harlem. Three teams. Your list...”

Theo was not surprised to see those assembled defer to Pascek, even Lucinda and Michaela—although Michaela seemed particularly sullen, which made Theo suspect that she had been as much out of the loop for the overall plan as he and Jan. Pascek gave decisive orders—this was his element, search and destroy, rooting out evil, in this case the Sabbat. To say that his arrangements were “more aggressive” was a phenomenal understatement. He had about the same number of Kindred to work with that Theo and Jan had—utilizing the mass exodus from Baltimore—but it was amazing the difference a few battle-tested elders could make.

*And an extra archon and two justicars, for Christ’s sake,* Theo thought. That still rankled. In fact, he resented it more and more as Jaroslav talked. He and Jan had been left to slap together what they could, to get by on their own when these other resources had been available—not only available but committed to a parallel plan to the one they had come up with. The two had made the hard decisions—to sacrifice Buffalo and Hartford for the dual purposes of concentrating forces and smoking out the spy. Then, by slowly drawing their defenders back into Baltimore, they’d suckered the Sabbat into using everything it could muster for a *coup de grace*, into attacking just as the Camarilla was striking elsewhere, where many of the invaders of Baltimore had just been taken from—New York. Jan and Theo’s plan had been necessarily more modest: Shore up Manhattan, press into the Bronx, establish a beachhead in Brooklyn. They had negotiated and worked it out with Michaela, who was pleased to accept the influx of manpower but was not excited about possible rivals to her authority. They’d set it all in motion—held off the Sabbat, suckered them in, dealt with the spy, abandoned Baltimore, arrived in New York to find...

That others had taken over, and that their own efforts had been a screen, a diversion, for what had been going on behind the scenes all along. Because from what Pascek was saying, it was obvious that the preparations had been underway for months, perhaps years. The ghoul attacks, as Theo saw reading over some of the lists, were too surgical, the intelligence gathered too complete for this to have been hastily arranged. From what he could tell, as much as a quarter to a third of the Sabbat strength in the city, mostly ghouls and lower-echelon types—Theo didn’t recognize many of the names or pictures—had already been ass-fucked. Tonight would probably push that figure over half. Meanwhile, the Sabbat was partying in Baltimore and maybe starting to figure out what had happened.



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The whole thing smelled of Lucinde. It had been so invisible until the last second. Theo wouldn't have been surprised if Michaela had been involved, if she'd led him and Jan on, knowing what was coming, setting them up. But no, she was the type who would gloat. She was too pissed off right now. She was out of the loop, and that didn't bode well for a prince trying to hold her own against a justicar.

*Against two justicars, damn it all,* Theo thought.

"Mr. Pieterzoon," Pascek was saying, "you will coordinate strike-force activities with support from the Tremere. Regent Sturbridge will be arriving shortly."

Jan nodded. He wasn't looking too chipper either, Theo noted. But like the Brujah archon, Pieterzoon did a better job hiding his resentment than did Michaela hers.

*As long as we fuck the Sabbat,* Theo kept telling himself. That would make it all worth it. He may have been hung out by Pascek—justicar, fanatic, asshole—but if it worked, that was what mattered. Like so much Theo did as archon, the end justified the means. It had to.

**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 8:45 PM**  
**Aqueduct Racetrack, Ozone Park, Queens**  
**New York City, New York**



Federico di Padua, the Right Hand of the Camarilla and archon of Clan Nosferatu, sat quietly among his fellow Kindred. Plans were laid, the time for talking had passed—at least for him.

For most of the others as well, but not for Justicar Pascek. The Brujah fancied himself an orator, an inspiring leader of men. *Demagogue* was closer to the truth. Pascek dominated any gathering to which he was a party; such overbearing and boorish behavior validated his innate sense of omnipotence. Not that the man was unable—far from it. Much of his high regard for himself was justified, yet his shortcomings were glaring. Not that anyone would ever say as much. He operated amidst a veil of secrecy, not because deception was at times necessary, but because he enjoyed knowing what others did not, and he enjoyed even more using that advantage to entangle those around him within his vile, paranoid fantasies.

Federico knew the value of secrets; he recognized their utility, but they held no titillation for him. As the evening unfolded and Pascek spoke of what had passed and what was to come, the Nosferatu grew increasingly appalled at the misuse of secrecy. Some had been necessary, of course, but, he wondered, how much?

Michaela, prince of New York, and no darling of the justicars or, Federico gathered, the Inner Circle, obviously had had no previous idea of the scope of the storm descending upon her. Yes, she had agreed to allow the ragtag refugees from the South to flee to her city, and she would use them to press her claim and bolster her title. Unbeknownst to her, this agreement had been but a plan within a plan.

She, along with Pieterzoon and Bell, architects of the northern exodus, had been unaware of the preparations undertaken by Pascek, Lucinde, Cock Robin, and Lady Anne of London, among others. For over a year, detailed information had been gathered concerning hundreds of Sabbat in the New York area, and agents loyal to the Camarilla, Kindred, ghoul, and kine, had been surreptitiously introduced into the city. The Pieterzoon-Bell plan, purely a result of Sabbat aggression, dove-tailed nicely—and in Federico's mind, too coincidentally—with the pre-existing arrangements, and so Pascek and the others had co-opted Archon Bell and the scion of Hardestadt the Elder.

Pieterzoon had not known the full story until quite recently, and later in the evening, when Theo Bell had arrived, he had been fairly disgruntled as well. Although in all fairness, with Bell it was not often possible to discern the source of his disgruntlement; that disposition seemed his natural bent.

As Pascek orated, presenting details and assignments like Prometheus bestowing fire upon humankind, and the extent of the deception became increasingly clear, Pieterzoon's unease grew, as did Bell's irritation. To their credit, each held his peace. A public forum would be *the* absolute worst place to cross Pascek, especially for his own archon.

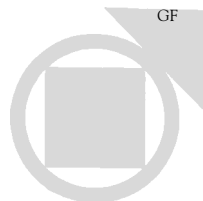
Lucinde held her peace as well, though she was in on the entirety of the scheme from the start. Pascek's demagoguery was not her style; hers was to appear meek and inoffensive, to allow others to underestimate her. Like Federico, she did her best work away from the spectacle of public attention.

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And so Pascek commanded, and Federico watched and waited. He had high expectations—for the battle that was now unfolding, and for the other, more personal drama that was playing out beneath the streets. For it was Federico's own early investigation into the destruction of Petrodon, an investigation handed over to Calebros over a year ago, that was now bearing fruit. The plan within a plan within a plan.

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**Wednesday, 10 November 1999, 11:10 PM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



Nickolai could feel them coming for him. Something about the air, even here in the air-conditioned hotel suite, was different. Before the first commercial break of the late local news, his worst fears were confirmed. Gas mains had burst. There was an industrial accident by the East River; bridges and riverside parkways were closed. The Busey Building in the Bronx was scheduled for demolition tonight, so streets were closed. The charges had not been set precisely, and a huge dust cloud had billowed forth, obscuring visibility and creating a public health hazard; citizens within half a mile were ordered to stay inside.

*They know*, Nickolai thought grimly. *Tonight it will end, or tomorrow night, or the night after. But soon.*

“Is she here?” the voice asked expectantly from the next room.

It was not what Nickolai expected from Leopold these nights. The warlock expected nothing, in fact, other than catatonic stupor. That was what the boy was reduced to. Never much of a conversationalist since the Eye had burrowed into his skull, Leopold had left Nickolai completely to himself—and to his daytime dreams of the Children.

Nickolai poked his head into the bedroom. Leopold was staring at him, eye and Eye. The boy sat at the table, as always, and it, like much of the room, was almost totally encased by the thickening, murky vitriol that oozed constantly from the Eye.

“Is she here?” he asked again. “You said soon.”

Nickolai had told him often that *she* would be back soon, the Muse for whom the boy longed. The lie had been required less often recently, as Leopold slipped further and further from reality. But what had roused the boy from his silent vigil tonight?

“She is not...” Nickolai began, but paused. “She is not here with us, but she is in the city.”

“Of course.” Leopold smiled. Clear ichor dribbled from the Eye down his cheek, a few drops into his mouth. “Soon...”

The time had come, the warlock decided. “I am afraid, Leopold, that there are those who would harm her. If they find her, they will destroy her, and we will see her no more.”

The words had instant effect on Leopold. Eye and eye grew wide, a disturbing sight, and a pained expression contorted his features. He tilted his head, as if the Eye were suddenly too heavy to bear upright. “They... they *mustn't*...” he stammered. “They look... I find...”

“I think you are right,” Nickolai said. He had long considered this option, but had not been able to bring himself to accept it. Not until this moment. There was so much, he was positive, that he could learn of the Eye, so much he could still do. But his experiments thus far had been productive, and if he did not act, he risked losing that knowledge, never using it. And it was possible, he told himself, that Leopold had exhausted his usefulness. His deterioration was rapidly accelerating. *Best to use what I know for the greater good—for my greater good.*

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Leopold stretched and writhed in his chair. Veins both above and beneath the surface of the Eye bulged, and the discharge grew heavier and increasingly frothy, churned by the boy's agitation.

"I think you are right," Nickolai said again. "They crawl beneath the streets, these people that would harm her. You must protect her. Give me just a few minutes so that I can aid you."

Leopold seemed disinclined toward patience, but Nickolai turned away confident that he would be obeyed. Blood listened to blood. The ritual did not take overly long to prepare. Nickolai had sent Leopold before and had also, the warlock hoped, perfected the additional rituals he required. The others would sense him, of course, in time. But that, too, might play into his hands. He had died to the world once, twice really, and that would have been sufficient had he not run afoul of the hideous justicar. Perhaps one more death would suffice.

**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 3:18 AM**  
**Alfred Thayer House**  
**Baltimore, Maryland**



TEMPORARILY CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS read the sign on the front gate of the restored nineteenth-century house and former home of some local personage. No lights burned within the building. In the spacious parlor, Parmenides sat in darkness. Sat and waited. For what he was not exactly sure.

“Are you ready, my *philosophe*?” Vykos crooned from nearby. Her voice, though still pitched like that of a woman, was more nasal, almost mechanical, as if the larynx had been reshaped, only slightly, but in some strange manner. There remained no trace of the feminine about her words. “We are close now.”

Parmenides waited in silence. He had given up trying to predict the actions or interpret the mutterings of this creature. She sat wrapped in darkness, her black robes indistinguishable from the shadows. All that was visible were her face, bone white, a vile beacon in the night, and one smooth, almost skeletal hand at her throat, as if she might at any moment choke herself.

“Are you ready, my *philosophe*?” she goaded him.

“I am ready.” Whatever the task, the Assamite was prepared. This fiend, to whom his masters had delivered him, had over the past months required any number of deeds from her charge, deeds ranging from the dangerous to the mundane, from the perverse to the menial. He was Ravenna, prepared to serve the whim of this abomination that occupied his heart and mind; he was Parmenides, prepared also to carry out the terrible purpose of his masters.

“Excellent,” said Vykos. Her eyes were not visible; they were hidden in the depths of hollowed sockets, beneath hairless and razor-sharp brows. “Then when my rivals assail me, you must strike me down.”

The words hung in the darkness between them, between the Cainite and the child of Haqim. Parmenides doubted himself, doubted that he had heard correctly—the fiend supporting the terrible purpose of his masters, urging her own destruction.

“You are silent,” Vykos said. “Have I not stimulated your mind as well as your body?”

“A thought unspoken is no less a thought,” Parmenides said.

“Ah, there is my *philosophe*,” said Vykos, but her words were cold, an emotionless mockery of her playful manner with him over many weeks, itself a mockery of true affection. Mockery of mockery. Just as the fiend was a mockery of all Cainites, themselves mockeries of frail humanity. “Good. I have not lost you. When my rivals assail me, you must strike me down,” she said again.

“I...” Parmenides did not know how to respond, could not quickly enough unravel his tangled impulses.

“That is what you people do, is it not?” Now Vykos’s words were not mocking, but measured, completely and utterly reasonable in their unreasonableness. “We will discover how much of the *philosophe* remains, will we not, Ravenna?”

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Parmenides was distracted by the sound of several automobiles outside, not passing on the street, but stopping by the front gate.

“Soon,” said Vykos. “Very soon.”

A few more seconds passed. Parmenides could hear car doors slamming, the gate swinging open, footsteps climbing the stairs to the porch. The front door burst open, and in strode Cardinal Polonia. He was flanked, as was beginning to seem usual, by Costello on one side and Hardin on the other. Parmenides heard others, but they remained outside; they were spreading out, surrounding the house.

*When my rivals assail me...*

“You have betrayed us,” Polonia’s steely voice snaked through the darkness as forcefully as any of his shadow minions.

Little light from the open front door was able to make its way as far as the parlor. The gathered Cainites remained in darkness, as Polonia no doubt would have had it. Parmenides, however, was assaulted by lights. For him, lightning flashed, terrific bursts that left him leaning on his cane lest he collapse to the floor. Conflicting images assaulted him: There was Polonia confronting Vykos, the here and now. But there was also the image of himself on hands and knees, vomiting forth black liquid that he had suckled from Vykos’s foul breast.

*You must strike me down.*

*What is your passion?* Vykos had asked him. Death. He was bred and trained for it. Destruction. *Who would you destroy?* He had told her Monçada, had misled her, kept from her his terrible purpose. But there was memory layered beneath memory, cloud upon cloud, lightning crossing lightning. Preceding the lie—the lie that was for *his* benefit, not hers—he had revealed all to her: his clandestine meeting with Fatima, the information he was seeking, his task once the knowledge was passed on.

*Who would you destroy?*

I would destroy you.

Ah, but the night was fated to come. It can be no different with your kind. When my rivals assail me, you must strike me down. You cannot betray your nature.

“Betray you, my Cardinal?” Vykos said. “But the city is yours.... If this is betrayal, then long reign the treachery of the Sabbat.”

“We did not take the city,” Polonia spat. “It was given to us, *handed* to us... and you knew. Your spy knew. Last night’s resistance was for show, a token defense. We surrounded the city, cut off the airport. There was no mass exodus to the north or any other direction, not by land or sea, yet *they are not here*. They are not hiding in wait for us. They are not here!”

“Then the city is yours,” Vykos said again, as if speaking to a slow child. “The last Camarilla city on the East Coast taken in a bloodless coup of your arranging. What more could you want?”

“I want to *crush* them,” Polonia said through clenched teeth.

Parmenides, still reeling from the lightning of his own self-discovery, could sense the tension in the cardinal’s muscles, could see the outline of the sword at his belt, even in the darkness.

“You have betrayed us,” Polonia repeated. “Now you will come with me, and I will determine what else you have kept hidden.”

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“Ah,” Vykos sighed. “This was bound to happen without Monçada to stand watch over you, eh? Tell me, did you wait to move against me out of fear of him, or merely so that I could first help you win your war?”

“Say what you like. We stand united against you, Archbishop.”

Vykos laughed: the sound of bone grating against bone. “You may have your cities, Cardinal. I do not care for them. As for standing united against me, I have little doubt. You have spoken with Bolon then, who cannot fashion his own war ghouls to command. And good Gregorio, my clansman?”

“Gregorio is loyal, as much as any fiend can be,” Polonia said. “Bolon has been dealt with.” The cardinal gave a slight, mocking bow. “Now... you will come with me.” Polonia’s hand moved to the hilt of his sword, but he paused.

There were more footsteps now, a single set ascending the front steps, entering the house. A young aide to Polonia, a junior Lasombra whom Parmenides had seen before, came into the parlor. The aide hesitated, sensing the tension between the leaders, but he was driven by the task entrusted to him.

“Your Eminence,” he said to the cardinal, “news from Bishop Mendes. There is trouble in New York.”

Polonia, still not forgetting Vykos, regarded the messenger skeptically. “Trouble—what sort of trouble? What did Armando say?”

“The news is not from the bishop *directly*,” the younger Lasombra clarified somewhat sheepishly. “Apparently he is... occupied.”

“Occupied? Yes?”

“Apparently New York is... well... under attack.”

Parmenides imagined that Polonia did not care to appear surprised in front of his underlings, because his obvious shock transformed almost instantly to rage. His eyes, flaring wide for an instant, narrowed. His dark, handsome, Spanish face contorted violently. To the cardinal’s credit, he didn’t sputter and bluster about the impossibility of an attack, as Borges might have done in similar circumstances, but neither could Polonia seem to accept that the oversight, the *fault*, could lie with him. Instead, he turned back to Vykos.

“You and your damnable spy arranged this!” Polonia bellowed, then his sword was unsheathed and in motion. The strike blurred toward Vykos’s head—but was deflected at the last instant. The cane should have been shattered by the force of fine Toledo steel, would have been had not Parmenides’s parry been timed and angled perfectly.

In the same motion that he blocked Polonia’s sword with the spiked cane, Parmenides lashed out with another blade. Two quick slashes at Costello’s eyes. The Lasombra stumbled backward screaming, hands over his face, blood streaming between his fingers.

Polonia recovered quickly and struck again—where Vykos had been standing but an instant before. The cardinal’s sword found only air. Vykos had skillfully shifted to interpose her assassin-ghoul directly between herself and her assailants.

*When my rivals assail me, you must strike me down.*

Parmenides stood between archbishop and cardinal, Vykos’s words, lightning, flashing through his mind. This was undeniably the moment—the moment to act upon his mistress’s command, the moment to fulfill the terrible purpose given him by his masters from Alamut. This was the moment to turn and strike down the Tzimisce fiend that had violated him body and soul.



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But the assassin could not strike, could not raise blade or hand against his torturer... his love, she who had made him what he was. *We will discover how much of the philosophe remains, will we not, Ravenna?* And in that instant of impotence, the question was answered. Not enough of the *philosophe*, not enough of the assassin, the Assamite. He was Ravenna. Created to serve his mistress. He passed one test only to fail another, his purpose for existence supplanted by this fiend! This, in the space of a human heartbeat.

Polonia's sword, raised again, fell. Ravenna blocked it not with the cane but with his own arm. Steel struck flesh, dug deeply, cut into bone—but did not pull free. Pain like fire coursed up Ravenna's arm, and he smiled. He smiled because, at the same time, with a flourish of black robes and one last alabaster sneer, Vykos was gone. Ravenna knew that she would be free, that he had served his purpose—her purpose for him.

The sword lodging in the ghoul's arm threw off Polonia's timing for a moment, and in that moment Ravenna plunged the ferrule spike of the cane through the cardinal's right hand, splintering bone, severing tendons and nerves. Polonia jerked his hand back. He managed, barely, to keep hold of the sword as it pulled free of Ravenna's arm.

Hardin rushed in with his falchion as the cardinal stepped back. The Lasombra messenger, too, had produced a weapon, a pistol that he was firing ineffectually above their heads. Ravenna, with his stiletto in his good hand, met Hardin's charge. The transformed assassin drew his blade along his useless arm, coating the blade with the toxin of Assamite blood. He brushed aside Hardin's awkward thrust and buried the stiletto deep in his attacker's gut. Hardin seized up almost at once, the poison taking hold. His falchion clattered to the floor. He raked frantically at the burning wound in his abdomen, but the poison spread, the fire shooting through his body.

Before Hardin hit the floor, Ravenna had flung his blade at the messenger. It sliced through his esophagus, coming to rest lodged in his spine. There was some poison still on the blade—enough, Ravenna suspected.

The guards from outside would rush in soon, he knew. But there was still time. As he reached for another hidden blade, however, the shadows closed in about him, slowing his movements. He tried to dive away, but the darkness was nearly solid; it held him in place—far too easy a target for Polonia to miss, even wielding a sword with his off hand.

The steel bit down through Ravenna's shoulder. Had the blow been a few inches farther from his neck, it would have severed his right arm. The next blow destroyed his right knee, and Ravenna collapsed to the floor slowly, the darkness cushioning his fall.

The enraged Polonia stood above him, and, as blow after blow fell, hacking Ravenna to pieces, Vykos's ghoul smiled.

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**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 3:51 AM**  
**East 129th Street, Harlem**  
**New York City, New York**



The blood-splattered drywall sizzled. So did the clothing and flesh bordering the massive, charred hole in the chest of the man of the floor. A few sputtering flames lent ghostly shape to the wisps of smoke rising from the wound. The hallway was dark otherwise. No electricity. The tenement was abandoned except for a few squatters: homeless, down on their luck, drug-addicted, illegal immigrants, mentally ill, whatever. They were nothing more than food to the predators among them.

Theo slipped another dragonsbreath round into the shotgun's magazine. Full up. He'd need to be—had needed to be all night. He'd used more ammo tonight than in the fight with Vitel. And the night wasn't over yet. Not quite.

He stepped over the body. The phosphorous blast at close range probably would have been enough to finish this Sabbat nobody, but for good measure the corpse had a crushed skull as well, the deep indentation conspicuously shaped like the metal butt of Theo's Franchi SPAS. They were like cockroaches, these Sabbat flunkies. Individually they weren't much of a threat, at least not to Theo, but they carried disease. Sickness spread wherever they gained a foothold. Society crumbled. The poor and the weak suffered the most; the disadvantaged preyed upon one another. It happened other places too, but when the Sabbat vermin infested a neighborhood, a city, it was far worse. They didn't give a shit about the kine. Neither did most members of the Camarilla, Theo knew, but the order provided by the Masquerade at least gave the mortals half a chance to pull themselves up, to fight the prejudices of their own society rather than being consumed by the hunger of the shadow predators. The archon might not have approved of everything that had happened tonight, but progress was progress.

Theo paused, looked back at the corpse, spat on it. Then he opened the door to the basement and began down into the darkness, where they were waiting for him. Firing his shotgun upstairs hadn't exactly left a lot of room for sneaking, so he was expecting them too. At times like these, Theo took pride in the fact that he always seemed better able to predict what his enemies would do than what his allies would do. As he went down the stairs, the darkness deepening with each step, he felt the tendrils of shadow snaking around his feet before it was able to trip him. He ducked so he wouldn't hit the ceiling, and jumped the tendrils and the last few steps.

As soon as his feet touched the floor, he whirled and fired into the room. The muzzle flash and the exploding phosphorous shell lit the room like a streak of lightning at midnight. For that split second, Theo could see them clearly. Two were within a few feet of him, one with a baseball bat, one pointing a revolver at him. A third was not far. The Lasombra maybe. A fourth—wide-eyed, deformed monstrosity; a Nosferatu that had lost its concentration, not a Tzimisce creation—was in the corner.

After the flashes, the room plunged into total darkness. Theo stepped toward the Sabbat with the bat, stepped into the swing that had to be coming. The attacker thought he was hitting something two feet farther away. The handle of the bat and the Sabbat's hand pounded Theo's shoulder.

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At the same time, the revolver fired. Theo had moved enough that the bullet struck him a glancing blow, didn't make it through his reinforced jacket. Theo fired his shotgun again—at the corner. The Nosferatu was the most likely to get away. Theo didn't plan on anybody getting away. The misshapen thing was lit up by phosphorous fireworks and slammed back into the wall, screaming, squealing.

Another blast from the revolver—this time square in the back. The Sabbat had a better idea again where Theo was standing after the veritable flare from the shotgun. The jacket helped, but the bullet penetrated, and stung like hell.

By feel, Theo clicked the SPAS from single shot to burst, and fired. The Lasombra practically disintegrated in a fiery spray. The shot bathed an entire wall in chemical light. The angle, as luck would have it, was good enough to send the revolver-wielding Sabbat down screaming too.

Sputtering phosphorous and flaming shreds of clothing cast an uneven pall across the room, which was quickly filling with smoke and the pungent smell of burning flesh. Theo looked for the Nosferatu—saw him dragging himself toward the stairs, going nowhere fast with wounds he couldn't heal and too shaken up to concentrate and disappear.

The Sabbat with the bat, a bruiser almost as large as Theo, was more reckless, or maybe frenzied, than smart. He charged, swinging. Theo blocked the bat with his forearm. The wood splintered, the barrel flying over Theo's shoulder. Theo smashed the stock of the SPAS into the Sabbat's face. The nose and left cheek bone gave way. The bloodied slugger crumpled to the floor. Back to single shot. One more white-hot blast and it was over.

Except for the mopping up. The Sabbat who had shot Theo was still moving. Theo replaced the couple of dragonsbreath rounds that were still in the magazine with conventional cartridges and blew the Sabbat's head off.

Then Theo walked over to the Nosferatu—the Nosferatu *antitribu*—who had pulled himself up to the fifth step. "I was spying on them," he pleaded through yellowed teeth clenched in pain.

*I don't think so*, Theo thought. The loyal Nosferatu knew what was going on. Federico's few words at the track had made that clear enough. If this was a Cam Nossie, it wouldn't have been here. Not tonight. Theo had no use for *antitribu*. Lasombra and Tzimisce were bad enough, but if it weren't for defectors from the Camarilla, the Sabbat wouldn't have the numbers to thrive. Probably one of the other fuckers on the floor was—had been—*antitribu*. It was a seductive call for somebody who was sick of taking orders, sick of being told what to do and pushed around. But it was just trading masters.

Theo sometimes wondered what would have happened to him if Don Cerro hadn't found him, if he hadn't been Embraced. He had achieved his freedom as a mortal. Probably he would have been shot eventually, while helping other slaves escape. Or he would have been captured and hanged. But he would have died a free man. Instead, he'd agreed to a deal with the devil. He'd received the power to avenge himself, to avenge his people, and while he wasn't exactly a slave to his masters in the Camarilla, he sure as hell wasn't free. How much more plainly could that point have been driven home tonight?

"Please..." the Nosferatu pleaded.

Theo cocked his shotgun. Finished it. Then he climbed the rest of the steps to find the others.

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**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:10 AM**  
**Eldridge Street, Lower East Side**  
**New York City, New York**



“Damnedest thing I ever seen,” Reggie said.

Eustace nodded and kept an even pace with his friend. “I think that white girl and that black girl was...” he searched for the right phrase, “you know... shacked up.” Now he started shaking his head. “That’s how you get them mongrel breeds.”

“With two women?”

Eustace saw his partner’s point. “Well, you know what I mean.”

They walked in silence now—or without talking, at least. There was no real silence. Even at this time of the morning, a good number of people were out and about, staggering home late, or on the way to early work.

“The city that never sleeps,” Reggie said to himself.

“Huh?”

“The city that never sleeps—that’s what they call it. New York City.”

“Oh. They ought to call it the city where don’t nobody speak English. I swear, except for us, I don’t think I’ve heard ten words of English all night. *We are* still in America, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“All three of them Sabbath fellas we caught were jabberin’ something at us. You understand any of it?”

“Nope.”

“Then again, I guess we weren’t sent to stop by for tea with them.”

“Nope.”

Three jobs carried out successfully, now they just had to find the safe house and hole up until tomorrow night.

“We on the right block yet?” Reggie asked.

Eustace took a scrap of paper from his pocket as they walked. He checked the address, checked a street sign. “Not yet.”

One block looked pretty much like the next: row after row of brick tenements, shops and cafes on the ground floor, z-stacks of fire escapes. Only the accents changed.

“This a Jewish fella we’re supposed to stay with?” Eustace asked. “I don’t know Jewish. I hope he speaks English.”

“Yiddish.”

“Huh?”

“They talk Yiddish.”

“Don’t say.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, I still hope he...”

Reggie and Eustace both noticed the stranger at about the same time. It took a lot to stand out from the kind of folks they’d been seeing all night, but this was not a run-of-

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the-mill vagrant. He was dressed as shabbily as a lot of them, but what set him apart was the thick, yellowish discharge running down his chest from his face, from his eye.

Eustace stopped, grabbed Reggie's arm, pointed. "Je-sus. Look at all that pus. I guess that'd make him a... *pus-sy*." Eustace chuckled.

Reggie wasn't so sure this was a laughing matter. The closer he looked, the more he decided there was something seriously not right about the vagrant's eye, his left eye. "It don't fit right."

"What was that?" Eustace asked.

"Looking, yes?" the vagrant asked. He seemed to be talking to them. "Looking for...?" He started moving closer.

Eustace sniffed at the air. "Jesus, do you smell that? We must've walked out of Little Italy and right into Little Leper Colony."

"Looking for...? *Won't find...*" The vagrant was coming toward them still.

Reggie took a step back. He had a bad feeling, a feeling he hadn't gotten even from the inhuman Sabbat creatures he'd encountered over the past months. "Look, buddy, you keep your distance, or somebody's gonna get hurt."

The vagrant stopped, smiled, nodded emphatically. And then the sidewalk opened up beneath Reggie and Eustace. It just wasn't there, and they were falling. They landed hard at the bottom of a steep pit, but they didn't have time to worry about that. The walls of the pit were melting, and molten rock rushed down over them to fill the hole.

For agonizing seconds, Reggie could only see the eye gazing down at him, glowing....

**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:17 AM**  
**Eldridge Street, Lower East Side**  
**New York City, New York**



"*Ramona!*" Hesha hissed in her ear, holding her arm.

She hadn't consciously thought about attacking Leopold, she'd just set out to do it. She could do nothing else. She couldn't stand by and watch that thing destroy more of her kind. In the back of her mind, she heard the accusing whispers of her dead.

Hesha had paged her hours ago. She'd gotten on the phone, quickly, and called the number he'd given her. Some woman named Janet had answered. "Mr. Ruhadze requests your presence right away." That was the code they'd agreed on, so they wouldn't have to mention anything over the phone. At first Hesha had told her it would be *demands your presence*, but she'd told him to piss off. So *requests* it had been. Janet had given her the address and directions.

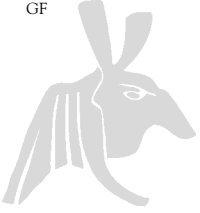
"The Eye?" Ramona had said as soon as she saw him.

"Yes. The gem, it came to life again." Hesha never seemed excited, but he'd been speaking very quickly, walking quickly. "It points us in the right direction, but we still have to find him." He was decked out in black, reinforced leather pants and jacket over a turtleneck, complete with binoculars, hip holster, and whatever else he had in that little backpack of his.

Found Leopold they had—and they'd watched him annihilate two Kindred. Watched and done *nothing*. The setting was completely different this time, but what Ramona saw was eerily familiar. She felt the onset of the ghost sight that Edward Blackfeather had imparted to her what seemed so long ago. She saw Leopold pull the Eye from its socket and hold it aloft. She saw, too, a writhing, serpent-like nerve stretch and grow down from the Eye, until it touched the ground and bore a hole into the pavement. Ramona knew this sight was for her alone—Hesha could not see it, the two Kindred could not see it. Both Eye and nerve pulsed red as blood.

And then the sidewalk fell away beneath the two doomed Kindred. They fell, and there was the sickening hiss of molten rock claiming more victims.

Now, she desperately wanted to feel Leopold's flesh and the meat of the Eye shredded between her claws. But Hesha was keeping her from it.



**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:18 AM**  
**Eldridge Street, Lower East Side**  
**New York City, New York**

She was straining against him with all her might, but somehow Heshha managed to keep his grip on her arm, to keep her from pulling away from him, to keep her from rushing to her doom. Ramona flashed him a glare of pure animal fury. He feared the Beast might take hold of her completely—it was so close to the surface, even at the best of times. She bared her fangs at him and growled, a feral, guttural rumble from deep in her throat.

“*Ramona!*” he hissed again, forcefully enough this time to get her attention, but hopefully not loudly enough for Leopold to discover them. Heshha’s tongue flicked in and out of his mouth. Despite his years and years of practiced calm, the girl’s near-frenzy was almost contagious.

She raised a hand to strike at him, claws glinting in the moonlight. Heshha did not flinch or turn away. He met her wild gaze, held it, would not let her look away.

“*Ramona!*” he whispered harshly. “If you do not stop, you will *fail your elders*. Their blood will remain on your hands.”

She cringed at that. She drew back her hand but did not strike. Still Heshha held her gaze; he willed her return to sanity. And slowly, he saw the red fury fade from her eyes. She looked away from him now, quizzically, up at her own raised hand, at the claws that were no longer extended. Ramona lowered her arm.

Heshha let go of her other arm. “That was him,” he said.

“Fuck, yes, that was him,” Ramona snarled. Her words dripped bitterness. They had seen Leopold, had watched him kill, *again*, and had done nothing.

“You must be patient,” Heshha said, “Or you’ll end up like...”

“I know, I know.” She smoothed her hair back, stretched her fingers against her legs as a cat stretches its claws. “But we just let him go...”

“We can find him again. Whatever was shielding him from me, is no longer. The gem I showed you—I can track him.”

Ramona sneered. “Yeah, well, that didn’t work so damn hot before tonight. What if it goes on the blink again?”

She was right. It was an infuriating habit she had. “I will find him,” Heshha assured her. Let her argue. Frustrating as she might be, he needed her lucid; he needed to know what she could see. “Was it the same as before?” he asked.

“The Eye,” she nodded, “yeah. He held it in his hand... and the nerve, bloody, hanging down from it, goin’ into the ground.”

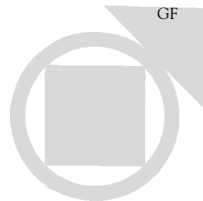
Heshha watched her closely. That was not what he’d seen. Not what he’d seen at all. But he had reason to believe her. In fact, Ramona, and what she claimed to see, was his reason for hope.

“Come on,” Heshha urged her, taking her by the arm and this time gently leading her away. “We’ll find him again. You’ll have your chance. Besides, there’s a different way we have to go about it.”

Ramona didn’t resist him, but neither was she comforted. Her blood was up. And blood must answer blood.

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**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:20 AM**  
**Chantry of the Five Boroughs**  
**New York City, New York**



There. The blood ran thick and speckled with dark corruption.

Aisling Sturbridge reached out a hand and touched Johanus. He must see, must taste. They all must. For ten nights now they had searched, since the Nosferatu had brought to them the words and the pictures.

Last words spoken by a lunatic, words describing Sturbridge's own dreams: *The last of the light...it fades...high above, far, far away.... The Final Night. Walls too slick...can't climb...surrounded by bulging eyes, blank, bloated faces.*

Words of prophecy, spurred by Malkav's childer, a fortress impregnable until the gates are lowered from within: *The Children down the Well...they point the way.... The Children fear their shadow, but the shadow fades with the last of the light.... The Final Night.*

The lifeblood of the city flowed in the streets and rivers. The veins were laid open to Sturbridge, to her adepts and acolytes. Johanus, her Pillar of Fire, saw and understood. He would not let his regent forge ahead too recklessly. They could ill afford to lose her, not with the chantry depleted through treachery and through duty. The traitors were but ash, but they had weakened the body. Sturbridge had sent away, too, Helena and her jackals to answer the pleas of the Camarilla. But more insidious enemies lurked amidst the blood. Blood of her blood.

Sturbridge had long ago suspected that the city's heart had blackened, yet the lifeblood flowed. For she who knew where to look, the signs were evident, the arteries dripping corruption, hardening, calcifying like so many of the pock-marked edifices of the cityscape. The capering insects feasted upon the blood, scuttled along the arteries, beaten back only to return in force, prayers upon carrion. Sturbridge swatted them away; they did not concern her at the moment.

The corruption amidst the blood—she could see it, taste it. Johanus understood; he would see that the others did. They were so tender of years, as guileless as any of the blood could be. Sturbridge must offer them guidance, while they lent her the vitality of their youth. The blood must boil.

There. The blood ran thick and speckled with dark corruption. She would trace the black trickle and, in time, sever the leprous vein.





**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:49 AM**  
**West 132nd Street, Harlem**  
**New York City, New York**

Christoph had finished cleaning the blood from his sword; it was strapped on his back again, hidden beneath his trench coat. Frankie waited... patiently? The shoulder twitch he'd developed recently didn't seem to be a sign of impatience. It just was there sometimes, and this was one of those times. Lydia had a smudge of blood on her cheek. Theo licked his thumb, wiped her face hard.

"What the fuck?" Lydia pulled away.

"The Avon lady you ain't," Theo said; then, "Let's go." They had time to get back to the track but not a lot of time to spare.

"Shouldn't we check back over some of the places we hit?" Lydia asked. "Make sure nobody's crawling out now that we're gone?"

"Nope," Theo said. They *could* do what she suggested. It wasn't a bad idea. They could find a place to spend the day in this part of town without too much trouble, but they'd had a full night already, and Theo had personal business he wanted to attend to. He didn't have personal business very often. Usually there was business, and that was it. Theo didn't take too much personally. But when he did, like tonight, he wasn't about to be kept from it just because Lydia had gotten herself a taste for killing.

She stared at him but didn't say anything, didn't give him any shit like she'd started to on the airplane. Could be that she was just tired. A long night of tracking down Sabbat cronies and blasting their fucking heads off could do that to a person. God knew that Lydia had done more than her fair share of patrolling and fighting in Baltimore, but tonight had been one long string of rooting out the bastards and tearing them apart. Then again, maybe she wasn't tired. Maybe she just had a handle on the fire in her belly—like she hadn't on the plane. Theo gave her a hard stare, held her gaze until she looked away. He wished he knew. She was a good kid, mostly. Better than a lot of others. He'd come to depend on her over the past weeks. It'd be too bad if she gave in to the fire, if the Beast clawed its way out.

But Theo had lost other people he'd depended on. Depending on somebody was a luxury, not a necessity. Losing people, that was a reality. He'd gotten over it before; if it came to that, he could get over it again.

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**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 4:58 AM**

**The warren  
New York City, New York**

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“Are you sure?” Emmett asked, not in the challenging way of a rival, but rather wanting to ensure that, in haste, mistakes were not made.

There was little time for reflection, for weighing of options. The sounds of frenetic activity permeated the entire warren. Calebros had roused himself from his office to be more readily available to answer those questions that could not wait now that the reconquest of the city as well as the Nosferatu’s own hunt were both underway in earnest. He had never seen the warren so crowded and busy. Some hangers-on had arrived with the justicar. Other clanmates had come north with the Kindred from Baltimore; Colchester was about somewhere in the confusion. More Nosferatu, those who had not flown but opted to risk the drive or to follow the tunnels, would straggle in over the next few nights, and the numbers would swell further. On top of that, Calebros was constantly receiving and sending messengers to and from other warrens across the city. The war, the hunt—he found himself at the center of all of it.

Calebros placed a reassuring hand on the shoulder of his broodmate. “You have done your part in this. I need you elsewhere now. Federico was hesitant to hand over the reins as well, but it has been for the best.”

“I *know* the city,” Emmett protested.

“Precisely. And Federico does not, not so well as you. We must devote enough of our people to the battle. The city cannot be lost because of our... distraction. I must attend to the justicar, to the hunt. You take up position near Federico—he will be with Pieterzoon and the others. They know him, they know his face.”

“The face he shows them, at least,” Emmett said.

“True enough. Keep in touch with him by messengers—take Pug, and Sneeze. They are quick and surefooted. You speak with my voice, Emmett. There is none other of whom I can say that.”

“Will Umberto stay with you?” Emmett asked.

“He will stay *here*,” Calebros said. “The justicar is hot for blood, and I must needs stay with him.”

Emmett glanced over one shoulder and then the other. “I don’t envy you that. I know we’re not much to look at, but he... he gives me the creeps.”

“He is our justicar, and I will serve him as I’m able. You could take Hilda...”

“Up yours.”

“I take it that you decline. Very well. Good luck.”

Emmett muttered as he trundled away and became merely one among the constant swirl of bodies, “Fat fucking whore.”

A few seconds later, Calebros reached into the swirl and stopped one of the bodies. He grabbed Sneeze by the arm. “Emmett just went that way. Go find him.” Sneeze nodded and was gone, back into the swirl.

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Mike Tundlight approached from the other direction. “Another message from Ruhadze.” He handed Calebros a folded sheet of paper and waited.

Calebros scanned the words. “He’s lost him. The gem has gone dead. Nothing to do except try again tomorrow night... but he thinks he’ll be able to respond more quickly next time.”

“If there is a next time,” Mike said. “The damned thing could disappear for months again.”

Calebros nodded agreement. “Hesha is not one to act hastily. He has chased the Eye for years—but some of us are on a tighter schedule. Any word from Sturbridge?”

“Cass took your message to the chantry,” Mike said, irritation evident on his maggot-white face and in his bloodshot eyes. “Seems the regent is too busy to be bothered. But the warlocks assure us that they are concentrating every possible resource on the problem, and they said this Nickolai is in the city.”

Calebros let that soak in; it was the most hopeful news he had received in quite a while. “Good,” he said. “How did they know? What did they say?”

“The one I spoke to wouldn’t go into much detail—no surprise there. It had something to do with Leopold reappearing tonight. That’s how they know Nickolai is near, but they didn’t seem to know specifically where.”

“Or they’re not saying,” Calebros speculated.

“But why would they—?”

“He’s *antitribu*, but if other clans were after one of our blood, wouldn’t we want to get to him first?”

“I see,” Mike said thoughtfully, then added, “But I thought, according to our sources, all the Tremere turncoats had... disappeared.”

“Vanished, yes,” said Calebros. “That’s far from a definitive conclusion, and there does seem to be at least one on the loose. If we can manage to—”

“Calebros! Calebros!” cried a small, scratchy voice. Pug wove his way through the milling crowd to tug on Calebros’s sleeve. “Calebros. Jeremiah—he’s missing. I took him some rats, but he wasn’t there. I tried to follow his trail, but I lost it.”

“You lost it?” That was not what Calebros expected to hear from Pug. The urchin could find anything.

“He’s crazy,” Mike said. “Gone in body is as good as gone in mind.”

Calebros couldn’t argue about the first part of that statement, but still he felt a certain responsibility for Jeremiah. Calebros had been the one to send him away with Anatole. *After he asked for the same thing*, he reminded himself. But there was no time for these distractions. And here was Pug...

“Emmett needs you,” Calebros said. “I just sent Sneeze after him, that way. You can find Emmett, can’t you?”

Pug seemed embarrassed by the rebuke. “But what about Jeremiah?”

“Are you in the habit of questioning your elders, boy?” Mike asked impatiently. “And in a time of war?” Pug shrank back and turned to go.

“No, wait,” Calebros said. “He’s right.” He sighed heavily. “Emmett will have to make do with Sneeze. Pug, take...” Calebros glanced around the crowded chamber to see who exactly was coming and going. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone approaching by whom he especially did not want to be bothered at the moment. “...Take Hilda to help you look. Check back by sunrise. That doesn’t give you much time at all. Do you understand?”

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Pug nodded and then shot off. Calebros watched surreptitiously as the youngster intercepted Hilda and then, after a brief explanation, led her away.

“Might as well throw him to the wolves,” Mike said.

“She’s all talk,” Calebros reassured Mike, and himself. “And Pug is... well, Pug.” He couldn’t imagine anyone’s libido being kindled by the boy. Although Hilda did seem more fervent than choosy.

“I’d best be going,” Mike said, looking over Calebros’s shoulder.

Calebros turned and saw Cock Robin making his way across the chamber. Amidst the noise and chaos, a path cleared for the justicar as he limped along. “Understood,” said Calebros.

Cock Robin came very close; he pulled on Calebros’s sleeve so that the warren chief would lean down. The justicar whispered unnerving clicking and choking sounds in Calebros’s ear.

“Yes,” Calebros said, “we will be ready should the opportunity present itself. But I must warn you, the Eye seems to be the only link we have, and it has disappeared before and not reappeared for—”

“Gk-gk-gk-girik-gk!” Cock Robin raised a claw to silence Calebros. The justicar wanted nothing of excuses.

“I understand,” Calebros said, and he did understand, only too well. It had been his success thus far that had brought the justicar here. There was to be continued success. The justicar expected nothing less. “I understand.”



**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 6:03 AM**  
**Aqueduct Racetrack, Queens**  
**New York City, New York**

Theo trudged down the plain corridor that only ever saw fluorescent light. He had on his steel-toe-capped shit-kicking boots. Anybody looking closely would see dried blood—very recently dried—on the toes and heels. It had been a long night, longer than most, and it was late. He wouldn't be up for much longer—wouldn't be able to stay up much longer. Lydia and the others had already turned in. Most of the strike teams weren't being housed here at the track facilities. They were spread among various safe locations in secure portions of the city. But apparently Pascek wanted Theo nearby. For the moment, that suited Theo just fine.

He came to a particularly solid metal door, stopped, knocked.

"Enter," Jaroslav Pascek said from the other side.

Theo opened the door and went in. Despite his dislike for his boss, Theo was impressed that Pascek hadn't used his position to secure extravagant lodgings for himself. No perks—hell, very few basic comforts, for that matter. The room was small, cinderblock walls painted dingy white, uncovered cement floor. There was a metal-frame folding bed that had been made up neatly, sheet, blanket, pillow, no wrinkles. A closed suitcase rested, exactly centered, at the foot of the bed. The only other pieces of furniture were a metal chair, which Pascek sat in, a free-standing metal closet, doors closed, and a metal table against one wall. On the table lay a mace. Not a can of Mace. An honest-to-God, crack-your-skull-fucking-open mace. The knobby steel head was clean, almost polished, but Theo knew that tonight, like his boots and his shotgun, it had seen use. Pascek himself, in the chair, wore a loose robe tied at the waist. He was bare-chested and didn't seem displeased to see Theo. There was not another chair. Theo did not sit on the perfectly wrinkle-free bed. The room was indeed too small for him to want to move in beyond the doorway. He towered over the seated justicar, but even had Jaroslav stood, Theo would have towered over him almost as much. The archon folded his arms.

"Theo," Pascek said curtly, "successful night?"

Theo nodded.

"Good. Tomorrow the Tremere help us track the survivors, but we won't have the element of surprise like today and tonight. It was imperative that tonight go well. We already have a bead on Armando Mendes, by the way. Polonia's second-in-command." Pascek watched Theo for a moment. The justicar's expression took on a slightly curious aspect. He'd said what he had to say, and he didn't recall asking his archon for anything. "What do you want?"

*That's a loaded fucking question*, Theo thought, thinking also some of the many things that he could but wouldn't say. It wasn't a good idea to push a justicar, especially Pascek, too far. It wasn't a good idea to push him *at all*. It was bad from the start and just got worse and worse. Theo knew it was a bad idea for him to be here in the first place. But he could feel the fire. Fire and hunger, his twin curses. All Kindred felt the hunger, but only Brujah truly knew the fire, the unrelenting *anger*. The hunger had been sated by blood tonight, and the

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fire had been assuaged through most of the night by the bloodletting, but as soon as Theo had started thinking about Pascek, the fire had been back. It was back now, growing.

“I wanna know why I didn’t know what was goin’ on,” Theo said.

Pascek’s face did not change at all, but instantly his gaze was hot, hard, as if he thought he could, from where he was sitting, crumble the cinderblock walls, collapse Theo’s massive chest. “There is no middle ground,” Pascek said quietly. “Are you challenging me on this?”

No middle ground. With us or against us. Your Camarilla, love it or leave it. Theo had heard all this before. “I did my job, didn’t I?” he said. But he knew that the justicar, even without provocation, often saw treachery where others did not. And Theo was provoking Pascek, counting on his actions to account for himself. But motives could *always* be suspect.

Pascek regarded Theo a moment longer, then smiled. It was not a warm smile. It was the smile of someone who sets you on fire and then, very calmly, asks you to repent. The justicar abruptly moved on to other matters. “This Prince Goldwin from Baltimore, what can you tell me about him?”

Theo shrugged. “Not worth a shit.”

Pascek actually laughed at that. “I see. And Gainesmil. Could he run a city?”

“Probably.”

“And Lladislas?”

“He’s done it. I hear he’s in the market.”

Pascek thought about that, then sighed. “Ah, but we could never replace a Ventrue with one of our own,” he said.

Theo wasn’t impressed by what Pascek was, in oh-so-general terms, hinting at. Was this the justicar’s way of trying to convince Theo that the archon really was in his confidence, by suggesting that Michaela’s position might be usurped, as if Theo couldn’t have guessed that on his own? Or was Pascek more pointedly reminding his underling of the influence, the *power*, that was entrusted to a justicar? That wasn’t news to Theo, but neither did it do anything to calm his fire.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Theo said.

Now Pascek’s expression did harden. He rose slowly from his seat. Normal physical standards, Theo knew, didn’t necessarily apply to Kindred, as with Lucinde’s apparent youth. Pascek stood barely five feet tall, but his countenance was that of an avenging god. Theo wondered for an instant if he’d pushed too far. It would be a close thing if he and the justicar ever came to blows.

“This assault,” Pascek said coolly, “has been under consideration for quite some time. Myself, Lucinde, Lady Anne, Prelate Ulfila... we were awaiting an opportunity....”

“And the Sabbath gave you an opportunity,” Theo said. *An opportunity to take the city or to fuck Michaela?* He suspected capturing the city was merely a pleasant bonus.

“Precisely,” Pascek said, not elaborating on the specific nature of the opportunity.

“Just like you had an opportunity to test me,” Theo growled.

Pascek sighed again. He glanced at his watch. “A test that you passed with flying colors, as I knew you would. All the better for Lucinde to see firsthand how trustworthy my archons are.”

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*Bullshit*, Theo thought. *You're a paranoid fucking bastard, and you woulda loved catching me at something.*

Pascek could see that Theo was not convinced, but the justicar's patience was at an end. "If you fear a test of your loyalty, there must be a reason."

"I don't 'fear' shit."

"Very eloquent, Archon. As for your not knowing everything that you would like to have known," Pascek waved a hand, dismissing the complaint, "there are numerous explanations: You were on the front line. How many soldiers on the front line know what their general is planning? More importantly," and now he took a step closer; the justicar came up to Theo's chest but narrowed his eyes and glared menacingly nonetheless, "*that is how I wanted it.*"

The two Brujah faced one another from just a few feet apart, Theo not going quite far enough to be disloyal, Pascek not going quite far enough to dismiss his archon.

*I guess you got what you wanted, then*, Theo thought. The fire still burned in his belly, but it was low and hot like red-orange coals. It was a foundation to rival a furnace, but it did not burn out of control. He could have let it get beyond control. Easily. But standing there across from Pascek, Theo was reminded of Lydia on the plane, how pissy she was, out of control. Except this time *he* was Lydia, bitching about what his boss had decided was best. Maybe she was right then, maybe he was right now. Or maybe he'd been right then, and Pascek was right now.

*Or maybe I'll just have to kick everybody's fucking ass*, Theo thought.

Jaroslav Pascek didn't know quite what to make of the half-smile that came across Theo's face just before the archon turned and left. He trudged back down the hallway in his shit-kicker boots. No point in polishing them tonight. It was too late. Besides, they'd just get dirty again tomorrow night.

**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 8:35 PM**  
**Beneath Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**



Cock Robin did not enjoy riddles, as Calebros had discovered. It had seemed a simple enough thing: Anatole had left them a riddle; shouldn't they all take a crack at it in hopes that someone might solve it? Perhaps it was because the justicar's emaciated frame made it possible to mistake him for a child—if one did not notice his grossly misshapen head. Whatever the cause, when Calebros had recited the riddle, Cock Robin's crumpled lips had begun to quiver and twitch. His eyes had burned, and he'd made queer warbling sounds, like a frustrated cat separated from its prey. Calebros had apologized. Profusely. And excused himself as quickly as possible.

That had been last night, just before they'd retired for the day. Tonight, Cock Robin had not spoken—to anyone as far as Calebros could tell. But the justicar had made it clear that the hunt would continue. If there were no new leads, they would scour the city. They would check any and every location that had the slightest connection to *any Tremere antitribu*. Calebros did not relish nosing into those places, what with the certainty of traps and the unpredictability of sorcery. He would have preferred waiting, watching, planning for the eventuality of Nickolai's discovery.

But it was difficult if not impossible, once the inertial surge of events had begun, to slow them again. Not until they had run their course and the momentum was spent. Cock Robin was not one to be swayed or put off. The hunt was on.

They were a silent band of deformed corpses, a macabre parade routed through the sewers. Cock Robin led them. Some of the others had started calling him "the silent one." They never meant to say it within the justicar's hearing, but Calebros recognized the tendency to confuse mute with deaf. The voices were sometimes a bit too loud, or the speaker not aware of his proximity to Cock Robin. Surely the justicar knew. Perhaps that was but kindling for his burning fury. Calebros had come to wish his elder were completely silent. The warren chief dreaded the whispered comments, the strangled, tattered sounds that were Cock Robin's voice.

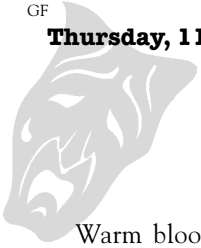
Above ground, the Camarilla's war was beginning anew. *Let them have their war*, Calebros thought. There was enough to be done in aiding them. The *antitribu* were fair game, as well as a suitable alibi. Bell and the others were again tracking Sabbat through Harlem. The Brujah archon could not know of these people, the third justicar in the city, and the hatred that raged in his heart.

*Let this be done, and he will go his way*, Calebros told himself. *If it was ever done*. *If they survived the hunt*. But whether it was this hunt or the next, or the next, Calebros knew that justice would be done. The Nosferatu did not forget.



**Thursday, 11 November 1999, 8:15 PM (9:15 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Haubern Estate  
Chicago, Illinois**



Warm blood wine. A tad too sweet, but with enough of a bite to be pleasing nonetheless. Victoria sipped leisurely. Unlife was more orderly, less surprising, here in the Midwest. There were all the schemes, of course, the slights remembered for hours or decades, and to be sure, the lupines lurked beyond the city gates—but that was all *out there*. Victoria was in here, safe if not content. For the many weeks now since she'd first arrived, she'd had very little contact with anyone beyond the household; she'd done little but sit and think and brood.

"You'll give yourself wrinkles if you're not careful," Dickie had warned her.

"If I give myself wrinkles tonight," she'd said, "they'll be gone tomorrow night." Dickie had tittered at that. *He's such a fop*, Victoria had thought. *But any port in a storm, and all that...*

Dickie Haubern, of the Chicago Hauberns. Publishing, investing, industry, race horses; more recently insider trading, industrial espionage, counterfeiting, extortion, pornography, prostitution, drugs. He was the black sheep of the family, and it seemed unlikely the family would survive him. He had cornered the market, so to speak, on Hauberns three generations back by disposing of all rival inheritors, and since then had cultivated a single, mildly incestuous branch of the family so that the estate could be passed along legitimately every fifty years or so. All that aside, he was a dear.

He had welcomed her into his household, no questions asked, when she had arrived on his doorstep unannounced. Politics and warfare bored him. Atlanta, Baltimore—he claimed he wouldn't even be able to find them on a map. "Why bother with other Kindred at all, except to keep them at an arm's length, or several arms'?" he would say. "Clan and sect rivalries be damned. It's the kine we're put here to enjoy, to oversee, to—"

"To dominate, pimp, and live off?" Victoria suggested.

"Don't forget violate. A good violation cannot be overestimated."

His renunciation of Kindred society was, of course, a bold-faced lie. Dickie was a brutal player of the game if his interests were threatened, or if he stood to gain at someone else's expense. But he was sweet and convivial, and he favored Victoria. Always had.

"Victoria," he called to her as she sipped her warm blood wine. "Victoria, I just received a call from Robert. I'm afraid the old boy is not at all well."

"Robert?"

"Robert Gainesmil," Dickie said, rolling his eyes. "He had to move. Infestation."

"Really? Termites?"

"No. Sabbat. They ate his staff, burned the house down. Poor Langford."

The blood wine suddenly went cold on Victoria's tongue. "The Sabbat, in Baltimore? In the city?"

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“Oh, yes. Hasn’t Alyssa brought you today’s paper? Honestly, I don’t know why I keep her around.”

“I think because she’s your cousin.”

“Cousin. Is that what I told you? Cousin, niece... it all gets so complicated and tiresome after a generation or two.” He wandered off in search of the newspaper, leaving Victoria to ponder Gainesmil’s fate and that of the Camarilla.

*Is it over?* she wondered. *Has the Sabbath taken it all?* Or could this be Dickie’s idea of humor? He returned shortly with the paper.

“Did you tell Robert I was here?” Victoria asked.

“Of course not, dearest. I never so much as mentioned your name. I gave you my word, and my word is my bond.”

“Oh, please don’t make me gag, Dickie.”

“Well, all right. I might have mentioned your name in passing.”

“Dickie...”

“Very well. I told him that you were here... and when you arrived... and that you were terribly unhappy and distracted, and that he should come visit, and we’d all have a fine time.” He sighed. “I am such a horrible liar.”

“You are a casual and habitual liar, Dickie, which is not at all the same thing. And quite practiced, I might add.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

He had brought two papers, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*. The *Tribune* had a front-page article, below the fold, on an industrial accident in New York City, an explosion and a spill into the East River. The *Times* had a large feature about the accident, as well as a great deal of coverage of other “natural” civic disasters: a subway accident, a botched demolition.... Victoria could imagine the rest. Buried in the paper was also a story on the spate of fires that had swept through various portions of Baltimore, which would be what Gainesmil was talking about.

“Where did Robert call from?” Victoria asked.

“New York,” said Dickie. “I hear it’s quite the place to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it seems all your friends from Baltimore abandoned ship.... Oh, wait. The ship was already blown up, wasn’t it? Along with that brute Garlotte. Anyway, they gave the city up, and while the Sabbath’s back was turned, waltzed into New York. Although Robert doesn’t make it sound that inviting—lots of fighting, killing, Brujah field day. Robert says none of the important Gangrel are helping, but I say good riddance; they’re only half a step up from lupines....”

While Dickie regaled her with his view of current events, Victoria’s thoughts wandered. The fighting was taking place hundreds of miles away. It had nothing to do with her anymore. She had faced down the fiends, had returned to the place of her torture; she’d attempted to find out something useful about Leopold—she had to believe that she’d failed at that. She could not believe otherwise.

And yet, word of the fighting tugged at her. *I am not a warrior that I must rend flesh and bone*, she told herself. What good could she, of all Kindred, do anyone in the midst of the

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carnage? Her hand rose to her jaw, to the tiny self-engulfing dragon. She had done her part. She had survived.

She thought of her moment of decision on the drive from Atlanta, her attempt to cheat the gods, her *need* to deceive them. Yet she had ignored her own test. If she chose chance as her god, so that no other creature could guide her steps, how could she so profane the deity? That was what ate at her soul and kept peace at bay.

“Victoria!” Dickie said peevishly, “you haven’t heard a word I’ve said.”

“Of course I have. You were saying that New York is far too cold this time of year.”

“I said no such thing.”

“Oh, very well,” she said, putting her fingers abashedly to her lips. “I am such a horrible liar.”

Dickie tittered. “Well, no wonder you ignore me, when I *bore* you with talk of politics. How many times have I said it? Dull, dull, dull, dull, dull.” He took the glass from her hand, took a sip of blood wine, then returned the glass. “But come, let me show you something you will like.”

Victoria followed him. The mansion was beautiful. The exquisite Persian rugs, the elaborate chandeliers that shimmered like ice on a chill winter morning, polished woodwork and sparkling tile—some nights walking amidst the finery improved her mood somewhat, and she could forget thoughts of her past... and of her future. This was not one of those nights. Dickie chattered on incessantly, but her mind was churning with disturbing visions of gods and elder powers. Chance would have taken her to Baltimore, and then what—to New York? Yet she was here.

Dickie led her to the parlor, where he pushed open the door with a grand flourish. “My latest triumph,” he said.

She stepped past him into the octagonal room. The furnishings were all mahogany and crushed red velvet, but what drew Victoria’s attention was a sculpted figure resting on a pedestal in the center of the room. She stepped closer.

The figure was a dancer, one arm raised above her head, the opposite leg bent counter-balancing. Details were minimal. The slight hint of breasts and the gentle curve of hips indicated she was female, but the emphasis of the piece was the strength of form, the suggestion of fluid movement. Victoria had never seen the sculpture before, yet she knew it.

“I knew you’d like it,” Dickie, pleased with himself, said from the doorway.

Victoria laid her fingertips lightly against the stone. It was cold. She recognized the hand of the sculptor. “How...?”

“I lucked upon it, really,” Dickie said. “And then I almost lost it to some dreadful Ravnos interloper who thinks he’s taken over the city, but I persevered. Some local artist, bankrupt or dead or something like that. You know how it goes. They’re selling off his effects, and there were a few wonderful pieces. This was my favorite. It reminded me of you...”

Victoria heard his flattering lie for what it was and laughed. She found that once she had begun laughing, small silent spasms that shook her body, she could not stop. She bit her lip as a blood tear traced the curve of her cheek. “What was his name, this artist?”

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Dickie paused for a moment. "Pendleton... or Pennington, or something. You've never heard of him, but he had some simply delightful work."

He was right that Victoria did not recognize that name, but she knew the artist well enough. *The gods mock me*, she thought. *They point to where chance would have taken me and then laugh that I am here instead, here where they would have me.* She wiped the tear from her face. She sighed and covered the indistinct face of the dancer with her own hand, leaving a crimson smear across the white stone.

"Um... Victoria...?"

"Call Robert back," she said without turning to face Dickie. "Tell him to meet me at JFK. He should know which hangar." She would do what she must to regain control of her destiny; she would prostrate herself at the altar of chance and beg forgiveness.



**Friday, 12 November 1999, 2:39 AM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**

*Mustn't make it too easy for them*, Nickolai thought. Toward that end, he had not sent Leopold out tonight. Not until now. He'd left the boy to his catatonia. Was the Eye literally eating away at the brain? Nickolai idly wondered. Such a pity that there was not more time for study.

Leopold was on the street again. The excursion south had gone admirably last night. Nickolai had decided upon north for tonight. He'd forced himself to wait this far into the night. *Must pace myself*, he kept thinking over and over again. Last night had taken a great deal out of him, and his stores of blood were not unlimited. Hunting was not an attractive option, not with the city fairly crawling with Camarilla. *They're coming for me*, he knew. *Let them come*. But he had to pace himself, conserve his strength. He must be ready for them.

Nickolai looked into the tall mirror and saw Leopold lurking among the darkness between rows of dilapidated tenements. The Eye glowed faintly, a malevolent red. Blood red. Leopold looked ghastly; he looked broken and crazed. All true. Nickolai vaguely supposed that he should feel some sort of regret or loss at the degradation of his own blood, his only progeny. But it had been necessity, not sentiment, that had driven him to Embrace in the first place. Why should he experience such emotions now, when he had already, almost two years ago, sent away his childe, devoid of true identity?

It had seemed the prudent thing to do. After that doubly cursed, self-important justicar had discovered that Nickolai, unlike all the others of his line, had survived the catastrophe, the slaughter beneath Mexico City. If they knew he still existed, if *anyone* knew, then the demon that had slain his kin would find out and would come for him. Nickolai had been sure of it, and he could not stand the idea of facing that again. The very thought nearly made him tremble. So he had sworn to himself that it must not come to pass.

For such a foul creature, the Nosferatu justicar had retained an incredible streak of vanity. It had been so simple to have Benito—dear Benito, who was always happy to extend any favor that he would be able to call due later—arrange for Petrodon's sitting with the mortal sculptor. And what a stroke of genius to provide a picture of the justicar's former self, so that he might be entranced by the evolving marblescape. Had it ever been completed, the beast would have shat itself in ecstasy.

But it never was completed. Instead, Nickolai had struck down Petrodon, and Benito, again proving himself cursedly resourceful, had fled rather than stay and perish like a good little Giovanni. Once the smuggler's guard was up, he was nigh untouchable, nestled away in the bosom of his infernal family. And if there was no convenient killer to be slain at the hand of the valiant, failing justicar, then the sewer dwellers would search and search and search.

In all of this, the young sculptor was not overlooked. Not by Nickolai, and not for long by Benito. When the Giovanni's assassins arrived to erase their own elder's trail, Pennington was already gone. How better to ensure the kine's loyalty than to bring him into the blood, when even death might not put him beyond the clutches of the Giovanni?

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The boy had not taken to the change, alas. He'd longed for his old life, the life that would have been taken from him no matter what, and he certainly showed no affinity for the mystical arts, not back then. Still, he'd had his uses. Scourge his mind of the reality he rejected; instill a new identity with foggy memories of an unremarkable past; send him to a new city.

Benito had heard of him, of course. Talent could not be hidden among the claustrophobic little world of the Kindred. But after the first assassin had failed to return, and the second and the third—for Nickolai had watched over his castoff childe—Benito had understood that the mysterious patron was out there somewhere, and that each move the Giovanni made threatened to uncover the trail that led to him. Better to bide his time.

There matters had stood until Benito had been foolish enough to accept the invitation to Atlanta. He should have known better. Nickolai never should have had to warn him away. But the keepers of secrets had been onto poor Benito by that point anyway, Nickolai supposed. They'd followed the spoor that led from Petrodon to him, and now they'd discovered the trail from him to Nickolai.

*Let them come*, Nickolai thought. He watched Leopold in the mirror and pulled the brazier closer. The warlock placed a kiln-hardened earthen bowl on the warm metal rim and dipped a golden knife into the bowl. When he removed the knife, a trail of the juices he'd removed from the Eye stretched along behind the blade. He crossed the coals, north to south, east to west, dripping. The coals sputtered and red smoke billowed up, partially obscuring the mirror before him.

Nickolai held the sanctified blade above the smoking coals until he felt the heat coursing through the leather handle, and the skin of his palm beginning to crisp. He raised the knife to his own eye, watching unflinchingly the shapes in the mirror through the billowing smoke. When the first drop of blood struck the coals, the image in the mirror rippled, as if the vitae had landed in the midst of a calm lake of quicksilver. Ripple after ripple after ripple flowed clear and true. And the Eye glowed more fiercely red.

**Friday, 12 November 1999, 3:21 AM**  
**Beneath Harlem**  
**New York City, New York**



The tunnels, his home for years, loomed alien and threatening. As he ran, the mold-covered stones were slick and treacherous beneath his normally sure feet. Corridors he should have known seemed out of place, the landmarks all a jumble in his frantically racing mind. “Ulstead,” he muttered unbelievably, as if saying the name aloud might bring his clanmate back.

Pug whipped around a corner and flung his back against the wall. South—which damned way was south? He felt blood pulsing through his dead veins, the old involuntary responses kicking in. He realized that he was panting, wheezing as he drew air in through his deviated septum, and he made himself stop. Breathing would do him no good, and the sound would make him easier to find.

Gunfire. South be damned, he was running again, heedlessly through the darkness. *It’s just Nigel*, he told himself after a few hundred yards, but he didn’t stop. It wasn’t Nigel that panicked Pug. Nigel wasn’t firing his precious little sub-machine gun just to hear the pretty noise.

“Ulstead,” Pug muttered again, shaking his head in disbelief. Ulstead was—*had been*—a rock of a Kindred, a walking, wart-covered, solid side of beef. He should have been able to snap the little man in two, or three.

But the Eye had opened, and the tunnel had been bathed in pale, blood-red light, and then...

Pug stumbled. He careened off a wall, almost righted himself, but then wiped out. He landed hard, a heap of short, flailing arms and legs.

The pale light had shone in the tunnel, and then Ulstead simply hadn’t been there. A smoldering, writhing mass of what *had been* Ulstead had been there instead, the speckling of dark warts joining together as all the skin turned dark and then flowed away into a spreading, steaming puddle.

Pug lifted himself to his hands and knees and wiped his face with a sleeve, but the fabric was little improvement over the brackish water in which he’d landed. More gunshots, and not that far away despite Pug’s headlong flight. *I shouldn’t abandon him*, he thought for the first time. Nigel wasn’t as familiar with the city; he was one of Colchester’s people come up in the past few nights from Baltimore. *I shouldn’t abandon him*, he thought again, then climbed to his feet and ran. Away. Let them call him a coward. If anybody called him anything, it would mean that he’d survived. Devil take Nigel, and Calebros, and the silent one, for that matter, and this Nickolai they were supposed to be finding.

Pug wanted to stop and get his bearings; he wanted—in a far more theoretical way—to go back and help Nigel, but his legs kept churning. *The fool should have had more sense, should have run instead of stopping to shoot.*

Pug turned another corner, and the world suddenly made even less sense. The bone-jarring collision snapped his head back. His feet flew out from under him. For the second time in the past few minutes, he lay in a painful heap. This time, however, his stunted limbs were intertwined with someone else’s arms and legs.

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“I almost shot you,” Nigel said, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs.

The fog of fear and concussion was not so quick to lift for Pug. “Where did you...? How...?” He must have gotten turned around somewhere along the way, inadvertently made a loop. The shock wore away quickly now. The two disentangled themselves with all possible haste and scrambled to their feet. Nigel was shaken too, and not, Pug suspected, by the collision. The out-of-towner clutched his sleek, black Sterling to his side. Pug could feel the heat from the gun’s barrel.

“I was coming back to help,” Pug lied. “Did you... is it...?”

“Didn’t even slow it down,” Nigel said, shaking his head. His eyes were very small and dark and set close together. He had no chin to speak of. “Keep moving,” he said urgently. “We need to keep moving.”

“Moving,” said the scrawny creature with the Eye, appearing from the darkness behind Nigel. “Yes, moving...”

Nigel whirled and fired. The shots that hit the creature’s body drove it back a few steps, but the bullets striking the Eye seemed to sink into a bottomless swamp of fizzling plasma. The wan red light that covered them was not from the Sterling’s muzzle flashes. Pug covered his ears and ran—*tried* to run. The stone beneath his feet was liquid sludge. He staggered and fell forward onto solid ground. Nigel sank. The sludge turned fiery hot and, in an instant, Nigel’s legs below the knees ceased to exist.

More shots. Pug scabbled to his feet and ran. Above the screams and the hiss of smoking brimstone, he imagined he heard the *click, click, click*, of the Sterling’s empty chamber. There were no more shots, of that he was certain. But then there were only the sounds of a pounding pulse in his ears and his wheezing as he ran.

Seconds, minutes or hours later—who knew—he scaled the ladder under 132nd Street and slammed into the underside of the manhole cover so hard that it popped out onto the street. He clambered out in the cold night. The street was deserted. The area might be bustling with activity during the day, but people knew enough to stay away at night. Many parts of the city were considerably less hospitable after dark—especially these nights, with the Camarilla and the Sabbath taking their fight to the streets. Kine weren’t stupid, just dense. They sensed that kind of thing even if they didn’t realize it. All the violence and fires and accidents—the kine were staying home in droves. And that’s where Pug wanted to be. Actually, anywhere but where he was would do. He was on his feet without hesitation and ready to resume his headlong flight when a deep, threatening voice checked him.

“Hold it right there, motherfucker.”

Pug instinctively froze, but after the first instant realized that, no matter who this person was, he couldn’t be worse than what Pug was already fleeing. He lifted a foot to run—

—And everything went black. His vision was swimming when he came to some time later, how long he wasn’t sure. The sky was clear and starry. He was looking up at it. From his back. On the street. The pieces came together slowly. A shape was blocking part of the sky, and a face behind the shape. The shape was a gun, a big gun, pointed at his head. The face belonged to an angry-looking young woman. Her anger, and the fact that she was holding the gun, did not comfort Pug.

Then he remembered the Eye, and his vague discomfort spiked to sheer terror. He started to get up, to flee, but the woman jammed the barrel of the gun against his wide, flat nose. “Nuh-uh!” she grunted.



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From somewhere behind her, came another sound—someone cocking a pump-action shotgun. Then another face was looking down at Pug, a man, a big man, a very big and very black man. Pug didn't get a good look; he was having trouble concentrating on anything except the gun pressed to his nose, and he kept going cross-eyed. He tried to look back in the direction of the manhole without moving his head.

"Gotta go," he managed to force out. "Gotta go. *Now.*"

"You'll be going," said the man, with a deep rumbling voice, "but it might not be *how* you wanna go, motherfucker."

"You don't understand. It's—"

"Shut the fuck up, asshole!" the woman yelled at him. She pushed him with the gun until his head was back down against the pavement. This woman seemed a bit too willing to splatter his brain all over the street. And she was strong. Kindred strong.

Fear and a fierce throbbing from the back of his head where he'd just been hit were mingling to make Pug feel sick. Beneath the veneer of terror that these people wouldn't give him a chance to explain, he was trying to guess whether they were Camarilla or Sabbat. At the same time, he kept trying to glance back at the manhole, but in a way that didn't induce anyone to blow his head off. He had to take a chance—it would mean his destruction if these two were Sabbat, but there was no time....

"I'm from Calebros's warren!" he stammered.

The woman pressed the gun harder against his nose. "I'm from Philly. Big fuckin' deal."

But the big man wasn't so hungry for blood. "Lydia, let him up."

"Huh?"

The man gently eased her gun aside. It was a pistol, a Desert Eagle, Pug could see now. It wasn't quite as big when it wasn't perched between his eyes, but it was still a handful for the small angry woman. She wasn't that much taller than Pug, and at least seventy-five pounds lighter.

"He's one of us," said the man, "if he's tellin' the truth." He extended a hand and pulled Pug roughly to his feet.

"I am!" Pug blurted. "One of you... I mean, telling the truth... both, *both.*"

"Theo Bell," said the big man.

Pug was trying to shake his hand and leave all at the same time. "No time. It's after me... the Eye. Got the others already. Gotta go. We've gotta go..." He paused, cocked his head, and looked up at the man again. "Did you say Theo Bell?"

"Right as rain," said Lydia. "We're the fuckin' cavalry. Who is it that's after you?" she asked, more suspicious than helpful.

Two more shapes were materializing from the shadows. One held his head at a strange angle; the other had a long mane of red hair and was doing a poor job of hiding what appeared to be a broadsword beneath his long coat. Pug was still trying to pull away, to get away, but Theo Bell wasn't letting go of his hand, and Pug's considerable strength couldn't seem to break the grip.

"Did you say something about an eye?" Theo asked.

They were interrupted by a hollow voice, all too familiar to Pug, which emanated from the open manhole. "Yes," it said, "the Eye, it sees.... Mustn't find... mustn't harm her." The spiky hairs on the back of Pug's neck stood on end.

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“Frankie, Christoph, spread out,” Theo said, watching the hole warily. He let go of Pug’s hand, and the Nosferatu, still pulling, stumbled to the pavement. He caught himself panting again, and wheezing, but he couldn’t stop. And then the creature was pulling itself from the sewer. The Eye took them all in, and Pug felt himself rooted to the spot; he wanted more desperately than anything in the world to flee, but he could not find the strength to do so. The man who bore the Eye didn’t seem so overwhelming out of the enclosed space of the tunnels; he seemed rigid and frail beneath the pulsating vibrancy of the orb.

Lydia turned to Theo. “You’re not going to tell me that’s one of us, are you?” Theo shook his head. “Good,” she said, and turned and fired. She squeezed off seven quick shots.

Pug meekly raised a finger behind them. “That’s not going to—” but the bullets were already slamming into the Eye. It sucked the slugs in like a putrid swamp embracing welcome raindrops. Lydia stared at the thing in disbelief. Theo leveled his shotgun at it—

The creature whipped its head to the side and spewed a spray of ichor over its assailants. The stink of burning flesh and the sound of screams filled the night. Lydia dropped to the ground, hands over her face, still screaming, and rolled. She clawed at her own face and chest, trying to rake away the burning, but the acidic ichor spread to her hands. Her fingertips instantly seared to bone. Theo also whipped around with a yell of pain. His face was steaming. The shotgun clattered to the street as he struggled to rip off his smoldering leather jacket.

From the other side of the Eye, Frankie was firing a pistol, and Christoph was charging from a different angle with his sword. Suddenly the pavement around the open manhole rippled—then stretched and rose, towering like a giant serpent. It snapped to the side and struck Christoph a bone-crushing blow, knocking him across the street, where he smashed into a parked car.

The huge black snake twisted and shot toward Frankie. The gaping maw—that seconds before had been the manhole—snapped closed on him. Frankie’s head and right shoulder fell to one side, his legs to the other, but that was all. And just as quickly as it had struck, the black snake was gone, and only crumbled pavement remained.

Pug lay sprawled on the pavement. Mere seconds had passed since he’d fallen—seconds that seemed to drag on for years, for it seemed they would be his last. He tried to crawl, but all he could do was stare at the pulsating bloodshot Eye.

Theo, flesh dripping down his face like melted wax and his smoldering jacket at his feet, was all that stood against the creature. The Brujah archon reached down to retrieve his shotgun.

Pug saw the streetlight bend and swing at Theo. The Nosferatu managed to call out a warning, but the metal post was lightning quick. It flailed Theo from behind with a spray of glass and the sickening crunch of steel and bone. It knocked him to the ground, and then pounded him again and again. Finally Pug forced himself to his feet. He charged toward Theo, hoping at least to pull the archon beyond the reach of the metal post. But it abandoned Theo and struck at Pug. He saw it coming straight for his face, and then the impact, then... nothing.

He didn’t think he’d lost consciousness, because the Eye was still there, the creature stalking toward Theo’s prone body. But this blow to the head left Pug’s vision blurry and clouded by... blood? He wiped a hand across his face, sniffed and licked at his own blood. He thought he saw the streetlight lying, broken, to his side.

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Theo moaned. The Eye creature was on him now. Pug tried to get up again, but the world was spinning, the street shifting beneath him. He saw Theo roll over and weakly raise his shotgun. The creature reached out a hand. A flash and an explosion, a spray of white phosphorus and blood.

The creature stood above Theo, staring at its own stump of a hand. All the fingers and most of the palm were gone altogether. It rotated its wrist and stared curiously at the bloody mess. Theo and Pug and the others were completely forgotten as the thing turned and wandered away down the street, all the while staring at what had been its hand.

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**Friday, 12 November 1999, 11:47 PM**  
**The International, Ltd., Water Street**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Although he was standing in the command center of the Camarilla reconquest of New York, few noticed Federico di Padua. The Nosferatu archon was simply one ruggedly handsome, well-dressed Kindred among many. As was his wont, he watched and waited as others received and made calls, directed couriers, and scoured countless maps of the city. He had bloodied his hands last night while Justicar Pascek had held himself in reserve should significant trouble arise. Tonight Pascek was venting his bloodlust while Federico played the role of backup. Lucinde, the second justicar in the city, was elsewhere and not so keenly interested in taking a direct part in the battle. The presence of the third justicar was unknown to any Kindred outside of Clan Nosferatu.

Here, in the American offices of the Dutch-based Jan Pieterzoon, that Kindred was directing the Camarilla efforts. “Are these the latest lists?” he asked his ghoul assistant, van Pel, who handed him a sheaf of papers, names and last reported locations of squads that were overdue.

“Current as of 11:30.”

Pieterzoon began poring through the pages. “Still no word from Archon Bell?” he asked after a moment.

“None, sir.”

The command center had been moved to the heart of the Financial District in Manhattan after two nights of operating in Queens, among the offices at the Aqueduct Racetrack. Despite significant losses, those first two nights had gone well and had seen the destruction of Armando Mendes, Cardinal Polonia’s chief lieutenant. Much of the Sabbat presence, which would normally have made the city virtually impregnable, was away to the south, sacking Baltimore—just as Pieterzoon and Archon Bell had hoped they would. That was not to say that the City That Never Sleeps had been empty of Cainites. The invaders had met fairly organized resistance in Queens, but that had crumbled beneath the two-pronged onslaught from the staging areas at LaGuardia and JFK. Brooklyn, where Federico himself had spent much of last night, had been more chaotic, and there were still isolated skirmishes breaking out at intervals. Otherwise, however, the Camarilla had succeeded in breaking the Sabbat power in those two boroughs, driving the enemy survivors north and west as far as the East River.

Much of the southern half of Manhattan was already a Camarilla stronghold. That line had been pressed north beyond Central Park. That left Staten Island, where Pascek was attempting to establish a beachhead, and the Bronx, with Harlem and Washington Heights as something of a no-man’s land to the west. That was the area that Theo Bell had been prowling with great success, and also where he was last heard from early last night.

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Pieterzoon seemed more at ease tonight than he had the past nights, though the absence of word regarding Bell obviously concerned him. Perhaps Jan's confidence was restored because the attack was well underway, and to all accounts largely successful thus far, or perhaps because Pascek was in the field tonight and not watching the Ventrue's every move like a hopeful vulture.

"Edwin," Pieterzoon said, handing the pages to a Kindred who appeared right at home in the fast-paced world of corporate America.

Edwin Mitchell straightened his tie and adjusted the headset he wore, then began to examine the MIA reports himself. He was the youngest of Prince Michaela's three remaining childer—the three that remained prior to the attack, at any rate. The eldest was a confirmed casualty, and the second was listed among the missing from last night. Michaela herself was leading the squadrons in the Bronx, the territory most firmly held by the Sabbat. That her assignment to the most treacherous portion of the city by Pascek was a clear rebuke, possibly handed down from as high as the Inner Circle, was lost on none.

"You can mark me off that list," said Theo Bell from the doorway, but his reappearance was a relief for only a brief moment—until those in the offices took a good look at him. His face was badly scarred and streaked with what appeared to be patches of melted skin. A wet cloth he dabbed against his jaw came away bloody. His bulky leather jacket, which looked lived-in at the best of times, was torn and speckled with burn marks. The buzz of conversations and phone calls that pervaded the command post fell away to nothing.

"What happened?" Pieterzoon asked quietly, but his words carried in the silence.

"Fuckin' Eye thing," Theo said. "I never seen anything like it."

"Did you...?"

Theo shook his head. "It got away. Or hell, maybe I was the one that got away. I don't know. But it cost me a good man, and two other laid up for I don't know how long."

"In Harlem?" Jan asked.

"Yeah. It was last night, but I couldn't get back before now. I was too wiped out."

Jan took that in and began to synthesize the information into the mosaic of reports and updates coming in from all over the city. While the uncomfortable silence lingered, Mitchell pressed a finger to the earpiece of his headset. His brow furrowed deeply.

"Heavy fighting from the Bronx," he relayed to Jan. "The prince's forces are engaged... being pressed. Identified among the Sabbat are... Lambach Ruthven..." He pressed the headset more firmly against his ear. "Repeat, please." He nodded gravely, then looked up at Pieterzoon. "And Polonia."

Federico stepped forward without hesitation. "I am ready," he said to Pieterzoon.

The Ventrue nodded acknowledgement, then asked Mitchell, "What is her position?"

"Current position?" Mitchell asked. He paused. "Just north of Whitestone Bridge."

"Federico," Pieterzoon said, "the reserves are yours. Use Throgs Neck. We'll send the Manhattan units from the west and encircle them."

"That would be my territory," Theo Bell said.

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Pieterzoon gave him a long look, sized up the archon's injuries and fatigue as much as possible. "I don't think so. I need you here... in case anything else comes up."

"I can do it," Mitchell said. He might not have experienced field command before, but his prince, his sire, was out there, and all present could see the intensity burning in his eyes.

"Very well," Pieterzoon said. "Get to it."

Federico was already slipping out the door.



**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 1:30 AM**  
**Pine Street, the Financial District, Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**

Emmett listened to what Umberto had to say, then clicked off the phone and tucked it back into his pocket. He was comfortably situated on a second-story limestone ledge of the skyscraper that towered above him. Sneeze sat nearby expectantly. The boy had done well so far—that meaning that he hadn't gotten lost running messages back and forth between Emmett and Archon di Padua several blocks away at the Camarilla temporary headquarters.

Federico had sent his last note just over an hour ago. Seemed Polonia had been spotted in the Bronx, and the Nosferatu archon was running over to Throgs Neck to pull Prince Michaela's bacon out of the fire. That wasn't exactly how Federico had stated it, but Emmett was used to reading between the lines.

At the moment, he was considering what Umberto had just told him: that Heshia had checked in with the news that the Eye was on the prowl again tonight, third night in a row. The only reason Umberto has passed that tidbit along to Emmett was that Calebros was out hunting with Cock Robin, everybody's favorite justicar.

Emmett was well aware of Calebros's deal with Heshia to find the Eye and then turn it over to the Setite, but in Emmett's opinion, Ruhadze could do with a little more backbone. While the snake was stalking Leopold and the damn Eye, the thing was taking out Kindred left and right. It had appeared on the Lower East Side two nights ago and wiped out at least a couple of sorry-ass Brujah. No great loss there. But then last night the thing had gone underground and waxed two Nosferatu and a few more Brujah to boot, including kicking Theo Bell's ass. Pug had come blabbering back to the warren half hysterical.

Emmett had heard enough. He was going to see that something was done about this Leopold freak, and if Heshia didn't like it, that was his tough luck.

*In the East Village*, Umberto had said. *Little Ukraine*. Emmett scribbled a brief note, folded it, and handed it to Sneeze.

"Take this to Federico," Emmett said. "I *know* he's not there. Don't interrupt me. Go like you're supposed to give it to him, then give it to Pieterzoon. Or better yet, to Bell." Federico's last note had said that the Brujah archon had returned in bad shape from his run-in with the Eye. *I bet he's pissed as all get-out*, Emmett thought. *Good*.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 1:41 AM**  
**The International, Ltd., Water Street**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



“I should’ve gone,” Theo Bell said. Injured or not, he wasn’t pleased about being left behind while a battle with the Sabbath was going on in the Bronx.

“I need you here,” Jan Pieterzoon said. “Pasek could run into trouble on Staten Island. Something could *easily* come out of the woodwork in Brooklyn....”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Theo said. It was all true, he guessed, but he refused to be happy about it. “You’re the general.”

Jan moved closer to the archon, so that his words would not be overheard by the other Kindred and ghouls in the room. “We both know that you could have gone... that you *would* have gone, whether I asked you to or not—if you felt up to it. But something beat the hell out of you, and you need the rest.” The words didn’t do anything to sooth Theo, but the archon didn’t argue. “No one’s seen it tonight.”

“Nobody that survived,” Theo said.

“Perhaps. There’ve been no reports at least. The Eye thing—are you sure it was the same thing... Xaviar’s Antediluvian?”

“It was the same thing Sturbridge brought the picture of, if that’s what you mean. We both know it ain’t no Antediluvian, but there’s gonna be trouble if it shows up again.”

“Mr. Pieterzoon?” Hans van Pel called from one of the desks in the office. He held a new report in his hand. Jan went to examine it, leaving Theo to brood in peace.

He needed more blood. Theo knew that much. The little bit he’d had, both last night after the fight and earlier tonight, hadn’t seemed to do much good. He felt some of his strength returning, but the burns from the acid, or whatever it was that spewed from that fucking Eye, hadn’t healed, hadn’t even started to scab over. He just needed more blood. That’s what he hoped, but he had a bad feeling about all of this. And that only made him more irritated that he hadn’t gone with Federico or that wet-behind-the-ears Mitchell.

Theo almost didn’t notice the boy who slipped in the door except that the youth was so obviously looking for someone he couldn’t find. He looked to be about fifteen years old, but Theo could tell he was Kindred, so looks didn’t really mean much. “Who you need, kid?”

The boy seemed surprised that anyone had bothered to address him. “Archon di Padua,” he said. He was holding a folded piece of paper.

“He’s gone and not gonna be back anytime soon. I’m Archon Bell. I’ll take your message.”

The boy hesitated, obviously uncomfortable with the suggestion, but also obviously uncomfortable with refusing an archon. He handed Theo the paper and slipped quickly back out the door. Theo opened the note and skimmed it. “Hey, Jan.”

Pieterzoon left was he was doing and took the proffered note. He read it quickly, looked up at Theo, then back to the note and read it a second time, aloud: “Federico: News from Ruhadze. Eye is back. East Village. Little Ukraine.” And that was all. “Who brought this?” Jan asked, handing the paper back to Theo.



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“Some kid. Kindred, though.”

Jan nodded. “He’s been in and out with notes for the archon all night.”

Theo crumbled the paper. It had blood on it from one of his wounds that wouldn’t close. “If I got burned all to shit because of some deal Lucinde made with that Setite...”

Jan looked around nervously and gestured for Theo to keep his voice down. “She’s agreed to let Ruhadze have it... if he can *get* it. Apparently he’s been after it for a long time. We had no idea it would show up here in New York. *I* had no idea,” Jan emphasized.

“Well, it’s here,” Theo said. He raised the crumpled wad of paper in his hand. “And if Ruhadze can put it on ice, more power to him. But until he does—”

“There’s no one else I can send with you,” Jan said. “Federico took our reserves. I sent most of our Manhattan teams with Mitchell. Those that aren’t with him are north of Central Park. I’ll call them back, and some of the squads from Brooklyn.”

“You do that,” Theo said, unclasping his shotgun from within his tattered jacket and slipping rounds into the magazine. “They can meet me there.”

**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:00 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**



"You want me to *what*?" Ramona asked incredulously, barely remembering to keep her voice down. "Are you out of your fuckin' mind?"

Hesha did not seem surprised by her reaction. He was decked out in what Ramona thought of as his city safari suit: black turtleneck, reinforced leather pants and jacket, holster. He was holding his backpack open between them.

"I know it sounds odd," he said in a perfectly calm and reasonable tone.

"No," she said raising a finger at him. "Living in the sewers, that's *odd*. This... this is just fuckin' stupid. *You* want *me* to attack that Eye with a *leaf*. Have I got it straight?"

"Not the Eye, the nerve. It will work," he insisted.

Ramona peered down into the backpack. "What—you got the demon-possessed-fucking-eyeball instruction book in there?"

"My research—"

"I got a better idea, Mr. Research. How 'bout *you* attack that thing with a palm leaf? How's that sound?"

"I can't *see* the nerve. You can. I'll be diverting its attention. I'll be in more danger than you."

"Who's gonna be closer?" Ramona asked.

"I'll be close—"


"Who's gonna be close-*er*?" They stood silently. Ramona peeked back around the corner. She could see a shambling figure about two blocks away. She recognized his irregular gait. She turned to Hesha. "I don't believe this. You say we'll get the Eye. I go along with it. I help you out. And now you want me to wave broccoli at it. You know, you need me a lot more than I need you."

"It is a palm leaf," Hesha said curtly, his patience thinning. "And we need *each other*, unless of course you'd like to go out there on your own and end up like your clanmates."

Ramona glared at him. Hesha's gaze was just as cold. She held out her hand, not quite believing that she was really doing it. "Give me the leaf." She paused before she slipped around the corner. "If this doesn't work, I'm gonna stuff the biggest chunk of flaming turmeric root you ever seen right up your ass."

"If this doesn't work," Hesha growled, "that will be the least of my worries."

"Hey," Ramona said, pausing at the corner again and peering around, "Leopold must be a popular guy. Looks like we got company."



**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:12 AM**  
**The International, Ltd., Water Street**  
**New York City, New York**

The fog of war. Jan found it maddening. He had marshaled his forces, dispatched them where he thought they were most needed, and now there was only waiting. Battle was raging in the Bronx. House-to-house fighting. It was impossible to keep the police away completely. Even if the Camarilla carried the night, the Masquerade would be at best frayed. And there was no guarantee that they would triumph. As word trickled back, it was becoming evident that Cardinal Polonia was fighting as a Kindred possessed.

Justicar Pascek was engaged to the south as well. There was no way to shift reinforcements from Staten Island. Also, unless Theo Bell could accomplish what had proved beyond an army of Gangrel, the Brujah archon could be fighting his last battle. Jan had hoped, but never expected, to get them this far, but Hardestadt would care little for preliminary successes if tonight turned against them.

“Jan,” said a familiar but out-of-place voice, intruding upon his dark thoughts.

He turned to see Victoria Ash for the first time in over two months, since she had left for Atlanta and disappeared. Robert Gainemil stood behind her. As usual, Jan’s first thoughts upon seeing her were of her perfect beauty; but his second thoughts were his suspicions of her time among the Sabbat.

She must have read his face or guessed his thoughts. “Jan, I know you don’t trust me, and I don’t care,” she said sharply. “You can have your Camarilla and your damned war. But Leopold is here, in the city.”

Jan nodded. He was unaccustomed to her directness. “In the East Village,” he said. “Theo has gone after him.”

That was apparently all Victoria wanted to know. She turned on her heels to leave the office, then stopped and turned back to Gainemil. “Give me the keys.”

He did so, somewhat befuddled. “I can drive you,” he said.

“I know how to drive,” she said. “And what good would you be anyway?” She strode from the office, leaving Gainemil and Jan in her wake.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:15 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Theo walked down the center of the street. He didn't see much point in playing coy, nor did he want to be in an enclosed area with the thing he was after. This was not a lively section of town after dark, even less so after the chaos of the past few nights. Sure, some kine were going to see whatever happened, but what were they going to do—call the cops and say they saw some big, black vampire fighting with some ugly, near-sighted motherfucker?

The street was dark despite the streetlamps. Theo made a note to watch out for the damn light posts. He wiped a leather sleeve across his face. The burns still hurt. A lot. That was one thing that this Leopold had to answer for. Frankie was another. Lydia and Christoph too. Christoph's head, arm and shoulder were torn up pretty good. Lydia was in worse shape, though. Her face and chest and hands were burned all to hell, and none of the blood Theo had given her had done any good, just like with his own burns.

He felt stronger walking down the street than he had hiding out in that office with Jan. It was the anger, the fire in his belly, that kept the Brujah going. If that wasn't enough, he figured, he was fucked.

As he continued on, he thought about the note that the kid had brought for di Padua. Somebody had been keeping track of Leopold and keeping the Nosferatu informed. Was the note from Heshu himself? Didn't seem quite like his style, Theo thought. Did Lucinde have more to do with this? Jan had said that she'd agreed to let Ruhadze have the Eye. *He's welcome to pick up the pieces*, Theo thought.

When Theo saw the other solitary figure a few blocks ahead, he knew it was Leopold. The way that the bastard carried himself was familiar even at that distance. Theo's burns began to sting and itch more than they had, or maybe he just noticed them more. He quickened his pace and strode purposefully toward his prey. Leopold didn't seem to notice him. Eye or no Eye, Theo would be damned if he was going to sneak up on a fucking *Toreador*. Last night the bastard had caught him off guard. Tonight it was going to be straight up. When Theo got within a block and the figure was still lumbering the other way, the Brujah stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

The creature stopped, and slowly Leopold turned around. His bulging left Eye seemed to cast a faint light on the street.

"Hey, motherfucker," Theo said, cocking his shotgun. "Remember me?" He kept walking closer. Leopold's right hand was a bloody stump, wrapped in rags but not healed.

Apparently Leopold did remember, and remembered what had worked so well last night. Theo heard the moan of metal twisting. He ducked as a streetlight swung just over him. He dropped and rolled and was back on his feet in seconds—just soon enough to leap over the metal post as it swatted at him on the backswing.

"*Will—not—harm—her!*" Leopold growled

"What the hell are you talking—" but Theo was dodging again from the metal post aimed at his head. He dove closer to the center of the street, out of the reach of streetlights

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from either side, if they didn't uproot themselves and come charging after him. They were all swinging now, on both sides of the block, like the legs of some giant, overturned beetle.

Theo rolled to his feet again, but before he could get off a shot, the ground was falling away beneath his feet. He leapt at the last second, his feet pushing off pavement that was crumbling to nothing, and landed hard. He squeezed off a quick round from his SPAS 12—and a flash of white phosphorous exploded against a parked car behind Leopold.

*Shit!* Theo was diving again, dodging, always moving. More fissures opened, in his path, under his feet. It was everything he could do to avoid being trapped by the earth itself. His lunges kept taking him back into the reach of the flailing streetlights. Every dodge ended in another and another after that. His speed was an advantage, but he could feel his strength draining away. Sure, he needed to avoid Leopold's attacks, but fighting to stay alive wasn't the same as making ground.

He was *not* going to his Final Death fighting a Toreador. He needed to get closer. Close enough to get his hands around that scrawny neck and snap it in two. And he knew, as one of the metal posts struck a glancing blow off his shoulder, that he needed to do it soon.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:22 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Ramona had been expecting this Theo Bell guy to get his head handed to him, although Heshahad made it sound like the Brujah was a real hardass. Maybe so. He hadn't even tried to sneak up on Leopold. Just walked up, *intentionally* got Leopold's attention, and then started fighting for his life. He was hanging in there so far, barely getting out of the way of whatever Leopold threw at him, keeping a step ahead, but Ramona could see him starting to slow down, starting to wear out. That wasn't all she could see.

She would have known that he was Kindred even if Heshahadn't told her, even if the ghost sight hadn't shown her. Bell was too fast to be kine, his movements a blur. He jumped and landed and rolled and got up and jumped again, all so quickly that Ramona had trouble keeping up with him. He got off a second shot that missed. That first shot had almost hit Ramona, who decided to keep behind cover for the moment.

From her hiding place, Ramona saw what no one else could. As she looked on and Theo raced around the street trying to get closer, Leopold plucked the horrid Eye from its socket. He held the orb aloft, not in his hand this time, but atop the bloody stump where his right hand once was. The Eye twitched and throbbed like a living thing. It shone like a blood-red moon. Fizzling ichor welled up upon its surface and dripped hissing to the ground.

Ramona could not tell where her normal sight ended and the ghost sight began. They were seamless. She couldn't distinguish between what was real and what wasn't. But she knew from Heshahad that others did not see the orb held high; they saw it still part of Leopold's face. She knew, too, that others didn't see the writhing, snake-like nerve that, even now, was stretching from the back of the Eye, reaching toward the ground and burrowing, pulsating, drawing strength from the earth. She had seen the fibrous nerve in the meadow before the cave as well, when the Eye had destroyed her kinsmen. But now there was no army of Gangrel. There was only her, cowering, and one foolhardy man trying to survive against the Eye. Ramona knew she must strike soon. She had come this far and felt she could force her body no farther. But she must! The man standing against the Eye didn't have much longer. That, too, she could see.

Slowly, painfully, Bell was working his way closer to Leopold, but for every two feet he advanced, he ended up giving back one through his evasions. Every so often, one of the malevolent streetlights caught him, just glancing blows, nothing solid, not yet. But they were starting to hit him more often, and the craters opening in the street were beginning to spread and connect one to another. Footing was rocky and treacherous.

*Where's Heshah?* Ramona wondered. It didn't matter. She had to strike without him. She had to take advantage of Theo's battle, for soon he would fall.

It happened the moment she thought it. A sheet of pavement rose above Bell like a tidal wave. It blocked the sickly light of the Eye and drowned him in shadow. The black wave rushed toward him. He fired his shotgun and the flowing wall of asphalt exploded, fragments flying everywhere. He dove, but not quickly enough this time. The remnants of the wave slammed into his legs and sent him spinning. He landed hard, and before he

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could dodge again, the closest lamp post pummeled him from behind. He slumped to the ground, and the post, instead of rearing back for another blow, wrapped around him, a constrictor engulfing a hard-won meal.

Ramona started to rise from her crouch. She looked at her weapon, the *palm leaf* in her hand, and was again gripped by misgiving and terror. *This is crazy!* she thought. But she could wait no longer, or Theo, like her clansmen, would be lost. She had hesitated on that field of battle, and they had died.

“Leopold!” came the cry, but it was not Ramona’s voice. Her head whipped up and she saw Hesha, pistol in hand, out in the street. He fired, and the bullet struck Leopold square in the chest. The bearer of the Eye staggered a step but did not fall. The Eye cast its blood-red gaze upon Hesha.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:37 AM**  
**Chantry of the Five Boroughs**  
**New York City, New York**



When the corruption revealed itself this, the third night running, Aisling Sturbridge knew that she would discover the fortress of her enemy. Discovering the fortress and breaching the walls, however, were very different tasks.

She followed the lifeblood of the city flowing through the streets; she tasted the corruption of her own blood and, recognizing it as her own, she could not lose her way. To the heart of the city she led her adepts and acolytes, loyal Johanus ever a step away. Only a little way from their own sanctuary did they travel. South beyond the lupine refuge, not so far as the tallest and thickest of the bones and headstones of the dragon's graveyard. The river of blood twisted through avenue and artery until it reached the fortress, and there it formed a fiery moat.

Johanus stepped forward to the edge of the infernal abyss and tested fire against fire. The acolytes joined him, gave their strength to him, as Sturbridge probed the walls of the fortress itself.

They were erected with no little skill, towers and abutments, wards placed much as she might have placed them. And therein lay the weakness. Though the hand of the builder was foreign, the architect was the same, and what Sturbridge comprehended she could destroy. Thus was the power of death over life and the secret of the Children.

She called her flock back from the chasm. There was no need after all to quench the flame. Instead, she called upon it, and it responded. The beast of blood and fire rose and spread its glorious wings. For a lingering moment it stood towering above the children, above the city, above the bone yard... and then it fell upon the walls.

Fire and blood engulfed the fortress, swept against the walls and drove the defenders from the battlements. The fortifications were strong, and it appeared that they would stand firm for quite some while.

But suddenly, unexpectedly, cracks formed along the walls. A giddy cheer arose behind Sturbridge, and the beast, smelling blood, roared at the prospect of triumph. Tongues of flame licked at the faults. Harmless clefts became gaping fissures. Once the first tower collapsed, the end was quick to come. Walls collapsed inward. The beast scoured the earth within, and the blood of the moat was purified by fire.



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GF



**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:40 AM**  
**Crown Plaza Hotel, Midtown Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**

The initial explosion gutted the twenty-fifth, twenty-sixth, and twenty-seventh floors of the hotel. Glass and fragments of granite were flung outward with such force that they would be found in buildings across the street the next morning. The blast shattered windows as far as two and a half blocks away.

The fire swept through floors down to the twenty-third and up to the thirtieth before emergency teams could arrive at the scene.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 2:45 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Ramona, frozen where she stood, palm leaf in hand, marveled at Hesha. He might not have possessed the same blinding speed as did the larger Theo Bell, but just the same he avoided Leopold's attacks with a mesmerizing grace and fluidity. Ramona wasn't sure if the scales that seemed to cover his exposed skin were real or of her ghost sight. And his body appeared to move in ways it should not, stretching farther than possible when he leapt for a signpost, twisting as if not constrained by joints as he dodged fragments of pavement hurled at him by bucking waves of street.

After the first few seconds, her watching became almost detached, for to care about the outcome, about Hesha or Theo, was to open herself again to fear. She was discovering that her thirst for vengeance might not be so strong as that fear.

Maybe Hesha could beat Leopold. Maybe he didn't need her to destroy the Eye after all. As she watched his desperate dodges and attacks—rolling, firing, twisting, firing, many of his shots tearing ragged holes in Leopold—she knew her false hope for what it was. Hesha, like the other man before him, was holding his own, but making little headway. He survived, but barely.

Theo, she noticed, seemed to have recovered his wits. He was still wrapped tight by the coiled lamp post, but, taking advantage of the respite Hesha's attacks created, the larger man was now struggling. He was straining against the metal, but the coil grew tighter as he pressed against it.

But then, suddenly, before Ramona's eyes, the coiled metal went stiff. At the same instant, the sound of a distant explosion reached them, and Leopold staggered. Not in response to Hesha's bullets, and no one was close enough to have attacked, but still Leopold's legs seemed to fail him. To Ramona's ghost sight, he seemed paler and less substantial, diminished somehow beneath the Eye, which along with its umbilical nerve was throbbing more fiercely, desperately.

*It's hungry*, Ramona realized. *It's not as strong as it was*. She took a step, sneaking closer. *It's not as strong as it was a few moments ago, and even then it wasn't as strong as the night at the cave*.

Before her, Hesha was advancing on Leopold, and Bell was still straining against the now-rigid, curled lamp post—except now he was *bending* it. Not a tremendous amount, but enough that he was able to slip free of it. He staggered to his feet, picked up his shotgun, and fired a blast that caught Leopold square in the chest. It knocked him back and left a large patch of smoldering flesh. He did not fall, but he was *hurt*.

Ramona saw images from that other night: wave upon wave of Gangrel charging to their deaths, erupting monoliths, and pools of molten rock. Something was different tonight. Something that allowed two battered Kindred to hold their own against Leopold, against the Eye. Why hadn't she seen it before? Maybe her terror had blinded her, but it was true. They were advancing on him now, Hesha's face inscrutable, Theo's gaze red as blood.

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Leopold seemed hesitant, unsure. No new pits opened before his assailants. No wave of pavement rose to break their bodies. Ramona saw her chance and charged. She was behind Leopold. If Heshā's bizarre plan didn't work, then she would rip the nerve and the Eye apart with her claws and her fangs—but she would not be a prisoner to her fear, to her past.

As she rushed forward, headlights appeared up the street. High beams, a car approaching at high speed from beyond Leopold, beyond Heshā and Theo. Ramona felt as if a spotlight were cast on her alone. She hesitated... and as she paused, her ears caught a strange sound, a sound she'd heard before—the wet split of flesh torn asunder. To her shock, she saw sharp bones slice through Leopold's clothes—*his own bones*, piercing his skin and protruding from his emaciated corpse. The ghost sight—that must be why she saw that. It *couldn't* be real. His bones couldn't actually be stretching out beyond his body.

The car was roaring closer. Two blocks away. One block. Ramona shot forward, blood in her heart and the names of her dead on her lips. She was mere yards from Leopold, from the phantom nerve she must sever, when the bones, Leopold's ribs, lashed out and struck her like a collection of scorpions' tails.

The impact stopped her in her tracks. The bone lances pierced her arm, her chest, her stomach, her legs. She was joined to Leopold, attached to him by his own impossibly long bones. Shock gave way to raging pain and to the sick, churning realization of failure. She was leaning forward but could not move. He didn't even bother to look at her. The pulsing nerve was feet away, but the palm leaf slipped from her hand as her fingers went numb, her own nerves severed rather than that of the Eye.

In her despair, she looked to Heshā and Theo. Only then did she see that they were impaled as well. Leopold had lashed out with his body, or the Eye had resorted to using him as a weapon. Either way, Heshā's chest was pierced by one large bone spear that had run him through. Theo was pinned more like Ramona. Ribs had punctured his knee and belly, his shoulders, and one ran through his upper lip and out the side of his face.

Ramona hung limp. She was surrounded by bent and broken streetlights, craters, asphalt and concrete rubble. She and Heshā and Theo were flies entangled in a web of bone. All the while, the car was barreling toward them, bounding over broken pavement. Finally it plowed into a hole far deeper than those preceding it. The nose of the car bottomed out and the vehicle came crashing to a halt.

Once the engine died amid the echoes of crunching steel, a strange quiet fell over the street. Ramona looked helplessly at Leopold, so close. He was sagging where he stood, pale and shriveled, the three Kindred he was joined to holding him upright as much as his deadly bones held them. The only sounds in that instant were the fizzing discharge of the Eye, Heshā's moans of pain and frustration as he writhed on his spear, and the hiss of steam escaping the car's ruptured radiator.

Then one of the car's doors opened, and an incredibly beautiful woman climbed from the wreckage.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 3:01 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**



Victoria could not believe the devastation she stepped into. Wreckage as if the street had been bombed, strange rolling hills of pavement. And Leopold, weak, palsied, his own bones somehow splayed out a freakish distance impaling three Kindred: Theo Bell, bleeding and stunned, closest to her; some dirty child the farthest away; and to the side she recognized Heshu Ruhadze, whose man Vegel she'd spoken to what seemed now like so many years ago. And in the center of it all stood Leopold, dwarfed by the malevolent Eye that she'd seen in the sketch Sturbridge had brought to Baltimore.

"Leopold," Victoria said gently. She set her gaze upon his face—not the Eye, but his face, his other eye. She looked for signs of the artist that had been so desperate to win her good graces back in Atlanta. She looked for any sign of *herself*.

*The young wizard's sire is within the clay.*

"Leopold," she said again, stepping forward past Theo, past Heshu. They watched her, Heshu struggling, Theo beginning to take stock of his situation and pull against the bone. She continued walking slowly and calmly toward Leopold. She slipped off her heels so as to make her way more easily across the rubble.

He watched her approach, warily, longingly. She came very close to him, close enough to scent the vitriol as it dripped from the Eye and sizzled on the broken pavement.

"I never knew, Leopold," she said. "You have to believe me. I never knew. Everything would have been different." She couldn't tell if he heard her, if he understood, if he *believed*. All she could see was that he was completely drained. He was a hollow shell, a pedestal of flesh upon which the Eye perched. Slowly, she reached out a gentle hand to him. "I never knew. I am your sire."



**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 3:03 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

Leopold was trapped, entangled by the barbs of an unbreakable thorn tree. Before him the red river flowed through the streets of the dragon's graveyard. The teacher was gone. His wisdom and power lost. But *she* was rising from the crimson water. Leopold could not remember if this was precisely as he remembered her. Her visits had always been so fleeting, her beauty real to his Sight, but ephemeral nonetheless.

She was reaching out to him with her delicate hand. *Be careful of the thorns*, he wanted to say, but words failed him. She had been part of every creation he'd given life, and her mere presence brought back to him the rapture of his masterpiece. How long he had struggled, despite her help. She had teased and abused and cajoled him, but she was here with him now, ready to embrace him.

She spoke, and her words dripped blood and honey. "I am your sire." She claimed him as her own. It was not her blood but the teacher's that ran in his veins, he knew in that instant. She was not his sire but his Muse. None of that mattered, though. She claimed him as her own. They were of one spirit for eternity. And Leopold knew peace.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 3:05 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Ramona could hardly see the woman walking slowly toward Leopold. The Gangrel was lost amidst her own private agony, of body and of spirit. She was run through in five places. She had failed her dead again. It was small comfort that this time she would join them, this time she felt their pain in her own body. She hadn't run away.

But she had hesitated. With her strength fading, she was still capable of accusing herself. She had stood frozen in fear, she had waited for the perfect moment—a moment that would never come. She had failed her dead, but at least she would join them. She owed them that.

She looked up again, to Heshu. He still struggled, though the bone that entered his chest and exited his back was curled upward behind him. There was no way he could pull himself from the spear, yet he fought on.

Theo, too, she saw, was fighting still. She could see the anger, the hatred in his eyes. One of the ribs had skewered his face. Grimacing against the pain, he pulled his head back. Slowly at first, and then with a rush, his skin slid over the intruding bone. That one rib, at least, did not extend far beyond him. Unable to maneuver the rest of his body, he craned his neck to the side. Inch by inch, he pulled his face back over the bone. His eyes were squeezed shut. Broken fragments of teeth fell from his mouth—and then he was free. Of that bone. Four others held him firmly in place.

Ramona, through the haze of pain, was amazed by Heshu's determination, and by Theo's will. They had no chance of freeing themselves, not in time to help. Ramona remembered the woman. She was as close to Leopold in front as Ramona was behind, as close as Ramona was to the nerve. But Leopold hadn't struck down the woman. Ramona's pained thoughts drifted from wondering if the woman needed help to resenting that she hadn't been attacked. He hadn't flung metal posts or waves of pavement at her. *What about the acid?* Ramona thought. *She's close enough to spray with the fucking acid!*

And now the woman was talking to Leopold. *Talking!* Ramona couldn't make out what the woman was saying. Her own ears were ringing, complaining of the damage done her body. *Don't fucking talk to him!* Ramona raged. *Tear his fucking heart out! The Eye! Slash the Eye!* But the woman stood close and spoke kindly to him—to the monster that had destroyed Ramona's people. The woman reached a hand out to him....

That was more than Ramona could take. She strained against the rods of bone that pierced her body. Pain flashed through her like fire from every point of intrusion. Her right arm was numb, skewered at the shoulder. But she leaned hard with her left. She was already leaning forward, propped up by Leopold's bones. The palm leaf—part of Heshu's plan, Heshu's stupid, insane plan—lay upon rubble just below her. She felt her skin tearing, the wounds stretching. Her taut fingers were razor claws, pincers closing on the large leaf. She had it! But now what?

She looked down at the bones impaling her, the five ivory spears. Despite the pain, or maybe because of it, she laughed grimly to herself. *Guess he ripped me five new assholes.*

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And then she drew on her rage. Theo was fighting, but he couldn't have as much reason to hate as she did. To hate and to *fear*. Ramona began telling over the names of her dead: *Eddie. Jen. Darnell*. And with each name she thrust herself forward on Leopold's bones. They protruded too far behind her for her to free herself, so she'd be his lunch and make sure he fucking choked on it.

*Ronja. Peera Giftgiver*. Ramona forced her body, inches at a time. *Crenshaw. Bernard Fleetfoot. Mutabo*. A stake through her heart, sun burning away her flesh, acid eating at her face—all of it was happening at once. *Lisa Strongback. Aileen Brock-childe. Brant Edmonson. Tanner*. Blood was running from her wounds, pooling on the ground beside the sickening, pulsing nerve that drew strength from the earth. Ramona's blood, blood she had stolen...

*Zhavon*.

With the last of her strength, Ramona's hand fell forward. She clutched the palm leaf as surely as pain and death and fear. It passed *through* the nerve, not cutting into the fibrous sinew. Ramona could feel no resistance to the leaf. She must have missed. She had to strike again. But the leaf was a leaden weight in her hand, her arm dead. Her fingers failed her, and the leaf slipped from her grasp. She screamed in outrage.

Or was it the other woman who screamed? Ramona wasn't sure. Her strength was gone. She was falling.... Falling? But the bones?

Ramona slammed into the rough ground face first. She looked up and saw the bones, like a path to Leopold's heart, from outward in, turning to ash. And from the three paths of ash, jagged bursts of lightning shot into the sky, streaks of gold, red, and green. For an instant the streaks met above Leopold, and there standing above him was a towering, monstrous apparition, its dark face a demonic snarl, its sole eye bulging with malevolent glee. Then, as Ramona watched in pain and horrified wonder, the figure was gone, and Leopold's frail body crumbled to dust.

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**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 3:11 AM**  
**East 4th Street, the East Village, Little Ukraine**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



Theo fell to his knees and then forward, face first onto the rubble. Every part of his body was in agony. He was exhausted. But he couldn't spare any time. Not yet. He tried to direct what blood he could to his knee. The gut shot was painful, but there was nothing much he needed in there. And his fingers all seemed to work, so the shoulder wounds could wait. His face felt like it was ripped off. *Never was much of a looker*, he thought.

Slowly and not very steadily, he climbed back up to his knees. He spat teeth onto the rubble. If he'd been kine, his face would've been gushing, and he'd have been choking on blood. He made it to his feet. Hesha was already staggering toward Victoria. The other chick was lying on her face behind... behind where Leopold had been. Now there was just a pile of dust—no, not *just* a pile of dust. There was something resting in the dust.

Theo saw his shotgun lying on the ground nearby and had to make a concerted effort to bend down and pick it up. The walk to Victoria felt longer and harder than it should have been. Every gouge in the street seemed a deep trench, and every pile of rubble a mountain. Theo wanted to hurry—they should get away from here before cops started to show, or kine in the neighborhood grew overly curious now that all was quiet—but it was all he could do to keep moving.

"You're back," he said to Victoria when he reached her side, and before he realized quite how much talking was going to hurt. He clamped a hand over the left side of his jaw.

She didn't speak to him. The Toreador just stood and watched as Hesha, kneeling by the Eye and the dust that had been Leopold, took a Kevlar case from his backpack. The Eye, perched atop Leopold's remains, was bluish purple. It no longer throbbed or moved at all, and a lid-like membrane had closed around most of the orb. Victoria seemed disinterested in what was going on. She was still a beauty, in that uptown kind of way, but she seemed empty, lifeless—even for a Kindred. "Fate plays its cruel tricks," she said to no one in particular.

Theo gave her a sideways glance. "Uh, yeah... right." After a moment, she turned and, without so much as looking at Theo or acknowledging Hesha, walked away. She seemed consumed by a tired, cold anger, or maybe it was just regret. Theo didn't understand either way, and didn't care. He was too exhausted at the moment to worry about a Toreador's hurt feelings. He wasn't sure why she'd shown up, or how the hell she'd managed to face down Leopold. It seemed to have been the scrawny kid that had finished him off, but Victoria had gotten his attention all right.

*She said something to that Leopold freak*, Theo mused. He shrugged. *Whatever works*. Watching the Setite stooped over his bag, Theo was still partially stunned himself. *Get my ass whupped by one Toreador and saved by another, all in one night*. He shook his head.

Hesha had unzipped the Kevlar case and laid it open. It was full of thick mud or clay. Intent on what he was doing, he smoothed the substance with his hands.

Theo cocked his shotgun and tried to speak without moving his mouth any more than necessary. "You're not planning on takin' that, are you?"



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Hesha didn't look up from his task. "Archon Bell," he said politely, as if he didn't have a gaping hole in his chest, "perhaps you were not informed. If you check with Mr. Pieterzoon, you will find that Lucinde has granted me this."

"I look like Lucinde?" Theo asked.

That gave Hesha pause. He stopped and looked up at Theo. "I believe Justicar Pascek signed off on the agreement as well."

"Shoot it," said the bloody, half-crippled Kindred who was crawling toward them. One arm hung useless, dragging along. She'd shown up at some point in the fight. Theo couldn't remember exactly when, but she, like Victoria, seemed to have come in handy.

"Ramona," Hesha said, unperturbed, "you did well."

"Fuck you," she snarled, then looked at Theo. "Shoot it. Shoot *him* if you have to. Shoot it." She was angry, but there was desperation in her voice too. "Don't believe anything he says. We were gonna destroy it."

"Ramona," Hesha said, "I never lied to you. We agreed that I would see that the Eye caused no more harm. I doubt I could have accomplished this without you, and I don't want us to part on unpleasant terms. But I will have the Eye."

Beneath the Setite's calm words, Theo sensed desperation of a different sort—fanaticism. He instinctively tried to gauge the extent of Hesha's injuries, what the chances were if it came to violence. Theo didn't like it one bit—the back-room deals, the sly promises, and to a *Setite*, for Christ's sake. *You may not have lied to her*, he thought, *but I bet you sure as hell didn't tell her the truth.*

Hesha went back to his work. He gingerly lifted the Eye and placed it into the clay, settling it firmly into place. "Archon, you might wish to take up the matter with Lucinde or Jaroslav, but in the meantime, I must see this to a safe place." He carefully closed the case and resealed the zipper. "If it makes it any difference, I promise you, both of you, that you will never have to face this again. And, Archon, a portion of turmeric root, still smoldering and pressed firmly against those burns, will allow the blood to do its work. They will not heal otherwise."

"Hmph," Theo snorted. *Right. Flaming whatever-you-said.* He wanted to blow the fuck out of the thing that Hesha was packing away, like Ramona had pleaded. But decisions, the archon had come to learn, were not always his to make. "Go on. Get out of here."

Ramona, too weak to fight anymore, sagged to the ground. Hesha slipped the quiescently bulging case into his backpack and was on his way.

**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 3:52 AM**  
**A subterranean grotto**  
**New York City, New York**



Calebros sat in the flickering light of the candelabra. He stretched and popped his back; he allowed himself to rest. Elsewhere in the city, in the Bronx, the war still raged. But the hunt was over.

Umberto had passed word along to him and Cock Robin as they had scoured the city: The Eye was captured; Leopold destroyed; and more importantly, as confirmed by the Tremere, Nickolai was no more. Sturbridge had tracked him somehow—Nickolai, betrayer of his blood, murderer of Justicar Alonso Cristo Petrodon de Seville. The Tremere messenger, flushed with victory, had been unusually forthcoming. Not intentionally, perhaps. But he had mentioned the explosion in Midtown and linked it to the final, mystical blow.

So much that had weighed on Calebros's mind was resolved. Even Cock Robin seemed to take his own sort of grim pleasure from the news, though he would have preferred to have done the deed himself, Calebros was sure.

The Sabbath was still struggling, Cardinal Polonia personally laying waste to Kindred. Calebros, upon his return, had sent Emmett with most of the hunting parties to Throgs Neck. If they could break Polonia's power, the city would still not be won, but the Camarilla would be so much closer to that goal.

Calebros himself was taking a few minutes to savor the successful labor of several years and countless of his clanmates. Soon he and Cock Robin would follow Emmett and see what further aid they could give. There was no time for him to retreat to the lake, but Calebros was tired and hungry. He rose from his desk and followed a different, seldom-traveled tunnel.

They heard him coming, as they always did, and the howling began, guttural cries of pleasure at his approach. The smell of the long, narrow chamber was very strong, and very familiar to Calebros. Sweat, body odor and wastes. The inhabitants wrapped their thin fingers around the bars of their makeshift cells and cages and rattled them. Many scampered back and forth in the few cramped feet allowed them. Calebros could never avoid a wash of nostalgia for the hard realities of the kennels.

Most of the children in the cages had long since forgotten all but the faintest traces of their former lives. It was best that way, Calebros believed, as Augustin had believed before him. For the few, the strongest, who would be brought into the blood eventually, it was better not to have a past to pine for, better for it to be washed away over the years. That way the Embrace was truly a gift, and one's place within the clan was one's only place. Even so, Calebros recognized in himself the occasional hints of regret, the rare longing for those distant, pale memories, for what might have been.

Ah, but how much harder it would have been, taken directly from the mortal world and thrust down here, away from the sun forever.

He walked along the row of cells, some wrought-iron bars sunk deep into stone, others small steel cages tucked into cubbyholes or tied to the back wall. Everywhere,

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expectant eyes watched him pass, each occupant hoping to be chosen—to be nourished, or to provide nourishment.

Calebros stopped before one of the cages, and the boy—it seemed to be a boy—thrust his hand through the bars. Calebros grasped the arm tightly just below the elbow. The boy knew to make a fist, to squeeze. Calebros waited, waited, as long as he could. As the veins in the skinny wrist and forearm rose, so did his own desire, his hunger. The boy tried to hold still, though one of his feet was bouncing against the back of the cage. He grunted and moaned in anticipation. And when Calebros could hold himself back no longer, he tore into the arm.

The world was a chaotic din, the children and youths pounding on the walls, wailing, and rattling metal against metal. Blood spurted into Calebros's mouth. A strong pulse sounded at his temples and attempted to drown out the external sounds. He felt whole in this place, one with these demi-humans, some who would be lucky enough to join him in time. He remembered his own blood drawn forth by Augustin's fangs; he remembered, later, standing with his sire as Emmett was chosen. The blood coursed into him, through him. Which one of these human larvae might one night prove him- or herself worthy to join the clan, so that the circle might continue...?

Calebros stopped drinking suddenly. Blood pulsed onto his face, ran down his chin. Absently, he licked the boy's wound, healed the flesh, and rushed from the kennels. The howling followed him through the tunnel, but already it was forgotten.

*The circle... the circle!*

He rushed back to his desk and began rummaging for the particular folder he needed—Jeremiah's reports from his time with Anatole. And all the while, the words were running a circle through Calebros's mind: *One in a minute, and one in an hour.*

There, the folder. *A circle, you fool, a circle!* Calebros berated himself. *On the face of a clock—the second hand makes one each minute, and the minute hand makes one each hour.* He flipped pages furiously until he found the early notation he was looking for: *“Anatole places his hands inside his sandals and then rubs the soles together.”* That was part of what he wanted, but not all. Calebros skimmed farther down the page, on to the next page, and found it: *“...constantly rubs his sandals in circles, first one way and then the other.”*

The Prophet was leading him somewhere. *Walk a mile in but seconds to deliver my letter.* Literally? Unlikely. Nothing so straightforward with the Prophet. Perhaps a progression. *Walk a mile... in the shoes of your enemy? Sandals, in this case?* But Calebros had already connected the sandals. Had he skipped ahead somehow? And what did seconds have to do with it? Reference to the clock again?

*...Seconds to deliver my letter.* A message? The riddle was a message of sorts, or there was a message in the riddle?

Calebros impatiently flipped more pages. Where was Anatole taking him? Where had the Prophet taken poor Jeremiah? Had Jeremiah recorded the right details? He *must* have. Anatole would have seen to it somehow. The Prophet had known all this would come to pass. He'd known about Jeremiah even before Calebros had sent him. Anatole had planted seeds with Donatello in the cathedral that would grow and bear fruit with Jeremiah much later.

*Seconds... letter...*

Calebros scanned ahead through the reports. *“Anatole begins his sandal rubbing. Four seconds, changes directions. One minute forty-four seconds, changes direction...”*

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“Seconds!” Calebros said aloud. Anatole knew that Jeremiah was timing him—knew that he *would* time him. Calebros had to abandon chronology; he had to acknowledge that causal and temporal relationships did not necessarily exist with the Prophet. Planting the seeds for the fruit he knew would be needed....

It had to fit. Jeremiah had timed the sandal rubbings, timed them in *seconds*. But how did that deliver messages? A message, rather. No, not a message, a *letter*. The answer had to be here. Seconds. What did seconds have to do with a letter? And what did Anatole’s sandal rubbing have to do with anything?

*Four seconds, changes directions. One minute forty-four seconds, changes direction.* Calebros slid his finger down the page to the notes from another night: *Four seconds, changes directions. One minute forty-four seconds, changes direction.* These were the first recorded times for the given nights. They were followed by various times, all between four and one-forty-four. It must mean something that they were the same. But then Calebros cursed when he saw the next night: *One second, changes directions. Twenty-six seconds, changes directions.*

What, Calebros tried to discern, was the pattern? Most of the recordings were four seconds followed by a minute and forty-four seconds. But every so often, seemingly at random, there was the one and twenty-six substitution, and on those nights the subsequent times all fell within *that* range: 1-26-1-14-1-14-7-5-12...

*A combination?* he wondered. *Or a mathematical relation?* *One and twenty-six, four and one-forty-four.* He started scribbling down the math. One-forty-four was divisible by four... thirty-six times. Was there a significance there? Thirty-six months? Three years? Was something going to happen in three years? The numbers all started to run together in his mind, then... *not one-forty-four. Seconds! One minute forty-four seconds is one hundred four seconds, not one hundred forty-four.* And one hundred four divided by four was *twenty-six*.

Calebros slammed his pen down in triumph. Even when the initial numbers were different, the *ratio* was one to twenty-six. *And how is twenty-six related to a letter? Each letter is one of twenty-six!* Calebros hastily began making a chart along the margin of the report: 1=A, 2=B, 3=C.... The four nights were merely multiples!

And the last line of the riddle, *Which way do I go? Which direction.* Jeremiah had already recorded the changes in direction. They signified the end of one letter’s time and the beginning of the next.

Quickly, he began flipping *back* through the report, gathering all the times that Jeremiah had listed. *What if he missed something? Something vital? Ah, but the Prophet would have seen that that didn’t happen. Best to see what’s here, though....*

It did not take long before Calebros saw the numbers transformed into letters into words into sentences. It did not take much longer than that for him to realize that he should find Cock Robin—*right away*. There was not a moment to spare.

**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 4:41 AM**  
**Beneath Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



Their restless, bloodthirsty gazes followed his every movement. Especially the stare of the silent one. Pug could feel them watching him. Knowing that their hatred was not directed at him did not calm his nerves. He'd already brought them farther than anyone else could have, but if he failed now, if he lost the trail, their denied vengeance might be directed toward other outlets—like him.

Calebros had led him into the still-burning hotel. How desperate did the chief have to be to do *that*? It was because of the silent one, Pug knew. The silent one wouldn't rest until this was over. After two nights of the relentless hunt, Pug thought he might rather have just kept helping that strange Hilda woman search for Jeremiah. In the hotel, Pug and Calebros had stayed away from the fire crews. They were everywhere, as was the smoke and the water. It had turned out that the floors Calebros wanted to check were too far gone. There wasn't much of them left, really. Nothing that Pug could have picked up a scent from. They'd left, defeated, and there it would have ended.

Except Pug found the trail. He'd found it where none of them had expected, where they had congregated beneath the hotel. While Calebros and the silent one had decided what to do next, Pug had noticed the familiar scent, the scent from the photograph. It had been touch and go through the tunnels since. It was touch and go still.

He moved forward slowly, cautiously, approaching another storm grate. Untold scents from the chaotic upper world flooded into the tunnel through the metal cross-hatching. The wave of competing stimuli engulfed Pug—litter blowing overhead, food wrappers, stale urine, motor oil, the ever-present, all-permeating exhaust fumes. He hesitated, doubted, faltered. The strand he followed was so faint!

"Concentrate, Pug," said Calebros from behind, understanding but anxious, impatient.

The silent one watched, glowering. He clicked his jagged fingernails together. The sound, like spiders clattering up Pug's spine, made the hair on his neck stand on end. He hoped that the others didn't smell his fear. But he knew the silent one did.

*Concentrate, Pug!* he echoed to himself Calebros's words. The extraneous smells, the clicking spiders in his mind—*Concentrate!* Set them aside. Then he heard the nervous shuffling. Behind Calebros, the others, too, were unnerved by the silent one, the monster among monsters. They wanted desperately to prove themselves to him, to play a part in his vengeance, but none could match his brooding ferocity.

Pug caught the trail again, moved forward, felt the beginning of the collective sigh behind him, instantly lost the scent. The tunnel split ahead, just beyond the storm grates—their quarry must have known that, must have risked rising this close to the surface for just that reason. The downdraft whipped the maddeningly churning scents into a cavorting frenzy.

The silent one let out a deep, throaty warble, a peculiarly disturbing sound.

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“Which way, Pug?” Calebros urged.

“I... I don’t know.”

“You must know,” Calebros said quietly. “Take your time. Here.” He reached into his pocket, took out a folded Ziploc bag, and handed it to Pug.

Pug opened the bag carefully, sniffed at the picture inside—a handsome kine, the former justicar before his change, before his first death or Final. The picture was not their quarry, but their quarry had handled the picture, had touched it and left his scent upon it. That was long ago, much too long for any normal bloodhound to pick up a scent, long enough that Pug was having trouble even without the distracting wind and smells from above. He handed back the bag, then closed his eyes and covered his ears, trying to ignore the mocking breeze that smacked at his face, and to concentrate instead on the plethora of scents the air carried. He tried, as best as he could, not to hear and feel the agitated trilling of the silent one awaiting results....

There. The left tunnel. As they continued, Pug moved more quickly, felt more sure of himself. The tunnel split again, but he barely paused before taking the left fork. The urgency of his clanmates drove him forward. His increasing confidence was exceeded only by his sense of relief that he had not failed those who depended on him. Not yet, he hadn’t.

There were still competing scents, distracting odors that threatened to overpower the true path, but Pug was up to the challenge. He had the trail. He had the scent of the Kindred they pursued and didn’t think he’d lose it again. It seemed normal again, natural. Not like before at the storm grate. Something there had been... *not right*. Even with the wind-borne smells from the upper world, he shouldn’t have had so much trouble. He never should have come that close to losing the trail and not finding it. He shouldn’t have needed the picture again. Maybe it was the Tremere they were following. Maybe he’d stopped and tried to conceal his passing—and almost succeeded.

What mattered, Pug reminded himself, was that he’d found the trail. Now, after the fact, he was halfway miffed with himself for having been so nervous. It wasn’t like they would have tossed him back into the kennels had he failed... at least he didn’t think so. But it wasn’t over yet. They were still right there behind him, after all. The silent one, Calebros, all of the others. Still depending on him....

*Concentrate*, Pug reminded himself, not wanting to subject himself needlessly to the overwhelming pressure of those other thoughts, of that slippery slope.

He led them deeper into the storm sewers, away from the upper world. He followed the trail as easily now as if their prey had unrolled a ball of twine as he went and left it to lead them along. The Kindred hadn’t attempted any of the usual tricks to obscure his passing. He hadn’t waded through the shallower sections of the sewer if there was an alternate dry route. He hadn’t tried to disguise his scent with garbage or overflow from the waste sewers. It was as if he thought he’d be home free by this point. He’d counted on his gambit at the storm grate. But he hadn’t counted on Pug.

*Concentrate*, Pug told himself. Whatever trick the Kindred had used at the grate had almost worked, and he could certainly try it again. Magic, Pug decided. To have given him that much trouble, the trick must have been magic. *Concentrate*.

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Just a few minutes later, Pug, with his nose almost to the ground, was concentrating so intently in fact that he didn't notice the feet that stepped toward him from the darkness. He did notice, at the last second, the lead pipe that smashed down across his skull. Everything was very suddenly confused.

He looked up just as the blow fell. The pipe struck above his right eye and along that cheek. The darkness of the tunnel was instantly replaced by bright flashes of light. Then Pug was weightless.

Shouting. There was shouting in the distance, muffled, incoherent. He tasted blood—his own blood, or what passed as his own blood. But that taste was quickly diluted by another, rank liquid. He opened his eyes—tried to, wasn't sure if he was successful. Darkness rushing.

Hands grasped at him. Pug struggled to get away, to shield himself from more blows. But he was merely fumbling. They grabbed him, held tightly against his weak thrashing, pulled him roughly but met resistance. Water. They were pulling him through the water.

Slowly, he was able to orient himself again. He'd fallen into the flow channel of the storm drain. *That was clumsy*, he thought vacantly. No, not a clumsy fall, he remembered. The pipe.

A struggle was still going on, not far away, on the walkway where his three clanmates were now towing him. Pug caught a glimpse of Calebros's wide face, all jagged fangs as he tore a savage bite from one assailant's shoulder. The silent one, too, was a blur of violent motion, claws slicing and rending. The other Nosferatu attacked ferociously, giving no quarter. Bodies already littered the tunnel.

Pug and his rescuers ducked as a projectile flew past—an *arm*, the hand still clutching a lead pipe. The arm landed in the foulness of the water, and the pipe pulled the limb under.

The enemies were not faring well. That Pug could discern as his senses cleared. The attackers, though immersed in battle, moved lethargically. Their pipes and scraps of wood rarely connected with a target, as the Nosferatu darted in and out among them, striking blow after blow. Pug had never seen Calebros move so quickly and was shocked too by the force of his attacks. The elder's every blow was a scythe of destruction. Bodies were piling up.

And then it was over as suddenly as it began, even before Mike and Paulie were able to hoist the still slightly dazed Pug back onto the walkway. Some of Pug's clanmates were rifling through the pockets of the few bodies that remained relatively intact.

"What were they doing here?" Pug, wringing out his clothes, asked no one in particular.

"They were dead. Already dead," said a quiet voice. Calebros. He sniffed at one of his own talons, stuck out a gray, pimpled tongue, and tasted a bit of the meat that wedged beneath. He nodded, confirming his assertion.

Pug looked around at the bodies—body parts, mostly—scattered about. It was difficult reconstructing exactly how many assailants there had been. At least seven or eight, perhaps as many as a dozen? But despite the degree of dismemberment, there was little blood. "Kindred?" he asked.

"No," Calebros said. "Little more than corpses."

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The other Nosferatu had finished ransacking the bodies and taken anything remotely of value: shoes, clothes, spare change, fillings. An ominous, throaty warble signaled the silent one's impatience to continue. The creature's deformed head, with its distended, vaguely avian chin, reminded Pug of a vulture. But Pug could also see—it was clear in the pale, icy eyes—that the silent one was not content merely to find carrion. He wished to create it.

“You'd best lead us onward,” said Calebros.

Pug nodded, turned back to recover the trail, and was relieved to have something other than the silent one to concentrate upon.



**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 4:46 AM**  
**The Shaft**  
**New York City, New York**



She could see how it got its name: “the Shaft.” The tunnel was roughly two car-lengths wide where it started, just below street-level Brooklyn. It was steep right off the bat, but almost immediately it turned sharply downward and continued from that point nearly vertically. There were ladders and ledges and carved steps and handholds all along the way—and more tunnels, hundreds of tunnels stretching out in every direction from the central shaft. Hilda had fallen in love with the place the minute she laid eyes on it. Pug had brought her here in their search for Jeremiah. That had been two nights ago. They’d come back last night, and still they had barely scratched the surface. A Kindred could spend lifetimes down here and never explore all the tunnels. If Jeremiah was lost near the Shaft, chances were he was going to stay lost.

Pug had said as much last night, and Hilda couldn’t argue. But tonight, when the odd little fellow had been called away to help with the hunt, Hilda had sneaked away and come back. She couldn’t care less about the hunt or the Sabbat. Petrodon had been a bastard, and nobody in the Sabbat had ever treated her worse than folks in the Camarilla. So here she was.

The last thing she had expected was to run into someone else.

She’d been in the shaft for hours when she heard him, following along, coming from the same direction she’d just come. Coincidence? Down here with hundreds of tunnels and passages turning and twisting back on themselves? Hardly.

She briefly considered hiding. Instead, picking up a large rock from the tunnel rubble, she bashed him in the head the instant he turned the corner. He was plenty big, and it must be true what they say about big fellows, because he fell plenty hard. She had considered the possibility that he was a friend, but he still had no business following her.

He lay stunned for a moment. He wore an old suit, but he was obviously very hairy, mangy patches of brown and gray. He didn’t move, except for his large black eyes, no whites whatsoever, blinking rapidly. He had a nasal cavity instead of a nose, and the longest of his jagged teeth protruded through half of his lip. After a few minutes of quiet groaning, he managed to sit upright. “You would be Hilda?” he said somewhat groggily.

“Guilty as charged, glamour boy.”

He rubbed his head and gave her a lusty stare. “I like a girl who can help me get my rocks off.”

“I’ll get your head off your shoulders if you don’t watch it. What are you doing here? Just in the neighborhood?”

“Marston Colchester. Thanks for asking.”

“I know who you are. Up with the Baltimore crowd. I seen you around the warren.”

“And you still bash me in the head?”

“I said I seen you. I didn’t say I liked you.”

“Help me up?” Colchester asked. She offered a hand and pulled him to his feet. She noticed the way his clammy fingers lingered on her own. “I wasn’t following you, by the

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way. Jeremiah and I go way back. Pug said he might be around here somewhere. I just saw that somebody had come this way and thought I'd check it out." Then he grabbed her ass. He grinned, waiting for a reaction—

And seemed surprised when she latched on to his crotch. "Hmm," she pondered. "Must be siesta time south of the border."

Colchester jumped back from her. "Well... *ahem*... about Jeremiah..."

Hilda moved closer. "What's wrong, sweetie? You wouldn't get a girl all flustered and then run away, would you?"

He started backpedaling. "Like I said, he and I go way back."

"I had a Rambler once. The seats went back *all* the way."

"Uh... Pug said that he thought maybe—"

She bashed him in the head with the rock again. He landed like a load of bricks, and she was on him in a second, tearing away the old suit. She rubbed herself up and down his abdomen and ripped away the buttons that had barely managed to hold her too-small blouse together. Her bountiful flesh fell in rolls across his face.

"Dear God, I've died and gone to heaven," he muttered beneath her.

Hilda reached down between his legs and took firm hold of a surprisingly turgid appendage. "Siesta must be over, eh, flyboy?" But when she looked, she saw that the appendage did not belong to him. Instead, it was a fleshy tendril that had somehow entwined itself around his leg and up to his waist. "What in the—?"

Suddenly the tendrils were everywhere, lashing the two Nosferatu like bloody, rubber hoses. Hilda jumped to her feet, but her own legs were quickly entangled, as were her arms, her neck. The tendrils pulled her back down. They pulled her along the tunnel floor toward the central chasm. Colchester was struggling, but she couldn't see him. He was a mummy wrapped in flesh instead of cloth.

Hilda pulled and kicked and bit, but to no avail. Finally all that was left to her was to scream. The sound, like Hilda herself, disappeared down the Shaft.

**Saturday, 13 November 1999, 5:50 AM**  
**Beneath Manhattan**  
**New York City, New York**



Although it was Pug who followed the scent, Calebros and company were close on his heels, leaning low as if they too could discern the trail. Mike Tundlight and Paulie and the others seemed to have, for the moment, forgotten their fear of Cock Robin. All kept close. Each time Pug picked up his pace, the entire pack of Kindred, nine in all, surged forward to keep up. They were driven by a thirst for vengeance.

Calebros was pleased that they were so sure of him. Or perhaps it was the words of the Prophet in which the Nosferatu placed their confidence. *The wizard does not burn, but seeks peace among the dead.* One of several messages Anatole had left—prophecies as much as messages, for he had set the messengers in motion long before the events themselves came to pass. He had loaded the messengers down and then pointed them toward Calebros. And was it merely luck or happenstance that the warren chief had deciphered the messages tonight, when another night or two might have been too late? Calebros had never been a strong believer in coincidence, and after being caught in the wake of the Prophet was even less so. He believed that the discovery of the hidden messages had to have come so closely on the heels of the note from Sturbridge for a reason. She'd informed him that Nickolai was destroyed in a great conflagration, but the regent had provided no proof. And then the revealed prophecy: *The wizard does not burn....* Calebros found it easier to accept the cryptic ravings of a madman than the bland assurances of a Tremere.

Even so, he had not been sure, not completely. Not when he alerted the justicar and gathered what clanmates had not been sent to Throgs Neck. Not even when Pug had found the scent beneath the burning hotel. Too many possibilities for error, too many potential avenues of failure.

But when the corpses had attacked, *then* he was positive. Not Kindred, but walking corpses. Thaumaturgy. Blood magic.

The others seemed to have sensed the final throes of his doubt. Cock Robin had pressed Pug more relentlessly, and the boy, to his credit, had forged ahead. They all had moved as quickly as possible behind their guide, who now brought them to a familiar place, a place Calebros was not completely surprised to see.

Pug came to a halt, and all the hunting party with him. Ahead, the tunnel ended at a stout wooden door, and before the door stood a Nosferatu familiar to Calebros. The warren chief turned and signaled to Mike, who promptly took two of their number, Thurston and Diesel, and retreated back the way they had come.

By the door, Abe Morgenstern scraped his toes in the muck and bowed placatingly. "Good morning to you all," he said nervously, "and welcome to my abode." His head was small, too much so, as if headhunters had gotten to him but not finished the job. Morgenstern was *antitribu*, but among the sewer dwellers that did not mean death on sight. Much could be learned by speaking to one's enemies and, on occasion, trading information with them.

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But Calebros and his hunters were in no mood to trade anything tonight. “We will have him,” Calebros said, eschewing pretense and civility.

Abe flustered easily. His entire head, little more than a skull with skin pulled very tightly over it, turned scarlet. “He’s not... I’m sure I don’t know what...”

Cock Robin stepped past Calebros, and in the blink of an eye had laid open Abe from neck to groin with the single swipe of a razor claw. Surprise more than pain registered on Morgenstern’s red face as the justicar shoved him to the side. At the same time, Calebros noticed a strange sound in the background—like a chorus of fingernails tapping on stone, faint but not far away.

There was no time to ponder, however. As Morgenstern fell to his knees and tried to stuff his withered intestines back into his belly, shouting and the sounds of struggle rose from behind the door. With one fierce blow of Cock Robin’s fist, the wood splintered, and the band of Nosferatu rushed forward.

They crashed through the first room, barely a widening of the tunnel filled with boxes and garbage, and into the second. Thurston was on the floor, writhing and jerking spasmodically. Blood flowed from his nose and ears—and the blood boiled. Mike and Diesel were struggling with another Kindred, a middle-aged man. He was not as physically imposing as they, but there was sorcery in the air, as Thurston’s simmering blood attested.

*Nickolai*, Calebros thought, *the murderer I’ve sought for so long*. “Yield, Tremere!” Calebros called. There were many questions he would ask, secrets he would pry loose. Mike and the others had circled around and blocked the warlock’s escape, but he was not yet subdued.

The Kindred answered Calebros with a sneer and latched a hand onto Diesel’s chest. The Nosferatu reared back his head, mouth wide to scream in pain, but only a thick gurgling emerged. And then his blood. Boiling and foaming, it poured from his mouth and ran down his body. As he fell away, Mike still wrestled with their prey. As the other Nosferatu piled into the room, *Nickolai* grabbed Mike’s arm and an ethereal emerald light spread over it. Within seconds, the arm withered and shriveled. Mike screamed.

With an alacrity that surprised even himself, Calebros clambered over the boxes and crates that filled the room to block the far exit himself. Mike, clutching his crippled arm to his body, staggered away from *Nickolai*. Cock Robin and the four Nosferatu behind him stepped forward threateningly.

“Yield!” Calebros commanded again. He spoke quickly, before another blow could fall. “Your clansmen think you destroyed, as you wanted.” *The wizard does not burn, but seeks peace among the dead*. “They won’t be looking for you. I know you fled the hotel; you fled them.” Calebros had sought vengeance for so long, but now that the moment was at hand, he discovered he desired *answers* far more. How exactly had the murder played out? How had Benito and Leopold been drawn into the web?

“Yield? So I can answer your petty questions, you wretched beast?” *Nickolai* sneered. He was pale and drawn. “I think not. The world is better off rid of your pathetic Petrodon, and it will be better off rid of you.” He reached a hand for Calebros, but the Nosferatu proved too quick, jerking out of the way.

But that left the door unobstructed, and *Nickolai* lurched toward it. Calebros could not both stay out of the warlock’s deadly reach and prevent his escape, so he fell upon the Tremere. Pug and Paulie were there with him too, piling on. *Nickolai* roared with anger

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and slapped a hand at Calebros's face. The warlock's fingers found purchase against a deep-set eye and a gaping nostril—

And nothing happened. Calebros waited a moment for his face to wither or his blood to boil away, but nothing happened. Nickolai screeched his rage and squeezed, as if he meant to crush the Nosferatu's skull with his bare hand, but no mystical surge of energies tore Calebros asunder.

The wizard, his strength spent, crumpled to his knees beneath the blows that Pug and Paulie rained down upon him. "I yield," he said, defeated, hardly trying to fend off the abuse heaped upon his shoulders.

"Enough," said Calebros, halting Pug and Paulie. "He has done his worst."

That was when Calebros heard the strange sound again—like fingernails drumming on stone, the fingernails of hundreds and thousands of fingers. As Calebros stood over the kneeling Tremere and Pug and Paulie backed away, the sound swelled, grew louder, almost deafening. Nickolai seemed confused by the noise as well, and the Nosferatu were craning their necks and looking about.

All except Cock Robin. He stood squarely in the doorway that divided the two rooms of Abe Morgenstern's pitiful haven. The justicar's fists were planted firmly on his narrow, twisted hips, his gaze, full of hatred immeasurable, did not shift from Nickolai.

*He cares nothing for the answers we could find*, Calebros realized looking at the justicar in that instant. *Nothing for what we could learn of the Tremere and their sorcery*. Cock Robin did not wish to exploit Nickolai; he wished him destroyed.

The roaches began streaming into the small room by the hundreds and then by the thousands. They covered the floor and climbed over each other, and when they became too deep on the floor they scurried across the walls. Even the Nosferatu were unnerved by the onslaught. They stood rigidly still and looked anxiously at one another as the flood of insects reached their ankles, and then their knees. If any of them had spoken, his voice would have been drowned out by the clatter and chitter of millions of insects.

Only Cock Robin remained unconcerned. Only he watched, unflinching, as the roaches began tearing away the undead flesh that was Nickolai. His screams were muffled by the rattle and buzz of the scavengers. But then he was beneath the flood, and at some point, his screams stopped.

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**Transcript of Interview, Held 14 November 1999**  
**Interview conducted by Madame Guil, Justicar of Clan Toreador**  
**Subject: Theo Bell, Archon of Clan Brujah**



**Justicar Guil:** And so, in your estimation, Archon Bell, at the point at which you lured Prince Vitel to the warehouse, he remained unaware of your harmful intent toward him?

**Archon Bell:** Do you think he'd have got in that car if he'd thought I was gonna blow his [EXPLETIVE DELETED] head off?

**Guil:** I'm interested in your opinion, Archon. [PAUSE; RATTLING OF CELLOPHANE] I'd prefer that you didn't smoke in here.

**Bell:** [BARELY AUDIBLE MUTTERING]

**Guil:** Excuse me, Archon?

**Bell:** Yes. In my estimation, he remained unaware. Hell, we spent weeks briefing him and the others, telling them that the Sabbat could bust through any night. Which was true. And the scenario we constructed for Vitel was credible. When they did attack a week later, they came along the same routes I told him they were using that night.

**Guil:** But you knew he was in communication with the enemy. Shouldn't he have known that the assault was not happening that night?

**Bell:** From everything that Pieterzoon and Colchester had scraped together, we thought his communication with the Sabbat was sporadic. We hoped he didn't know the exact details of whatever attack was coming.

**Guil:** You "thought" his communications were sporadic. You "hoped" he didn't know?

**Bell:** Look. That whole operation in Baltimore was built on hope and speculation. If anybody had bothered to tell us that there was a plan underway to take New York, it would've helped. As it was, I say we were damn lucky that the plan Pieterzoon and I came up with dovetailed with what was already going down in New York.

**Guil:** I believe had your plan not coincided with our wishes, Lucinde would have guided you in a more convenient direction. As it was, your actions bore out our predictions to a significant degree, so you were left to operate independently. But we were, I believe, discussing Marcus Vitel.

**Bell:** Right. And you're interested in my lowly opinion. Well, it seemed most likely to me that the Sabbat high command wasn't going to keep Vitel completely informed. If your spy gets bagged and spills his guts, you're screwed.

**Guil:** You seem to accept this theoretical Sabbat policy of parceling information on a need-to-know basis more wholeheartedly than our own similar practice—at least as far as you are concerned. Would not our New York gambit have been threatened had a combatant such as yourself been aware of every detail and captured?

**Bell:** Different situation, lady.

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**Guil:** That would be “Madame,” or “Justicar,” thank you.

**Bell:** Hmph.

**Guil:** Let us skip ahead, Archon. Once you were in the warehouse—you and your driver, the prince and his retainer—your first interaction there with Vitel was...

**Bell:** I shot him in the face.

**Guil:** Indeed. Before or after extracting a confession?

**Bell:** This wasn't no interrogation. It was a hit. We already knew what we needed to know. We were there to take him out of the picture, not ask questions.

**Guil:** And Mr. Pieterzoon concurred with your assessment?

**Bell:** Yeah.

**Guil:** And Lucinde?

**Bell:** Couldn't tell you for sure. But since you're so interested in my opinion, I assumed Pieterzoon was keeping her informed. I don't think she would've had it any other way. Look. We were trying to hold Baltimore till the last second and pull off a screened withdrawal to another city. If you folks are unhappy about how we did it, then just have Pascek give me my pink slip, and I'll be on my way.

**Guil:** I am merely attempting to ascertain the facts.

**Bell:** Bullshit. We were cut loose, and I bet that for every justicar who hoped we'd pull it off, there was another hoping we'd fall on our ass. And now that we did pull it off, you're gonna second guess me to death because you, or somebody, can't stand for the credit to go to Pascek or Lucinde or who-the-hell-ever.

**Guil:** Archon Bell, I am not unaware of this and other services you have rendered the Camarilla, but I will not be addressed in that tone. [PAUSE] Now, in your experience, the shot you fired at Prince Vitel—that would have incapacitated many Kindred?

**Bell:** I gave him a burst, four shots, of dragons breath—that's white phosphorus incendiary rounds—square in the face. Many... hell, most Kindred that's gonna take their head clean off. At the very least he should have been incapacitated for a long [EXPLETIVE DELETED] time.

**Guil:** But he was not.

**Bell:** No. Not for long.

**Guil:** What other force did you bring to bear against him?

**Bell:** Besides me, we had thirteen ghouls plus Pieterzoon with sub-machineguns, and four more of my people, Kindred, three with side arms, the other with a sword.

**Guil:** I see. And your losses?

**Bell:** Eleven ghouls dead, one Kindred destroyed, another completely fucked up, and the rest of us banged around pretty good.

**Guil:** From just Vitel and his retainer?

**Bell:** No. That's just from Vitel. Lydia blew the ghoul's [EXPLETIVE DELETED] head off right after I shot the prince the first time.

**Guil:** [PAUSE] I see. [PAUSE] Was that the type of encounter you were expecting, Archon Bell?

**Bell:** [DERISIVE LAUGHTER] No. Not exactly.

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**Guil:** What exactly were you expecting?

**Bell:** Well, any time you tackle a prince, it's gonna be tough. And Vitel, to be prince of a city like D.C., he's got a lot in his corner. The advantage we had was that he'd been run out of his city, he didn't have the power structure and built-in safeties that he was used to, and we were taking the initiative. All of that, and the firepower we had—it should've been... not easy, but not as damn hard as it was. I mean, take your ghoul on the stenograph machine there—I pop him in the face with one dragons breath round... he's toast. Like I said before, I hit Vitel in the face with four rounds. And then, over the course of the fight, with four more bursts—that's three or four rounds each, maybe twelve to fifteen shots after I plugged him in the face, point blank. Add to that... God, I don't know, hundreds of solid shots from everybody else. I know a few ain't nothing, but that many added up.

**Guil:** Prince Vitel seems to have made quite an impression on you.

**Bell:** I've been in some rough spots. It's my job. And I wasn't expecting some [EXPLETIVE DELETED], but he was no typical elder. He had to have been old to have taken that much punishment and still tossed around the heavy [EXPLETIVE DELETED] he was.

**Guil:** Not a typical Ventruue.

**Bell:** [PAUSE] No.

**Guil:** What “heavy [EXPLETIVE DELETED]” was it that he was tossing around, Archon?

**Bell:** Well, I've said how much of a beating he took and kept going. He was fast—he got out of that car in a damn hurry when we were distracted for just a few seconds—but that's not a big surprise. For a little while after he came out from under the car, he was hiding from us, and there wasn't nothing to hide behind, and the lights was on. I know that's the kind of trick a Kindred might be able to learn, if you know a Nosferatu who's stupid enough to teach you and give up his competitive advantage, but still... I can swallow that much. But this guy was levitating. He was throwing fireballs, for Christ's sake. Fireballs he just summoned out of nowhere in his hand. [EXPLETIVE DELETED]. I don't even like to think about it. And he was packing some serious shadow magic.

**Guil:** Shadow magic. As a Lasombra might wield.

**Bell:** You could say that.

**Guil:** But would you say that, Archon Bell?

**Bell:** I might.

**Guil:** Prince Vitel seems to have been a very... resourceful individual.

**Bell:** Jesus [EXPLETIVE DELETED] Christ.

**Guil:** But it was the sword that finished him?

**Bell:** Right.

**Guil:** Tell me, Archon Bell, as powerful as it seems Prince Vitel was, far more potent than you expected even of an elder, did it not seem odd to you that he did not escape from the warehouse once the combat was underway? Do you not think he would have been capable of that?

**Bell:** Hell, yes, he was capable of that. But he was [EXPLETIVE DELETED] pissed.

**Guil:** Are you suggesting that a Kindred prince, a creature that had existed perhaps hundreds of years, met his Final Death because he was angry?



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**Bell:** Angry. Arrogant. Whatever you want to call it. You weren't there. You didn't see his eyes. I was concerned about him escaping, but that was only at first. Once I realized how powerful he was... He was insulted that we attacked him. He was enjoying ripping ghouls limb from limb and roasting Kindred. It was gonna be a close thing. I think he just miscalculated. Even prince that's old as dirt can make a bad call, especially if he's pissed. And this time it was his ass.

**Guil:** I see. And your conviction couldn't possibly stem from the satisfaction and notoriety you derive from having destroyed Marcus Vitel?

**Bell:** [EXPLETIVE DELETED] you, lady. Oh, pardon me... [EXPLETIVE DELETED] you, Madame Justicar.

**Guil:** I believe this interview is at an end, Archon.

**Bell:** You might be at an end. I got a few more [EXPLETIVE DELETED] things to say....

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**Personal Correspondence, Sent 15 November 1999**  
**From Madame Guil, Justicar of Clan Toreador**  
**To Hardestadt of the Inner Circle of the Camarilla**



I believe you will agree that my interviews with Mr. Pieterzoon and Archon Bell, in addition to the correspondences retrieved from Marcus Vitel's possession, confirm my earlier assertion: that Vitel was not at all what he seemed. The letters, consistently addressed to "Lucius" would appear to corroborate other information I have uncovered concerning one "Lucius Sejanus". These traitorous retches can hide from me for only so long before I unearth their black secrets.

We are fortunate to be rid of "Vitel". There is undeniable evidence that he was consorting with the Sabbat. Your stratagem of utilizing Pieterzoon and Bell as pseudo-independent (i.e., expendable) agents against Vitel proved practicable. Had their investigation of and assault versus the prince gone badly, the matter would have been to their detriment—and would have created no additional complications for yourself or the other members of the Inner Circle.

I fear, however, that one issue may not be in full resolved: We may be rid of "Prince Vitel", yet not have seen the last of "Lucius". Despite Archon Bell's strident protests to the contrary, I have difficulty accepting as a certainty that a being as evidently aged and powerful as the one Bell fought was dispatched—even by so able an archon. Perhaps Bell is correct. I hope that he is, but I cannot yet *believe* it. (You have long accused me of playing the skeptic, and I freely confess: Neither have yet allowed myself to believe the reports regarding that bloated spider, Monçada!) Even should the most desirable outcome have come to pass, prudence behooves us to remain guarded. As always.

Until our next meeting.

Yours Indubitably, etc., etc.

Mme. Guil



**Friday, 19 November 1999, 11:00 PM**  
**Office 7210-A, Empire State Building**  
**New York City, New York**

Lucinde's Ventrue ghoul below had pressed the button for the elevator and then gestured for Calebros to enter when the doors opened. *As if I didn't know how the blasted thing worked*, the Nosferatu thought. That alone might have perturbed him had he not been of a foul temper already. He was not in an all-fired hurry to pay his respects to Prince Victoria Ash of New York City.

She sat across the table from him, all splendor and makeup and pearls. It was not official yet. She was not actually prince, not yet. But Calebros had heard the rumblings; he'd received word of the maneuverings and machinations, the unsavory deals. This Council of Twelve, as Lucinde so grandiosely referred to it, was but a perfunctory show for the masses. The fix was on. Otherwise, Pascek would have stayed in town.

The six clans were each represented around the table. That's what they were calling the Camarilla already, *the six clans*. Never mind that no one seemed to know for sure if Xaviar had followed through with his threat, if Clan Gangrel was truly no longer part of the sect. Certain individuals would remain loyal, no doubt. The outlanders had never been a model of top-down leadership. But for the time being, Lucinde and her ilk had sufficient cause to exclude the Gangrel from decision-making. One less wildcard with which the Ventrue and Brujah intelligentsia would be forced to deal.

Calebros himself would have skipped this charade had not Cock Robin insisted that they attend. That alone had been worth the trip—seeing the reaction of the others in the room, most of whom had not even known that the Nosferatu justicar was in the city. Lucinde, who jointly with Pascek had called the meeting and remained to act as chairperson, represented Clan Ventrue along with Jan Pieterzoon, who had served so well over the past months. With Pascek's absence, Theo Bell, seemingly fully recovered from his exploits, and Lladislas accounted for the Brujah, the latter looking decidedly disgruntled. Victoria had Gainesmil beside her for the Toreador. Regent Sturbridge had brought a Tremere underling along, and two brothers, Eric and Jonathan Chen represented the Malkavians. They appeared disturbingly normal.

"Greetings and welcome," Lucinde addressed them once the gathering was complete. She seemed deceptively young and vulnerable among the hoary old Kindred at the table. "The city is ours," she announced. "Fate has smiled upon us."

Calebros thought he noticed Victoria flinch at the words. No doubt she, too, felt the assumption of victory to be premature. It was true that the Sabbat's organized resistance had been broken at what was becoming known as the Battle of Throgs Neck, and Cardinal Polonia forced to retreat from the city, across the Hudson into New Jersey. A humiliating defeat for the newly ascendant cardinal, but that only made him more dangerous. Sabbat packs still roamed portions of the city, and many attempted to return home each night, now that the war to the south was over and the grand alliance forged by the late Cardinal Monçada was defunct.

The Camarilla organization had largely collapsed as well, now that the majority of Sabbat had been scourged from the city. Polonia might have lost his battle, but he had struck down

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Prince Michaela and her last known child. The lack of mourning among the survivors was fairly conspicuous. Once the generals and justicars moved on, a proxy would be left as prince, and the struggle for the soul of New York would begin in earnest. Every night would be a war, and Calebros had little optimism for Victoria's skill to lead in that capacity. She would attend the festivities, the balls and the galas and exhibits, much as Michaela had frequented Wall Street and Broadway, but the street was as much a player in New York as were the boardrooms and theatres. So few of them realized that. Bell did, and maybe Pieterzoon after the past weeks.

"We pay tribute tonight," Lucinde was saying, "to our heroes both standing and fallen. To Archon di Padua, the Right Hand of the Camarilla, and the Hero of Throgs Neck." She nodded solemnly toward the representatives of Clan Nosferatu.

*Oh, please.* Calebros fought his urge to gag audibly. Yes, Federico had taken a saber to the head and slipped into torpor for God knew how long, but did anyone in this room actually *believe* that Lucinde felt bad about that?

"To Archon Bell, the Scourge of Harlem; to Jan Pieterzoon, our able field commander..." The bestowal of honors and sobriquets seemed to take hours. Calebros shifted in his seat periodically, setting off chains of popping vertebrae that everyone else at the table did their best to ignore.

"But we must also look to the future," Lucinde said at last. "The routines of the night have been disrupted, and already there is strife among our own." Calebros wondered when there *hadn't* been strife among their own. "Hunting grounds must be established in the territories we've gained, or re-established where Kindred have fallen. New Kindred enter the city in great numbers, some having fought by our sides, others seeking their destinies. Justice must be administered. Boundaries must be secured—"

"What you're saying," Theo Bell broke in at last, "is that the city needs a prince. Right?"

"I am," Lucinde said, slightly flummoxed. "But—"

"Pascek left a letter for the council about that." Bell produced a folded paper from his new leather jacket, waited long enough that everyone could see Pascek's personal wax seal, and then opened the letter. "The justicar *instructed* me to read the whole thing..." his eyes ran down the page, "but Lucinde here seems to have hit the hot spots already. Important part's at the end." He slid the letter across the table to the Ventrué justicar.

Lucinde retrieved it and her eyes took in Pascek's words a bit more carefully than Theo's had. When she came to the bottom of the page, she folded it and placed it back on the table. "To fulfill the duties of prince of New York, Justicar Pascek nominates Victoria Ash."

Nods and murmurs betrayed the lack of surprise. Calebros, like Cock Robin beside him, responded not at all. The city could not function without the Nosferatu. It mattered little who was prince. Calebros would advise the new prince as faithfully as he had the old. *But what would the others think if they knew Victoria was the sire of that thing that wreaked such havoc? Would they be in such a hurry to make her prince? What would Bell say? Dear God—what would Xaviar do if he found out?* Calebros darted a glance at the seat beside him. *What would Cock Robin do?*

"And I," Lucinde added, "am honored to second the justicar's nomination. Let the clans speak."

One after another they gave their blessings: Sturbridge, then Eric, elder of the Chens. When Theo mumbled his assent, Lladislas, formerly prince of Buffalo, cursed, slammed his pen to the table. He stood and stormed from the room. "He agrees too," Theo said.

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As junior member of his delegation, Calebros had no vote—but he could stop the proceeding in an instant, merely by revealing Victoria’s secret. Those who’d already spoken would reconsider. So tempting... yet what purpose would it serve? Victoria would be spited—no small accomplishment that, and satisfying. But the city would wallow in chaos, and the Sabbat would be that much more likely to reverse its losses. Cock Robin’s bloodlust would be stoked by the revelation. Calebros knew that. Then Victoria might not only be passed over for prince, but might suffer some horrible “accident” as well, and then Calebros might never find the answers to the questions he still had about Nickolai, about Benito, answers he thought Victoria must have. Cock Robin would care only for the blood.

And so in the end, Calebros remained silent. *She’s in my debt, and she doesn’t even know it*, he thought. *Not yet she doesn’t.*

Cock Robin nodded his approval, and it was done. Victoria had been the perfect compromise candidate. Neither Lucinde or Pascek would allow a member of the other’s clan to gain the position, especially after the mess Michaela had made of things. Nor would the Ventrue or Brujah have considered a Tremere, not after the warlocks had guarded their precious citadels rather than supporting the string of Camarilla princes that had fallen from Atlanta to Washington. The Nosferatu were seen as but servants to the “worthier” clans, the Gangrel were gone, and no one was going to consider a Malkavian except as a last resort.

But someone had to rule. Otherwise the elders and neonates flooding into the city would tear themselves apart fighting for territory and influence. *They might do that anyway*, Calebros thought.

So it was that Lucinde, justicar of Clan Ventrue, conveying the decree of the Council of Twelve, turned to Victoria Ash. “The mantle is passed to you, Victoria. Do you accept it?”

Victoria had met no one’s gaze since the beginning of the proceedings. She had sat uncharacteristically quiet while Lucinde and Theo had spoken; she had not seemed to notice as Lladislas left, or as the votes were tallied. Now, she looked around the table, from one of them to another. She removed her hands from her lap and placed them flat on the table before her.

*She wanted Atlanta and gets New York instead*, Calebros thought. *Not a bad deal.*

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**Friday, 19 November 1999, 11:49 PM**  
**Office 7210-A, Empire State Building**  
**New York City, New York**





“The mantle is passed to you, Victoria. Do you accept it?”

She had known this moment was coming, but still she felt blood welling deep in her throat. She feared she might vomit right there on the table. Her great ambition was within reach, was being placed into her hand—and she did not know if she could take it.

*Of course* she desired to be prince. Atlanta would have been sufficient, but this... *this!*

Yet she did not know. She could feel the itching of the mark on her jaw. The gods of Fate were cruel and capricious, but she had pledged herself to them. She had vowed never to defy them again. Once she had denied them and followed the road to Chicago. As her penance, she had watched her newfound childe destroyed before her eyes, her hand offered to him.... What vengeance would they unleash, what pestilence would they inflict, were she to ignore them now?

No, Fate must needs be consulted, and Victoria, though her desire in the matter held her heart in its crushing grasp, must abide by the decision. Pascek had set forth her name; his words would tell the tale. There was no time, and too many people watching her, to count his every word.... The paragraphs, then. If their number was odd, like the five boroughs of the city, then she would assume her rightful place. If otherwise... no, she would not think of it. Fate could not continue to abuse her so.



**Friday, 19 November 1999, 11:53 PM**  
**Office 7210-A, Empire State Building**  
**New York City, New York**

“May I see the letter?” Victoria asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

Lucinde stared at her for a moment, uncomprehending. “Pardon?”

“Justicar Pascek’s letter. May I see it?”

Profoundly confused, Lucinde looked at the letter as if it were lethal poison, and then back at Victoria. “I assure you, the seal is authentic, and Archon Bell is—”

“I doubt neither you, nor Archon Bell, nor the letter,” Victoria said icily. “But I would see it.”

Lucinde passed her the letter, and Victoria opened it as if it might crumble to dust in her fingers. She took a long time reading it. Watching her eyes, Calebros saw her start over twice. The silence around the table deepened unbearably. Finally, Victoria was done with the letter. She set it down and placed her hands again flat on the table.

“No,” she said quietly, jaw clenched. She stared daggers at her own hands. Calebros could see the tension there, skin taut over thin bones, knuckles white even for her pale complexion. “No,” she said, speaking more quickly and forcefully this time. “I do not accept the mantle.”

“Ah... Victoria,” said Gainesmil beside her, “if you need time to—”

But she had already pushed back her chair, and without explanation she stalked out the room much as Lladislas had minutes before. Ten shocked, gawking creatures of the night watched the door swing closed behind her.

It was Lucinde who eventually broke the silence. “It’s not often that... really I don’t think I’ve ever...” She reached for Pascek’s letter and read it silently again, as if the answers she sought might be found within. But the letter provided no satisfaction and she dropped it back on the table. “We must delay this meeting... this decision until—”

The pounding on the table startled them all. All except Cock Robin. He smashed his fist against the table just twice. And when he had their attention, he took Lladislas’s pen, and on the back of Pascek’s note the Nosferatu justicar began to scratch large, childlike block letters.

**Tuesday, 30 November 1999, 1:25 AM**

**The Shaft  
New York City, New York**



It all seemed so odd. To hide from the dark *in* the dark. Jeremiah couldn't decide if it made sense or not. Either way, he couldn't bring himself to use a light of any sort. He'd broken his flashlight—stomped the bulb and thrown the batteries away—lest he turn to it in a moment of weakness. So like it or not, sensible or not, he would wait in the dark. He resolved not even to think of the light again....

The worst part was that he knew that the light wouldn't really have made a difference. Not to the things out there. Nictuku. He said it quietly to himself, feeling the different ways that his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth. "Nic-tu-ku. Nic-tu-ku. Nic-tu-ku. Nictuk-u." They didn't need the light any more than he did. They would smell him. They would smell the *blood*.

There was worse out there too, of course.

Poor Colchester. Marston might have understood. *I could rescue him*, Jeremiah thought. But it would mean going... *down there*. He wasn't sure what was down there, not exactly. Anatole wouldn't tell him. *Damn the Prophet!* Jeremiah lunged at the ground, seized two rocks, and smashed them together in an explosion of shrapnel and dust.

"Damn the Prophet," he said, defeated, despairing.

"Not much use hiding if you're going to smash rocks together," said a voice.

Jeremiah spun to face the intruder. He could make out a vague outline but no details in the gloom. The shape seemed familiar. "Calebros?"

"No," said the shape. "Not Calebros. Tell me, Jeremiah, why are you hiding?"

"Why?" he said, laughing sarcastically. "Because the eldest of our clan are prowling the night, hunting. Except you say they are an old wives' tale."

"Calebros says that," the shape said. "I know better. But why else are you hiding?"

Jeremiah's eyes narrowed. He moved closer to the shape, peered back in the direction of the shaft, and then whispered, "Down there... in the darkest places. It's there."

The shape moved closer also, and spoke in a quiet voice. "How do you know this?"

Jeremiah rubbed his thumb and fingers together before his face. "Can't you feel it... in the air? I can almost smell it too. It's dark and cold and angry."

"Everyone *should* feel it, Jeremiah. But the kine, they don't. And most of the Kindred ignore it. But you... you know."

"You never believed me before," Jeremiah said, pleased by this turn of events.

"I told you, I'm not Calebros. But he is of my blood. *You* still haven't told me how you know, how you learned the smell. You spoke with the Prophet, didn't you?"

"I did," said Jeremiah. He thought for a moment that he was angry at Anatole, but he wasn't sure why that would be.

"Come with me, friend," said the shape. "You must tell me about your time with the Prophet."

Jeremiah was pleased to have a friend again. He'd been alone in the dark, *fearing* the dark, for so long now. He gathered up his few belongings in his canvas sack and left that place.



**Tuesday, 30 November 1999, 11:07 PM**  
**The underground lake**  
**New York City, New York**



Calebros did not crawl full into the water. Instead he sat naked on his haunches, waist-deep, on the shelf of rock near the shoreline. If previously he had been haggard and at a loss for time, now it was worse, a hundredfold. And the whispering earth would tell him nothing he needed to know at the moment. It would not tell him which middling heroes of the Sabbat war deserved which tunnels and neighborhoods to claim as their hunting grounds. It would not tell him which disputes to settle in whose favor. It would not tell him how to be *prince* of such a sprawling and chaotic city.

He glanced over at the shore, at the crown that Emmett had fashioned him from a mangled hubcap, begemmed with cigarette butts and some kind of unidentifiable, molded fruit. “King of the Sewers,” Emmett had called him during those first heady minutes back at the warren, before the reality had settled in. The hubcap was not heavy, yet the crown had weighed heavily on Calebros when he’d tried it on to humor his broodmate.

Cock Robin was gone. He’d drunk his fill of vengeance and then, though perhaps the least political of justicars, had managed to install his protégé as ruler of the city. After Victoria had walked out, Calebros had been as shocked as anyone to see his own name rendered in Cock Robin’s awkward scrawl. Theo Bell had seemed to like the idea that his justicar’s motion had failed, and was the first to voice support for the Nosferatu. Sturbridge had taken her time before agreeing, and then the Malkavians threw their support behind him. Lucinde and Gainesmil had acquiesced once the vote was carried—for the good of the city, so there would be no doubt of the new prince’s legitimacy. Unanimous selection.

The nights since had been pure toil, and prospects for the future were not much brighter. Yet the feeling of dread within Calebros had nothing to do with territorial disputes or Sabbat raiders. He could not shake sense that something far more ominous hung over him and the city, *his* city.

He tossed a single pebble toward the center of the lake and watched the ripples spread. Then he threw a handful of stones and tried to count the points of intersection among the concentric circles. But there were too many. Far too many. He looked down into the briny water and saw his own reflection, distorted and wavering. He looked into his own eyes.

It was an eye that had begun so much of what had transpired, and now Heshia was gone with that Eye. Strange how circumstances had brought them together. *Circumstances*. *Coincidence*. Calebros thought of the Prophet and knew that those other words held no meaning, no truth. There was a *reason* for all that had happened. But what reason? And whose?

His mind was reeling. Thoughts mundane and abstract converged, collided, became hopelessly enmeshed. Calebros rose from the water. He gathered his clothes that were lying on the shore and climbed the tunnel back to his desk. If anything could help him make sense of his tangled thoughts, it would be his Smith Corona.

30 November 1999

**FILE COPY**  
*Personal*

I find myself too involved in events to observe objectively. So many questions—seemingly unconnected. But the task is not to find if the pieces fit the puzzle, but where they fit it. Seeing only the tip of the proverbial iceberg atop the water, we must somehow map the underlying, unseen dangers. Who (or what) has lost and gained from the results of this past year's extraordinary events? The Camarilla lost much in the way of territory, but the Sabbat has (practically) lost New York and finds itself as fractious as ever, or more so. We Nosferatu have gained our revenge for Petrodon's murder, yet I have more questions about what led to the foul deed. The answers may have gone to the grave with Nickolai. Or does Victoria know? And what insanity prompted her to reject her greatest achievement? Her Leopold is gone. The Eye, too, is out of sight. May Hessa use it wisely. But the question remains: What is the thread that binds these questions together? What is the cause of so many intrigues—the Eye, Petrodon, Nickolai, the war—resolving at the same time and upon the same stage? I can sense it, but not perceive it. Perhaps the answers are in the addled messages of the Prophet. For instance: "An angel must enter the hell of the dragon's belly before this age passes, lest all ages come to pass." If so, I fear I lack the insight to decipher them. He left his coded words and his bloody scrawl upon the Cave of Lamentations. I shall seek what it was he found, and pray that I have time enough.

*Prince Caleb*

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GF



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

Once each of the ripples had run its course and the face of the lake was as smooth and slick as glass, a single, fleshy tendril broke the surface. It stretched toward the shore, where it twined around a discarded, bent hubcap and pulled it back to the depths.





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Epilogues:  
Roulette  
(Russian and otherwise)

From Wednesday, 1 December 1999  
until the time of judgment





**Tuesday, 7 December 1999, 10:45 PM**  
**Uptown 6 Train**  
**New York City, New York**

With a screech of steel, the subway car lurched heavily to one side. Someone behind Ramona screamed as the lights flickered out. The oppressive darkness of the tunnel clamped down.

"This is not funny," she yelled at no one in particular. The human noises around her went suddenly silent. Ramona pushed her way toward the doors and felt for the crack between them. There. Claws parted the rotted weather gasket. With a heave, she wrenched them apart and was rewarded with a faceful of foul, stagnant air.

There was a crackling noise from the car speaker. "...will not be nezezzary Miz Zalvadore."

The sound of her name brought her up short. She turned, her already-keen senses going to full battle readiness. Pinpointing the source of the sound, she edged cautiously toward it. She was surprised that she did not have to fight against a press of bodies stampeding toward the exit. There was no other human sound in the darkness.

"Please ztep away from the doorz." The doors resealed behind her. There was the familiar rumble of a train starting up and pulling away. A flicker of receding lights shone through the grimed windows. The car Ramona was standing in did not budge.

Ramona carefully crossed to the intercom, half-expecting, hoping, to trip over a few bodies lying on the floor. Nada. Angrily, she mashed the button. "I said, this isn't funny. Now you knock this crap off right now and help me get these people out of here or I'll..."

The dim emergency lighting hummed and shuddered to life. The car was empty.

Ramona pressed her face right up against the speaker and yelled directly into it, "All right, what the hell did you do to them?!"

"They are fine, Miss Salvador," the voice came, not from the tinny speaker, but from a shadowy form standing at the far end of the train car. "For them, the train lost power for a moment only and then continued on its way." Ramona whirled upon the newcomer.

The hunched form stepped forward, leaning heavily against the seatbacks as he came. Ramona kept straining to pick out the sound of broken gasps that must accompany such labored progress, but the air did not stir.

"You had requested an audience, my dear. A *private* audience. I have gone to some pains to secure a place where we might be alone. Privacy is such an indulgence here. All too often, I find myself unable to justify the expense of importing it. And there is always someone else jealous of such decadence. But you have not come to hear of my distractions. Sit here, next to me, and tell me why you have come."

He lowered himself torturously into a double seat facing the aisle.

"I didn't ask to be hijacked." Ramona grumpily took the seat opposite him. "I know you've got 'offices' for receiving visitors. Couldn't we just have met in one of those bunkers of yours carved out underneath... oh." Ramona followed the thought through to its logical conclusion and found she had answered her own question. Those places she had met with Calebros before, where they had openly discussed the secrets of the Eye with Hesh—

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those places had not been ‘private’. Their conversations had been overheard, documented, replayed, analyzed, annotated, collated and distributed.

“How long do we have?” she asked shrewdly.

“A better question. At least twenty minutes or so, before I’m missed and someone starts asking questions.”

“Boy, you’re not kidding about that lack-of-privacy thing.”

“Somewhere this week, I seem to have lost my sense of humor. This ‘provisional council’ idea looked a lot better on paper.”

Ramona shook her head. “How’d you get roped into that, anyway? Holding the city together while the rest of polite society is out there butchering each other in the streets—and all for a shot at a seat on some fledgling primogen council. It’s just stupid. It would serve them right if the Sabbat just marched back in and spanked the lot of them. No offense.”

“I believe that I was what they call a ‘compromise candidate.’” Calebros smiled self-deprecatingly.

“They *told* you that? I’d leave them to run their own damn city.”

“You are not alone in that opinion. I believe that many of your relations have felt that way throughout this struggle. No, I’m afraid that, as a Gangrel, you will find that the doors to the backroom intrigues of the Camarilla will no longer open to you—even if you were inclined to knock.”

“If I were interested, I wouldn’t bother knocking.”

Calebros chuckled low, a sound like an engine turning. “No, I don’t imagine you would. I will miss your straightforward style, Ramona. I find it refreshing. But already you know that there is no longer any place for you here. In the midst of battle—against the Sabbat and later, against Leopold and the Eye—we could afford certain marriages of convenience. But these partnerships will not survive the challenges of peacetime. Your associates, Mr. Ruhadze and Mr. Ravana, they found themselves in much the same position. Each has already left New York.”

“What?! You let Heshu go? With the Eye? Are you *nuts*?” Ramona was out of her seat. “That’s why I came to you tonight. I thought you were on the level. That maybe you would help. That maybe there was a place for me here, somewhere. What the hell was I thinking?”

“Please calm yourself, my dear. Mr. Ruhadze did not seek out my permission in this matter. But I was certainly in no position to deny him what had already been pledged by the justicars. It was a *fait accompli*. Nothing worth getting worked up over. You don’t think him so foolish as to attempt to use the Eye? Not after...”

“Damn it, he snowed you too.” Ramona’s fist cracked the plastic seat next to her. “And you knew better. What the hell do you think he’s going to do with the Eye? Put it on his mantelpiece and forget about it? Is it just me? I can’t be the only one in this whole damn city to have ever seen a B-movie. Here, let me set the scene for you. Fade in a temple interior. A Priest of Set, robed and masked, gloats over the ancient gem he has stolen. It is shaped like a giant, malevolent eye. He holds it up to the adulation of a throng of thuggee fanatics. A mammoth golden idol of a serpent presides over the debacle. One of its eye-sockets gapes empty...”

“This isn’t Hollywood, Ramona. Sometimes, the dark, mysterious stranger keeps his word.”



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“Yeah, and sometimes the heroes hunt people down and murder them and drink their blood. Sometimes they do it just to stay ‘alive.’ Sometimes they do it just for kicks. And sometimes they do it just to hurt somebody else—someone close to the victim. Shit, this ain’t Hollywood, it’s daytime TV.”

Calebros was silent for a time, letting her wind down. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you with the Eye, Ramona. And I’m sorry you will have to leave us. Believe me, I would like nothing better than to find a place for you here. I will have sore need of people who can be relied upon in the nights ahead. But you know what you would be up against if you remained here—the posturing, the none-too-subtle snubbing, the outright backstabbing. You are a rarity among our kind, Ramona. But because you are different, you will be hated and eventually destroyed if you stay among the society of the damned. Know that I will remember our time together fondly. If I can be of any assistance to you in relocating...”

“No, I understand. It’s ‘thanks for your help; here’s your bus ticket.’ Well, I don’t need any of your favors. I don’t like the strings attached to them. And I resent the fact that you think I’m so stupid that I’ll let you screw me over and then thank you for it.”

“Ramona...”

“No, you won. I killed that bastard Leopold for you. *Killed* him. Your honorable Mr. Ruhadze never said anything about it killing him. He said it would cut the connection with Eye. Well, it certainly did that. Lying bastard.”

“I thought you wanted Leopold dead,” Calebros replied guardedly. “He butchered your people. He twisted them into that blasphemous...”

“You think I don’t know what he did?! I was there, all right? He deserved to die. But you didn’t see him, at the end. When the nerve unraveled and the influence of the Eye lifted from him... Forget it, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Ramona, you can’t go around blaming yourself for Leopold’s death—nor is it going to do any good to blame Heshu, or me. He was lost to us as soon as he took up the Eye. A victim, nothing more. A walking corpse.”

“Yeah, whatever. Look, it’s been real nice reminiscing over old times with you. Now are you going to let me out of here, or do I need to find my own way out?”

“I suspect you will not be happy until you find your own way out. Goodbye, Ramona. If you need...”

“I don’t need anything from you.” The subway car lurched forward, pitching her over sideways. She caught herself and, straightening up, found that the figure across from her was gone.

“You’re welcome,” she shouted after him.

**Wednesday, 8 December 1999, 2:07 AM**  
**Along the Hudson River**  
**Bergen County, New Jersey**



Ramona turned her back on the city and began walking north. She had no particular destination in mind, she just needed to put as much distance as possible between herself and New York. There were too many memories for her there—and every one of them a death or a betrayal or a reproach. Her thoughts kept returning to the first time she had seen the city, rising out of the swampy miasma of the Jersey Turnpike. It had filled the entire horizon, the sharp buildings piercing the soft underbelly of the sky like a fistful of knives.

Damn, she had been naïve. All of them had, Jen, Darnell... If they could just get to New York! The promise of it had kept them going through that entire hellish trip across the country. And what had they found when they got here?

Ramona brushed the thought aside brusquely. It just didn't matter anymore. Jen and Darnell were dead, killed by that monster Leopold. And Zhavon...

She *had* found Zhavon, and that counted for something. It had to count for something. Ramona clung to that. But there was pain there too. Ramona used the anger to keep it down, to keep the hurt at bay. But she could not deny the fact that she had failed Zhavon. She couldn't help her, she couldn't 'rescue' her, and she sure as hell hadn't been able to prevent her death.

Ramona knew that there was nothing here for her anymore, in New York. She had gradually come to despise the city and all it represented. A low, roiling anger churned in the pit of her stomach. She had been duped and manipulated ever since she set foot back in the city. By Heshia, by Khalil, by the damned Camarilla. The meeting with Calebro had been only the final indignity. She had gone to him for help and he had dismissed her out of hand—banished her. Where the hell did he get off bossing her around? She certainly didn't remember voting him in as king.

She just needed to get away for a while. Not because they told her to. But because she needed to prove to herself that they didn't really matter—that all their insular little slights and intrigues and posturings didn't amount to much out here, beyond the outskirts of the city. That all their strivings and betrayals were just a sad sort of pantomime. Children fighting over sandbox real estate.

New York was a trap. She knew that now. A very pretty trap, decked out in bright neon and raw altitude, dressed in the decadence of power and wealth, and wrapped in a brightly colored shawl of ethnic diversity. But every skyscraper cast an even longer shadow in which dark things festered. And every immaculately tailored suit carried the subtle but unmistakable reek of the sweatshop. And each different cultural group huddled apart, brooding upon its own hatreds and sheltering behind its own fears.

Ramona was still running when the sunrise caught her and pressed her gently back down into the earth's arms.



**Saturday, 11 December 1999, 6:45 PM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Essex County, New York**

Ramona stretched, her fingers scabbling through the loosely packed soil. Instinctively they sought out the only significant direction in this subterranean world—up. Her hands broke the surface, planted themselves firmly and pushed—dragging the rest of her body from the earth.

She brushed away the worst of the dirt from her clothes, casting about, trying to get her bearings. This was the third night since she had escaped the city. She was already deep within the Adirondacks and, she realized with growing apprehension, her surroundings were beginning to look familiar. She had not intended to return here, but she could not fail to recognize the path her feet were taking. Back toward Zhavon's grave. Back toward Table Rock. Back toward the cave where Leopold had massacred her people.

No. She was not yet ready to face that again. But where would she go? The question had not really occurred to her before. Not back to New York, that was for sure. For a moment, she thought of returning home, to L.A., but there was nothing waiting for her there either. Nor did the thought of attempting the perilous cross-country journey alone appeal to her.

It seemed she didn't belong anywhere anymore. She couldn't blame her feet for carrying her back here. Back to her dead.

She almost laughed aloud at the thought. She knew better. She didn't even have a place among the dead anymore. Of course she would never find any place among the living that would accept her. She was not *of* the living. She did not belong among them any more than she belonged among the dead.

Well, that didn't leave her a lot of options. She could seek out others of her kind, but she had no reason to expect any better reception from that quarter. She knew all too well what she would receive at the hands of the Camarilla—their polite scorn, their casual betrayals. Ramona was not about to lower herself to their level—to spend decades learning the polite nuances of their little games. She wasn't even convinced that, if she did so, she would be accepted among them, much less treated as an equal. She simply did not rate in their world. They would always look down at her as an outsider, a wannabe. No thanks.

That left the Sabbat. Frankly, Ramona had seen enough of that debacle back in New York to last her a lifetime or two. The Sabbat seemed to thrive on frenzy. They reveled in the Beast. Ramona had already received two very personal and unambiguous warnings as to what awaited those of her kind who abandoned themselves to that path. She absently stroked the coarse fur behind one sharp lupine ear—a transformation she had discovered upon emerging from a particularly murderous rage. One that had gotten the better of her. Her feet also bore the mark of the beast. Now, that was a sight! The very bones had twisted into gnarled animal paws. She could not even wear normal shoes anymore.

She looked down at the clumsy, oversized boots. At night, at a distance, they might pass for human footwear. But they were uncomfortable as hell and she couldn't tie them tight enough to keep them from spinning around and pointing the wrong way after a few hours of walking. When Calebros first gave them to her he had said...

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*Calebros.* Ramona sat down on a nearby rock and patiently unlaced the boots. She left them there, arranged neatly like a pair of slippers peeking out from beneath the edge of a bed. She didn't need his damned help.

She was close now. She could feel the proximity of her dead all around her. They flickered at the periphery of her vision, trying desperately to get her attention, tugging at her.

"Damn it, leave me alone!"

Even the dead wanted something from her. And she was getting just a little bit tired of not living up to everybody's expectations. "I don't owe you anything. You're not my real relatives. You weren't there for me. When Jen got killed, and Darnell and Zhavon, where were you then, huh? When were you ever there for me? I'll tell you when—never. Where the hell do you get off thinking I need to drop whatever I'm doing and do something for you? You are nothing to me, you get it? Nothing."

Her words seemed to have the exact opposite of the desired effect. The shades pressed closer, drinking in her anger and growing more substantial. They hung about her like a tattered cloak.

"Just get the hell off of me!" She batted at them, trying unsuccessfully to dislodge their ravenous maws. "I didn't ask for this. Any of this. Do you think I wanted to end up this way, stuck here, in between? With you? You think I wanted to be like you? You think I asked that bastard Tanner to do this to me? To leave me like this? Fuck you. All of you. I don't need you. I don't need some stupid 'clan'—especially one full of nothing but a bunch of dead, pushy losers."

She broke away from the press of the dead and stumbled out into a clearing. At its center a huge, horizontal slab of granite lay atop a jumble of boulders. Its surface was rough, pitted, and not quite level. It sloped down to the east at a perceptible tilt. Table Rock.

Ramona felt the heat of shame and anger welling up behind her eyes. It was here that that damned mystic, Blackfeather, had forced the second indignity upon her. She remembered her awe at the seer's occult mutterings, his preposterous ritual. He had forged a sacred hoop of chalk and firelight atop Table Rock. He had drawn her into its intimate circle. He had pressed the ashes into her eyes. And from that time forward she could not shut out the visions. The ghost sight.

She thought of it as her "ghost sight," but that didn't really capture it. It wasn't so much that she saw spooks—what she saw was the interconnectedness of things. Like seeing Xavier standing atop Table Rock as the very personification of the hunt. Like perceiving the link between herself and the wolf that precipitated the first time she stepped outside her human skin. And like seeing the connection between Leopold and the Eye as a pulsing optic nerve binding him inextricably to... well, to whatever the hell that thing was that had risen up and consumed him. Hazimel, she guessed. Whoever he was.

Here, at Table Rock, she always saw her dead. They slipped in and out of the clearing, calling to one another in greeting or in challenge. Reciting their lineages and their deeds. Tussling for dominance. The old habits were so ingrained, her people could not abandon them, even in death.

No, that wasn't fair, Ramona thought. She knew that these were not really the spirits of the dead, denied their final rest and doomed to linger here for all eternity. The truth was nothing so romantic. These were only dim afterimages, reminiscences. As quaint and beside the point as silent movies.

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It had something to do with integrity. People who lived authentically left an impression on a place by their very presence. A lasting impression. Table Rock was a receptive place, a place of power. If she gazed at the stone with her ghost sight, to Ramona the slab looked like a picture of the Rosetta Stone she had seen once in a magazine—its polished surface crowded with carved letters and pictograms of many different tongues. Proclaiming the legacy of her people across the flimsy barriers of language and time.

She shut her eyes tightly to block out the vision. She had no desire to read the condemnation that was graven in that stone. The tale of the massacre of her people; the story of her own failure.

Was it always going to be like this? Seeing reproaches in every outcropping of rock? Damn these eyes of hers, and damn Blackfeather. She hadn't ask for this.

Against her will, she found herself thinking of Leopold. She had been thinking of little else of late. Of his face at the very end. When he was finally free of the Eye.

He had turned to her. He must have known that she had just killed him—that the stroke that severed him from the Eye was a mortal blow. But there was no fear in his face. No hatred, no reproach, not even surprise.

The look he gave her was one of recognition and of sadness. In those final moments when he was finally himself once more, he'd smiled at her, damn him. With the last vestiges of *his* unnatural sight, he had *seen* her. In that instant, he knew her for what she was—cursed, spent and discarded. Just like him. Alone.

He had called her by name and spoken words of compassion she would not soon forget or forgive him. Where the hell did he get off pitying her? That monstrosity. That sick, murdering bastard.

Even as the accusations formed, however, Ramona knew them for what they were: shallow. Empty. It was not Leopold that had massacred her people and desecrated their remains. It was whatever he had become under the influence of that blasphemous Eye.

*He was lost to us as soon as he took up the Eye. A victim, nothing more. A walking corpse.* Calebros's words came back to her, but they brought no comfort. Instead, they only fueled her outrage.

"We're all walking corpses, you self-righteous bastard." The words she could not give voice to three nights ago would no longer stay down. "That makes it okay? Okay for him to kill my people and then leave them like *that*? Because the Eye made him do it? Bullshit. If the Eye was making him do all that sick shit, if the Eye was consuming his identity and turning him into something he despised, why didn't he just reach up and pluck..."

A realization dawned upon Ramona, and not a pleasant one. The anger drained away from her as under the shock of cold water. She thought of Theo Bell, the Brujah Archon, going toe to toe with Leopold. Bell would have killed him as a matter of course. Dispassionately, perhaps even with a hint of annoyance, like someone might feel at having to take out the trash. But Bell couldn't kill him.

Hesha would have stolen the Eye. He would have manipulated, cheated and yes, even killed without the slightest hint of remorse, to secure the priceless artifact. But he could not take the Eye. He could not perceive the bond that joined it to Leopold—much less sever the connection.

But Ramona could. With her "gift," her *sight*, she had stolen the eye for Hesha. With her sight, she had murdered Leopold for Theo and his damned Camarilla. She was no better than

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Leopold. Her ghost sight had made her a less scrupulous thief than the infamous Heshu Ruhadze, and a more callous murderer than the Camarilla's avenging angel, Theo Bell.

She felt dirty, polluted, like she wanted to throw up. It was as if she were responsible, not only for Leopold's death, but for the deaths of countless others—of all her people. She was complicit in all of Leopold's crimes. She had compounded his offense by heaping another victim upon his already considerable pile of skulls. And it was no good blaming it all on this damned ghost sight. That did not absolve her of a single drop of the blood she had spilled.

Damn it, she was no thief, and she was no killer. Leopold hadn't had the balls to break free of the power of the Eye and reclaim his own identity. "But you'd better believe I do, you bastards," Ramona's voice was low and rumbling, like a storm breaking. She was unaware she had spoken aloud.

She planted her elbows firmly on Table Rock, as if to steady her resolve, clenching and unclenching her fists. The soft pads covering her fingertips slid back, revealing vicious claws which extended with aching patience until they brushed gently against fluttering eyelids.

She thought of Tanner's caress as he'd pressed closed those eyelids, drawing her into an Embrace from which she would never emerge. She thought of the pressure of the heel of Blackfeather's palm as he ground ashes and vision into her tightly shut orbs. She felt the white-hot fire of the third and final indignity—the gouging claws, groping for and severing tenacious optic nerves. Ramona threw back her head and howled in agony and release, scattering droplets of precious vitae on all sides.



**Sunday, 12 December 1999, 4:02 AM**  
**Adirondack State Park**  
**Clinton County, New York**

The Dreamstalkers found her there, pitched forward across Table Rock. She was lying heavily upon one arm, her claws still deeply lodged in the furrows they had gouged into the slab's surface. The newcomers spared hardly a glance for these ambiguous runes, Ramona's epithet. In defiance, or perhaps despair, she had carved her mark upon the ongoing story of the people. It was not for them to interpret that mark, to give it meaning.

They gathered the little one up in their arms and, lifting her gently over the threshold of the night wind, carried her home to her people.

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**Tuesday, 14 December 1999, 6:47 PM**  
**River Road**  
**Fort Lee, New Jersey**

RD



“Motherfucking Jersey.”

That pretty much summed up everything Theo Bell was feeling at the moment, so he just shook his head and watched the traffic pour slowly by. Down the street, a neon sign shone redly against the night, promising passersby a cool Budweiser and not much else. City sounds floated through the air, indelicately, and the breeze smelled like car exhaust and spilled beer.

There was no pedestrian traffic, no one on the sidewalk besides Theo, and he liked it that way just fine. He'd had entirely too much of other folks lately, living and dead, and he would be much happier if he didn't have to speak to anyone for the next ten or fifteen years, easy.

Mind you, the chances of that were about the same as Theo's chances of going for an afternoon stroll, so he just spat once on the sidewalk and decided to enjoy what time he had. Picking a direction at random, he set off at a slow pace. Moving too fast was still painful: The shotgun holstered across his back rubbed neatly against where some Sabbat shit head had inserted a length of copper pipe into his liver. He'd killed the man, of course, and God alone knew how many others, but even for a Kindred of Theo's strength, that sort of thing took a little while to heal.

One of the pockets of Theo's vest bulged with ammo, but that and the shotgun was all he carried. Clothes, money, luxuries—Theo had learned that those could be found easily, regardless of circumstance. A fistful of dragon's breath rounds and a way to put them right down the fanged asshole that passed for a Sabbat flunky's throat—those were traveling essentials.

Up ahead, a traffic light made up its mind to go red. Brakes squealed, someone cursed, and otherwise life went on without paying Theo any mind. He liked that. He liked that no one was trying to kill him, that no one was telling him to go places where people would try to kill him, and that he didn't have to kill anyone else at the moment. The fact that the battle for New York had ended up more or less victorious was all well and good—if nothing else, it meant that a few of the justicars would be too busy handing out attaboys and fighting over territory to get in his hair for a while. What he really wanted, though, was to find some godforsaken town that was such a shit hole that neither Camarilla nor Sabbat wanted it, and he could kick back and watch everyone else tear the crap out of one another for a change.

Unfortunately, Fort Lee, New Jersey, did not meet any of those requirements. It did, however, have a bar conveniently stationed across the street from where Theo now stood, a shabby little place with a half-lit sign promising “A friendly place to drink and socialize” in faded red letters. The door was red, too—some sort of fake leather with grimy brass studs holding it to the wood—and in the dark window cool red light still offered that ice-cold Bud.



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“There’s a lot of goddamn red light in this town,” Theo muttered to himself, then crossed the street toward the bar. He’d never actually had a beer—he’d been turned before the opportunity had presented itself—but he understood very clearly what the place was really selling.

Sanctuary.

Theo had been in a thousand joints like that, and they were all the same. *Come inside and forget the world, they whispered. Your wife can’t find you here. The bills can’t find you here. The boss can’t find you here.*

“That’s a fucking joke,” growled Theo. “Fucker can find me anywhere on the planet just by waving his dick around.” But he went into the bar anyway.

As grim as the outside of the bar was, the inside was grimmer. The lighting had been designed to be low, but time and the frailties of tungsten filaments made it even lower. Tables and ice-cream-parlor-style chairs were scattered across the floor haphazardly; most were upright, and few were occupied. Booths with torn red Naugahyde seating lined the walls, and a dim sign marked the location of the restroom, singular, in the back. The bar was against the wall to the right-hand side, the patrons maintaining stony silence and a distance of at least one empty seat from each to each. The barkeep was a middle-aged white man in an ugly shirt. He had a pot belly and a bad haircut, and Theo knew without a doubt that he had an over-under tucked under the beer cooler in case of trouble.

Every other bartender in every other place like this he’d visited did, after all.

The other patrons—mostly men—noted Theo’s presence by pointedly ignoring him. That was just fine by Theo, as he had no desire to talk to anyone here. He’d spent nights in the salons of Paris’s Toreador elders, listening to centuries’ worth of distilled wit and philosophy; he had no interest in speaking with anyone here. For one thing, sooner or later the conversation would inevitably turn to sports, which Theo mostly despised, and for another, conversation was contrary to the point of the place. You came here to be alone with your troubles, not mix them with someone else’s.

After a half-second’s deliberation, Theo picked a booth and slid into it. From where he sat, he could see both front door and rest room, and get a more or less decent view through the window. The table was bolted to the floor, but not well, and he could easily overturn it for cover if the situation demanded. And while Theo somehow doubted that he was going to be dealing with any problems of that nature here tonight, old habits of survival die hard. You had to be vigilant at his age, or you just plain stopped being.

It took a few minutes, but eventually the bartender wandered over to where Theo sat. “What’ll you have?” he more or less said, though he couldn’t appear less interested in the answer.

“Gimme a beer,” Theo found himself saying, and suddenly he grinned. Why the hell not? He’d trained himself to be able to keep food down, at least for a little while, so a beer shouldn’t be too much of a problem.

“What kind?”

“What you got?”

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“Bud, Bud Lite, Icehouse, MGD, Miller Lite, Coors, Coors Lite, Genny Cream Ale and Keystone. Read the sign,” the bartender said, and gestured toward the barely legible blackboard that hung next to the bar.

Theo turned. If he squinted, he could lie to himself and claim he saw those words scrawled in chalk. As things stood, he just took the bartender’s word for it. “Screw it. What sucks the least?”

“Genny it is,” the fat man mumbled, and turned back to the bar. He returned a few minutes later, saying something that sounded like “Tree-fiftee” and bearing a mug that was half filled with foam. Theo threw a five at him, took the beer, and then stared pointedly until the man shuffled away. “Asshole,” the bartender muttered under his breath, and then vanished back behind the counter.

Theo just stared after him while the beer quietly sat on the table. After a minute, he shrugged and lifted it—the damn thing almost seemed to be staring him—and immediately wished he hadn’t. “Tastes like drinking piss from a three-day-dead horse,” he said under his breath, and put the mug down. No one heard him, or if they did, none of the other patrons cared. Each just huddled over his own drink and shut out the rest of the world. Taking advantage of that, Theo discreetly spit his beer back into the glass. While he was reasonably sure that keeping that stuff in his system wouldn’t do him any permanent harm, he wasn’t dead certain, and these days he took no chances.

So intent was he in getting the beer back into the glass that he didn’t notice the man who slid into the booth across from him, at least not until the stranger addressed him. “Bell, I presume?” The man spoke with a noticeable English accent, and he was smiling as he said it.

Theo sat up like a shot. “Who the fuck are you?” he asked, even as his foot found the base of the table in preparation for shoving it at the stranger, hard. “And how the fuck did you sneak up on me?”

The stranger shrugged and spread his arms in a rueful gesture. “I was able to sneak up on you because you let me, Theo.” His grin left no doubt that he felt that he just might have been able to accomplish the feat on his own. “And my name is Talley.”

“Son of a bitch...” Theo’s voice trailed off as he stared at the other man. Talley was tall, thin and pale in a way that would have attracted notice even if he weren’t dead. He wore a black suit in a very conservative cut, and his hair was close-cropped to his skull. Leather driving gloves were on his hands, and a no doubt expensive pair of sunglasses peeked out of a breast pocket.

The shirt underneath the suit was, of course, black.

Theo growled. “War’s over, dog. Your side lost. Did you need a reminder of that?” He leaned forward and the table groaned under the pressure of his hands. “What are you doing here?”

Talley hastily turned his hands palm-forward. “Please. I’m just here to talk. Just talk.”

“And what if I don’t feel like talking?” Theo was halfway across the table now, and Talley still hadn’t budged.

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“Then I let a shadow rip off the bartender’s head, and while you’re trying to tape the Masquerade back together, I stroll out the front door safe as houses. It’s your choice.”

Theo stopped and just stared. “I’m fast enough to take you before you do that, you know.”

Talley eased back in the booth and shrugged. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. I’m reasonably quick myself, you know. As I said, the choice is yours.”

For a long second, Theo’s eyes held Talley’s. There was a smile there, and a challenge, and something else, something Theo didn’t recognize. He sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. “Fine. So talk. I’m all motherfucking ears.” A sudden thought struck him. “The beer’s yours, if you want it.”

With a sickly grin, Talley put his arms down. “No, thank you. The bartender spat in it before you did, you know. Just in case you were wondering.”

“Hunh. Probably improved the taste. But if you came all this way to talk to me about beer, you’re shit out of luck. Besides, I thought you were flying the friendly skies back to sunny Spain. What happened—Monçada get a new poodle?”

“Cut the shite, Bell. The cardinal’s dead and you know it, and you probably knew about it ten minutes after it happened. Don’t play games, or by God I will turn this hole into an abattoir and smear your fingerprints all over it for Pascek to find. Do you understand me? Good. I’m glad we understand each other.”

Theo smiled, thinly. “I knew the fat man was dead. Didn’t know if you knew that I did, and didn’t know where you fit in. I think I do, now. So tell me, why are you here? If you want to start something, I’ll finish it. You’re not taking New York back by yourself, Talley.”

“You’re welcome to it, Bell, stinking cesspool that it is. I told you, I came here to talk, and I came here to talk to you. Why do you think I made this dive so appealing to you? It’s public enough that we can’t afford to tangle. If I wanted to fight, we’d be fighting and you’d be wondering who turned out the lights. I just want words. No one knows I’m here, not even Monçada’s successor.”

“Is that what you’re here for? Asylum? You want to defect, and think I can arrange protection? Or are you just here to sell info? Which is it? Let’s make a deal here.”

“Would you believe none of the above?” Talley’s voice was clipped and quiet, full of menace. “I decided to get out of Spain while the getting was good until the situation resolved itself and my role was known. I have no interest in joining your little club, Bell, now or ever. I am here. To. Talk.” With each word, he slammed his fist down on the table. At the bar, patrons turned to look, then began whispering to one another, lazily.

“Whatever. But I don’t know what we’ve got to talk about, in that case. How ’bout them Mets?”

“Look, Bell, I’m serious here. You and I have more in common with one another than we do with the idiots we work for. Tell me what you think of Pascek. Tell me what you honestly think of him. Come on. Say something *nice* about that arrogant bastard. I dare you.”

“I can’t.” Theo shook his head. “But that’s not the point. You know that.”

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“No, I don’t. You get old enough—give yourself a few centuries—and you start asking questions. I’ve got six centuries on you, Bell, and after all that time, I find myself finally starting to ask why. And so I ask you: Why do you put up with it? Why do you deal with the shame of being subordinate to a man who’s clearly your lesser, who clearly despises you and who clearly would gladly be rid of you? Seize the moment, Bell—make your own path. Or at least tell me why you stick to theirs.”

Theo eased himself out of the booth. “I could ask you the same question. Why do you put up with the shit?” He took two steps toward the door. “Your job’s the same as mine, Talley. You look at the bigger picture and figure it’s worth shoveling shit to make the whole damn garden grow. I don’t do this for Pascek. I don’t do it for those bastards on the Inner Council. I don’t do it for anyone but me, because I decided it was worth doing. And you know what? You made the same decision yourself a long time ago when you turned yourself into Monçada’s dog. Just deal, Talley. We made ourselves what we are. Get used to it. Now you can either go back home, or you can decided to do something new—but we both know which way you’re going to jump. Don’t we?” He paused for a second and stared at Talley, who eventually looked away. “Hah. Thought so.” He walked toward the door. “Call me if you really have something you want to talk about. Otherwise, don’t bother. And keep the beer.”

Behind him, Talley stood. “You really believe in it, don’t you? You actually believe it’s worth it?” His tone was incredulous.

Theo turned. “Until something better comes along, yeah. I believe. You happy now?”

“Disappointed, actually.” Talley shook his head, and spread his arms wide. “All the power of the centuries in front of you, Bell, and this is the best you can do? It’s your damn job? You’re no better than they are.” One by one, the bar’s patrons turned to stare. “Oh yes, my good people, didn’t your new friend warn you? He’s a vampire.” Talley’s voice took on a mock-conspiratorial tone. “But don’t worry. He’s a nice vampire. He doesn’t want to cause any trouble.”

“Talley...” Theo’s voice was a low warning. Talley ignored him.

“Oh, hush, Theo. They don’t believe me. Your precious little Masquerade isn’t going to fall down from that. It might, however, from this!” Even as Theo leaped for him, he brought his arms up in a gesture that might have been stolen from a circus ringmaster.

Pillars of shadow exploded from every corner. Two passed through and shredded the hapless bartender. Others battered patrons. One smashed the mirror behind the counter, filling the air with shattered glass and screams. Though it all, Talley just smiled, even as Bell smashed into him with fangs bared. The two tumbled to the floor with a crash, Bell on top. Around them, the shadow tentacles continued their rampage.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” he snarled. “I’m going to kill you for that.”

Unexpectedly, Talley laughed. “Do that. Take the time to kill me. And in the meantime, the survivors of this little fiasco will be taking to the streets. Running away. Spreading their stories. What’s that going to do to the Masquerade, Bell? Or is it worth putting the job aside for a minute just to try to kill me?” A shuddering crash distracted both of them for a second, as one of the tentacles punched through

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the front door and withdrew. A patron, seeing his chance, burst for the exit. “What’s it going to be?”

With a muttered curse, Bell threw himself off of his opponent and chased after the fleeing patron. “Nobody move a fucking muscle,” he bellowed as he went through the doorway. “I’ll be right back.”

Talley dusted himself off, stood up, and snapped his fingers. The shadow tentacles faded. For a second, the only noise was the quiet sobbing of one of the wounded patrons, and the gentle gurgle of beer leaking from broken bottles. “He will, you know. More’s the pity.” With that, he, too, strode out the door into the night—and then vanished. Behind him, the remaining mortals sat, or stood, and just waited. After all, Theo had ordered them to.

A block down, Theo sprinted with inhuman speed after the fleeing patron. He was pretty sure this was the only one who’d gotten away, but the uncertainty kept him glancing from side to side, and had prevented him from quite reaching his target yet. “Come back!” he yelled fruitlessly over the traffic. “I’m not going to hurt you!” *But if this takes much longer, I’m gonna motherfucking kill you*, he muttered under his breath. Ahead of him, the man ran heedlessly on.

Talley was right, unfortunately. He had to stomp this one, nip it in the bud. If there was a Masquerade breach with him at the center, and with Talley sitting across the table, Pascek would have his balls in an egg cup for breakfast. He’d just have to trust that he hadn’t missed anyone, and go get this guy *now*. With that decision, Theo put his head down, concentrated for a second and put on additional burst of speed. This had to end.

Ahead of him, the runaway turned a corner and slammed into an abandoned newsstand. He went down, hard. Theo was on him in an instant, grabbing the front of his shirt and hauling him to his feet. “Listen to me, you saw nothing back there, do you hear me? Nothing!” He’d done this a million times before—convince some kine that he hadn’t just seen a lame-ass vampire pull something stupid. But this time, he hesitated, hearing Talley’s words in the back of his head. Why was he doing this? To protect the Masquerade? Habit? Or just to cover his own ass? Did it even matter? He shook his head and tried to concentrate again, but it was too late.

With a tearing sound, the guy’s shirt ripped, leaving Theo holding a double handful of fabric. The mortal staggered out into the street, eyes wide with panic, then turned and caught a city bus full in the face. It dragged him for half a city block, then screeched to a halt. A babble of voices broke out, but by then, Theo was gone. Only a double handful of cloth, drifting to the sidewalk, showed that he’d ever been there.

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**Tuesday, 14 December 1999, 8:09 PM**  
**River Road**  
**Fort Lee, New Jersey**

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It was a bare fifteen minutes later when Theo left the wreckage of the bar once more. All of the patrons had been spoken to and had their memories readjusted; each had been given a story sure to contradict the others so that the cops would tie themselves in knots trying to figure out the truth. Ambulances had been called, as had the police, and it was time to get a move on. In the distance, flashing red lights indicated that an ambulance had arrived to deal with the accident victim. Sirens howled in the night air, getting closer. There was no reason to stay any longer.

Theo crossed the street and cut through an alley, pausing to stamp his feet in some standing water to get the mirror shards off his boots. The pants were a loss, but he'd replace them as soon as possible. A good pair of boots was like an old friend, though. You didn't give those up unless you had to. Soundlessly he padded off again, putting as much distance as he could between him and what had happened earlier in the night. There'd be hell to pay over that, but he wouldn't be the one to pay it.

A soft sound from above caught his attention. Alert, he slid into a shadow and looked around for the source. He didn't have to look long.

Up above, on a fire escape, stood Talley. The moon was behind him, and he was looking down at Theo, smiling. The sound came from Talley's hands. He was applauding, slowly. Then, he bowed.

"I was wrong," he mouthed. "You win." And then, as a cloud passed over the moon, he vanished.

Theo shook his head. "Motherfucking Jersey" was all he said, and continued on.



**Wednesday, 15 December 1999, 8:22 PM**  
**R.J. Reynolds Associated Holdings, Inc.**  
**Winston-Salem, North Carolina**

*Bad cop.*

Preston Marshall sat back in his chair and stuffed the last bit of his Subway sandwich into his mouth. *Bad cop.* Fine security officer, though. Well, not really, but at least it made more money for him to be a crooked security commandant than it had for him to be a high-profile renegade law officer.

Six years ago, Preston had been indicted and convicted for going above and beyond the call when it came to restraining a suspect. Okay, fine; it was two suspects, but at least it wasn't in the same case. The incidents were months apart. The first one, some drunk, snotty college kid, only spent a few weeks in bed recovering. The second one, that crazy nigger bitch who had scratched him and then stabbed him with his own car keys, she wasn't so lucky.

After a brief media circus, Preston found himself out of a job. Damn kangaroo court was what it was, with liberals and spooks in the jury. In the end, though, it worked out all right. He'd answered an ad for the midnight security supervisor over at RJR, and they hired him on the spot. Turns out they wanted someone willing to look the other way and shut the hell up for a few bucks. One of their export companies drove a truck in every now and then and all Preston had to do was water-damage their manifest. Whatever happened with sixty-million-dollars-a-year's worth of cigarettes after that wasn't his problem.

Some of the guys on his shift had had a problem with it. Some of them found themselves unemployed or reassigned to day shifts. No big deal. They learned that it was best to shut your mouth if you wanted to keep working. Preston found out that it was worth an extra thousand dollars a month—hell, an extra fifteen hundred dollars in some months—to acquire a selective blindness. If it wasn't him doing the deed, it would be someone else, so why be a martyr... especially if you don't believe that anything seriously wrong is happening, anyway? The export company was probably just selling the cigs in Mexico or Canada, ducking the duties and taxes that only made those government bastards rich.

Preston Marshall's face opened up like a watermelon dropped from a second-story window. Blood, flesh and less identifiable bits of gore splattered the security dispatch office, marring the windows, the computer, the clipboard, the stack of bills of lading....

Under the sterile darkness of shadows thrown by fluorescent lights, a figure in a navy peacoat walked nonchalantly into the unassuming night, smelling ever so faintly of gunpowder.

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**Wednesday, 15 December 1999, 10:01 PM**  
**R.J. Reynolds Associated Holdings, Inc.**  
**Winston-Salem, North Carolina**



If one chose to look deeply enough, one could find current employment records for Detlev Hrad in over sixteen companies, half of which weren't even in his native Estonia or adopted home in the United States. Detlev's job consisted primarily of receiving large shipments of cigarettes from an American wholesaler attached to RJR, and cycling them as inventory through each of the sixteen companies for which he worked. With many of these companies, Detlev was the sole owner. In others, he was a member of a partnership. Still others were limited-liability offshoots of existing companies, perhaps even with their business documents sent to mail rooms of larger corporations that didn't even know Detlev had paid a mail-room attendant or two to pass on letters addressed to him in weekly bundles.

Cigarettes went to Detlev's warehouse in New York, where they sat and waited to be shipped to distributors after circling the globe three or four times—in principle, if not in practice. It was beautiful: Nobody knew anything was illicit, and even if they did, what were the odds that they'd trace it back to him through *sixteen* fronts?

Someone had, though. Detlev sat stock still in his executive chair, his white-knuckled hand clenched so tightly around his red ledger pencil that he had snapped it in half. Someone had found him, and was making one hell of a racket in the foyer of his for-appearances office. For a long time, Detlev's girlfriends had been complaining that he seemed paranoid and distant. Whenever one brought it up, he dumped her. Half of him wished he could have all those girls there in front of him, so he could slap them, scream at them, "See? See? I was *right*."

Detlev's other half, though, was scared shitless. Normally anyone who came to the office was either in the wrong place and stepped right back out, or announced their presence at the door, like the FedEx guys and the mailman did. For a moment Detlev had thought that it might be a bum looking for a dry place to spend the night, but the moment he'd seen the light in the foyer flicker out and heard the deadbolt of the front-door lock, he knew he was in trouble.

Who could it be? It didn't seem like a cop—the actions were too ominous. A cop would have arrested him already, or at least announced his presence. Detlev wasn't aware of any enemies. He paid RJR on time, he never short-shipped any of his "independent representatives," and he wasn't aware of anyone else's international claims to territory. Still, a man in his position was bound to upset someone. Maybe it was one of the Cosa Nostra fat tonys, one of the yaks, or even the Russian mob. Maybe it was some activist or the relative of some smoker who died who'd gotten a wild hair up his ass and dug up Detlev's number. Whatever—this was someone who was pissed about something, because no one else ever came calling.

Without warning, the noise stopped utterly. Detlev sat stock still, looking expectantly, fearfully, to the doorway that led from the foyer into his office proper. A long, *long* minute ticked away on the cheap electric clock hanging above the Ansel Adams print to Detlev's right; a pair of flies dueled over the oily Chinese take-out sitting on the corner of the desk.

The desk...?



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Detlev noticed the pen from his desk set had gone missing. Was that what this was all about? Was that all? Someone had broken in while he went to fetch the Chinese food, stolen the utterly unremarkable pen from the matching set in the office, and was awkwardly trying to escape? It couldn't possibly be so innocuous.

Detlev felt his doubt confirmed when a harsh, strong hand grabbed the top of his head and pinned him back in his chair. A piercing sensation pulsed briefly at the back of his neck, and he knew that the missing pen had been driven into the divot between his shoulder blades with unimaginable force. For a flickering moment, it hurt as if a fire had been ignited in the pain center of his mind; his eyes widened involuntarily and bulged forth. Then the pain dulled, and with it dimmed all of Detlev's awareness of the world around him.

Breaking the few protruding inches of the pen off, Detlev's murderer unbuttoned his navy peacoat and left through the front door, leaving it unlocked.

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**Friday, 17 December 1999, 8:15 PM**  
**Broadway Avenue**  
**New York City, New York**



The outside lane was already full with taxis disgorging theatre-goers, so Benjamin Neil's cabby did what to him, a cabdriver in midtown Manhattan, seemed perfectly reasonable. He triple-parked. The northbound lanes of Broadway, now completely blocked, rapidly degenerated into a snarled, angry mass of immobilized, horn-blowing vehicles.

"Six eighty," the cabby said with a thick Indian accent.

Benjamin handed him eight dollars and slipped from the cab. He could feel the curses of the other drivers, already lined up a block and a half deep, but the insults and enmity slid off his shoulders as easily as did the cold, pelting rain that caused the bearded and tuxedoed theatre-goers to cower beneath black umbrellas and hurry toward the relative shelter of the marquee. The show was a revival of "Annie Get Your Gun," with Bernadette Peters and some cast-off television actor. Benjamin was not attending the show; he did not stoop to such mawkish fare. Benjamin attended the opera on occasion.

Tonight, however, was a working night. He navigated through the sea of cabs and past the theatre to the front door of his gallery. It wasn't, technically speaking, *his* gallery. He merely managed the establishment for Mr. Stephenson—the Mr. Stephenson of the Stephenson Gallery. Although for all practical intents and purposes, Benjamin *was* the Stephenson Gallery. He oversaw day-to-day operations. It was he who maintained relations with the artistic community as well as the influential museums. He made all of the financial and exhibit decisions. Except for tonight.

Benjamin thrust his key into the front door's temperamental lock and twisted it like the knife he wished it were in Mr. Stephenson's back. Previously, the owner had always treated Benjamin well. So confident was Stephenson that the gallery was in competent hands, in fact, that he had not visited the premises in just over three years, leaving everything to Benjamin. Why, then, Benjamin wondered as he stepped inside and pushed closed the heavy door with a bit more force than was required, had Stephenson forced tonight's client upon him without explanation, or even twenty-four hours' warning?

Benjamin had been compelled to close the previous exhibit early and delay the opening of the next, a new collection of oils by Jacopo Finini. The artist would be outraged, and with good reason. There were also financial repercussions, of course. Benjamin had already decided that, should Stephenson hold him responsible for the owner's own erratic and unreasonable demands, he would resign. Just quit and walk away from the gallery that he had transformed from a nothing to a shining star of the Manhattan museum scene. Benjamin simply would not allow anyone, not even Mr. Stephenson, who had been so good to him, to ruin Benjamin's good name in the art community. Credibility was as fragile as the most delicate orchid, requiring perfect conditions to flourish, but so easily destroyed by carelessness or neglect.

Mark had urged Benjamin to quit tonight, to stand up the intrusive client and tell Mr. Stephenson what he could do with his gallery. But then again, Mark tended to overreact. Benjamin wasn't one for burning bridges. Not yet.

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His steps echoed from the sparkling black tile of the walls and stairwell as he hurried up from street level to the double glass doors of the gallery proper. Benjamin glanced at his watch and then punched in the combination for the doors' electronic lock. He had plenty of time. The client wasn't scheduled to arrive for another two hours—an inconvenient late-night appointment for Benjamin, but not out of the ordinary for a client operating on European or maybe West Coast time. Benjamin wasn't sure from whence or where this mystery client hailed. Another irritant, that.

Benjamin shrugged off his overcoat and had started to toss it on the receptionist's desk in the lobby when he saw the elegant fur already draped across the desk. His hand stopped in mid-throwing motion, but the overcoat was already out of his grasp and struck the front of the desk, then slid off onto the floor.

He stood staring at the fur for a long moment. Who the hell had left that on the receptionist's desk? It was *not* the receptionist, that was certain. Benjamin compensated Lilia handsomely, but the sleek sable cape on the desk would have cost her nearly a year's salary, and Benjamin knew for a fact that at least half of every paycheck went straight up her nose. Who then?

Slowly, he bent down and retrieved his coat. He wiped absently with his fingers at the water that had dripped from his wrap onto the hardwood floor. Standing just as slowly, Benjamin stepped carefully around the desk, watching the fur as if it might move, and laid his coat over the receptionist's chair.

Strange. The client, even if she'd arrived early, would have been locked out, and burglars, even art burglars, Benjamin imagined, didn't generally wear fur to a heist. Maybe some senile dowager had left the fur and arranged with Lilia to pick it up in the morning. That seemed the most reasonable explanation.

As Benjamin made his way through the empty rooms of the gallery, his footsteps seemed to thunder resoundingly, the sound of each step blending with those before and after to create a rolling military tattoo. Perhaps the exaggerated sound was merely his imagination, or it could have been because the gallery was so completely empty. Literally empty. Of patrons and of art. Except for one painting.

Benjamin had seen hundreds of exhibits come and go. He had chosen what pieces would go where, in which room, on which wall. Never before, even when every piece had been taken down and packed away, had the gallery felt so empty to him. Never had the walls seemed so stark white, sanitary, void of life. Never had the hardwood floors felt so cold and sterile.

He strode through the main gallery, poking his head into the four smaller chambers that flanked the central room. All silent as the grave. He moved toward the three rear galleries, thinking about the one painting, the only work on display, that hung in the rearmost room. He'd supervised Raul's hanging the rather largish piece this afternoon. Benjamin had had specific instructions from Mr. Stephenson concerning exactly where the portrait should be displayed. The alleged portrait. Mr. Stephenson's letter had mentioned that it was a portrait, but the letter had also been quite emphatic that the silk tapestry attached to the frame and covering the painting itself not be removed. So Benjamin had not yet seen the painting. That, he assumed, would wait until the client arrived later tonight.

Perhaps Mr. Stephenson was arranging a sale to this self-important person. That seemed the likeliest scenario, though Benjamin, grinding his teeth as he thought about

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it, would have appreciated the courtesy of an explanation. He felt that, considering his loyalty and proven ability, he deserved that much at the very least.

Benjamin continued on through the first two of the rear galleries. He almost expected the staccato percussion of his footsteps to shatter the empty display cases. Absorbed by thoughts of the many things he would like to tell Mr. Stephenson, he turned the corner into the last gallery and started violently, his shoes squeaking on the heavily polished floor. Despite the fur, he hadn't been expecting to find anyone, least of all a goddess.

She wore an ivory, sleeveless gown with a fitted bodice and long, flowing skirt. Her hands, in matching formal gloves, were propped gracefully on her hips. The lines of her cheeks were rounded, narrowing considerably toward the chin, the effect unusual, interesting, perfect, entrancing. The soft tone of her gown and the milky white of her skin, far from causing her to appear bland or washed out, served to set off the auburn curls of her hair, the similar dark red of her lips, and her vibrant emerald eyes.

"Mr. Neil," she said, and the syllables eased from her tongue like a guilty pleasure.

He stared at her. "Ms. Ash," he managed at last. He began toward her, surprised to find his knees weak. He ran a hand through his prematurely thinning hair, felt the raindrops still resting there, and noticed in contrast how dry his mouth suddenly was.

"I hope you don't mind my arriving early," she said, unconcerned. "Emil sent me a key and the combination, and I just couldn't help myself."

Emil. Benjamin's mind was blank for a moment, then he realized. Emil Stephenson. Mr. Stephenson. Mention of Benjamin's employer rekindled his ire somewhat. Mr. Stephenson had given her a key? And without so much as consulting Benjamin? He was more than a little irked at his boss and, by extension, at this woman, the mysterious client. But her voice was a warm, sensual shower, and there was something about her eyes....

"You do understand, don't you?"

Benjamin blinked repeatedly. She had said something, asked him a questions. "I... understand? Beg your pardon?"

"I said, Benny, that I just couldn't wait any longer to drop by." Her eyes shone brilliantly. Her smile was very slight, and perhaps a bit cruel, like that of a child pulling legs off a spider.

"Benjamin, please," he said, recovering his earlier irritation. No one called him Benny except Mark. Benjamin dealt daily with beautiful men and women, and with wealthy, affected eccentrics. They often needed a reminder that theirs was a business relationship, not the dealings of master and slave. They needed, in short, someone to put them in their place, and Benjamin was pleased to accommodate. "Your visit *per se* is not a problem, but quite frankly the suddenness of your exhibit—"

"*Watch your tongue, you petulant child,*" she hissed, then very sweetly added, "or I'll tear it out."

Benjamin's knees again nearly failed him. He stood dumbfounded, mouth agape. His stomach churned. The intimate gallery was suddenly cavernous, and he, exposed, vulnerable, standing alone in the center of it. He wanted to flee from the room, but his feet, rooted to the spot, were not his to command. He couldn't have just heard what he thought he had. For an instant, he thought his client's eyes burned bright red... but no, they were the same enticing emerald, and he couldn't explain the visceral fear that had just swept over him and receded in the space of two heartbeats.

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His collar was too tight. Benjamin tugged at his black shirt, buttoned to the top. A bead of sweat trickled down his side.

“Are you quite all right, Mr. Neil?” Her eyes were watching him, encompassing him with her gaze, delving into him.

“I... Would you excuse me? I need a Perrier.”

“Certainly.”

“May I get you something?”

“No, thank you. Not at present.”

Benjamin turned on his heels and beat a hasty retreat from the room. Away from her he began breathing regularly again, realized that he'd been holding his breath. His heart was pounding. He glanced over his shoulder, sure that he was still in the line of sight of those bright green eyes, but he was alone. Had she just threatened to pull out his tongue? Impossible. His analyst was going to have a field day with this one. Did the woman remind him of his bitch mother? Had she tapped into some repressed childhood memory? Benjamin stretched his mouth and eyes open wide, then squeezed them shut. He flicked beads of sweat from his forehead.

Before he remembered it was locked, Benjamin tried to turn the knob and walked face first into his office door. He stood stunned for several seconds. Finally, he laughed, a bit nervously. There was no one to witness his embarrassment. He was alone.

He unlocked his office and took a bottle of Perrier from the refrigerator. On second thought, he put the bottle back, poured himself two fingers of Scotch from the bar instead, and gulped down the sweet liquid fire. Thus fortified, he returned to the rear gallery. His heart raced to keep time with the rataplan of his shoes across the hardwood.

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**Saturday, 18 December 1999, 7:13 PM**  
**Times Square Bistro**  
**New York City, New York**



“And she wouldn’t show you the picture?” Mark asked incredulously.

“No. It was covered the entire time. A beautiful silk tapestry, by the way,” Benjamin said. He poked at his unfinished dinner.

“What a *bitch*.” It wasn’t the herbal tea Mark was sipping that left the sour look on his face.

Benjamin gazed out the window of the bistro at the throng of people passing along the sidewalks and across the streets of Times Square. He was practiced at guessing which passersby were the tourists and which were native New Yorkers. It was all in the bearing, the attitude. The city had a spirit that infused its inhabitants and spurred them on to flamboyance and greatness. The punks were more rebellious here, green spikes of hair, giant stud piercings. The young professionals were sexier, short skirts and spiked heels that showed off sculpted calves and thighs; tight blouses and crisp suits, accentuating gravity-defying breasts and stone-hard pecs. The intelligentsia here were more brilliant, the artists more gifted.

Yet compared to Victoria Ash, they were all but pale, faded ghosts devoid of substance.

“You don’t listen to me anymore,” Mark said.

“What?” Benjamin was drawn back within the bistro and confronted by Mark’s expression of habitual irritation, slightly pursed lips, brow furrowed. “Of course I do. You were... complaining about something.” That was a safe enough guess.

Mark snorted derisively. He was wearing a snug T-shirt, the short sleeves cuffed. He never wore a jacket, even though it was cold out; he liked to show off his work at the gym. “You should’ve told her to go fuck herself.”

“Oh, that’s good for business. Not to mention job security. My employer sends me an obviously rich-as-sin client, so I insult her and turn away her business. Mr. Stephenson would love that.”

“Oh, fuck Mr. Stephenson,” said Mark, rolling his eyes. “That gallery would be *nothing* without you. He might as well shoot himself in the head as fire you.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Benjamin said, anxious to change the subject. He squeezed Mark’s knee under the table.

“It already has, dearie.” Mark grinned conspiratorially, but then became serious again. “But none of that means you should take any guff from this woman. What’s her name?”

“Victoria Ash.” There was a long pause before Benjamin registered his companion’s displeasure. “What?”

“I don’t like the way you say her name.”

“What? What are you talking about? That’s her name. Victoria Ash. I didn’t make it up.”

Mark crossed his muscled arms. “It’s not her name that bothers me. Although... *Victoria*... it’s rather pretentious, don’t you think? No, it’s how *you* say it that bothers me. *Victoria Ash*. All dreamy and gaga. Did you fuck her?”

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“No! Of course not. And I didn’t say her name gaga. You are so paranoid. This is a client.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“Oh, here we go. You are *so* juvenile. I am *not* going to have this conversation. I refuse.”

“You did fuck her.”

“I did not,” Benjamin said. “Listen to me.” He grabbed Mark’s hand but Mark resisted and looked away. “Fine,” Benjamin said through clenched teeth. “*I’m* not the one who banged a fucking cocktail waitress. And how about the buff young usher? At least I had some class. But *nothing* happened with this woman.”

They sat for several minutes without speaking, an eddy of high-strung silence amidst the swirling bodies, neon, and flashing digital projections of Times Square. Benjamin was less concerned by Mark’s surliness than by his own inability to remember exactly what *had* happened last night.

Finally, he stood. “I have to go.” He leaned over and kissed, unrequited, Mark’s pursed lips.

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**Saturday, 18 December 1999, 9:35 PM**  
**Broadway Avenue**  
**New York City, New York**



She was waiting for him at the gallery. He knew she would be. Benjamin was trying to convince himself that Ms. Ash must be paying an obscene amount for Mr. Stephenson to have agreed to all this. That had to be the explanation. The gallery remained bare, all white walls and vacant pedestals, except for the alleged portrait. All thought of the financial side of the affair fled Benjamin's mind, however, when he stepped into her presence.

She wore a simple white, starched blouse tonight, and a calf-length, form-fitting black skirt with black heels. A string of pearls graced her chest beneath her open collar; two more pearls dangled gently from her delicate earlobes. She was black and white against the bare expanse of gallery, again her hair, lips, and eyes the only dashes of color.

"Would you like to see?" she asked as Benjamin approached.

Only then did he realized that the tapestry was removed from the frame of the painting. The silk lay on the floor beneath.

"I..." Never in his life had Benjamin found himself so tongue-tied. Of course he wanted to see the mysterious painting. He was unable to feign disinterest, unable even to try.

He came within a few steps of Victoria. She stood in virtually the same spot as last night, directly aligned with the painting several feet away. Only when she gestured toward the piece did Benjamin manage to look away from her and at it.

The portrait was tall, life-sized, and before Benjamin stood the mirror image of the goddess at his side. He looked back and forth between the visions of beauty, two but one. Impossible. Judging by the slight darkening of the oil pigmentation, Benjamin would have guessed that the painting was a hundred-fifty, maybe two hundred years old. Yet the likeness was too uncanny to be coincidental. On the canvas, Victoria's auburn tresses flowed over her shoulders and down her back. The artist had *almost* captured the vibrant eyes; the color was right, but how could he have hoped to reproduce the gaze that drove Benjamin to distraction? The lips were full, rounded perfectly, enticing. Benjamin only vaguely noted the background: trees, Grecian columns, broken, one overturned. Victoria, too, wore classical trappings, a white robe draped over a shoulder, clinging to her hips, her right breast bare.

Impossible, Benjamin told himself again. The age alone... But his mind could not completely discount what his eyes told him: The portrait was of Victoria.

Of it all, Benjamin's mind fastened upon the lips. There was the faintest hint of a smile—the same amused, cruel smile that he had seen last night.

"The likeness is very good, don't you think?" Victoria asked. She was very near him. Had she stepped closer? Her alluring scent filled his awareness. "Would you like to touch it?"

Benjamin watched his hand rising toward the canvas. He wanted very much to touch it, to touch Victoria. His fingers brushed her lips, traced the line of her strong cheekbone, but returned to the lips, lingered there.



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“The artist mixed a few drops of my blood with the red to get just the right shade for the lips,” she whispered to him. “The nipple as well. I think the effect is... pleasing.”

*But this picture is over a hundred years old*, Benjamin wanted to say. Instead, he leaned close to the wall. The texture of the layered paint was strangely electric. His fingertips tingled. *Literally* tingled. A distant, nagging thought tried to break in on his reverie. Had she said *blood*?

But then he found himself with his lips against Victoria’s, tasting her, his tongue padding back and forth against the canvas. Mixed with the acrid taste and smell of the oils was something arousing, stimulating. He pressed his body against the canvas....

“Mr. Neil?”

Benjamin froze. It was as if a fuse popped in his brain. He was suddenly and painfully aware that he was standing in front of the most influential client he’d ever met, perhaps the most important client his employer had. And he was kissing, *licking*, practically humping, a portrait. *Of her*.

“Emil said you were a lover of fine art,” Ms. Ash said.

Benjamin jumped back from the wall as if the current he’d felt had spiked, shocking him. He was mortified to discover that, beneath his sleek black slacks, he was, quite obviously, erect.

“Oh my God,” he sputtered. He had spent years dealing with arrogant, narcissistic patrons, and had constructed his own wall of disdainful egotism as a defense, as an *offense*, but nothing he’d ever encountered had prepared him for this demon.

“I’d hate to know what you do to portraits you *don’t* like,” Victoria said.

Benjamin cursed her in that instant, as she mocked his confusion. If he could have, he would have taken her by her perfect neck and throttled her, squeezed until her eyes bulged and no breath entered her body. But he could not. He could only look into those green eyes and watch as she laughed at him. Gone was the pretense that anything going on here was normal, and with it Benjamin’s embarrassment. So what if he’d tried to hump the fucking picture? Inconsequential. What was the point of modesty in the face of something so unnatural, so deviant? Benjamin desperately wanted to choke her with his bare hands, he desperately wanted to hurt her, he desperately *wanted her*.

He reached for her, determined to rip the blouse from her shoulders, determined to grasp the perfect breast exposed on canvas behind him, determined to bruise and bloody her nipple between his teeth. *Then* he would throttle her, *then* he would—

Her fingers were around his wrist. He hadn’t seen her move, but she stopped his hand, twisted it backward. Benjamin cried out and fell to his knees. The angel of death swooped down upon him.

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**Sunday, 19 December 1999, 7:02 AM**  
**Broadway Avenue**  
**New York City, New York**



Benjamin left the gallery shortly before daybreak. In the back of his mind, he thought he would walk home. He needed the fresh air. At some point during the first hour, he realized that he'd forgotten his overcoat. A biting wind whipped through the mazelike streets of Manhattan. The streets themselves, the buildings, the landmarks, were unfamiliar to Benjamin. On several occasions, he stared at one street sign or another, reading the name but uncomprehending. Walking, home should have been roughly half an hour away, but after something like three hours, he still couldn't orient himself, couldn't place his surroundings or decipher the sights and sounds that he'd experienced every day for years.

The business day began. The streets grew crowded. Benjamin wandered among the people, not really noticing them except when he bumped shoulders with someone walking the other way. Eventually he reached a river; it was the Hudson or the East, but which one? The sun, largely obscured by gray clouds, climbed higher in the sky, but the day did not warm. At some point after noon, Benjamin gave up. He slumped onto a park bench and remained there, shivering and crying.

People continued to pass, hurried past him, in fact. None of them was Mark; none of them was Victoria.

Victoria. Benjamin shuddered, doubled over in pain, retched. "Oh, God," he muttered as he nearly choked on warm, steaming bile. He was afraid to look at the splattered sidewalk, afraid he would see blood. *Blood*. She had slit her own wrist and fed him *blood*. And he had drunk... and wanted more! No, he was wrong, *must* be wrong, delusional. He staggered to his feet, forced himself to walk, to keep moving. If he collapsed on the bench, a policeman might find him. Would a cop think he was a drunk and haul him away, or try to help, ask him if he was all right? What would Benjamin say? How could he explain what he did not himself understand?

Keep walking. Things would come into focus, get better. They had to. They couldn't get worse. And gradually his mind did begin to clear. And things were worse. As the sun began its descent, Benjamin was finally able to concentrate, to hold a coherent thought, a recognizable image, in his mind. But that image was Victoria. Hundred-year-old canvas or perfect flesh. The distinction was unclear. He had tasted her blood from both. His tongue and throat burned at the memory. Emerald eyes, rose-red blood. It was true. They were all that were there, in the empty white expanse of his gallery. The place where he'd spent most of his waking hours over the past three years was now changed, foreign, repulsive.

Benjamin stumbled through the landscape of his mind. He felt the sickening nothingness as his foot tried for a step that was not there. Glaring lights. Blaring horn. He caught his balance. Looked up at the lights, looked down at the curb he'd stumbled from. Music, as a window rolled down.

"Hey, mon, you get in?"

A taxi. A city of taxis waiting to take him where he could not go by himself. Hand sliding along the hood. Fumbling at the handle. Exhaustion pulled him into the seat.

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Sickly sweet air freshener didn't really cover the scent of *ganja*. Dreadlocks helicoptered in slow motion as the driver turned. The music wasn't reggae. Zydeco. Benjamin laughed. Said the address. Closed his eyes.

"Mon, that's only three blocks. You sure?" And in the next instant, "Here you go, mon."

Benjamin gave him a bill, left the door open, struggled with the door to his own building. So close now. His feet and hands and head were heavy, pulling him down. The key turned. Through the foyer, another locked door, stairs, home.

He shed clothes from the door to the bed. Shoes, socks, shirt, belt, slacks, silk boxers. Finally, between the satin sheets. They were warm after the cold outside. His fingers and toes were numb, but he was home. Peace.

"You were with her, weren't you?"

Benjamin buried his face in the forgiving pillow, pulled the sheet tightly around himself. Peace. Sleep.

"You were, weren't you?" Mark said. "Fuck you."

Benjamin didn't respond. He was so cold, chilled to the bone by the long day outside without his overcoat. But the body beside him provided little warmth, and no comfort. Benjamin felt the tears on his face; they washed over the grime of the city as he wept silently. His nose was running on the pillow. "I don't feel... well, Mark."

"You are such a fucking bastard."

Benjamin closed his eyes tightly but could not stop the tears that flowed more fiercely now. His sobs shook the bed. The room spun, and as his world turned upside down, he could no longer deny what he had long suspected, what he had long struggled to hide from himself. There was no love in the man beside him, only possession and envy. And there was no love between them, only dependence, desperation, tired routine. "How could I have ever loved you?" Benjamin whispered. "It must have been my fault. Must have been." When had it died? When had the joy drained away from their lives?

Mark lashed out. He flung an elbow at Benjamin, cracked him on the back of the head. "Fuck you."

Benjamin shot up in bed and smacked Mark in the face... then realized what he'd done. It was the first time he'd ever hit Mark. And it felt good. The slap enraged Mark. His face contorted horribly and he smashed a fist across Benjamin's jaw. Suddenly the world was streaks of light and dark, dancing colors—then just as suddenly Benjamin's face was in his pillow, and he could taste blood.

"Oh, God, Benny... I'm sorry, so sorry.... You shouldn't have hit me."

Benjamin waited for the hesitant, gentle touch on his shoulder. So many of their fights went this way. Mark lost control and then felt guilty; they kissed, made up, made love. It was so clear now—how Mark abused him, emotionally as much as physically. Mark was a monster, a user. Had been from the start. Benjamin had always let him be, had played his part in the game. It was as much his own fault; he'd never complained, never threatened to leave.

And there, the gentle touch on his shoulder...

Benjamin whirled and smashed his head into Mark's nose, felt the crunch, smelled the blood gushing through Mark's fingers as he screamed his shock and outrage. Benjamin couldn't believe what he'd done, couldn't believe what he was *doing*, because he didn't stop. Something about the blood fueled his fever. He slammed his head into Mark's face

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again. Bones, not just cartilage, crunched this time. Mark fell back, stunned. Benjamin threw himself on top of Mark and latched his fingers around the throat of his lover, his tormentor. The urge to throttle came back easily; it felt right, natural, overdue.

Benjamin's hands were stronger than he'd ever imagined. He savored the strength, the control. But suddenly it was Victoria's delicate neck his hands were around. He redoubled his efforts. If only it could be...

From beneath, Mark's hands thrashed wildly at his face, but Benjamin didn't ease the pressure. Mark's fingers clawed at his eyes, his mouth. Benjamin bit down hard and felt a digit come free between his teeth. More blood. He relived all the abuse, all the cruel words, all the violent sex that had left him, *always him*, bruised and bleeding.

Never again. Never again.



**Sunday, 19 December 1999, 6:02 PM**  
**Broadway Avenue**  
**New York City, New York**

Benjamin was a dead man walking to the street door of the gallery. He was showered, his hair still wet, his skin brutally scrubbed, pink and raw, but he still felt the filth of the city clinging to him. He felt the blood on his hands, on his face, in his mouth. He was completely certain that every person who passed him on the street knew exactly what heinous crime he'd just committed. It was much like the feeling he'd experienced as a young man having come to realize he was queer—the surety that eyes were following him, that others had access to his deepest secrets. He looked into the glass of a storefront and saw the heavy, dark circles under his eyes; he hadn't slept at all tonight, or last night.

He fumbled with his key as he took it from his pocket. The lock, temperamental at the best of times, thwarted his repeated attempts. Giving in to fatigue and tension, he cursed and kicked wildly at the door for a moment. His frantic burst of energy and rage quickly spent, he noticed the patrol car driving slowly past, New York's finest observing his erratic behavior. He felt the word "murderer" was tattooed across his forehead. Perhaps, he thought, he should reach for his wallet and hope the police gunned him down. The punishment would fit the crime. It was one thing to have discovered that, somewhere through the years, his love had died; it was quite another to have strangled his lover until Mark's eyes and tongue had bulged. But this was the classy part of town, and Benjamin well-dressed and neatly groomed, so the police continued on their way.

Benjamin attempted the door again, but still his murderer's fingers could not make the key work. Something was not right, something was different. Then the door opened, and Lilia was staring out at him. "I thought I heard somebody."

"My key wouldn't work," he said numbly.

"Yeah. Ms. Ash had the locks changed." Lilia was too cheerful; she must have scored some high-quality powder. "She is a beautiful woman, isn't she?" she said. "I mean, really *beautiful*."

"She changed the locks?"

"Yeah. Come on up. I've got a key for you."

His footsteps rang hollow as he followed her up the black tile stairs. The corridor was dark and bleak and barren. And then at the top of the stairs—"She had me change this combination too."—the gallery shone with bright white light, but, like Benjamin, it was cold and dead. "She's in the back with somebody. I didn't see who."

Benjamin threw his coat onto Lilia's desk. "Hang it up with her fur," he said sharply, and left her. Back in the sterile, empty gallery, Benjamin managed to recoup a portion of his spirit, his will. It was all going to stop, all the strangeness. Blood-drinking, indeed. He'd obviously been suffering some sort of episode, some severe dementia. He'd best act while his mind was relatively clear, and then seek professional help. *He* had been the victim here; he'd been Mark's victim, and Ms.

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Ash's victim. She was at the root of this somehow. Benjamin had had enough of this farce, he decided as he strode toward the rearmost gallery. What did he have to lose by kicking out his employer's rich and beautiful client? He'd already killed his lover. *She is a beautiful woman, isn't she?* He could have smacked Lilia. Of course Ms. Ash was beautiful. But she was a beast, a cruel, inhuman monster. This was all her doing. Benjamin would throw her out, bodily if she forced him to that. He would deal with the police later. He'd confess everything about Mark; he could plead self-defense maybe. But first he must rid himself of this woman. He wasn't sure exactly how she had taken advantage of his lapse into mental illness, or how she had caused it, but he was certain she had.

He gained strength and determination with each step. The stark, white walls were his evidence against her. For the gallery to sit empty at her whim was a crime. She wasn't the one who had made this place what it was. By the time he reached the final room, he'd built up a full head of steam.

And it promptly dissipated, every ounce of his fury stolen by shock and dismay.

Victoria, stunning in a green velvet gown, stood admiring the portrait with the most hideous creature Benjamin had ever seen. He wasn't sure at first that it was a man, that it was *human*. It wore clothes, a long coat, and it held a fedora in its twisted fingers—but any number of freakish creatures could be dressed up and put on display. Was this what Victoria—herself the subject of an impossibly old portrait—would do with the gallery? Turn it into a freak show? Benjamin was speechless.

Victoria, unsurprisingly, was not. “Benny, do come meet our guest, Mr. Pug.”

Benjamin was unable to step forward until the pressure of their expectant gazes overcame his shock. He moved closer—to Victoria, to the repulsive Mr. Pug.

This room had become a gallery of the impossible, the bizarre—Victoria threatening to have out his tongue; the painting; Benjamin attempting to fornicate with that painting, then attacking a client, and, in the end, *drinking her blood*. But the impossible had latched onto Benjamin, had followed him beyond the gallery, had infected him. He'd killed his lover, strangled Mark with bare, impossibly strong hands. Why not a freakish monster of a Mr. Pug? Why not? The creature was short, just over five feet tall, and thick in the middle. Its face was sprinkled with boils and smashed flat as if by violence, the nose easily wider than the squared chin. The eyes bulged out—like Mark's dead eyes—and the grinning mouth was full of jagged fangs. It offered a hand, each nub-like finger decorated with protruding bone knobs at the joints, to shake. Benjamin hesitated. He could feel Victoria's glare. He touched the proffered hand, shook it.

“The pleasure is mine,” said Mr. Pug.

Benjamin laughed nervously, his earlier determination having drained away under the onslaught of giddy, ineffable delirium. His stomach was tied in knots, his ears ringing. *The pleasure...* He bit his lip lest he slide into hysterics. Perhaps madness would be a blessing.

Victoria's voice interrupted, if not diminished, the tension. “In looking through your files, I decided that far too many people have access to the gallery. As you've no doubt discovered, the locks and combination are changed. I've given Mr. Pug a key to the rear door, so he may come and go as he pleases.” Her voice was hard and cold. It was ice down Benjamin's spine, but still barely managed to penetrate the thick fog of his mind, the

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onrushing madness. She was giving him instructions, *orders*, as if she were master of the gallery. Benjamin blanched. What had she done to Mr. Stephenson? *Emil*. So familiar, so intimate. Had she fed him blood from her perfect body? Had she destroyed his life?

“This room is to be walled off,” she said. “Lilia is making arrangements with contractors I have used before. The portrait is to remain, and no one other than Mr. Pug is to enter the room. When the new construction is completed, then you may prepare the next exhibit.”

*Construction... walled off.* She would defile his gallery, create a shrine to her own likeness? And the inhuman Mr. Pug would be her first supplicant? Not her first, Benjamin realized.

“And I’ve spoken to Jacopo,” Victoria added. “He understands the delay and sends his regards.”

Jacopo. Jacopo Finini, important painter and pompous ass who would *never* in one thousand years consent to such a slight, much less send his regards. “My God,” Benjamin muttered under his breath. She’d gotten to Finini too. Twisted him with her blood. How many others? And over how many years?

“Is that clear?” she asked, as one might address the lowliest of servants.

Benjamin realized he was still staring at Mr. Pug, turned his eyes from the grotesque and looked upon the sublime, though truly Victoria was but the grotesque in a different guise. This was the woman who had destroyed his life with but a few sips of her blood. Benjamin didn’t understand what had happened, *could* not understand. None of this could be *real*. Mr. Stephenson was still master of the gallery; Mark was waiting at home, in bed, *alive*; neither of these people was standing here. Benjamin remembered his resolve to evict her from the premises, to carry her out the door and fling her down the steps, and then he opened his mouth. “I killed Mark.”

Victoria and Mr. Pug regarded him curiously for a moment. “Did you now?” Victoria asked. “And what did you do with him?”

Benjamin felt he was going to be sick. His legs were going to give way. He’d said it, made it real by his acknowledgement. How had it happened? How? But more mystifying than what he had said, than what he had done, was the matter-of-fact reaction from these two... *creatures*. “I... I didn’t know what to do. I left him.”

“Not a good idea, leaving bodies lying around,” said Mr. Pug, shaking his head.

“Pug, could you be a dear and take care of that little problem for us?” Victoria asked with an unconcerned smile.

“Where is it you left him?”

“Was it your home, Benny? Give him your address, Benny. Pug will see to it.”

Pug promptly left them. Benjamin had said the words, given his address, followed instructions. With mounting trepidation, he watched the oddity go. Even the company of the hideous Mr. Pug seemed preferable to being alone with Victoria. Benjamin couldn’t trust himself with her. He wanted to be with her too much. He couldn’t be sure of what he would say or do. At least Mr. Pug’s monstrousness was readily visible.

“Poor, poor Mark,” Victoria said. “You’ve been very evil, Benny.”

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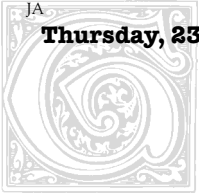
Finally, his legs did give way, and he sank to the floor at her feet. He despised her. He hated the fact that he would kiss the hem of her garment if she so commanded. And so he tried not to look at her, as he sat there in her shadow.

“Up now, Benny,” she said. “Look at me.”

She read his thoughts. She ordered him to do that which he would not. And he did. He climbed to his knees. He looked at the cold, green, monstrous eyes. It wasn't even a real struggle. He had sacrificed his world to her, and he would give his life if she asked it. He watched as one of her long, white fingernails gouged a red line along her forearm.

“You look so tired, Benny. You must keep your strength up.” She lowered her bleeding arm to him. Benjamin drank in her poison—poison that had freed him only to enslave him to a world far darker than he'd ever believed could exist. He drank, and he hated her, and he thanked her.





Thursday, 23 December 1999, 11:13 PM (5:13 PM Eastern Standard Time)

A country road  
Near Ombrosa, Italy

Gianfranco switched off the lights of his English truck and wheeled the heavy vehicle from the road into the darkness of the Italian night. Twenty-five gross cartons of “duty-free” cigarettes—over fifty thousand dollars at American retail—rode with him. He stood to make his usual ten percent cut, with maybe a few dollars in “bonus” if Biagio was feeling characteristically generous. A man could get used to the smuggler’s life, especially when it paid so well every other week for just a few hours’ work and a few minutes of risk. All you had to do was grease a few palms at the airport and watch out for the roadblocks where they searched your car for contraband. Since Gianfranco’s brother-in-law worked for the police, he always knew where the roadblocks would be and when, and happily shared his knowledge for a few cartons and a hundred peeled from the roll in Gianfranco’s pocket. Kill the lights, coast downhill and hit the road a half a kilometer from the roadblock, and it was practically a free ride from there.

Mama had even packed him a snack to make the trip more comfortable: a small bunch of grapes, a wedge of lemon and a crusty roll. No doubt the farmer over whose field he was currently cutting would have a similar meal for lunch tomorrow, wondering just who in the hell had become so drunk that they decided to take a shortcut through his flock’s pasture.

It always occurred to Gianfranco as he crept slowly past the roadblocks that his truck smelled of stale smoke and gunpowder—he knew he had to quit pocketing the odd packs of American cigarettes that broke loose from his bundles because sooner or later Biagio would find out and he’d probably lose his bonus pay. The gunpowder smell came from the *lupare* shotgun he had stashed under his seat. That was another similarity between Gianfranco and the farmer—they both carried the “wolf-gun,” albeit for presumably different reasons. While the *lupare* worked well against the wolves who chased down stray sheep from farmers’ flocks, it also put the fear of God into fellow marauders who prowled the night, animal or otherwise. Not that Gianfranco had ever used his *lupare* against a man. That would cut the poor victim in half! The few times he’d had to grab for it, the appearance of the thing alone had warded off his antagonists.

And then Gianfranco saw the wolf in his rear-view mirror. At the crest of the hill, just before the place where he had turned the truck from the road, stood the unmistakable predator’s form. It seemed almost as if the wolf had followed Gianfranco’s very path. He felt an odd sensation come over him, perhaps spawned by his musings about his gun and the virtually divine placement of the wolf. Or maybe it was the thrill of being caught that enticed him; smuggling was always more exciting at the cinema or in the books than it was in real life, and he felt no small disappointment at that. On a whim, Gianfranco decided to brake the truck and shoot at the wolf.

It served no purpose at all, of course, this humanly cruel endeavor. Still, Gianfranco reasoned that it could do him no harm. Even if the roadblock police heard the shotgun’s report, they would simply think it was a farmer putting an end to

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some unlucky predator. He probably couldn't even reach the damn thing—it was a scrawny target, probably half-mad from hunger yet wary of untended meals, and likely too far away for the short, brutal scatter of the weapon's shot. But men have never been known for prudence or kindness, and Gianfranco was no exception. He brought the truck to a stop using its parking brake and quietly exited the seat, gathering his gun with him.

Almost half a kilometer away, a candle's light went out at the farmer's cottage, and a door opened briefly, discharged a slight form from inside, and closed quietly.

Gianfranco crept slowly back up the grade, unaware of the silent figure following him. He found a small outcropping of rock and squatted down behind it, using it to hide himself from his oblivious prey. The light of the heavy moon shone down, enabling Gianfranco to draw a bead on his mark with ease.

With similar ease, Gianfranco's hunter closed on his own prey. A change of plan, surely—the smuggler was originally to have been dragged into the farmer's home and the whole thing set ablaze, but this would do. Indeed, this might prove to offer a little more creative freedom....

As Gianfranco slid a shell into the barrel of the gun, his predator made short work of the distance between himself and his victim. Rising slowly, quietly, deliberately above the crouched form of the gunman, the killer announced his presence with a disapproving "Tsk, tsk," and slapped the gun out of Gianfranco's hand as the latter turned in shock.

The killer took up the fumbled weapon and raised it over his head, intent on bludgeoning the man with it. Gianfranco put his own hands over his head, as if his feeble arms could deter the blow that came down. Deftly, the assassin took out a heavy hunting knife and dressed the unconscious body, taking distinct care to leave the victim alive. Blood scattered; flesh parted.

Gianfranco awoke to a dull ache in his head and chest, and cold in his extremities. He could move neither his arms nor his legs.

On the slope above him, the wolf had smelled blood on the wind. The predator would eat well tonight.

And again, the murderer in the peacoat strode away unmolested into the relentless darkness of the Italian countryside.

The next day, seven more men turned up dead, having been seen by others only the night before. All seven men, it was whispered through the streets of town, had worked as "salesmen" for Biagio Bernardo Giovanni, the new and reckless don.

Old Dondi had strangled in his sleep, wound up tightly in his own bedsheets.

Carlo had had too much wine, and was dead before he could make it to the hospital because the blood in his veins couldn't carry enough oxygen.

Peter and Joseph's mother had locked the house, not remembering that her sons had left for the evening. They must have tried to climb in through a second-story window and fallen, because both were found in the bushes in front of their house with broken necks.

Lui's own wife had thought he was a burglar when he returned home, drunk, from the public house and killed him without knowing what she had done. The neighbors remembered her screaming in hysteria hours before he had come home—perhaps a *real* burglar had scared her and driven her to such fear that she'd stabbed her husband, thinking her tormentor had returned.

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Gianni's tie had become caught in the belt of his car's engine as he looked to see why it was making some terrible noise. It had pulled his face down into the fan and burned the bloody remains against the hot radiator.

Silvio had been nailed to the underside of the pier with an oil-soaked rag stuffed in his mouth so he couldn't call for help before he drowned.

It was also said that a drifter had left town in the early hours of that morning, before the sun rose. He had nothing with him but the woolen coat on his back and a stray dog that chased him to the horizon but returned shortly thereafter.

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**Thursday, 23 December 1999, 7:45 PM**  
**Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**



The falling snow muffled the rhythmic clanging of the bell and speckled white the faded red Santa suit. Pristine flakes drifted gently, lazily, to earth, where the city claimed them as its own, and countless feet and tires churned them to gray sludge. Heavy clouds lay low, obscuring the tops of buildings; the horizon was close, never more than a block or two away. Amidst the muted winter wonderland, nocturnal hands lifted aside from underneath the wide, steel storm grate that stretched across the sidewalk. The gently falling snow muffled the sounds of the brief struggle, and in the end, there was only a silent bell and a faded red Santa cap lying in the churned snow of the sidewalk.



**Thursday, 23 December 1999, 9:02 PM**  
**Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**

The door slammed open and Colin stormed in cursing. In the past three hours he'd made the rounds of his whores and his dealers and taken out some of his frustration on each of them in turn. He felt warm and flushed with blood now, but was soothed not at all.

"You break the door and you gotta fix it," Gordon said from his perch in the corner atop a sprawling pile of sofa cushions. The dilapidated couch frame, rotted wood and a bent metal sleeper frame, was in another corner. Little remained in the way of intact furniture in the squalid apartment.

"I'm not gonna break your stupid door," Colin snapped, kicking it shut.

"He's still there, huh?"

"It's a disgrace! That's what it is, a damn disgrace, I tell you," Colin raged as he stalked about the room looking for something to break. He settled on the couch frame and gave it a few good whacks. "I do what I'm supposed to. I never gave Michaela no problems. I got my little neighborhood—"

"Our," Gordon interrupted.

"Huh?"

"Our little neighborhood."

"Right. Our little neighborhood. But that's not the point." Colin resumed his pacing. "I've always done what I'm supposed to. Okay, maybe not always, but pretty damned close. As close as anybody. I keep things quiet in our neighborhood. I don't cause no waves. Sabbath thugs roll through—I lay low instead of causing a fuss that's gonna attract a lot of attention. You know, the Masquerade, First Tradition, all that stuff. And I help out with trouble. We got all these new high-and-mighty types rolling into town, kicking the Sabbath out. I was at Throgs Neck. I did my part. Man, I was standing right behind that Nosferatu guy, the archon, when Polonia split his freaking skull in two. Anyway, I come back home, and what do I find? Some dirt bag loser has holed up in my territory. *Our* territory."

"So I guess he's still there," Gordon said. He was scratching and biting at a patch of hair on his shoulder that itched constantly, tearing it out with his teeth, never mind that it would be back tomorrow night.

"Yes, he's still there. Haven't you been listening to anything I've said?"

"You didn't say he was still there."

"Well, he is. And you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna kill him. I know, I know. We're all dead already. Don't give me that. I'm gonna kill him *dead* dead. Permanent-like. I'm gonna cut off his head and drink his stupid-squatter blood. Ho, ho, ho, and Merry Christmas, and screw him." Colin had continued stalking around the room throughout his rant, but now he stopped. He looked warily into the corners, at the ceiling, at the door. An important fact had just popped into his mind: The new prince was a Nosferatu. People said he had spies everywhere. They could hear what you were talking about, and

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you'd never have a clue that they were there. Colin walked to the other doorway and peeked into the closet-like kitchenette. "Figuratively, I mean."

"What?" Gordon paused from his grooming. "You're gonna kill him and drink his blood figuratively?"

"Right. It was a... you know... a metaphor."

"Like one of those things spelled the same way frontward and backwards?"

"Cause killing him," Colin continued as he walked deliberately to the center of the room and scanned the ceiling, "killing him would be against the... uh... against one of the traditions."

"Why are you talking to the light fixture?"

"No, I'm not killing anybody. I'm gonna take this to the prince, 'cause I'm in the right here. That building and that cellar are my—our territory. I done my part, and Prince Calebros has always been good to me."

"You always told me you hated those stinking Nossie bastards."

"*Shut up.* You don't know what you're talking about. You don't even know if you're *part* of the Camarilla anymore," Colin said in an attempt to change the subject.

"Yeah, tell me about it. Nobody tells me nothing," Gordon said. "But I don't really care what Xaviar does, or what anybody says he does. I'm staying right here in Brooklyn. The city's been good to me."

"So you'll go with me to the prince?" Colin asked.

"You're really not gonna kill this squatter guy?"

"*What* did I say?" Colin looked around again. "*I-don't-kill-nobody.*" And he'd seen this squatter guy in action—not the kind of guy Colin wanted to mess with. Otherwise, he would have killed him already.

**Friday, 24 December 1999, 1:07 AM**  
**The warren**  
**New York City, New York**



“I brought you something.”

The prince of New York peered over the stacks of papers that ringed his massive, battered desk like battlements. Emmett handed him yet another piece of paper, which Calebros set aside without perusing. Emmett was one of the few Kindred welcome in Calebros’s “office.” Aside from the desk, the countless papers, and the trusty Smith Corona practically buried beneath them, the subterranean grotto was crammed with shelves and boxes, themselves crammed full of more papers, reports, bundles of photographs and newspaper clippings.

“You probably want to read that,” Emmett suggested.

“Oh, do I? I suppose you know better than I what I want.”

“I suppose I do.”

Calebros scowled at Emmett but elicited no response from his broodmate’s familiar features—familiar because Calebros had known him for so many years, and because the face and body very nearly matched Calebros’s own. Bald, rough head and jagged ears; wide, deep-set eyes; flat nose; long, unevenly spaced fangs; gnarled, bony fingers that ended in sharp talons. Calebros retrieved the sheet of paper Emmett had given him and read it by the light of the candelabra situated near—but not too near—his desk. His former desk lamp had met an unfortunate end; its base currently protruded from his rubbish can. Calebros read the paper.

“So? Another petition to the prince,” he noted dryly. “This is the kind of thing the council should take care of.” The *provisional* council of primogen, just as Calebros was the *provisional* prince of the city. This council was the successor to the Council of Twelve, which had selected him prince. That council had been the brainchild of justicars Jaroslav Pascek of Clan Brujah and Lucinde of Clan Ventruue. They had arranged for the selection of a new prince—but Calebros was not who they had planned to have chosen.

After the destruction of Prince Michaela at the hands of Cardinal Polonia of the Sabbat during the Battle of Throgs Neck, the Camarilla powers-that-be had determined that Victoria Ash should assume the mantle of prince of New York. The justicars must have felt confident that they could bully and cajole her to do their bidding. The backroom deals had been made, and all was ready—except Victoria had inexplicably refused the position. She had walked out of the council meeting, leaving all present stunned. Cock Robin, justicar of Clan Nosferatu, had then swooped in like a vulture upon carrion to see his candidate enthroned as prince.

Calebros, Prince of the Sewers, some called him, which was fine with Calebros. He was less kindly disposed toward those who referred to him as the Shit King, or the Fecal Regal. He made no attempt to curb the epithets, but neither did he forget those who were heard to utter them. The Nosferatu did not forget.

At any rate, the justicars, it turned out, did not hold ultimate authority in the matter of selecting a suitable prince—or so read a statement issued shortly thereafter

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by Justicar Pascek, who had not been present himself at the meeting. Any decision made by appointees of the Inner Circle, he claimed, must subsequently be ratified by the Kindred inhabiting the territory in question. As there was no mechanism to confirm the decision, and since neither Pascek nor Lucinde had seen fit call a conclave to address the matter, and Cock Robin had left the city for parts unknown, both prince and his newly formed council of primogen were to be considered of a provisional nature. Provisional. Temporary. Illegitimate.

The designation was a slap in the face, a procedural and petty lashing out by Pascek, who was himself petty and vain. His candidate having proved a mistake, he was not willing to remove his fingers from the affairs and governance of the city. The stigma attached to the word *provisional* was not crippling—Calebros was accustomed to stigma—but it made his job of restoring order and security to the city that much more difficult. Why should Kindred flock to his banner when the implication was that he might not be around all that long? None opposed him openly; none save a few of the stupid, inconsequential, or more radical and foolhardy among the anarch element. Calebros even took some amusement from the fact that many of those who conspired against him in private often went to incredible lengths to ensure the secrecy of their plotting—with mixed results. One of those individuals in particular—the *almost* prince—interested Calebros a great deal.

“Have you spoken with Pug?” he asked.

“The petition...”

“Later, later,” Calebros waved off his broodmate’s complaint. “Have you spoken with Pug?”

“I thought it’d be better if I didn’t question him directly. Wouldn’t want to raise any suspicions. Tundlight is keeping tabs on him for me.”

“And what does Mike have to say?”

“He’s been to meet her all right. At that gallery. He’s been back several times—he has a key to the back entrance—but Victoria hasn’t been there many of the times.”

Calebros pondered that. Victoria had not appeared pleased when she’d rejected the council’s offer, yet she had elaborated to no one her reasons for doing so. “Has Pug mentioned his visits to anyone, any of our people?” Calebros asked, and frowned when Emmett shook his head. “He’s not the secretive type.”

“Not usually,” Emmett said. “Should we be worried, you think?”

“Concerned.” Anyone dealing with Victoria Ash on a regular basis was a concern. She had a habit of bending the weak to her own needs and wants, and while Pug was a productive member of the warren, he was not the craftiest or most astute.

“I could question him,” Emmett suggested.

“No. I’m sure you could get to the bottom of it, but I think I’d rather... Have Mike continue to watch him and report back. Pug isn’t normally included in sensitive discussions—”

“But you want that to change.”

“Exactly. Very gradually, though. I don’t want him to notice. Just a few more responsibilities, a bit more trust given him,” Calebros said.

“Limited range of topics?”



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“Yes. Toss him a few tidbits that Victoria will be interested in if she is getting anything from him. Perhaps some dirt on Robert Gainesmil. She’d like that. Just enough to convince her that she has an open channel to sources close to the prince.”

“You think she’s... pumping him for information?”

“Oh, please,” Calebros rolled his large eyes. “You’re beginning to sound like Colchester. By the way—”

“No, no sign of him. Others are still missing too. Since before most of the fighting with the Sabbat and after. Jeremiah for one. Hilda for another. How’s that for a scary couple? Hilda and Colchester.”

“I don’t want to think about it.”

“Then think about that petition instead.”

Calebros snatched the paper back up with a snort of disgust. “Territory dispute. Let the council handle it.”

Emmett folded his arms. “Would I bring that to you if I didn’t have a good reason? Look again.”

Calebros’s scowl deepened. He read the paper again, more carefully this time. “The Shaft. This location is near it.” Emmett nodded, a smug expression taking shape on his face. “Yes, I asked you to keep an eye on that area,” Calebros acknowledged. “So go check it out.”

“Did,” said Emmett, quite pleased with himself now. “And, I found, among other things... this.” He tossed a filthy canvas sack onto the desk.

Calebros examined it closely, at the same time attempting to downplay his considerable interest, lest he give Emmett too much satisfaction. The prince sniffed at the sack and the miscellaneous collection of items within. “Get the others.”

“They’re already waiting.”

“Then let’s go.”

**Friday, 24 December 1999, 3:00 AM**  
**A Brooklyn Tenement**  
**New York City, New York**



There was no mistaking Cranston for a sane individual. His eyes, blue-gray and piercing, seemed to take in something no one else could see. And whatever it was that he did see was, in his eyes, worthy of scorn, hatred, destruction.

They found him in the cellar of the Brooklyn tenement. By the time he realized they were there, Emmett and Mike and Clubfoot were on him with fists and claws and teeth. Emmett had insisted that Calebros wait upstairs—he was the prince, after all, and shouldn't be directly involved with such rough work any longer. Junior and Albatross had gone down with the others, leaving Pug, of all people, as an honor guard of sorts with the prince. Calebros twisted with impatience, only half-heartedly attempting to stretch the painful crooks of his twisted spine.

When they sounded the all clear and Calebros made his way down the stairs, he found Cranston beaten into submission. “On your knees for the prince, you ingrate,” Emmett told him with a none-too-gentle cuff to the head.

“That won't be necessary,” Calebros said. Strange, he thought, that Emmett seemed to enjoy the trappings of royalty more than did the prince himself. Perhaps it was merely a convenient outlet for his broodmate's mean streak.

Cranston looked quite the worse for wear. There was little enough blood, but he had several gashes on his face and head. At least three hundred stitches' worth, Calebros estimated, if he'd been kine. His stringy black hair hung past his shoulders. He was severely thin, a pale scarecrow dressed in black. Two of his fingers lay on the floor nearby; they looked as if they'd been bitten off and spit out.

“Don't worry,” said Mike Tundlight, following Calebros's gaze. “They'll grow back.”

From the looks of things, Cranston had moved into the cellar some time ago—that, or he'd been extremely busy in the intervening period. Scattered along the floor were a series of six irregularly dug graves and a discarded Santa suit. Only a fool or a madman brought his dinner home with him. Death was an unfortunate but occasional side effect of feeding, but burying bodies in one's haven was an invitation for some kine to come poking about and take special notice. The graves were not even disguised or hidden.

*This one we'll have to put down*, Calebros knew. The integrity of the Masquerade demanded as much. But there were other things that they must learn first. He reached out a hand, and Albatross handed him the canvas sack. “This came from here,” Calebros said. “You found it somewhere. Where?”

Cranston's blue-gray gaze came to rest vaguely on Calebros, but the prisoner showed no other sign of having heard the question. Emmett drew back a fist, but Calebros stopped him with a curt gesture. The prince very calmly shifted the sack in his taloned grip and dumped the contents onto the floor. There were several small rocks and dented, empty cans, a tangle of metal wire, a broken flashlight, and... *something*. It was like a short

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length of rope or cord, except... fleshy. Emmett nudged the thing with his toe. Cranston did not look at the items on the floor. Now that he had looked at Calebros, he seemed unwilling to look away.

“Were these in the bag when you found it, or did you put them in it since?” Calebros asked him. *Did you find the sack, or take it from Jeremiah?* he wanted to ask. *Did you destroy him? Like you killed whomever these were?* Calebros glanced at the graves that surrounded them. Cranston had the eyes and manner of a mindless killer; he exhibited the telltale disconnect between action and consequences. There were kine in those graves. Kindred would have crumbled to dust, simply disappeared—as Augustin had disappeared. Cranston had not merely hunted for food; he had hunted and killed—not out of any true necessity, not from a need to defend himself, or friends, or a warren. He had simply killed. Because he could. Because he wanted to. A Kindred isolated often ended up that way, sliding over time into the maw of the Beast. And if he had come upon Jeremiah, he might have destroyed the unfortunate, addled Nosferatu out of hand—for something as simple as a canvas sack, or something even less significant. Cranston did not respond to the prince’s questions.

Calebros nudged the fleshy cord much as Emmett had. A trickle of viscous, bloody juice trickled from one end. It was at least partially hollow, like a short section of hose—hose made of skin and meat and blood. “Where did you find the sack?” Calebros asked.

And then a slight smile crept over Cranston’s face, a mocking smile. “Not so far from the dragon’s belly,” he said.

“*What did you say?*” Calebros snapped, having heard but hoping that his ears had deceived him.

“Not so far.” Cranston’s smile grew to a full sneer.

“*What did you say?*” Calebros pressed him. “Before.” The other Nosferatu seemed very far away suddenly. There was only himself and the smiling, icy-eyed killer saying words that he should not.

“Hell,” Cranston said, relishing the word, caressing it on his tongue. “The dragon’s belly. Not far away at all.”

*The dragon’s belly. He had said it.*

Calebros leaned close to the killer and spoke in a low, hard-edged whisper. “You are a childe of Malkav, then? Have you spoken with Anatole?”

“Spoken?” Cranston found that amusing. “No.”

For a moment, Calebros feared that he should not have mentioned the Prophet of Gehenna, because Cranston’s fleeting engagement with reality, the brief recognition in his eyes of place and time, suddenly faded. But he spoke again, and his words caused the stolen blood in Calebros’s veins to run colder. “An angel must enter the hell of the dragon’s belly before this age passes....”

“*Lest all ages come to pass.*” Calebros whispered these last words—the words of the Prophet, given secretly to Jeremiah the messenger but understood by the prince. Or first translated by the prince, if not completely understood. *Do the words come to him through his blood?* Calebros wondered. *Or through Jeremiah’s blood, perhaps?* Had the killer found him and somehow reclaimed Anatole’s knowledge for his deranged clan?

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“I will take you,” Cranston said. Calebros looked at him suspiciously. The Malkavian nodded toward the canvas sack. “I’ll take you, if that’s what you want.”

“To where you found the sack?” Calebros asked. The grinning lunatic nodded. To where he’d found the sack. Hell. The dragon’s belly.

**Friday, 24 December 1999, 3:35 AM**  
**A Brooklyn Tenement**  
**New York City, New York**



One of the graves in the cellar wasn't a grave but rather, when the heaped dirt was pushed aside, revealed itself as a hole that wound down through the cracked foundation of the tenement. Unwilling to risk Cranston squirming through and escaping, Calebros sent Mike ahead first, and then Emmett. Cranston went next, with Calebros on his heels, and Pug, Junior, Clubfoot, and Albatross filing along behind. The false grave led down to a tunnel, and that tunnel to another, and that to another. At every fork or turn, Mike and Emmett paused until Cranston indicated which way they should go.

As they trudged along, Calebros watched the Malkavian's back and tried to divine from his movements and bearing any hint of what had happened to Jeremiah. Did the prisoner appear guilty? Did he hunch his shoulders as if he expected a vengeful deathblow at any moment? Was Cranston *capable* of remorse, guilt, fear? Had he killed Jeremiah? Or was Calebros merely imagining the defensiveness, seeing what he wanted to see? There was no way to be sure. Calebros soon abandoned the task. He thought instead of the last time he'd seen Jeremiah: huddling, a trembling mass crammed back as far as he could go in the most remote crevice of a dead-end tunnel. Jeremiah had always been high-strung, but that night he'd quivered and laughed and sobbed and spoken words of doom. All that after his time with Anatole. *After I sent him away with the Prophet*, Calebros thought. But Jeremiah had agreed, had wanted to go, and in the end his sacrifice—of his sanity? of his unlife?—had proven vital in the destruction of their enemies, the enemies of the clan. Leopold. Nickolai. The murder of Petrodon had been avenged.

That had all been going on still when Calebros had seen Jeremiah. Calebros had not become prince yet. He had not fully understood the depth of the other Nosferatu's distress, and had left him alone. So much had been going on, every person had been needed. Calebros had sent Pug back to check on Jeremiah periodically. But Jeremiah had disappeared. Vanished.

There were subterranean dangers aplenty to which a healthy, lucid Nosferatu might fall victim: *antitribu* angered over their rough treatment at the hands of the newly ascendant Camarilla; insane Kindred, like Cranston, who sought refuge or prey or both beneath ground; old wives' tales taken flesh, Nictuku, or, as Calebros had come to suspect, terrors far, far worse. Who was to say what danger might have overcome Jeremiah in his vulnerable state? They might never know; they might never find him, or evidence of what had happened to him. But opportunity had presented itself in the person of this Malkavian, by the looks of his dwelling, a serial killer of kine. Destruction of Kindred and consumption of vitae would be no great crime for one such as this. And there were the words of the Prophet...

So Calebros followed. To find where the lunatic might lead them, to see what, in the end, the canvas sack would reveal.

Eventually, Cranston's route led them into a much larger tunnel, a cavern. The Shaft. They were still relatively close to the surface world, and here the Shaft ran at a fairly gentle angle, which they followed downward. Other tunnels led away from the main

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hollow, some straight down, others from varying heights along the walls. Shortly, however, the Shaft turned sharply downward, the angle of descent growing increasingly steep until soon there was no floor or ceiling, only up and down, and vertical walls pock-marked with irregularly radiating tunnels. For the band of Nosferatu and their guest, the going rapidly changed from simple tunnel-crawling to skittering down the steeper slope to difficult climbing, searching for foot and handholds in the darkness.

*Insanity*, Calebros thought. *Only a childe of Malkav would bring us here.* But he knew that was not true. Back when Jeremiah had first disappeared, Pug had tracked him to this area, and though he'd been unable to find Jeremiah, Pug was seldom wrong about such things. The rest of the Nosferatu had been too busy to join that search, but Hilda had helped Pug. Now she was missing as well.

The Shaft was a forbidding place. The darkness, normally friend to the Nosferatu, clung heavily to them here, as if it were water seeping into their clothes, their flesh, adding weight and pulling them downward. As much as possible, they tried to descend in a spiral, no climber directly beneath another, so that a single misstep, though it could mean the end of one of them, would not take them all. *Is that what Cranston wants?* Calebros wondered of the Malkavian below him. *He couldn't think all of us would fall—but enough so that he could escape?*

Calebros was relieved when the Malkavian finally pointed out one of the side tunnels that they should follow. They waited—far enough in that Cranston, if he did try a desperate attack, couldn't push anyone over the edge—until all of the Nosferatu were out of the Shaft. Calebros could sense the relief of the others at being out of the dark, seemingly bottomless well. He shared their sentiments. As it was, it was a miracle that Clubfoot, at the very least, had not fallen and taken someone with him, like some twisted carnival game of cadaver pinball.

**Friday, 24 December 1999, 4:27 AM**  
**The Shaft**  
**New York City, New York**



“This is the place? You’re sure?” Emmett asked.

Cranston turned to look at the Nosferatu—no, to look *through* him. The blue-gray eyes saw some invisible place in the middle distance. The thousand-yard stare, but not a blank stare. Cranston was definitely seeing *something*, something that only he could see. His stare clearly made Emmett want to look back over his shoulder. But the Nosferatu did not; probably didn’t want to give the childe of Malkav any satisfaction. Calebros suspected that Cranston wouldn’t have noticed either way. He was intent upon his own private vision.

“This is the place?” Calebros echoed his broodmate’s question. “Where you found the sack?” The section of tunnel was unremarkable; there was no curve, no outcropping, no prominent feature of any sort that might remind a traveler of the underworld that he’d passed here before. How could Cranston know that this was the spot?

“If you brought us all this way to jerk us around...” Emmett let an ominous, drawn-out silence complete the threat.

Calebros had just begun searching the area—hoping to find any sign of Jeremiah, or a clue about the fleshy cord, anything that would connect Jeremiah to this place—when Pug, nose to the ground, started waving one hand excitedly. “It’s him!” he said, sniffing about more enthusiastically. “Jeremiah, his scent!”

“Don’t lose it, for Christ’s sake,” Emmett said.

Calebros moved closer. “Where does it lead?”

“This way.” Pug was already moving down the tunnel.

Calebros and Emmett fell in step behind him, and Junior behind them. “Mike,” Calebros said, “make sure our guest does not lag behind.” Clubfoot and Albatross took up positions behind Cranston, and the entire procession trailed along behind Pug. No light penetrated this far beneath the earth. Only the grossly dilated pupils of the Nosferatu allowed them to maintain the pace they now assumed. The Malkavian, who’d kept up well enough while the group had been dependent upon him for directions, began to have difficulty, stumbling. Clubfoot and Albatross grabbed him by either arm, holding him upright and dragging him along.

Close behind Pug, Calebros was reminded of their recent hunt, when Anatole’s riddle and Pug’s nose had made the difference in bringing the Tremere *antitribu* Nickolai to justice. Remembering an unexpected attack that had materialized out of the dark that time, Calebros alternately watched Pug and scanned the darkness ahead. And, for the first time this night, the prince felt the stirrings of real hope. If Cranston was not lying or mistaken, if that had been the place he’d found the canvas sack, and the trail led away from that spot, then chances were good that Jeremiah still survived. He hadn’t been destroyed—not by the lunatic, at least. Calebros could not speak for the other terrors of the dark.

They continued that way for several hundred yards—this collection of sniffing (Pug), hoping (Calebros), and limping (Clubfoot) Nosferatu, dragging a psychotic Malkavian

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with them—until Pug grew excited again. The scent had seemed strong from the start, and he'd paused only twice to check his direction; but now he sniffed and wrinkled his flat face with increasing agitation. "It's recent here. Much more recent than before." He backtracked for a moment to confirm what his nose was telling him—and that was when Calebros saw movement ahead. A shape dodging around a sharp curve in the tunnel.

"*There's something there,*" Calebros said in a hoarse whisper.

Emmett must have seen it as well, because he sidestepped Pug and slipped past Calebros like a shot, but the prince was not far behind. They turned the corner in time to see the shape—was it *two* shapes? Calebros thought—duck around another turn. The rest of the Nosferatu had joined in the chase now as well. Calebros turned the second corner and thought again that two shapes were disappearing into the darkness ahead of Emmett down a long straightaway. The prince was well along the tunnel himself when he heard shouting and the sounds of struggle behind him.

He turned, fully expecting to see Cranston attempting escape, but the two raging beasts at each other's throats were Clubfoot and Albatross. They were a mass of savage fangs, flailing limbs, and slashing claws. Reason had fled them—both of them, victim to the cannibalistic hunger that was never far away for the Kindred. And where sanity was not in evidence, neither was the Malkavian.

Calebros looked back the other way, where Emmett was receding into the darkness. "Pug, Junior—Go with Emmett! Hurry!" Calebros shouted, then, "Mike, stay with me!" As Pug and Junior registered what their prince had said and tore themselves from the spectacle of their warring clanmates to follow Emmett, Mike was trying to separate Clubfoot and Albatross. He took as many blows as he prevented, and then for a moment it seemed that he had succeeded in attracting the combatants' attention—and they both turned on him. Mike staggered away from them, sensing the bloodlust that drove them.

Calebros didn't bother with getting their attention. He swooped in with flashing talons and hamstringed Clubfoot. The unsteady Nosferatu crumpled to the ground and, as Albatross turned, the heel of Calebros's hand slammed upward against that frenzied Kindred's chin. Albatross's thin neck whipped up and to the side, and he fell stunned to the ground among a clattering of broken teeth.

For several seconds, Mike stared at his suddenly incapacitated clanmates, then at his prince. Calebros was already stepping past him. "Come on," he said to Mike.

They quickly began retracing their steps toward where Cranston had claimed to have found the canvas sack. Calebros's sense of smell was not nearly that of Pug's, but the Nosferatu prince hoped he'd be able to tell if Cranston had deviated from their earlier route. That would be the best chance the prisoner had; in such total darkness, he couldn't hope to outrun the Nosferatu—but who could guess what path a Malkavian might choose to follow?

Within a very few moments, Calebros didn't have to guess. The prince was covering ground rapidly, Mike struggling to keep up. Calebros's painfully twisted spine did not slow him down when circumstances demanded speed, and shortly past the point to which Cranston had led them, Calebros spotted the Malkavian ahead. Cranston was not moving nearly as slowly as he had been; he was not as disadvantaged by the darkness as he'd led them to believe, but still Calebros and Mike were gaining ground on him.

Although a tiny portion of Calebros's mind continued to ponder the two figures fleeing in the other direction, most of his energy and attention were focused on the



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Malkavian. Surely Cranston had brought the hunger, the *madness*, on Clubfoot and Albatross. It was the Malkavian's fault that they had done harm to one another, that one would likely have destroyed the other had Calebros not struck them both down. Calebros felt the cold fury of vengeance rising in his veins, but even as he considered what he would like to do to repay Cranston, the Nosferatu tried to keep the comeuppance within reason. He remembered the blind hatred in Cock Robin's eyes, in his animalistic warble, as they had tracked down Nickolai. And just as destruction of the Tremere had closed off an avenue of information, a destroyed Malkavian would serve no further purpose. There might be much they could still learn from this lunatic—which wasn't to say that he would not suffer.

As Calebros and Mike closed to within a few yards of Cranston, the racing trio was rapidly approaching the edge of the Shaft, where their tunnel ended abruptly in nothingness. *He'll have to slow down*, Calebros thought. *Whether he plans to climb up or down, he'll have to slow down to grab a handhold—and then we'll have him.* Cranston would never make it as far as the Shaft. Calebros estimated the point at which the Malkavian would have to slacken his pace—several yards shy of the Shaft. The two Nosferatu would be on him the instant he slowed—

But the Malkavian did not slow. He did not pause, but instead ran until the ground ran out beneath him, and without word or scream he plunged headlong into the abyss. Calebros and Mike just did manage to stop at the edge, but the Malkavian was already lost to the deep darkness below.

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**Friday, 24 December 1999, 9:45 PM**  
**The warren**  
**New York City, New York**

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“But who were you with?” Calebros asked.

Jeremiah had not fought being brought back to the warren, and he seemed perfectly content now, smiling up at Calebros. Jeremiah’s smile was neither cruel nor mocking, nor was it a particularly insane smile. But this was not the same focused, analytical Nosferatu whom Calebros had sent so many weeks ago to lead and be led by the Prophet of Gehenna. “I was alone until you came for me,” Jeremiah said. “Alone with the darkness.”

“But I found you only last night,” Calebros pointed out. “What you said before—you make it sound like we were together many nights.” Calebros had asked the same questions over and over again; sometimes Jeremiah gave slightly different answers, but all were similarly unhelpful.

“You believed me,” Jeremiah said gratefully. “You believed me and took me where I’d be safe.”

“Of course you’re safe here in the warren,” Calebros said, but he couldn’t help the feeling that they were speaking at cross-purposes. Jeremiah was talking about someone else—someone else who’d believed his mad ravings, someone else who’d taken him *somewhere* else, not to the warren. And Jeremiah’s reaction bore out Calebros’s suspicion.

For the first time, Jeremiah seemed cognizant of the fact that he *was* in the warren. The stone walls of the small room were solid, but he glanced around suddenly as if countless predators were descending upon him from every direction. Jeremiah pushed himself back into the corner; he pressed his back against the converging walls, but took little comfort in his more easily defensible position. “*This place isn’t safe!*” he screamed. “Especially not this place!”

Calebros recognized both the panic that took hold of Jeremiah and the catatonia that quickly superseded it, seemingly the only way he could cope with the imagined horrors that assailed him.

*Imagined*, Calebros thought. *I pray that they’re imagined.*

There was nothing more to learn from Jeremiah once he entered that state—not that he’d revealed much of substance otherwise. He’d slipped in and out of paranoid paralysis all night. Calebros had had his fill for the time being. It was enough that Jeremiah again was safe among them, the prince told himself, but the consolation was slight.

*What of the other shape I saw fleeing in the tunnel?* he wondered. Emmett had caught up with and pounced on Jeremiah, but neither Emmett nor the others sent to aid him had seen a second shape. And Jeremiah’s answers since then had proven singularly unrevealing. *Then again*, Calebros thought, *Jeremiah’s notes about Anatole proved of limited use—until the exact moment when they were the most use.* As if they were meant for a specific purpose and

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would not be unraveled until that purpose was at hand. Could Jeremiah's ranting be another maddening gift of the Prophet?

Calebros raked his talons across his vein-raddled scalp. His head hurt; his entire body, every bone, and joint, hurt. He'd gotten more exercise running about the city these past few weeks than he had in the past thirty years, and he was convinced it wasn't healthy. An eternity of quiet contemplation was more to his liking, but his responsibilities to the clan, and now to the city, demanded that he act otherwise.

The warren was abuzz with activity. In addition to the ruckus caused by Jeremiah's presence and condition, there was significantly more pressure to gather and digest information from all over the city now that Calebros was prince. The slightest, most seemingly inconsequential bit of news or gossip might reveal a danger toward his person, and the reports that had always flooded his desk now washed over his office like a tidal wave. There was increasing word of paranoid dread of the prince among Kindred loyal and disloyal alike—they seemed to think that Calebros was everywhere, and he tried to foster that impression, that he knew *everything*, by knowing as much as he could. Now that Jeremiah was accounted for, there was more than enough work to get back to.

After a brief stop to make sure that Clubfoot and Albatross were recovering from their Malkavian-induced rage and the injuries Calebros had dealt them, the prince returned to his office and his desk with its comfortably familiar, if overwhelming, stacks of reports, newspaper clippings, and photographs. So preoccupied was he with the latest discussion with Jeremiah that Calebros had almost let himself collapse into his sturdy wooden chair before he realized what was wrong—or *different*, if not exactly wrong.

The tiered candelabra still stood near—but not too near—his desk, but the candles did not burn. Yet the office was not in darkness. The desk lamp that Calebros had buffeted beyond use and then stuffed into the trash was now upright on his desk, nestled in among the stacks of papers and his trusty Smith Corona. It was an irony of unlife in the warren that among the Nosferatu, who so closely watched over and used to their advantage the city's department of sanitation, no one ever emptied the trash with any regularity. In the case of Calebros's office, no one so much as *touched* his rubbish can; he'd long ago boxed bloody the ears of any such do-gooders. For the rare item that Calebros actually brought himself to throw away, his trash can was much more a purgatory than actual banishment. More often than not, he repented of his decision. The scraps of paper or twisted trinkets he'd fished from the bottom of the container were too numerous to count, and so the prince was particularly protective of his seemingly cast-off possessions, which an ignorant clansman might consider fair game. Umberto had made that very mistake just over twelve years ago—it had been a smashed transistor radio, Calebros remembered—but Calebros had promptly set matters aright, and there had been no repeat, by anyone, in the intervening years.

And now the desk lamp, from the sanctity of Calebros's trash, had been restored to functional life. Not only did it illuminate his desk, but the light was bright and strong, without the first hint of a flicker. The light had *always* flickered, from the first night Calebros had liberated the lamp from an abandoned office in Queens.

Calebros did not lower himself into his chair. He looked carefully around the grotto, his office sanctum, which had been violated. Aside from the lamp, all was as he'd left it—

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all except a certain bookshelf that was several inches farther from the wall than it should have been. The lamp and the bookshelf told him what he needed to know—they told him what he would have thought to be impossible.

The prince of New York left his desk and pulled the bookshelf farther from the wall. He bent down, with a great popping of joints, and crawled into the low, narrow tunnel the shelves concealed. With one foot, he hooked the metal bracket attached to the back of the shelves and pulled the unit to. *There were two shapes*, he told himself as he crawled along the tunnel and down the increasingly steep slope. By the time he emerged into the larger chamber that was home to his own personal lake, Calebros had convinced himself of who he would find.

Nonetheless, he was surprised to see Augustin sitting atop the large bags of salt next to the lake, waiting for him. “It has been a long while,” Calebros said.

“Indeed it has.” If looking at Emmett was like gazing at a reflection, then seeing Augustin was like peering into a funhouse mirror: The features were not dissimilar, but they were contracted, shriveled, aged. Calebros didn’t know how much older than he Augustin was, but he knew the difference was considerable. In addition to his other talents, the elder Nosferatu was an accomplished tinker; restoring a discarded lamp to life was right up his alley. “I have been watching,” Augustin said, “but now the time has come.”

“Watching me,” Calebros said.

“You... and a great many people and events.”

“What time is it that has come?”

“Hasn’t Jeremiah told you?”

“His mind is gone,” Calebros said, though he felt a dam within his soul crumbling, and walled-away, unfounded fears beginning to seep through. “He is a fearmonger now, little more.” *He was broken by his time with Anatole and speaks only of the darkness beneath the earth, and the Final Nights.*

“He is wiser than any of us,” Augustin said. “You know it. I’ve seen your notes. You just won’t let yourself believe.”

“The Nictuku are nothing more than old wives’ tales,” Calebros said, still trying to convince himself that he could hold the dam intact if he but tried hard enough.

“Oh, they’re real,” Augustin said nonchalantly, “and they’re awakening. But they are the least of our problems.”

Calebros was speechless. Mythical creatures of destruction, three steps in blood from Caine himself—and they were the least of the Nosferatu’s problems? “You left *years* ago to find the truth about the Nictuku,” Calebros said. “Now you return saying you’ve proven your worst nightmares, but you’re not concerned?”

“I didn’t say I’m not concerned.” Augustin worked his way down from the bags of salt. “I am. They are worse than I feared. But they are no longer my *worst* nightmare, nor should they be yours, prince of New York.”

“The darkness beneath the earth,” Calebros said.

“Nothing that has happened has been by accident,” Augustus said. “You know that, don’t you? Oh, the war with the Sabbath would have happened regardless, but did it have to go the way it did—the particulars, I mean?”

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“How much has been *your* doing?” Calebros asked. “You were with Jeremiah. Near the Shaft.”

“Yes. I knew that the Malkavian would come to your attention sooner or later. I’d hoped you’d find the sack, and that it would lead to that place, though I admit I was growing tired of waiting. There were other clues you missed—”

“The *bozzetto*, the one in Atlanta that was different than the rest, the wrong type of clay, more like the ones in Chicago. And the picture.”

“Very good.” Augustin gave him a dainty golf clap. “I’m not blind to the needs of my clan. I did my part for you and Cock Robin—although mostly I wanted to make sure that he moved on. He’s fairly... limited in his perspective, not so much a free thinker, as you are. But don’t fool yourself into thinking that all the fingerprints you’ve imagined are mine.”

“You’ve read my notes,” Calebros said sharply. “You say you know what I think.”

Augustin scowled at him. “You’ve begun to ask the right questions, but you won’t let yourself go far enough. Imagine the worst-case scenario—and then let yourself believe that reality is as bad tenfold, hundredfold. Yes, your clumsy handling of the Eye of Hazimel might have helped set things in motion, but do you really think that a single Ravnos—even a Methuselah, perhaps the eldest surviving member of that clan—could be the cause of everything that has happened? Do you think it coincidence that New York fell to the Camarilla? An accident that you are prince?”

“Certainly no Ravnos *caused*—”

Augustin cut him off. “I’m not going to debate free will and determinism with you. You may choose what you’re going to wear when you get up. If I know what that will be, *for a certainty*, not just a guess, and I wear the same thing, did you have free will regarding whether we would wear the same thing? Was it coincidence?”

Calebros could see the dots connecting one to another. He had charted the dots for so long now, but he’d been unwilling—*afraid*—to draw the lines.

“That Leopold,” Augustin continued, “even with the Eye, should he have been able to do what he did to a small army of Gangrel? Wouldn’t he have destroyed all our allies, not to mention half the city, if he’d wielded the same power just a few weeks ago? There was a *reason* for him to destroy the Gangrel. The Gangrel abandon the Camarilla; the Camarilla is forced to abandon valuable territory; their only chance to salvage the situation—take New York from the Sabbat.”

“But how—?”

“I’m talking about a consciousness so profoundly greater than ours,” Augustin said wagging a finger, “with predictive powers of our actions so extensive, so accurate, as to be able to look into the future, to *shape* the future.”

“How can you be so certain?” Calebros asked weakly. He wasn’t sure exactly when he’d sat down, but he was sitting now on the shore of the underground lake.

“After a few decades of seeking the Nictuku, of searching for signs of the dark, hidden things under the earth,” Augustin said, “I began to realize that all that we know, even all that we speculate about, is but the tip of an infinite iceberg, and we are in a very tiny boat on black, black waters.”

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“If what you say is true, and I’ve been walking down this predetermined path, why didn’t you warn me?” Calebros wanted to know.

“I am a watcher.”

*Watcher. Inconnu.*

“Much of what I’ve learned,” Augustin said, “I’ve confirmed with others who have watched and searched far longer than I. Why didn’t I warn you? It is not our way. We flatter ourselves that we are beyond the reach of the Jihad, above the maneuverings of the ancients—but it is a lie. We are pawns as surely as you are. Still, to show ourselves is to risk much.”

“Then why now?”

“Because *time has run out*. The red star shines in the sky, and the Nictuku rise... and because you are blood of my blood.”

*Time has run out*. The words rattled like thunder in Calebros’s mind. *The Final Nights are at hand*. “But if the ancients are as powerful as you say, then there is no hope. Our cause is futile.”

“You are right that, whatever sleeps beneath us, we cannot surprise it. The behemoth wakes, surveys its surroundings, knows the hearts and minds of all creatures of the blood, sets in motion events that will safeguard it, and returns to its slumber. I believe, though, that there are multiple paths within its plans, differing possibilities, though they all lead to its survival.”

“But if it has such pervasive predictive powers,” Calebros protested, “there is nothing we can do.”

“Nothing we can do that will *surprise* it,” Augustin said. “You’re right. So in this case... we do what it *wants*.”

“We defeat it by helping it?”

“Not defeat it. Prolong the struggle. We must assume the ancients do not yet wish to be revealed, else they would be—and that would be the end. So the ancients’ ideal path is to remain hidden. And so we help them remain hidden. For now. There are those of my comrades who believe, with time, we will be able to defeat the ancients, or avert their rising altogether.”

“Prevent Gehenna,” Calebros muttered, shaking his head in stunned disbelief.

“If the Sabbath had secured all of the East Coast,” Augustin said, “some among them would have had leisure to begin the search. They claim to wage war against the ancients.”

“You fear they would have discovered one?” Calebros asked. “Then it is an ancient that lies beneath us?” *Ancient. Antediluvian.*

“Naming is a way to gain mastery, and I do not pretend to gain mastery over... over it. But there is an elder power. And were we to expose it tonight, it would mean our destruction, the destruction of all of our kind. And perhaps of the earth itself.”

“And so hiding it,” Calebros said, “does not defy its will, and works in our interest as well.”

“Exactly.” Augustin allowed a mirthless smile to crease his lips. “Unless I am wrong.”

Calebros considered that possibility for some time. Even if little of what Augustin said could be *proven* beyond a doubt, much of it dovetailed with Calebros’s own

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suspicious—suspicious he had been denying. And suddenly Jeremiah didn't seem so insane—or rather his insanity had been brought on, thanks to the Prophet, by seeing what no Kindred or kine was meant to see. Calebros wished he could have the old *sane* Jeremiah back. The prince wished that he had never guessed any of this, that Augustin were long dead instead of standing before him. It was *all* insane, the more Calebros thought about it. How many individuals were involved? How many of their actions had been influenced, or predicted? Better not to know at all. Better not even to suspect. “But why—if it is true—why a Nosferatu prince? Who else would be more likely to stumble onto the truth?”

“Who indeed?” Augustin asked.

Who better to see the truth? Who better to play along, to make sure no one else stumbled upon what must remain hidden? “Then it knew you would come to me; it knew you would warn me.”

“Perhaps,” said Augustin. He sounded less sure of himself than he had earlier, but by now he would know that Calebros had taken the hook. There was no more need to convince the prince of New York.

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**Friday, 24 December 1999, 11:45 PM**  
**Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**

GF



“Colin, this is Emmett. He works for the prince,” Gordon said. He’d already gnawed away the patch of perpetually itching hair on his shoulder tonight and was now working on his knee. He chewed his knee only when he was nervous. He and the disconcertingly ugly Nosferatu—as if there were any other kind—were waiting in the apartment.

“So,” Colin said, trying to sound more confident than he really was, “I guess the prince got my perdition.”

“Your petition,” Emmett said. “Perdition is all yours.”

“Right,” Colin said, not quite understanding. “And so...?”

“The Kindred you told us about has been removed.”

“Removed? What do you mean? Like...” he made a gesture with his finger slicing his throat, “...removed, or just, you know, removed?”

Emmett folded his arms. “How badly do you want to know?” Something about the way he asked the question told Colin that he did not want to know, that it might not be healthy to want to know.

“Uh... nevermind. That’s not the important thing. Am I right? The important thing is that I...” Colin paused significantly, “have been vindicated. That squatter son of a bitch is gone—wherever and however ain’t none of my business, and I don’t wanna know, right? Right. The important thing is that my territory—*our* territory—is safe again. That Prince Calebros is a stand-up guy. Am I right?”

“Oh, by the way,” Emmett added, “the tenement where that squatter son of a bitch was holed up—it’s off limits.”

Colin cocked his head. “Huh?”

“You know,” Emmett said with a blank expression, “off limits. Stay the hell away. Don’t go near it. Probably a good idea to stay away from the whole block. Think of it as a commission. The prince took care of this little problem, and you’re so happy that you gladly turn over that territory.” He gave Colin a cold, hard stare. “Am I right?”

Colin didn’t know what to say. He stared at Emmett, then at Gordon, then at Emmett again. Finally, he recognized that there was only one thing he could say. “Uh... right.”





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**Saturday, 25 December 1999, 12:35 AM**  
**Brooklyn**  
**New York City, New York**

After Emmett left Colin and Gordon, the Nosferatu made his way through the gently falling snow to the cellar where he'd found Jeremiah's canvas sack. Tonight he found Mike Tundlight there supervising a handful of their clanmates. There was no longer any sign of graves, shallow or otherwise; there was no Santa suit. The floor of the cellar was now smooth, fresh cement, not yet dry. One of Mike's workers was finishing the last corner.

Mike shook his head. "I guess we don't have enough cement to fill in the whole Shaft, so we're going to close off all the tunnels." He let slip a wry laugh. "It'll take years."

Emmett sighed. "Yeah, he's doing the same thing around the warren. Pretty soon all of Manhattan is gonna be a concrete bunker."

"What's Calebros afraid of?" Mike asked.

Emmett just shrugged. "Don't know, but I guess whatever it is, it doesn't hurt to be ready." They stood and watched for a few minutes as the worker smoothed over the final corner.

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**Monday, 27 December 1999, 12:04 AM**  
**(Sunday, 26 December 1999, 6:04 PM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**The villa of Biagio Giovanni**  
**Ombrosa, Italy**



“It’s quaint. It’s almost medieval.” Isabel looked to the clock, which proclaimed the time to be just after midnight. “I’m sure you do it for convenience, though.”

“Very true, my dear cousin, very true,” replied Biagio. “When the men you work with keep their hours only after dark, you learn to make concessions for them. You take your supper when you can.” He smiled. “May I pour you wine?” Biagio waved to a servant but Isabel held up her hand in polite protest. “No? Nothing at all? I know your tastes, but a gracious host never assumes...”

“No, that’s fine, Biagio. You have a lovely home and a lovely table. It’s a shame that I must decline.” Isabel noticed the pleasant warmth emanating from the great fireplace that heated the patio. Without the comfort given off by the great hearth, it would have been far too cold to sit outside on such a cold night.

Isabel watched as the two stewards set the table for their master. In her own haven, Isabel would likely have dispensed with all the pomp, perhaps waving her hand toward a ghostly servant to bring her a snifter of decanted vitae. Then again, no—in these modern nights, such truck with the spirits was frivolous. As fewer and fewer of the departed souls seemed able to answer the call of the Giovanni’s deathly magic, the practice was now a luxury, not a convenience.

Biagio Giovanni’s wine steward poured him a glass of valpolicella; apparently the meal would be pasta. The other servant brought forth a scalloped bowl, filled to brimming with field greens, a crisscross of sliced ham and cheese, and a few of the black calamata olives Biagio’s younger brother grew in Greece. She smelled the bite of vinegar.

“I hope you don’t mind,” her host continued, his eyes on her and not on the food being set before him. “Battista says it repulses her, but she said it wouldn’t be too untoward to eat before you if the invitation specified dinner.”

“I don’t mind at all. This is what I do.” Isabel leaned back in her chair, feeling the satin of her Yves Saint-Laurent gown crush the tender velvet of Biagio’s ostentatious patio furniture. She imagined a host of attendants earned their keep only by watching the skies and waiting for the slightest hint of rain before scurrying out and rushing it to some unobtrusive safe place inside their master’s loggia. “I have had dinner with diplomats, ambassadors, and heads of state. You’d be surprised what a simple complaint of a delicate constitution or upset stomach can defer. Few of them have been as gracious as you, however, Biagio.”

Again her host smiled. “What is a man, if not the sum of his demeanor?” He picked up a salad fork, speared a leaf and an olive, and raised them to his mouth. “Now I should tell you why I’ve asked you here, should I not?”

“And what is it that I can do for you, Biagio?” asked Isabel, casually running her finger around the rim of an empty crystal glass.

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More servants had entered the room, carrying away her host's antipasto and leaving in its stead a small silver tray of spinach-garnished *crostini* covered in melted mild cheese, and a plate of small bay scallops and orange slices that smelled like they had been pan-seared with a sweet wine.

Biagio sipped from his wine glass and then offered Isabel the plate of bread. Smiling, she declined. "Don't feel as if you have to offer me something each time your staff brings it to the table."

"I'm sorry. It's force of habit." A wisp of steam rose from Biagio's mouth.

"No, it's not," Isabel looked across the table, her eyes meeting Biagio's. "You're trying to change the subject. You know you have to ask me whatever it is you're going to ask me, but you're nervous about it." Isabel crossed her hands in front of her. "Honestly, Biagio, do you think I haven't talked with enough people over my hundreds of years to recognize an uncomfortable gesture or an empty motion?"

"Hundreds of years? You wear it so well!" Biagio joked in reply.

"Now you're being ridiculous."

"I'm sorry; I'm making light of my own fault. But I certainly hope you don't think it was completely disingenuous?"

"Not at all. I'm certain that you honestly were sharing the bounty of your table with me. But that doesn't mean you weren't using the most available avenue to deter the conversation."

"As I'm continuing to do now?"

"Exactly."

"Such psychology! I truly share the table with a master."

"As I said before, it's what I do."

Biagio Giovanni, his eyes never leaving Isabel's, impaled a tender scallop on his fork and raised it to his lips.

"It's more complex than a simple favor." Biagio wound a bulge of linguine around the end of his heavy, silver four-tined fork, taking care to include a caper and a sautéed shrimp in the payload. Long shadows emerged from behind him, as if the night had grown as tired of his delays and deferrals as Isabel Giovanni had.

"I'm sorry? What is?" Isabel replied, making less and less effort to hide her increasing frustration. She had volunteered to meet with Biagio as a favor. The man was a financial prodigy, well-versed enough in both American law and Italian to find a not-quite-illegal method of importing tobacco from the United States into Italy without paying the mammoth tariffs and taxes on the product. Through a series of blinds and exchanges among front companies, he kept the paper trail obscure enough to hide his own involvement and further occlude the location of the product itself. Of course, the product never made more than three stops, but to trace its supposed location, one would have to call a dozen different companies before being graciously redirected to the first.

Isabel felt this was not unlike how she was being treated herself. Either Biagio was stupidly unaware of the passions of the Kindred—unlikely—or he was so thrilled and satisfied with himself that he found it pleasurable to test the limits of everyone with whom he came in contact.

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“The whole situation. I’ve broken a few rules, Isabel, and I wanted to talk to you about making amends.”

“Amends for what? Not going through the proper channels?”

“So to speak. I know that I haven’t paid what’s due.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little late for that? Anyone who has a problem with what you’re doing has undoubtedly already made up his mind against you. As a matter of fact, if I can indulge in a little of my own psychology, that’s what you’re really asking me. Someone’s jeopardized your business, and you want me to find out who he is.”

Biagio put his fork down in the pasta bowl. “Isabel, please don’t make me the villain here.”

“It’s not a question of villains. It’s a question of doing what’s expected. You know you didn’t do what was expected of you—you didn’t talk to your don and you refused to pay off the local *gabelotti*. You didn’t think it would matter, but the cigarette business grew so quickly that they noticed you before you were wanting them to.”

“That’s not wholly true, Isabel. I didn’t know who to go to. I didn’t know who to tell. I figured that they would come to me once I was worth their notice.”

“Dammit, Biagio, who do you think you’re talking to here? You’re a part of one of the most influential and respected families in the world. You were mentored by one of the three biggest drug smugglers running the triangle between Cuba, the United States and here.”

“Isabel, please—”

“No, Biagio, you know it as well as I do, as does everyone in this house, whether they’re the person who cooks your dinner or the daughter who plays with toys out by the fountain. These people know what it is to be involved with the Giovanni family. They know who the Giovanni are and what they do. But, before you interrupted me, I was talking. You yourself took the trip between Cuba and Italy several times, and not for the purposes of vacation. You saw an opportunity, you took it, and it broke your heart to think of paying anyone who didn’t know that they were due.”

“It’s not like I’ve done anything wrong, Isabel. I haven’t paid the thieves and racketeers who dip into other businesses because they’ve scared everyone into accepting their presence.”

“You *are* a thief and racketeer, Biagio. Now that you’ve been caught, you’re all upset and claiming that everyone else has done an injustice to *you*. While that may work for adolescents, I don’t think it’s going to hold much water when the dons really grow frustrated with you and want *your* head on a platter. That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You understood the message that they sent you by killing your people, and you want me to take care of it before it makes it back to you.”

Biagio licked his lips and sipped his wine. “In so many words, yes. But how do you know that some of my associates have turned up dead? Is the information network of the estimable Isabel Giovanni so vast that she knows the movements of the world before they happen?”

“Put aside your snide vanity for a moment and think it through. Yes, I have contacts everywhere, but up until now, who cared about another cigarette smuggler?”

“This is what I’m asking you, Isabel.”

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“It’s someone from your own family, you simpleton.” Isabel made a grand point of sighing with this revelation. “I don’t know how you stay so thin, eating like you do. It’s enough to stop a man’s heart,” she added.

“Not that you have to worry about such things,” replied Biagio with all the bile he could muster. In truth, he was growing a bit sleepy, having sated himself with such a luxurious repast. It didn’t help that someone in his own family had chosen to work against him; disappointment weighed him down, as did the feeling of having revealed to Isabel that perhaps he wasn’t as clever or wise as his success implied he was.

Breaking Biagio from his brief reverie was the servant bringing his final course to the table: tender veal garnished with asparagus and soft-shelled crab caught down by the docks. Children who lived near the villa, the families of the servants and the young Giovanni themselves, brought crabs they had trapped to Biagio’s chef, Giuseppe, who paid them a few lira and rewarded them with a smile. Indeed, everything Giuseppe cooked was fresh; no doubt the lamb was brought in from market this morning and the *crostini* had been baked this very afternoon.

The manservant set the succulent dish before his master and vanished quietly into the kitchen.

Isabel continued her unblinking stare, albeit without any further remark. Another barb would simply add insult to Biagio’s injury, and her malevolence was not one of petty spite. Quite the opposite—Isabel was like a wolf or a raptor, a woman for whom “evil” was an utterly inappropriate word. She was a balance of virtues twisted by the Embrace: Her esteem for her family had become tainted by her knowledge of its predatory nature. Her duty to the family name had made her a vicious rival, turning her back on those too weak to preserve the prominence the Giovanni had achieved. The fact that she was a drinker of mortal blood, a “Kindred,” also made her a murderess.

A murderess.

Such being the case, Biagio felt his blood grow chill. She had come here to kill *him*. But if that was true, why did she simply sit there at the end of the table, enduring his ever-more-awkward manners and his growing fear of the hideous world of monsters who lurked in the shadows and took their tribute as they took the warm sustenance from their prey? Why had she not simply broken him with the news that he had disappointed whomever it was in the Giovanni who had sent her here? Why did she at all explain to him the true nature of her charge?

Was this a test? Had Isabel been sent to bless or curse him with the same deathlessness that afflicted her? It was a tantalizing possibility—that someone had recognized his “audacity” as ambition and his “temerity” as drive. Like his blood, his bones grew cold with the thought, that he might change into one of those night creatures and know power of which this mortal life was the merest echo. To become a monster! To taste the might of Heaven or Hell and wield it like a feudal lord over the peasants of the sunlit world!

Biagio could practically feel the change already—he no longer wanted the sumptuous spread that had comprised his dinner, could hardly bring himself to place the morsels into his mouth. It was true! She worked the magic right now, bringing him into the family of the dead! His extremities grew numb, his limbs resistant to movement. His eyes drooped. Biagio’s joints ached with the coming of his new nature!

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“Joseph...” Isabel called. What was this?

From the kitchen emerged a man in a heavy woolen coat of navy blue hue. This was not Giuseppe, nor a servant. Damn her! She had poisoned him under his own roof and he had taken it all in like a gluttonous fool, the veriest embodiment of greed, much the way he had taken his ill-earned money.

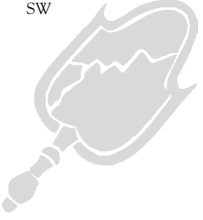
“But... why bother? Why... this way?” Biagio croaked, his stiffening lips forcing themselves with terrible exertion to form the words.

“For two reasons,” Isabel glared down at her expiring cousin. “First, we have no need even to clean this up. It will appear that your own gluttony did you in. No one will believe it, of course, but the coroners should have no reason to doubt their expedient result.

“The second reason, though, is one after your own heart. You said yourself, ‘What is a man, if not the sum of his demeanor?’ This is true not only of men, but of the Kindred; perhaps even more so. I’m no knife-wielding throat slitter, cousin. Among our kind, subtlety is the surest way to preserve one’s own unlife. It’s a lesson I’m sure you appreciate.

“But at such a great cost. Good night, cousin.”

With dead eyes, Isabel Giovanni watched the ghost of her cousin flow fluidly up from his dead body and fade away into the cold air. Then she accompanied her peacoated associate on the long walk home.



**Friday, 31 December 1999, 11:28 PM**  
**The Shaft**  
**New York City, New York**

That which had been Anatole the Prophet—or which thought it had—remembered a story of a greedy and cruel king who lived within a castle formed entirely of perfect, leaded crystal. He ostensibly demanded this transparent abode so that he could look out upon the lands made lovely by the tireless work of his servants, but in truth it was because he knew those who plotted behind his back were legion. The king was determined that his enemies would never find a corner in which to conspire.

No paramours for his wife. No allies for his advisors. No sleepy guards at the gate.

Of course, the result of this was increasing paranoia. Though virtually omnipresent in his near kingdom and crystal castle, he was not omniscient, and he began to ferret out enemies where likely none existed. He came to distrust his own eyes, so that when he saw his craven uncle speaking with a guardsman, the king could only believe foul intentions were the topic of conversation. He was no fool!

Any sign at all became an ill omen. And that's exactly what Anatole required when his erstwhile angel descended this so-called Shaft straight to the hell of the dragon's belly.

The point of the story? None that it had not already served. Fire with fire was required here. Thankfully, it was not truly fire they were dealing with, as that was just a metaphor for metaphors. In fire versus fire, he would lose. No matter the fact that he no longer possessed any real essence. But with metaphors the weak can become mighty. And that was his only hope for saving humanity, for in the shadow of the dragon he was truly nothing.

True, the thing, the dragon he fought may simply have existed as a metaphor as well even though it wielded tremendous power. For in truth, how seriously could one accept such anthropomorphized evil? This embodiment of the direct blood-spawn of the presumably mythical fourth inhabitant of the planet?

Yet it was against such an implausible reality that Anatole had struggled for centuries. Even now, with his ephemeral consciousness opening to a whole network of minds and perspectives, he could not demean his own search by pointing out the ridiculousness of his battle. He had ample proof of his foe's reality. He knew the reasons for his continued struggle.

He sought to delay—he would not presume to use so strong a word as halt—a terrible event that he had every reason to believe was moments from commencing.

And now his angel had arrived. And he must See things.

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**Friday, 31 December 1999, 11:29 PM**  
**The Shaft**  
**New York City, New York**

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A hunchbacked figure approached the entrance of the Shaft. The figure's shambling feet still trailed debris of unknown nature and origin from the slimy and fetid walkways of the sewer tunnels that had brought the figure here. But the Nosferatu Donatello was oblivious of such unpleasantness, much as he disregarded his physical deformities. Especially on this foreboding night when he felt that he was walking into a lion's den.

He was truly a dead man walking, but the strange circumstances that had led to Donatello's being here made the vampire certain that this night even his unlifeline would end. How else should he feel, informed by Calebro, the new prince of New York, of the content of a coded message from the mad prophet of Gehenna, the Malkavian Anatole: "An angel must enter the hell of the dragon's belly before this age passes, lest all ages come to pass." To the prince this meant only one thing: Donatello, tattooed as he was on his back by the hand of a gifted mortal with the figure of Uriel, the angel of death, must descend the Shaft before the new year—the new millennium—began.

And so here he was, seeing ominous signs in every shadow, sensing a grave responsibility that was evidently his, yet not knowing what exactly he must do. And here too was Anatole.

The Malkavian appeared to pixilate into soft focus until he was adumbrated by the fragile light that illuminated the Shaft.

Donatello approached the elder Kindred with care, yet in plain view and without the benefit of his shrouding powers, for the Malkavian appeared not to notice him. The Nosferatu did not wish to become a casualty of destructive reflex.

Donatello said, "I am here as you instructed, Prophet."

Despite Donatello's echoing words, Anatole did not budge. The Nosferatu imagined him engaged in some internal dialogue from which his crazed consciousness could not escape.

This was the Nosferatu's second encounter with Anatole, and he felt no more at ease than before. In fact, the prophet's odd, almost impossible lack of movement made him even more uncomfortable, as if there was a pressure here building toward some resolution that could surely only be fiery. Or perhaps it was because Donatello had met Anatole before but could recall nothing of the encounter that he felt uneasy now.

The prophet looked much the same now as he had then when Donatello had spent several evenings with him within the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. His blond hair was dirty and tousled. His eyes stared blankly, not just into Donatello, but through him. In general, Donatello was stunned again as before by the paradox of the mundane nature of this man and his seeming saintliness. Perhaps it was a true paradox. Anatole was so ordinary that he seemed something more. And not saintly in a trivial, soup-kitchen kind



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of way, but in a larger regard, as if the prophet truly did carry a greater Word and was ever at liberty to disseminate it.

Donatello almost laughed out loud then, because he suddenly realized that this was not Anatole at all. Rather, here, on the verge of the dreaded Shaft, the wide tunnel with countless entrances that plunged almost vertically into the heart of the city and maybe the whole damned Earth itself, where the darkness seemed more intense and where the already clotted blood inside a vampire seemed to grow even heavier—here, Donatello was hallucinating.

Despite being a figment of the Nosferatu's imagination, Anatole's eyes suddenly came into focus, staring directly into Donatello's own. The Nosferatu shuddered. Donatello's senses continued to inform him that this Anatole was an apparition, but it was far more a Holy Ghost than a phantasm to be explained by the Nosferatu's apprehension of the Shaft and his descent therein.

Still staring silently, intently, the vision of the visionary clasped his fingers together high in front of his chest. There was nothing akin to supplication in this display, but only the impression that what he was about to say was indeed more than the mere words of a mortal, or at least one who had been such some time in the past. With a voice like the wind through a hollow reed, Anatole spoke.

“An angel must enter the hell of the dragon's belly before this age passes, lest all ages come to pass.”

Despite his trepidation, in spite of his anxiety, Donatello felt a bubble of anger and frustration burst within him. He nearly shouted at Anatole, but held back out of respect and also for shame, for was he as mad as the prophet to be snapping at a specter? Even so, realizing that he was engaging an illusion in conversation, he muttered through clenched teeth, “That much we... I... know already, Prophet. But why? And why me, if indeed any could truly conceive of me as angel? And for what purpose? If there is—”

Anatole cut him off with a slight motion of his hand. “Aisling Sturbridge thought you beautiful. Tremere witches can be wise indeed.”

Donatello wondered for a moment at the stories he'd heard of a likeness of the mistress of the razed and overrun Atlanta chantry—what was her name? Hannah—in the cavern in upstate New York where Anatole had last been seen. Had that gargoyle been an advisor to Anatole when the Malkavian had written in blood upon the cavern's walls?

And then Donatello felt an itch upon his back. Not merely an annoying irritation, but more like a scratching that quickly grew to a sense that something within his body was clawing its way out. Then the sensation spread into a lopsided ring across the breadth of his back and Donatello squirmed in discomfort. He knew it was his tattoo, the final masterpiece of the artist Ernst Lohm who was to the mortals much of what Anatole was to the Kindred: someone who seemed to look in all the wrong places yet find all the right things.

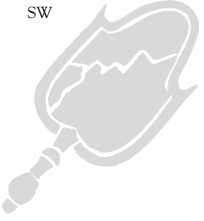
The Nosferatu continued to twist about. Suddenly, great fiery wings blossomed from his back and shed light upon the tunnel and the Shaft as if a torch of God had illuminated the firmament. No heat radiated from these great wings onto Donatello's face even though great licks of feathery flames crackled only inches away. But Donatello could not deny the existence of either the prophet or this seeming miracle. He thought it best if he did

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not too prodigiously apply logic to this mad, mad night, especially now, mere moments from the millennium.

Anatole's crisp voice rose above the popping of the flaming wings, "Now descend to Hell, angel. Follow the trail of the martyr's blood and spread your light to briefly illuminate the infinity of darkness."

With a slow and heavy stroke, Donatello's blazing wings beat the air and lifted the Nosferatu from his feet. His body swayed like a pendulum over the recesses of the abysmal Shaft below. Then he descended into the depths, the light of the great wings pushing the darkness aside.



**Friday, 31 December 1999, 11:59 PM**  
**The Shaft**  
**New York City, New York**

Most—both Kindred and kine—would think one so old (as the dragon) could not be so misled. But most did not truly understand the power of metaphor, since it had never been applied against them. Anatole understood. As in examining the secrets of the mistress of the traitor of a cabal's inner circle, one never knew where truth might dovetail into falsehood. That is why this was fire against fire in so many ways. What was the truth of this old one, called dragon, High Fiend, Antediluvian and many more names? It was the dragon's greatest weapon that Anatole and his ilk could not answer that question with any degree of certainty. However, like the king, the dragon could not know what his hunters could *in fact* verify.

And only a nudge was required. Anatole knew so many secrets. His time in and between the minds of these ancient monsters had revealed much. More than enough reward for centuries of diligent exploration. Perhaps more than enough for an eternity, for what truth matters beyond the one with the power to destroy?

He knew this story: God had sent the dragon's father away, so perhaps an angel would suffice for it. Anatole's own belief in God had wavered, had perhaps been extinguished centuries ago, but God as metaphor proved ever-strong even in the hands of the infidel.

Not for the first time, Anatole the Prophet asked himself "why." Why should he go to such lengths? Why had he even gone to any effort at all? Why save mortals from whom he was currently two steps removed, or even the Kindred whom he had now left behind as well? It had been the blood of this willing martyr—himself!—before Cranston's reluctant blood that had set this endgame in motion. Why had Anatole ever embarked on this road, this effort to save millions—now billions!—of miserable lives, even if among that sad majority there were a handful of good souls to spare?

He wondered if his adversaries had already addressed this question, or dismissed it. Did they even care? Whatever their thoughts, their actions betrayed them. It fell to Anatole to preserve this trivial existence for a little bit longer. It was without any sense of pride that he completed this task, that he saw the angel stepping into the dragon's belly and dispersing ever so slightly the gathering darkness.

So Anatole's answer was, as ever, a metaphorical one. Why would a wolf disable its hunting prowess, its means of survival, and chew off its leg to escape the huntsman trap?

Or was he, his mission, his adversary or even the greatest truth he could offer—his story—*only* metaphors too?

Regardless, there would be no Gehenna that night.

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**Thursday, 6 January 2000, 11:50 PM (4:50 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Somewhere southeast of the Kharga Oasis**

**The Libyan Desert, Egypt**



Hesha Ruhadze stood atop the dune like a solitary watchman upon a parapet. The wind patiently clawed at the edge of the battlement, dislodging a steady hourglass-stream of sand over the lip of the precipice. Hesha smiled knowing that, if he had to, he could outwait even the wind. Given time, his howling adversary might tear down his fortifications and bury him beneath shifting cinnamon mountains of sand. But Hesha could outwait the comings and goings of mountains.

As if sensing his determination, the wind fell back to gather its forces. No sooner had the swirling sands begun to settle, than ice-sharp stars pierced through the veil above him. Hesha was suddenly aware of the scrutiny of the unblinking night sky—its eyes as innumerable as the grains of sand that already buried him to mid-calf.

The brilliant desert above was fiercely protective of the one below. Hesha was trespassing deep within the no-man's-land of the *Desret*—the Red Land. Behind a nearby embankment, which shielded from the worst ravages of the wind, his motorcycle leaned drunkenly to one side. It had served him well to this point, but Hesha doubted that it would carry him much further. The bike had become so pitted that even the chrome had taken on a uniform dun color. The pervasive grit steadily ground down the engine from the inside out. It was unlikely, however, that the bike would succumb to this slow death. At any moment the sheer weight of sand upon it threatened to topple it altogether and bury it from sight.

Hesha had already salvaged everything of value from the bike, mostly the contents of the saddlebags. But he had siphoned off a canteen-full of gasoline as well. Just in case things turned ugly. A strip cut from his immaculate Armani suit (also written off and stuffed back into the bags to await the same fate as the motorcycle) stoppered the canteen and served as a makeshift fuse. One could not be too careful.

Hesha could not be sure of the good will of his “contact.” Where possible, he made it a point to avoid personal involvement in such distasteful dealings. He went to great effort and expense to maintain able retainers who could flawlessly handle routine underworld transactions. This transaction, however, was not with the routine underworld.

From the position of the stars, he knew that the hour was upon him. The nadir. The time when the loathsome sun disk was at its point of greatest despair—trapped deep in the underworld, within the bowels of Master Setukh, the Glorious Serpent.

Some night soon, very soon now, the fiery chariot of the Pretender would falter and fail to emerge. The people of the Two Kingdoms would look to the East in vain for some sign of the rising of the sun and there would be only wailing and gnashing of teeth. And then the Long Night, the Night of One Thousand and One Years, would begin.

But tonight, Hesha had a more humble appointment to keep. Carefully, he arranged his remaining possessions before him: two ancient funerary jars, a curious bronze-tipped drill and a bulging waterskin. He felt awkward and slightly ridiculous as he gave voice to the grandiloquent verses in the forgotten tongue—forcing breath and life back into

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formulae that had long ago been relegated to the Book of the Dead—that ignominious and oft-plundered parchment tomb.

The winds stirred at his words, plucking at the edge of his simple white linen kilt. Heshu, already stripped to the waist, self-consciously smoothed down the military-sharp pleats. He pitched his voice to carry above the rising winds and called out the name of his contact.

“Amenophis.”

The ground shuddered and slid away sharply to his left. Heshu scrambled away from the edge, snatching up his artifacts before they were swallowed into the growing funnel of sand. His eyes furiously scanned the crest of the dune for signs of approach.

“Amenophis!” he called again. But if he expected some help from that quarter, he was disappointed. No sooner had he given voice to the name, than the wind shouted him down. The force of its shout knocked him from his feet and buried him in a thick shroud of sand. The night sky was suddenly and completely extinguished. Fighting against a mouthful of sand, Heshu managed to call for help one last time.

“Amenophis!”

At the third iteration of the name, the wind fell suddenly and inexplicably silent. Heshu struggled to one knee, sloughing off the mantle of sand and clawing layered grit from his eyes. He spat mouthfuls of mingled blood and sand.

Somewhere, as if from very far off, he heard a faint scratching. It was weak, but tenacious. With growing apprehension, he recognized the sound—the clawing of someone who had been buried alive beneath the shifting mountain of sand.

Furiously, he scanned the surface of the broken dune. His keen eyes picked out nothing more unusual than a gnarled stick poking from the sands. But that was unusual enough. Heshu hurled himself toward it and began furiously shoveling away double fistfuls of sand.

He was reluctant to yank on the twig for fear it might come away in his hand and he lose his only link to the man trapped below. Soon he had uncovered a foot-long section of branch and the outline of a larger, vaguely man-shaped hump of sand beneath it. The scratching sounds maddeningly grew neither louder, nor more frantic at his approach.

“I am here,” Heshu kept up a steady monologue that he hoped sounded reassuring, trying to hold on to the buried man with, if nothing else, the anchor of his voice. He gave no sign of realizing that he was still speaking in the ancient tongue. “It is all right. I will have you out soon. I swear it. If you can hear me, dig towards the sound of my voice.”

It was a sisyphusian effort. For every double handful of sand Heshu hurled away from the hole, his weight where he knelt at the edge of the excavation sent another six handfuls of sand back into it. The wind had picked up again and seemed intent on filling every slight depression on the exposed dune face as quickly and efficiently as possible. It also kept knocking the branch against his face and shoulder as he worked—a distraction that was quickly escalating from a slight annoyance to the brink of a dangerous full-blown fury.

Heshu broke off his efforts in frustration and defeat. Clearly another approach was called for here and quickly. He cast about for his belongings, which were already themselves hidden under a fine layer of sand. Unstopping the waterskin, Heshu poured out the entirety of its contents over the buried man.

The sand eagerly soaked up the life-giving moisture. It was not just water, it was river water. The waters of the Nile. The very lifeblood of the land. That meant something here in the deep *Desret*.

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Hesha immediately found that the wet sand held its form better and was less likely to drift back into the hole. It may have been a trick of the imagination, but Hesha thought that the scrapings below had grown steadier and more focused as well. He fell to digging with a renewed energy.

He ignored the redoubled howlings of the wind. He ignored the jerking and crackings of the exposed branch as the buried man apparently sought to employ it as a digging tool from below. He ignored the rising swell of the outline in the sand.

What he could not ignore was the unmistakable grip that suddenly tightened upon his shoulder.

Hesha wheeled. Faster than an asp striking, his fingers closed and locked on the offending wrist. It felt brittle, like gnarled wood in his grasp. Hesha immediately realized what he held.

The exposed twig had ravenously consumed the spilling waters of life, resuming some vague semblance of the human form it once wore. Its branching fingers flexed, knuckles cracking, elongated fingernails cutting deeply into the muscle and tendon of Hesha's shoulder. He stiffened under the sudden pull as the dried and desiccated corpse dragged itself bodily from its tomb of shifting sands.

They made an odd pair, these two refugees from the courts of death. They knelt, locked together, alone in the midst of the deep *Desret*. The one who had once been known as Amenophis, son of Hapu and Overseer of all the King's Works had not weathered the journey across the sands of time unscathed. His body was bent and stunted, as petrified and hollow as an old log. His leathery skin stretched paper-thin over all-too-visible bones. Scattered patches of coarse black hair stuck out from the skull at odd angles. The teeth tenaciously clung to their posts, but they had been worn to crooked nubs from a lifetime of ingesting the pervasive sands with each mouthful of food.

Hesha, on the other hand, might have been a beaten copper idol. Stripped to the waist, lustrous with exertion, he had the type of figure that Greeks were want to immortalize in sculpture. As he struggled against the unbreakable death grip, he was forced to relax something of the strict control he kept over that most dangerous opponent of all—the inner beast. Sensing opportunity with its darting tongue, it reared to strike.

Hesha's jaw audibly unhinged, revealing wicked and venomous fangs. The skin of his face and shaved scalp took on a greenish tint reminiscent of a pattern of overlapping scales. His hand groped blindly for the improvised Molotov cocktail he had constructed earlier, only to find he had lost it to the struggle. Some distant, saner part of his mind told him that this was probably for the best. At such close quarters, fire might well prove as lethal to its wielder as to its intended victim.

Hesha felt the wracking tremor pass through the body of Amenophis. Blind and orbless as he was, the master builder could sense the transformation that had come over Hesha, the nearness of the Great Serpent. He surrendered his grip and fell face-first to the sands.

It was all Hesha could do to refrain from striking, crushing the shriveled husk before him. The beast within swayed hypnotically from side to side, but in the end, it held the final blow. Slipping the precise noose of self-discipline over its head, Hesha deftly flipped the serpent back into the depths of that brimming inner snake pit.

The corpse of Amenophis was mouthing silent words into the sand at Hesha's feet. The son of Setukh rose to his full height and towered over the legendary architect.

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“Amenophis, you have been selected for a peerless honor. If you serve us well, you will be well rewarded.” He gestured with one foot to the pair of funerary jars that were lying nearby. One had fallen over on its side, but appeared intact. They were of the type that traditionally contained the preserved inner organs of mummified corpses.

“If you fail us, you will wander the *Desret* without rest. Even at night, the sun will not cease to bear down upon you and the sands will refuse to close over you. Do you understand?”

The prostrate form pushed itself up far enough to nod its head once before sinking back again. It kept its tongueless silence. “Excellent. Know then that a grave peril is upon the land. The Great God Thoth, Keeper of All Knowledge, has loosed his gibbering baboon—whose name is called *Scienca* by the Greeks who worship the mad beast—upon us. The capering monster has laid a cunning trap and captured the life-giving Nile.

“For twenty-seven summers,” Heshu continued, “the *Kemi*—the Black Land—has not known the nurturing flood waters. Without the floods, the very cycle of life is broken. Without the rich silt the waters bring, the Black Land becomes only more Red Waste. It yields no crop. The people go hungry and die. You must free the Nile from this trap. Do you understand?”

Amenophis, again pressed upward and nodded, but still he kept as silent as the grave. “I have brought you a gift, to aid you in your task.” Heshu drew out the wooden hand drill. Its brass tip caught the light as he tossed it disdainfully to land inches from the master builder’s head.

“You may take this tool and the jars and go now. And do not think to play me falsely. If the waters of the Nile do not flow again, the jars—like the *Kemi* itself—will surrender only red dust and spent ashes. May Set smile upon your efforts, Amenophis.”

What remained of the Royal Builder pulled itself to its feet. It gathered in the offerings and bowed low before lurching away over the edge of the dune. Heshu watched the receding figure until it was no longer visible. It never looked back.

Somewhere, far to the south, he imagined the lumbering corpse picking its way determinedly forward. Heshu could see Amenophis retracing long-forgotten paths through the ancient quarries that had once supplied the stone for the great obelisks and pyramids. He could see the architect coming at last upon the unimaginable marvel of the Aswan Dam which, since its completion had done what no god-king had ever dared presume—to put an end to the annual summer floods which were the very pulse of the Two Kingdoms. He could almost picture the millenniums-old master mason tackling the mad monkey god’s trap with nothing more than his brass-tipped wooden hand drill. It was sublime.

And Heshu knew with cold certainty that the legendary Amenophis—a man who had bridged the worlds of the living and the dying with nothing more than mere quarried stone and sacred geometry would not fail in his appointed task.

Heshu thought fleetingly of the thousands upon thousands of lives that would be lost in those first hours when the flood waters, after long years of imprisonment, at last burst free. He was perfectly prepared to accept such losses. They amounted to very little in the long run, especially when weighed objectively against the potential—against *his* potential—gains.

It was obvious that it was not concern for the “starving” inhabitants of the *Kemi*—many of whom he had just consigned to a watery grave—that drove him. Nor was it any sense of restoring the ancient ecological rhythm of the region. No, something else was at work here. Something very tangible.

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That something lay deep beneath the brooding waters of Lake Nasser.

Bunched up against the solid wall of the dam, Lake Nasser still managed to cover more than 310 miles. Its silent waters closed over the entirety of what had once been the rich and enigmatic land of Nubia—a land rich in gold, ebony, ivory, pygmy slaves, exotic animals and, of more direct interest to one Heshu Ruhadze, fabled treasures.

In his line of work, reputations had been made and broken over the raising a mere ocean liner. What was such a meager achievement in comparison to the feat of raising an entire nation from its watery grave?

With mounting anticipation, Heshu strode off purposefully to the south. When the drowned land first reemerged, he intended to be there to welcome it home.



**Saturday, 1 April 2000, 4:12 PM (6:12 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Motel 6  
Gunnison, Colorado**



She is sixteen. It's a summer evening, and the stars overhead shine dimly through the smoke of countless chimneys. The city below reeks, but her father sees that the palace is swept and cleaned and garnished with incense. In the courtyard, grooms tend to the horses after the last messengers of the day have arrived, and the cooks and scullery boys start to gather the ingredients of tomorrow's meals for slow cooking.

She walks along an upper hallway to the family chapel, where the archbishop waits for her and her confession. She does not like Archbishop Monçada, and never has. From the moment she began to form impressions of people, she thought of him as a hole where a soul should be. His march to power has not changed that. As she studied rhetoric and poetry, she learned of mystics who regard themselves as vessels through which divine light pours. Monçada is like that, except that within him there is no light. He sees himself as nothing, but he also sees the world as nothing but himself. She suspects that his vision of heaven is himself, endlessly repeated.

Though most ignore it, the archbishop is more secretive than any other clergyman. He will not come out during the day, and quotes strange mixtures of passages from the Old Testament about evil under the sun. He meets with others only at night, and almost always in darkness. Lucita has tried to warn her father that their confessor is up to no good, but her father remains awestruck by having such an important cleric pay attention to him. Perhaps there is something more sinister at work, too; she suspects many things but cannot yet prove them.

She enters the chapel. The decorations have changed. The altar cloth is now pure black. The stained glass windows are purely red, and they seem to be wet, as if some force held liquid in place. The walls shine with reflections of scenes Lucita does not recognize, though her older self knows that they are moments of faith and doubt from later years. The Archbishop does not wait in the confessional booth. Instead he stands as if for a sermon. When she enters, he motions to her to shut the door.

"Child," he says in that grating tone, "what are the great commandments?"

"To love the Lord, my God, with all my heart, and to love my neighbor as myself." She speaks with reverence toward the commandments, even though she despises the Archbishop's use of "child." She is not a child, and she will show him a woman's understanding.

The candles begin to flicker out as he lectures her. "What is the duty of the child to her parents?"

"To honor them, that her days may be long in the land that the Lord has given her."

A red glow kindles somewhere near the ceiling. She can see that the redness in the windows is in fact flowing, steaming off as it leaves the frames. Monçada drones on. "And what is the duty of the bride?"

"To forsake her home and cleave to her bridegroom, to become one flesh."

"That is correct." The red glow is now clearly coming from a hole in the ceiling, a single light in the darkness. The chapel smells of musty upturned earth. The Archbishop seems to loom larger in front of her. "You have forsaken your parents. I have drawn you out of that world. I am your father, and yet you do not cleave to me, nor do you respect me. What are the wages of sin?"

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She is lying in a coffin. Things scabble all around her. She feels her flesh crackle, and smells corruption within her. "Death."

"That is correct. The wages of sin are death. You are in disobedience of God's holy plan."

She only barely manages to draw breath and whisper, "How do I know?"

"You have never seen God, and you never will. You see His chosen ministers on Earth, of whom I am one. I tell you what God's will is, and you obey. If I were to stray from the path, God would judge me and you would know. But as you see, he has crowned my work with success." The coffin opens, and she finds herself standing in the basement of the great cathedral in Madrid. The moon passes by an open window...and again...and again, faster and faster. Trophies accumulate. Defeated enemies come in to prostrate themselves at the Archbishop's feet. He grows fatter and meaner. "God rewards my payment of the ultimate price."

She struggles to answer, but cannot now find air.

"You see? Your own body knows your sin. Come, let me show you what should have been." Again she steps from the coffin. But now she steps to his side. The tribute comes for her as well as him. She feels the power of enemies chosen for destruction coursing in her veins, providing her fresh power. As her sire's power grows, she grows with it. In time she strides across the New World as its dark queen, reaping an endless harvest of blood and sorrow as she serves her sire in his quest to punish all sin and create the New Jerusalem on Earth.

She feels herself within that other self, but it is a lie. She tries to tear off the mask, but cannot. Gradually she forces herself out through the lie's pores, one drop at a time. In the end, after countless years of effort, she draws herself up out of a black puddle and watches the lie's barren husk collapse. "I reject you."

Everything—people and building alike—ooze and crumble as did her lie. Soon she and her sire stand on a featureless plain, ankle-deep in dust. "Do you? Tell me, daughter of my blood, what is it you reject?"

"You. Your schemes. Everything about you. Whatever you are, I am not. Whatever you do, I will stop you." She is so young, she knows in the dream, and has no idea what she's promising. But she knows, in the dream, that she will spend nine hundred years trying to live up to those words.

"Tell me of these schemes."

"I...you...the throne...the ships...the colony..." Her thoughts mash together. None achieves complete expression. She stammers in frustration and anger.

"You see? You rebel not against me, but against your image of me. You do not see that you are my child in truth, the image of my soul. You do my will as I do God's will. You are just like me." He smiles at her. "Everything you have ever done serves me. Everything you are serves me. When the great trial comes, you will stand confirmed as my worthy heir." In violation of the great curse, Monçada suddenly appears reflected in all the mirrors that had sprung up unnoticed. The source of the reflections reaches out to touch her, his hands tracing the lines of her horrified face. In the mirrors, his hands leave behind a faint impression, which takes on clarity and definition: it is his own image.

Lucita woke with a scream. The words "child in truth" echoed out from under the bed. She jumped up and ran into the bathroom, pressing blood-sweaty hands against the mirror, which, of course, showed nothing. Blood dripped down into the sink, forming

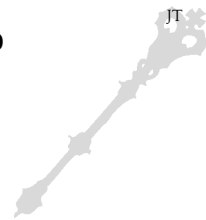
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letter after letter as it swirled it away. “Child in truth.” Gradually she emerged more fully into wakefulness, and the manifestations settled down. The Beast, she realized, had been goading itself into activity, and she took calm slow measures to subdue it again.

She could feel the press of daylight outside. Fearful of attack, she calmed herself and conducted a lengthy probe of her psyche. In the end she found no trace of manipulation. But though she lay almost stupefied with the agony of daytime wakefulness, she could sleep not again that day.

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**Private Journal Entry, Thursday, 20 April 2000**  
**Entered by Jan Pieterzoon (Encrypted)**



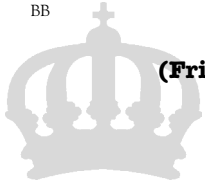
The Gangrel call it the Cave of Lamentations, and if the girl Ramona is to be believed, it has become something of a place of pilgrimage for them. They say that only the worthy can find it, that it is shielded by the power of the blood spilled there, the blood of massacred Gangrel and of the Malkavian prophet Anatole. It was not easy to find; in the end, I was forced to rely upon the guidance of Heshu Ruhadze, who has visited the location several times before.

It was a horrific sight. I cannot even begin to imagine how such a monstrosity came to be constructed: bodies melded together in a gruesome monument to the slain, just as she had described. It was some time—at least an hour—before Ruhadze could pull my horrified gaze away from the twisted limbs and anguished faces to look upon the rust-brown markings on the cavern's walls that I had actually come to study.

I am no scholar of ancient tongues, but even I could see what had been scrawled there was of no single language or alphabet. I could not even begin to comprehend its message, and yet even in its crude media it was executed too carefully to be totally random. I had seen Ruhadze's photos before, and I could recognize some of the images here on the wall as those that had only a few months previously driven two Malkavians to their Final Deaths.

But there was one line of symbols in particular I had noticed in the photos and wished to view with my own eyes: a line of Greek characters and numerals in a pattern that was disturbingly familiar. But how would one such as Anatole have learned those library codes, if indeed it was the old Malkavian who left them written here?

In that cave, surrounded by the remains of nearly two score of the toughest fighters the Camarilla ever knew, I remembered most clearly Xaviar's twisted arm, and the fervent belief—and fear—I had heard in his voice. I looked at the perplexing images painted in Malkavian vitae on solid rock, and every report I have heard about the Ravnos and their so-called Week of Nightmares came back to me. Even now, away from the maddening spectacle of the cave itself, I can hardly deny that it appears to be true that in the space of a single week last summer, an entire Kindred clan was all but obliterated from the face of the earth. It's easy to cry "Gehenna! Antediluvians!" when confronted with such mysteries—but I am resolved that there must be a better explanation, one born of reason rather than myth. We must find that answer, lest hysteria and madness overtake us all and doom us more surely than anything hinted at in prophecy.



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**Saturday, 22 April 2000, 1:40 AM**  
**(Friday, 21 April 2000, 7:40 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Leonardo da Vinci Airport**  
**Rome, Italy**

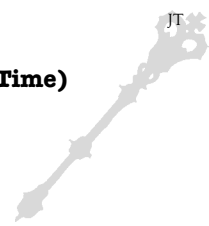
As Angelica, her new ghoul, made arrangements on a secure cell phone acquired for this one call, Lucita reopened the telegram from Dubai she'd received six months ago.

*When Allah calls, indeed,* she thought. But her need was as great as a divine mission, and she could think of no one left in the world more likely to offer solace and advice than her old comrade, Fatima al-Faqadi. She hoped that Fatima would receive her even without the conviction of holiness.

Lucita had picked up an atlas in one of the airport bookstores, and thumbed through it, assimilating all the details she could. Al Hejaz was not a town or nice compact region. It was hundreds of miles of barren mountains, broken by occasional streams, with the narrow coastal plain and then the Red Sea to the west and the great deserts to the east. People did live in the midst of the wilderness, where oases permitted; most of the space belonged in practical terms to no one. There one could find, with some searching, pilgrims and fugitive criminals and lepers and all other sorts of outcasts. It was just the place for a devout vampire to try and commune with her God without presenting a tempting target for the clanmates bent on her destruction.

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**Friday, 5 May, 2000, 3:00 AM**  
**(Thursday, 4 May, 2000, 9:00 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Schwalenberg Castle**  
**Westphalia, Germany**



Hardestadt flipped through the photographs quickly, his eyes barely taking in one image before turning it over on the stack to look at the next.

Jan Pieterzoon took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. His vision of Hardestadt at the desk was now softly indistinct, but even his nearsightedness could not blur the stern intensity of his sire's gaze, or mute the cool disapproval radiating outwards from the elder's form.

He had not seen his sire since the previous summer, when Jan had been dispatched to defend the Camarilla's holdings on the American East Coast from the Sabbat's powerful offensive, a mission that had not ended as well as Jan had hoped. The Camarilla had lost essentially all of its territory on the East Coast, but after one of the most well-organized uses of mortal and Kindred resources Jan had ever been privileged to oversee, the sect had regained dominance in all five boroughs of New York City, successfully destroying almost all the Sabbat residents there, or driving them south into New Jersey. Jan wasn't sure this was sufficient victory to offset the loss of several dozen other vital cities such as Atlanta, Charleston, Richmond, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, but Hardestadt had not yet chided him for his failure to do the job he had actually been sent to do.

This worried Jan rather more than he wanted to admit. He disliked the taste of failure, even though he could not, even now, think of any way he could have accomplished his task any better with the resources he had been given at the time. He had done the best he could. He had uncovered a traitor in their ranks, and with the aid of Theo Bell and others, dispatched that Judas; he had orchestrated the evacuation of several score Kindred from Baltimore right out from under Sabbat noses, and he had overseen the reconquest of New York, for which the Ventruie justicar Lucinde had commended him. But he still wasn't sure that was enough. Lucinde was not his sire.

There were more recent concerns that troubled him as well, but those had to wait until Hardestadt was ready to hear them.

Hardestadt finished with the photographs and restacked them, tapping the edges against the surface of the desk to even them out before sliding them back into the envelope Jan had brought them in. "You saw these writings, these so-called prophecies, for yourself. How do you interpret these images?"

"Well." Jan put his glasses back on and sat up straighter, all a ploy for time to get his thoughts together, to call upon reason for the kind of answer Hardestadt would expect. "For the most part, it's apparently gibberish. A mix of languages, alphabets, symbols — in no apparent order. There was a phrase in Latin and two in Greek. Some even appeared to be Egyptian hieroglyphics—"

"I saw it. *Quia venit hora iudicii eius*, 'for the hour of his judgment is come.' Any fool with a copy of the Vulgate could have written that. Vague warnings and inane gibberish. It makes as much sense as the patterns in thrown knucklebones, the arrangements of the

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stars, or the intestinal spatters people used to read oracles from. The less concrete sense it makes, the better for the impressionable to receive *visions* from it.”

*Basic psychology.* Jan nodded. “People tend to see patterns in randomness, shape a meaning out of it, whether there is truly meaning in it or not.” He hesitated, feeling rather the fool approaching this subject now, but having little choice, seeing what he had seen, knowing what he now knew. “There was, however, one line of characters—you’ll see them on the photo numbered 37—that did not seem entirely random and did give me some cause for concern.”

“Oh?” Hardestadt frowned and flipped through the photos again until he’d found the right one. “Greek gibberish, but still gibberish.”

“The Greek letters, read with the numbers after them, are exactly like the catalog codes in your own library, my sire,” Jan said.

Hardestadt glanced at them again and then shrugged. “It could be, but as I’m sure you know, those volumes are not accessible to anyone without my express permission. It’s likely there’s not even any such book to match this code. Coincidence should not be mistaken for a miracle.”

“Of course not, my sire,” Jan agreed, obediently. Inwardly he winced and wondered if Hardestadt was already aware of what he had done.

Hardestadt did not reply, and as the accusing silence stretched between them, Jan went from wondering to certainty. Of course Hardestadt knew. He always did. “There is such a book,” he admitted. “I found it. The pages cited deal with the awakening of a great king, who fights powerful enemies, but dies in the sun; he curses his children and children’s children to devour each other, and so his entire house is destroyed. I had Anneka copy the pages for me as well.”

“And which is it, coincidence or miracle?” Hardestadt’s tone held no hint, no suggestion of which answer was expected. Jan had only his own best judgment to go by.

“My greatest concern, of course, was for the security of the library,” Jan started. “If there was any chance that the security had been compromised—”

“It has not. Of this I am quite certain. Your concern is laudable, but misplaced.” Hardestadt did not quite scowl—in truth, his expression rarely registered much emotion. Even so, Jan did not doubt his disapproval.

“Yes, of course, my sire,” Jan said. “I am greatly relieved to hear it.”

“What did you think of those verses, since you found them?”

On the spot again, Jan chose his words carefully, uncertain of where the trap might be waiting. “I can see how an uneducated individual might see those verses—some of them, at least—as prophecy that has recently been fulfilled. They would then take that connection to current events as proof that the succeeding verses are accurate prognostications for the future.”

“But you are not an uneducated individual, Jan.”

His words stung. “I like to hope not, my sire.”

“That being the case, once again, what did *you* think of them?”

There was no escaping it; Hardestadt would have his answer. “Well, I found the verses far too vague overall to be provably accurate about the past or helpful for the future,” Jan said, equivocating as much as he dared. “But if we have not succeeded in

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removing this book from circulation quite as completely as we have hoped, then these particular verses can only add fuel to the fires of hysteria.”

Nor was Hardestadt fooled. “But something about it still troubles you, doesn’t it?” His voice softened. “Come. Surely you’re long since past this sort of childish reticence. You know we can hardly address your concerns unless you confess them.”

Jan took a deep breath. “I...well, to be honest, I would have moved on this matter already, but the fact that you yourself had requested that Anneka make photocopies from the book.... Or, at least, I assumed that it was you who had requested them, since I actually found the book in the copy room with bookmarks in it and not on the shelf. At any rate, it made me wonder whether you had plans in that direction already.” He hesitated and then added, “And if that was the case, whether you had any instructions.”

“So, to put it plainly,” Hardestadt said coolly, “you want to know why *I* had the copies made. Is that it?”

Jan fought down a wave of panic. There *had* to be a good reason. Of course there was. Hardestadt did not believe in prophecies, after all. “I confess to some curiosity on that point, my sire. Yes.”

“Well, then, why didn’t you say so?” Hardestadt asked. An actual smile curved his lips; for a moment, his face appeared almost jovial. “Never fear to speak your heart to me, my son.”

The tension in the room evaporated as if it had never existed, leaving Jan slightly weak in the knees, almost giddy with relief at being restored to his sire’s good graces. “Then you do have a plan,” he said.

“Yes, my son,” Hardestadt assured him. “I do in fact have a plan, and since you’ve brought it up, we may as well discuss it now.” He reached into a desk drawer, brought out a plain manila folder. “Come here, and take a look at this.”

His sire’s smile soothed Jan’s worries as no mere words could do, and he knew then everything would be all right.



**Sunday, 7 May 2000, 10:02 PM (3:02 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**King Abdul Aziz International Airport**

**Jiddah, Saudi Arabia**



Lucita's ghoul was an expert pilot and taking off from Jiddah they made their way into the desert. Within a very few minutes they were outside the major air routes. In the clear dark skies, it was easy to trace those routes. Jets left crystal-white contrails that almost shone, running to Cairo and Riyadh and Amman. Oil derricks lit up the Red Sea with landing lights and exhaust flames. A few highways flickered with the headlights of cars and trucks winding their way toward distant cities. Elsewhere the night held sway. Lucita felt very comfortable in the midst of it all; Angelica was still a creature of the day, and felt isolated from the world.

"Wouldn't I do better to search while you sleep?" Angelica asked at last.

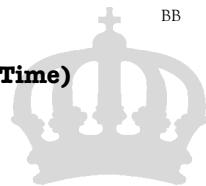
"No. Fatima couldn't know for sure whether I'd be alone or not, and would plan on the assumption that I was. So whatever her sign is, it's something that I can see at night."

"All right."

The coastal strip gave way to hills, and then to genuine mountains. Instruments showed that many of the crests were over 8,000 feet, and as steep and rugged as anything Angelica had ever seen. There were many narrow canyons with nearly vertical slopes, completely unsuitable for landings, and a few strips that looked barely wide enough for the Twin Otter to come to rest on. A handful of lights sprinkled the mountains like fallen stars: some campfires (singly or in tribe-sized groups) and some electrical. The talk Angelica had heard at the airport suggested the usual mix of withdrawn people, from tradition-minded natives to smugglers. There had been tales of cannibals in the hills, and while Angelica was *mostly* sure they were just talk, her own experience of life in the gravest extreme made her cautious of dismissing them altogether. She hoped they had no mechanical troubles this trip.

Three times Angelica spotted something unusual, and each time Lucita dismissively told her to check it out, with a manner indicating that the vampire already knew it wasn't what she was looking for. In a canyon that petered out in a foothills landslide, an irregular dark mass proved to be a row of black cargo containers, smashed and clearly dropped from a great height. They weren't leaking or labeled, and Angelica couldn't tell what they were. She took pictures and flew on. An hour after that, something glinted halfway down a moss-covered slope. Some very careful angling let her pass right overhead only a few dozen feet overhead, and she could see that it was a jeep pinned by a boulder fallen from father uphill. Wind and perhaps fire had polished it smooth in places. Finally, less than hour before it'd be time to scout the day's resting place, there was a perfectly straight black strip two feet wide, running up over one hill, down to the next valley, and up the next slope. Angelica crested the second hill, only to find a cluster of dumped toxic waste barrels. A straightforward leak must have sterilized or mutated whatever grew in the black strip. Lucita did not say "I told you so."

**Sunday, 14 May 2000, 5:09 AM**  
**(Saturday, 13 May 2000, 10:09 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**150 miles northwest of Medina, Saudi Arabia**



Lucita smiled. As she'd suspected, the sign, when it came, was obvious enough.

The valley was small, and nearly perfectly circular. Flying at this particular angle, Lucita could see how that particular combination of ridges resembled the stylized crown favored in her clan's heraldry. It wasn't obvious, and would likely have escaped her notice from almost any other viewpoint, but it was there. And it was like Fatima to do that, trusting to fate or Allah to see that her friend would see the sign if and when she needed to.

"There," she said and pointed.

Angelica turned to follow Lucita's finger and did a double-take. "All right, that's certainly something. Do you want me to land?"

"Of course."

Lucita looked on with rare impatience as Angelica circled the valley, established it was indeed wide enough for the plane to land, scouted out a relatively good approach, and finally began her descent. Faint white lines—veins of quartz, Lucita thought—ran through the "crown" to mark a landing path, but Angelica preferred an alternative angle; she came in almost due east to west to take advantage of a gap in the mountains to the east for a little extra descent before the actual landing run. At the last moment there was nearly a disaster, as the plane rolled over crevasses not visible in the night and nearly got its wheels caught in them. Angelica managed to put on a brief burst of speed, then a series of rapid, shallow turns to shed the excess. She taxied to a stop mere yards short of crashing into the cliff face that defined the valley's western edge.

Lucita was out of the plane even before it came to a complete halt. By the time Angelica secured the controls and stepped down, Lucita was moving in long loping strides, clearly searching for signs of current or recent presence.

And there she was.

A woman stood at the northern edge of the valley. The nearly full moon shone down nearly as brightly as a streetlight, and without the distorting, monochromatic hue of a sodium lamp. Lucita suspected that even Angelica could make out at least some features, and to the vampire it was all perfectly clear. The woman waiting was taller than either Lucita or Angelica, and her hands and neck held the Assamites' dark sheen where they extended beyond her pristine white robe. Lucita wanted to run to her, but she made herself slow to a walk, and at the last moment to pull herself into a formal bow.

"Hello."

It was her friend. Lucita would have known those eyes anywhere, and the robes held few secrets from someone trained in the best use of supernaturally acute sight. She knew Fatima's lines and curves, the particular angle of her left heel as she stood at rest but ready to leap if necessary. She knew the hands that extended from the long white sleeves, how they hooked and curled while their owner thought of other things. It was she.

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Fatima reached up to pull back her hood. Her long black hair was cut short now. Her gaze was alert, concerned, but not warm. “The peace of this place be upon you and those who travel with you. Welcome, Lucita, to my sanctuary.”

Lucita turned briefly to look at Angelica, who was walking carefully across the valley’s sharp outcroppings. “She is my pilot, serving me while I travel this time.” She remembered the formal phrasing. “I speak for my companion, and pledge that she brings peace and not conflict, gain and not loss, good and not evil, into your home. What she does here, it shall be as if I did it, and there shall be no account left unreckoned when we depart.”

“It is good. Be welcome, you and yours.” Fatima still didn’t smile, but she shifted her weight slightly, away from the ready-to-lunge stance toward a position of less immediate preparation for attack. “Come in. The night won’t be long.”

The cave opened into the northeastern side of the valley, where dawn glare couldn’t reach. Fabric dyed the colors of valley stone hung in three layers across the entrance. No one passing overhead could have seen that there was anything beyond the apparent back wall of a shallow niche, and even someone on foot would have had to come quite close to discover the truth. The night was quiet, but Fatima took no chances. She stopped motionless for a moment, and Lucita heard all sounds fade away. She couldn’t remember whether she’d explained to Angelica about how Assamites could do that, but decided that if not, the ghoul would nonetheless learn soon enough. Sound returned as they entered the cave.

There. They were in. Fatima lit the nearest oil lamp and paused to let her guests examine the scene.

The main chamber was no more than five feet wide, but at least thirty feet long. Long-ago residents had hewn niches out of the rocky walls. Angelica realized after a moment that the niches were most likely originally for internment of devout hermits, and wondered whether Fatima or someone else had removed the bodies. She remembered the mounds of corpses cleared from cemeteries the victorious armies wanted for their own purposes in Vietnam. In any event, the cave was now completely clear of dust, animals and insects—apart from Fatima herself, only a few lichens occupied it now.

The niches along the left wall were all completely barren. The right-hand ones were given over to a library: books and scrolls filled some, while others held writing supplies. In between the niches, long scrolls held careful calligraphy of Arabic passages (from the Koran, Angelica presumed). At the back of the chamber, a stone slab closed off a passage running downhill toward unknown inner chambers.

“It’s not the palaces of old,” Lucita said, and immediately regretted her glibness. What was it about Fatima that always brought out this crass, facile side? She was, after all, born to a higher station than Fatima and more skilled in aristocratic arts. Somehow she always ended up sounding, at least to herself, like the vulgar one.

Fatima simply nodded. She took off her outer robe and hung it on two hooks so that it spread out and covered the first left-hand niche. Beneath it she wore a black tunic and trousers, with soft black sandals. As she moved down the chamber to light more lamps, she was very aware of Lucita’s person studying the black skin that was part of her Assamite legacy. “This is a place for contemplation, and I’m here to study the world and my soul. It serves me very well.” Her voice came out softly, with just enough air so that it would carry

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to her guests, and she deliberately chose a neutral accent. Only her gentle soprano pitch kept her words from sounding inhuman and intimidating.

“How much of the world can you actually see from here?”

“All of it. Or at least enough of it to remind me of it all.” Fatima frowned. “But this isn’t the time for that, yet. Dawn will be on us in scarcely more than an hour, and both you and I must rest by then. We should arrange the accommodations for your entourage.”

Lucita could feel some confusion in Angelica. Apparently the use of terms like “entourage” made her feel like she was part of an unseen group. She’d have to explain more of the Traditions to the ghoul another time. She remembered from adjusting Angelica’s memories in London that the mortal did have experience with ceremonial greetings at extended length—as a child she’d paid formal visits to grandparents before the war swept across her home. So there would be a point of familiarity. Lucita was also slightly touched and a little amused to notice that Angelica felt her mistress was acting hastily. She worried about the vampire’s state of mind and feared the intentions of their hostess. If anything, Fatima’s resolute calm only made it worse, reminding Angelica of psychotic torturers in her homeland. That, too, would need to be addressed in the future.

“Angelica can use the plane,” Lucita said. “It’s got space for us both to rest in. Shall I join her, or do you have a place here for me?”

“I prepared one for you precisely the way I prepared one for me,” Fatima answered and gestured at the empty niches.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. It’s sufficient for what you and I really need, after all.”

“Are you so sure that peace of mind isn’t necessary?”

“We will talk more about that later.” Fatima’s tone did not invite response.

Lucita looked at the niches, then at Angelica. Without hearing any words, the pilot nonetheless developed the distinct desire to step outside, and not to return until half an hour after sunset. During the day, she realized, she should rest, and study the plane, and conserve her energy. She should be ready to leave at a moment’s notice, but under no circumstances should she stray outside the valley. If she felt restless, she could remove the trails of her landing gear. Yes, that would be wise. With a final look over her shoulder, she stepped on out.

“Have you really slept this way the whole time you’ve been here?” Lucita asked once they were alone.

“Yes, I really have. Does it bother you so much?”

“It looks like an invitation to nightmares and despair, if you must know. Yes, it bothers me. The symbols of where we sleep are important.”

“And yet you’re the one who came around the world to seek me out, not vice versa. Do I look like a woman in the clutches of nightmares and despair?”

“Well...no.”

Fatima didn’t precisely smile, but the muscles of her face relaxed more than they ever had. “Child of Aragon, childe of Monçada, trust the tradition of hospitality. Not the story about vampire traditions we tell the young ones, but the living tradition of hospitality. You are my guest, and I do not condemn you to bad rest any more than I would condemn myself to it.”

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Trust wasn't something Lucita gave willingly. But then perhaps that was part of the problem... "Very well."

So she lay there in her chosen niche, halfway back the length of the chamber, and listened to the sounds of approaching dawn. The gathering dew collected on plants and outcroppings of rock and trickled down around the cave. Nothing moving came inside the cave itself, but insects and burrowing mammals moved around it, skirting the water's channels. Birds of prey swooped out of the pre-dawn sky to catch rodents seeking shelter before the day grew hot. Every few minutes an airplane passed by far away, far beyond any mortal's ability to detect. As her cursed body drove her to sun-fleeing sleep, Lucita gradually became aware of the cave as a safe place and of the outside world as dangerous intrusions best kept at bay. She marveled briefly at the reversal before all conscious thought ceased.

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**Sunday, 14 May 2000, 9:59 PM (2:59 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**150 miles northwest of Medina, Saudi Arabia**

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The sky was dark again. Lucita and Fatima sat across the valley from the cave entrance, beneath a deeper overhang, and watched the stars rise over the valley mouth. While they slept, Angelica had moved the plane up against the steepest cliff she could find and strung netting to mask the plane's outlines. No thorough search would be fooled by the disguise, but it should at least cut down on casual intrusions, and there was something to be said for knowing that any visitor had made a determined effort to get there. The pilot now dozed fitfully in the plane's main compartment, her sleep slightly augmented by gentle suggestion from Lucita. The vampires had the little world to themselves.

"What do you do for food?" Lucita had fed before they left Jiddah and could go several more nights without blood if she had to, but she was curious.

"I leave the valley, of course."

"And?"

"And Allah provides."

"What does God provide you, though?"

"You must have seen that these mountains are by no means empty."

"Yes. Angelica kept finding signs that she thought might be yours, but they were all from people's ventures."

"Sometimes, when the world is rich in irony, Allah provides me flocks of shepherds. There are some very rich pastures further north, where springs keep the canyons green, and in season I take from the men who guard the sheep. Other times I feed on the smugglers, bandits and escaped convicts. Twice I've fed on scientists, and twice on tourists. I don't starve."

"I see." Lucita looked down the valley. "So if I had to feed in a hurry and Angelica weren't available, I would...what?"

"This isn't really the question, is it?"

"What?" Lucita swung her gaze back to Fatima, who showed the same calm reserve as ever. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're letting a particular piece of detail eclipse the larger scene. You want to know how I survive and what I do."

"Well, yes." Lucita could produce a blush on command, but chose not to. Her words would suffice to indicate embarrassment to one who knew her so well.

"I came here because I had to go somewhere. I had to go somewhere. Alamut was dangerous—" She paused to hold up a cautionary hand. "I'll explain that, but later. Alamut was dangerous. I needed time to think and remember and pray. At first I settled as close to Mecca as I could get with my cursed blood, but it didn't work. There are too many people, too many complications of all sorts. I wandered north until I found this place, marked it out for you with stone stones placed on the ridge, and settled down. That was ten months ago. As you can see, I'm not wasting away."

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“No, you’re not. You look as fit as ever.”

“I should. Do you see those marks?” Fatima pointed. Lucita looked, thought, and looked again. She realized that what had seemed minor natural cracks were in fact the marks made by hand and foot blows, running from the valley floor up more than thirty feet toward the crags above. “I may not have the training floors and precision instruments, but I use what I have.”

“And what do you do when you’re not training?”

“Pray. Question. Read. Write.”

“You told me once that I had the art of giving perfectly truthful answers which said nothing. That sounds like one of them to me.”

Fatima looked startled. “Is it?”

“I think so. What would you say to me if I’d given you an answer like that?”

“Pray what? Question what?” Yes, I see. Very well.” But she sat silently for many minutes. When she began again, Lucita was surprised all over again. “When I pray, of course, I pray as the Koran instructs. Five times a day, or rather a night, and on all the other occasions I’m supposed to. No, don’t interrupt yet.” She hadn’t looked at Lucita, but Lucita suspected she must have moved in some small way that alerted her host to impending speech. “I read the Koran and Hadith and works of the law and memoirs. I write out my own experiences. I question...everything, I suppose.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Let me answer with another question. How much do you know about the state of Haqim’s children?” Lucita remembered that the Assamites tended not to call themselves “Assamites,” preferring instead to associate themselves as the family of Haqim, their clan’s founder. It was a very alien way of thinking for Lucita, to whom the Antediluvian founder was almost anything but a friendly father figure. “You see many things from the outside, I think, and I don’t know what shows.”

“I know that many of your Muslim clanmates seem afraid for themselves. The rumor mill says that some have even joined the Camarilla. I know that I encounter more independent wanderers from your clan than I ever have before, and I know that there are also many fresh Sabbat recruits from your lines.”

“What do you make of it all?”

“I think there’s a purge going on. The council must have decided that Islam is no longer acceptable, which causes the Muslims to flee, and it’s acting brutally enough to make the Sabbat’s ‘kill your sire’ nonsense sound appealing.”

“Not bad.”

“But wrong, I take it.”

“At least in part. It’s not the council. It’s one individual.”

“One individual has your whole clan in this much uproar? Did Haqim wake up after all and decide to put you all back on the straight and narrow path?”

“Close. Ur-Shulgi claims to be one of Haqim’s own childer.”

Lucita felt an arctic chill around her heart. The Sabbat took it as given that apart from the Antediluvians they’d destroyed themselves, the ancient monsters were still all out there, manipulating Cainites and humans alike toward the grand destructive consummation that would be Gehenna. The Camarilla claimed as a matter of policy that

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all the Antediluvians were destroyed or sunk into torpor from which they'd never awaken. Like most vampires who thought about it at all, Lucita had always assumed the truth to lie somewhere in between. But she'd always assumed that any active Antediluvians were active in ways and in places far removed from her own experience, so that she would never encounter them.

A vampire of the fourth generation, if such this Ur-Shulgi was, was altogether too damn close to the Antediluvians. Lucita had met others of that generation, of course, but this thing sounded—in both Fatima's description and in her evident fear—far more formidable than Lasombra's childer, Montano and Gratiano and the rest.

"Is..." The words died in Lucita's throat. "Is he?"

"I don't know. I don't think any of us can know for sure. I do know that he's strong enough to destroy everyone who opposes him. The Caliph is destroyed. The Vizier and the Amr have fled. Alamut is given wholly over to the ones who believe that they're preparing for Haqim's imminent return, when he will judge all in the blood."

Memories washed over Lucita: neonates in rebellion against their sires, princes at war with each other, the tide of blood attracting mortal attention, inquisition and secular hunting, the great diablerie within the Lasombra Antediluvian's stronghold...it had been a nightmarish time. She did not welcome the thought of it coming again, to any clan.

"Have you seen him yourself?"

"No. I don't expect I'd survive if I did. Much stronger vampires have already perished in the attempt."

"What precisely is this Ur-Shulgi demanding?"

Fatima pitched her voice lower, clearly imitating some male vampire. "Know, childe, that it is time for all Children of Haqim to forsake mortal faith. The end is upon us, and we must prepare for our appointed role. Give up the gods of men and honor in your heart only our Father who was and is to come. Do this or perish."

"And you..."

"I couldn't. No matter how much I feared for my existence, I couldn't abandon Allah to worship any of His creations."

"So you fled."

"Yes."

"What have you done since then?"

"I've asked Allah to give me the courage to do what I know must done."

"You want the courage to confront the Methuselah?"

There was no real humor in Fatima's laugh. "I do not ask Allah to make me stupid, no."

"What, then?"

"My brothers and sisters in the blood need to see strength turned to causes other than this delusion of purging all vampires for Haqim's glory. They need me along with the others. But I don't yet know what I should do. So I seek an answer. When it comes, then I'll go back out into the world."

"That's very convenient."

The rock on which Fatima had been sitting shattered when she smashed a fist into it. She didn't seem to notice; both the strength and the subsequent healing of broken bones



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in her hands came unbidden. “How *dare* you speak to me that way! What do you know of duty except that it’s something you can exploit in others? When did you ever sacrifice your personal ambition for the sake of anything at all? Did you ever once submit in obedience to anyone, choosing any greater good over your own desires?”

Defensive reflexes took over for crucial seconds. Lucita ran a distance away at high speed, fell into a defensive crouch, and wrapped herself in concealing darkness. By the time she realized that Fatima was not in fact going to attack her, she was altogether geared for battle—a waste of blood as well as an embarrassment. She tried to maintain her poise as she dropped the defenses and came back to sit down next to her friend, but it wasn’t easy. “I didn’t mean to give offense.”

“At least, you hoped that I’d overlook the offense.” Fatima’s voice was cold now, purged of most of its humane cover. It was very easy now for Lucita to remember just how effective a killer her friend was. “Did you really come all this way to mock me?”

Lucita swallowed, an involuntary response she’d last made more than a century ago to what had seemed like an inescapable death trap. “No.”

“What, then? Do you want to recruit me for some new mission? Does the dear departed cardinal have an heir you’d like to remove?”

“No, nothing like that.” Lucita looked up to see Angelica emerging from the plane with a worried expression. The noises of the not-a-fight had disturbed her rest. This was time for no subtlety. “Sleep again,” Lucita called to her with the force of a mistress’ command. Obediently, Angelica climbed back into the plane. “Nothing like that,” Lucita repeated, half to herself.

“What, then? What brings you here tonight?”

“I have lost my way.” There. It was out in the open.

Fatima made a snuffling sound that might have been a snort if she put more air into it. “Your *way*. What sort of way did you ever have?”

Now it was Lucita’s turn to be angry. As she spoke, her anger bled out in subconscious commands to darkness. Shadows pulled themselves loose from the valley floor and swung around the two vampires. They shifted from irregular blobs into demonic figures from the folklore of three continents, and the air whistled in minor keys as they cut through it. In a moment the pair sat at the center of a tall column of angry shadows. “I didn’t realize mockery was part of your holy meditation. You speak as if it was just me and my whims, but it’s not so, damn it. I gave my existence to stopping my sire, on every front I could, in every way I could. I couldn’t make him unmake me, but I could and did try to keep him from enjoying success ever again. I spent centuries acting out a practical atonement for his sins while you cheerfully carved your way through bystanders.”

“But your duty was never more than pique.”

“What?”

“You acted against one individual. While you did, his cohorts went about their merry way, and you never did anything against them unless someone hired you. This is not morality, this is a grudge. It’s what my people train children to grow out of.”

“You...” For a moment Lucita envisioned herself smashing her fists into Fatima’s face while shadows pulled her wretched corpse apart. The intensity of it shocked her. The shadows around them instantly collapsed back to their natural forms, and all the fighting power within Lucita boiled away. “It doesn’t matter. That’s history now.”

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“Yes. You’re not here to tell me that he’s come back, I assume.”

“No, he’s well and truly gone, as nearly as I know. No sign tells me anything else.”

“So tell me of your way, and how you lost it.”

“The cardinal is gone. I can continue to clean up his schemes, of course, but then what?”

“You could...”

“Wait. You asked. I’ve been traveling, trying to see our kind from their own eyes, looking at the alternatives. Whatever you think of my calling, accept at least that I knew it wasn’t like allegiance to another cause. So I’ve been seeing what it’s like to hold some other tenet.”

“And?”

“It’s all lies.”

“It is?”

“Everything anyone said to me about duty to a sect or cause was so clearly a cover for their own personal ambitions. Manipulators use it as an excuse to manipulate; fighters use it as an excuse to fight. Whatever it is they want to do, there’s some justification for it in their various codes. None of them seemed any more conscientious than I am, and most less.”

“Do you think the same of me?”

“I’m not sure.”

“That is not the most reassuring thing you ever said to me.”

“I don’t really *understand* what it is you do. You follow the words of some mortal man...”

“No. I follow the words of God, given by the Archangel Gabriel, to a mortal man.”

“So you say. I don’t believe it, but at least I can tell you’re submitting to a real discipline. But now, at a time when you say yourself your clan needs you most, here you are in the desert, speaking to nobody but me.” Fatima looked pained. Lucita tried to sound apologetic. “I don’t mean to doubt your honesty, but can you really tell me that your faith is making you any more effective in a time of need than my choices have?”

“I can, but not in any terms you would accept.”

“Then no, you cannot. Unless you can make your God speak to me himself, I must act on what I see, and I see stillness at a time when you know motion is needed. This isn’t any help to me. I could pick an ambition at random and get just as much use out of it.”

Fatima trembled. “You cannot speak this way to me.”

“We decided once that there would always be honesty between us. Are you recanting that commitment, too?”

“You admit that you don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“It’s true. But I know what schemes are like. I see that your faith takes you out of the struggles most important to you at just the time when your enemy is consolidating his hold. You’ve crafted enough useful deceptions in your times. Can’t you at least entertain the idea that this story, like so many others, is a trap for people like you?”

Fatima leaned back and closed her eyes. “There speaks the childe of Monçada, who has learned her lessons well.”

“What does *that* mean?”

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“Your sire was one of the best manipulators your lineage ever produced. He saw everyone but himself as dupes and pawns. You absorbed more of that outlook than you ever realized. Once you rejected his own convictions, you simply assumed that you’d never find anyone who was actually acting out of conviction rather than in response to manipulation.”

“But I’ve searched...”

“And found just what you expected to, isn’t that right?” Fatima opened her eyes just in time to see Lucita’s nod, and closed them again. “You found that the Camarilla is in fact just what you and I decided it was long ago. The details may vary, but in essence you got what you went looking for. Then you came to me, and again you found what you expected to find.”

Lucita clenched her fists again. “I didn’t expect to find someone who’d attack my motives and soak herself in dogma...”

“But neither did you come prepared to accept anything I might have to say.”

“What?”

“You knew that I had gone into retreat of some sort. You knew that I have always cherished the faith of my father and mother, where you rejected it long ago. You knew that there’s been trouble among my family in the blood. You must have known that I’d be reexamining my decisions, and that either I would be freshly immersed in the will of Allah or altogether turned from it, since at times of crisis I commit myself wholly to a course until I see my way out again.”

“Well, yes.”

“But look. You brought no supplies. You made no arrangements to stay any period of time. Your whole plan assumes that you’d fly in, speak with me, and fly out. But if you thought you might want to hear the answers I have, you’d have acknowledged that it might take quite a bit more time to work it all through. You prepared for failure. You don’t want to allow for the possibility of an answer that would impose the sort of external restraints you know the will of Allah does.”

More than anything, right now Lucita wanted to flee the scene. This was not a charge she wished to hear or consider. She forced herself to stay.

Fatima ached to see her friend’s pain, so manifest in every tight muscle and almost-concealed tremor. She also knew that if nothing jarred Lucita into a reappraisal of her own legacy, the course her friend pursued could lead only toward destruction or the acceptance of some other darker creed. “Your sire poisoned the well of faith in you.”

“He was the most evil man I ever knew! And he was the most completely devout. How can I trust belief, when it lives so happily in someone like him?”

There. That was the essence of it. “The conviction that guided the cardinal was a counterfeit. But we do not counterfeit what’s worthless, only what’s valuable.”

“That’s the sort of smug rhetoric I’d expect from a rank neonate.”

“If I’m so wrong, ask yourself why you’re so afraid to consider the possibility that I may be right.”

A long silence followed. The tension slowly eased out of Lucita’s frame, leaving behind despair. “I wanted for so long to keep believing, you know.”

“Yes.”

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“But I looked and looked, and I found those who manipulate and those who are manipulated. Everything I’ve seen tells me that we make faiths to trap each other, and that’s all.”

“You’ve seen miracles. Remember that time on the shore...”

Lucita waved a hand dismissively. “You and I could both be quite plausible goddesses if we chose to. We are the heirs of vampires stronger than ourselves, and they of vampires stronger than themselves. I remember the halls the Antediluvian walked down, how air and stone responded to its will as readily as my clothes follow my movements. I have no reason to believe that there’s any power beyond our kind, or that if there is, that it means good for anything but itself.”

“Reason. But what does your heart say?”

“My heart doesn’t say anything! It lays there like the dead tissue it is, preserved by a power that makes death itself a tool for inflicting suffering on the world.”

“Set aside the rhetorical defenses for now. You know what I mean.”

“Yes.” Lucita paused. “I wanted to believe. I don’t know if I still do. I fear to give myself to anything answered in the unseen, because I look there and see puppeteers only.”

“You believe I’m a dupe.”

“I can’t believe anything else.”

“And are you so very sure that your disbelief is any less a plot?”

“Eh?”

“Your refusal to commit to anything beyond yourself ensures that you will never get the benefits of cooperation. You have individuals to work with, yes, but you will never have the power of an organization. When you perish, as we all must, your memories will go with you and no one will benefit thereafter. You leave behind no students, no legacy apart from your clients and their victims. What a convenient existence for someone who could lead armies if only she could get past her need to be queen.”

This time panic did overtake Lucita. She flattened out and sank into the deepest corner of the niche she sat in. Once in shadow form, she moved in jerky leaps throughout the valley, careening off rises and flowing into dips, burning off frustration in nervous exertion. It was almost half an hour before something resembling clear thought returned. In the intervening time she was only dimly aware of the tangible world; currents within the darkness constantly captured her attention, and there were bass rumbles from far away that reminded her uncomfortably of an unwanted voice she couldn’t quite identify. Reason returned to her like a hot rain, a few painful drops at first, then an escalating torrent in which she had to swim or perish. It was close: part of her wanted only to shrink from light and self forever.

Fatima was still sitting in the same place, and turned only her head to watch Lucita reassume human form. “I think you should go. This cannot do either of us any good.”

“I agree.”

They said nothing more as Lucita walked to the airplane and climbed in. Fatima heard her friend (her former friend, perhaps) mutter “Wake up, now” to the pilot, and the sounds of the pilot stirring to begin flight preparations. She watched from an absolutely motionless stance all during the plane’s revving up, taxiing, and takeoff into the night. She remained motionless until all trace of it was gone. Then she returned to her cave,

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and didn't notice for many minutes that she was shedding tears of blood onto the commentary she'd chosen as that night's reading.

Lucita likewise remained very still once she'd roused Angelica. She swayed slightly as the plane bounced along on its way, but otherwise might have been some statue consigned to an art collector with a taste for medieval ladies. Gradually Angelica realized that there were twin red streaks running down her mistress' face, but she lacked the courage to say anything about. Sometime in the pre-dawn hours the trickle stopped, and Lucita removed the marks before settling down to sleep. She said nothing.

**Wednesday, 6 September 2000, 7:00 PM (12:00 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Cairo Tower Sheraton**  
**Cairo, Egypt**



Lucita becomes aware of herself standing on the battlements of the Aljafería, the castle where she'd grown up, not long after sunset. The village of Zaragoza and the surrounding valley are flooded with rich ruddy light, while the mountains to the west loom black and knife-edged in front of where the sun went down. Nobody is very close to her, but the castle was filled with the noises of life. Her father and Uncle Ramiros ride out on some unknown business to the south, leading a company of knights and soldiers. Her mother takes the other children out into the fields to the north. Servants gather and pack gear for villagers to carry away on stout wagons.

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

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

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

"Hello?" She calls out uncertainly.

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

"Hello?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lifts a cautionary finger. “Remember that your refusal makes me stronger.” He demonstrated by holding up the gates of hell with one hand, and absently banged the doors open and closed. Damned souls crowd up in search of relief, but upon finding the cardinal standing on the threshold, they wait patiently for the opportunity to fly. “There is in the end nothing you can do or be but what I want of you. You will accept this, because you must.”

“No!”

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

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

She remembered listening to military commanders now and again, and their repeated refrain: When there is no acceptable outcome to a question, change the terms. She could

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not bring the old bastard back from the dead. She could not refuse to slumber. She could not change the contents of her subconscious mind, not without submitting to outside manipulation. But she *could* change how she responded on a conscious level. And a series of connections that she'd tried to avoid in the past suddenly came together now with the inevitable rightness of a mosaic, or a chain.

The cardinal had given up on anything resembling a human ethos long before she was born. Any humane appearance he'd made in public had been a carefully crafted act, perpetrated by one who believed that no lie counted—no sin of any kind counted—as long as it was in service to the mission of divine wrath. He had seen himself as a damned agent of the holy God, thrust into darkness to serve the purposes of the Lord of light. Anyone who fell into his clutches, including Lucita herself, had proven themselves his fitting prey, he believed, since if God wanted to stop the cardinal, God could do so. Those who escaped must have the Lord's favor, or at least a destiny to meet judgment at some other hands.

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

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

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

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

Vampiric alternatives to human moral codes were ancient. If indeed there had been a world flood, then at least some of them must date back to antediluvian



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

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

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

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

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

**Wednesday, 6 September 2000, 9:50 PM (2:50 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Four Seasons Hotel Cairo**

**Cairo, Egypt**



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

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

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

"Lucita here."

"Good evening, childe of Monçada."

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

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

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

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

"I want your help."

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

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

A long silence ensued.

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

"Is this a prank?"

"No, Excellency."

**Saturday, 14 April 2001, 11:02 PM (5:02 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Museo del Prado**

**Madrid, Spain**



Alone, Lucita sat at her desk. The last six months had been hellish and exhilarating. De Polanco had led her on a bloody path through northern Spain, stripping her bare of what few human morals she had left and rebuilding her soul with the harsh code of the Path of Night. He'd left her to stake her claim on her sire's old domain in Madrid, and that had meant more bloodshed and something shy of actual victory.

Not failure. Failure was unacceptable. But at least enough to compel her to adopt another strategy. She would be Archbishop of Aragon. Let the rabble fight over Madrid. She was going home.

She looked down at the desk. The stationery on it bore the logo of the Chateau de Lyon, and she wondered just how that had happened, which larcenous aide was furnishing offices in mismatched accessories. The thought made her smile briefly, for the first time since that unhappy Abyssal encounter with de Polanco. The smile passed as she contemplated the task ahead of her.

Long before there was a Sabbat, there had been an ambitious Tzimisce lord a little older than herself, one Myca Vykos. Over the centuries, he (sometimes "she," given the Tzimisce fondness for manipulation of form, and often "it") had been a thorn in her side. They'd conceived an instant dislike and reinforced it at every meeting over the first few hundred years of her existence, until they drifted out of contact in the wake of the Sabbat's founding. Even if she had not had the personal crusade against her sire, the mere presence of Vykos in a position of authority would have repelled her from the Sabbat. She knew that he had often tried to arrange for her destruction, just as she often sought out—without success—contracts from anyone willing to pay a suitable fee for assassinating him.

She had not attempted to communicate with him since her decision to join the Sabbat. She'd wanted to present him with a magnificent accomplishment. But now she would need to say something to him, or he could wreak great havoc in her efforts in Aragon. He must be satisfied as to her motives, and perhaps ever so slightly intimidated or even just bewildered into leaving her alone. She set the first sheet of stationery into the vintage typewriter and began.

*My Dear Vykos,*

*It is not without a sense of irony that I find myself writing this letter, and I'm sure that you're not without your own sense of something similar—whatever it is that approximates emotions in your malign little heart—as you read it. You no doubt know by now that my sire, Archbishop Ambrosio Luis Monçada, has met with his final death. Part of me suspects that you knew before I did. Not only was he a contemporary and sectmate of yours, he was part of that hideous little cabal of monsters who crawled forth from the Middle Ages and gouged a place for themselves among these modern nights without yielding the tiniest iota of their former habits. For this,*

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despite my hatred for him and my admitted lack of fondness for you, I salute you both. I salute also those fallen in the effort. Those of you who died without compromising your Cainite natures deserve a nod for your commitment. Those who served without compromising—who have reached the letter Z—I afford you the reverence due to your fiendish selves.

It was no secret that the archbishop and I had our differences. I am no stranger to the whispered tales of his decadence, and no stranger to the rumors of the carnal knowledge we shared of each other. Quite simply, you know that never to have happened.

I am glad he is dead. The very fact that he rose each evening weighed heavily on me, and I knew that the only reason I was given to achieve the great heights that I have was due to the old beast's last impotent and Heaven-denied urge to have one last fuck before he went to his place at the devil's right hand. He was a faithful Cainite, and I was the embodiment of his failure. I never wanted to be that; I never asked for it. When he pulled me under the shroud of night, I was a stupid, impetuous girl who accepted the curse of undeath only in an effort to spite my father. I can hear the leathery lines at the corners of your mouth curving right now, Myca—"You two deserved each other," I can hear you croak. You are right, much as it embarrasses me to say it.

I have come to a turning point in my unlife because of this. His final death, my understanding of what I meant to him, and a long-dormant sense of that wretched but unavoidable progeny's guilt have stirred the primal fire within me. I have played the dangerous game for almost a millennium. I have taken the side of right (or the side as closest to right) for as long as I have been able. I have divorced myself from the morality of the Damned long enough to hinder the twin evils of the Camarilla and Sabbat. I have studied futile, obsolete arts and devoted myself to killing and later to making amends. I have been a whore for war and a whore for peace. I have been a martyr and cynic, a killer and saint. I have watched demons poison the earth around them (with your help...) and I have led feints for the Ancients more times than some Cainites have uttered the word "Antediluvian." Our own games of gambit and counter-gambit, Myca, have colored history, threatened the world with genocide, served as blinds for the true masters of the Jyhad and killed those who may possibly have risen one night to places as leaders of the world. I have watched history occur; I have contributed to the color of cultural advancement with the crimson of my own blood. I have seen miracles, and have been a miracle to many.

I don't want to do it any more.

Let them drop their jaws in wonder, Myca. Let them curse me for abandoning the fight against Gehenna on their terms. Let them call me a traitor, place me on their absurd Red List, curse me for a coward and a selfish fool. I am sick of playing the game the world has set before me. The time has come for Lucita to do what she should have done centuries ago. Despite the horror and wonder and fate-shaping I have done and seen, I am still no more than my sire's childe. I must step down from the world's stage. I am no longer a figure; I am one Cainite attending to her own matters.

Please allow me to surprise you now, Myca. I mentioned before that I believe you knew of the archbishop's final death before I did. Well, allow me to turn the tables and make your introduction to the archbishop who will succeed him. My own domain will be the new archbishopric of Aragon, because I want to go home for a while.

Open your arms to welcome me, Myca. I am Sabbat.

Sister to your brother,

Lucita

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She thought with great satisfaction that this would keep the fiend busy with speculation for a while. She knew that he spoke from time to time of “getting that bitch.” He might yet some night, but this move in the struggle gave her the advantage. For now he would respond to the actions she initiated, and that suited her very well. Of such things is eternity in darkness made.

**Wednesday, 21 June 2001, 6:40 AM (12:40 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**

**Hotel Vista del Castillo**

**Zaragoza, Spain**



The night's business was done. Or rather, as much of it as she could manage to do in the night was done.

It was so difficult to get much of anything done in these short passages of darkness, when the sun so obviously still ruled the world and flouted Lasombra ambitions. She and her subjects had so much to do, so little time... she knew that it was a self-indulgent complaint and that the complaint itself wasted time, but she remembered very vividly being a girl in the long summer days, when it had seemed there was time to do not just anything but everything.

It could be worse, of course. They weren't under siege here. She'd even spoken, once, with some of the leaders of that assault on her holdings in Madrid. The invaders proved to be under the command of what she thought of as the "mountain men," the descendants of vampires of her own time who'd gone all but feral and led predatory, purposeless lives in the mountains between human kingdoms. These latter-day mountain men seemed primarily to want Madrid's Cainites led by someone who wouldn't challenge their existence, as they feared she would. (They were right about that, too. Had she been able to secure her position, the next step would have been alliances with and conquests of the domains all around Madrid. But she didn't tell them that.) Zaragoza could be hers, they said, as long as they deemed her no threat.

So she, and Conrad, and the surviving members of the hunting pack—Andrew, Barry, Roxana, and Rosa—made their way northeast. Here there were only scattered solitary vampires, all of whom would yield as soon as she summoned them. She knew that things had gone so terribly wrong in Madrid partly because she had inherited a complex situation devised largely by her sire and therefore tainted with attitudes and outlooks she hated. Starting essentially from scratch, she knew that she could build a better kingdom for herself here, a better tribute to the principles of the Sabbat as applied to the challenges of these troubled times. Final Nights, as the mystics said? Perhaps so. If so, she would at least lead an army worthy of the name "Sword of Caine" into battle.

The Hotel Vista del Castillo was happy enough to rent out an entire floor in exchange for hard American currency, and she presented a different enough appearance that the staff didn't associate her with the strange woman who left behind charred furnishings on All Saint's Day, 1999. They knew her as a young woman come from far lands to revisit ancestral glories and, perhaps, to build up new businesses that could offer employment to the town's many needy and of course highly deserving youth. In the longer term she would need other means of persuasion, but for now she could let the hunting pack study the situation and prepare their own plans. They were such good holy terrors, she felt little worry on that account.

The rest were gone to their rests now. For reasons she could barely identify to herself, she felt that she ought to greet the dawn a second time, a sort of commemoration of who she'd become since the last such occasion. Tonight there was no friendly family ghost to

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speak with her—indeed, no ghost at all. She suspected that they could sense the growing aura of mastery within her and no longer regarded her as someone they might manipulate for their own ends. The dead were loathsome things, and never more so when they were so restless as to refuse to stay in their graves. They were part of the realm of the night, fit only for use in accordance with Lasombra wills.

The realm of the night. There was a phrase to conjure with. It wasn't just the night, it was the perpetual absence of the manifestations of God's will for the waking world. There was a tension there, the dream of endless night in defiance of the God who said "let there be light" and perfect service in damned obedience to the God who said "an eye for an eye." It wasn't anything she expected to resolve anytime soon, either—every Lasombra library of philosophy and theology had its share of long tracts about the matter. It might well be part of the reason there were so few truly perfect masters of any form of the Path of Night; perhaps only those who managed to leave the world altogether behind could escape the dichotomy, by moving out of the flesh and its complications.

A stray thought crossed her mind, a fragment of conversation with Munther in Cairo shortly before she began her studies under Elieser. She'd commented on the unfolding evidence from the Castle of St. Rafael the Archangel that the summoners there had unwittingly created the great beast themselves. Munther smiled tightly and asked her why she thought the Abyss was so ready to produce such a thing in response to a few desperate souls. At the time she hadn't given it much attention beyond the obvious response that their lineage had always been associated with the Abyss and had a sort of understanding with it. Now she realized that she'd been hasty leaping to that conclusion. There was no account of anything like what the summoners had done before the founder's "destruction" and disappearance. Now the Abyss responded as it never had. Perhaps it was not so much that the founder had gone *into* the Abyss as that the founder and the Abyss were one, or at least growing together. If so, then it was all just a matter of time.

She also supposed that she would likely never know the truth of the matter. Gratiano was wrong and would never be able to learn it. She could also be wrong and might never suspect it. Had the founder grown more malicious after centuries away from the flesh? Who could ever say, until the founder chose to speak? It was even possible that the founder was truly destroyed and had worked all those changes in one final instant in the flesh before perishing forever... comforting, that thought, but not one she wanted to gamble on.

Sunlight again struck the ramparts of her ancestral home. She would reclaim that home and turn it into a suitable seat of power. The financial maneuverings might take a year or several, but she had time. She'd need to make more ghouls to replace poor unsatisfactory Angelica, ones with more strength to sustain them in difficult times. No more weaklings, Lucita thought to herself, but pillars of strength whose souls would reflect her own growing strength. They would hear and obey, not whine about lost friends and hobbies. Soon enough they would present her the keys to the castle, and Zaragoza would gradually become a byword for the power of the night.

It was harder to stay awake now than it had been on that All Hallows' Eve. Then the remaining taint of humanity had protected her from the full war between the force inside



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her and the sun and what it stood for. Now that was gone, but she was still so new to the Path of Night that her defenses were weak. The reflected dawn hurt worse than anything she could remember, worse than that last sun-kindled fire or the terrible flames when Andrew and the others hunted her down. (She wished she could make them pay for that, but it was not hers to do that. She knew them now and trusted them as much as any student of the Night could sensibly trust another, but still, it would be good to hear them scream. Something to plan for the future, perhaps.) She would not be able to endure the few minutes she had last time....

...She came to herself still awake, still smoldering, buried beneath the covers of her bed. In a moment of total unconsciousness, the Beast she carried had acted to protect itself, pulling her away from the window. Now she could hold off sleep no further. Her last waking thought was this:

*And this too shall pass.* Final Nights, perhaps, but first Final Days, after which the sun would fall before her like all her other enemies. In the end, it would all be hers.

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**Thursday, 9 August 2001, 10:01 PM**  
**(Friday, 10 August 2001, 1:01 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**A private home**  
**Santa Barbara, California**



It was not long after sunset, and Stephen Walinsky was alone in the mansion he and the others had acquired in the late 1990s. Alone apart from the bound novelist and his bound servants, that is; the other vampires were out on various errands. The phone rang. He answered. "This is Ms. Haqim," the cool female voice said in its unaccented, flat English. "Is Mr. Ranulfson in?"

"No, I'm sorry, he's out for the evening. This is Mr. Walinsky. May I take a message?"

He felt a brief buzzing in the phone, and in his head, and then the woman spoke again. "Mr. Walinsky. I remember you, the young man who used to be a librarian. Does your heart still tingle with grief, or have you accepted your condition?"

If he'd been breathing, Stephen would have held his breath. As it was, he simply stood very still.

"Mr. Walinsky," she persisted. "Are you there? Do you understand my question?"


"I am here. I understand. But I cannot answer." He gasped out this last, feeling the blood serpent inside him strike and strike again in an effort to keep him from even acknowledging that there might be an issue there. His sire, Ranulfson, had bound him well.

"Ah. I see. Very well. We will speak again. In the meantime, you will say nothing of this call to Mr. Ranulfson."

"Can I refuse to tell him?"

"You can, if you are very careful. Goodbye, Mr. Walinsky, until we speak again."

That night was very long for Stephen Walinsky.



**Friday, 10 August 2001, 9:05 PM**  
**(Saturday, 11 August 2001, 12:05 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**A private home**  
**Santa Barbara, California**

Stephen Walinsky woke with the sense that he really ought to speak alone with Ranulfson about the situation. He'd tried keeping silent, but it wore on him like chains, like tar creeping up around his waist, sucking him down. He babbled something more or less incoherent, which made Ranulfson raise a questioning eyebrow, but the elder vampire agreed to step out into the vast backyard with his child.

They sat on a bench by a small decorative pond. Stephen tried to speak, and failed. Soon enough Ranulfson realized what was going on. "You are under a compulsion, Mr. Walinsky. But we will take as much time as necessary to work through it and let you speak what you must to your master."

Behind Ranulfson, the bushes stirred in absolute silence. A woman stepped through a narrow little opening. She let a branch snap back, and it made no sound. Stephen looked at her, but could not speak. She had a strange appearance. Her features reminded him of the Lebanese families who had lived down the block where he grew up, but her skin was a dusky black unlike any mortal skin tone. Stephen recognized her eyes. They were the eyes that had peered into his twice before, above the mouth that said an unfamiliar word, back in the offices now lost to them, and a warning on the sidewalk before that.

Ranulfson never saw her coming. She wore a simple gray jumpsuit. From one pocket she drew a long knife. As Stephen watched, speechless, she sliced through Ranulfson's neck. His head fell; before it even hit the ground, she'd drawn a stake and rammed it through his heart.

What came next was almost indescribable. The blood serpent that had been poured into Stephen years before suddenly coiled and died. He did not return to life, but all at once his will was again his own. He could choose to perish, if he wanted. He could choose anything at all. "Thank you," he whispered.

The woman sat on the bench, casually pushing off Ranulfson's corpse as it crumbled into dust. "Let me tell you why I did that. It's important that someone know."

Stephen didn't really understand the tale she told him. Vampires in the Middle East, some great struggle between ancients who all claim to know the mind of their progenitor, a vampire who proclaims himself master of all the assassins and scholars and viziers and demands their absolute loyalty. "For a year," the woman said, "I wrestled in solitude. Almost solitude." She paused. "That is not a story to tell now. I wrestled, as I say. My heart has always yearned to serve both Allah and Haqim, the father of all things and the father of my kind. I have not found these duties to war against each other, because Allah's words speak of duty and how one may serve the commandments when one must do things otherwise prohibited to believers. Do you understand?"

"No," Stephen said.

"I thought not. Never mind, just listen." She continued, telling him how her own father-vampire had commanded her to give up Allah, and how she had refused. "So I went

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to the cave, and I pondered on Allah's words. He said to Muhammad, 'It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets; and giveth wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor-due.' I thought about how my would-be master wanted to make us slaves and about how Allah loves those who set slaves free. So I set myself free and returned to the world."

She looked at Stephen with the most compassionate eyes he'd ever seen. "You were a slave."

"Yes."

"You needed me."

"Yes."

"I remembered you. Deep in your eyes, there was a little shout that said that this was not what you wanted. Many slaves of the blood do seek it out, you know. There are always men and women who dream of power, of holding slaves and taking and never giving. You didn't seem to be one of those. You were tricked, Ranulfson said, and he was proud of it."

"He did?" Stephen was surprised.

"Oh, yes. He didn't precisely realize it, but we—the Children of Haqim, that is—seldom take contracts until we understand our employer as well as his targets. We maneuvered him into telling us more than he may have realized. So when it was time to set slaves free, I decided to start with you."

Stephen was speechless for a long time. The woman—his liberator—just watched him. Finally it occurred to him to ask, "What about the others you were with?"

A crease of pain ran across her brow. "They...chose to remain slaves."

"Did you destroy them?"

"Not yet. Perhaps never. Punishment is a worthy task for Allah's servants, too, but I would prefer to begin with liberty. There are enough prisons of one sort and other in the world. So." She paused. "Tell me. What will you do now?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

She smiled. "Liberty takes more work than bondage." The smile faded like shadows after sunset. "I will watch and see what you and the other freed slaves do. You will be a testament to me and to the other Children of Haqim, to show us whether the words of Allah remain for us or whether we are no longer among those to whom he speaks."

Stephen shuddered.

She saw it, scrutinized his twitch with a chilling, dispassionate gaze. "You are afraid."

"Yes."

"Good. Learn to use that fear as a reminder that there is always an audience and that you act not only for yourself but within the great theatre that is the universe."

Stephen tried to say something, but lapsed back into a confused silence. In the blink of an eye, she disappeared. One instant she was there, the next she was gone. He couldn't feel her passage, but he knew that she had left, somehow.

That marvelous absence of compulsion stirred him. He got up and quite casually strolled down the hill, under the freeway, past closed bars and open coffee shops, out onto

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the beach. He meandered out onto the pier, a favorite place of his in the days when he still had days, rather than endless night. Out at the far end there were some grotty old benches, where fishermen gathered in the daytime. At this hour, though, there wasn't anyone but Stephen; even the make-out artists had gone elsewhere or given up.

He sat down. He did not move for two hours.

The surf rolled in beneath him, in a rhythm older than humanity. Older than vampires? Stephen knew so little about his kind, since Ranulfson had never told him more than he needed to carry out his master's orders. Stephen understood that he'd have learned more after their expected victory, so that he could be a credit to Ranulfson's coterie when presented to the masters of the Camarilla. Now...well, there were others out there, he supposed. Perhaps they could teach him.

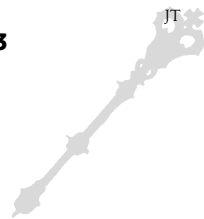
He had no idea what he'd do next.

For the first time since that wretched monster began to displace Stephen's blood with its own through illusion and trickery, Stephen was under no command. He was under the Haqim's *advice* that he would be watched, but he had no direction. Perhaps...no, somehow he didn't want to destroy himself. He wanted to understand, first, to know what this had all been about. Then there'd be time to make decisions.


He turned his face to the east and began to walk back along the pier, toward Los Angeles. He would find out what it is that his life and unlife had been serving, whom his master had warred against and whom he had served. He would understand, no matter how long it took, and then when he knew, he would act.

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**Private Journal Entry, Sunday, 20 October 2003**  
**Entered by Jan Pieterzoon (Encrypted)**



It was a thing of nightmares — something I would have expected to see in the cinema, not on the streets of Manhattan. As if the foul creature that haunted us four years ago was not bad enough, the Thing—I can find no better word to describe it, for it defies description—that we fought last night was far worse. I still find it hard to believe the empirical evidence of my own eyes. Its destructiveness, its hunger, its incredible size and speed, all boggle the imagination. It ravaged buildings, scooped up fleeing pedestrians and Kindred alike and left only husks and ashes behind, tore cars apart with thorny tendrils to get at the sweet meat within. Bullets could sever a limb, but it just as quickly reattached or absorbed its own flesh, and in the end, only fire served to do it harm—regretfully, that is a weapon as dangerous to the wielder as to the target and one we were not sufficiently prepared to use effectively, particularly when our own preternatural abilities might falter unpredictably at the very moment we most needed them. Fortunately, only the most ambitious and foolhardy of media crews dared approach close enough to the writhing mass to observe our own doings—it took care of the interlopers and I have entrusted my people with the destruction of any permanent recording of what they might have witnessed. When dawn approached, we were forced to retreat—it was only when I rose this evening that I learned of its destruction, how it withered and burned in the first light of the sun, almost as if it were itself built of undead Kindred flesh....



**Wednesday, 22 October 2003, 1:15 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 21 October 2003, 7:15 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Jordaan Kliniek**  
**Amsterdam, The Netherlands**

She did not breathe, nor did her heart beat, but she was not yet truly dead. Whether thin-blooded, former Sabbat, or anarch rebel, her past no longer mattered, and she had no future. Staked and helpless, pale eyes staring in stark, frozen terror, she was stuffed into a partially open body bag and laid on a stainless steel gurney, awaiting her executioner.

Jan Pieterzoon did not even read the dossier that came clipped to the gurney. He did not want to know her name. His visits here were regrettably necessary. He could not otherwise continue to fulfill his duties, do what had to be done to keep the Masquerade in place and the Camarilla of Europe unified in the face of anarch dissidents and thin-blooded rabble who sought to overthrow the wisdom and traditions of centuries. Until an explanation could be found to the Withering, the weakness in the blood of Kindred elders, there was only this bitter solution—which at least had the advantage of solving two problems at once.

Jan reached down and closed the girl's eyes with a gentle hand. He inhaled, breathing in the scent of her blood. A great emptiness opened up within him, hunger rising and sharpening, overpowering the heaviness in his limbs, the pain from broken ribs and deep, painful gashes across chest and thighs sustained in the battle of three nights before. Relief from it all lay before him, and he did not deny himself any longer; he slid one arm under her shoulders, lifting her so that her head lolled back, and sank his fangs into her throat.


When he was done, and had drained his victim of the last drop of blood and the dregs of her soul, he felt strength once again running in his veins, felt his torn flesh and cracked bones begin to mend. *Finally. I should not have waited so long.*

Feeling more like himself than he had in a fortnight, Jan laid the corpse down and zipped the body bag shut. Others would see to the disposal. Already his mind was racing ahead: skimming through his schedule, the specimens they had brought back of the Thing that had reduced Manhattan to ruin, phone calls to be returned and letters to be written. The Camarilla came first.

It was the only justification he had, and he clung to it fervently.

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**Wednesday, 22 October 2003, 2:25 AM**  
**(Tuesday, 21 October 2003, 8:25 PM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**Office of Arjan Voorhies, Prince of the Netherlands**  
**Grand Hotel Krasnopolsky, Amsterdam**



*“New York City remains under martial law, three days after what can only be described as a most unnatural disaster. Decontamination crews, under military escort, continue to sweep through the streets and the rubble of buildings. Federal Emergency Management Agency officials at the scene estimate it may take weeks to tally up the thousands of dead, not only human beings, but cats, pigeons, rats, squirrels, foxes and other animals fallen victim to the highly toxic chemicals being used to flush out the sewers. The President has appointed General Jason Quincy Hall to head up a military task force charged with an immediate investigation into the nature and source of the events of three nights ago and has declared that no possibility, however remote, is being overlooked....”*

In the monitor over the prince’s shoulder, CNN began repeating the blurry images of massive scaled and thorny vines wrapping around the Empire State building and squeezing it to rubble, while Voorhies and several advisors, of whom Jan Pieterzoon was nominally one, discussed what this incident’s significance might be to the Kindred of Europe.

Jan took a silk handkerchief out of an inside jacket pocket and began to clean his glasses. He had seen enough of the thing in New York three nights before; the news clips didn’t do it justice. He wondered what Voorhies would say if he knew Jan had several living samples of the monster in sterile containment, undergoing testing and analysis in his research lab in Leiden.

His reflections were interrupted by a light touch on his shoulder. His assistant Hans van Pel stood beside his chair and offered him a folded note.

Jan put his glasses back on and opened it. It took a second to register and to get past the otherwise natural assumption that this was a prank—if it was, it was not one Hans would be capable of pulling off.

He nodded at Hans and slid the note into his inside jacket pocket. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Prince Voorhies, gentlemen,” he said politely, “I must take this call.”

Even so, he suspected a prank, or an impostor, as he followed Hans back to the room serving as his office. “*Hallo, met Jan Pieterzoon,*” he said, picking up the phone and motioning Hans to shut the door for privacy. “*Met wie spreek ik?*” *Who am I speaking with?*

“You will forgive me, I trust, if I do not speak your language,” the voice on the line said, in a precise but oddly lilting French. “I assume this will do; I rather doubt you speak my native tongue either. But you already know who I am. You would not have come to the phone unless your servant gave you my name.”

“Very well,” Jan replied in French. The voice was familiar, the faint accent exactly as he remembered it, although he thought perhaps the pitch and timbre had deepened.



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Still, there were many who could imitate a voice. “Assuming you are who you claim to be, why are you calling me?”

“To play upon your curiosity, and to perhaps satisfy mine. The third time, as they say, is the charm. But I do not think Lucita will be so obliging this time—if you want to see what I have to show you, you’ll have to risk coming alone.”

Vykos. Who else but the Sabbat’s chief torturer would know of that night? Well, Lucita would, of course. But if there was something Lucita was not, it was a gossip. “I’m not especially interested in satisfying your curiosity,” Jan said coolly. “Nor have you piqued mine, save to wonder how you got this number.”

“No secret lasts forever, Mr. Pieterzoon. There will always be someone with the persistence and creativity to dig it up, sooner or later. Your phone number was easy compared to uncovering a few things your sire should have known better than to ever commit to parchment...especially in a letter to such an obsessive and paranoid old bastard as Rafael de Corazon. Things I’m sure he never intended you to see.”

At least Jan no longer doubted the identity of his caller; only Sascha Vykos could taunt and tantalize him at the same time, with that precise note of arrogance. “What kinds of...things...are you talking about? Why should I even be interested?” *And for that matter*, he added silently, *why should you?*

“You might find them interesting,” Vykos replied. “Of historical value. I had the opportunity to study de Corazon’s files before we burned his mansion to the ground back during the French Revolution. Of course, you may prefer believing the fiction of Camarilla history to accepting the evidence of its reality.”

“Why should I shy away from evidence of any sort?” Jan retorted. It came out a little sharper than he had intended. “Assuming it’s genuine, of course. I’d have to examine it at length to even begin to determine that, especially given the source.”

“Of course.” The voice on the other end of the line was just as maddeningly calm as ever. “You can take all the time you like, once the letters are in your hands. And I’ll be happy to put them there...if you’re willing to accept them.”

So Vykos hoped the offer of documents from the long-lost archives of a Camarilla founder would draw him out. But why? What did the creature really want? Did the letters really exist, and even if they did, were they simply bait? Jan considered. “My schedule is very full these nights, I’m afraid. The emergencies of the present must unfortunately take precedence over the relics of the past.”

“Ah, yes. Your little adventure in New York. You’ve become quite the action hero, haven’t you? First Vitel, then Jan the Giant-Killer versus the overgrown beanstalk that ate Manhattan. But where did that beanstalk sprout from, have you discovered that? Are you sure you got every last magic seed?”

*Seeds.* That thought was chilling. “That—beanstalk, as you call it—was neither plant nor animal,” Jan replied, coolly. “Are you telling me you know something about it? Was it of your making, Vykos? Did you breed that unnatural *thing* in the sewers until it was time to let it wreak its havoc?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. “No,” Vykos said at last. The rancor seemed to have drained out of the Tzimisce’s voice. “I did not make it. But I suspect I know something more of its origins than you do. Meet with me, Pieterzoon, and

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I shall give you de Corazon's documents, and you may ask any questions you like. Whether you accept the answers is, of course, your own affair."

The sudden change in tone surprised him. Vykos sounded tired, almost resigned. *Why?* Jan wanted to demand. *Why do you want to meet with me so badly? What are you really after?* He'd had cause to study Vykos over the years. The Tzimisce was a scholar and historian, very old and very proud, and did not waste time with idle games, nor make false boasts—at least the fiend never had before.

Whatever Vykos wanted, though, there was likely only one way Jan was going to find out.

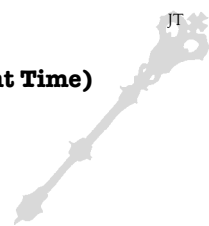
**Private Journal Entry, Thursday, 23 October 2003****Entered by Jan Pieterzoon (Encrypted)**

Sascha Vykos is a monster, long divorced from any lingering vestige of humanity. Her name is spoken in whispers even among Sabbat—her face feared, no matter what shape it takes, and her cold cruelty yet more than the face. And yet now, as rumors reach us of the disintegration of the Sabbat, of the young packs hunting down their weakening elders like wolves after a wounded stag, I wonder: Is Vykos the hunted now—is that why the old criminal seeks to meet me? And, more importantly, why should we of the Camarilla interfere in nature's course, should this turn out to be so?

I have asked Dr. Van Driesen to pack up one of the specimens I brought back from New York. Perhaps I shall be able to persuade Vykos to offer a Tzimisce perspective on the thing; no doubt that will provide me with plenty to muse upon, if not to believe....

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**Friday, 24 October 2003, 12:01 AM**  
**(Thursday, 23 October 2003, 7:01 PM, Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**The ruins of the Abbey of the Sacred Crown**  
**Near Silchester, Hampshire, England**



Meeting at Thorns had been Jan's idea. He'd chosen it for its isolation and for its history, being the site where the Camarilla was born—and where, if his sire's recollections were to be believed, Vykos had once led the rebellious anarchists in a heinous massacre, leaving no mortal in the neighboring village alive. He wasn't sure whether the Tzimisce felt haunted by past deeds or not—but at the very least, it was highly unlikely Vykos would have been able to prepare much of an ambush in such a place, given such short notice.

Following the terms of their agreement, Jan left the bulk of his security escort with the rented Land Rover, parked just off the road. Only Anton Baas accompanied him past the line of trees and up the hill. Baas, now walking on a totally reconstructed knee, carried the sample case—as well as a Heckler & Koch G3KA4 automatic rifle Jan hoped he wouldn't need. Vykos had suggested they simply dispense with the fiction of being unarmed, and so Jan also carried a Glock Model 19 handgun holstered under his jacket—although should the worst happen, he doubted it would do much good.

There was little left of the abbey itself; only decades after the historic Concord of Thorns, the monastic dissolution had left it in secular hands, and the fires of civil war a century later had burned it to the ground. Now Jan could see flickering light coming from within the broken shell of the great hall that had hosted seven nights of passionate debate, and there was a distinct smell of wood smoke. Motioning Baas to be prepared for anything, Jan stepped through one of the gaping doors.

A small bonfire blazed inside the hall, warming and worrisome at the same time—bonfires were, Jan recalled, a game for the Sabbat, and its light made anything on that end of the hall difficult to see. Warily, he walked along the side of the wall, to the raised podium on the end opposite the fire. Baas followed and, at Jan's signal, set the sample case down, readied the G3KA4 and retreated back into the doorway.

"Vykos?" he called, stepping further inside. "I'm here. Where are you?"

"Here," came the familiar voice to his right.

Jan had braced himself for the Tzimisce's usual monstrous appearance, but the figure that stepped out from the shadowed archway looked surprisingly ordinary: a slender young man with longish dark hair, clad in jeans and a plain sweater, a backpack hanging from one shoulder. For a moment, he almost doubted this was Vykos at all—since when did a creature that reveled in its ability to change even the slightest detail of its appearance, even its apparent gender, settle for the guise of a mere mortal and of an ubiquitous college student at that?

"Your sire stood there, right where you're standing now," the young man said, almost conversationally, and it *was* Vykos' voice, right down to the pitch and accent. "He was, of course, taller—" He stopped, his youthful face suddenly wary and suspicious. "What—*what did you bring?*"

"A piece of the beanstalk," Jan explained. He knelt down and unsnapped the case. The sides split and folded totally back on their hinges, revealing a three-gallon glass specimen jar with a special filtration lid, to keep the liquid within circulating. Floating

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within the jar's confines was an irregular chunk of organic material about twice the size of a human heart, one surface sporting gray-green scales and stiff patches of hair, and the others raw, bloodless meat, threaded through with veins and sinew.

He rose and stepped back from it. "I thought you might know—"

"No!" Vykos actually recoiled. "How *dare* you! That—that *thing* in my presence! Destroy it! *Destroy it! At once!*"

Inside the jar, the specimen moved. From a pore on its scaly side, it extruded a stalk, on which formed a tiny humanlike hand, pale and sickly as a corpse, that groped blindly in the Tzimisce's direction until it reached the inside surface of the jar.

Vykos stood transfixed, staring in horror, one hand now rising and extending stiffly forward despite the efforts of his other hand to draw it back. Jerkily, unwillingly, his body took a step forward, closer to where the specimen awaited him, the tiny, translucent hand pressed against the glass.

"What is it?" Jan was horrified too; the specimen had been quiescent until now. "Why is it—"

"*Destroy it!*" Vykos shouted at him. There was something in his voice Jan had never expected to hear—sheer terror. "*Damn you, Pieterzoon!*" His outstretched arm began to lengthen, and the Tzimisce gritted his teeth, fangs extended, brow furrowed in fierce concentration, trying to pull his arm back while his feet appeared rooted to the ground.

There was something in Jan that wanted to watch the Sabbath monster suffer whatever fate he so greatly feared—it was likely no more than he deserved. But Jan wanted answers even more, and if it turned out that Vykos actually *owed* him something after this, it would be well worth the loss of this particular specimen.

He drew the Glock out from inside his coat, took careful aim at the thing and fired. The jar and its contents exploded into fragments, glass, liquid and bits of flesh splattering outwards. The bulk of the specimen itself went flying backwards but somehow—astonishingly—remained mostly intact.

"Mr. Pieterzoon!" Baas called. "It's still *moving*—"

Almost half its mass had been blasted away, but what was left was still animate, hunching its way across the stone pavement a few inches at a time, heading straight for Vykos. Jan belatedly remembered the Thing in New York's resistance to mere gunshots.

"*Destroy it!*" Vykos shrieked again, falling to his knees. "*Burn it! Now!*"

*The fire!* Jan took a few steps towards the bonfire, but the flames were too bright, too hot. The heat of it on his skin sent a wave of burning terror spiking sharply up from his belly, clutching at his heart, coloring his vision. It was too much; he turned away, leaning against the cool stone of the wall. "*Baas,*" he gasped. "Do it!"

The mortal shifted the rifle to his left hand and obeyed, pulling a flaming branch from the blaze, warily approaching the creeping horror from behind. It became aware of him too late; Baas touched the burning end of the branch to the slab of unnatural flesh and it burst into flames.

Vykos screamed as if it were his own flesh burning and curled up into a shuddering ball, face buried in his arms.

The thing burned as quickly as Kindred flesh—which did not surprise Jan in the least—leaving a greasy gray smear where it had lain. As soon as the last of it collapsed into ash, Baas was stamping out the remains of the fire with his shoe. Then, with a wary eye on the hunched-over, shaking form of Vykos, he backed away slowly, holding the smoldering branch like a shield.

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Slowly, the Tzimisce unfolded, his wary attention on the ashen remains for a moment and then to the mortal backing away. His cold eyes never blinked; lips curled back from extended fangs.

“Vykos!” Jan shouted. “Your quarrel is with me, not him. *Look at me!*”

The pale face turned towards Jan, and Vykos rose awkwardly to his feet again. His left arm, still a third again longer than his right, he held close against his chest. “You,” he hissed, fangs still showing behind his lips. “You *bastard*. How *dare* you—”

“Whatever else you believe,” Jan said, preparing himself for an attack, should it come, “*that* was not my intent. I didn’t know...didn’t expect...*that* to happen.”

“What then *did* you expect? A rational, scientific discourse on cellular metamorphosis and mutated DNA? There are things in this world, Pieterzoon, that do not fit into genus and species, that cannot be *defined* by your precious science.”

“Then why—” Jan found himself staring at the Tzimisce’s distended arm, the thin fingers flexing nervously, and then it struck him. *The Withering. He can’t change his shape; his flesh no longer obeys his will. Could that even be his true face, his mortal form?*

Vykos suddenly glided towards him, lip curling back from his fangs, dark eyes red-tinged by reflected firelight. “You *ignorant little fool*,” he hissed, as he came closer, step by step, “Do not think that I have grown soft as well as weak. I could break you in half like a rotten log, tear your limbs off one by one like a captive spider and suck them dry—”

“But that’s not why you came,” Jan said, standing his ground. He could sense Baas’ consternation somewhere behind him at the Tzimisce’s proximity, but he refused to back down. “Nor did you come merely to give me de Corazon’s letters. You want something more from me. Something you think I can give you better than anyone else.”

Vykos stopped less than an arm’s length away, the cold, flat stare belying his otherwise human appearance. “And what,” he asked, his voice thin and whisper-soft, “do you think I want from *you*?”

Part of Jan wanted to pretend ignorance a little longer, to force his old enemy to actually say the words—but the more pragmatic side of him simply wanted to survive this encounter and make the best deal possible, which required that he allow Vykos his pride. “You want an alliance. Protection from those in the Sabbat who would hunt you.” He did not say *asylum*.

“There is no *Sabbat*. Not anymore,” Vykos said and turned away, much to Jan’s relief. The scorn in the Tzimisce’s voice was very plain. “Can you imagine it, Pieterzoon? Surely you’ve heard. The terrible Sabbat, scourge of the Camarilla for five hundred years, Caine’s great army against the Antediluvians...and at the first real test, it shattered like glass into pathetic little warring fragments. Now when the Antediluvians rise, there will be nothing to stand against them.”

“Antediluvians?” Jan snorted. “A myth, Vykos, to frighten the ignorant. Surely *you* do not—”

“*Listen to me*, Pieterzoon,” Vykos snapped, turning to face him again. “*Listen* and spare me the inane repetition of your sire’s lies—just because it’s what you would like to believe does not make it true. I knew its voice once. I heard it long ago. Then for a time I thought we had silenced it—the more fools we, for it was stronger than we knew. I heard it call to me months ago, as it called to all of us...all its blood. But I resisted. I left the New World, returned to my homeland. I avoided its presence...until tonight.” The dark eyes glittered angrily. “How ironic that it used *you* for its carrier, who does not believe it exists.”

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“The thing in New York—?” Jan repeated, uncertain whether he believed this or not. “But it was destroyed. When the sun came up—even the underground portions were burnt to ash. There’s nothing left.” *My other samples can be destroyed if necessary.*

“No,” Vykos said. “That was not enough, as what we did five hundred years ago was not enough.” He hefted up the backpack off his shoulder, let it dangle by its strap from his good hand. “I hear it still. It is weaker now, diminished. But not silent, not while any of its blood still exist...not while *I* still exist.”

*No. It cannot be.* Antediluvians, Gehenna: Hardestadt often said that myth was still myth no matter how old the one who told it, or how often it was told. It was important to remember that, especially in the presence of one such as Vykos—and in spite of the unexpected fear written in his old enemy’s every word and gesture. And this supremely pernicious and disruptive myth was one Jan had dedicated most of his own long existence to eradicating. How could he then allow himself to fall prey to it, all in a moment? Unconscionable.

Vykos studied him dispassionately. “There is an old saying: *Own the boy, and you will own the man.* Of course, elders usually mean neonates when they say that—but I shouldn’t be surprised that Hardestadt would take the logic a step further and start on you even before the Embrace. I daresay he’s owned you for a long, long time. How old were you—nine? Ten? You never had a chance, did you?”

Jan stiffened, but forced himself to relax. “That is none of your business.”

A faint hint of a smile appeared on the Tzimisce’s lips. “Tell me, Pieterzoon, what did you think he was? Your long-lost uncle? Your illegitimate father? Some lonely, wealthy man of business, a widower perhaps, aflame with the secret yearning for a son? What did old Meems at the orphanage tell you? Did you have any idea who it was that you worked for, learned your lessons for, looked to for your welfare? Was he truly the father you always imagined?”

Jan hadn’t thought of the orphanage in decades. Centuries, really. Of working hard to please the mysterious patron who had taken an interest in his future. That Vykos would know so much about him was frightening—and infuriating, an invasion of his past and his memories. “Your information appears to be a few centuries out of date,” he said curtly.

“Is it? Have you really changed that much in a few hundred years? Or are you still the little boy who’s so anxious to please his master that he will do anything—*believe* anything—he’s told?”

“Scientific research is not based upon belief. It’s based on evidence, on provable facts. Not some old saying, or what’s written in some dusty medieval tome.” Jan sought a way to take control of the debate, turn it to something less personal. “Tell me, Vykos. If the Book of Nod said the world was flat, would you believe it?”

“If Hardestadt said it was, would you?” the Tzimisce fired back. “Or would you impose your will on every mapmaker in the world until you had reshaped it to suit your master’s image? Would that really change anything at all?”

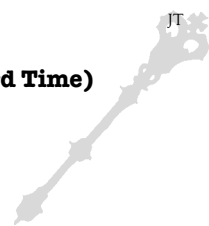
Vykos swung the backpack forward and sent it flying through the air; Jan caught it. “Wait,” he said, as Vykos turned and began to stalk away the way he had entered, out of the ruins. “Vykos. I thought you wanted to discuss...well...something more.”

The Tzimisce paused on the edge of the firelight and looked back at him. “I have wasted five centuries in the company of fools, and that was quite enough,” he said. “If you come to your senses in time—if indeed you can *survive* the shattering of all your illusions—perhaps then, Jan Pieterzoon, we will have something to talk about.”

Then he was gone.

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**Wednesday, 28 October 2003, 11:45 PM**  
**(Thursday, 29 October 2003, 2:45 AM Eastern Standard Time)**  
**The Mission Inn**  
**Riverside, California**



“It seems to be beyond all reason that what Vykos said is true. I have examined myself to the best of my own ability, and I do not believe he—and it is ‘he’ now, with his current infirmities—was attempting to use any of his powers in the Blood in his persuasion. It is possible, of course, that his weakness was deceptive, but I doubt it, and in this I must again reference Vykos’s pride, for while I could conceive that he might feign an inability in his desire to lure me off my guard, I do not find it in me to believe he would do so to the point of his own embarrassment, nor permit a true disability to be revealed.

“What he said still troubles me, against my better judgment. Even the documents he showed me—a letter signed by my own sire, relating his precise lineage from Caine—serve to undermine my confidence, my very faith in the truth I have so long defended. And the Thing in Manhattan troubles me as well, the unnatural animation and purpose that yet survived in even such a sample as I had thought to be a harmless remnant. And its connection to Vykos himself, the Tzimisce’s own response to its presence before I’d even revealed it was there, that disturbs me as well....”

Jan hit PAUSE on the keyboard and set the microphone down, to collect his thoughts and check the storage space on the DVD. Almost full—the images from New York and the recording of his meeting with Sascha Vykos had taken up quite a bit of space. Well, then, time to end it.

“I feel it necessary to present this information to my lord Hardestadt. For despite my firm beliefs in the inadequacy of our many legends to explain our existence, it may be there are some truths hidden amidst the veiled prophecies that we cannot afford to discount and ignore totally.”

He pressed SAVE and then watched the message ENCRYPTION IN PROCESS. When it was done, he popped the disk out, put it in its case and slid that into a pre-addressed mailer that Hans had left for him, and then packed up his laptop.

He had a meeting with his sire on the latest developments in the matter of New York and the thin-blooded plague in Europe. Hardestadt being heavily involved in eradicating that plague in North America, Jan had made yet another transatlantic and now transcontinental flight to accommodate his elder’s schedule. That it waged hell with his own, and the time-lag was hard on his staff, was not a matter open for discussion.

Jan left Hans sleeping in their suite and went down to the front lobby. He stopped momentarily at the concierge to ask her to ensure his package went out on the next pickup and then walked down the corridor past several well-armed security guards to where Hardestadt was keeping his offices. He quite literally didn’t give the package another thought.



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JT  
**Thursday, October 29, 2003, 12:15 AM (3:15 AM Eastern Daylight Time)**  
**The Mission Inn**  
**Riverside, California**

“Come, sit down.” Hardestadt waved him towards a chair and took the facing one himself. Jan obeyed. “You seem to have weathered the storm in Manhattan better than most.”

His tone was hard to read—it could have been an expression of satisfaction that Jan had survived or a subtle insinuation of cowardice. Jan tried to ignore it. “Yes, my sire.”

“I read your report. You seem to have taken the appropriate steps to preserve the Masquerade, despite the circumstances. I presume things are still under control? Good. You understand how important the Masquerade is, especially now.”

Jan nodded. Hardestadt’s war against the thin bloods of Southern California could be passed off as gang warfare, even local neighborhood terrorism. But what Jan and his allies had been forced to do in order to fight the thing in New York had been far beyond what could be explained by normal mortal violence.

“What exactly happened to the thing?” Hardestadt paused, and his expression was stern. “Your report said it burned when the sun’s light struck it, which I presume you did not witness yourself.”

“No, I had retired. There were, however, a number of other eyewitnesses. Several were mortals in my service, who had been set to watch the thing from a distance. There were also media recordings, which I can provide for you if you like. It was indeed the sunlight that destroyed it, as if—” he stopped suddenly, sensing he was getting close to dangerous ground.

“As if it were Kindred,” Hardestadt finished for him. Now it had been said.

“Yes, exactly,” Jan agreed.

“So, is that what *you* think it was, that monstrosity?” Hardestadt asked. “A Kindred? A Tzimisce, perhaps?”

Jan hesitated. There was nothing in Hardestadt’s voice or features that gave him the slightest clue of what was on his sire’s mind, of what answer was expected. *There are no Antediluvians*, he reminded himself and heard Vykos’ mocking laughter in the back of his mind. “It might be one of their creatures, their constructed monsters, built with Kindred flesh,” he offered.

Hardestadt nodded, and Jan felt a wave of relief unknitting muscles he hadn’t even realized were tense. “It might, yes. It would be the work of an elder, of course, possibly even one of the rare Methuselahs. They held New York for a long time. There’s no telling what they bred down there in the dark, where even the Nosferatu fear to go.”

“Calebros had reported a number of disappearances recently,” Jan said. “He didn’t admit any of them were his own blood, but I suspect some must have been. Now Calebros himself is among the missing as well. In fact, we’ve not had word from any of the New York Kindred since that night.”

“Which is suspicious as well,” the Founder growled. “The Sabbath may be broken, but some of their elders likely still survive, and they must thirst for vengeance, for the blood

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from Camarilla throats. They have always sought to destroy *everything* we have built, to indulge their Beasts and sate themselves on our blood—” He broke off, his hands gripping the arm of the chair so tightly the bones showed white under his skin.

Jan froze, all his senses suddenly fully alert. He could all but see his sire’s Beast rising to the surface, feel the hunger that mortal blood could no longer satisfy. For one awful moment, he feared for his very existence but dared not make a single move.

But Hardestadt had a will strong enough to wear down stone, and he did not permit himself to lose control. “If you will excuse me,” he said stiffly and rose to his feet. “I shall return momentarily.”

Jan stood as well and bowed politely. Hardestadt turned and strode swiftly to a side door. Before it shut, Jan caught a glimpse of the bedroom beyond, and a valet’s luggage carrier standing in the middle of the room, with three staked figures hanging by their bound wrists from its top bar.

The mere sight of them was enough to arouse Jan’s own appetite with a fury that left him trembling. How could he be *that* hungry again, so soon? So weak? It hadn’t even been two weeks since the last time he.... Jan let himself sink back into his chair again, took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. *No. I am not that weak, not yet. I don’t need it yet. I can’t. Think of something else. Anything else.*

But what appeared suddenly in his mind’s eye, blocking out the image of the three captives awaiting their fate, was the haunted face of an old enemy, holding his distended arm against his chest.

*—I heard it call to me months ago, as it called to all of us...all its blood. I hear it still. It is weaker now, diminished. But not silent, not while any of its blood still exist....*

*While any of its blood still exist.* The Sabbat was fragmented, but the Camarilla did not know how that had happened. And for the thing in New York to have grown so incredibly huge, to be constructed of Kindred flesh—had it been Tzimisce flesh? An icy chill touched Jan’s spine. Just how many Tzimisce *did* exist?

It could be just a blood-feud, such as the one that had all but decimated the Ravnos a few years ago. The Tzimisce had that reputation, as did most of the Sabbat. They treasured their hatreds. Vykos himself had said the Sabbat packs now warred among themselves.

But Vykos had feared what Jan had brought before he had even opened the satchel. He had never imagined he would ever see the Sabbat’s chief torturer afraid.

*—I avoided its presence...until tonight. How ironic that it used you for its carrier....*

The door across the room opened, and Jan rose to his feet, forcing his thoughts back to the present, his features to polite neutrality. Behind Hardestadt’s back, only two prisoners now hung from the rack.

“I was wondering,” Jan began, after they had both taken their seats again. “Have you noticed many Tzimisce among the thin-blooded and rebels you’ve captured? Surely some are Sabbat, aren’t they?”

Hardestadt shrugged. “Most of them are so weak in the blood, it’s impossible to tell their lineage. And it hardly matters; they serve their purpose no matter what their blood. Why?”

“Well, it’s probably nothing,” Jan said. “If the thing in New York was built by some Tzimisce Methuselah, any Kindred could have served that purpose. It wouldn’t necessarily require Tzimisce victims specifically.”

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Hardestadt gave him an odd look. “No. It wouldn’t. But do go on. Maybe you’ve thought of something we’ve overlooked.”

“Well, it’s just a rumor,” Jan admitted. “I’ve not had a chance to verify the information, and I’m not sure how I could do so even if I wanted to. But I’ve heard the Tzimisce are...well. Far fewer in number than they used to be. Something appears to be thinning their ranks, by a considerable margin.”

“If that were only true, I’d rejoice.” Hardestadt shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “We could do with less Tzimisce in the world—the fewer, the better. Where did you hear this? Is your source reputable?”

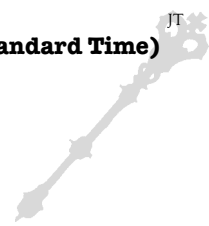
“I would say so, yes,” Jan said, picking his words carefully. “He believed he was one of the few who had survived. And he spoke of hearing a voice—” He hesitated, looked up to see his sire’s reaction.

Hardestadt leaned forward then, his expression intent, clearly interested and encouraging. “Did he indeed? Tell me, my son. Tell me all that he said.”

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**Saturday, 1 November 2003, 6:30 PM (12:30 PM Eastern Standard Time)**

**Jan Pieterzoon's haven  
Herengracht 284, Amsterdam**



"Good evening, sir," Hans greeted Jan as the Ventrue sat down at the table to look at the newspapers. "I'm afraid there's no news yet on the thin-bloods who destroyed the lab Thursday night. Our contacts with the police have nothing yet to report. Mr. Voorhies did send a message, though, that they captured the Noddist Prophet who's been leaving those leaflets all over the city."

"Good." Jan nodded. "We need to get that nonsense off the streets. And what's this?"

"That? Oh," Hans picked the slim package up and put it in his master's hand. "It came in today's mail. Funny, though. I don't remember sending anything out while we were in California, do you?"

"No...but that is your handwriting. Well, I'll have a look at it later. Hand me the NRC *Handelsblad*—"

It was some time later when he finished with the papers and his other correspondence and opened the package. It contained a single DVD, which he popped into the player before sitting back in his favorite chair and pushing PLAY on the remote.

*It withered and burned in the first light of the sun, almost as if it were itself built of undead Kindred flesh.... You may prefer believing the fiction of Camarilla history to accepting the evidence of its reality.... Spare me the inane repetition of your sire's lies.... I knew its voice once.... I heard it call to me months ago, as it called to all of us....*

Two hours later, he stared at the last image on the disk—his own face, dictating the ending words—and heard the damning words echoing in his mind.

*I feel it necessary to present this information to my lord Hardestadt.*

Jan took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. *I did present this; I know I did.... But then what did he say?* He frowned. *I remember....* And then he did remember it, remembered explaining his observations, the evidence and testimony he'd gathered of the Thing in New York, even Sascha Vykos's recollections of its voice, though without identifying the source of his information. Perhaps that made his evidence weaker, but at the time, it had seemed prudent not to give all the details.

*"You will not concern yourself further on this matter, Jan. Forget this inquiry, it is pointless, based on false logic and lies. You don't understand what you saw, but I will explain it to you.... Forget this matter, it is of no relevance to you. Forget...."*

Perhaps the ancient Ventrue's powers had ebbed at that moment, despite the blood he had taken. Or perhaps all Jan's mind had needed was the repetition of his own observations, what he had seen and recorded, what Sascha Vykos had said. But at that moment, he could suddenly recall every last word of it with perfect clarity.

*Why? Why would he do such a thing to me? What had I done?*

His mind felt numb, wrapped in cotton wool; he didn't want to think these thoughts, admit this betrayal was real. He found himself unexpectedly clumsy, almost dropping the DVD as he tried to extract it from the tray. This had to be put away somewhere safe,

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somewhere Hans or other eyes would not see it. Somehow he got the disk back in its case and took it to his desk.

*This cannot be happening. It cannot be real; he would never do this to me.*

He sank down in the chair, the DVD in his hands. The Tzimisce's words resounded in his memory, cruel, cutting into his very soul: *Own the boy, and you will own the man.*

*So speaks the slave of Hardestadt*, Xaviar had said to him back in 1999, and Jan had not disputed his characterization. His loyalty to his sire was well known, his obedience absolute, and his sense of duty ingrained in his very flesh. Hardestadt, of course, would have settled for nothing less.

But in the end, all his loyalty, obedience and duty had not been enough. Despite all the dark secrets he had kept, there were apparently things that he could not be trusted to know. It hurt, and it frightened him—for those Hardestadt did not trust did not last long in his service. *Why didn't he trust me?*

Perhaps it was not too late. Perhaps he could still redeem himself, show his sire he was worthy of that trust. But first, he must put this damning evidence away, out of his sight. Perhaps there was still hope—

The massive antique roll top had been a gift from Hardestadt decades ago, and among its many storage slots and drawers were a few secret compartments for extremely sensitive files such as this one. He slid one of them open, a false bottom in a side drawer. It was not empty, and yet the small, flat book within looked unfamiliar. He drew it out; it was a journal in his own hand, dated April 2000. *Odd*, he thought, almost grateful to be distracted from his current train of thought. Until he read, near the end of the last entry:

*I found the book, not on the shelf, but in the copy room, with the very pages I had sought already marked for copying. And in those words were the same images I had seen recorded in the ravings of the mad and drawn by seers: the great King rising from sleep, fighting the tiger, the dragon and the crane, only to be struck down by the dawn. The madness of his childer and childer's childer, cursed to destroy one another...and yet this passage was written over seven centuries ago. This King, it declared, would be the first to fall. And the Ravnos have fallen; there is no debating that.*

He remembered now. He had asked his sire about it, asked for the reason, some logical purpose to which those words could be put. Some kind of plan.

But there had been no plan. No reason. Only Hardestadt's eyes and unbreakable will.

*This has happened before.* Cold realization was settling somewhere deep in his belly. It was a physical pain, an ache that spread outward into his limbs, leaving emptiness in its wake, a hollow feeling in his heart and a bitter taste in his mouth. *What else I have forgotten?*

*He trusted me to do his will, to be his voice and hand and weapon, to burn books and make pious speeches, but never to know the truth. He used me to perpetuate a lie, a lie that I believed. I wanted so much to believe it.*

*But he betrayed me.*

Now that cold, painful truth, the hollow aching in his heart was somehow igniting a slow-burning anger the likes of which he could not remember ever feeling before. *He has betrayed me more than once.*

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The Antediluvians were not a myth. He had come so close to the truth—the book in Hardestadt’s archives, the Thing in New York, the utter terror of an old enemy that had spoken volumes more than his bitter affirmations.

The truth that might have changed the order of the world, might yet even *save* the world—and that truth was kept from him. Stolen from him, so that he might continue to perpetuate Hardestadt’s lies.

Red washed across his vision. *He has stolen my reason and my memories, forced me to remember only what he desired. He knew it—had to have known it, and he used me...used me to perpetuate his lies.*

*Everything I have done for him — the books I burned, the Noddist scholars I persecuted — has been based upon a lie. A deliberate, malicious, intentional lie.*

*My entire existence has been based on a lie, and he knew it all along!*

The Beast roared in mindless fury, its rage boiling up from within, setting his blood on fire and driving reason to the shadows, and Jan Pieterzoon let it come.

Solid oak cracked and splintered under his fists, every blow falling with the full power of his rage behind it, seeing Hardestadt’s cold eyes, his smug, knowing smile in every shattered drawer and dented brass plate. He was dimly aware of his staff exiting the adjoining office, seeking shelter and safety in distance from their master’s frenzy, and that pleased him, that none of them would suffer for his own loss of reason—only the desk, which had suddenly become Hardestadt’s effigy and so rightfully bore the brunt of his fury.

When he came to himself again, he stood over the broken pieces of what had once been the desk, amid the scattered papers, pens, books, file folders and cards it had once contained; his suit was covered with dust and tiny splinters of wood, and his hands were scratched and bloody.

His initial wave of fury had burned itself out—and burned blood he would have to soon replenish—now only the pain and the emptiness remained. Jan sank into the desk chair again and simply sat there, unmoving, for a long time.

Images flashed through his memory: meeting Hardestadt, his guardian and future employer, for the first time. That rare, but cherished, word of praise that was always enough to spur him on to even greater successes. The terrifying night of his own Embrace, and the terrible shame he’d felt when his “taste” established itself. And through all his existence, he had given all he had, all his intellect, his business acumen, his intuition and political skills, passion and courage, to serve Hardestadt’s cause.

But the cause was a lie, an elaborate falsehood perpetuated so that the Camarilla might remain stable, paramount in the night — the young serving the old, the old serving the ancient. For the good of the Camarilla, it was necessary to dismiss forgotten history as legend, the Antediluvians as a fairy tale, the Sabbat as a rabid, monstrous cult of doomsayers.

But when the cause was gone, what was left? Without Hardestadt, without the Camarilla, who was Jan Pieterzoon? Was there anything left of him at all that was himself alone and not the tool that Hardestadt had molded from an anxious, studious little boy without a father or a future?

The outer office was deserted; the staff would not return until he called for them, or until the sun had risen. He could see the clock on the wall—how had so much time gone by so quickly? He would have to get up soon and prepare to retire. So many tasks he had not accomplished tonight. Calls he had not returned, letters he had not written.

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But did any of that *matter* anymore?

He watched the second hand sweep around the circle, the minute hand advancing one notch at a time. What now was his existence worth? Had his entire life, his long survival after that brief life ended, been a waste?

But of all things, Jan Pieterzoon abhorred waste. It was poor business practice to waste anything, poor management of resources, of investment capital. No asset should ever be wasted. Not materials, not people and their labor, not investments, not time, and not lives—especially not his own.

And he would waste no more of his eternity shoring up Hardestadt's lies.

What Hardestadt had done—had been doing to him for decades, if not his entire existence—could not be forgiven. *Enough. More than enough; I will not be his puppet, my mind and reason manipulated to perpetuate his lies. This ends now, forever.*

The enormity of what he was considering did not escape him. The danger was tremendous; Hardestadt's reach was long, even from California. He would have to disappear, to take his people and as many of his assets as he could manage and go underground, risk a blood hunt, turn his back on all he had known, all he had worked for.... *All the lies....* Alone, he would not survive.

*But perhaps I won't be alone.* Already he could think of several others who chafed under the rule of their elders, or who had long believed what he had sought to disparage—who might be persuaded to *do* something about the real dangers facing the Kindred now. Dangers greater than gangs of thin-blooded Kindred, greater perhaps than the Withering—or perhaps they were in fact symptoms of the time, a time that had been prophesied for thousands of years. He didn't know what it all meant, what the truth really was—but without the blind fear of certain Camarilla elders deliberately obscuring the past and poisoning their minds, perhaps they could discover it. If they had time....

*"If you come to your senses in time—if indeed you can survive the shattering of all your illusions—perhaps then, Jan Pieterzoon, we will have something to talk about."*

"Maybe we will indeed," he said aloud and wondered if Sascha Vykos would be surprised.







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# Appendices to volume Four

A glossary of the undead  
prominent characters  
About the Authors  
About the compilation





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A Glossary  
of the undead



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The Kindred have their own dialect of specialized words and phrases. Vampires have a tremendous capacity for double-talk; what they say often means something other than its literal interpretation, or something in addition to its simple meaning. Certain words have evolved new connotations among the Damned, while others are unique to vampires and their society. The Kindred, set in their ways as they are, are loath to adopt new manners of speech or slang, and one can often determine a rough estimation of a vampire's age by listening to the individual words she chooses.

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**Alamut:** The hidden fortress that is the traditional heart of the Children of Haqim (Clan Assamite). Thought to be in the mountains of Eastern Turkey.

**Amis Noirs, Les:** Literally “The Black Friends” but usually translated as “The Friends of the Night,” the *Amis Noirs* are those members of Clan Lasombra who have achieved enough prestige among the clan to sit in judgment over their fellows. This secretive body acts as something between an old boys network and a deliberative body for the clan (and through it, for some key parts of the Sabbat).

**amr:** Traditional title for the eldest of sorcerers among the Assamites.

**anarch:** A Kindred rebel who opposes the tyranny of elders. Anarchs wish to redistribute the wealth and resources of a city equitably among the vampires therein. Anarchs generally operate in Camarilla cities as a rough opposition.

**Antediluvian:** A member of the dreaded Third Generation, one of the eldest Kindred in existence. Antediluvians are said to have sired all thirteen clans, to be the hidden masters behind the Jihad, and to be in a semi-slumber from which they will rise during Gehenna.

**antitribu:** Literally “anti-tribe,” the name for those members of a clan who reject the sectarian allegiance of most members of the clan. The Sabbat includes members tied by blood to most of the Camarilla and independent clans and to distinguish them from their “loyal” brethren, they are called *antitribu*. There are also a few Lasombra and Tzimisce *antitribu* who actively oppose the Sabbat.

**archbishop:** The Sabbat vampire who has domain over a large area, usually a city. Equivalent to the Camarilla term prince.

**archon:** A vampire in the retinue of a justicar. Archons enforce the traditions of the Camarilla.

**Assamite:** A member of the Children of Haqim, one of the five so-called independent clans of vampires, or that clan as a whole. Assamites have a reputation as assassins, but are also skilled sorcerers and schemers. Their center of authority is Alamut.

**Beast, the:** The inchoate drives and urges that threaten to turn a vampire into a mindless, ravaging monster.

**Black Hand, the:** An extremely zealous secret society within the Sabbat, the Black Hand’s members firmly believe that Gehenna is on the horizon and that they are fighting a war against the agents of the dread Antediluvians. Also called the *manus nigram*.

**blood bond:** A mystical power over another individual engendered by partaking of a particular vampire’s blood thrice; accepting blood from a vampire is an acknowledgment of her mastery.

**Blood Curse, the:** A wasting disease of supernatural origin that claimed the unlives of many Kindred in the middle of the 1990s.

**blood hunt:** An official death sentence pronounced on one Kindred by the prince or archbishop of the city. Traditionally, the convicted vampire is given the chance to flee, and the one who brings him down gains substantial prestige.

**Book of Nod, The:** A loose collection of Kindred legendry and history. *The Book of Nod* chronicles the origin of the Kindred, though it has never been published in its entirety. Fragments of the document and its many partial transcriptions circulate among certain strata of Kindred society. A scholar of these texts and the ancient times they purportedly chronicle is generally called a Noddist.

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**Brujah:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. The Brujah are feared for their explosive tempers and great physical might.

**Caine:** The biblical elder child of Adam and Eve and murderer of his brother Abel. According to *The Book of Nod* and assorted Kindred legendry, God's curse upon him was the origin of vampirism, and all Kindred descend from him through the Embrace.

**Cainite:** A vampire; a member of the race of Caine. The Sabbat use this term in lieu of Kindred.

**Caitiff:** A vampire of unknown clan, or of no clan at all. Caitiff are typically of high generation, where Caine's blood dilutes too greatly to pass any consistent characteristics.

**caliph:** Traditional title for the eldest of warriors among the Assamites.

**Camarilla, the:** A sect of vampires devoted primarily to maintaining the Traditions, particularly that of the Masquerade. It opposes the Sabbat and the anarchs. The recent sect warfare has cost the Camarilla its domain over Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Hartford, Buffalo and several smaller cities. It retains domain over Baltimore and Chicago.

**cardinal:** A powerful elder in the Sabbat, roughly equivalent to a Camarilla justicar.

**chantry:** The local sanctum and domain of a city's Tremere blood-sorcerers, home to their library and thaumaturgic resources. The head of a chantry is called the regent.

**Chantry of the Five Boroughs:** The Tremere chantry in New York City. The city is predominantly under Sabbat influence, so the chantry (aligned with the Camarilla) is something of a stronghold. Aisling Sturbridge serves as regent.

**childe (pl. childer):** A vampire created through the Embrace—the childe is the progeny of her sire. This term is often used derogatorily, indicating inexperience.

**Children of Haqim:** Clan Assamite.

**clan:** A group of vampires who share common characteristics passed on from sire to childe. There are thirteen known clans, all of which were reputedly founded by an Antediluvian.

**diablerie:** The consumption of another Kindred's blood, to the point of the victim's Final Death. Vampires can gain significant power in this way, but it is considered a capital crime among the Kindred of the Camarilla.

**du'at:** The tripartite council that is the governing body of Alamut and the Children of Haqim. Made up of the caliph, *amr* and vizier.

**ductus (pl. ducti):** The leader of a Sabbat pack or coven.

**Elysium:** A place where vampires may gather and discourse without fear of harm. Elysium is commonly established in opera houses, theaters, museums and other locations of culture.

**Embrace, the:** The act of transforming a mortal into a vampire. The Embrace requires the vampire to drain her victim and then replace that victim's blood with a bit of her own.

**Family, the:** Euphemism either for the vampiric species at large or one of the tight-knit clans (e.g. "He's in the Family now."). Used primarily among Followers of Set, Ravnos and Giovanni.

**fidai':** A neonate of Clan Assamite still undergoing training in the ways of the clan.

**fire dance:** A ritual and rough celebration in which Sabbat vampires prove their loyalty and bravery by jumping through raging fires. Many Sabbat war efforts and other events begin with fire dances.

**fleshcrafting:** The vampiric ability and art of reshaping living and undead flesh and bone into a wide variety of shapes. Clan Tzimisce produces most fleshcrafters.

**Followers of Set:** Clan Setite.

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**Friends of the Night:** The secretive elite of Clan Lasombra; usually called *Les Amis Noirs*.

**Gangrel:** Until recently, one of the seven clans of the Camarilla and now the fifth of the so-called independent clans. The Gangrel are said to be masters of the wilds and some can assume animal forms, including those of bats and wolves. Justicar Xaviar recently officially withdrew Clan Gangrel from the Camarilla because he felt Gehenna was dawning.

**Gehenna:** The supposedly imminent Armageddon when the Antediluvians will rise from their torpor and devour the race of Kindred and the world.

**generation:** The number of “steps” between a vampire and the mythical Caine; how far descended from the first vampire a given vampire is.

**ghoul:** A minion created by giving a bit of vampiric vitae to a mortal without draining her of blood first (which would create a vampire instead). Ghouls are fanatically loyal.

**gin-gin:** A poison used by some Assamite warriors to lace their weapons. Gin-gin can cause pain and decomposition in the unliving flesh of the Kindred.

**Giovanni:** One of the five so-called independent clans of vampires, the Giovanni draw many of its members from the descendants of a Venetian trading family of the same name. They are reputed to be necromancers, able to commune with ghosts, and to have made themselves vampires in a way similar to the Tremere. Giovanni in North America have domain over the city of Boston.

**Goratrix:** One of the original fellows of Tremere (the sorcerer who founded the clan of the same name). Goratrix later rebelled and joined the Sabbat, forming the Tremere *antitribu*, more formally called House Goratrix.

**Haqim:** Traditional name of the Antediluvian founder of Clan Assamite.

**justicar:** A vampire appointed by the secretive inner council of the Camarilla to act as enforcer, arbiter and executioner of the sect. There is only one justicar per Camarilla clan (so seven in total) and this select group can act with virtual impunity to defend the sect. Justicars are assisted by their handpicked archons.

**Jyhad, the:** The secret, self-destructive war waged between the generations. Elder vampires manipulate their lessers, using them as pawns in a terrible game whose rules defy comprehension. The Antediluvians are said to pull the strings of the Jyhad.

**Kindred:** The race of vampires as a whole, or a single vampire. Sabbat vampires scorn the term.

**kine:** A term for mortals, largely contemptuous. The phrase “Kindred and kine” refers to the world at large; everything.

**koldun:** One of the rare (and feared) blood sorcerers of Clan Tzimisce.

**Lasombra:** One of the two founding clans of the Sabbat. The Lasombra are political schemers extraordinaire and feared for their characteristic powers to summon up darkness—both immaterial and fatally solid—and even to enter a realm of shadow called the Abyss. The Lasombra are said to have killed their Antediluvian as part of the founding of the Sabbat.

**Lupine:** A werewolf. These savage beasts are said to hate Kindred and to hunt them for sport. Thought to be found only in the deepest wilderness.

**Malkavian:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. Malkavians are said to all be mad, but are also known as seers and prophets.

**manus nigram:** Traditional name for the Black Hand, the secretive and zealous Gehenna cult within the Sabbat.



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**Masquerade, the:** The tradition of hiding the existence of vampires from mortals. Designed to protect the Kindred from destruction at the hands of mankind, the Masquerade was adopted after the Inquisition claimed many Kindred unives. The Camarilla enforces the Masquerade on penalty of destruction.

**Methuselah:** A vampire who has existed for a millennium or more; an elder who no longer exists among the greater whole of Kindred society. Methuselahs are rumored to hail from the Fourth and Fifth Generations and are nearly as feared as the Antediluvians.

**necromancy:** The blood sorcery practiced by members of Clan Giovanni, it concerns itself with binding ghosts and other unhealthy spirits. Properly called *nigromancy*.

**neonate:** A young vampire, recently Embraced.

**Nictuku:** The apocryphal name given in the legends of Clan Nosferatu to those descendants of their Antediluvian who were never cursed with ugliness and who, it is said, hunt their leprous cousins for past sins.

**Nod:** The mythical land east of Eden into the wilds of which Caine was cast by Adam and God after the murder of Abel, and where he later built Enoch, the First City. A vampiric scholar of those hoary times is termed a Noddist.

**nomad:** A Sabbat vampire who (along with her pack) travels constantly in her duties to the sect.

**Nosferatu:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. The Nosferatu are cursed with terrible ugliness that manifests immediately after the Embrace. They are known as hoarders of information and for their ability to vanish from sight.

**pontifex:** A title of high rank among the Tremere, it is usually given to vampires who act on behalf of the clan elders in Vienna rather than for the sake of their own chantry.

**primogen:** The vampire leaders in a Camarilla city; its ruling body of elders, typically composed of one member from each clan present in a city.

**prince:** A vampire who has claimed a given expanse of domain as her own, particularly a city, and supports that claim against all others. The term can refer to a Kindred of either sex and is mostly used by the Camarilla. The Sabbat uses the term archbishop.

**rafiq:** A full-fledged member of Clan Assamite, who has successfully undergone training as a *fida'i*; literally, “comrade.” *Rafiq* is most often used to refer to members of the warrior caste of the clan.

**Ravnos:** One of the five so-called independent clans of vampires, the Ravnos hail from India and often feed from Gypsies and other wanderers. They are thought of as thieves by other Kindred and are said to be able to summon up illusions.

**regent:** The leader of a chantry of Clan Tremere. The regent is often the most potent thaumaturge in the chantry, but not always. Especially large chantries—like the Chantry of the Five Boroughs, in New York—may have an assistant regent (“regent secundus”) and other ranked officials.

**Sabbat, the:** A sect of vampires that rejects humanity, embracing their monstrous natures. The Sabbat is often bestial and violent, preferring to lord over mortals rather than hide from them, and is founded on opposing the machinations of the Antediluvians. With the recent warfare, the Sabbat has gained domain over Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Buffalo and Hartford, as well as holding the cities of Miami, Detroit, Montreal and most of New York City.

**SchreckNET:** The private computer network certain members of Clan Nosferatu use to communicate with one another.

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**sect:** A group of Kindred arguably united under a common philosophy. The two most widely known sects currently populating the night are the Camarilla and the Sabbat. The anarch movement is not organized enough to form a sect, per se.

**Setite:** A member of the Followers of Set, one of the five so-called independent clans of vampires, or that clan as a whole. Setites reject the Caine story and claim descent from the Egyptian god whose name they take. They worship him with religious fervor and are mistrusted by most Kindred.

**sheriff:** In Camarilla cities, a vampire empowered by the prince to enforce the traditions and edicts of the sect—often to the point of destroying offenders.

**shilmulo:** A term used among vampires of Clan Ravnos to refer to themselves. Used interchangeably with undead, Kindred and vampire.

**sire:** A vampire's "parent"; the Kindred who created her.

**szlachta:** A fleshcrafted ghoul of a Tzimisce vampire. *Szlachta* appear patently inhuman or animalistic thanks to their patron's ability to reshape bone, skin and muscle. *Szlachta* most often serve as guards or soldiers for Tzimisce lords.

**templar:** A Sabbat vampire assigned to enforce the will of an archbishop or cardinal. Equivalent to a Camarilla archon.

**thaumaturgy:** Literally, "the making of miracles"; the form of blood sorcery practiced by Clan Tremere. It is widely recognized as the most systematic and effective form of vampiric magic, thus accounting for Clan Tremere's power among the undead.

**Toreador:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. The Toreador are sophisticated and depraved, often patrons of the arts. They are known for their inhuman beauty and refinement.

**Tremere:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. The Tremere are dreaded as blood sorcerers and organize themselves into chantries, answering to the father house of their clan in Vienna. The Tremere were once mortal sorcerers and became undead through the ritual consumption of vampires of Clan Tzimisce and the now-vanished Clan Salubri. The Tzimisce hate them still.

**Tzimisce:** One of the two founding clans of the Sabbat. The Tzimisce are perhaps the most feared of all vampires for their utter rejection of humanity and their dreaded ability to mold living and undead flesh like others would clay. Like the Lasombra, the Tzimisce are said to have killed their Antediluvian as part of the founding of the Sabbat.

**Vaulderie:** The ritual bond between members of a Sabbat pack that makes them immune to the blood bond of elders.

**Ventrue:** One of the six clans of the Camarilla. The Ventrue are the traditional rulers of the sect, and are feared for their powers of the mind.

**Week of Nightmares, the:** A period of storms and chaos that occurred in the summer of 1999 when, it is said, the most Ravnos vampires were destroyed. Rumor has it that unknown forces destroyed the Antediluvian of that clan at that time.



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characters  
of note



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The **Clan Novel Saga** covers a great deal of ground and includes a large cast of characters. Following are some of those who make notable appearances in volume two.

**Aaron Light-Bringer:** Clan Tremere. A member of the Chantry of Five Boroughs, Aaron guided the Assamite Anwar into the sanctum of Johnston Foley, where the regent was assassinated. Aaron was also destroyed at Anwar's hands.

**al-Ashrad:** The current preeminent blood sorcerer (or *amr*) of Clan Assamite. He is credited with lifting the blood curse the Tremere placed on his clan long ago.

**Anatole:** Clan Malkavian. Known as the Prophet of Gehenna, Anatole is a feared and respected member of his clan. Almost a thousand years old, he has served as a priest and prophet at different times across the centuries. He is obsessed with uncovering the Antediluvians, and has traveled to the United States, following his mad visions. There he has come under the close observation of Jeremiah of Clan Nosferatu, who has followed him from New York to Chicago, Atlanta, and finally to the hidden cave in upstate New York where the mad Leopold worked his masterpiece with the Eye of Hazimel.

**Anwar:** Clan Assamite. A warrior and assassin of the clan, seeking to avenge the insult of a blood curse Clan Tremere placed on Clan Assamite during the Renaissance. Currently operating in New York City, Anwar assassinated the Tremere Johnston Foley with the assistance of the Tremere Aaron Light-Bringer, whom he also murdered.

**Ash, Victoria:** Clan Toreador. A dilettante, socialite, schemer and dabbler in the music scene, Victoria Ash has a reputation as a skilled member of her clan. Until recently a primogen of Atlanta, she has a long history, including a liaison with Prince Alexander Garlotte of Baltimore. She organized a ball for the solstice night in Atlanta, one interrupted by the Sabbat assault on the city. Victoria was captured and tortured by the Sabbat but escaped Atlanta, only to return on behalf of the Camarilla worthies gathered in Baltimore. There she came to believe that Leopold, now in possession of the Eye of Hazimel, was her childe.

**Augustin:** Clan Nosferatu. The sire of Calebros and his occasional ally. Augustin believes his lineage to be hunted by the legendary Nictuku.

**Bat Qol:** Clan Setite. An agent of Heshu Ruhadze, Bat Qol traveled to Atlanta with his fellow Orthese in order to track down the missing Erich Vogel. Instead they freed Victoria Ash from the torturer Elford.

**Bell, Theo:** Clan Brujah. An archon working under Justicar Jaroslav Pascek. He has joined the war council in Baltimore and is overseeing the city's defense.

**Benison Hodge, J.:** Clan Malkavian. The fallen Camarilla Prince of Atlanta, Benison had imposed a harsh rule on the city in the wake of the Blood Curse, taking desperate

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measures to repress the anarch movement. He survived solstice night but has not been seen since he took refuge in a secondary haven in suburban Atlanta.

**Blackfeather, Edward:** Clan Gangrel. An elder of the clan, he was destroyed in the assault on Leopold and the Eye of Hazimel in Upstate New York. Before that, however, he granted the neonate Ramona Tanner-Childe a vision and the ability to see things others could not. She refers to this as her ghost sight.

**Bolon:** Clan Tzimisce. A leader of fleshcrafted shock troops in the Sabbat, he is a veteran of the siege of Atlanta.

**Borges:** Clan Lasombra. The former Archbishop of Miami, Borges was one of the most preeminent Sabbat in the United States and one of the driving forces behind the Sabbat assault on Camarilla assets along the Eastern Seaboard. Lucita of Aragon assassinated him under contract from both Sascha Vykos and Jan Pieterzoon.

**Calebros:** Clan Nosferatu. A well-respected member of his clan, Calebros sits at the center of a large network of clanmates, informants and allies. He is a careful plotter who—among his other schemes—wishes to extract vengeance on whomever was responsible for the destruction in 1997 of the justicar of his clan, Petrodon. To do so, he engineered the kidnapping of Benito Giovanni.

**Chin, Maria:** Clan Tremere. Regent of the Washington, D.C. chantry, she made the strategic decision to have her clanmates fall back to their chantry rather than fight the Sabbat invaders. The chantry remains the only Camarilla enclave in Washington, but Chin herself was assassinated by the Assamite Parmenides while attending the Camarilla council in Baltimore.

**Colchester, Marston:** Clan Nosferatu. The ranking Nosferatu in Baltimore, Colchester is a valuable ally of and spy for Prince Garlotte. Little does the prince know that Colchester also reports to his clanmate Calebros.

**Costello:** Clan Lasombra. Hailing from New York, Costello is a lieutenant in the Sabbat forces most loyal to Archbishop Polonia.

**Dimitros, Elizabeth:** Clan Setite. A restorer and historian of art, Elizabeth Dimitros was brought into the entourage of Heshu Ruhadze to help him find the Eye of Hazimel. She traveled with him to Maryland, Calcutta and Upstate New York, all the while growing both entranced and repulsed by the Setite. After she rebelled against him, Heshu tracked her to her home in Brooklyn, Embraced her and left her chained to face the sunrise. With the dubious help of Khalil Ravana and Ramona Tanner-Childe, she eventually escaped.

**Donatello:** Clan Nosferatu. A member of the New York brood overseen by Calebros, Donatello's flesh is marked by a beautiful tattoo of an archangel on his back. This intricate piece of art was placed there by the artists Ernst Lohm shortly before his death, and made Donatello the subject of the desire of a conflict between the Toreador and Tremere of New York City in the late 1990s.

**Dorfman, Peter:** Clan Tremere. Pontifex in that clan and a resident of Washington, D.C. He was away during the assault.

**Emmett:** Clan Nosferatu. Based out of New York City, Emmett is an agent of Calebros and participated in the abduction of Benito Giovanni.

**Fatima al-Faqadi:** Clan Assamite. An elder and feared warrior, Fatima al-Faqadi is among those in her clan who most ardently marry worship of Haqim (the clan founder) and Muslim faith. She has a longstanding (if difficult) friendship with the Lasombra *antitribu* Lucita. She is currently under orders to assassinate Lucita's sire, Cardinal Monçada.

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**Fedlos, Havel:** Clan Tremere. Once a member of the chantry in Budapest, Hungary, he fled the city around the time of the First World War, hoping to escape the Jihad.

**Fin:** Clan Ventrue. Youngest childe of Prince Garlotte of Baltimore.

**Foley, Johnston:** Clan Tremere. Regent secundus of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs in New York City. A powerful thaumaturge known for his ability to train novices and his skill at language, he was assassinated by the Assamite Anwar while performing a complex ritual having to do with the Eye of Hazimel.

**Gainesmil, Robert:** Clan Toreador. Primogen of that clan in Baltimore, Gainesmil has participated in the defense of the city and was the host for Victoria Ash in his home.

**Garlotte, Alexander:** Clan Ventrue. Longstanding Prince of Baltimore, Maryland. Garlotte has had a liaison with Victoria Ash of Clan Toreador and still has strong feelings for the undead beauty. With the fall of Atlanta and Washington, his city is the Camarilla's last bastion in the South.

**The General:** Clan Malkavian. Hailing from the Antebellum South, the General recently rose from long slumber beneath the earth and had become a de facto member of the primogen of Atlanta. He foresaw the attack on Atlanta and helped Victoria Ash when she returned to the city.

**Giovanni, Benito:** Clan Giovanni. A high-ranking member of his clan in the New World, Benito has substantial influence in Boston and has overseen relations with high-ranking Camarilla vampires. In 1997, he was involved in the murder of Nosferatu Justicar Petrodon and has recently been kidnapped by members of that clan.

**Giovanni, Francis “Frankie Gee”:** Clan Giovanni. A boss in the parts of the New York City Mafia under the influence of the Giovanni and the superior of Chas Giovanni Tello. He has assigned Chas to find Benito Giovanni, who owed Frankie several debts.

**Giovanni, Isabel:** Clan Giovanni. An elder of the clan, she originated in its traditional Venetian homeland and is a feared necromancer who acts at the behest of her eldest cousins. She has come to the New World to oversee negotiations with Camarilla and Sabbat as to the fate of Giovanni-held Boston in the current sect war and to investigate the disappearance of her clansman Benito Giovanni. She is also pursuing leads about the fate of members of the “old clan”—the ancient race of vampires the Giovanni necromancers usurped during the Renaissance. Evidence is mounting that some of these may be resurfacing and seeking vengeance.

**Giovanni Tello, Charles “Chas”:** Clan Giovanni. A *capo* in the parts of the New York City Mafia under the influence of the Giovanni. Hardly a mover and shaker in Kindred affairs on a global scale, Chas is nevertheless known for getting things done. He has been assigned to assist Isabel Giovanni in her activities in the New World and to locate Benito Giovanni.

**Goldwin, Isaac :** Clan Ventrue. The childe of Prince Garlotte of Baltimore, Isaac serves his sire as sheriff.

**Hannah:** Clan Tremere. The once-regent of the Atlanta chantry of Clan Tremere and their representative on the city's council of primogen, she was destroyed by Sascha Vykos during the assault on Atlanta. Before her destruction, she instructed the Toreador Leopold to create a perfect stone replica of her.

**Hardestadt:** Clan Ventrue. One of the founders of the Camarilla and the sire of Jan Pieterzoon, this elder is said to be one of the most influential vampires in Europe.

**Hazimel:** Clan Ravnos. One of the ancient Methuselahs of the clan, Hazimel's existence is more myth than confirmed reality. He is said to have (at some point) lost one

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of his eyes, which has since become a potent artifact of some sort. The Eye of Hazimel resurfaced in the midst of the assault on Atlanta.

**Don Ibrahim:** Clan Lasombra. Once a Muslim scholar in Moorish Spain, Ibrahim is now an elder Lasombra, and archbishop among the Sabbat, and a confidant of sorts of Cardinal Monçada.

**Jeremiah:** Clan Nosferatu. An agent of Calebros, Jeremiah is something of a Gehenna scholar and has begun close observation of Anatole the Prophet, hoping to piece together clues from his ramblings.

**Katrina:** Clan Ventrue. A childe of Prince Garlotte of Baltimore, she has always acted the rebel. Her own childer, never officially sanctioned by the prince, were recently destroyed so that her sire might save face.

**Leopold:** Clan Toreador. A neonate among the Kindred of Atlanta, Leopold survived the assault on the city only by taking the Eye of Hazimel from the dying Erich Vogel. Under its sway he began the creation of a horrific masterwork of flesh and stone in the Adirondack Mountains, and destroyed a Gangrel war band sent against him. Thanks to the interference of Nickolai, Jordan Kettridge and others, however, he has lost the Eye to Heshu Ruhadze.

**Lindberg, Janet:** Mortal. An agent of Heshu Ruhadze, Lindberg is an information and communications specialist.

**Lladislas:** Clan Brujah. The former prince of Buffalo, New York, he was convinced to retreat to Baltimore by Theo Bell ahead of an expected Sabbat assault.

**Lucinde:** Clan Ventrue. The justicar of her clan, Lucinde is both respected and feared by her clanmates for her history as a ruthless hunter of the Camarilla's enemies.

**Lucita of Aragon:** Lasombra *antitribu*. The childe of Cardinal Monçada, Lucita has spent a millennium opposing her sire's machinations. She is a highly trained warrior and often acts as an assassin for hire among the undead. She has a longstanding (if difficult) friendship with the Assamite Fatima al-Faqadi. She recently assassinated Archbishop Borges under contract from both Jan Pieterzoon and Sascha Vykos.

**Lucius:** Clan Unknown. A mysterious informant of Sascha Vykos's within the Camarilla, "Lucius" seems to have a love-hate relationship with the Tzimisce fiend.

**MacEllen, Roger:** Clan Lasombra. A pack ductus among the militant nomads of the Sabbat.

**Michaela:** Clan Ventrue. Michaela claims the title of Prince of New York but in reality is only the preeminent member of a small band of Camarilla Kindred who have survived in the masses of Manhattan despite the power of the Sabbat.

**Miles, Pauline:** Mortal. An agent of Heshu Ruhadze, Miles has recently stepped in to replace Ron Thompson as head of security for the Setite.

**Monçada, Ambrosio Luis:** Clan Lasombra. The Cardinal of Madrid and one of the most prominent Sabbat the world over, the cardinal has sent his ally Sascha Vykos to represent his interests in the campaign against Camarilla assets in the eastern United States. Monçada, who affects the style of a catholic prelate, is the sire of the *antitribu* Lucita, for whom he is said to have an unhealthy lust.

**Nickolai:** Tremere *antitribu*. A thaumaturge and member of the Sabbat, Nickolai is a long-standing schemer, notably using the vampire Benito Giovanni in his plans. The *antitribu* has recently suffered serious setbacks and Nickolai fears that he is the last of the line, which he calls "House Goratrix."



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**Orthese:** Clan Setite. An agent of Heshu Ruhadze, Orthese traveled to Atlanta with his fellow Bat Qol in order to track down the missing Erich Vogel. Instead they freed Victoria Ash from the torturer Elford.

**Parmenides:** Clan Assamite. A loyal Child of Haqim, Parmenides received the unsavory task of serving as a delegate of Alamut to the Sabbat in general and Sascha Vykos in particular. There he fell under Vykos's cruel sway and has become masochistically enraptured to the Tzimisce. Parmenides' body has been reshaped to resemble that of Ravenna, a ghoul of Vykos's.

**Pascek, Jaroslav:** Clan Brujah. The justicar of his clan, Pascek is Theo Bell's superior.

**Pennington, Gary:** Mortal. A Chicago-based artist, Pennington was commissioned by Benito Giovanni to paint portrait of Nosferatu justicar Petrodon. It was at Pennington's studio that Petrodon was murdered. Pennington's whereabouts since that night in 1997 are unknown.

**Petrodon de Seville, Alonso Cristo:** Clan Nosferatu. Once the justicar of his clan, Petrodon was murdered by parties unknown as he sat for a portrait in the Chicago studio of artist Gary Pennington.

**Pieterzoon, Jan:** Clan Ventrue. A respected elder of the Camarilla with holdings in the Netherlands, Pieterzoon is the child of the vampire Hardestadt, one of the founders of the sect. He has arrived in Baltimore to coordinate the Camarilla efforts to fight back against the Sabbat. There he has had a liaison with Victoria Ash, one that did not end well.

**de Polonia, Francisco Domingo:** Clan Lasombra. The Archbishop of New York, Polonia is considered the most preeminent Sabbat in the United States. He leads the effort to spread Sabbat domain on the East Coast, along with Archbishop Borges of Miami and Archbishop Sascha Vykos (who represents Cardinal Monçada).

**Ramona Tanner-Childe:** Clan Gangrel. A young vampire originally from the barrios of greater Los Angeles who has relocated to New York City. As a mortal her name was Pilar Ramona Salvador. She survived the raid on Leopold's horrific cave in Upstate New York, but those she cared for did not.

**Ranulfson:** Clan Toreador. A member of a Scandinavian-based coterie, Mr. Ranulfson had set up shop in Southern California by the early 1990s. He enslaved then embraced the mortal Stephen Walinsky as part of his plan to overthrow the anarchs who held domain over Los Angeles at the time. He also had dealings with Clan Assamite. His plans went horribly awry and he and his brood had to flee to Santa Barbara.

**Ravana, Khalil:** Clan Ravnos. A Bengali vampire considered by most to be of little import. Thought of as thief and guttersnipe among the undead. Years ago, he fell under the sway of an elder of his clan who sleeps under Calcutta. He recently crossed paths with Heshu Ruhadze and is now in the United States.

**Rolph:** Clan Nosferatu. An agent of Calebros operating in Atlanta.

**Ruhadze, Heshu:** Clan Setite. A respected Follower of Set, Heshu is a specialist in the acquisition of ancient artifacts and has a substantial network in such circles. He is assisted by a cadre of ghouls and clanmates, whom he treats with a careful mix of pragmatism and care. This summer has seen the death of two valuable aids, Erich Vogel and Ron Thompson.

**Rutherford, Amaryllis:** Mortal. One of the owners and operators of Rutherford House antiques, who employ Elizabeth Dimitros and number Heshu Ruhadze among their clientele.

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**Sturbridge, Aisling:** Clan Tremere. The regent of the Chantry of the Five Boroughs in New York City, Sturbridge has the unhappy task of leading a group of vampires aligned with the Camarilla in a city under Sabbat influence.

**Talley:** Clan Lasombra. Templar in the Sabbat. Called “the Hound” for his tenacity, Talley is a shadow warrior of great skill and perseverance. Cardinal Monçada had tasked him with thwarting Lucita’s assassination attempt on the Sabbat archbishops of North America.

**Thetmes:** Clan Assamite. The sire of Fatima al-Faqadi, he has instructed her to choose between her Muslim faith and her loyalty to the clan and its founder.

**Thompson, Ron:** Mortal. A ghoul of Hessa Ruhadze and once the chief of his security detail, Thompson was a retired policeman who looked forward to becoming a full-fledged Setite. Elizabeth Dimitros’s fate changed his mind and he chose death over immortality.

**Ur-Shulgi:** Clan Assamite. Called the Herald of Haqim, Ur-Shulgi is an ancient Methuselah with vast sorcerous powers. He recently arose from torpor, broke the centuries-old curse the Tremere had placed on Clan Assamite and has directed the clan to purify itself.

**Vitel, Marcus:** Clan Ventrue. The former Prince of Washington, D.C., Vitel now shelters in Baltimore and seeks revenge.

**Vykos, Sascha:** Clan Tzimisce. A feared elder of the Sabbat, and the newly installed Archbishop of Washington, D.C., Vykos has changed appearance (and gender) many times over the course of her (or its) millennial existence. She is thought to be tied to Cardinal Monçada and has served as a Priscus, an advisor to the Regent of the Sabbat herself.

**Walinsky, Stephen:** Clan Toreador. Once a consultant in Santa Barbara, Walinsky was enslaved and eventually Embraced by the vampire Ranulfson. He and his sire now reside in a Santa Barbara mansion, where they fled when foreign vampires pushed them out of Los Angeles.

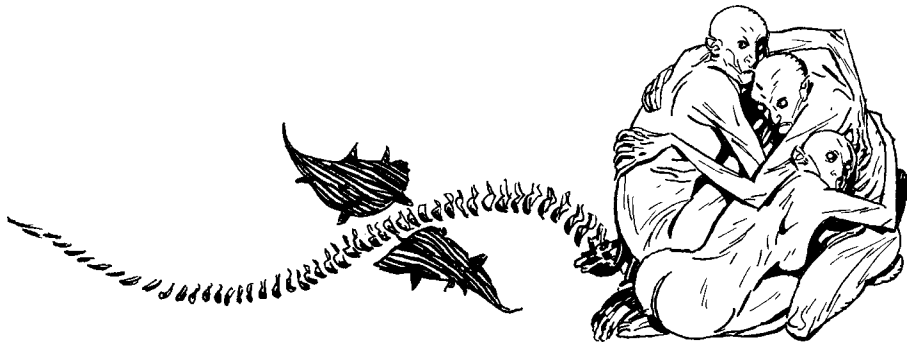
**Washington, Cassandra “Cass”:** Clan Nosferatu. A New York area Nosferatu affiliated with Calebros.

**Xaviar:** Clan Gangrel. Once the justicar of his clan and one of the most feared warriors in the Camarilla, he led the Gangrel assault on Leopold’s cave of horrors. He only survived thanks to Ramona Tanner-Childe and proceeded to withdraw his clan from the Camarilla when the council gathered in Baltimore refused to help him against a creature he called a harbinger of Gehenna.



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# About the Authors



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Each chapter of the **Clan Novel Saga** begins with a small two-letter code on the top-right of the first page. This code indicates who wrote that individual chapter, allowing us to give proper credit in a compilation that includes the work of almost a dozen writers.

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## Justin Achilli (JA)

Justin Achilli is the Intellectual Property Manager for **Vampire: The Masquerade**, and the past developer of **Vampire: The Dark Ages** and **Werewolf: The Wild West**. His writing has appeared in many White Wolf game lines. He is the author of **Clan Novel: Giovanni**.

## Bruce Baugh (BB)

Bruce Baugh is a freelance writer and game designer whose work has appeared across much of White Wolf's product line and in the catalogs of several other game publishers. His novels include the three volumes of the **Clan Lasombra Trilogy—Shards, Shadows, and Sacrifices**—and of the novel **Mage: Judgment Day**.

## Philippe Boulle (PB)

The past developer of **Dark Ages: Vampire**, Philippe Boulle is the Managing Editor of White Wolf Fiction. He compiled the volumes of the **Clan Novel Saga** and is the author of the novels in the **Victorian Age Vampire Trilogy**, namely **A Morbid Initiation, The Madness of Priests, and The Wounded King**.

## Richard Dansky (RD)

Richard Dansky has been the developer of several White Wolf game lines, most notably **Wraith: The Oblivion** and **Vampire: The Dark Ages**. In addition to penning **Clan Novel: Lasombra** and a story for the **Clan Novel Anthology**, Richard is the author of the **Trilogy of the Second Age** for **Exalted**. He is now a computer game designer at Red Storm Entertainment.

## Gherbod Fleming (GF)

Gherbod Fleming is the pen name of freelance writer John H. Steele. The author of five of the thirteen Clan Novels and one of the original series editors, Steele is the most prolific member of the White Wolf Fiction stable. His other novels include the **Trilogy of the Blood Curse**, four of the six **Predator & Prey** novels and **Dark Ages: Nosferatu**, the first of the **Dark Ages Clan Novels** (a medieval equivalent to this series).

## Robert Hatch (RH)

Robert Hatch has been a copyeditor, editor and game designer at White Wolf. Most notably, he was the line developer for **Vampire: The Masquerade** and spearheaded the 1998 Revised Edition of that game, which sparked the Clan Novel saga as a whole.

## Eric Griffin (EG)

The author of **Clan Novel: Tzimisce** and **Clan Novel: Tremere**, freelance author Eric Griffin served as part of the editorial team of the Clan Novel Series, as well as that of the subsequent Tribe Novel Series, based on **Werewolf: The Apocalypse**. Penning three novellas for that latter series, he is also the author of the **Clan Tremere Trilogy**, namely **Widow's Walk, Widow's Weeds and Widow's Might**.

## Janet Trautvetter (JT)

Freelancer writer Janet Trautvetter is the author of the novel **Dark Ages: Toreador** and a variety of game supplements published by White Wolf. She contributes to this volume a look at Ventrue paragon Jan Pieterzoon as he comes face to face with the reality of the myths he's fought to suppress.

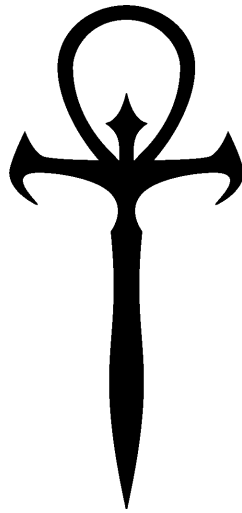
## Stewart Wieck (SW)

Publisher and co-founder of White Wolf Publishing and co-creator of the World of Darkness, Stewart Wieck was the editor of the Clan Novel Series and the near totality of the elements grouped together into the **Clan Novel Saga** volumes. He is the author of **Clan Novel: Toreador** and **Clan Novel: Malkavian**.



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About the  
compilation





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**Monday, 16 February 2004; 4:15 PM**  
**Offices of White Wolf Publishing**  
**Stone Mountain, Georgia**

And so it ends.

As I write this, it is a touch over a month since the release of the *Gehenna games* supplement and its accompanying novel, **Gehenna: The Final Night** by Ari Marmell. That novel and this last of the **Clan Novel Saga** compilations bring to a close fiction associated with **Vampire: The Masquerade** and the original World of Darkness. The 13 Clan Novels showed the world lurching toward Armageddon and now it has finally occurred. New novels for **Vampire: the Requiem**, set in an all-new World of Darkness, are in progress and will release in the fall. But that is a whole new series without any continuity ties to what you hold in your hands. After more than a million words, this is the end.

**End Games** completes the compilation of the thirteen-part Clan Novel series that started in **The Fall of Atlanta** (volume one). As before, each chapter has been gathered and reorganized so that it all flows chronologically. This volume includes the entirety of **Clan Novel: Brujah** as well as portions of **Clan Novel: Assamite**, **Clan Novel: Nosferatu**, **Clan Novel: Malkavian** and **Clan Novel: Giovanni**, and the very last smidge of **Clan: Novel Ravnos**. It also includes the rest of the short stories originally published in the **Clan Novel Anthology**, two more stories published in **The Beast Within (Second Edition)** that tied into the Clan Novel series, and key sections from Bruce Baugh's novels **Shards** and **Sacrifices** (volumes 1 and 3 in his **Clan Lasombra Trilogy**) which round out the stories of Lucita of Aragon and Fatima al-Faqadi. New material comes in the form of a story by Janet Trautvetter focusing on the eve of Gehenna itself and a new scene by yours truly featuring characters created by Camarilla fan-club members Tony and Charity Taboas.

As before, almost all the text in this volume appears as it did in the original clan novels. I have broken down a few long scenes (or scenes with internal breaks) to better suit the overall chronological flow. As in previous volumes, those scenes from Stewart Wieck's **Clan Novel: Malkavian** and from Bruce Baugh's short story "Turning the Face" that originally appeared in the first person and the present tense have been edited so they appear in the third-person, past-tense style of the rest of the novels.

So cue the lights, kids.

—Philippe Boule

CLAN NOVEL SAGA™: VOLUME FOUR

# END GAMES™

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—J.L. Comeau, *creature feature*

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