



SHADOWRUN[®]

ENHANCED FICTION



SAIL AWAY, SWEET SISTER

PATRICK GOODMAN



17 DECEMBER 2073

Karla Marshall remembered a time when she could sleep in on a Sunday morning. That had ended when she started working for NewsNet, but she still remembered it.

The obnoxious air-raid-siren noise her commlink was making belonged to only one person in her address book, and he was the last person she wanted to talk to. He paid her, though, so she sat up and grabbed her 'link from the nightstand. She made sure it was set to audio-only—the damn thing still synced with her home comm system every time she came back from an assignment, no matter how many times she reprogrammed it, and she wasn't about to give the creepy pervert a free show if it could be helped—and answered. "It's five in the goddamn morning, Eddie, and this is the first time in nearly three weeks I've slept in my own bed. What the hell do you want?"

His voice sounded like a rusty chainsaw. "Sorry, sugar; I'm in London right now and I always screw up the time difference." She tried to think of a way to reach through her 'link and strangle the man; on her list of things that made her homicidal, being called "sugar" was right up there with devil rats and NukIt Burgers from Stuffer Shack. "Nice stuff on the Halloween killings. The Denver piece was especially good."

"You're complimenting me on my work. Worse, you're complimenting me on *old* work. So you want something. What is it?"

He chuckled; she was positive now that he was up to something she was not going to like. "Someone was looking for a reason for your ex to be in Denver twice in less than a week. Of course, there were leeches involved, so it didn't surprise *me*." He paused, then added, "I found something interesting while I was reviewing the file."

"Cut to the damn chase, Eddie."

She could almost see him running his hand through his thinning hair as he replied. "Simpson sent me a bunch of art from around Denver the day after Halloween; we were lucky he was there. I saw a familiar face pop up a couple of times in a few of the images."

She frowned; that couldn't be good. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

"Pretty sure it was your sister-in-law."

Karla felt the room get colder. "Ex, Eddie. My *ex*-sister-in-law." After fifteen years of listening to her bitch about Thomas, she thought for sure that Eddie would know not to push that button. *Probably why he's pushing it*, she thought. She pulled a bottle out of her nightstand and took a swig; it was far too early for the whiskey, but the glass of water sitting there suddenly didn't seem like nearly enough. She began getting dressed as she asked, "You're sure it was Lenore?"

"Pretty sure," he said. "She's changed her hair since the last time I saw her, and her taste in clothes, but it sure looked like her to me."

"Shit."

He chuckled mirthlessly. For the third or maybe fourth time in the conversation, she wanted to kill him. "I've sent you the art. Let me know what you find out." He closed the call before she could reply.

"Anything you want, you colossal prick," she said to the silent 'link. She brought up the lights and an AR window, propped a pillow against her headboard, sat back, and began sifting through the images Eddie had left in her inbox. The young woman in the pictures was a pretty human in her early twenties who didn't seem to notice she was being photographed. Of course, like most journalists these days, Simpson was using an eye-cam, so if she noticed anything, it would be a youngish, semi-decent-looking guy staring at her.

The images were taken before dawn on November 1, at the scene of the Mealtime Killer's murder in Denver's UCAS sector; news of the Halloween Killings had already broken, but there was somebody else covering that. Simpson was on the street, just before he snuck up to Corinne Lawrence's apartment. Knight Errant was about to release the scene for cleanup, though the actual cleanup crew hadn't arrived. He had been able to get the only images of the MTK's Denver killing site, while she had worked both stories from the Las Vegas office. She saw that she hadn't seen anywhere near all the art available for the story.

The first shot was Simpson checking out the woman's ass. The next was Simpson checking out the woman's tits. Karla groaned, and made a promise to herself to beat both of the perverts with a baseball bat the next time she saw them. The next three images showed the woman more completely. Karla sighed. Hair she remembered as a honey-blonde cascade that hung past her shoulders was now sleek, neck-length, and black as coal. Flowing Bohemian-style clothes had been replaced by an unremarkable set of biker's leathers. There was no mistaking the face, though, in spite of the dirt and smudges applied in an apparent attempt to blend in.

It was Lenore McAllister. There was no mistake there.

She hadn't aged a day in nearly twenty years. No older, but the innocence Karla remembered in her face was only a distant memory, replaced by a hardness it was almost painful to look upon.

Karla sagged wearily against her headboard. "Oh God, Lenore," she said to the image. "The Monster finally caught up to you, didn't it?"

Most days, you needed a breathing mask if you went out on the streets of Pasadena, but a front had come in overnight and blown the most pernicious of the pollution out toward what most Texans still referred to, in spite of four decades of Aztlan propaganda, as the Gulf of Mexico. The air was, at least by the standards of the Houston sprawl, quite fresh and clean. Thomas McAllister made his way through the throng of people on Strawberry Road,



keeping a careful grip on the old-fashioned doctor's bag he wore slung across his chest. He'd carefully arranged it so that he could easily reach the shoulder holster he wore beneath his armored black longcoat should it become necessary. He felt confident that it wouldn't; his other weapons were far more potent, though he hoped he wouldn't have to use any of them at all.

As a human in a suit, he stood out, if only a little. The neighborhood held mostly working-class orks and trolls, though there were enough humans and dwarfs in the crowd to keep him from feeling completely outnumbered. This particular area of Pasadena was mostly owned by some division or another of Ares Macrotechnology, though he couldn't recall which one it was; he seldom came to this part of town if he could avoid it. Today, he hadn't been able to.

Parking here was nearly impossible during daylight hours, so he'd parked by the college, a couple of kilometers away, asked a city spirit to watch over his car, and walked the rest of the way. He could have driven up to his patient's house, but the exercise would do him some good. Seamus's call to the answering service had sounded important enough to drag Thomas into Pasadena on a busy Sunday morning, but not life-threatening. He maintained a brisk walk as he turned off Strawberry into a depressing low-rent residential neighborhood.

He walked a few more blocks, winding his way through streets that all looked alike, past row upon row of houses, which also all looked alike. He could never remember the correct address, though he knew which street to turn down. He occasionally took a moment to look at the street in astral space, which was even more depressing than the mundane view—the general mood of the neighborhood left the astral plane looking muddy and dull. It did, however, make it easier to spot the house he was looking for. Seamus was a lot of things, but one thing he was not was subdued. Thomas could never remember the street number on Seamus's house, but he didn't have to. He had the only house for fifty kilometers in any direction with a fire elemental standing watch in the front yard. He was at least subtle enough to have the brute stay in the astral instead of manifesting on the material plane. Thomas approached the small yard, shifted his senses, and said, "Morning, Aloysius."

The elemental was roughly humanoid, tall as a big troll and half again as broad. It turned its blazing head to greet him. "Morning, Doc," it rumbled, more or less cheerfully. All the time it had spent working with Seamus had definitely affected its personality—for the better, in Thomas' opinion. "Haven't seen you for a while; the last couple of house calls have been Doctor Cassie."

Thomas shrugged. "She had some personal business. He's lucky I was in town." He gestured towards the house. "Any idea what happened?"

Aloysius shook its head. "Started screaming about half an hour after sunrise, but wouldn't let me in. A little while later, he said you'd be coming out and I should watch for you."

"I'll bet he's been drinking again," Thomas said. "You'd think he'd get the idea after a while." He started for the house, but paused as the elemental rumbled behind him, a noise it made in lieu of clearing its throat. He turned around to face Aloysius again and chuckled ruefully. "Do we really have to do this? How long have we known each other?"

"Long time," the elemental said. "I've still got orders to flambé anyone who tries to get in without the password."

Thomas looked skyward and shook his head. "I suppose he's still on the outs with Molly."

"She has three different lawyers looking for him. Managed to send the last one running without blowing anything up."

"How very disappointing for him."

"He was depressed for days."

"I can imagine," Thomas said. "The password is, 'Look what that bitch has done to me!' At least that's what it was the last time she was mad at him."

Aloysius moved symbolically to one side. Thomas made his way up the crumbling sidewalk to the front door, which he found unlocked. *Sloppy*, he thought as he entered. He found himself in a cramped living room, dominated by a comm system and trideo set of truly epic proportions. The small couch was threadbare and completely unremarkable, the carpet on the floor was patchy and approximately the color of oatmeal, and the walls were in need of a fresh coat of paint that they were unlikely to see any time in the immediate future. There was no sign of vomiting, however, which spoke against his initial idea that his patient had tried drinking alcohol again.

The most prominent thing Thomas noticed about the living room, though, was the fact that the drapes were wide open, letting sunlight spill into the room. Considering Seamus was a vampire, this seemed like a very bad idea. "Seamus?" he called out. "It's Thomas."

"Bedroom, Doc," a weak voice called from the short, dim hallway to Thomas' left.

The doctor pulled the satchel off his shoulder and made his way down the hallway to the bedroom door. He looked in; unlike the living room, the bedroom drapes were securely and sensibly closed. The windows, Thomas knew, were also all painted over. Why he didn't do that with the rest of the house was a mystery. Thomas didn't reach for the light switch immediately; his AR contacts also gave him some vision enhancements that compensated, at least partially, for the darkness of the room. He could tell from where he was standing that Seamus O'Toole was putting out a lot of heat. Too much heat, even for a dwarf, and especially for a dwarf turned vampire.

"What's going on, Seamus?" he asked as he approached the bed. "You're burning up."

Seamus chuckled mirthlessly. "Funny you should put it that way, Doc" he said. His voice, usually boisterous and loud, was a pale shadow of itself. "I feel like I've gone three rounds with Aloysius."

"Just three?"



“He’s got a lot of reach on me. Not to mention his skin temperature’s about 600 degrees.” He made that dry chuckle again. “You gonna turn that light on?”

“Sure.” Without another word, he did so. A moment passed as his eyes adjusted to the brightness; he then dropped the bag on the floor and breathed, “Goddess ...”

Seamus’s chest and left arm were a sea of livid blisters, as was the left side of his face. The right side of his face and the upper part of his right arm were a shade of red Thomas normally associated with the jerseys of the Roughnecks, a local minor-league combat biker team he’d taken a liking to a couple of years ago. It was a shade one rarely saw in a metahuman’s skin, and never in a vampire’s. “Seamus,” he said as he sat down on the edge of the bed, “these are second-degree burns. What the hell happened?”

The dwarf chuckled, then winced. “Fell asleep on the couch watching one of those ‘dragons are aliens from another planet’ documentary things on the trid last night, forgot to draw the fucking curtains,” he said. As he spoke, Thomas placed his hand on the dwarf’s head and closed his eyes. “I’ve been caught in the sun before, Thomas, but Christ Almighty damn! It’s never done *this* to me!”

Thomas didn’t respond to him immediately. Instead, he cast the simple diagnostic spell which had been his first gift from the Great Mother when he’d Awakened nearly forty years ago. His magic, as much a part of him as his flesh and blood, flowed from his fingertips and into his patient like a whispering brook. It streamed through the dwarf’s body, wrapped around it like a caress, and began to tell Thomas everything that was wrong with his patient.

There was the fractured right ulna that had been the first injury of Seamus’s which he’d treated, tidily knit together now for more than a decade. Multiple bullet wounds had also long since healed. The dwarf’s liver had recovered from the years of alcohol abuse he’d subjected it to after his divorce, and his vampirism had ensured he didn’t damage it that way again. Then there were the burns covering his arms and most of his torso. They were deeper than Thomas had suspected, but not life-threatening.

Even taking the burns into account, something felt vaguely wrong. He’d known and treated Seamus for nearly fifteen years, treated him as a vampire for a little more than ten of those. Something was different, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.

Finally, he opened his eyes. “You didn’t make it sound this bad when you called the service,” he said. “You have my commcode; you should have called me directly.”

A frightened look crossed Seamus’s face, but quickly passed. “Am I going to die from this, Doc?” he asked.

Thomas shook his head. “They’re deep, but not that deep. None of them progressed to third degree,” he said, a troubled look on his face. “I’ve never seen the sun do this to a vampire, though. Saw some video of it happening to a nosferatu, but that healed almost immediately.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Why didn’t it regenerate for you?”

Seamus shook his head. “Couldn’t tell you, Thomas,

and I’m far enough out of vampire social circles that I haven’t heard of it happening to anyone else, either.”

Thomas nodded. “I’ll talk with Cassie when she gets back into town,” he said. He placed his hand back on Seamus’s head. “Why didn’t you do this yourself? I know you know the spell.”

“Concentration’s a little shot at the moment; can’t cast a thing,” the dwarf said. “Besides, it seemed important that somebody else see it, whether it was you or Cassie.”

Thomas sighed. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” He closed his eyes again and said his silent prayer. Moments later, his hand began to glow with a soft golden light. The light slowly poured from his hand and enveloped the dwarf’s body in a healing cocoon. Thomas could feel his patient’s body begin cooling almost immediately; in his mind’s eye, he could see the blisters slowly begin to shrink and fold themselves back into healthy flesh. The angry red faded away to the paleness he was accustomed to seeing. Seamus closed his eyes, and his breathing slowed and deepened as the spell did its work.

Several minutes passed like this. Finally, the golden glow faded away and Thomas opened his eyes. He cast the diagnostic spell again, and determined that the burns were, in fact, healed. That nagging wrongness was still there, though. He shifted his perceptions to the astral and assensed his patient.

A vampire’s aura was slippery at the best of times, but he’d assensed Seamus O’Toole dozens of times over the course of the past decade. He had seen his aura at its lowest ebb and its highest crest and all places in between. He knew it well. At this moment, it resembled a normal, more-or-less healthy dwarf’s, neither particularly dim nor bright. There was the subtle discoloration he’d long ago learned to associate with Seamus’s condition.

It was still Seamus’s aura, but it had changed. It was a subtle difference, something you’d have to be looking for to notice, but there was no mistake. It was there.

Thomas’s senses returned to the physical world, where he found Seamus looking up at him. “How are you feeling?” Thomas asked.

“A hell of a lot better,” the dwarf said. “You seem a little distracted, Thomas. Everything okay?”

Thomas weighed a lie in his head, but decided against it. “Your aura’s a little off, but it might just be the burn trauma making it look that way. Physically, you should be fine; the burns are completely healed.” He rose from his seat on the bedside and headed for the door. “Get some rest, and call me if anything changes.”

“You bet your ass. Take care, Doc.”

Thomas waved his acknowledgment and walked back down the narrow hallway. He closed the curtains in the living room on his way out, said goodbye to Aloysius, and began the walk back toward the college and his vehicle.

He had planned to wait until she was back in town, but changed his mind. He was on the line with Cassiopeia Paterson before he was even a block away.



19 DECEMBER 2073

Her office was elegantly appointed, if sparsely so by the standards of many corporate executives. A set of low shelves along one wall sported a number of books, but mostly served to display several small stone sculptures, many of which she had carved. The walls were mostly bare, save for a framed Matisse print above the desk. Her chair was luxurious, upholstered in genuine leather that was as black as a dragon's soul. The desk itself was made of real cherry wood and cost as much as most wageslaves earned in six months. It was bare, save for her commlink and an antique pen stand.

There were two comfortable armchairs in front of the desk for those rare occasions she had visitors. Today was one of those occasions; Ian Richards had chosen to have their daily meeting in her office this afternoon, rather than his study. He sat casually, his deep gray eyes focused on the printed synopsis of the day's activities.

Priscilla Deacon leaned back in her own chair, waiting patiently for him to finish. She ignored the various AROs floating around her, and found herself instead studying him, as she often did. He was a large man, nearly two meters tall, with a sinewy, athletic build. One could easily mistake him for an urban brawl player instead of a businessman. He shook his head as he tossed the report onto the corner of her desk. "I'm becoming less and less enamored of Ares upper management. It might be time to divest myself of some of their stock," he said.

Deacon shrugged. "I'm not certain about that, sir," she said, her soft Alabama drawl a stark contrast to his bass rumble. "They're stumbling at the moment, but I don't think they're going to fall. If we ride this out, we could increase our stake with minimal additional exposure." She sat up and leaned on the desk. "As long as we're talking about Ares, though, I'm concerned with the Knight Errant situation."

He sat there a moment, then asked, "More trouble with Mr. Dalton?"

She nodded. "He slipped up with Denver, which got Castillo killed and disrupted the timetable for other parts of the campaign," she said. "Worse than that, he allowed word of Detective Bowden's success in Denver, and the ineffectiveness of Dr. McAllister's investigations in other Knight Errant markets, to come to the attention of others higher up the chain of command. This has made things harder to manage and posed a few new problems. Ms. Kenyon at Lone Star tells me that talks have begun about the formation of an inter-corporate task force to deal with the campaign."

"Really?" Ian considered this for a moment. "Well. We knew it would eventually reach a point where we wouldn't be able to effectively control it," he replied. "While I wish we'd had more time to lay our foundation, the campaign is working, and to read some of the newsfaxes, it seems to be working better than I'd initially hoped. Ms. Marshall at NewsNet has even given us our own nickname."

Deacon smiled and shook her head. "I expected better from her than 'Fear the Dark,' though."

"I think it's precious," he said, with a smile more menacing than mirthful. That faded to a thoughtful expression as he considered the various options. He eventually ran a hand over his clean-shaven scalp and said, "All right, let's see how this all plays out. Keep the Ares stock for the time being, remove Mr. Dalton from my payroll, and tell our other law enforcement employees not to interfere with this proposed task force, even if their position might allow it."

She gestured, entered a note in one of her AROs, and then said, "Very good, sir." She motioned to the summary he'd placed on the edge of her desk. "Will there be anything else?"

He rose and shook his head. "No, Priscilla, I think that should cover things today. I'll be up in my room if you should need me. Good day to you." He left, closing the door behind him.

She turned back to her work, beaming. He seldom used her given name when they were discussing business, and every time he did, it left her flustered. Like now. She shook her head; she managed tens of millions of nuyen in assets, had issued or relayed orders resulting in the deaths of dozens of people, and that man saying her name still made her as giddy as a schoolgirl.

She pressed on with her work, and when she stopped for a break some time later, she noticed the cut-crystal flask sitting on the corner of her desk. How long had that been there? She smiled; it had probably been sitting there the entire time, behind one of Ian's illusion spells. She picked it up and rocked it back and forth in her hand, watching the light play off the surface, almost hypnotized by the swirling and sloshing of its contents. The liquid inside was a deep brownish-red, thick and viscous. Poured into a tumbler, it would be about the same as a generous double-shot of whiskey, but this wasn't some cheap liquor. A magnum of the world's finest wine wasn't worth a tenth of what she held in her hand.

On the streets it was usually called "Renfield," but that name always seemed demeaning to her. She preferred to simply call it what it was: Blood. *His* blood ... and her life. Her employer had many servants, but she was the only one he rewarded like this. It marked her as special to him, which pleased her enormously.

She put down the flask and turned her attention back to her AROs. Flask or no flask, she still had one last bit of work left to do. She found she was actually looking forward to this one. She reached up and placed a call to an operative she had in the Detroit sprawl.

A man's voice, smooth and mellow, answered. There was no video. "Yes?"

She didn't bother to identify herself. "Mr. Dalton's services at Knight Errant are no longer required. Please notify him at your earliest convenience."

"Should the notice be low-key?"



She shook her head, even though he couldn't see it. "No. Make a statement."

"Consider it done." He broke the connection without waiting for a reply.

With that, her work was finished for the day. She closed her AROs, placed her commlink on standby, and picked up the flask once again. She rose from her chair, placed her commlink in her handbag, and walked out of her office. Quickly, she made her way up the wide staircase to the second floor and her quarters. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she pulled the stopper from the mouth of the flask, raised it to her lips, and drank its contents slowly. It was sweet and salty and thick; it flowed down her throat like warm honey.

A moan escaped her as warmth began to course through her body; she fell back onto the bed as it filled her. She could feel her life growing stronger, radiating from her until she felt she might burst with the ecstasy. Blood was always good, but some draughts, like this one, were exceptional. She lay there, sure she must be glowing, as she slowly regained control of her limbs. She rose, a feral smile on her lips, and walked out of her room.

She made her way to the opposite end of the corridor, where Ian's private suite was situated. She didn't bother to knock; the flask was its own invitation. He was sitting in an armchair covered in rich azure velvet, seemingly engrossed in one of the endless documentaries about the great dragon Dunkelzahn. He wore only the dark trousers he'd had on earlier in the day; the silk shirt had been carelessly tossed over the back of his chair. His smooth, pale skin contrasted vividly with the velvet upholstery.

He turned off the trid with a wave of his hand and rose from the chair as she closed the door. She undressed as she walked, her blue eyes never leaving his gray ones. She was nude by the time they came together. Their lips met, and they kissed passionately as his hands explored her body.

Her first orgasm of the evening arrived when his fangs plunged into her neck, and he began to feed.

22 DECEMBER 2073

Thomas sat alone in his office at the Texas A&M&M lab facility in Houston. In fact, he was just about the only person in the entire building. He slumped back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. Mostly, it was exhaustion that prompted this—the last six weeks or so had been unbelievably busy—but the dozens of medical files from the South Houston clinic he had established a few years ago hadn't helped.

"Turns out, this has been going on since July," Dr. Casiopeia Patterson said to him over the comm. "Every one of our patients has seen increased photosensitivity to one degree or another. Most of them are experiencing more acute hunger pains as well."

"Have their appetites increased?"

"No," she said. "At least not that anyone has told me."

"Goddess," he said, shaking his head. "How did I get so out of touch with the situation?"

"You've had a lot going on the past few months, with the MTK killings and all," she replied. "And it didn't just all happen out of the blue; it was gradual, part of a continuum. I mean, hell, I was on the ground treating it, and I didn't see the patterns until almost the end of September. Even then, I wasn't sure."

He looked at the graphs she'd been putting together at the clinic while he'd been out playing consultant instead of doing one of his real jobs. The patterns were there, sure enough. "None of this makes any damn sense, Cassie," he said. "But I guess I shouldn't be surprised at something like this after all these years. Have we updated protocols at the clinic to keep up with this?"

He heard her sigh. "Yes we have," she replied. "I've got to get off this thing, Thomas; they're discharging Keith sometime today, and you know what that entails. I should be back to work soon."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "How's the old buzzard doing?"

"Better. They think they got everything, though there's going to be a lot of rehab."

He nodded. "Give him my love; I'll talk to you later. Merry Christmas." With that, he broke the connection and sighed. He needed to go visit them at some point, but he didn't see many chances opening up. He had too many irons in the fire, as Karla used to say; something needed to give.

He closed the charts he'd been reviewing with Cassie and brought up an image on the trid screen of the office's main terminal. Hanging there was a gently twisting strand, delicate-looking and crystalline, almost radiant. It struck him as ironic that one of the most hideous diseases he'd ever encountered was also one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

The comm chimed, and a pleasant artificial female voice said, "There's a Lieutenant Bowden here to see you, Doctor. She does not have an appointment."

Lieutenant? "Send her in, please," he said without turning around. He heard the door open and shut behind him. "You know, Lydia, for someone who didn't want to be responsible for a bunch of knuckle-dragging legbreakers," he said, "you seem to have moved up in the world." He then turned to greet her. "When did 'lieutenant' happen? It's only been a couple of weeks since we saw each other."

She chuckled. "Early Christmas present from Knight Errant. Apparently, I've made a bit of a reputation for myself, and the higher-ups thought I should be further up the food chain. So they yanked me out of Denver last week, made me a lieutenant, and put me on Colonel Ravenheart's weird shit squad."

He nodded. "It sounds like a good promotion. Right?"

Lydia shrugged. "I suppose. I get a lot more freedom of movement and no thugs to supervise, but I don't really



feel like I'm still a cop, and I get the distinct impression that Colonel Ravenheart wasn't all that thrilled to have me thrust on her the way I was."

"Give it some time," he replied, turning back to the trid image. "You grow on people."

She walked further into the office and looked at the image hanging in the air. "If you say so. Mr. Dalton from Municipal Ops told me the promotion was permanent, but the position was only temporary. Whatever that means. They had to put me somewhere for the time being, and I guess they thought vampire serial killers qualified as weird shit." She looked at the facility's abandoned parking lot. "Why the hell are you here during Christmas break, Thomas?"

He gave her a genuine laugh. "It's really quiet, I can get a lot of work done, and I've got no life."

"Fair enough." She turned and motioned to the image and said, "That's pretty. What is it?"

He brought up one of his AROs and began fiddling with data. "That's the Enemy," he said. "Baseline HMMHV, one of the great evils of the Sixth World. And you're right; it really is pretty to look at." He quit working in his ARO for a moment. "In the layman's course, we concentrate more on identification of the various expressions of the disease. Have you started going through the reading list yet?"

She turned away from the trid and faced him. "What?"

"I read through the class rosters, and saw you'd signed up for the layman's course on the Matrix next semester."

Lydia found a chair and sat down. "Seemed like a good idea, considering vampire-related cases appear to be my new career."

"I know what you mean," he said, slumping into his own chair. "I'm considering a police procedures course myself." He motioned back toward the image. "So, the reading list. Have you started on it yet?"

She grinned sheepishly. "Would you be disappointed if I told you I'd started with *Shadows at Noon* instead of any of the heavy-duty stuff?"

Thomas chuckled. "No one in fifteen years has ever started with my book. Why is that?"

"It's probably because *Variations of Morphism in HMMHV Expressions* sounds like a very dry read."

He shrugged. "It's not that bad." He scratched his beard absently. It probably needed a trim; he'd neglected it since October. He turned his attention back to Lydia. "Don't let his style fool you; de Vries packs a lot of actual data in between the sword fights. Of course, if he hadn't had a decent editor on that one, it probably would have read like *Moby Dick* in places. Typical first-novel issues, I think; the other books get better as he goes on." He reached up and started flipping through AROs, then made a couple of gestures once he'd found the one he wanted. "I sent you some extra-credit, just in case you make it the rest of the way through that list."

"Gee, thanks." She reached up into one of her own AROs, then gave him an odd look. "I told you, I'm already reading *Shadows at Noon*."

He shook his head. "Not the original version. It started life as an exposé, not an action novel." He sighed.

She looked at the clouded expression on his face. "What's on your mind, Thomas?"

He told her about the conversation he'd had with Cassie just before she arrived, and how out of touch with things he was feeling. "Something's got to give," he said finally. "I'm thinking of resigning my teaching position at the university, getting back into research and treatment at the clinic. I didn't start out to be a teacher anyway."

Lydia leaned back in her chair. "Wow," she said. "I didn't realize all the things you had going on." She reached up and began adjusting her pony-tail. It was something Thomas recognized as a nervous habit. "If you don't think you're doing all that you should be, then giving something up is definitely worth considering." She shook her head a couple of times, which signaled the end of the ritual. "That you're considering it on your own, without having to be told that you're slipping, is a good sign. For whatever my opinion's worth, I think it's probably a good idea."

He gave her a slight smile. "Thanks, Lydia."

Just then, the automated receptionist's voice spoke up again from the intercom. "You have another visitor, Doctor. She refuses to identify herself, but she's not otherwise disruptive. Should I call Security?"

He rolled his eyes. "Let me see." A trid image of an attractive female dwarf appeared in the air over his desk. She had long, curly auburn hair and dark brown eyes that spoke of intelligence and hinted at mischief. Thomas groaned, and then said flatly, "Let her come in."

The image faded, and Lydia asked, "Who's that?"

He gave her a meaningful stare. "My ex-wife."

"Why did you let her in?"

"If she's come to find me, she's going to keep trying until she gets to see me. It's best to just get it over with."

The door opened, and the woman walked in. She was tall for a dwarf, and she had a worried expression on her face. She looked first at Lydia and then at Thomas. "Hi, Thomas," she said. "I tried the main campus in College Station first, but Alexis says you haven't been there in ages. They're thinking of renting your office out to one of the local corps for storage space."

She wanted more of a reaction than he was going to give her. She was going to have to try harder. "This is closer to the virus research I'm involved in," he said.

Karla nodded. "We need to talk about the Mealtime Killer."

That made Thomas sit up. Apparently small talk was over. "I don't —"

"I know you don't give interviews."

He gave her a hard look. "And whose fault is that, I wonder?"

"How many times do I have to apologize for that?"

"At least one more."

She looked at him, her eyes almost pleading. Karla rarely let anything like that get to her face, at least in *his* presence. "Can we talk? Privately?"



His fingers skittered on the tabletop until he willed them to stop. “If it’s about the MTK, you can talk in front of her. Lydia Bowden, Karla Marshall. Karla, Lydia.”

Recognition dawned on Karla’s face. “You’re the Knight Errant detective who’s been working with Thomas since Denver,” she said. “Apparently, his attitude about the press has rubbed off on you.”

Lydia smiled. “Guilty as charged.”

Karla chuckled, then pulled up the other chair and sat down. “I know who the MTK is,” she said matter-of-factly, once she had sat down. “She’s the same vampire who attempted to kill Oliver Santos in Denver on Halloween.”

Thomas and Lydia looked at each other, and then at Karla, then back at each other. “That’s not possible,” he said. “The Mealtime Killer was dead before the Halloween attacks happened.”

The worried expression turned to confusion. “How do you know that?”

“Because,” said Lydia, “I put two bullets in her head on the evening of the twenty-seventh.”

Karla stared at her. “I have images of her outside Corinne Lawrence’s apartment building just before dawn on the first of November.”

Lydia shook her head. “Teresa Castillo was in a drawer at the KE morgue on the first,” she said. “It took us a while to find a coroner that Dr. McAllister thought was competent.” Thomas nodded, and Lydia continued. “I was a witness at the autopsy the next day, and he was, too.”

“Who was Teresa Castillo?”

“The MTK,” Thomas said. “The original one, anyway.”

Karla rubbed her temples. “That doesn’t scan with who I saw.”

Realization washed over Thomas like a sick tide. There were very few reasons Karla would have come all the way to Houston to find him, and only one of them had anything even remotely to do with the vampiric serial killings he’d been investigating. His face went pale, and he asked in a whisper, “Karla, who did you see?”

She looked him in the eyes. “It was Lenore, Tommy,” she said quietly. “I saw Lenore in Denver.”

Thomas slumped in his chair, and Lydia asked, “Who’s Lenore?”

He didn’t look at her. “My sister,” he said. “She’s a vampire.”

Thomas looked down at the reasonable facsimile of blackened catfish and dirty rice on his plate, and wondered, not for the first time, why Lydia always seemed to insist on discussing police business over food. She’d done it in Denver when they’d first met, and nearly every time they’d worked together since.

The three of them were sitting in a place called the Pelican, not far from his lab and office in downtown Houston. Karla had gotten something that featured grilled faux

shrimp, while Lydia had ordered what Thomas knew to be a tasty gumbo; he’d had it more than once. “You just can’t get good gumbo in Denver,” she said after the first couple of bites, “and believe me, I’ve tried.” She downed another mouthful and chased it with some sweet tea. “Not as good as Mama’s, but it’s pretty damn good.”

Thomas took a bite of his fish, without actually tasting it. Except for his order, he hadn’t said anything since before they’d left his office. He wasn’t particularly hungry, but if he kept his mouth full, he wouldn’t have to talk for a little while longer.

Karla took a bite of her food, then said, “I’ve been working on the Mealtime Killer story since the first killing back in April. I mean, we don’t generally handle local stories at NewsNet, but it happened almost literally in my backyard. When she moved on to New Orleans, it became our kind of story.”

Lydia sighed. “Oh, good, one of you took the hint. For a minute there, I was afraid I was going to have to be really blatant about asking about things.”

Thomas finally spoke up. “Remember in Corinne’s apartment, you asked about the nickname?”

Lydia nodded, and Karla shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “You said some bored reporter somewhere came up with it.” Thomas pointed at his ex-wife, and Lydia looked at her with disappointment. “Oh, really?” she asked.

“It sounded good at the time,” the dwarf said defensively, and then turned on Thomas. “Boring? Really, is that what you think of me these days?”

“I said ‘bored,’ not ‘boring,’ Karla. Big difference. You’re a lot of things; boring has never been one of them.” He turned to Lydia. “Amazing as it might seem, this is not why we divorced.”

The detective stepped in before things escalated. “So you’ve been covering the MTK since the beginning. What does that have to do with Thomas’s sister?”

Karla’s gaze didn’t leave Thomas for a few moments. Then she replied. “We had a guy in Denver after the Corinne Lawrence killing, trying to get anything he could. A few days ago Eddie Harman, my editor, sends me the entire art file on the Denver case because he said he thought he saw someone familiar.”

Thomas rubbed his temples. “Eddie was one of the few people who met Lenore when Karla and I were married. He knew she was a vampire, but I’ve never figured out how.” He turned to Karla. “He’s still *alive*? He’s an ork; I thought he’d have keeled over a long time ago.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said, “but yeah, the old lech is still breathing.”

“Children, focus,” Lydia said. “Your editor saw Lenore in the photo archive?”

The reporter nodded. “Yeah.”

“And he told you ... why?”

“Because he knew once I saw it, I wouldn’t let go. I started back-tracking her movements from Denver, and I can put her in every city where the Mealtime Killer left a



victim.” She looked at Lydia. “That includes the ones that Lone Star and KE kept from the press. Contrary to what some people like to think, I can be discreet.”

Lydia leaned back in her chair, tea glass in hand, her gumbo momentarily forgotten. She stared off into the middle distance, lost in thought. Eventually, she shook her head. “Teresa had a shadow the whole time?”

“She obviously didn’t know it,” Thomas said. “The way she talked to me at the hotel, Teresa thought she was a lone crusader, spreading the word for whoever it was she was working for.”

“That doesn’t make any damn sense. Maybe this Fear the Dark group ...” She turned to Karla. “Is that one yours, too?”

Karla rolled her eyes and shrugged. “Guilty as charged.”

Lydia groaned, then continued. “Maybe Fear the Dark had her going along as a backup.”

“Or they were testing her resolve,” Thomas said quietly. “She’s always been very ... reticent about what she’s become. Survival has been a harsh reality for her for the past twenty years or so.”

“What do you mean, reticent?”

Thomas leaned back in his chair. “Not all vampires are natural killers,” he said. “Some of them survive on blood stolen from blood banks rather than drain a living victim.”

Lydia frowned. “You said they didn’t just survive on blood, though. What about the auras you said they had to consume?”

“They can do that bit by bit, without having to kill the victim,” he said. “They still do harm that can’t be easily repaired, but the victim survives.”

“So they don’t have to be predators to survive,” Lydia said.

“No. They’re not all monsters like Teresa was.”

Karla dropped her fork suddenly. “Oh, my God! They’re trying to set the Monster loose.” Thomas and Lydia both looked at her. She looked from one to the other. “She wasn’t a backup, and they weren’t testing her resolve. They were training her.” She turned to Thomas. “They were showing her how it’s done.”

Andrew Dalton walked through the front door of his luxurious apartment, went straight to the bar, and poured himself a double scotch, neat. He tossed it back like water and felt it burn down his throat as he poured himself another. He didn’t normally drink scotch—it was, in his studied opinion, a lot like drinking gasoline—but it was an excellent choice of liquor for feeding a poisonous mood, and he wanted to nurture the anger that had been brewing in him for the last three hours.

How dare Anne Ravenheart speak to him that way? He was Director of Municipal Operations, dammit; as far as the organizational chart was concerned, they were at the same level, even if she had Mr. Knight’s ear and he didn’t. And it wasn’t like transferring the Bowden woman

to her precious Office of Special Investigations had been his idea. He’d just wanted to promote her to get her away from the Mealtime Killer case. That order had come from Clayton Wilson himself, and if the crazy Texan wanted to give the crazy Sioux bitch a hard time, he wasn’t going to stand in the way.

He sipped at his second drink and replayed the visit in his head. Storming in without an appointment, she’d spent twenty minutes reading him the riot act before he’d ever had a chance to get a word in edgewise. He’d stood his ground, told her where the order actually came from, but she’d given him a look that was more frightening than he cared to admit and informed him that she didn’t give a damn where the order had come from. He hadn’t been able to get hold of Wilson to back him up, either; bastard had flown back down to Dallas, leaving him to take the brunt of Ravenheart’s displeasure on his own.

So now he was at home, standing in the dark—he hadn’t bothered with the lights—letting his anger build up, the incessant neon of downtown Detroit the only illumination in his living room. He knew how to deal with the anger. He smiled coldly, opened an ARO, pulled up a local brothel’s Matrix site and placed an order. Petite. Good physical condition. Short hair. Sioux. They’d dealt with him before, they knew his tastes. She’d have a high tolerance for pain, and enough sense to act like she didn’t. He’d have to remember to tip her well; tonight was probably not going to be very good for her.

He set the bottle of scotch down and turned away from the bar, contemplating what he was going to have for dinner, when he noticed the well-dressed elf sitting on his leather sofa. “Good evening, Mr. Dalton,” he said, his voice a smooth, mellow baritone. In the flickering neon city-glow coming through the window, Dalton thought he looked terribly thin.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked. The scotch was doing its job, transforming his anger into belligerence. “How the fuck did you get in here?”

His unwelcome visitor smiled. “I’m a messenger, Mr. Dalton. Ms. Deacon sent me.”

That stopped Dalton cold in his tracks. “She ... she did?” He felt his heart speeding up. He wanted to back away from the elf, get far away from him, but he found his feet didn’t want to do as they were told.

His breathing quickened as he watched the elf rise slowly from the sofa. “She did, indeed,” his visitor said. “She asked me to notify you that your services are no longer required.” Fear was quickly turning into panic, and still Dalton’s feet refused to move. He found himself unable to use his hands, either; his attempt to contact the Knight Errant detachment downstairs was cut off abruptly. His hand simply froze mid-motion as he reached for the ARO that would have summoned them.

His gaunt visitor reached into a pocket and withdrew something that Dalton couldn’t quite see in the neon glow. With a few flicks of his wrist, he made a show of opening



the butterfly knife. He smiled as he approached his victim. “She left it up to me to deliver the message in any way I saw fit.”

His heart trying to escape his chest, terror flooding his soul, Andrew Dalton’s voice also abandoned him. He tried and failed to scream as his killer slowly approached him, knife in hand, laughing.

23 DECEMBER 2073

Thomas sat in his office and stared at the half-dozen images of Lenore he’d received from Karla. They were hanging in the air over his desk on his computer’s trid display. There were a couple of full-length shots, and an excellent head shot. He’d deleted a couple of the pictures, and made a mental note to do something unpleasant to the photographer if he ever met him, but there were still these. He sighed. “Doesn’t even really look like her.”

His ex-wife, seated on the other side of the desk, shook her head. “The clothes aren’t her at all, but I actually kind of like the hair.”

He nodded. “Yeah, the hair’s cute.”

Karla shifted in her chair and took a drink of the coffee Thomas had given her. It was strong and dark, only a hair’s breadth away from being a controlled substance. Just the way she liked it. He’d always made the best coffee. Seeing him like this hurt, in spite of all the problems they’d had over the years. Lenore’s Infection had been almost as traumatic for him, in its own way, as it had been for his sister. Knowing she was somehow involved with a serial killer was clearly eating him alive inside. “The last time I saw her,” she said, “was about a year after the divorce. She came to our old place looking for you. She hasn’t aged a day.”

“They don’t,” he replied. “For some people, it’s an entitlement to get Infected. You get to live forever; all it costs you is your soul.” He drank some coffee, then said, “Let me ask you something, Red. You haven’t seen her in, what, fourteen years?”

“About that.”

“If you haven’t seen her in fourteen years, how’d you know about the Monster? She didn’t start using that term until eight or nine years ago.”

Karla leaned back in her chair. “I haven’t seen her, but she sent me emails for a while. Short notes, mostly, but every now and then she’d send something that would knock me back on my heels. Part slice-of-life documentary, part confessional. The confessionals would scare the hell out of me, and the slice-of-life bits would annoy the hell out of me because she’s a much better writer than I am.” She smiled and laughed. “She nearly had me in tears once, and all she was talking about was picking out a new couch for her living room.”

Thomas smiled. “She’s done that with me, too.”

“The last note I got from her was three, four years ago, talking about how the Monster was getting harder and harder to control.” Karla sighed. “You haven’t called me ‘Red’ since before we separated. This must really have you rattled.”

He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling fan. “Wouldn’t it mess with you?”

“Oh, yeah.” The silence stretched out for longer than she cared for. In an attempt to make conversation, she said the first thing that came to mind. “I like the beard.”

He lifted his head and looked at her. “Excuse me?”

She felt herself blushing, but it was too late to take it back now. “The beard looks good on you. You should get a shorter haircut, but the beard’s a nice touch.”

He sat there a moment, staring at her, then simply said, “Thanks.”

He was about to say something else when the automated receptionist interrupted. “You have a Lieutenant Lydia Bowden to see you, Doctor. She does not have an appointment.”

“Send her in,” he said. “I thought I turned that damn thing off.” He grabbed his commlink and fiddled with it.

A few moments later the door opened and Lydia walked into the office. “At the office on a *Saturday* during Christmas break? You really don’t have a life, do you?”

“You thought I was making that up?” He motioned to his left. “There’s coffee if you want some.”

The Knight Errant detective walked over and poured herself a cup. She sat down and took a sip, and rolled her eyes. “Oh, my God, this is fabulous. Who made it?” Karla motioned to Thomas, and Lydia said, “Really? You’ve been holding out on me, McAllister.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll let you off with a warning. This time.” She motioned to the images of Lenore floating over the desk. “Do you want me to issue a lookout order for her?”

“Probably wouldn’t hurt,” he said, “Don’t know much good it’ll do, but it can’t hurt.”

“She left Denver and went to Chicago,” Karla offered. “If she’s left Chicago, I wasn’t able to find a record of it.”

Lydia nodded. “Thanks. I’ll put the BOLO out when I get to Detroit.”

Thomas looked at her. “Detroit? What happened?”

She chuckled mirthlessly. “Remember me telling you about Mr. Dalton in Municipal Ops?” He nodded. “Well, he got geeked last night by an MTK copycat. Colonel Ravenheart personally asked me to investigate it.”

He sat up, the images of his sister momentarily forgotten. “You want me to come along?”

She shook her head. “I’ll get one of the local forensics mages to look the place over. I kind of doubt there’s anything new to learn, and you’ve got other things on your mind.” She sipped at her coffee. “Besides, weather there’s worse than Denver this time of year.”

“So what was he?” Karla asked.



“Retirement dinner, according to some of the CSI images I saw a little while ago.”

Karla nodded, then set her empty mug down on the desk. “Well, I have a plane to catch. We’re having Christmas with my brother this year.” She rose from her chair and walked to the door. “If I hear from her, Tommy, I’ll let you know. Merry Christmas, you two.”

“Merry Christmas.”

After the door closed, Thomas said, “She’s as subtle as a juggernaut in heat.”

Lydia raised an eyebrow, then asked, “What do you mean by that?”

He looked at her. “Karla’s an only child. That was the kind of dodge she’d use while she was chasing a story back when we were married. A hundred nuyen says she’s changing her flight from Dallas to Detroit even as we speak.”

“Why didn’t you call her on it?”

Thomas shrugged. “I did, when we were married,” he said. “It’s one of the reasons we’re not married anymore. Now, it really doesn’t matter. She is who she is.” He turned back to the images of his sister. “Besides, you said it yourself. I have other things on my mind.”

Lydia nodded and drank her coffee. “Are you just going to hang around up here the entire holiday?”

“I’ll go home eventually, and have my traditional Christmas pizza,” he said, “but I haven’t celebrated Christmas in more than thirty years.”

“Really? Why not?”

He was quiet for a long time, and she was about to tell him to forget about it when he said, “When I was ten years old, I was out playing with some other kids. My best friend, Hank Ellis, ran out into the street for something and got hit by a car.” He was staring through the images now, reliving the memory. “They weren’t going very fast, so he wasn’t hurt too badly, but everyone was panicking. Except me. I knew I needed to help him somehow, and then a woman’s voice in my head told me to hold his hand and she’d show me what was wrong.” He sipped at his coffee, and went on. “So I did. He had cuts on his face, and we could all tell his leg was broken, but we couldn’t see the broken ribs. But when I sat down beside Hank and held his hand, it began to glow and then all of a sudden the woman’s voice was telling me everything that was wrong.”

Lydia sat there in silence, fascinated. “You Awakened at ten?”

He nodded. “It’s not that unusual. The Goddess showed me what was wrong, and then she showed me how to heal him. Right there in the middle of Tannehill Drive, in front of a couple of dozen people. Including my very devout Catholic mother.”

“I didn’t think the church had a problem with magic.”

Thomas shrugged. “In general, they don’t. Mom and Dad were a different story. So were Father Gibson and the particular church we attended. They didn’t hold with *In Imago Dei* or Rome’s stance on magic, and when they found out that my magical patron was some pagan spirit ...” He

exhaled sharply. “They just about blew a gasket. They tried for a couple of years to get me to renounce what I was and to give up my connection to the Great Mother. As if I had any idea how to do that, or would have if I’d known how.”

Lydia scowled. “And you were just a kid. It must have been horrible.”

He nodded. “I spent all that time trying to figure out what I was, what I could do, and the whole time Mom and Dad were losing their damn minds. When they started talking about an exorcist, I figured I’d had enough with them and with the church. Left home and went to live with my crazy Uncle Wayne in Dickinson, and didn’t see my parents again until my freshman year of college.”

She sat there quietly for a few minutes. “I can see that putting you off the church,” she said, finally, “but Christmas?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, looking back, it doesn’t make a lot of sense. Wayne just never really did anything for Christmas, though, and when I was younger it just reminded me of Mom anyway. It made me miserable, so I gave it up. Only person who ever remembered me at Christmas was Lenore, and once she turned, even that stopped after a while.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said, shaking his head. “One lonely holiday a year is a small price to pay for an otherwise blessed life, and on the whole, mine has been.”

She stood up and set her coffee cup down next to the pot. “I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “I have to go catch my flight; can’t leave the boss waiting. I’ll get hold of you in a few days, once I put this one to bed. Merry Christmas, Thomas.”

“Merry Christmas, Lydia. Have a safe flight.”

Thomas sat there after she left, alone with his thoughts and images of his sister, feeling strangely calm. Lenore’s possible involvement still bothered him, but the conversation with Lydia had settled him somehow. He closed the images of Lenore and put the computer into standby. As he walked out of his office, his commlink chirped in his ear, telling him he had an incoming email.

He brought it up in an ARO as he entered the elevator. “I’ll be damned,” he said, leaning against the wall. The email said simply, “Merry Christmas, Tommy.”

It was from Lenore.

26 DECEMBER 2073

The next-to-last thing Lydia Bowden expected was a knock at the door of her minuscule temporary office at Knight Errant headquarters in Detroit. “It’s open, come in,” she said, barely looking up from the report she was composing in one of the ten or so AROs she had floating around her head.

The last thing she expected was for Colonel Anne Ravenheart, Knight Errant’s Director of Special Investigations, to walk in. Lydia stood abruptly, her report forgotten. Not many people spooked her, but Ravenheart was



one of them. The woman had survived Bug City, and she knew that had taken a special combination of strength, tenacity, and insanity. Not everyone who had emerged from the Containment Zone in Chicago after the bugs had come out into the open had managed to do so more or less intact, but Ravenheart had done it.

“Colonel! If I’d known you were going to come see me, I’d have tried to get some furniture in here! Please,” she said, moving toward the other side of the desk, “you can sit in my chair.”

Ravenheart waved her off. “I’ve read your file, Lieutenant,” she said without preamble. “Please don’t start kissing ass now.” She was dressed in gray urban fatigues, a subdued Ares Firewatch insignia on her right shoulder, with her field jacket draped over her left arm. Her hair was in a short clipper cut, but not as severe as some of the photos Lydia had seen of her. Her dark eyes were hard as stone, speaking volumes of the things she’d seen and done. “I won’t be here long anyway. Please, sit. It’s your office, after all, for a little while longer, at least.”

Lydia sat, and said, “I was just finishing the preliminary report on the Dalton murder.”

Ravenheart nodded. “Give me the condensed version.”

“There’s really not a lot worth reporting, ma’am.”

“Colonel,” Ravenheart said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I prefer to be called ‘Colonel.’ ‘Ma’am’ makes me think you’re talking to my mother.”

Lydia nodded. “Fair enough, Colonel. Anyway, it’s a Mealtime Killer copycat. Dalton’s COD appeared to be exsanguination; I’m waiting for confirmation from the ME. A licensed prostitute he’d hired discovered his body when she arrived that evening.” She picked up her commlink and flipped through the crime scene photos on its screen until she found the one she was looking for. “This was the only deviation from the standard MO,” she said, sending the image over as an ARO.

The image was of Andrew Dalton from the waist up. His shirt had been cut away, and the words “Fear the Dark” were carved into the ashen flesh of his chest. “Charming,” the older woman said, settling onto the edge of the desk. “Could they be escalating?”

“It’s possible,” she replied. “Even likely. We’ve had a lot of copycats since Halloween. A lot of them. It’s getting harder to tell the real vampire attacks from the sick bastards looking for cheap thrills.” She looked up at Ravenheart and asked, “I know you had a meeting with Dalton the afternoon before he died. What was it about?”

“You. Why?”

Lydia paused, not expecting that answer. “I must have really riled the two of you up, then.”

“We were discussing the circumstances of your assignment to my office. Things got heated. What led you to that conclusion?”

“The hooker who found him looked a great deal like you—Matrix records from the brothel show he’d made a

special order that evening—and one of the rooms in his apartment was devoted to S&M gear, most of it pretty heavy-duty stuff. Follow-up with the brothel indicated that it would not have been the first time he’d beaten the hell out of one of their girls, and factoring in his special request and your argument earlier that day ... well, I don’t think he was looking to get laid.”

Ravenheart shook her head and exhaled softly. “Sounds like he left the world no poorer with his death,” she said after a few moments.

“Not even a little bit, Colonel. Not even a little bit.” She paused, then looked up at the colonel again. “I’d be very surprised and disappointed if you came here to listen to this report,” she said. “Can we get to why you’re really here, Colonel, so we can both get back to our real jobs?”

The colonel smiled. “Took you long enough.”

“I was being polite, Colonel Ravenheart. That shouldn’t be misconstrued as kissing ass.” Lydia straightened up in her chair. “I know you’re not happy that I’ve been assigned to your unit. As soon as I file this report, I’ll be requesting a transfer out.”

“Denied.”

Lydia looked at her sharply. “Excuse me?”

“Your immediate supervisor would have to approve that transfer request, Lieutenant Bowden. As your immediate supervisor, I’m denying it.” She stood up again. “I never said I didn’t want you in OSI. I objected to Dalton and Clay Wilson making an end-run around me; part of my agreement with Mr. Knight is that I get final approval of anyone assigned to my office. Now, serial killers aren’t generally the kinds of things we investigate in OSI, but when they’re vampires, they start to wander into our territory.”

“So you want me to stay on?”

“I wouldn’t have asked you to conduct this investigation if I didn’t. You’re tenacious, and you have very few cold cases on your ledger. You close things, and I like that.”

Lydia leaned back. “Thank you.”

“The MTK and her copycats have a lot of people running scared, Lieutenant, and it’s cutting into the bottom lines of several security corps around the world.”

“Really?” Lydia replied. “You’d think it would be the other way around.”

Ravenheart nodded. “You’d think that, but a lot of the big security corps are looking a little less than competent with the escalation you’ve noted. People aren’t upgrading their services; they’re getting supplemental security from smaller firms or the shadows. We’re not really losing business, I suppose, but the increases you’d expect at times like this aren’t happening. Our customers would like this to go away, which is one of the reasons Clay Wilson has been talking with his counterparts at Lone Star and Eagle, the FBI and the DDI, and a few smaller corps who’ve asked to be included.”

Lydia cocked her head to one side and said, “All right, you’ve got me by the intrigue glands. Included in what?”



“We’re forming an inter-corporate task force to deal with the MTK and Fear the Dark cases. It’s all but a done deal; they just need a couple of signatures and a presentation to the Corporate Court. The task force would have jurisdictional authority wherever these killings take place and whatever resources it would need to get the job done.”

“Where do I come in?”

Ravenheart smiled. “You bagged the MTK. This task force is an Ares/Knight Errant initiative, and we have the right to choose who’s in charge. I’m recommending you for the job, if you want it.”

Lydia stood up and leaned her hands on the desk. She looked Ravenheart in the eyes and said, “I run it my way, choose my own people, and I don’t have to put up with the kind of shit that normally gets piled on me when I’m running a case down.”

Ravenheart nodded. “You’ll report directly to me, Lieutenant,” the colonel replied, turning towards the door. “Get me that report as soon as you’re finished with it, and while you’re looking into Mr. Dalton’s life, see if you can find out why he was sitting on your Denver report for the last two months.”

Lydia watched the door close. “You better believe it, Colonel.”

31 DECEMBER 2073

When Deacon walked into the study for their evening meeting, she felt a brief moment of alarm: The entertainment system was silent, and Neil the Ork Barbarian was not cleaving villainous elves in twain with that ridiculous glowing sword. That almost never happened, and when it did, it usually signaled that something was seriously amiss. Her anxiety subsided almost immediately as she saw Ian turn in his chair and motion to her. “Deacon! You’re just in time,” he said. “We have company!”

Her face brightened as a raven-haired woman rose from one of the armchairs facing the desk. “Lenore!” she said, quickly closing the distance between them and embracing her. “I didn’t know you were back in Seattle. How long have you been here?”

“I only arrived last night,” she said as they both sat down. “Had to take a circuitous route from Santa Fe; seems I’ve become very interesting to Knight Errant in the last couple of days.”

Deacon nodded. “Yes, somehow Lieutenant Bowden learned about you. You haven’t been in contact with your brother recently, have you?”

Lenore shook her head. “Not in the last couple of years,” she replied.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ian said. “I want to finish business early tonight, and take the two of you out dancing. So, Deacon, has there been anything noteworthy today?”

She shook her head. “Not particularly, sir. The holi-

days have slowed things down considerably; I don’t expect much change until after the new year’s hangovers are dealt with, probably Wednesday at the earliest.”

“Understood,” he said. “Speaking of the new year, do we have anything special planned for this evening?”

“Nothing like Halloween,” Deacon replied, “though we do have several new recruits that will be joining the ranks and stirring things up.”

Ian contemplated this for a moment. “That should be satisfactory,” he said.

Lenore cleared her throat. Without waiting for a response, she said, “I have something in mind, sort of my way of making up for Halloween.”

“I’ve already told you, Lenore,” Ian said. “What happened in Denver wasn’t your fault. We didn’t expect every single one of those attacks to succeed—that would have been unrealistic.”

Lenore shrugged. “I still feel like I let you down. I’ve been letting you down since you made me,” she said, “and I’d like to make it up to you, and make a statement for the cause at the same time.” Taking his silence as assent, she outlined her plan to the two of them.

After she finished, Deacon said, “It’s certainly ambitious.”

Ian nodded. “Yes, it is,” he said. “A little off the beaten path for us, which I like. When do you think you could do this?”

Lenore closed her eyes and lost herself in thought for a few moments. “Two weeks,” she said, opening her eyes, “maybe three. There are some details I still need to research.”

Ian nodded. “Do it, then. If you need anything, Deacon here will get it for you. Do either of you ladies have anything else?” They both shook their heads. “Then I think we should go get ready. I’ll meet you back here in, say, an hour.”

The two women looked at each other and smiled. “That sounds divine,” Lenore said as she rose from her chair and walked to the door.

There were more than two dozen AROs open around him. All of his notes from nine different murder scenes. Autopsy reports from each killing. Crime scene photos. Thomas had been poring through all of this since Saturday afternoon, barely pausing to eat or sleep as he searched for some clue to his sister’s presence anywhere near the Mealtime Killer murders.

He couldn’t find anything. So far, nothing he found supported Karla’s assertion that Lenore had been there, in every city, while Teresa Castillo had been killing people. He’d known Karla Marshall too long to think she was mistaken, though; she was nothing if not thorough. If she said she’d linked Lenore to the cities where the killings had taken place, when Teresa was there, then Lenore had been there. He had no doubt of it; he just couldn’t link his sister to the killings.



A voice in the back of his head said, not for the first time, *It's a coincidence*. He shook his head unconsciously as the thought formed, though. He knew, and believed, the old canard: Once was an accident, twice was a coincidence, and three times was a conspiracy.

Nine times? Nine times was a terrorist training program.

Nothing in *his* notes put them there together. There was another possibility, of course, but he'd been hesitant to use it for days now. Karla had forwarded him all of *her* notes, and he had access to all of the official reports from Lone Star, Knight Errant, and Eagle. Frustrated, he muttered a curse, reached up and closed most of the AROs around him. Opening a new one, he took a look at Karla's research. She'd clearly gone back and double-checked some things after her first conversation with him and Lydia, since the travel records included not only Lenore and some of the aliases she'd traveled under, but also Teresa Castillo and some of *her* aliases.

Teresa had arrived in UCAS Sector, Denver on October 22, traveling as Teresa McAllister. On October 23, a Lenore Small had landed in UCAS Sector. Surveillance images for both women matched. Corinne Lawrence had been murdered on October 25. An unidentified female vampire whose description more or less matched the images of Lenore that Karla had provided tried to kill Oliver Santos, a local writer and restaurateur, on October 31. Lenore Small had then flown out of Denver to Chicago on November 2.

Dammit. Karla could be right. He almost couldn't decide which was worse, Karla being right or Lenore becoming the Monster. Almost.

He checked through the rest of Karla's notes. She was her usual, damnably thorough self throughout. Solid documentation, photographic evidence to back it up ... Lenore really had been in every city that Teresa had been in. He wondered how high the body count had really gone. He knew Teresa had taken twenty-three lives as the Mealtime Killer; if Lenore really had succumbed to the Monster, and really had been traveling and training with her, the total could be considerably higher and he'd never really know.

Teresa, he noticed, had been remarkably boring with her travel alias. Her obsession with him had led her to use his surname as her own for the entire span of killings. Lenore, at least, had been a bit more varied in hers. Clara Beck, Georgia Milton, Candy Crooks, Joanna Stein, Lenore Small.

Something about that list seemed familiar to him, but he couldn't place it. He closed the file and brought up a search agent Lydia had given him. He turned it loose on all the MTK notes he had and instructed it to cross-reference everything. He put his commlink in standby, then rose from his kitchen table and walked into the bedroom. He took out his earbuds and his contacts, and then undressed. Naked, he walked from his bedroom to his Circle.

Once, it had been a relatively spacious den. Like most of the walls in his home, the wall to his left was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. These overflowed with books, in this case books on magic and its use. The wall

sharing the room's door had a small rectangular table pushed against it, upon which sat a pair of candlesticks holding fresh tapers. He closed the door, walked to the table, and lit the candles, which gave the room its only light.

The room was otherwise bare of furniture, and he'd long ago ripped out the carpet. The floor was made of some kind of wooden laminate, but most of it was covered by an immense, circular azure rug nearly four meters in diameter. There were three concentric rings of complex geometric patterns decorating the rug, each one about half a meter wide and spaced about a half a meter apart. The ring at the outer edge was black. The next one was silver, and the innermost ring was crimson.

Thomas walked to the center of the rug and knelt down. On the wall he faced were hung relics of his growth as a healer and a magician: His doctor of thaumaturgy degree, which he'd stood for when he was twenty-four, hung next to his MD, which he'd received only a year later. The caduceus he'd crafted in art class at Dickinson High School when he was fifteen was below them; on one side of it hung the Saint Luke's medallion that Karla had given him on their first anniversary, while on the other side was the rosary he'd been wearing when Hank Ellis had become his first patient all those years ago. There were other things, but those were the important ones, the sacred ones.

He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and began praying for guidance. Somewhere along the line, prayer turned to meditation. Sometime after that, a voice as old as the sea spoke to him. "Hello, Thomas McAllister."

He opened his eyes, and he didn't. In astral space, you didn't really use your eyes to see, but there still was something in you that opened, to let the visions in. The magical barrier surrounding his Circle was a brightly glowing dome of translucent golden energy; it protected him here, and kept him from being interrupted by many of the denizens of this place. The figure seated before him, though, was beyond his power to repel even if he'd wanted to. She was ageless and eternal, sheathed in shimmering gossamer, with hair of flowing gold and eyes of lapis lazuli.

"You came to see me, Goddess," he said. "Things must be worse than I thought."

"Do I not always answer you, Thomas McAllister?" she asked, her eyes flashing.

He smiled wanly. "You usually don't come in person," he said. "You often speak to me, you occasionally send me gifts, but you rarely, if ever, visit."

She might have smiled in return, but it was hard to tell. "What troubles you?"

"My sister," he began, "may be losing her fight."

"She has lost already. You have seen it yourself; you simply refuse to accept it."

Stated that bluntly, by an entity which had never lied to him, it was impossible for Thomas to deny. Almost impossible. "I've seen no such thing."

"Of course you have." Without warning—without movement—she was in front of him, her hands on his tem-



ples. “See what you have forgotten, Thomas McAllister.” Her gem-blue eyes blazed.

—He was in the office in Cheyenne where Gary Fivecoats had died. The bloody words *Sunday Brunch* on the wall mocked him, just like the ones in Chicago, New Orleans, and Dallas. He touched the wall, was nearly overcome with a wave of joy that was nevertheless tinged with an unexplained misery. *They’re right! It’s so much easier when you stop fighting it!*

—You could see the Space Needle down below from the apartment’s window, which was probably the only good thing about the place. The astral space of the ACHE sang of misery and loss in general; this apartment, and this room in particular, also sang of agony and terror. He approached the tape outlining where they’d found Constance Turner’s bloodless body. He touched the piece of floor where she’d died. *It was cold, so cold. She couldn’t speak, could barely move. The woman with the dark hair had done nothing during the attack, had just watched, but she was approaching her now. Help me, Connie wanted to cry out, but she couldn’t speak, and all she could see were the vicious fangs in the other woman’s mouth, and she was licking her lips as she came closer ...*

—He was in the morgue in Denver, standing over Corinne’s body, his hand on her forehead, her death struggle sharp and vivid in his mind. *The razors popped out of her fingertips as the red-haired intruder lunged for her, a fighting knife in her hand. Fast, too fast, she’s so damn fast! The knife’s edge sliced across her ribs, through the fabric of the vest like it wasn’t even there; strong and fast, a bad combination. Corinne managed to get a straight jab into the woman’s gut as she shot past, driving the razors deep into her flesh and coming away with blood on her hand. The dark-haired girl just stood there, watching from the kitchen, her arms crossed across her chest. The pommel of the knife struck Corinne in the back of the head as the redheaded bitch shot past; would have crushed her skull if it weren’t for the ceramics fused with her skeleton ...*

—He was in Oliver Santos’ library, only a few kilometers from the morgue. He’d interviewed Santos, one of the few survivors of the Halloween killings across North America, though the man had declined to let him give him more than a cursory assenting. He was still clearly shaken from his brush with death. While he hadn’t allowed Thomas to examine him closely, he gave him leave to look over the library, where the attack had occurred. Santos had a sizable collection, many of them first editions; Thomas ran his fingers along the shelves as he walked slowly around the edge of the room, trying to find something useful in astral space. *We’ll live off the fat of the land!* It struck him like electricity, jolting his senses back to the physical world as he looked for the book that had spoken to him in his sister’s voice. It was a slender volume, John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, long one of Lenore’s favorites.

“Stop!” he cried out.

They were back in his Circle, he kneeling in the center of the rug, breathing heavily, and she seated on the outer

edge as if she’d never been anywhere else. “Do you believe me now?”

He was trembling. He tried to get control of that and didn’t answer immediately. Finally he asked, “How could I know all that and not remember any of it?”

“Pain and hope,” she replied, “can be powerful things. The pain of learning of your sister’s consumption by the Monster, as she calls it, forced the memories to a dark corner of your mind. Your hope of rescuing her built a wall around those memories so that you wouldn’t find them.”

He bowed his head. “So it’s too late for her.”

“You cannot heal her, Thomas McAllister,” she said, a note of sadness in her voice. “But you can still set her free.”

He looked up, his eyes wide with shocked realization. “No! I’m a healer! There’s got to be another way.”

She shook her head. “Sometimes the body must die so that the spirit may heal. You know this; you have ended life before.”

“As a last resort,” he said. “When there wasn’t any other choice!”

“There is not one now,” she said. “You choose not to believe it, for now. You will see.” She raised her right hand and opened it, palm up. It held a small, glowing orb of angry-looking red energy. Without a word or gesture, it rose from her palm and streaked towards him, striking his chest and enveloping his astral body for a moment in a hazy nimbus. Almost as quickly as it had struck him, the red haze soaked into him and disappeared from sight. “Perhaps this will help you when the time comes.”

Abruptly, he was back in his body, in the room, the only light the guttering of the candles as they flickered, almost spent, in their stands. He was lying on his back on the rug, his body glistening with sweat, trembling and breathing heavily. He stared at the ceiling for a long time, until he was finally calm enough to stand. He felt tired and bruised.

He rose from the rug, blew out the candles, and staggered into his bedroom. He collapsed onto his bed and fell into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

01 JANUARY 2074

The doorbell woke him up sometime later. It didn’t look like the sun was quite up, and it was therefore an uncivilized hour; he was going to skin whoever it was alive. He was a doctor, dammit; he knew how to do it, and make the process as painful as possible to boot.

“Thomas, it’s Lydia. Are you all right?”

Okay, maybe not. She could hurt him, probably a lot, before he was able to start. Besides, if she was waking him up at this ungodly hour, in person, it had to be important. He pulled the door open quickly. “Come on in,” he said, still a little bleary.

She was facing the street as he opened the door. “I was beginning to worry,” she said, turning back to the door.



"I tried to call, but—oh, Christ!" She turned back around quickly.

"What's wrong?"

"Do me a favor," she said over her shoulder. "Close the door and go put some clothes on, then let's try this part again."

He looked down, and then closed the door. With all that had happened last night, he had completely forgotten that he'd fallen into bed naked. He quickly put on a pair of jeans and a Darwin's Bastards t-shirt, and then opened his front door again. "Sorry about that. Come in."

"Oh, yeah, that's better," Lydia said as she stepped into his house. "I've been trying to call, but you didn't answer. After the third time, I started looking for you. You weren't at the office, which I half expected, so I decided to check here. If you hadn't answered the door, I'm not sure where I'd have checked next."

He chuckled. "Even I wouldn't be at the office at—what time is it, anyway?"

"About a quarter to eight."

"Even I wouldn't be at the office at a quarter to eight in the morning on New Year's Day."

"What did you do last night, Thomas?" she asked. "It's nearly eight at night, not eight in the morning."

He stopped in the middle of the living room and turned to look at her. He raised his eyebrows, motioning her to the couch as he collapsed into a recliner facing her. "That would explain why I'm so damn hungry," he said. "How do you take your pizza?"

"Everything but anchovies."

He rose from the chair and headed for the kitchen. "Good answer," he said as he found his commlink. It was still in standby; no wonder she'd not been able to reach him. He brought it to life and saw that the search agent had completed its task. He'd look at the results later, after Lydia had left and he'd had a chance to put his AR contacts in. He found the Matrix site for his usual pizzeria and ordered a large with everything. He then called into the living room, "Are you on duty?"

"Not at the moment."

He pulled two beers out of his refrigerator and walked back into the living room. "Glass or bottle?" he asked, holding them up for her.

"Bottle's fine," she said.

He got each of them settled with an open bottle and took a long pull from his. Then he asked, "So what brings you to my door?"

She took a drink, then said, "Well, I got back in town earlier today, and thought I'd call and wish you a Happy New Year, tell you about my new job. You didn't answer, so I started looking for you."

"New job?"

She told him about the task force that was being assembled, and her role in it. "All the paperwork's been signed, and they present it to the Corporate Court tomorrow. I don't think they technically have to do that, but it

makes a couple of the smaller corps feel more important, so Mr. Wilson is throwing them a bone. We make a public announcement in a couple of weeks, once the team's put together."

He finished off his beer as the doorbell rang. "I suppose congratulations are in order," he said as he answered the door to claim the pizza. He grabbed some plates, napkins, and another beer from the kitchen, then took everything into the living room. He placed a plate in front of Lydia and said, "Don't stand on ceremony. Dig in."

"This looks good," she said as she put a slice onto her plate.

"So, where's this new joint venture going to be headquartered? Detroit?"

She shook her head, and washed a bite down with her beer. "Hell, no. I've had enough winter to last me for a long, long time," she said. "Mark and I were talking about transferring someplace warmer just before he died; I think it's about time I made that happen."

"So maybe Atlanta, then? The CDC is there, and they've got an excellent HMHVV research center."

"I'm a cop; we catch bad guys," she said. "Our work together aside, there's not as much need for a virus research center in the cop business as you might think." She took a few more bites. "That said, you and I make a pretty good team on investigations. I was thinking of setting up shop here in Houston, even if it is a Lone Star town."

He chewed and nodded. "Hurricane season's a bitch, but the place is never boring."

She laughed, and then said, "There's something to be said for that." She paused. "I had to do some housecleaning while I was in Detroit," she said. "You remember me telling you about Dalton, the exec who was murdered?" Thomas nodded, and she continued. "He was on the take. Apparently a million-three a year before profit-sharing wasn't enough for him. A third party that I haven't tracked down yet was paying him an extra fifteen thousand a week, and had been since at least early March."

He whistled. "That's a lot of extra cash," he said. "Have you figured out why?"

"Partially. You had an incompetent goober escorting you in Seattle on the MTK case, as I recall."

"Yeah, both times. I've had better conversations with a doormat."

She nodded grimly. "That was on Dalton's orders. He told the Regional Commander there to assign his biggest problem to assist you. He gave the same orders to Alice Bujold when you went to Denver. It was only because she thought I was her biggest problem that you and I wound up working together."

Thomas took a long drink of his beer as he began putting pieces together. "Fear the Dark had a Knight Errant executive in their pocket." Lydia nodded, and he continued. "It's not unreasonable to think they have people in other security corps as well. We knew they were organized after the Halloween killings. Now we know they've got resourc-



es to back it up. I don't think I like where this is going."

"Me neither. He was sitting on my report about Teresa in Denver, too," she continued. "Near as I can tell, also on their orders."

"That explains a lot." He sighed. "Well, at least you got something positive done. More than I can say."

"What do you mean?"

"I went through all of Karla's research. She's right; Lenore really was in every city that Teresa Castillo was in, at the same time."

Lydia nodded. "I know; I double-checked all of her notes on my flight to Detroit last week." He gave her an odd look. "What?" she said. "I'm a detective; it's what I do."

"Yeah, I know," he replied. "I just hate it when she's right." He sat there in silence, nibbling his pizza and drinking his beer. "I also hate it when it turns out I've been holding out on both of us without even realizing it."

When he didn't continue, she said, "Don't leave me hanging, Thomas."

He sighed again. "You know how I go into a trance state sometimes when we're on a scene?"

"Yeah. It creeps me the hell out."

Thomas nodded. "The technical name for what I'm doing is psychometry," he said. "Highly charged emotions can leave traces on objects—walls, books, dead bodies—and I can sometimes pick those up. Sometimes it's just a feeling, like fear or joy; sometimes it's fragments of memories. Sometimes it can even be a message, if someone who knows I've got this ability puts enough effort into it."

Lydia looked at him sternly. "Are you telling me you withheld information in the investigations?"

He nodded again. "Until last night, I didn't even know I'd done it."

"What happened last night?"

He smiled without humor. "I took a little jaunt into astral space, and my Goddess, or one of her avatars, reached into my head and played with all the mental blocks I'd been building walls with. I hadn't even been consciously processing some of what I'd seen."

She shuddered. "I put on a brave face, but sometimes the things you say so casually scare the hell out of me."

"I thought magic didn't bother you."

She leaned back on the couch. "Most of the time, it doesn't, or at least I don't think it does. It's one thing to see you do it, but when you healed me in Denver back in October? I had the shakes for three days after that. You just completely re-arranged reality, because it didn't suit you, and it was *my* reality. It's not that I'm ungrateful, it was just ... really damn weird."

Thomas nodded. "That's why Karla and I aren't married," he said. "The real reason. There were a lot of other things, sure, but at the heart of it, the magic just skeeved her out."

"Was it the magic, or the way you can say, 'An extradimensional being reached into my head and mind-raped me,' in the same tone of voice I'd use to tell you I was head-

ing to the Stuffer Shack for a six-pack and a SloppiSoy?"

"That might have been part of it, too."

They were quiet for a long time. Then Lydia broke the silence and said, "I was there when my husband was killed. A big novacoke deal went sour and it turned into a shootout." She took a long swig of her beer. "I was on the scene completely by accident, trying to find a witness on a different case entirely. Anyway, Mark was on the fast-response team. The dealers and the buyers had a school bus trapped in their crossfire; driver was dead, and there were twenty-six screaming, panicked fourth-graders. Mark went in to get the kids out of harm's way."

"Did he?"

She smiled wistfully. "Yeah. Nothing but scratches and bruises, though only God knows how. Mark could do two things well, drive and shoot." Her smile widened a little. "Okay, three things, but the third wasn't work related. He took four bullets driving that bus out of there. Took out at least two of the bad guys in the process."

Thomas looked at her. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's tragic, but it also sounds like you have every reason to be extremely proud of him."

"And I am," she replied. "My point, though, was that I started to get angry with you when you first told me about withholding that information. Somehow, though, the talk about magic and what you went through to get those memories back reminded me that I was a pathetic witness. I didn't remember any of that for months. I can't be mad at you for blocking out the memories of your sister during all of this, when I did the same thing with Mark's death."

"I still feel like I let you down."

She rose and shook her head. "Don't worry about it," she said, downsing the last of her beer and setting the bottle down on the coffee table. "Thanks for dinner. I'll see you in a few days, once everything is all put together." She walked to the door. "Happy New Year, Thomas."

"Happy New Year, Lydia."

He sat there alone for a while after she left, drinking his beer. He finished it, then rose from his chair and walked over to one of the many bookshelves in his house. He ran his hand along one of the shelves until he found the book he was looking for. It was a slender, well-worn volume. It had been a long time since he read it last.

He walked back to his recliner, leaned back, and began reading *Of Mice and Men*.

11 JANUARY 2074

The Mansion was an impressive three-story building on Main Street in downtown Dallas. Built in the twenties before the first Crash, it had long been a fine dining destination for the elite. Lenore McAllister, cloaked in a spell that made her invisible to both metahuman eyes and security cameras, followed some of those elite through the door.



She smiled; becoming a vampire had turned her into a magician, like Tommy, and that was one of the only good things that had come of it. She was also happy that Pris had been right and that there were no chem-sniffers in the Mansion's security system.

The elven couple she'd followed in, both of them swathed in the latest Zoé creations, were escorted by an impeccably dressed human girl into the spacious bar to Lenore's left. She went straight ahead, past the *maitre d'* station and into the main kitchen. Her sense of smell was considerably sharper than a normal metahuman's, and it was easily the worst aspect of this part of the plan. The food they were cooking here smelled magnificent, and passing through the kitchen to the service elevator was torture. It had been nearly twenty years since she'd had solid food, and if she hadn't been on a mission, she might have given in to her impulse to sample some of the dishes she was passing—the horrific after-effects of such a meal notwithstanding.

She stole onto the service elevator with one of the waiters and his push-cart, and followed him out into the rear of the second-floor main dining room. Once there, she loitered for a few moments near the ladies room. Eventually, one of the patrons arrived and entered, and Lenore snuck in quickly behind her. She stood in a corner until the other woman had left, and then dropped the invisibility spell. She needed all of her concentration for what she was about to do next. She checked the pockets of the vest she wore and made sure the canisters were still there. Fear and anticipation were flowing through her; she leaned against the lavatory counter and fought to regain control of her breathing.

"It's too late," she told herself. "You have to go through with this to be free." She closed her eyes, and someone—some *thing*—different opened them again. Her breathing eased, and a smile crossed the Monster's lips. "And I will be free of you, Lenore," she said to her reflection.

She stood straight, closed her eyes, and exerted her will on the very molecules of her body. In a heartbeat, she transformed herself from a body of flesh and blood to a nearly-transparent cloud of mist. In a moment, as she drifted to the door and exuded herself underneath it, even that was invisible to the naked eye. She couldn't move quickly in this form, but she didn't have to, either.

She drifted toward the staircase to the third floor, where the offices and environmental systems were located. The staircase and the elevator to the third floor were guarded by a pair of ork security guards. Their job was to discreetly keep random guests from wandering upstairs by accident, but they were trained to employ force if necessary. She was able to flow past the one watching the staircase and eventually found herself on the third floor. So far, so good. According to the plans Pris had given her, the security office was the second door on the left.

The building's security was monitored here by a single operator; if something were to go wrong, all the doors and

windows could be sealed, and the two orks guarding the way up could be dispatched along with three other security personnel on standby in a ready room next door. The Monster drifted under the door and coalesced behind the operator, a young man in his twenties. He sat there, eyeing the various monitors and tell-tales casually. The building itself was not rigged, so she would have no problem handling the system. She resumed her physical form and, before the man even had a chance to show his surprise, she reached down and broke his neck. She dropped him to the floor and took his seat.

It only took a few moments to familiarize herself with the controls; it was a fairly standard NeoNET security console setup customized, as one might expect, to the design of the building. She tapped a few controls on the touchscreen and silenced the building's alarms, and then emergency-sealed the doors and windows. She then scrambled the key codes for all the locks. Nothing could get in or out now.

Satisfied, she transformed again into mist and left the security booth. She made her way as quickly as she could to the end of the corridor, approaching the last door on the right. This was the environmental control system and the physical plant for the heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system. She flowed under this door and again materialized. This room was unoccupied, and she was able to set to work immediately. A few moments later, she'd taken control of the air circulation system; it was no longer bringing in outside air but instead was recirculating the air already inside the restaurant.

She looked up at the security camera in the corner and smiled. That done, she walked to the HVAC system's main intake. She could feel the air moving past her as she reached into the pockets of her vest. She pulled out two gray metal cylinders, each a little larger than a beer can, with a spray valve on top. She held them up for the security camera to see, then mashed the valves with her thumbs, releasing a fine mist which quickly evaporated into the air, which was in turn sucked into the ventilation system and dispersed throughout the restaurant.

Lenore choked and coughed as the poison gas spewed into the air. As a vampire, she was immune to its toxic effects, but that didn't make it any easier to breathe the stuff. She still had work to do once the fumes dissipated; her nature made the poison little more than an inconvenience.

For everyone else in the Mansion that night, it was the end of the world.

12 JANUARY 2074

It was barely nine degrees Celsius outside. Most residents of Dallas considered it a chilly afternoon, but Lydia had spent too many years in Denver; this was light-jacket weather at best. She leaned against the door of her rented car, across Main Street from the Mansion, looking at the



knot of Lone Star cops conferring with one another in front of the restaurant. She was dressed in a dark Actioneer suit, her Knight Errant badge conspicuously displayed. In the next few minutes, they'd get the word confirming that she was in charge of the crime scene, and she very much wanted to see the look on the scene commander's face when that happened. She wished that she'd had them put some vision magnification into her cybereyes; that would have made it easier. Maybe it was time for an upgrade.

She turned as one of the LS beat-walkers manning the cordon a few meters away began arguing with a man trying to get through. "He's with me," she called. The cop turned, glared at her, but then grudgingly moved the cordon to allow Thomas McAllister onto the scene. "What took you so long, Doc?" she asked.

He handed her a foam cup. "Had to find provisions," he said. "Don't get your hopes up. It's better than nothing, but only just."

She took a sip of the soykaf and grimaced. "Thanks for the warning," she said. She looked him over for a moment; something was different. The suit was what she was used to seeing him in on scenes; he wasn't usually a jeans-and-tee-shirt kind of guy. The beard she'd quickly grown used to. "You cut your hair," she said finally.

He nodded and sipped at his soykaf. "I occasionally take advice," he said, "sometimes even from Karla. She thought I should try something shorter. I'm told it looks dignified."

"It's sharp," she replied. "Goes better with the suit."

"Thanks. Speaking of my ex-wife, fair warning: I spotted her about a block that way. She's going to want to talk to you." He took another sip of his soykaf, then poured it out on the street. "They still don't believe you about the jurisdiction thing, do they?"

She shook her head. "We're still a new unit; it's going to take a little time to get people used to it. Besides," she said, "there's nothing I hate more than handing a case off to Lone Star. I can't imagine they like handing something off to Knight Errant any better."

He looked up as a stocky man in a Lone Star sergeant's uniform crossed the street. "Lieutenant Bowden?" he asked, approaching Lydia. She nodded, and he reached out to shake her hand. "I'm Sergeant Aaron Collins, ma'am; we've received orders confirming your task force's jurisdiction in this case. I've been assigned as your liaison." Turning to Thomas, he said, "I wish I could say it was good seeing you again, Dr. McAllister, but given the circumstances ..."

Thomas shook his hand. "I understand that, Sergeant. I feel the same way."

Lydia looked at them. "You two know each other?"

Collins nodded. "I was the original officer on scene for the first MTK case, ma'am," he said.

"Before she had a nickname," Thomas added. "Wrote up a great case file, briefed me on it, and then got replaced by a glory-hound with the IQ of a vacuum cleaner."

Collins smiled. "Won't have to worry about him; he got recalled to Austin a couple of months ago." He motioned across the street. "Far as this case is concerned, I reckon you're stuck with me; my ell-tee over there isn't too happy about this whole task force thing and will probably be sulking in his cruiser until he's sent home."

Lydia snorted. "Let him know that he can take off as far as I'm concerned," she said, pushing off from the car and starting across the street. "I don't want him on my crime scene if he's not going to pull his weight."

The Lone Star officer chuckled. "This should be fun," he said, and subvocalized something into what Lydia guessed was an implanted transceiver. "He says that you can kiss his ass, but he's also leaving."

Lydia smiled and blew the departing officer a kiss, then said, "Talk to me, Collins. What have we got?"

"Right now, we've got a drone rigger with half a dozen Flying Eyes inside getting detailed imagery of everything *in situ* before we go inside in person. There are 187 dead people in there, including one of the owners; no survivors. We don't know exactly what killed them yet, but there were a pair of gas canisters in the environmental plant; once Terry gets her toys out of there, we'll get them to the lab for analysis."

She nodded. "Good. How'd we find out about it?"

"Multiple PANICBUTTON calls as whatever happened was going down," he said, stopping in front of the restaurant's front doors. "When the patrol units got here, they found the doors maglocked shut. No one could get in, no one could get out. Once the responding officers got them open, they sent in a drone, saw the bodies and the tag on the wall, and called in a Fast Response Team, which led to you getting a call this morning."

Just then, a young woman with a slightly dazed expression and a large shoulder bag walked up to them. "Drones are all clear, Sarge; we can go in whenever you're ready." She noticed Lydia and Thomas standing there and added, "Hi."

Collins smiled. "Good job." Turning to Lydia, he said, "Lieutenant Bowden, this is Officer Beth Terry, our team's drone rigger. Terry, this is our new ell-tee for this case."

The younger woman looked at him with concern. "She's KE, Sarge," she said. "The enemy." She looked at Lydia, and added, "No offense."

"None taken."

The sergeant said, "It's a long story, Beth; I'll explain it all later. Meantime, though, she's the boss."

"Roger that," she replied.

Lydia sighed; this was going a little easier than she'd expected. She'd gotten lucky and found a couple of Lone Star troops who seemed more loyal to the job than the corp. Motioning to Thomas, she said, "This is Dr. McAllister, a consultant on the case." She turned to see him staring into thin air. His eyes had a blank, glassy look she'd become all too familiar with. "Oh, God," she said distractedly, "he's doing magic shit again."



“You’re doing cop shit,” he said in the same tone. “It’s only fair.” He walked slowly up the stairs towards the main entrance, diving into his private sources of investigation.

“What do we do?” Terry asked.

“Same thing we do with you when you’ve got feeds from a dozen drones playing around your head,” Collins said as he ran to open the door before Thomas could walk into it. “Follow him around and make sure he doesn’t wander into an elevator shaft or something.”

She nodded and said, “I’m on it.” With that, she pulled a filter mask out of a jacket pocket and put it on as she followed Thomas inside.

Collins reached into his own jacket pocket and produced a similar mask. “You want one, ma’am?” he asked, holding it out to her. “What about the doctor? It looks like a lot of the victims were throwing up; it’s probably pretty rank in there.”

“Thanks,” she said, “and the lucky bastard doesn’t need one. He’s an MD and he’s seen it all before, and he can’t smell anything anyway.” She took the mask and put it on as Collins donned one of his own and led the way into the restaurant. She shook her head. “My God,” she said, “I’ve been doing this for twenty-one years, and I’ve never seen anything like this.” Thomas had already disappeared; she decided not to follow him. Terry would make sure he didn’t hurt himself. She turned to Collins. “Let’s see the tag.”

He nodded and led the way to the main dining room. On the far wall, facing the entry, the words FEAR THE DARK were scrawled in meter-high letters the color of wet rust. Collins shuddered. Lydia walked past him to the wall. Lying on the floor beneath the words was an attractive middle-aged woman with curly auburn hair and a gaping hole in her throat. A blood-soaked cloth napkin was lying on the floor next to her.

Collins joined her. Looking over the sea of bodies, he asked, “Where the hell do you even start with something like this?”

“Your first multi-victim homicide?”

He shrugged. “On this scale. I’ve worked a couple gang-related cases, but never more than about a dozen bodies on the ground.”

She nodded. “You never get used to it.” She began looking around the room. “We can’t do much with the bodies until the ME arrives to release them.”

“She’s on her way; with this many, she had to get some reinforcements.”

Lydia nodded. “Roger that. We’ve got imagery of the scene; we’ve got CSI on the way to gather evidence.” She pointed out a couple of points along the edge of the ceiling. “Their cameras are very discreet. Where’s their security booth?”

“Third floor.”

“Then that’s where we start. Let’s go take a look.”

As they left the dining room and headed for the main elevator, they passed Officer Terry and Thomas. The latter was speaking with a faintly glowing, human-shaped figure

dressed in a tuxedo and a Stetson; the former was looking thoroughly freaked out. Lydia patted her on the shoulder reassuringly as she passed. “She’s never worked with a magician before?” she asked as they entered the elevator.

Collins shook his head. “I don’t think so, ma’am,” he said.

Lydia smiled and chuckled. “You never really get used to that, either.”

They arrived at the third floor and quickly found the security booth. They found the operator lying on the floor, his head at a sickening angle. Collins sat down and quickly assessed the system. “Building’s automated, but not rigged.” He keyed a sequence in on one of the touchscreens. “Our perp scrambled the maglocks at twenty-fourty-three. Let’s see if we can get a look at him.” He keyed in a couple of commands, and one of the screens began playing video of the security booth. The camera was above them, to the left, and offered a clear view of the terminal and the door.

About a minute before the system said the locks were scrambled, a pale white vapor began oozing under the door; within seconds, it had coalesced into a dark-haired woman wearing a black vest over a long-sleeved white shirt and dark slacks. The security operator didn’t even realize she was there before she’d snapped his neck and dumped him onto the floor.

Lydia stared in stunned silence, begging the image to not be who she was afraid it was. Collins said, “What the hell just happened?”

“She’s a vampire,” Lydia said, her voice flat. “We can’t see her face in this. You said there were gas canisters in the environmental plant. Get me video from in there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” His fingers danced over the console, and the scene changed. They watched the cloud of mist coalesce again. This time, the woman turned to face the security camera and smiled, then pulled the grenades out of her vest pockets.

“Freeze it,” she said. Collins did so, and Lydia stared into the image of Lenore McAllister’s face. She bowed her head, then said, “Oh my God.”

“You recognize her?” he asked.

She nodded. “Get a copy of every bit of this footage for analysis, from two hours before the first PANICBUTTON call to right now. I have to go give a friend some really bad news.”

She made her way downstairs to search for Thomas. She found him seated on a bench in the foyer, staring blankly at the opposite wall. Terry was standing over him, a look of concern on her face. She looked at Lydia, and said, “He’s been almost catatonic for the past five minutes or so, ma’am. He kept muttering things as we went up to the second floor, then we ran back down here and he talked to that spirit thingie, and then he went in there.” She motioned to the dining room. “He walked over and touched the wall with the words on it, and his body got really tense, then he walked out here and sat down. He hasn’t said a thing since.”



Lydia recognized the description; he'd been performing psychometry on the wall. He must have found something he didn't like. Or couldn't accept. She sat down next to him. "Thomas?" she said, putting her hand on his arm. "Thomas, it's Lydia. I need to talk to you."

He turned his head to look at her. "It was Lenore," he said, his voice hollow and defeated. "She killed all these people, for *them*." He all but spat the last word. "All these people." He got up and walked out of the restaurant; she didn't try to stop him.

She turned to Terry. "Collins is up on the third floor. Tell him I said to turn the CSIs loose to start gathering physical evidence and logging it. I've got to take care of some things."

"Yes, ma'am." She turned to leave, then paused. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Maybe someday." She rose and followed Thomas outside. She didn't see him anywhere. She tried to call him, but he didn't answer. She'd track him down later. Remembering something he'd said earlier, she looked down the cordon line. As expected, she saw the auburn curls of Karla Marshall. She walked up to her and invited her inside the cordon. "Missed you in Detroit," she said.

"I try to be discreet," Karla replied. "I didn't really need an interview, so I didn't track you down, though maybe I should have. Getting into Dalton's apartment to get crime scene photos was a bit of a challenge."

"Not too much for you, I hope."

Karla smiled. "No way," she said. "I'm surprised to see you here; this is a Lone Star town."

Lydia smiled. "So I've been informed." She motioned towards the Mansion and began walking. "I know Thomas doesn't give interviews," she said, "but sometimes I have to. I'm about to give you an exclusive; don't make me regret it."

Karla looked at her as she walked, composing a handful of possible ledes in her head. As they approached the entrance to the Mansion, she said, "Okay. I'm all ears."

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Thomas sat in the armchair in one corner of his hotel room, staring at the ceiling and trying to process everything that had happened at the restaurant. He'd been sitting here for hours, since wandering out of the Mansion after he'd told Lydia about Lenore. He didn't remember the drive back to the hotel, though there had obviously been one. He didn't remember ordering food, though the debris of a delivered meal occupied the small table next to him. He didn't remember taking off his jacket and tie, though he sat wearing his dress pants and the light blue Oxford shirt he'd worn under the jacket.

He remembered the astral space in and around the Mansion. Decades of hospitality and service had made the astral space there warm and inviting; ten minutes of

terror had scarred it with icy streaks of black and gray. He remembered the faintest hint of the spell signature still lingering in the astral, the shock of recognition as he'd touched it and realized who it belonged to. He remembered the psychic message his sister had left him as she painted words in the blood of one of her victims: *Hide in the brush and wait for George*.

He was so busy remembering what had happened that day that he didn't notice the troll in urban camouflage fatigues standing over him for several minutes. He started, then shot to his feet. He raised his hand as if to cast a spell, but paused as he noticed the figure's hazy outline; the troll was a manifestation of someone's astral form. He wasn't really there.

For his part, the troll did nothing, as if expecting this reaction and waiting for the smaller man to relax. "Thank you for not disturbing your neighbors, Doctor McAllister," he said, his voice a deep, smooth bass with an accent Thomas couldn't place. He was short for a troll, though he still towered over Thomas by half a meter, perhaps more. His skin was smooth and tan, and he sported a pair of thick ebony horns jutting from his temples and curving upward, like a bull's.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," he said. He ran his hand through his hair, then added, "I've never met a minotaur before."

"You still haven't," the apparition replied. "Technically, at any rate. I'm actually at a considerable distance right now."

"I know how astral projection works," Thomas said.

"Of course you do, Doctor," he replied. "You know, then, that my time is limited."

Thomas collapsed back into the chair. "It's your credstick."

The minotaur's image inclined his head. "I'm called Jericho," he began, "and you and I have a common interest. We're both pursuing the Mealtime Killer and the group known as Fear the Dark." He sat down on the floor so that his eyes were closer to the same level as Thomas'. "It occurred to me, and to some of my associates, that perhaps we could be of benefit to one another."

Thomas snorted. "The MTK's dead," he retorted. "You're going to have to try something else."

"Ms. Castillo is dead, yes," Jericho said, "but Fear the Dark is not. Neither is your sister."

Thomas sat up straight. Lydia's report about the Denver case had only been released a couple of days ago, but it was out there now. Teresa's name would be easy enough to come by. However, he could think of fewer than half a dozen people besides himself, who knew about Lenore and her involvement with Fear the Dark. "You have my attention, Mr. Jericho."

The minotaur appeared to sit down on the hotel bed. "Would you consider your sister a gifted businesswoman, Dr. McAllister?"

Thomas shook his head. "No. She has a master's degree in English literature," he said. "She taught at a high school in the Woodlands before she was Infected. Why?"



“She has a not-inconsiderable portfolio, Doctor, and she controls a number of local corporations scattered across North America. This is not something she seems likely to have to done on her own, given her skills and abilities.”

“If you’re trying to tell me that Lenore had some support over the years and is associated with Fear the Dark,” Thomas said, “it’s not exactly a revelation.”

Jericho stood. “I didn’t think it would be. It might be an avenue for research, however; I know that you’re trying to find her.” Thomas was about to say something, but Jericho raised one of his massive hands. “Our revels are at an end for this evening, Doctor. We’ll be in touch again.” Without further ceremony, the troll’s apparition vanished as if it had never been there.

We. Teresa had been part of a *We*. Lenore was now part of a *We*. This Jericho was a part of a different *We*. Thomas was growing thoroughly tired of the word *We* in that context, he realized as he again leaned back in his chair. He was about to give up and call it a night when his Hermes Ikon commlink beeped to indicate an incoming message.

“Who the hell’s sending me email at one in the morning?” he grumbled. He pulled up an ARO to look; it was a virtual business card from Jericho. Attached to it was a small text document titled *LM Business Holdings*. He opened it and scanned through the list. There were nearly two dozen small companies he’d never heard of listed, but one in particular caught his eye.

Milton & Small, Furriers. Headquarters: Soledad, CalFree. Offices and warehouse: Los Angeles, CalFree; St. Louis, Missouri; Atlanta, Georgia; Dallas, Texas

He sat up with a start. Reading through the document more carefully, he saw that none of the other businesses listed a presence in Dallas, and none of them seemed to make a reference to Steinbeck, as Lenore had been doing for the last several months. He thought of the message he’d picked up in the Mansion: *Hide in the brush and wait for George.*

She was Lennie, he was George, and she was waiting for him. All he needed to do was figure out where. He did a quick search for Milton & Small in the local area, and quickly found the address of a warehouse in the Cleburne district. He shoved the ARO aside as he pulled his duffel bag up from beside the bed and opened it. He pulled his armored longcoat out and laid it across the foot of the bed. He pulled out a worn shoulder holster and shrugged it on, and then pulled out a pair of small boxes.

He carried them across the room, placed them on the small desk, and opened them. Each contained a pistol, one of them an Ares Viper, the other a Colt Government 2066. He stared at them in distaste. His reverie was interrupted by a knock at the door. He pulled the Colt ’66 out of its box, saw the smartlink data appear in his contacts as it linked with his commlink and his PAN. The pistol told him it was fully loaded with a round ready in the chamber. Weapon in hand, he walked over and cracked open the door.

It was Lydia. Her hair was down, and she was wearing

jeans and a lilac cardigan. She still wore her badge and had her Ares Predator III holstered on her hip, but it was probably the most casual he’d ever seen her. She looked down, saw the pistol in his hand, and said, “Expecting trouble?”

He opened the door wider and invited her in with a tilt of his head. “It’s one-ish in the morning,” he said. “Can’t be too careful.”

She entered the room and closed the door. “You missed all the fun. I just got out of there a little while ago; probably the most complex crime scene I’ve ever dealt with. I was going to go get something to eat and I saw your lights were still on.” She took a longer look at the pistol in his hand. “A Colt?” she asked, half-jokingly. “Really? I can get you a real gun if you’d like; there’s a Weapons World not far from here. I can even get you an employee discount.”

He smiled and holstered the pistol. “Gift from a friend. Thanks, though.”

“No problem.” She looked at the longcoat on the bed. “I was going to get something to eat. Where were you headed?”

Thomas looked at her, and felt a pang of guilt. “I might have a lead on Lenore.”

She raised her head, her eyes wide. “Really? Damn. Good work,” she said. “I was afraid you’d be moping all day. Let me grab a jacket and we can go run it down.” She turned and headed for the door.

“Not this time,” he said, raising a hand.

Lydia stopped and turned, disbelief on her face. He didn’t give her a chance to say anything before he cast an intense stun spell on her. There was a brief moment of recognition in her eyes, then they closed and she collapsed in a heap. She looked quite undignified.

Thomas shook off the spell’s backlash as he pulled on his longcoat. He dropped the duffel bag to the floor, then lifted her up and laid her gently on the bed. “I’m sorry, Lydia,” he said as he pocketed his commlink. She stirred slightly; she’d be awake soon. He did not envy her the headache she’d have when she did. “This is something I have to do on my own.” He walked out of the room and closed the door behind him.

As he walked out of the hotel and headed for his car, Thomas said, “Call Seamus.”

The number rang, and just as he thought it was going to go to voice mail, the dwarf’s voice answered. “Hey, Doc. What’s going on?”

“Seamus,” he said. “I have a favor to ask.”

The Cleburne district of the Dallas sprawl was filled to overflowing with low-end shopping centers, low-end apartment buildings, and low-end warehouses. Thomas stood outside one such building. The moon was lost behind the clouds, and the street lights in this part of the warehouse district weren’t particularly well-maintained. The only lights in the immediate vicinity were coming



from a second-floor window, and the glowing shell of the armor spell he had cast around himself.

So much for stealth, Lydia's voice said in the back of his mind.

"Fuck stealth," he said quietly to the darkness. "She knows I'm coming."

He let his vision slip into the astral plane and assensed the building. Like the neighborhood, it was dark and desolate, forlorn and forbidding. It was also utterly unprotected. No wards, no spirits—nothing at all, near as he could tell. She really was expecting him.

He took a deep breath and let out a sigh. He looked first at the door, and then the lighted window above him. It looked large enough for him to stand up in. She'd be expecting him either way; the window was quicker, and he wouldn't have to search for the stairs. He concentrated for a moment, and then rose purposefully into the air as mana lifted him to the window sill. Reaching out, he pushed on the window. He was not surprised when it opened.

The room inside was large and mostly empty. What furniture there was in the room was arranged along the walls, leaving a rough square of empty burgundy carpeting nearly four meters on a side. A queen-sized bed stood along the wall to his left; a small bookcase, stuffed to overflowing, sat in a corner to his right, next to a writing desk occupied by several loose sheets of paper, a pen, an expensive-looking commlink, and several more books.

Along the far wall, on the left-hand side of the room's only door, was a long, low table. A candle burned at either end with a crucifix standing in the middle. Once it had been a coffee table; now it was an altar. Lenore knelt before it, rosary in hand, with her back to the window. She was dressed like her old self now, in a long-sleeved tan tunic over a pair of dark blue trousers. She was barefoot, as she usually was.

He could almost forget what she was.

He floated inside and came to a landing just inside the window. Without looking up she said, "Hello, Tommy." He could tell she had been crying. She shifted the rosary slightly in her hands, and added, "I done another bad thing."

It was Lennie's final confession to George in the book. He chuckled mirthlessly, then responded in kind. "It don't make no difference."

"Sure it does," she said, then added, "That thou doest, do quickly."

He took a couple of steps closer to her. "I'm confused, Sissy. Am I George, or am I Judas?"

She set the rosary down on her makeshift altar and crossed herself before she stood to face him. Her face was tear-streaked. "Little of both, maybe," she said with a shrug. "You said it yourself, though: It don't make no difference. It's going to be over now. I'm so tired, Tommy."

Thomas raised his right hand. "I know," he said. "I am, too." He concentrated, and his hand began to glow as mana coalesced around it. This spell looked different;

most of his spells had a golden glow, but this one was a dull, angry red. He willed as much mana as he thought he could handle into it and reached toward his sister. All he had to do was turn it loose.

They stared at each other for what seemed an eternity, then he lowered his hand and the glow began to subside. He shook his head and muttered, "I can't do it."

Lenore looked at him, her shoulders slumped, her eyes wide and imploring. "You have to! Please, Tommy!"

"I *can't!*" he replied. "For all that you've done ... you're still my sister."

She straightened herself up and cocked her head to one side. "I'm really not," the Monster said in Lenore's voice. "You had your chance." With no further warning, she raised her hand and let her own spell fly without hesitation.

Instinctively, he reached out with his will and seized her spell, ripping it to pieces before it struck him. At the same time, he unleashed his own. He saw her lurch as it struck her, felt its backlash sear itself into his mind. He didn't have the chance to shake it off, though, since the Monster kept up her assault without hesitation. Thomas countered with a spell of his own, and then the battle was on in earnest.

It went on like that for what seemed like hours: spell, counterspell, feint, thrust, parry. Mana collided with mana, will with will, and astral space smoked and sizzled under the onslaught. He'd been a magician longer, studied it more thoroughly, but she could conceivably channel more power into her spells. He hoped experience would be able to trump power. Thomas could feel the drain taking its toll on his body; he could only imagine it was doing the same to her, and could only hope that she reached her limit before he reached his.

He was slowing down; something got through and struck his chest like a hammer. He pumped more power than he should have into the deadly spell the Great Mother had given him. It got through her defenses, but the backlash whipped his head back violently. He felt his nose start bleeding as he watched the Monster stagger backward. He tried to take advantage of the opening, but he was too slow; she hurled another spell that smashed into his chest, flinging him into the wall next to the window he'd entered the room through. Stunned and beaten, he slid gracelessly to the floor.

The room was eerily silent, except for the sounds of their ragged breathing. She was still on her feet, but he could see her weaving, struggling to remain there. Slowly, she staggered across the room until she was just in front of him, on his right side. She sank to her knees, and then reached into his jacket. He noticed his armor spell was no longer active; he wondered when it had crumbled.

When she pulled out her hand, it held his Colt '66. Her hand was shaking, but in spite of that the pistol was pointed straight at his forehead. At this range, a little bit of wobble wasn't going to make much difference. The shot would hit, and the gun would make a hole large enough to kill him. Then she lowered the weapon. She reached out with



her left hand and grasped his right one; at the same time, she flipped the gun expertly in her hand and pressed the grip into his. He felt his fingers curl around it as she raised the barrel and tucked it under her chin.

"It's hungry, Tommy," Lenore said quietly. "It's very hungry, and I can't hold it back much longer." She looked into his eyes. "That thou doest, do quickly."

He released the Colt's safety with his thumb. "Goodbye, Lenore. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. "Goodbye." She closed her eyes, and this time he didn't fail her.

He didn't know how long he sat there next to her body, but after a while he was able to stand up. He holstered his pistol as he looked at her. Her face was peaceful, serene, as if she'd been relieved of a great burden. In many respects, he figured, she had. From this angle, he could barely see the entry wound, and as long as he didn't turn her over, he wouldn't have to see the exit wound. The one was bad enough; the other would be unbearable. He knelt down and arranged her body in a more dignified position, then rose again and walked across the room to her makeshift altar. He picked up her rosary and slipped it into the pocket of his longcoat, then walked over to the writing desk and began going through the books and papers on its surface.

The papers were random notes and doodles. Thomas chuckled ruefully as he read through the pages; she had been a gifted writer, but her penmanship was abominable. "And they say doctors can't write legibly," he said. None of the papers held anything of real value. The books were a haphazard selection of literature, mostly American works from the 18th and 19th centuries: Poe, Chaucer, Franklin, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Twain, the Bible. He recognized several of the titles as personal favorites of hers that she'd read and re-read over and over as they'd grown up.

That left the commlink. A person could fit their whole life onto one of those, someone had told him once, and he was pretty sure that she had. He hoped she'd put the important parts in there. He smiled in spite of himself as he picked it up. It was a Transys Avalon; a love of gadgets and expensive toys appeared to be a McAllister family trait. He stood up and pocketed the commlink as he prepared to leave.

"Put it back, Doctor."

He turned to see Lydia Bowden standing in the doorway, her Predator III in a two-handed grip, not quite pointed at him. "I wondered when you were going to get here, Lieutenant," he said as he approached his sister's body. He wobbled a little, then sank to his knees beside her.

"I would have been here sooner," she said, "but someone bushwhacked me." She paused, then repeated, "Put it back, Doctor. It's evidence."

He thought about moving the body to her bed, but decided against it. He shook his head. Without turning around, he said, "How'd you find me?"

"I traced the GPS in your rental."

He nodded, "Are you going to shoot me, Lydia, or do we get to remember that we're friends?"

He heard her exhale sharply, then heard the sound of the pistol sliding into its holster. "No, I'm not going to shoot you. Tempting as I might find the notion at the moment." She walked over to the other side of Lenore's body, and sat down against the wall where he'd been sitting a little while ago. "Why didn't you trust me, Thomas?"

He didn't look up. "How could I? What could I say? 'Yeah, I have to go across town and kill my sister. Want to come with?' There was no ending I could imagine to that conversation that didn't involve me being tasered, strapped into a mage mask, and tossed into a cell somewhere," he said. "This was something I had to do, Lydia, or she would've gone to ground again. We'd be back where we started, and there'd be a lot more bodies on the floor."

He could see her nodding out of the corner of his eye. "I suppose I can see that," she said. "Six months ago, before I met you and started seeing some of the really weird stuff the world's got to offer, I probably *would* have taken you in. Twenty-odd years as a cop, and I'd never really encountered some of the things I've seen since we met. And I've dealt with some pretty harsh cases."

He nodded. "It's not like the trid, that's for sure, where every third person's a mage. Real people can go their whole lives without ever seeing real magic. They see some of the things it's done, and they think they've seen it, but they really haven't." He paused, collecting his thoughts. "Even when they do see it, it's being used for special effects and the like. So few people ever get to see the real wonders and terrors of magic. The things I've seen ..." Looking her directly in the eyes, he said, "You think it's weird, being on the outside looking in? It's no picnic being able to rearrange reality, either."

"I can't even imagine." She got to her feet, and offered him a hand up, which he took gratefully. He gave his sister one last look, and then they both walked slowly toward the door. "I really do need you to put the commlink back on the desk, though. Gathering evidence here is going to be a pain in the ass as it is."

He shook his head again and continued walking. "She left it there for me, Lydia. Besides, this is a Lone Star town. You don't really need to worry about it."

"It's *my* jurisdiction, Thomas. Any case related to Fear the Dark—and you and I both know this one is—is joint task force jurisdiction under the new agreements. Like it or not, it's my crime scene, and I don't need you tampering with evidence."

He stopped and turned around, an angry expression on his weary face. "Oh, you ain't seen nothing yet."

Lydia stopped and rested her hand on the butt of her pistol. "What's that supposed to mean, Thomas?"

He looked back to where Lenore's body was lying on the floor, not meeting the detective's gaze. "Aloysius? Are you there?"

The temperature in the room increased significantly as the huge fire elemental materialized in the center of the room. The carpet began to smolder and smoke around its feet. "Right here, Doc," it rumbled.



Lydia stared at the elemental. “Thomas, what the hell is that?”

“More weird shit to check off your list,” he replied.

She turned to face him. “I didn’t know you could summon something like this.”

Thomas smiled grimly. “I can’t. Aloysius here’s a loaner.” He turned to the elemental. “Give my friend and me time to get clear, and then burn this place to the ground.”

Lydia turned on him, her face a mask of disbelief and fury. “Have you lost your fragging *mind*?! This is a crime scene!”

Thomas nodded. “Yes. Yes, it is. Arson, I believe it’s called.” He looked up to Aloysius. “I know it’s not Seamus’s style, but try to keep the collateral damage to an absolute minimum.”

“You got it, Doc.”

Thomas turned to leave, but Lydia grabbed his arm. “No, Thomas! I can’t let you do this!”

He pulled himself free and started walking again. “It’s too late to stop it, Lydia. The carpet’s already burning, and the longer he stands there waiting for us, the worse it’s going to get.” He stopped at the door. “It’s time to leave. You can arrest me later.”

She looked and saw the flames around the elemental’s feet slowly beginning to spread. Her anger mounting, she followed him down the stairs and out into the parking lot. “This isn’t over, McAllister!” she said as she caught up with him. He had stopped at the edge of the lot, next to his car. He was leaning against it, watching as the warehouse began to burn in earnest. He was clearly exhausted, and she saw tears running down his cheeks.

“Of course it’s not,” he said. He sank to the ground, watching the flames dance as Aloysius did his work, and began to weep without shame.

She gave him a few moments, then sighed and said, “You’re in no shape to drive. I’ll take you to the hotel, and we can talk about this when you wake up.” She helped him to his feet and put him in the passenger seat of her own rental; he didn’t protest or resist. After programming his car’s auto-pilot to return to the hotel, she climbed into the driver’s seat. Neither of them looked back as she drove away. She heard emergency response vehicles approaching the warehouse as she turned toward the freeway and the heart of the Dallas sprawl.

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Thomas felt like hammered hell when he finally woke up. Looking at the clock on the wall, he saw that it was nearly ten in the morning. It had been close to thirty hours since Lydia had unceremoniously deposited him in his hotel room; he’d apparently been more exhausted than he’d known. He had no doubt that Lydia had gone through his longcoat’s pockets and confiscated Lenore’s commlink

as soon as he’d lost consciousness. He’d have to talk to her later and try to get it back.

He staggered to the bathroom and undressed. He was not surprised to find his arms and chest covered in livid bruises. He tried not to remember the fight as he climbed into the shower.

Sometime later he emerged, feeling cleaner and substantially closer to human. All that was left was to get some food; sometime during his shower his appetite had re-appeared. He pulled clean clothes from his duffel bag and dressed slowly, then put in his AR contacts and began to look for his Hermes Ikon. He found it on the nightstand, right next to Lenore’s rosary and her Transys Avalon. Lydia had left it there after all. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said quietly to the nightstand. Picking his Ikon up, he turned it on, keyed his password, and was immediately greeted by a blinking indicator in his field of vision telling him he had a message waiting.

Quickly, he put his earbuds in and brought the message up as he picked up his sister’s commlink. It was an audio-only message; Lydia’s husky Louisiana accent filled his ears. She didn’t sound angry. Considering how they’d parted, this surprised him. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while, Thomas. My report’s going to show that the fire started because of the fight, and that we managed to recover her commlink before we escaped. It isn’t evidence tampering if I ask you for your help in getting past your sister’s security codes. I need it back, though, the sooner the better.” There was a pause, then she said, “I’m sorry, Thomas. About everything.” The message ended, and he sat there alone in silence for a minute or two as he turned the Avalon over and over in his hands.

Finally, he pushed the power button on his sister’s commlink and brought it to life. The unit’s touchscreen lit up with a keypad. He stared at it for a while, considering possible phrases she might have used. It was almost certainly something he’d know; she knew his love for electronics, and there had been no notes written down. Any notes she’d left regarding Fear the Dark were almost certainly on her commlink, and she’d wanted him to have that data.

Of Mice and Men. No. Steinbeck. No. George. No. Lennie. No. Rabbits. No.

He smiled sadly as another thought struck him. *That thou doest, do quickly.* The screen flickered a moment, and then the words *Access Granted* appeared on the screen. A moment later, his earbuds and contacts indicated that they’d synced with the Avalon, and then Lenore’s voice began to speak in his ears. “Tommy, if you’re listening to this, then I’m free of the Monster. I have you to thank for that. Don’t be sad. We both knew it would have to happen.

“The information you need to deal with the vampire who made me is in your hands now. There’s other information here for your lady friend. I hope you both use it appropriately. Good-bye.”

The message ended, and an ARO opened up showing a folder labeled *Detective Bowden*. He copied it to his



own commlink for later, but otherwise left it alone. Lydia could deal with those files herself when he gave her the commlink. The folder bearing his name, he copied over to his Ikon, then erased from Lenore's device. Flicking through the rest of the commlink's contents, he discovered that it was mostly empty. The only other data he could find was the contacts list, which only contained five names. One was Karla's, one was his, and one was their mother's. The other two were more curious: *Jericho* and *Deacon*. The mysterious minotaur who'd visited him here had called himself Jericho. He brought up the virtual card the man had sent him; the commcodes matched. He'd figure out how she knew him later.

Who was Deacon, he wondered? He sifted through some of the material that Lenore had earmarked for him and saw the name appear several times. He felt anger rising in his chest as he saw who this woman was and who she worked for. For all intents and purposes, this woman *was* Fear the Dark, and behind Fear the Dark was the man who had caused him and his family so much pain over the last couple of decades.

"Call Deacon," he told the commlink. It responded immediately.

The connection itself took a long time; he could imagine that this call was being shunted over any number of Matrix hosts to camouflage its actual destination. Eventually, a woman answered. "Well, hello," she said, her voice light and Southern. Thomas thought the accent was Georgia, maybe Alabama, but he wasn't sure. "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"I reckon not. Is this Deacon?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Who is this?" The voice was sterner now; she had *clearly* not been expecting a man's voice, at least not his.

"My name is Thomas McAllister. I believe you know my sister, Lenore."

There was a brief pause. "Yes, Dr. McAllister, I do know your sister."

He nodded, though she couldn't see it. "You work for Ian Richards?"

"Yes, Doctor, I do," she replied.

"Then you should both know that Lenore's dead," he told her. "And you should also know this, Ms. Deacon: I'm coming for you. Both of you."

He broke the connection before she could answer.



GAME INFORMATION

USING THIS BOOK WITH SHADOWRUN, FIFTH EDITION

The Game Information for *Sail Away Sweet Sister* is provided with stats for both *Shadowrun, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* and *Shadowrun, Fifth Edition*. Several of the qualities, metamagic techniques, spells, and weapon modifications listed here are not detailed in the *Shadowrun, Fifth Edition* core rulebook. Supplemental rulebooks such as *Run Faster* and *Street Grimoire*, which will provide more details about these items, are coming soon. Where necessary, though, interim rules are presented here. Any rules presented here will be superseded by later supplemental rulebooks.

CHARACTERS

THOMAS MCALLISTER

VITAL STATS

Date of Birth: 13 May 2024
Height: 1.78 m
Weight: 81.6 kg
Hair: Black
Eyes: Grey
Gender: Male
Metatype: Human
Awakened: Yes (Shaman)

SRS

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
3	4	4	3	5	5	5	4	9	4	6

Condition Monitor (P/S): 10/11

Armor: 9

Limits: Physical 5, Mental 7, Social 7

Physical Initiative: 9 + 1D6

Astral Initiative: 10 + 2D6

Active Skills: Arcana 7, Artificing 4, Assensing 9 (Astral Signatures +2) 9, Astral Combat 3, Banishing 4, Binding 3, Blades 3, Chemistry 7, Computer 5 (Data Search +2), Counterspelling 7, Exotic Ranged Weapon (Bracer) 1, First Aid 9, Instruction 8, Intimidation 1, Medicine 10 (Magical Health +2), Perception 7 (Visual +2), Pilot Ground Craft 3, Pistols 3, Ritual Spellcasting 3, Running 3, Spellcasting 10, Summoning 7, Swimming 3, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: Action Trids 7 (Neil the Ork Barbarian +2), Anatomy 9, Area Knowledge: Houston 5, Biology 9, Gaming 3, Goblin Rock Bands 4, Magical Theory 9, Magical Threats 7, Physiology 9, Sports 3 (Football +2), Vampire Lore 8, Virology 10 (HMHVV +2)

Languages: English N, Japanese 4, Spanish 5

Qualities: Analytical Mind, College Education, Day Job (10 hrs/wk), Mentor Spirit, Reduced Sense (Smell, Complete), Senses Vertigo, SINner (National, CAS)

Initiate Grade: 3

Metamagics: Centering, masking, psychometry

Spells: Alleviate Addiction, Alleviate Allergy, Antidote, Armor, Bind, Confusion, Cure Disease, Detect Individual, Detect Life (Extended), Detox, Diagnose, Fix, Fling, Foreboding, Heal, Healthy Glow, Increase Reflexes, Levitate, Light, Magic Fingers, Manabolt, Night Vision, Preserve, Prophylaxis, Resist Pain, Shatter, Slay Vampire, Stabilize, Sterilize, Stunball, Stunbolt
Mentor Spirit: Great Mother [+2 dice to Medicine tests, +2 dice to Health magic, -1 die for combat]

Gear: AR contacts [Rating 3 w/ image link, smartlink, thermographic vision], AR earbuds, AR wristbands, 2x clips of regular ammo, commlink [Hermes Ikon, Device Rating 5], license [legitimate, concealed carry], lined coat, medkit, Uncle Wayne's military dogtags [Sustaining focus 3 (Manipulation spells)], silver ring [Sustaining focus 2 (Health spells)], sister Lenore's high school class ring [Power focus 3]

Weapons:

Colt Government 2066 [Heavy Pistol, Acc 6 (8), DV 7P, AP -1, SA, RC —, 14 (c), w/ regular ammo, smartlink]

SR4A

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	4	4	3	4	5	5	5	9	4	6	9	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 6/4

Active Skills: Arcana 4, Assensing 5 (Astral Signatures +2), Astral Combat 2, Banishing 3, Binding 2, Blades 2, Chemistry 4, Computer 3, Counterspelling 4, Data Search 3, Enchanting 3, Exotic Ranged Weapon (Bracer) 1, First Aid 5, Instruction 4, Intimidation 1, Medicine 6 (Magical Health +2), Perception 4 (Visual +2), Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols 2, Ritual Spellcasting 2, Running 2, Spellcasting 6, Summoning 4, Swimming 2, Unarmed Combat 2
Knowledge Skills: Action Trids 4 (Neil the Ork Barbarian +2), Anatomy 5, Area Knowledge: Houston 2, Biology 5, Gaming 2, Goblin Rock Bands 3, Magical Theory 5, Magical Threats 4, Physiology 5, Sports 2 (Football +2), Vampire Lore 4, Virology 6 (HMHVV +2)

Languages: English N, Japanese 3, Spanish 3

Qualities: Analytical Mind, College Education, Day Job (10 hrs/wk), Magician, Mentor Spirit, Reduced Sense (Smell, Complete), Senses Vertigo, SINner (CAS)

Initiate Grade: 3

Metamagics: Centering, masking, psychometry

Gear: AR contacts [Rating 3 w/ image link, smartlink, and thermographic vision], AR earbuds, AR wristbands, 2x clips of regular ammo, commlink [Hermes Ikon w/ Novatech Navi, Response 4, Signal 3, System 5, Firewall 5], license [legitimate, concealed carry], lined coat, medkit, Uncle Wayne's military dogtags [Sustaining focus 3 (Manipulation spells)], silver ring [Sustaining focus 2 (Health spells)], sister Lenore's high school class ring [Power focus 3]

Spells: Alleviate Addiction, Alleviate Allergy, Antidote, Armor, Bind, Confusion, Cure Disease, Detect Individual, Detect Life (Extended), Detox, Diagnose, Fix, Fling, Foreboding, Heal, Healthy Glow, Increase Reflexes, Levitate, Light, Magic Fingers, Manabolt, Night Vision, Preserve, Prophylaxis, Resist Pain, Shatter, Slay Vampire, Stabilize, Sterilize, Stunball, Stunbolt
Mentor Spirit: Great Mother [+2 dice to Health spells, +2 dice for earth spirits, -1 die for Combat spells]

Weapons:

Colt Government 2066 [Heavy Pistol, DV 5P, AP -1, SA, RC 1, 14 (c), w/ regular ammo, smartlink]



LYDIA BOWDEN

VITAL STATS

Date of Birth: 6 February 2029
Height: 1.63 m
Weight: 54.4 kg
Hair: Light brown
Eyes: Brown
Gender: Female
Metatype: Human
Awakened: No

SRS

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	Edg	Ess
4	5	5 (7)	4	4	4	5	3	4	1.6

Condition Monitor (P/S): 10/10

Armor: 9

Limits: Physical 6 (7), Mental 6, Social 4

Physical Initiative: 10 + 1D6 (12 + 3D6)

Active Skills: Archery 3, Automatics 8, Blades 4, Computer 9 (Data Search +2), Etiquette 4, First Aid 3, Gymnastics 5, Instruction 3, Intimidation 7, Leadership 7, Longarms 4, Negotiation 7, Perception 9 (Visual +2), Pilot Ground Craft 8 (Car +2), Pistols 10 (Ares Predator III +2), Running 4 (Urban +2), Sneaking 9, Swimming 3, Throwing Weapons 7, Tracking 4 (Urban+2), Unarmed Combat 9 (Counterstrike +2)

Knowledge Skills: Area Knowledge: Denver 8, Art (Impressionists) 5 (+2), Firearms 7, Forensics 9, Gangs 7, Literature 4, Police Procedure 10, Sci-Fi Trids 7, Security Companies (Knight Errant) 9 (+2), SWAT Tactics 9, Syndicates 7

Languages: English N, French 8, Japanese 4

Qualities: Ambidextrous, College Education, Day Job (40 hrs/wk), SINner (Full Corporate, Ares), Will to Live 2

Martial Arts: Karate [Counterstrike (allows for Unarmed Combat + Reaction Test versus melee attack to deliver damage to attacker), Kick (+1 Reach on Unarmed Combat attacks), Opposing Force (Block, +1 die to Block), Sweep (attacker may choose to deliver normal melee attack damage on successful Knockdown)]

Augmentations: (all alphaware) Bone lacing (Kevlar), cybears [Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement 3, balance augments, damper, ear recording unit, and sound link], cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ eye recording unit, image link, low-light vision, thermographic vision, flare compensation, and protective covers (transparent)], datajack, smartlink [w/ off-hand induction pad], wired reflexes 2

Gear: Actioneer Business Clothes, 4x clips of standard ammo, commlink (Erika Elite, Device Rating 4), flashlight, Ford Americar (w/ engine customization [acceleration], engine customization [speed], improved suspension, and vehicle sensor), handcuffs, license (legitimate, concealed carry)

Weapons:

Ares Predator III [Heavy Pistol, Acc 6 (8), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC 1, 15 (c), w/ personalized grip and safe target system]

SR4A

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	5	5 (7)	4	3	5	4	4	4	1.6	10 (12)	1 (3)

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (P/I): 6/3

Active Skills: Archery 2, Automatics 5, Blades 3, Climbing 3, Computer 5, Data Search 5, Dodge 4, Etiquette 3, First Aid 2, Infiltration 4, Instruction

2, Intimidation 3, Leadership 4, Longarms 3, Negotiation 4, Perception 5 (Visual +2), Pilot Ground Craft 5 (Car +2), Pistols 6 (Ares Predator III +2), Running 3 (Urban +2), Shadowing 4, Swimming 2, Throwing Weapons 4, Tracking 3 (Urban +2), Unarmed Combat 5 (Martial Arts +2)

Knowledge Skills: Area Knowledge: Denver 5, Art 3 (Impressionists +2), Firearms 4, Forensics 5, Gangs 4, Literature 3, Police Procedure 6, Sci-Fi Trids 4, Security Companies 5 (Knight Errant +2), SWAT Tactics 5, Syndicates 4

Languages: English N, French 4, Japanese 3

Qualities: Ambidextrous, College Education, Day Job (40 hrs/wk), Martial Arts 3 (Karate, +1 die for Full Parry, +1 die on melee block Defense Tests, +1 DV on Unarmed Combat attacks), SINner (Ares), Will to Live 2

Augmentations: (all alphaware) Bone Lacing (Kevlar), Cybears (Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement 3, balance augments, damper, ear recording unit, and sound link), Cybereyes (Rating 3, w/ eye recording unit, image link, low-light vision, thermographic vision, flare compensation, and protective covers (transparent)), Datajack, Smartlink (SR2050-style, w/ off-hand induction pad), Wired Reflexes 2

Gear: Actioneer Business Clothes, 4x clips of standard ammo, commlink (Erika Elite w/ Novatech Navi, Response 4, Signal 4, System 6, Firewall 5), flashlight, Ford Americar (w/ engine customization [acceleration], engine customization [speed], improved suspension, and vehicle sensor), handcuffs, license (legitimate, concealed carry)

Programs: Analyze 4, Browse 6, Command 3, Edit 4

Maneuvers: Disarm, Ground Fighting, Kick Attack

Weapons:

Ares Predator III [Heavy Pistol, DV 5P, AP -1, SA, RC 1, 15 (c), w/ personalized grip and safe target system]

LENORE MCALLISTER

VITAL STATS

Date of Birth: 12 February 2029

Height: 1.55 m

Weight: 47.2 kg

Hair: Dark blonde (dyed black)

Eyes: Blue

Gender: Female

Metatype: Human (Vampire)

Awakened: Yes (Shaman)

SRS

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
3	5	6	2	4	5	5	6	7	8	3

Condition Monitor (P/S): 10/10

Armor: 6

Limits: Physical 5, Mental 7, Social 8

Physical Initiative: 11 + 2D6

Astral Initiative: 10 + 3D6

Active Skills: Arcana 3, Artisan 10 (Writing +2), Assensing 6, Computer 5, Counterspelling 6, Diving 1, Etiquette 5, First Aid 4, Instruction 7, Perception 6, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pistols 5, Spellcasting 9, Swimming 6, Unarmed Combat 6

Knowledge Skills: American History 4, Area Knowledge: Houston 7, English Literature 9 (20th Century +2), French Literature 7, High Fashion 4, Monster Movies/Trids 6 (Kaiju +2), Religion 4 (Catholicism +2), Vampire Groups 9 (Fear the Dark +2)

Languages: English N, French 4, Spanish 3

Qualities: Ambidextrous, Bilingual, College Education, Inspired, Speed Reading, Will to Live 2

Initiate Grade: 1



Metamagics: Masking

Gear: AR contacts [Rating 3 w/ flare compensation, image link, and low-light vision], AR earbuds [Rating 1, w/ spatial recognizer], AR wristbands, armor clothing, commlink [Transys Avalon, Device Rating 6]

Spells: Detect Life (Extended), Fling, Levitate, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Mask, Physical Barrier, Physical Mask, Stunbolt

Critter Powers: Dual Natured, Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell, Thermographic Vision), Essence Drain, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Infection, Mist Form, Regeneration, Sapience

Critter Weaknesses: Allergy (Sunlight, Severe), Allergy (Wood, Severe), Dietary Requirement (Metahuman Blood), Essence Loss, Induced Dormancy (Lack of Air)

Weapons/Attacks:

Natural Weapon [Bite: DV 3P, AP -1, -1 Reach]

SR4A

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
3	5	6	2	6	5	5	4	7	3	8	11	2

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/10

Armor (B/I): 4/0

Active Skills: Arcana 2, Artisan 7, Assensing 3, Computer 2, Counterspelling 3, Diving 1, Etiquette 3, First Aid 2, Instruction 4, Perception 3, Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols 2, Spellcasting 5, Swimming 3, Unarmed Combat 3

Knowledge Skills: American History 2, Area Knowledge: Houston 3, English Literature 5 (20th Century +2), French Literature 4, High Fashion 2, Monster Movies/Trids 3 (Kaiju +2), Religion 2 (Catholicism +2), Vampire Groups 4 (Fear the Dark +2)

Languages: English N, French N, Spanish 3

Qualities: Ambidextrous, Bilingual, College Education, Inspired. Magician, Speed Reading, Will to Live

Initiate Grade: 1

Metamagics: Masking

Gear: AR contacts [Rating 3 w/ flare compensation, image link, and low-light vision], AR earbuds [Rating 1, w/ spatial recognizer], AR wristbands, armor clothing, commlink [Transys Avalon w/ Novatech Navi, Response 5, Signal 4, System 5, Firewall 3]

Programs: Analyze 4, Browse 4, Command 2, Edit 4 (Pro User Suite)

Spells: Camouflage, Detect Life (Extended), Fling, Levitate, Makeover, Mana Barrier, Manabolt, Mask, Physical Barrier, Stunbolt

Critter Powers: Dual Natured, Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell, Thermographic Vision), Essence Drain, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Infection, Mist Form, Regeneration, Sapience

Critter Weaknesses: Allergy (Sunlight, Severe), Allergy (Wood, Severe), Dietary Requirement (Metahuman Blood), Essence Loss, Induced Dormancy (Lack of Air)

Weapons/Attacks:

Natural Weapon [Bite: DV 2P, AP 0, -1 Reach]

KARLA MARSHALL

VITAL STATS

Date of Birth: 29 August 2026

Height: 1.31 m

Weight: 52.2 kg

Hair: Auburn

Eyes: Brown

Gender: Female

Metatype: Dwarf

Awakened: No

SRS

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	Edg	Ess
6	3	4	5	5	4	6	5	3	5.3

Condition Monitor (P/S): 11/11

Armor: 6

Limits: Physical 7, Mental 7, Social 7

Physical Initiative: 10 + 1D6

Active Skills: Artisan 4 (Writing +2), Blades 2, Computer 6 (Data Search +2), Con 7, Etiquette 5, First Aid 3, Forgery 3, Gymnastics 2, Negotiation 6, Palming 4, Perception 7 (Aural +2), Pilot Ground Craft 4, Pistols 3, Sneaking 5, Tracking 3

Knowledge Skills: Combat Bikers 3, Criminal Psychology 5, Denver Streets 5, English Grammar 5, Infected Creatures 3, NewsNet Personnel 4, North American Media 4, Serial Killers 3

Languages: English N, Lakota 3, Spanish 4

Qualities: Analytical Mind

Augmentations: Cyberears [Rating 2, w/ audio enhancement 3, damper, select sound filter 4, sound link], cybereyes [Rating 2, w/ image link, low-light vision, vision enhancement 3, vision magnification], datajack

Gear: Armor clothing, bug scanner [Rating 3], commlink [Erika Elite, Device Rating 4], jammer (area, Rating 3), maglock passkey (Rating 3)

Weapons/Attacks:

Defiance EX Shocker [Taser, Acc 4, DV 9S(e), AP -5, SS, RC —, 4(m)]

SR4A

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
6	3	4	5	5	4	6	5	3	5.3	8	1

Condition Monitor (P/S): 11/11

Armor: 4/0

Active Skills: Artisan 2 (Writing +2), Blades 1, Computer 3, Con 4, Data Search 2, Dodge 2, Infiltration 2, Etiquette 2, First Aid 2, Forgery 2, Negotiation 3, Palming 2, Perception 4 (Aural +2), Pilot Ground Craft 2, Pistols 2, Tracking 2

Knowledge Skills: Combat Bikers 2, Criminal Psychology 3, Denver Streets 3, English Grammar 3, Infected Creatures 2, NewsNet Personnel 2, North American Media 2, Serial Killers 2

Languages: English N, Lakota 2, Spanish 2

Qualities: Analytical Mind

Augmentations: Cyberears [Rating 2, w/ audio enhancement 3, damper, select sound filter 4, sound link], cybereyes [Rating 2, w/ image link, low-light vision, vision enhancement 3, vision magnification], datajack

Gear: Armor clothing, bug scanner [Rating 3], commlink [Erika Elite, Device Rating 4], jammer (area, Rating 3), maglock passkey (Rating 3)

Weapons/Attacks:

Defiance EX Shocker [Taser, DV 8S(e), AP -half, SS, RC —, 4(m)]



COLONEL ANNE RAVENHEART

VITAL STATS

Date of Birth: 17 August 2016
Height: 1.67 m
Weight: 65 kg
Hair: Black
Eyes: Brown
Gender: Female
Metatype: Human
Awakened: Yes (Shaman)

SRS

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
4	4	5	3	6	5	6	4	13	7	5.6

Condition Monitor (P/S): 10/11

Armor: 6

Limits: Physical 5, Mental 8, Social 7

Physical Initiative: 11 + 1D6

Astral Initiative: 12 + 2D6

Active Skills: Arcana 10, Assensing 11, Astral Combat 10, Athletics skill group 3, Banishing 4, Binding 7, Close Combat skill group 5, Computer 4 (Data Search +2), Counterspelling 9, Enchanting 7, Etiquette 9, Firearms skill group 9, First Aid 7, Free Fall 3, Heavy Weapons 7 (Machine Guns +2), Instruction 7, Leadership 8, Perception 10, Pilot Aircraft 4, Pilot Ground Craft 7, Ritual Spellcasting 7, Spellcasting 11 (Combat spells +2), Summoning 9 (Spirits of Man +2), Survival 4, Tracking 7 (Urban +2)

Knowledge Skills: Area Knowledge: Chicago 10 (Containment Zone +2), Criminal Groups 7, Firearms 8, Folk Music 7 (Native American +2), Magical Groups 7, Magical Theory 4, Magical Threats 10 (Insect Spirits +2), Police Procedure 5, Public Relations 4, Romantic Trids 3 (Magical +2), Security Companies 10 (Knight Errant +2), SWAT Tactics 9, UCAS Politics 7

Languages: English 10, Sioux N, Spanish 4

Qualities: SINner (Full Corporate, Ares), Spirit Affinity: Spirits of Man

Initiate Grade: 8

Metamagics: Absorption, centering, cleansing, divining, invoking, masking, quickening, shielding

Spells: Acid Stream, Analyze Truth, Antidote, Armor, Astral Armor, Blast, Combat Sense, Detox, Fix, Flamethrower, Heal, Healthy Glow, Increase Reflexes, Makeover, Mana Barrier, Manaball, Manabolt, Mass Confusion, Phantasm, Powerbolt, Prophylaxis, Shattershield, Silence, Spirit Barrier, Stabilize, Stunball, Stunbolt, Toxic Wave

Spirits: 1 x spirit of man (Force 8, 3 services; manifests as an old Lakota woman), 1 x spirit of air (Force 8, 2 services), 4 x watcher spirits

Augmentations: Cybereyes [Rating 2, w/ eye recording unit, flare compensation, image link, low-light vision, thermographic vision], datajack

Gear: AR Gloves, area jammer (Rating 7), armor clothing, earbuds [Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement 3, select sound filter 3, spatial recognizer], commlink (Erika Elite, Device Rating 4), holo projector, mage sight goggles, medkit (Rating 3), plasteel restraints, power focus (beaded necklace, Rating 4), 20 x RFID Tags

Weapons:

Fichetti Security 600 [Light Pistol, Acc 6 (7), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC (1), 30 (c), w/ folding stock, laser sight, explosive ammo]

Stoner-Ares M202 [Medium Machine Gun, Acc 5 (6), DV 10P, AP -3, FA, RC —, 50 (c) or 100 (belt), w/ laser sight]

Vibro blade knife [Blade, Reach —, Acc 5, DV 5P, AP -2]

SR4A

B	A	R	S	C	I	L	W	M	Edg	Ess	Init	IP
4	4	5	3	4	6	5	6	13	7	5.6	11	1

Condition Monitor Boxes (P/S): 10/11

Armor (B/I): 4/0

Active Skills: Arcana 6, Assensing 6, Astral Combat 6, Athletics skill group 2, Banishing 3, Binding 4, Close Combat skill group 3, Computer 2, Counterspelling 5, Data Search 1, Enchanting 4, Etiquette 5, Firearms skill group 5, First Aid 4, Heavy Weapons 4 (Machine Guns +2), Instruction 4, Leadership 4, Parachuting 2, Perception 6, Pilot Aircraft 3, Pilot Ground Craft 4, Ritual Spellcasting 4, Spellcasting 10 (Combat Spells +2), Summoning 5 (Spirits of Man +2), Survival 3, Tracking 4 (Urban +2)

Knowledge Skills: Area Knowledge: Chicago 5 (Containment Zone +2), Criminal Groups 4, Firearms 4, Folk Music 4 (Native American +2), Magical Groups 4, Magical Theory 3, Magical Threats 5 (Insect Spirits +2), Police Procedure 3, Public Relations 3, Romantic Trids 2 (Magical +2), Security Companies 5 (Knight Errant +2), SWAT Tactics 5, UCAS Politics 4

Languages: English 6, Sioux N, Spanish 2

Qualities: Magician, SINner (Ares), Spirit Affinity: Spirits of Man

Initiate Grade: 8

Metamagics: Absorption, centering, cleansing, divining, invoking, masking, quickening, shielding

Spells: Acid Stream, Analyze Truth, Antidote, Armor, Astral Armor, Blast, Combat Sense, Detox, Fix, Flamethrower, Heal, Healthy Glow, Increase Reflexes, Makeover, Mana Barrier, Manaball, Manabolt, Mass Confusion, Phantasm, Powerbolt, Prophylaxis, Shattershield, Silence, Spirit Barrier, Stabilize, Stunball, Stunbolt, Toxic Wave

Spirits: 1 x spirit of man (Force 8, 3 services; manifests as an old Lakota woman), 1 x spirit of air (Force 8, 2 services), 4 x watcher spirits

Augmentations: Cybereyes [Rating 2, w/ eye recording unit, flare compensation, image link, low-light vision, thermographic vision], datajack

Gear: AR Gloves, area jammer (Rating 7), armor clothing, earbuds [Rating 3, w/ audio enhancement 3, select sound filter 3, spatial recognizer], Erika Elite commlink [Response 3, Signal 4, Firewall 3, System 4], holo projector, mage sight goggles, medkit (Rating 3), plasteel restraints, power focus (beaded necklace, Rating 4), 20 x RFID Tags

Weapons:

Fichetti Security 600 [Light Pistol, DV 5P, AP —, SA, RC (1), 30(c), w/ folding stock, laser sight, explosive ammo]

Stoner-Ares M202 [Medium Machine Gun, DV 6P, AP -2, FA, RC —, 50(c) or 100 (belt), w/ laser sight]

Vibro blade knife [Blade, Reach —, DV 4P, AP -2]



QUALITIES

POSITIVE QUALITIES

COLLEGE EDUCATION

Cost: 2 Karma

A character with the College Education quality has not only attended an institution of higher education but has made the most out of her stay and knows a substantial amount about a diverse group of academic subjects. The College Education quality modifies the Mental limit by +1 for any Academic Knowledge skill tests made by the character.

WEAPONS & GEAR

FIREARMS

ARES PREDATOR III

A favorite of law enforcement in the 2060s, the Predator III combines a rugged frame with a menacing appearance. Its integrated smartlink system is incompatible with modern wireless protocols and requires a translator program and either a fiber optic cable or skinlink to interact with modern PANs. Older, pre-Crash 2.0 smartlink systems (such as the one possessed by Lieutenant Lydia Bowden) require no such adaptations to function properly with the pistol.

SRS

ACC	DAM	AP	MODE	RC	AMMO	AVAIL	COST
5 (7)	7P	-1	SA	—	15 (c)	6R	600¥

SR4A

DAM	AP	MODE	RC	AMMO	AVAIL	COST
5P	-1	SA	—	15 (c)	6R	600¥

INSPIRED

Cost: 4 Karma

That chorus with the earworm hook. The story that grabs you by the throat and won't let you go. The painting whose colors seem to move and dance as you stare at them. That's what an Inspired character can pull off. They have a reputation for being able to pull off miracles in their chosen field, and for having the muses whisper regularly in their ear. Choosing this quality provides an Artisan specialization for the character of their choice; unlike normal specializations, this one gives +3 dice to the Artisan test. The character also receives a +2 bonus in Street Cred (p. 372, SR5) among anyone who has knowledge of the area in which the character has their specialization.

MELEE WEAPONS

Vibro Blade: The blades of these weapons are serrated, and they vibrate at more than twenty times per second; they saw their way through their target, as well as slicing. This feature causes the weapon to hum audibly, making the weapon useless in situations requiring stealth.

The weapon's battery lasts for two hours, and it takes one hour to recharge. Additional batteries can be purchased for 25 nuyen each. Removing or inserting a battery into a vibro blade requires a Complex Action. If using the weapon unpowered, reduce the DV by 1 and ignore the AP modifier.

VIBRO KNIFE (SR5)

ACC	REACH	DAM	AP	AVAIL	COST
5	—	(STR+2)P	-2	6R	1,000¥

VIBRO SWORD (SR5)

ACC	REACH	DAM	AP	AVAIL	COST
6	1	(STR+4)P	-2	8F	2,000¥

WEAPON MODIFICATIONS

Personalized Grip: This modification is available for both ranged and melee weapons that include a handle or grip. It customizes the grip to a specific person's hand. When using this weapon, this person receives a +1 bonus to the weapon's Accuracy. This is cumulative with any other Accuracy modifiers used with the weapon.



RENFIELD & VAMPIRIC PAWNS

Sometimes, a vampire needs to get things done during daylight hours, or with a certain degree of circumspection. Often he can simply hire someone to do these things, but some things require more trust and discretion than the simple bonds of an employer/employee relationship can provide. A vampire often needs someone he can control completely.

He needs a pawn. A vampiric pawn, to be precise.

In the late 2040s and early 2050s, it was believed that the ability to create vampiric pawns was limited to a small subset of vampires and nosferatu. It has since come to light that nearly anybody Infected with HMMHVV-I can do it, provided they have the proper tools and training. Vampiric pawns used to be created by feeding the victim the vampire's blood, though this method was hit or miss at best. Now, in the 2070s, it's done through a drug called known on the streets as Renfield.

Renfield, while not an alchemical preparation in the strictest sense of the word, is a magically produced drug used by vampires (and other HMMHVV-I Infected) to create vampiric pawns. Creating the drug requires the vampire to draw approximately 250 ml of his own blood and then combine it with certain exotic (and potentially toxic) reagents and other ingredients; these ingredients can vary wildly, depending on which vampire is making the drug and how he was taught to make it.

Once the ingredients are combined, the vampire performs certain incantations over it. This is an extensive process, which costs the vampire 1 point of Essence when it is completed. In *SR4A* terms, this is an extended Enchanting + Magic (18, 12 hours) Test. In *SR5* terms, it is an extended Alchemy + Magic [Astral] (18, 12 hours) Test. Any glitches during this test cause the drug to impart one less point of Essence per glitch to the recipient when it is taken. A critical glitch means the enchantment fails, and the vampire loses the point of Essence for nothing. Edge may be spent on this test.

Once the drug is complete, it's time to administer it to

the (prospective) vampiric pawn. Ideally, the potion is ingested, but it can be injected if needed; after all, the chosen pawn may not be a willing volunteer.

Renfield is both physiologically and psychologically addictive. Once the pawn has become addicted to the drug, he gains the Immunity (Age) critter power (p. 295, *SR4A*; p. 397, *SR5*) and the Essence Loss weakness (p. 298, *SR4A*; p. 401, *SR5*). Immunity (Age) remains in effect as long as the pawn receives a regular dose of the drug. What constitutes "regular" is left to the gamemaster's discretion, but most vampires won't give a dose more frequently than once a quarter, due to the great personal expense involved in creating it.

Once transformed, the pawn is dependent upon the drug to maintain his Essence; even if he breaks the habit, he'll still have the Essence Loss weakness. Each dose gives him 1D6 points of Essence; he can carry up to twice his natural Essence, just like a vampire.

RENFIELD (SR5)

Vector: Ingestion, Injection

Speed: 1 Combat Turn

Duration: 7 days

Addiction Type: Both

Effect: Agility +1, Intuition +1, Strength +1, +1 Physical Limit, Euphoria (8 - Body hours, minimum 1 hour), +1D6 Initiative

Addiction Rating: 8

Addiction Threshold: 3

RENFIELD (SR4)

Duration: 7 days

Effect: Agility +1, Intuition +1, Strength +1, Euphoria (8 - Body hours, minimum 1 hour), +1 Initiative Pass

Addiction Type: Both

Addiction Threshold: 3



SPELLS

COMBAT SPELLS

ONE LESS [METATYPE/SPECIES] (DIRECT, TOUCH)

Type: M **Range:** T **Damage:** P
Duration: I **DV:** F-7

SLAY [METATYPE/SPECIES] (DIRECT)

Type: M **Range:** LOS **Damage:** P
Duration: I **DV:** F-4

SLAUGHTER [METATYPE/SPECIES] (DIRECT, AREA)

Type: M **Range:** LOS (A) **Damage:** P
Duration: I **DV:** F-1

These are variations of the Death Touch, Manabolt, and Manaball spells (p. 284, SR5). They're specialized, designed to target a particular species or metatype: One Less Naga, Slay Ork, Slaughter Vampires, and so on. The target of each spell is designated by the spell formula. These spells only discriminate based on biological species, not social status or any other quality.

One Less requires the caster to touch the target. Slay affects a single target. Slaughter is an area effect spell.

MENTOR SPIRIT ARCHETYPES

GREAT MOTHER

The Great Mother embodies nature, and supports all living things. She also embodies fertility; her bounty is great, even in the Sixth World, and she gives of it generously to anyone who needs it. She will fight to the death to protect her children. Her followers are healers of both body and soul, and cannot refuse aid to those who need it.

ADVANTAGES

All: +2 dice pool modifier to either First Aid or Medicine Tests (choose one)

Magicians: +2 dice for spells, preparations, and rituals in the Health category

Adepts: 1 free level of Rapid Healing

DISADVANTAGES

Followers of the Great Mother are lovers and healers, not fighters. As a result, they suffer a -1 dice pool modifier for any combat-related actions (using a combat skill, or casting a spell from the Combat category).

Similar Archetypes: Fertility, Healing

CREDITS

Dedicated, with love and respect, to Dan Johnson, who taught me the beauty of the English language, and his wife Laura, who taught me how to type. Thanks, both of you; I couldn't have done it without you. -Patrick

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