

Edited by Matthew Dawkins

A Golconda Story

G. Houtchens

STORYTELLERS
VAULT 

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Glossary

Blood magic- a power/discipline used by the Tremere to create unusual effects. Other Kindred call it blood magic as they don't understand it.

Court- a meeting of vampires, usually held by the Prince of a city to deal with issues of Kindred law

Haven- safe house for a family of Kindred

Kindred- word that vampires use to refer to themselves

Kine- word Kindred use for human mortals

Nosferatu- Clan of vampires known for intelligence gathering and a hideous/cursed appearance

Regent- Head of a Tremere chantry, usually an elder

Thaumaturgy- a type of blood magic practiced by the Tremere

Tremere- Clan of vampires (Kindred) known for secret mystic powers

Vitae- a word that Kindred use for blood

Character List in Order of Appearance

Aaron Blick- student, Tremere acolyte

Patricia Heron- writer; curious and intelligent, naïve

Aurah Washborne- owner of the Washborne Hotel and editor of the Little Tokyo Observer

Deacon Lyle- murderer, enforcer

Tattooed Man- broke "the rule"

Officer Wei- he protects and serves

Desk Sergeant- befuddled and lazy

Lyon Jeffries- mechanic at Scooters Auto Repair

Father Mikhail- rector at Holy Sacrifice Episcopal

Meg Wycliffe- distraught Asian widow

Khalid el-Mazri- owner, The Daily Grind

Serishen Cagney- waitress, The Daily Grind

Expert Falworth- IT guy, regular customer at The Daily Grind

Nix Maruti- owner, Scooter's Auto Repair

The Monster- Harold the wolf spider

Jeri Jaxxon- woman with claws

Amalthea McMahon- Patty's friend; has bad dreams

Abi Moore- photographer for The LT Observer

Gabriel Montagne- owner, Arts Haven

Wrenn Antara- kiosk lady at Arts Haven

Cillian Sass- Nosferatu, "phantom of the opera"

Tisa Ilyar- employee, The Book Rook

Dr. Derrial Bleac- owner, The Book Rook, Tremere elder

Penny Angel- insane pedestrian

Scarlett Renner- Sabbat leader

Luke Sabatelle- Sabbat Kindred

Sabiya Nikolaidis- detective, LT police

Tyson Vox- Prince of Little Tokyo

Kayler Augustus- Seneschal of Little Tokyo, assistant to the Prince

Dominae, Byron Hammerer, Wynter Paine- Toreador Kindred

Reverend John Mark Inglewood- Catholic priest and officer in the Leopold Society

Anton Gregory- Lasombra Kindred

The Vozhd- itself

Prologue

In the recesses of every city, in the deep corners of every society there lies an unseen, undetected menace. Menace is probably too kind a word – the concept is more akin to a group that is a lethal threat to any and all that happen to cross their paths. Faster than the eye can follow, they disappear as shadows do in the corner of one's eye. They are most adept at hiding from the light of understanding yet in certain instances they brazenly display themselves to a naïve and unsuspecting world.

These predators are different in the animal kingdom, if they could even be considered as such. They are not normal or natural in the broadest sense of the term. Cold blooded and nocturnal, they hunt at the very top of all food chains, their prey oblivious to the stark terror that lurks within their midst. They feed on humans.

The sundew promises nectar, glistening from tender stalks. The snapping turtle has a tasty worm wriggling in a small cave. These are evolutionary adaptations. A sparkling eye or a honeyed tongue can be equally dangerous for those lured towards their doom. Not that entrapment is necessary of course, for even the thickest steel is no match for these dwellers in the dark, much less human efforts or ingenuity.

But these predators are different from all others. They have no aging process. Reproduction is not accomplished through sex cells but rather through a form of blood transfusion, with spiritual implications and consequences. They are vampires; they do exist... and I should know.

Grime in the streets would move aside if it could to avoid these unholy, undead creations.

Twisted versions of their human counterparts, each is like a film negative of humanity, with virtues cruelly bent inward to serve themselves. Driven by instinct to feed on blood, they play a

game pretending to be the loving, laughing, vibrant individuals they once were. It's a bloody parody – a cosmic joke. They masquerade, pretending to be what they are not and fooling themselves that they are not the monsters they have become.

Some say the origin of these creatures stretches back to the beginnings of the human race. Caine was allegedly the very first of their kind. Never dying, shunned by the warm life-giving light of the sun and cursed by God, he would become the legendary father of all vampires, or Kindred as they call themselves. Later, the Clans that arose from his progeny with their peculiar traits would strive for power and control behind the scenes in a never ending struggle of futility.

As for me... well... let's just say I have a unique perspective. Whether it was fate, karma, bad luck or a combination of all three that placed this path before me I do not know. I can't help but feel that the individuals I have met and the places I have been are a small part of a greater, unseen design. The extraordinary circumstances that resulted in my involvement could have been avoided with even the slightest of deviations. I wish it might have been so.

I do have a final warning. Beware the words of this chronicle. Put it down. Burn or bury it. Drop it into the sea. Failing that, send it far away if you can and never mention it to another. For if it were discovered that you had access to this material, you would become a target. Then, there would be little anyone could do for you. I urgently caution you, avoid *their* attention at all costs.

Chapter One: A Curious Beginning

Aaron slipped into his master's room illuminated dimly by blue luminescent mosses. The Regent, Derrial, would destroy him in ten different ways if he were discovered, but that was not going to happen; all his plans had fallen into place. The stuffy Tremere elders were out for the

night leaving him alone to test his forbidden knowledge. He smirked thinking about how he had put one over on all of them. They had no clue he was immune to the standard conditioning.

He allowed one fang to grow and punctured his finger, squeezing out a drop of blood on the table of rituals, an arcane platform designed for secretive Tremere arts. Getting out what looked to be a wedding ring box, he opened it. The wolf spider which Aaron had named Harold, crawled out onto the surface of the table. Its movements were hampered as it crawled; four central legs on its torso had previously been removed as the cryptic instructions demanded.

Eight eyes surveyed the landscape on the mystic platform. Harold paused, then noticed the blood drop. It made a beeline scuttling as best it could towards the scarlet orb. Touching the vitae tentatively with one black, hairy foreleg, the arachnid plunged its mandibles into the dark red fluid and began sucking greedily. Aaron watched his little friend then completed the necessary requirements of the ritual.

When the spider was finished Aaron scooped it up and placed Harold back into the ring case, which then went into his jacket pocket. He quickly vacated his master's room and went back to his study, placing the jacket over the back of his chair. Still thrilled with his successful crime, he settled back to a night of study. His little pet, his little spy would prove quite useful in the chantry over the coming nights. Even more privileged information, even greater knowledge would be his for the taking. He would gain power without anyone being the wiser.

However, the arachnid was not so little anymore. Harold had begun to grow inside the velvet prison, and armed now with a pseudo intelligence as well as exceptional strength, it opened the clasp and crawled out from the pocket behind Aaron's back. The spider pivoted on the jacket, surveying the room with its perceptive, beady eyes. The ventilation duct was on the opposite

side of the study, and beyond that, freedom. By the time the creature had made its way out into the night air it was 10 inches across. All Aaron would find later would be an open Pandora's Box of his ill-fated attempt to gain power.

It all started out innocently enough. I never would have considered, much less imagined the incidents that occurred, the revelations that were to unfold. This record is written so that in the event others happen to find themselves along the path I followed, they might find wisdom in learning what not to do.

It was the summer of 2005. I was new in the town of Little Tokyo, a suburb of San Francisco, north of the bay. The town itself is laid out like a square clock, with districts generally following a central theme. On the north end are the municipal buildings; City Hall, the LT Police and Fire Departments, Angel of Mercies Hospital and the Bark and Bite Pet Store. There's also the Washborne Hotel, a touch of elegance in a city pretending to be bigger and more important than it actually is. Finally, there are several office buildings that house lawyers. May they be the very first to go when the big quake hits.

To the west is Club Inferno, a local hot spot, playing techno, heavy rock, goth and grunge depending on what night you visit. Arts Haven is a museum of fine art of unique design that houses treasures usually found in much more prestigious institutions. Finally there is the Daily Grind—a coffee shop—and some apartments where I reside.

On the east side is a comic book shop, a central gathering point for people with strange tastes and questionable hygiene. The Book Rook is a specialty store with both best sellers and recycled

older out of print stuff. Numerous oriental restaurants dot the street as well as Highdale Park and Holy Sacrifice Episcopal.

On the south side are the docks and the industrial district. Warehouses and container ships clutter the shoreline and stevedores sweat all day moving tons of cargo. Cheap housing in crime infested neighborhoods crowd the rest of the area here.

Downtown has the medium size high rises and the merchant district. Shops fill the streets for two blocks in every direction. Glass fingers poke up from among the boxes of the city.

As for me, at the time I was 25 years old. I was an only child. Family was a subject I tried to avoid. Christmas and birthdays were very lonely, especially when others had loved ones with them. I suppose in hindsight I was left looking for a place to belong... to matter... to be able to express myself and somehow make a difference in the world.

I was always kind of artsy, in an intellectual way. I found myself attracted to writing and received my degree in journalism. During my senior year in college and shortly after, I worked for my ex-boyfriend's detective agency, setting up security cameras to catch cheating husbands in the act. The irony was, he was cheating on me the entire time. I left that relationship hurt, alone and heartbroken.

I waitressed for a couple of years because the newspapers were downsizing or going out of business due to the internet. All the TV stations were fully staffed. Life in the real world after graduation was... not all I had thought it would be, filled with romance, fulfillment and a great paying job. Then, I read about an opening in the local paper, a yellow rag called "The Little Tokyo Observer." It was sheer crap, an "American Tattler" copycat filled with salacious stories, local gossip and mindless tripe. Although I hated compromising my integrity, it was a job.

By contrast, the Washborne Hotel was pure class. Exterior lights illuminated the white outer façade, a relic of a bygone age when craftsmanship was a trade and design was not sullied by plastic and cheap electronic gimmicks. I arrived at the Observer offices at the top of the four-storied historic building in a conservative, belted black dress, low heels and minimal jewelry, portfolio in hand for my evening appointment. The high ceilings were noticeable here as well as the non-functional side wall steam radiators, leftovers from the time it was built. Roses blossomed in pots on either side of the glass double doors. As I entered the foyer, I noticed several different branching hallways. The office in front of me had a plaque: Aurah Washborne, Editor.

“Patricia Heron?” I heard my name called from inside. *Here we go.* I straightened my shoulders, put on a smile and walked in.

Her office was stunning. The décor itself was all done in a black and red motif with beige accents; high end artwork and exquisite vases lined the shelves and walls. Black walnut floors offered polished reflections making the office seem larger than it was. Ms. Washborne was a woman gifted with good genetics; a petite, upturned nose, high cheekbones, blue grey eyes and pert endowments; some people have all the luck. Just like her office, her hair and makeup were perfect, her designer dress, perfect, her accessories, perfect. Miss America smiled professionally as she rose from her desk and extended her hand, which I shook. It was cold.

“Let’s see what we have here,” she mused as she opened my portfolio and began to scan, turning the pages without reading too much, just getting a feel for my work. The minutes crawled by as she evaluated my work. After a while those grey eyes glanced up at me from over the top of the papers. “What do you have to offer us, Miss Heron?”

What do I say? “I think my columns can increase your circulation,” I offered hopefully. She didn’t buy it.

“Appealing to my business sense,” she countered, neutrally. “Nonetheless, your work is good, and I would like to increase our page count. All right, three columns a week! You’ll start with lifestyle, local news and business reviews. You’ll find the information you need to register and submit your work in this folder,” she added, getting out a manila folder from her desk drawer, “along with your tax forms and the employment data we need. Make sure your work is submitted before Thursdays at midnight.”

“Thank you Miss Washborne,” I smiled.

“Aurah, please.” She stood and walked towards the door as I followed. “I look forward to reading your work, Patricia.”

With the job interview successfully completed I left feeling confident. Things were looking up. It was several blocks back to my apartment on the west end of town. Lights from businesses illuminated the streets where streetlights did not. The stars were out and a light breeze swept in from the ocean. I sauntered along the sidewalk thinking about the ideas I had in mind for my columns. As I passed along behind the Daily Grind, I noticed two men standing close together, face to face. It wasn’t the chummy kind of thing going on, however.

“I *told* you not to *say* anything.” A tall man with stringy black hair leaned into a shorter, tattooed gentleman, his dark, buckled jacket hanging loosely open. He pushed the tattooed man with each step forward. The few other pedestrians around froze in place, looking on. Hairs prickled on my skin.

The tattooed man staggered back, rubbing his arms uneasily. “Just relax Deacon, it was nothing.” He kept his eyes down.

“No, it *wasn't*.... You *broke*... the *rule*....” Deacon continued forward, emphasizing his words with his steps and proximity. Then he reached for something on his side. Tattoo man’s eyes widened. I froze and then instinct took over. *Run!* As I turned, the loud bang of an M-80 went off behind me. Only it wasn’t an M-80.

Running footsteps scattered in all directions. My heart was racing when I reached the cafe and peered back around the brick corner. I saw tattoo man stretched out on the pavement, twitching. Red blood pooled underneath the back of his head and gore was splattered on the sidewalk. Up the street aside from the pedestrians in full retreat was Deacon, walking away. He paused and turned briefly to stare back at the corner where I had retreated. I felt goosebumps stickling my arms and neck as I held my breath. Finally he turned and moved off.

I cringed and retreated while fumbling with my cell phone. I had the foresight to poke the cell out around the corner and get a quick snapshot. Then I dialed 911.

“Little Tokyo Emergency,” said the operator. “How can we help you?”

“There’s been a shooting next to the Daily Grind – please hurry!”

“We are dispatching officers immediately,” replied the operator.

It only took a few minutes for the patrol car to get there. It skid around the corner, lights and siren blaring. An officer jumped out and hurried over to the victim, who was quite dead. He spoke to the small crowd that had gathered from inside the coffee shop. “Please step well back.

This is a crime scene now.” His partner was setting up yellow tape and traffic cones. An ambulance arrived shortly thereafter, as well as several other police vehicles.

I checked the cell and sure enough had a picture of the scene with the murderer in retreat.

Walking up to the tape I got the attention of the initial responding officer. “Wei,” his badge read. “To Protect and Serve.” Blue and red strobes reflected off his dark glasses. Other police personnel were busy bustling behind the barrier, doing whatever it is they do.

“Officer, I saw the whole thing,” I told him, shaking as the enormity of what had just happened hit me.

“Just calm down, ma’am,” he reassured me. Behind him, the sheet covered body was being placed in the ambulance. “May I have your name please? What exactly did you see?”

“Patricia Heron. I got a picture of it too, on my cell phone.” I opened it up and he leaned forward, looking at it closely.

“Good work!” Officer Wei smiled, nodding. “That will make our jobs much easier.” He paused a moment. “Unfortunately, that also makes this cell phone evidence and it will have to be confiscated.” He flipped it shut and got out a plastic bag to put it in.

My shoulders fell. “Oh,” I replied. *Screwed for being a witness.* “Do you want to take a statement?”

“Tell you what Miss Heron,” he put a hand on my shoulder with reassurance, and spoke calmly.

“Why don’t you take some time to relax and get over the trauma you witnessed tonight, hmm? You can come by the station tomorrow. We can take your statement then.”

“All right,” I replied, glad the incident was over, but feeling sorry for the poor guy who was murdered. I crossed the street past workers with overalls that said “LTPD” as they cleaned up the remaining mess. They were already removing the yellow evidence tape that surrounded the scene as they finished. I was worried that ‘Deacon’ would come looking for me, but he had only seen one eye poking around the corner. Or had he been watching the entire giving-cops-the-information scene from the shadows? It had been a long day, and I was anxious to get some rest.

Something nagged me as I fell asleep that night. I had a dream that I was in a maze. Glossy, white marble walls stretched upwards into a hazy light. I knew the way out, but it was the wrong way. I wandered from one faceless corridor to another, trying to make sense of where I was and how I could get out. Then I woke up. I chalked it up to stress and made some coffee, then drove over to the police station.

The place smelled like old, dusty papers and burnt electronics. Morning sunlight filtered through dust covered blinds. There was a line at the window so I waited to be helped. An old lady had lost her cat. Someone wanted to file a restraining order against her husband. A man wanted to inquire about bailing someone out. Then it was my turn. They directed me to an unshaven officer with a belly full of doughnuts at a desk.

“Whatcha need, ma’am?” the desk sergeant asked. He tapped a pencil on a notebook and sipped from a covered mug.

I sat down on a spartan wooden chair that offered no comfort at all. “Yes, I’m Patty Heron, and I’m here to give a deposition on the shooting that occurred last night.” I folded my hands, ready to give an account and description of what I saw.

“Shooting,” the officer said.

“Yes, the homicide last night.”

“Homicide,” he stated. “Last night.” He paused and furrowed his brows at first, then leaned back and shook his head. “Are you sure? Maybe you are thinking the next county over.”

“No, not at all, it was down by the Daily Grind, around 9 pm.” Give me a break! I frowned as I listened to what he was saying. I mean, yes government service usually isn’t as efficient as the private sector, but this was just... bizarre.

“Ma’am, we didn’t respond to any shooting last night at all. The only actions logged on the computer are a couple of traffic tickets.” He turned to the computer and quickly began to type into his terminal reading the data on the screen. “There, you see? It was all quiet last night.”

I was simply dumbstruck. “Maybe Officer Wei can help. He was there. He... he confiscated my cell phone... last night... at the scene. He’ll verify what happened.”

“Ma’am,” he stated, his eyebrows now arched with concern, “We have no ‘Officer Wei’ on the force. Are you sure you weren’t drinking?”

I sat up a little straighter and stared at the man while my heart shrank. I didn’t know whether to be upset or outraged. What the hell was going on? I asked them to check the evidence room for my cell phone. It wasn’t there. I finally left.

My thoughts were doing circles as I drove back to the apartment. Was there some sort of conspiracy? Maybe the murder of this guy was being covered up somehow. Who was Officer Wei if he was not part of the police department? No wonder the ‘crew’ was so efficient at getting the scene cleaned up. No photos were taken of the crime scene. Additionally, the body was placed in an ambulance instead of a vehicle from the coroner’s office. It was a cleanup

operation from beginning to end. Did these people have a reroute on calls to 911? I turned on the radio and tried to forget.

The rest of the day I worked on planning my columns. I used to be a morning person, but with the free schedule of writing I knew I would eventually revert to sleeping late and getting things done in the evening. The businesses I wanted to highlight were the Daily Grind, Arts Haven and Scooters, the vehicle repair shop. Lifestyle was easy – nightclubs and community activities. As for local news, I decided to bring up this police incident with Aurah and see if she would green light it for me. A multi-part series on corruption would look good, and might be a stepping stone for me to get a decent paying job as a reputable journalist. Yes.

I opened up the yellow pages and went to my purse for the phone. Crap. I sighed and went out for another trip, this time to get a new cell phone. On the way back, my car died. It was one of “those” days. I took the opportunity to have it towed to Scooters and also to schedule the business review I had planned.

The shop acquired a lot of business from San Francisco as it was open and staffed 24/7 for repairs with its own parts shop. A cheap, angled, tin waffle roof covered the sprawling garage. Machine sounds from the repair bays mingled with bright fluorescent lights which illuminated the parking lot. As the tow truck was dropping off my vehicle I went to the office to speak with one of the attendants. The dingy walls inside were decorated with advertisements for high performance parts and products; they seemed more suited for professional racing than street driving. A lean, chiseled guy with a big nose rose from the chair behind the counter. A cloth nametag on his shirt read ‘Lyon.’

“Evening, miss.” He touched the tip of his grey fedora, which didn’t go with his outfit, but seemed to fit him in an unkempt way nonetheless.

“Hi. I’m Patty Heron and my hatchback is being dropped off outside.” I nodded out the window.

“It just died. No unusual sounds or odors or anything. Any idea how long it might take to get fixed?”

“Well, we have a few jobs ahead of you. Soonest I can get our mechanics to look at it will be later this evening.”

“All right. Are you the owner? I’m on staff with the Observer and I wanted to do a business review on Scooters for the paper.” I flashed my pearly whites at him to no effect whatsoever.

“No, I’m not. Nix Maruti is the owner. But I think she’d like to have our business in the paper. We take great pride in our mechanics. She’ll be in later to do the books.”

“Oh, could you have her give me a call please?” I got out a business card with my contact information and handed it to him. Lyon tucked it away. After I filled out the paperwork, I dropped off the key and made arrangements for a rental, which was conveniently right there in the lot. The rest of the evening was filled with reading, writing and housework. I got my new cell phone activated as well. With this expensive and trouble-filled day behind me, I retired early and watched TV until I fell asleep.

Sunday arrived and I dragged myself from bed to go to church at Holy Sacrifice Episcopal. In spite of my not-too-regular attendance, I had a genuine heartfelt faith. It gave me hope and a sense of reason and purpose in spite of my own weaknesses. I prayed for others and had some sort of devotional on almost a daily basis. I wished I could be more loving and compassionate,

instead of a messed up, plain, lonely woman. I shrugged into a yellow summer dress patterned with flowers, threw on some color and headed out the door.

The familiar brick building with a tall, white steeple stood at the crest of a hill. Bells rang from a speaker system just underneath the cross as people strolled in from the parking lot. Father Mikhail greeted me at the entrance. “Good morning, Patricia. It is good to see you again.” He smiled a wrinkly, sweet smile; the type one gets from your grandfather. He was a kind man, a servant who did not judge or get caught up in politics or drama. He was cool.

“Hello, Father, I’m glad to be back.” I returned the smile, gave him a hug and entered the sanctuary. The sweet smoke of incense drifted through the hall and solemn chords came from an organ playing softly in the corner. Colored sunlight flooded through stained glass windows spreading out among the pews. I looked up at the window above my seat and saw Jesus, crucified and dying, yet brilliant in the light of glory.

The message came from the book of Job. Father Mikhail spoke of Job’s ability to remain steadfast in the face of tremendous opposition, the danger of internal compromise and of the importance of faith. I reflected on the ideas but perhaps not as much as I should have, had I known the journey that would unfold before me. I left feeling uplifted and reassured.

As I walked across the parking lot, I noticed a middle-aged Asian woman sitting on the bench along the edge of Highdale Park across the street. She seemed to be sniffing, her body quietly shaking. No one seemed to be paying any attention to her as she sat alone in an old wool coat. I resolved not to let her sit alone.

She looked up at me as I got near. Tears flowed from red-rimmed eyes that she wiped with the edges of her sleeve. I had the tissues out as I arrived, which she accepted with an open hand.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, concerned.

“There’s nothing you can do,” she replied, sniffing. “It’s too late. She’s lost.”

“Who is lost?” I asked.

“My cousin. But there’s nothing we can do. They told me not to say anything. They said they would kill me. And then they would kill her.”

“What?” I asked as I took a half step back. My brows drew together as my heart poured out to her in compassion. I considered what I could do to help as I sat down on the bench. I chewed my lip and offered softly “Well, my name is Patricia. You seem to be in great distress, and you look like you could use a sympathetic ear. If you would like to talk about what is going on, I promise not to say a word to anyone. Nobody will find out. We’re just sitting on this bench; no one is around. Sometimes just being able to vent can be helpful. If you don’t want to, that’s ok, too.”

She looked over at me and the tears began to flow again. She dabbed her cheeks with the tissues.

“Thank you for the offer, Patricia. I’m Meg. Meg Wycliffe.” She took a breath and shuddered. I was crying myself by this time. A lump formed in my throat as I leaned towards her, concerned.

“I just...” Meg paused and looked around, speaking with the barest of whispers.

“There’s – there’s a group of very bad... individuals.” She looked around again, her eyes tracking the surroundings. “They’re using a drug to control people. They have Sabiya, my cousin addicted. That is all I can say.”

“I’m so sorry,” I replied as I gave her a light hug. The poor thing. God it must be horrible to have a loved one in the vices of a chemical hell. I got out a card and a tissue for myself. “Here’s my number. If you want to talk again, call.”

“Thank you for the offer, Patricia. I will.”

I went home that day emotionally spent. The bastards. I said a prayer for Sabiya and Meg. *Lord, have mercy upon them both. Let them know You are with them. Deliver them from their place of hardship. If there is any blessing that might be coming my way, send it to them, instead. Amen.*

After that I tried to work some on my columns, failing miserably. Punching the power button on my desktop computer, I pushed back from my work desk and went to the kitchen to make a salad. As I was doing this mundane chore a thought came to me, as if out of nowhere. It was something the murderer had said... what was his name? Deacon! I planted my hands on my waist and stood there as the gears turned. He said... ‘You told.’ No. It was ‘I told you not to say anything.’ The same thing that Meg had related. What did he say after to the tattooed man? ‘You broke the rule.’ I rolled this idea around, considering the connection between the two situations. There was nothing I could do, as I had no way of contacting Meg. Deacon I just wanted to avoid.

That evening the phone rang. It was Scooters.

“This is Lyon with Scooters Auto Repair. We’ve figured out what caused your car to break down.”

“What happened?”

“It was the computer chip. We’re having another one sent over from the main shop in San Francisco. But they need to order one as well from their supplier. It should be here in a few days, depending on the mail.”

“Thanks for keeping me posted.”

“No problem. Also, Nix asked me to let you know she would be interested in doing that interview. She suggested Wednesday evening as that is the expected time your vehicle will be ready.”

“All right. Thanks.”

Early Monday evening I was ready to swing by the office to talk with Aurah about the police situation. She was in her office when I arrived.

Aurah glanced up from the monitor with her grey eyes. “Hi, Patty. Glad you are here. We’re going to have a staff party this Friday at Club Inferno and you’re invited.” She played with her earrings and smiled.

“Oh wonderful!” I slid into the chair and handed over the government forms she needed for work from the folder. “I could use some social time to get to know my co-workers.” I paused a moment, wondering how to bring up what happened at the Daily Grind.

Aurah gave me a look and deduced what I was evidently telegraphing. “Go ahead, spit it out,” she said, tilting her head, wondering what was on my mind.

“Ms. Washborne,” I began taking a breath, “I have reason to believe there is either a conspiracy or cover up in the Little Tokyo Police Department. Either there are people impersonating police officers who can intercept 911 calls, or the police department is complicit in covering up a

murder.” I related the events that occurred while she listened carefully, occasionally asking for clarifying details. Finally she leaned back and rubbed her eyes wearily when I finished.

“Your instincts are good Patty,” she began in a reserved way, looking at the desk as she chose her words carefully before glancing back up. “However, we are just getting over a situation with the police department and I have moved hell and earth in order to get back into their good graces without a lawsuit. For business reasons, we will not be doing an exposé of any kind on the LTPD. I hope you understand.”

My shoulders sagged. I mentally kicked myself. “Oh. I see. Well, I appreciate your taking it into consideration. I’m looking forward to our staff get together.” I spun a positive note out of it and tried not to sound too disappointed. It was a shame to let a good story get shot down by politics.

I left the hotel and decided to get two tasks done tonight, swinging by the Daily Grind to see if I could get that interview out of the way. I had met the owner before, Khalid el-Mazri, an older, tanned gentleman who liked to banter with the customers. He was a little odd as well; his craggy eyes seemed to protrude a bit too much. A chill breeze passed as I approached the coffee shop. Customers sipped beverages in a fenced, covered patio outside. “Daily Grind” was spelled out in orange and yellow tube lights above the entrance.

Inside, a fire crackled in a two sided fireplace spreading warmth through the central seating area. Curved, plush, beige couches with low coffee tables surrounded the inner perimeter. Old signs decorated the brick walls and the wafting aroma of spices, coffee and tea scented the air. Khalid gave me an oily smile with a nod as I entered; his balding pate topped a ring of salt-and-pepper hair over his ears and around the back of his head. Two others were there who I recognized; Serishen Cagney, a waitress, and Expert Falworth, an IT guy. I cozied up to the bar with them.

“Good evening, good evening Miss Patty,” Khalid enthused with a slight accent as he came over to my stool. He was dressed in an unbuttoned old-fashioned vest and tie.

Seri made a face. “Now honey, how am I supposed to make any tips if you take all the customers?” She put a hand on her hip in indignation, and adjusted her yellow tinted glasses at him with the other.

“Shush!” He waved his hand at her as one would an annoying fly, chuckling at his mock depreciation. “What can this humble servant get for you this evening?” He stared straight at me as he was talking, which was a little un-nerving.

“Decaf coffee please, cream and sweet and low,” I ordered. “Actually, I’m here for business as well as pleasure. How would you feel about a business review on the Daily Grind for The Observer?” I forced myself to look up at him and engage in his little staring contest. At least he was keeping his eyes where they were supposed to be.

“This would be good – on one condition. You must join us at my wine tasting party Saturday night.”

“It’s going to be a blast,” Expert chimed in. “Trust me; we’ll have fun.”

“The old geezer is actually going to close up the store!” Seri added.

“Well then, how could I say no?” *The things I do for a job.* I smiled and looked away, then changed the subject. “So, tell me Expert, how did you get your name?”

Expert appeared to turn a little red and started to respond. Before he could, Seri quickly volunteered the information. “It’s a nickname. In an office filled with tech experts, none of them could figure what had caused a certain computer to crash. No one could get it to work. Ed here

was the only one who thought to plug it back into the wall outlet.”

“And the nickname stuck,” Expert finished, sharing a wry grin with Seri. “Karma is going to get you, Seri.”

She removed her glasses and pointed at Expert with them. “Karma needs protection from me.”

“Well, I’m glad you will all be coming to the party” Khalid said as he prepared my order. “It will be at my home in the Towers, suite 802. Nine o’clock sharp.” The Towers were the tallest structures in town. Luxury apartments accommodated the wealthy inside the tinted glass obelisks. He brought the steaming cup of decaf to the bar, and as he did, it dawned on me what was so strange. *He doesn’t blink.* There were also times when he would pause, motionless, for a second or two. It was an odd mannerism, but hey, I wasn’t perfect.

“Could I interest you in some cheesecake?” he asked, pausing in that odd way, eyes fixed on me. I looked up preparing to say “no thanks,” but noticed a silver pendant had slipped between the buttons on his shirt. It looked to be hand-crafted and resembled a square with half circles cut out of the left and right sides. Asymmetrical beads adorned a thick, yellowed string which held it in place. I had never seen anything like it before. Khalid’s smile vanished as he turned from me.

“Let me fetch some fresh cream for you. What other stories have you been working on?” He opened the cooler behind the counter.

“Oh, the usual. Crack heads forming a union to demand government assistance, that sort of thing,” I rattled off the top of my head. Khalid chuckled and turned back to place the cream on the counter. The necklace was back underneath the shirt. “What was that unusual necklace?” I asked, inquisitively.

“It’s nothing. A family heirloom is all.”

“Could I look at it?”

“I’d prefer not.”

He was hiding something. I leaned on the counter and smiled. “Can’t I just look at it? It’s so unique.”

Khalid looked over my head and then returned the smile. “It’s a private matter, however, perhaps after the wine tasting we could talk about it.”

“Oh all right,” I conceded with a sigh. I added cream and sweetener to the coffee and took a sip, then got my mini tape recorder out, my mind still on the necklace. Why would he not want to discuss it? I put my thoughts aside for the interview. My customary 3 x 5 card came out with the questions I had prepared in advance. Khalid invited me over to one of the empty couches by the fireplace which was much more comfy than I had thought.

He was personable and accommodating during the interview, talking about his family and how he learned the business from his father, who owned the franchise. He spoke with familiarity of exotic teas and coffee blends and how climate affected the final product. When the interview was finished, I went back to the apartment.

There was a voicemail on my new cell phone when I arrived. I pushed the playback option.

“Hello, Patricia, this is Nix Maruti from Scooters Auto Repair. We’ve ordered the part you need and I understand Lyon has been in touch with you about it. I appreciate your offer of a business

review for the LT Observer and have set aside time for us to get together when you come to pick up your vehicle.”

I listened to the tape I made with Khalid and banged away on the keyboard until the article was finished, early into the morning hours. Satisfied, I emailed the article to Aurah and got a quick reply. “Received – A.W.” Not a glowing response, but between owning the hotel and running the paper, Aurah was probably a busy woman.

My work was finished but the necklace still itched at my curiosity. I decided to try to draw its features while they were still fresh in my memory. The beads were each unique in size, color and pattern. The silver metal had a sheen to it that made it glow in the light. Also, most men don’t wear beads. A family heirloom, he said. Maybe I could find some resources in helping me to identify what that old necklace was. After I finished the drawing I went to bed, tired.

The next day was business as usual. I stayed home and worked on some leads for my lifestyle columns. I thought that perhaps I was just being paranoid with my something-is-amiss ideas. There had to be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the things that were happening – incompetence on the part of the police, probably.

That evening I was unable to sleep. I tossed and turned and finally got up just past midnight. Throwing on some clothes and a raincoat, I grabbed my purse and a camera and went for a late night chocolate and junk food trip. Maybe I could find something to photograph for the Lifestyle section as well. I rolled the driver side window down and let the cool wind blow my hair around. Mist floated down from above like tiny wisps caught in sweeping currents. The few people who were about hurried along huddled under umbrellas. Headlights from vehicles reflected down into the pavement as if revealing a hidden world under the streets.

As I approached the Bark and Bite Pet Store I heard a woman call for help. I thought as I pulled into the parking lot that perhaps an animal had gotten loose or someone had tripped and hurt herself. What if it was Deacon? I was just going to find out what was going on, I reasoned. What if someone needed an ambulance? The front doors stood wide open with the lights streaming out into the night.

When I arrived at the entrance, the entire place was cleared out. There was not a cage, display or animal in sight. How odd. The empty, sterile front room had an eerie, haunted quality to it. As I stood in the doorway, I noticed there was no sound at all. Even the crickets were silent. Then I heard some scuffling to the side of the shop. Fear began to creep up my neck as I approached the side of the building.

Rounding the corner my hands gripped the sides of my coat and I froze. Long shadows crept across the lawn between the pet store and the art gallery. There in the darkness was the woman who was in distress. She was in close combat with a four legged thing that was not natural by any stretch of the imagination. It was bigger than a large dog. Large, shiny black eyes were clustered around a furry head, under which stretched a curved pair of deadly fangs. Four hairy legs arched up into the air like those of a giant spider. The creature snapped and hissed at the woman.

This woman may have been in dire danger but *she* was attacking *it!* Even more, instead of hands, the woman appeared to have stunted claws that she was using to slash at it. The silhouette of dancing death bobbed before me.

I whipped out my camera and took a quick flash of the scene. The four legged ‘thing’ jumped at me from twenty-five feet away, crashed into me and punctured my calf. Much of what happened

after that is somewhat hazy, but I'll let the op-ed speak for me.

The Monster of Little Tokyo

The story you are about to hear will be denounced by authorities who sneer at the safety of citizens, laughed at by skeptics out of intellectual pride, and derided by the police who assuredly, can and will do nothing. It is unbelievable, but nonetheless true.

As I was traveling along Little Tokyo's north side early this morning, I heard a call for help. Wanting to assist someone in need, I pulled over where the "pet store" is. Yes, the one with no pets. The door was wide open and lights from inside were streaming out into the night. I had thought the call for help came from within the store, when I heard a commotion outside along the back.

There, I found the following scene: A woman, draped in viscous, molasses-like slime was in personal combat with, for lack of better terms, a monster. Now most people when they hear the word monster think of children's nightmares and ghost stories made up to explain things that go bump in the night.

This was real.

This 8 foot thing had two body sections and a blackened, hard carapace, like a spider, but only 4 legs. It had black, reflective eyes and the temperament of an alligator that had been prodded with a stick too much. Thick hairs or spikes protruded from its body at the joints and along the back. The creature also had a muzzle surrounded by 10 inch mandibles. If you think that's odd, the story gets weirder.

The woman, and I use the term loosely, was not running away, not even trying to defend

herself. She was swiping at the thing with her 3 inch claws. However, I guess women who enjoy draping themselves with goo at 1 am would also have the tendency to wear 3 inch nails, growl like an animal and engage in combat with demonic denizens of the dark.

I snapped a picture of the creature and I guess the flash got its attention, as it deftly passed the hissing and spitting petri dish reject and came after me, crushing my camera with one claw and giving me a nasty gash with the other. As I was being dragged away to the hospital by a bystander I took another picture of the thing with my cell phone.

Both my cell phone and the camera were stolen from my hospital belongings. Naturally.

If this thing escaped from the pet store and if this woman survived are both unknowns to me. So, if you are out walking late at night, and you hear a woman scream.... check to make sure that she's not covered in ectoplasm.... if she is, just walk the other way.

When I sent the article in along with my illustration, Aurah loved it. She thought I had made it up. "More of this!" she said in her response.

I was finally discharged from the Angel of Mercies Hospital Wednesday morning after a sleepless and disturbing night. The situation in Little Tokyo had gone from strange and uncommon to beyond anything capable of objective comprehension. I went home to recuperate and tried not to think about the new questions this incident brought to my mind, lest I consider myself insane.

Chapter Two: Life is a Masquerade Old Chum

I awoke in the early evening after a nap, feeling a little better. My calf smarted with pain at the site of the stitches as I put weight on it. I took some pain medication and showered. The first

order of business was to get my car back. Hopefully, Ms. Maruti would be there as well.

After purchasing yet another cell phone I drove the rental to Scooters and saw that my silver hatchback had been moved to a different spot. I looked for a place to park and finally had to settle for a space in the back of the building. As I started to walk past the corner where the office was, I heard voices. They were slightly muffled, although the tin waffled roof was not enough to keep it totally quiet. I paused and listened to the voices reverberating off the thin metal.

“Only ever met one of you before,” said someone. It sounded like a woman -perhaps Nix. *Only ever met one of you? What?* “Well, not counting court, of course.” This statement was strange. Too strange. My journalistic instincts started buzzing.

“Who did you meet?” asked a male voice that sounded like Lyon. I went into my purse quietly and got out my mini tape recorder, the one I was going to use for the interview. I crouched down there behind the office and pressed the record button until it went click and started rolling. *Hoo boy.*

“Honestly, I can’t remember. She was quiet and mopey – not exactly my type of person.”

“How long ago?” There was a pause.

“Oh, two months I’d say.”

“Until recently,” Lyon chuckled, “our Clan just usually stayed among our own.”

“It happens. I tend to float around the different families. I enjoy everyone’s quirks.” *So, this might be the reason why all the weird stuff is happening. And these two are in on it. It’s a secret society of sorts – some kind of California Deliverance thing.* “Granted, I walk around with weapons strapped to my legs and hips, but cops look the other way as long as we don’t stir up

too much attention.” *Ah ha.*

“Your family is just lucky. I have been doubting my karma lately.”

“What sign are you?” asked Nix.

“Scorpio, both kine and Kindred,” answered Lyon. *Kine and Kindred?*

“My second birthday doesn’t match my first, but it’s all sort of fuzzy. Care for some purified refreshment? It’s from a vegetarian. Good for the vitae.”

“No thanks.”

From there the conversation turned to shop business and I quietly turned off the tape recorder, slipping in a different cassette for the interview. I wondered what that was all about. All set, I walked around the corner by the large glass window and went to the door. A lit sign read “Scooters Open 24/7.” It was locked when I first tried it; Nix hopped up to let me in.

She had long straight red hair that flowed down her back. Leather wrist guards with studs adorned her wrists and two holsters hung on her hips. Tattoos covered her arms and stretched down one leg. A knife was strapped to one of her calves. Green glassy eyes smiled at me as she opened the door.

“Hi, you must be Nix... or should I say Sheriff?” I asked smiling.

She blinked at me then patted her guns. “Oh, heh, just ignore the weapons. They are there to discourage gangs from robbing the place.”

“Evening Patricia, the car is all ready,” Lyon got up and put some paperwork on the counter, getting my key from a rack on the wall.

“Oh, the reporter,” Nix turned back.

“Is there a gang problem in Little Tokyo?” I asked as I limped over to the counter.

“On the record, no,” Nix said. “Off the record, there has been talk of the Yakuza having a presence here. They leave us alone. You may want to carry some mace, though, just in case. What happened to you?”

“Stray cat thought I was yarn,” I lied.

“Ouch.”

I looked over the paperwork. At the bottom scrawled in hastily was ‘AT COST.’ I got out my credit card and gave it to Lyon. “Who have I to thank for the discount?”

“Me,” Nix answered. “It’s my way of saying thanks for doing the story for us here at Scooters.” She went back behind the counter and motioned to a pair of empty chairs. “Ready for the interview?”

“Yes, let’s get this started.” Lyon returned the card to me as well as the receipt, key and paperwork. I sat down and switched on the tape recorder.

Nix sat in a red chair, her smoky green eyes reflected the gloss of the fluorescent lights. She sat straight up, her posture forward, chin high. If I didn’t know any better, it looked like she was getting ready to jump right out of her chair at me. I cleared my throat and started the interview, rubbing the back of my neck. Did she suspect that I had overheard her conversation with Lyon? I tried to act normal and got out the 3 x 5 card with my prepared questions. I would be glad when this was done.

Nix flexed her fingers as I went through the questions. She gave no verbal indication anything was suspect and provided thoughtful, detailed responses. I didn't even consider confronting her about what I'd overheard on the tape. I'm stubborn, curious and some would even say daring, but I didn't want to get on her bad side. She certainly was not someone I wanted to piss off.

After the interview I retrieved my vehicle. I left Scooters and decided to get some groceries and do some evening shopping. Comfy Peds was a favorite of mine, a store that specialized in great shoes with a limited selection. After some browsing I found exactly what I was looking for. Knee high boots that were soft and comfortable – in my size! As I was reaching for the box, another hand came in and grabbed it from the side at the same time. I looked up and saw a blonde savvy shopper who was also single minded on the boots – my boots. We both let go at the same time and laughed. I lifted the box and handed it to her as we both smiled, before getting the next pair, thankfully in the same size.

“Good thing there's another box or I would have to open up a can of whup ass!” I raised an eyebrow in false ire and we both collapsed into giggles.

“Pardon me,” she replied in a French accent, waving a hand before her red face as she recovered.

“Patty Heron,” I introduced myself.

“Amalthea McMahon,” she replied. “You have good taste in boots.” Amalthea had a straight-edged nose, and pretty pink lips. Her dark brown eyes were a little puffy underneath.

“Thanks, you too, heh.” We both started towards the registers. Amalthea dragged herself along.

“Are you from France?”

“Yes, I arrived just a few hours ago.”

“Your English is very good, but you must be exhausted!”

“Thank you, I am. Unfortunately, I’m alone and the airlines have lost my luggage, so I need to replace everything,” she sighed.

I frowned and shook my head. “Hmm, let’s do this. Check with the airport tomorrow. If your luggage has not been found, I’ll go with you and help you find some new stuff. How about that?”

“Thank you, I appreciate the offer.” She smiled wearily.

We exchanged numbers. While we waited in line I learned that Amalthea was staying at the Washborne Hotel so at least she would have a good room. She was here in Little Tokyo to take care of her father’s estate, and intended to remain in America. She did not say why she was not staying in her father’s house and I didn’t ask.

Friday arrived and Amalthea called me late in the afternoon. I took her to my favorite place for clothes, Bad Kitty. It was fun to do some window shopping and I even splurged and picked up an outfit for myself as well.

We decided to eat dinner at one of the open air restaurants on the east side. I was glad to relax and unwind without having to think about the upsetting incidents I had seen lately.

“So, tell me, Patty, what kinds of things ignite your interests? Your passions?” Amalthea asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. A good story. Quiet solitude. Peaceful surroundings. I used to tinker some with electronics and computers, but not anymore. *Men...*” I looked at her as I said the word with clear distain and we both broke out into smiles. “How about you?”

“I am your opposite. I like meeting people and partying.” Her eyes wandered around the ceiling.

“I used to get into so much trouble at school because I could not stop talking!” We both laughed.

“If you ever come to France, I’ll have to introduce you to my friends there.”

We talked about her life in France, my new job, and men. I noticed a dashing young guy, a graduate-type with tousled dark hair, a sports jacket and scarf sitting alone a few tables away.

Amalthea followed my look and turned back to me. “Go meet him and introduce yourself,” she whispered.

“No!” I laughed and pushed her arm. “You go meet him.”

“Okay.” She got up with this mischievous look and wandered over his table. I watched to see what would happen. She sat down and whispered into his ear, then turned and pointed directly at me. Now they were both smiling and looking at me and I didn’t know what to do as heat started warming my face. Finally he said something to Amalthea and she came back to rejoin me.

“You are so going to pay for that,” I told her still laughing and feeling self-conscious.

Amalthea chuckled. “He told me to tell you that he appreciates the interest, but he doesn’t like women.”

“Isn’t that the way it always goes?” I asked. I checked my watch and was alarmed at the time.

“Crap! I have to leave now or I am going to be late for the staff party.” I got out some money and placed it on the table. “I’d invite you, but I don’t know whether or not I’m allowed to invite guests.”

“Go,” she said shooing me with her hand. “We’ll get together again later.”

I hurried back to the apartment to get ready for my appointment at Club Inferno. I settled on a

simple, un-tucked blue kimono-style printed blouse with blue jeans. It's hard to go wrong with that. I arrived just in time and parked along the side of the windowless two story building, the music already thumping on my windows. College age people milled outside the entrance as I walked to the window.

"I'm here for the Observer staff party," I told the shaven bouncer.

"Your cover charge has been paid. The Observer table is on the second floor," he said as he checked my ID and stamped my hand. The music practically blasted my hair back as I went through the doors. Dazzling lights played around the large central dance floor as people in various stages of intoxication moved in rhythm. I would not be doing any dancing as my calf was still sore.

I moved along the side walls and found the stairs to the second floor balcony, which had a good view of the entire club. An empty table with an upright sign "LT Observer" flanked the side of the clear glass partition overlooking the dance floor below. Well, it was not quite empty. The cutest guy was getting up from the table and *looking* at me. Shades of George Clooney! His sweet brown eyes pierced right through me and I practically melted right there. Words failed me as I froze for a moment. I finally regained some control and smiled reflexively as he approached. "Hi," I said, my voice nearly drowned under the throbbing acoustic mayhem.

Only he wasn't looking at me. He was looking past me at his buddy, with whom he traded a high five as I was completely ignored. I felt like an idiot and tried my best to act naturally, slinking into a seat at the reserved table. *Don't be a fool, Patty*. I shook my head and watched the crowd below. Then the waitress arrived.

"Can I get you a drink?"

“I think I’m going to need it,” I replied. “Vodka martini with a twist of lime.”

My drink arrived and I sipped at it, willing myself to forget being disregarded. Hopefully the guy was not on staff and that would save me from having an awkward situation later. Warmth filled my stomach and I tried to relax. Before long, a commotion on the dance floor drew my attention. Everyone stopped to turn around, looking toward the entrance lobby. It was like an act of nature was occurring. Aurah Washborne and a small entourage entered. She looked absolutely magnetic in a Ken de Strata black, strapless evening dress with just enough shimmer to enhance her svelte figure. Aurah smiled and nodded, occasionally giving a wave to the crowd. It was as if royalty had arrived. The dancing picked up again as she got to the stairs and ascended. She saw me immediately and smiled, coming over to give me a hug.

“How’s my new rising star?” she asked in my ear above the music.

“Great. Thanks for inviting me to....” A group of men had followed Aurah up the stairs and were sliding in between the staff members who had come in with her. ‘George’ was among them.

“Hey Aurah....”

“Miss Washborne....”

They were charming, young, just slightly aggressive in a confident sort of way and insistent. One of them posed against the side of the table and another held a gift. All of them were completely focused on her.

Aurah turned around and held up a hand; her grey eyes sparkled as flashing lights swept past.

“Boys, not now.” As one they all fell silent and backed down. If they had tails they would have been tucked between their legs. I could not believe the power she had over them.

“How did you do that?” I asked as she turned back to me. She looked at me without speaking, a silent message, unspoken. “I wish I were you.” I just blurted it out, without really thinking.

She shook her head slightly and sadness crept over her eyes. “No... no you don’t.” She paused a beat, then turned back to the others who had come in with her, changing the subject. “Patty let me introduce you to the rest of the staff,” she raised her voice again to be heard as the group approached the table. “We have our talented typesetter and sports reporter, Brett Bisiani, our staff photographer, Abi Moore, our computer expert Mike Freund, lead staff writer Scott Bachman, and our legal counsel, Alexander Montgomery and Amalia Coronet.

We all shook hands and I received some compliments on the articles I had done so far. The rest of the evening passed with stories of near misses, juvenile escapades, mildly embarrassing gaffes and mutual bonding, the type of stuff most companies have. They were a fun bunch, and I was glad to have met them.

Chapter Three: A Taste of Wine

“Well hey you,” I said when I heard Amalthea’s French accent on the cell phone. “Whatcha up to?” I looked down at the traffic outside my second story apartment leaving the computer and the work associated with it hanging.

“Not much, which is why I decided to call. How would you like to visit the Art Museum?”

“I have wanted to go there for a while. You know how to get there?”

“Oui. Six this evening?”

“Sounds good. I have an appointment later, at nine.”

“I shall see you then at six.”

At 5:55 I arrived at the museum and parked in the lot. “Arts Haven,” the sign said above the entrance, “Where Beauty Keeps on Living.” The gallery was three stories and fitted with glass sides. Soft lights illuminated the interior. I paid the young woman at the kiosk for general admission for two. She smiled and gave me a brochure and I read about the selected exhibits that were showing. A rare, black metal samurai sword was showcased. “A Soul’s Cry,” a study inspired by the silent victimization of human trafficking by Jonathan Dwight was on loan from Europe. “Lady Gwen,” a modern version of King Arthur’s wife by the Italian painter Soranno was also on display.

Amalthea arrived and we browsed for a while. We meandered among the artworks before coming to an indoor hot tub which was the size of a small pool. It was mentioned in the brochure as an example of cutting edge air circulation technology. No doors separated the swirling steaming waters from the rest of the museum, but the humidity was completely controlled in all rooms. Amazing. Hope they didn’t have a power blackout.

Amalthea was fidgeting as we looked through the museum’s displays. She would rub her fingers together and shift her weight back and forth. Then she started twirling her hair obsessively. I looked over at her. “You okay? Something on your mind?”

“Yes,” she nodded. We went to an outdoor patio overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She shook her head as she looked out at the growing violet sky, the wind playing with curls in her blond hair. “I’ve been having nightmares since I arrived. They are unlike any dreams I have ever had before. This is the whole reason I am not staying at my father’s house. But they seem unrelated to my father.”

I frowned and wondered what to say. “I’m sorry to hear that. What are your dreams about, if I may ask?” I gave her a little hug, which she returned.

“In my nightmares... in my dreams... a hideously grotesque man comes to my hotel room and crawls around on the ceilings and walls.” She drew a breath and her lower lip trembled. “This is not some childish dream. It’s monstrous and scary! He comes to me every night now, speaking to me in a low, gravelly voice.”

She shuddered and clutched her arms around her waist, so I drew her over to a stone bench where we sat down. Ocean waves and a salty breeze helped calm her down as the sun ducked under the horizon. “Would you like to stay at my place?” I offered. “I have a spare couch which is comfy and safe.”

“No no,” she shook her head. “The only way to deal with this is to confront it, in spite of the anxiety.” She nodded to her own thoughts, sorting through them. “This is most likely a reaction to my sleeping patterns being disturbed, along with dealing with my father’s death. We were not very close at the end.”

I let my silence and concern speak for me as we sat there. I was beginning to get anxious as well, but for a different reason. Amalthea needed to know she was not alone in her pain. It was agonizing to think about, much less utter. The dull knife had already begun to pull back the scab that was my broken heart, so I turned towards her without looking up. “When my parents died, I had dreams as well.” Amalthea looked towards me and took a quick breath, surprised. “They perished in a plane crash. I had reoccurring dreams of them screaming for help as the cabin spiraled down towards the ground... and I was powerless to do anything.” My nose started to drip as the tears built up and soon we were both crying.

Amalthea gave me a hug this time, which I returned. “Thank you for letting me know I am not alone in my loss.” She sniffled. “Even though we have just recently met, I feel we will share a bond.”

“I do, too.” I agreed. “Come, let’s go to the rest room and freshen up.”

After we had gotten ourselves together in front of a mirror, Amalthea began to relate more about her disturbing dreams. “When he speaks to me, he says he is misunderstood; that he is an outcast, a tragic figure of rejection and that only I can understand and appreciate him. He calls me beautiful; he says I am his soul mate, his waif-in-white, but at the same time he is so twisted and ugly. His body is covered with boils, and his skin looks like deep fried leather.”

My eyebrows crawled up my head in horror as she described the monster from her nightmares.

“He also wears a half mask like the Phantom of the Opera. I’m not sure what that symbol represents. But the really terrifying part is when he tells me to do things; to meet certain people in the subway or to gather information on the paper where you work.”

“Amalthea, you realize dreams can be symbolic – they represent something your subconscious is trying to tell you. As far as the Observer... there’s nothing special about it, it’s just a typical rag.”

“He also told me to investigate Arts Haven.”

“That’s strange.”

“I didn’t even know about it until he told me.”

“Hmm,” I puzzled. “Perhaps you passed Arts Haven sometime in town or heard about it and

remembered it subconsciously.”

“That’s what I am thinking. But there is something else that is happening, you see.”

“Oh?”

“Yesterday he started speaking to me when I am awake. His voice just came out of nowhere.”

We just stared at each other for a moment. “That’s not normal,” was all I could say. Amalthea shook her head slowly. “Maybe you should see a doctor to get some medication to help you relax. It’s hard enough having a death in the family, much less going halfway around the world to deal with it.” I reconsidered my offer of the couch. Even if she was a little nuts, it would be wrong to make the offer then pull it away. “Well, my offer of the couch stands. If you are sleepwalking or hearing noises in the hotel that are causing these disturbing issues, we can get it worked out.”

“I really appreciate it and will take you up on it if this does not stop. Thank you, Patty.” We started towards the exit.

“Any time.” The stars shone in the sky and the evening now buzzed with activity. As we got to the front door, a gentleman was chatting with the kiosk lady. He had sandy hair, stylish clothes and sweet blue eyes. He turned to us as we approached. “I hope you enjoyed my museum tonight, ladies.”

Ah! The owner. Awesome. I looked over to Amalthea. “Are you going to be ok? I am supposed to do an interview for the Observer.”

“Yes, absolutely sure. I’ll be fine.” She waved good bye and I turned back to the cute museum

owner.

“Did I hear something about an interview?” he asked smiling. Talk about chiseled. California dreamin’.

I treated myself to a closer look. Besides his lean, muscled frame he had a nice tan, over the collar blond hair, a black paisley shirt and loose dress pants with expensive leather shoes. His smile was infectious; the kind a prankster would wear when devising mischief. Yum. I blushed as my mind strayed to places it probably shouldn’t.

“Uh yeah,” I began. Great. “I was wondering if I could interview you for the “LT Observer’s” business review section?”

“I don’t know, I have a lot of paperwork to get done tonight,” he replied, locking his hands behind his mane. He regarded me like that, still smiling. Kiosk girl giggled. I bit my lip, sort of standing there looking like a schoolgirl asking for help with her delinquent homework. What was I supposed to say?

“Please?” I asked.

“Just kidding, I have nothing to do. Let’s get your interview done.” He had me completely fooled. I smiled sheepishly, glad he could assist me on such short notice. “I’m Gabriel Montagne, by the way. Just call me Gabe.”

“Patricia Heron,” I replied, both relieved and embarrassed.

“Where would you like to do the interview? My office is upstairs, but we could go down to the sea shore or there is a balcony that overlooks the shoreline.”

“The balcony, definitely. The views are spectacular.”

“They are. Go ahead and close up, Wrenn.” He led the way back up the stairs and we sat on the bench underneath the stars. Purple wash in the sky from the departed sun spread over tiny blinking motes from the ocean waves. Above the skyline behind us the stars hid behind translucent clouds in their dark recesses.

As I got out my tape recorder, Gabe reached out and placed his hand over it. “I have a few questions for you before we start, if you don’t mind.” His eyes twinkled in the dim light flowing through the glass walls of the museum.

“I don’t see why not,” I looked up at him, pulling my hair aside in the breeze.

“You’re new at the Observer, aren’t you?” He stroked his chin.

“Why yes, yes I am.”

He paused for just a moment, then smiled, pivoting his wrist to gesture at me with his forefinger.

“You are the one who wrote The Monster of Little Tokyo article, aren’t you?”

I blinked, surprised. “How would you know that?”

“It’s because writing is your art. Your passion. It’s in your spirit. Bachman could never write anything approaching that. Besides I make a living evaluating art, remember?”

“How very observant of you. You are right. And thank you for the compliment.”

“You’re welcome. One more question.” He turned his head just so and his gaze became intense.

“The incident you talked about in the article – it wasn’t fluff. It really happened, didn’t it?”

“I have the stitches to prove it,” I answered flatly. “Why would you believe such a fantastic story in a paper known for stretching the truth?”

He leaned back quickly, looking towards the yard between Arts Haven and the pet store. “Let’s just say I’m a concerned business owner.” *That was a lie.* He knew something, but he was not saying what it was. I didn’t let him know I was wise to him. “Shall we start the interview?”

“Yes, I’m due somewhere in an hour.”

Gabe gave a good interview, personable and engaging, relating stories about himself, art in general and his personal philosophies. Gabe’s goal was to enlighten the community and allow folks to enhance their aesthetic appreciation by connecting with their emotions. It would make a great article.

I drove to the Towers, which stretched high up, reaching into the sky. The multicolored lights of the city reflected off the dark glass like translucent candy illuminated from behind. The security guard on duty checked that my name was on the list of invited guests and waved me through. Massive earthquake-proof columns arose through the middle of the garage. Fluorescent lights buzzed quietly as I shifted into park and grabbed my purse. I looked around at the expensive toys as I exited my little hatchback, noting one of the first S7’s I had ever seen, wide luxury vehicles loosely inspired by military trucks used in the Gulf War. It gleamed shining big and black among aerodynamically designed speedsters, each of which cost more than a house. I walked into the elevator, then pressed the button for the 8th floor.

The halls upstairs were decorated in muted earth colors. The walls had murals of various nature scenes in shadowed silhouette. I found the right apartment and rang the bell.

“Miss Patty!” Khalid beamed, opening the door. “Please come in and welcome to my humble home.”

“Thank you, Khalid,” I smiled politely, then took in my surroundings with an appraising eye. His condo was a study of Egyptian artwork. Statues of Egyptian gods guarded the main entrance to the living room. Giant reeds rose from the walls and curved overhead where they rustled slightly in the air conditioning. Mirrors were strategically placed to make the room seem larger than it was, and one side of the main living area was a giant window which stretched floor to ceiling overlooking the tiny lights of the city below.

“Hey Patty,” Seri called from an overstuffed couch. “Glad you could make it, sweetie. These are Brandon and Susie, two other regulars, and you already know Expert.” The couple waved at me and I returned the greeting.

“All right, now we can get started,” Expert rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Patty, you are going to love this stuff. I can’t get enough. What’s it called again, Khalid?”

“It’s a special vintage made by my family back home.” He ignored the question and strode toward the kitchen fluidly, almost as if he was gliding through the air. “The dates have a certain sweetness when cultivated in the dry air, don’t you see?” he asked rhetorically.

So this was date wine. “Isn’t producing it rather difficult, with the religious objection to alcohol over there?” I asked.

A smile quirked from Khalid’s lips. “One must have the right connections. The sharing of this rare delight is a tradition I am most pleased to continue here in America.” He went to an old trunk next to the kitchen area and dialed a combination into a padlock. Seri clasped her hands as

the lock went *snick* and everyone leaned forward to see the treasure.

“Oh, yes,” Expert breathed as Khalid took out two bottles from the trunk. The wine itself was a deep, deep red hue; it was almost purple. The label was in Arabic. Khalid unstopped one bottle with a corkscrew and we held out our glasses from the central table.

“To friendship,” Khalid toasted, and we all raised our glasses. Expert was already draining his. Brandon and Susie both sipped from theirs as did Khalid and Seri. Seri was watching me intently as I raised the glass to my lips. As I was about to drink, I noticed Expert had completely vegged out on the couch. He was just sitting there, staring at... nothing, unmoving with the half-finished glass still in his hand. I paused, smiling nervously.

“Ah, Expert, are you ok?” Time was creeping slowly as I awaited the reply. It wasn’t coming. I glanced over at Seri, Brandon and Susie, and Seri was still staring at me but Brandon and Susie had also frozen there, expressionless, staring past one another.

Hairs went up on the back of my neck. “May I use your bathroom?” I asked and headed towards the hallway in the back without waiting for an answer. Seri and Khalid both threw knowing looks at one another as I retreated, my heart beating insanely in my throat, trying not to look too conspicuous.

“First door on the left,” Khalid replied as I left the room. The door on the right further down the hall was open a few inches. As I entered the bathroom I glanced over between the door and the doorframe. There in the center of the other room appeared to be a 10 foot wide circular sand pit. It was level, perhaps 5 inches deep and bordered by a thick wooden retaining ring.

I closed the door behind me and locked it. *Dear God, what was going on? Why were Expert and*

the others acting like they were drugged or paralyzed? What the hell was a massive sand box doing in a luxury apartment? I knew I should not have come to this thing, and now I was trapped in the bathroom. Panic set in and I took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

I considered my options as I set the wine glass on the counter next to the sink. Khalid and Seri were whispering now in the other room. Well, clearly I had to get out of there. I flushed the john and turned on the sink, then poured half the wine glass down the drain. I left a lipstick print on the other side of the glass and decided I would feign illness as a reason to leave.

Gathering myself together I opened the door and walked out with a hand to my head, the other still holding the wine glass. Expert, Brandon and Susie were all still frozen in place in their hellish chemical ecstasy. Khalid and Seri both looked at me with disbelief as I set the wine glass down and grabbed my purse on the way to the exit. "Please forgive me, I'm feeling a little dizzy," I quickly headed to the door.

"Won't you please stay? There's plenty of wine left," Khalid called after me.

"Night," I said from the hallway not bothering to look back as I approached the elevator. Some neighbors were just arriving and they watched as I passed. Thankfully luck was with me and the elevator doors opened immediately. I hit the button for the basement car park and they took far too long to close. When the elevator began to descend, I hyperventilated, shaking as my stomach lurched. As the doors opened at the bottom I heard running footsteps coming from the stairwell. My car was across the lot. I would never make it without being spotted. Without even really deciding I ran over to the back side of the S7 and crouched down behind the rear wheel.

Seri's feet came running out from the stairwell, paused, then headed toward the exit of the parking lot. I crouched down even lower and slid against the concrete underneath the chassis,

hiding in the shadows, watching, hoping she would not to look my way. Desperation was setting in; I was concerned my breathing would give me away. I was a trapped rabbit, afraid to even move.

“Damn!” she muttered then turned back from the ramp. I watched, willing myself to be still and silent. Seri opened up her cell phone and hit some numbers. “She got away.” She nodded, then put her cell away and went to a white van, which she backed up to the elevator doors. I felt for certain my thumping heart would betray me. The numbers slowly went up to the 8th floor, then came back down.

When the elevator doors opened again, the back doors of the van partially obscured my view, but I saw enough. Khalid wheeled out a hand truck and platform, covered with a tarp. As they maneuvered it, the tarp came off. Like so many logs on a flatbed Expert and the others were strapped to it. They were quickly loaded into the back of the van and covered with the tarp. I briefly considered getting out my cell to take a picture, but had learned my lesson and realized they would spot me from the light that it would give off when it opened.

They pulled out with their cargo of anesthetized victims and I waited two minutes until I crawled out and ran to my own vehicle. I made a note to avoid the Daily Grind at all costs and drove home; my nice dress was covered in grease and sweat, my heart beating rapidly, my hair a mess. I was a nervous wreck but alive and free.

I checked to make doubly sure the door was locked when I got home and then ran myself a bath. As I tried to relax, I wondered what was going to happen to Expert and the others. I could forget about calling the police. They had clearly been drugged. *Drugged... Wait a minute! Was this the drug that Meg was talking about?* The wine had been used as a masking agent. Anyone could be

tricked into taking this stuff without even being aware of it. It was just insidious. No wonder Expert had been so amped up about it.

Chapter Four: Investigation

After the bath I wrapped myself in a fuzzy robe and slumped on the couch. Geez. The way things were going with crazy people killing and drugging each other, the police either on the take or involved more directly, it was a wonder this town had not seen a major disaster. I got up and paced before deciding to find out more. I lit up the computer and began looking for the amulet I had seen on Khalid. Maybe I could find something that would shed light on these mysteries.

It was like searching for a needle in a haystack without a search word besides “ancient necklaces.” I tried looking for it with his name, Khalid el-Mazri. Nothing. On a whim, I put his name into a translator. It came out “the immortal of Egypt.” Hmm. Nothing there.

An hour passed. Then as I was plodding through images of old woodcuts doing nothing but wasting my breath, I saw it. The title attached to it translated as “The Real Shield of Durer.” I clicked on the picture and zoomed in. A bearded man dressed in robes stood before a workshop of some sort with crude utensils hanging on the walls. A fire smoked under a closed fireplace, bellows attached. An ornate shield leaned against the wall behind him, but on his chest, clearly, was a small square necklace with half-moons cut out on each side. I saved the image and put in a search for Durer, Shield of Durer and Necklace of Durer. Nothing but the lone woodcut came back. I put it on the back burner for now and turned to the strange conversation Nix and Lyon were having in the Scooters office earlier.

I inserted the tape, turned up the volume and listened to what was said, then typed in the search words that had sparked my curiosity. “Only ever met one of you not counting court.” Crap about

William Howard Taft came up. “Clan quirks,” I typed in. Idiots and their relatives.

“Kine.” Well this was interesting. Kine was used as an archaic plural of cow; as a prefix to refer to motion and as a video game character. A motion birthday? A cow birthday? It just didn’t make any sense, unless the word was adapted for a specific meaning in some secret society.

“Kindred.” A group of related individuals. A Clan or tribe. Well that made sense. Perhaps they had special birthdays in this family, like AA or something. Only they were freaking nutcases! Part of the entry on Kindred was redacted and unavailable. I right clicked on it and was directed to a website requiring a login. Dead end.

“Vitaye” Nothing. “Vitae.” A scientific word describing living systems. I switched to a different search engine. “Vitae.” An archaic term referring to vital life blood. Something good for the blood? Probably some hick sports drink to go with their two-headed birthdays and inbred relatives. Another section was removed and when I right clicked on it I was sent to the same site requiring a login.

Well, it was worth a try. I turned off the computer and went to bed to watch some TV. As I browsed, I wondered if that devious bastard Khalid had tried to put some of his special wine on the open market. I could look for it, and if I found it, I would take it directly to the FBI. Maybe they would believe me with the goods in hand. I said a prayer for Amalthea, Meg and Sabiya, Expert, and that poor couple Brandon and Susie and went to sleep.

Deep beneath the streets, a rat skittered through brackish water then perched in place, sniffing the air. It hopped over some electrical wiring and disappeared into the darkness. The sewers were

dank, dark and filled with methane and offal. Not that Cillian Sass cared, he didn't breathe except to speak. He was looking at the monitor in front of him, a picture of Amalthea sleeping in her bed plastered across the screen.

"Yes, my sweet!" he hissed. "Soon we shall be together, you and I, my white princess. Together forever. You liked that present I brought for you tonight, didn't you? A taste of the eternal, hidden in a jeweled goblet." He chuckled in a low rasping voice, laughing at his little trick. Cillian was prone to speak to himself as he was the only member of Clan Nosferatu left in the city. He was alone, but not for long, he hoped.

He snorted and a viscous glob came shooting out from his nose to land on the table near his Phantom of the Opera mask. He brushed it aside with a pus-covered hand leaving a streak on the table next to the keyboard. Like the rest of his body, his hand was decaying. This was the curse of his Clan, physical deformity to the point of utter abhorrence and revulsion in all who viewed them. All Nosferatu had the latent ability to deceive minds in order to appear normal, but Cillian had never worked hard enough to develop it. He did know how to become invisible though, and that was enough for him.

The dim glow of the screen faintly illuminated the room, a reinforced earthen womb dug out from the main sewer channels. It led to a series of chambers connected like an ant maze, all strewn with trip wires and pressure plates. Any uninvited Kindred trespassing in this domain would go out in a fiery blaze of glory. He was a bit concerned about the excavation that had been taking place beneath the sewers, but as long as they left him alone, what did he care? He was waxing romantically as any decaying, undead, self-deceived, paranoid vampire was likely to do, when an alarm went off above the computer station and a revolving light began to spin around.

The buzzer blared and he jolted back in surprise. “I’ve hit the jackpot!” Cillian screeched, elated for a moment as if he had won the lottery. He then calmed down and reached up to hit the snooze button. “What have we here?” he asked as he leaned into the screen and hit the flashing icon.

Entries lit up from a computer on the west side. “Kine, Kindred, court, Clan and vitae, hmm? Nosy, naughty meddlesome searches!” He turned on the trace function and followed it to an address, then plugged that into the state police network. The Nosferatu were the Camarilla’s information gatherers, and their ability to find data was legendary. A driver’s license picture showed up on the screen. “Patricia Ann Heron. Tsk, tsk, tsk. You bad, bad girl. Looks like I have another job for my assistant.” He selected the print button and began to make plans.

The next morning was Sunday. I overslept and missed the beginning of the service at Holy Sacrifice so I decided to go for a walk in the park. Some dew still dotted the green grass and fog wafted over the trees as the sunlight burned it away. I looked for Meg but found no sign of her. Oriental food stands were just opening up and birds sang as they perched, contented and happy on their little branches.

As I was walking, I noticed a bookstore on the road beside the park. It looked like an old two story house converted into a business. Weathered, yellow siding wrapped the quaint house and manicured bushes flanked the sides. The sign outside said “The Book Rook” and underneath “We specialize in finding rare books.” A large chess piece was mounted next to the sign. I entered and a little bell rang on the door. A young woman with John Lennon glasses and large boots got up from her chair behind the register. Shelves with New Age stuff, History, Biography and Best Sellers lined the walls with both new and used books. A dusty aroma drifted within the

shop.

“Hello,” she said stuffing something hastily underneath the counter. “I’m Tisa, how can I help you?”

“Hi. I’m looking for more information about an old pendant called the Shield of Durer. Do you think you could help me? I’ve exhausted the internet without success.”

“Oh, you are looking for rare historical information. Well, you are in luck, because the owner Derrial Bleac happens to specialize in finding just that sort of information.” She handed me a form. “He isn’t in at the moment, but you could fill this out and he’ll get back to you when his schedule permits.”

“Is that him?” I asked, nodding to the portrait of an austere, short cropped, dark haired man above the register. His hair was parted in the middle and he wore old fashioned Teddy Roosevelt glasses.

“Yes, in fact it is. He’s a good man. If anyone can find the information you need, he’s the one.” I looked up at the portrait again. He seemed daunting but fair, at least by his facial expression.

I filled out the form and added my contact information. “I have some electronic data as well that might assist him in his search – a woodcut image I found online.”

“I can take that on my cell phone.” She gave me the address and I sent the file. I went home hopeful to find some information that I might be able to hold over Khalid’s head should he threaten me.

Late that evening Derrial sat down with the newspaper. He had read the article about the ‘Monster of Little Tokyo’ and was most displeased. Actually, that was an understatement. He was absolutely livid, but he didn’t let his exterior betray his inner thoughts. This sort of fiasco attracted attention – the wrong kind of attention. The town was already bad enough with most of the elders either gone or not caring to watch over the neonate fledglings, who were running amok. It presented a threat to the Masquerade, and the fact that one in his charge had screwed things up royally would not sit well with the Tremere hierarchy over him. He retreated to his room to confer with his watchers.

Aaron was in his study, a good little Warlock. He did not know about the newspaper article, but was disturbed to discover the empty ring case in his jacket pocket. Even more, his new spy did not answer to his calls to return which was unusual. Aaron was unaware that Harold could no longer fit through the air duct which led to the basement of the Book Rook.

The door to his study slammed open against the back wall with a loud crash and a cloud of dust as Derrial floated through the air silently, his robes flowing in the disturbed atmosphere. He did not look happy. Aaron jumped up from the desk in complete surprise, eyes wide. Never before had the Regent appeared in this manner. Derrial gestured with his left hand and Aaron felt himself rise off the floor. He couldn’t run now even if he tried.

“*What did you do?*” Derrial’s lips trembled.

Aaron tried to kneel, discovered all he could do was lift his lower legs, then scrambled for an excuse. He tried denial which was a mistake, not that it would have mattered at this point.

“Nothing,” he replied as his voice cracked, still hovering.

Derrial spoke slowly. “So you *didn’t* enter my sanctum and violate Tremere laws and my

privacy?”

“No,” Aaron said.

Derrial slowed further. “That’s... not... what... my... plants... tell... me.” He extended his right hand, palm up toward Aaron.

Aaron began to squirm in the air. “The Sixth Tradition demands that my life is not forfeit,” he shrieked as the squirming turned into thrashing.

Derrial sneered, his body shaking with rage. “You’ve been *transferred* out of town, Aaron!” His open palm squeezed into a fist, then opened with fingers splayed. A large spout of leaping fire erupted beneath Aaron’s feet, completely consuming him. His cries of pain were excruciating to hear as the flickering cracks of flame fed on his dancing, suspended body. Shadows jumped around the room and a roiling smoke cascaded across the ceiling as nearby books were singed.

After a few moments of turmoil, it was over. Derrial released his grip and settled slowly back to the floor. Ashes drifted down where Aaron the misbegotten vampire had met final death. Derrial checked to make sure none of the books had actually caught fire then poked his head out the door, now calm once more. “Tisa, could you come in here please? We have a clean up to do.”

The next evening I drove over to the Washborne for a meeting with Aurah. She wanted to speak with me personally on a matter of importance. I hoped I had not screwed up somehow, though at the staff meeting at Club Inferno she seemed pleased with me. I pulled into the parking lot and locked up my trusty hatchback. I guess it was semi-trusty now. As I came to the hotel entrance, a woman dressed in a raggedy, long black dress approached me. Her thin physique was topped by

straight brown hair.

“I know you but you don’t know me,” she breathed in a clear but quiet voice.

“Pardon me?” I paused. I was puzzled by the way she focused on me with her dark, soulful eyes. I didn’t think she was dangerous, but I could always bolt inside and scream bloody murder if she was.

“You are Patty Cakes. You are going on a walk with Mr. Uncertainty.” The rain started coming down as we stood under the awning.

I frowned at her not quite sure what she was talking about. “Who are you?”

“I am the penny angel. But I don’t give out pennies.” She glanced behind me and I turned around but no one was there.

“Well, that’s... really... special. I’m happy for you. Thank you for sharing that important information with me.” *She’s definitely a psycho, but if she’s in with them, maybe I can get her to reveal something, such as what the hell that monster was, or what Khalid is up to.* “So what’s on your mind Penny Angel?”

She stared past me and again and began to speak in a detached way, as if her body was disconnected from her mouth. Her hands fell limply to her sides and she tilted her head. “The Red Queen is coming. She is both beautiful and menacing. The parts will destroy the whole. The Sheriff is gone and there is no law. All will be revealed in fire. Many will die. You are in great danger.”

“What do you mean I am in great danger?” This was either a set up or the entire town had gone mad. Rain began to pound the awning and was drenching everything outside.

Penny Angel blinked and shook her head. “Danger? Who said anything about danger? You’re crazy.” With that she continued on into the rain, leaving me standing there. I shook my head and sighed, then proceeded to the doors. Amidst the rain, I thought I heard a low guttural laughing coming from somewhere above the canvas awning.

With a shiver I changed my stride and hurried inside.

Aurah was pacing when I reached her office. She closed the door behind me and we sat down at her desk. “Patty, I have a special assignment for you. I don’t trust Scott with this; he’s too connected. I need someone who can come in and do a good job, and someone who isn’t compromised.” I was squirming in my seat from the incident outside and she paused mid-sentence. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, yes.” I assured her, forcing myself to relax and concentrate on the job.

“Okay.” She lowered her voice and leaned towards me. “We have an insider on the police force and she has informed me that there’s a serial murderer on the loose. She’s a detective so she has firsthand knowledge of the case. Your job will be to work with Lieutenant Nikolaidis and see if a little public attention can develop a lead to put this guy behind bars.”

This was getting interesting. At least I wouldn’t be working with Officer Wei. “Sounds good.”

“Here’s her phone number. She’s made arrangements so you will be allowed to accompany her at crime scenes. Also, I have a police band scanner for your home so you can respond without having to wait for her to contact you. She knows about it.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“I’d start by contacting her and getting access to the case files of the previous murders. This is all

very hush-hush, so get the information and don't blow it."

I left the hotel by the side entrance of the restaurant and went out to the car, scanner in hand, hunched over in the rain. After I checked to see if Detective Nikolaidis was available at the police station (she wasn't) I drove over to the Book Rook to see if Mr. Bleac was there.

I got there just before closing time. The bell jingled and Tisa was there along with the man in the portrait. Tisa mouthed the words 'That's the one' as they both turned toward me. Mr. Bleac smiled in a forced way, like it hurt to use those muscles. "Ah, the one with the inquiring mind."

"Mr. Bleac, I presume?"

"*Doctor* Bleac. You are the one who wanted to find out about the 'Real' Shield of Durer, hmm?"

"Yes."

"That won't be easy, miss. Not at all. I can do it for you, but it will cost you." He leaned against the counter.

"How much?" I asked, shoulders slumping.

"You don't have the shield itself, do you?"

"No sir, I don't."

"Do you have any knowledge of where it might be?"

I frowned and furrowed my brows as I held his attention. "You're not implying that this jewelry still exists and can be found, are you? I'm just doing some historical research."

Dr. Bleac slowly came around the counter to stand before me. "Who said it was jewelry?" he

asked quietly behind his spectacles, looking down at me.

My lips parted as I scrambled for an excuse. Then it came to me. “You’ve seen the woodcut, and you still haven’t figured it out? The title, ‘Real Shield of Durer,’ implies misdirection. If it’s not the shield on the wall in the background, it obviously has to be the necklace.”

His eyes half closed as crow’s feet wrinkled them around the sides. He didn’t say anything, but glanced at Tisa before turning back to me. “What a shame. I had my hopes up for a moment. Well in that case I suppose a little knowledge would not hurt. Three hundred dollars should grease the right hands and procure the proper book.”

I winced at the price. “Ouch. Why is the book so expensive?”

“It’s clear you are unaware of what you are asking for. I have to arrange a private trip by sea with one of my contacts, to avoid customs. He is skilled with this sort of request, but his services are costly.”

“It’s the knowledge in the book, not the book itself that I require. Perhaps you could charge a retainer and keep the book, selling it afterwards and saving both of us on the some of the expense.”

“I’m afraid that’s entirely out of the question. I would be out the money until it could be resold, and there’s not a lot of demand for it despite its rarity. However... you seem like a hard luck case. I’ll make the arrangements for two hundred fifty. I won’t be making any money at all, but the pursuit of knowledge is a goal I admire. Greasing the wheels of karma certainly could not hurt, eh?” He smiled with a wince once more.

“It’s a deal.” *Anything to keep that creep Khalid away from me.* I handed Tisa my debit card.

“I’ll send for it tomorrow. It should be here in a few days.”

“Could you arrange to have it sent to my apartment?”

“Yes, of course. And do tell your friends about my services.”

Chapter Five: The Red Queen Murders

She was here. It was time. The moment she longed for had arrived. It was time to make him suffer for the death of her lover Doran as well as her comrades. Scarlett Renner had allowed the hate to fester and bring forth its bitter, bitter fruit, and now she was in a position to enact her retribution. *Prince Tyson Vox would pay for his treachery!*

She was the leader of a small Sabbat pack, one of many scattered groups of independent Kindred who were despised enemies of the Camarilla. Her followers called her “The Red Queen,” not because of her hair but for her penchant to spill copious amounts of blood. She didn’t care as long as she got results. Scarlett absently clawed grooves into the wooden table while she waited.

Luke Sabatelle made his way back up from the lower tunnels towards the suburban basement, which served as a temporary headquarters. The diggers were making progress, although they had been worked to the point of collapse from fatigue. “Diggers” was the polite word for them – they had been transmuted from their human form with Tzimisce blood for their assigned task. Now with no eyes to see, the former occupants of the house were monstrosities. Bones had been elongated and strengthened. Fingers were joined and flattened into corundum-covered shovel-like appendages and had the toughness to bore through earth and rock. Legs were useful only in powering through the dank earth, so they had been modified as well. What used to be feet had been made into flat, wide, thick flesh supports to assist in the diggers’ tunneling efforts. The

ghouls received blood from their Tzimisce taskmasters in return for their work. The operation had been going well with the needed depth achieved to avoid the sewers... for the most part.

Luke entered the dusty cellar which was lit by a single, dim bulb. In the corner stood a brown, blood-crusted exercise bench which had been converted into a makeshift operating table. The white concrete walls were covered in blood spatters. Three sips of vitae were all it took to make the homeowners willing participants in their nightmarish metamorphosis. Scarlett looked up from the table where she had been plotting her revenge.

“Mistress, the project proceeds although the workers have slowed due to exhaustion. They need food and rest to continue.” Like the diggers, both Tzimisce had modified their bodies through their Clan abilities. Luke’s size had been augmented through muscular and skeletal growth. His frame was tremendous. Scarlett had opted for a lithe, thin appearance. Her ankles and joints were elongated making her gait inhuman, catlike. Tzimisce could change and remake themselves at any time. Reshaping their form like pliable pieces of art was part of their faith. She brushed some hair away from her face and crept around the corner of the table.

“So... what is the problem?” she asked. “Kill them; harvest the parts we’ll need; then get some more.” Scarlett was practical. “There are houses all around filled with *potential volunteers*. Or, if you lack amusement, harvest them first, and then kill them.” She frowned at the inconvenience of Luke’s reluctance to get the job done expediently.

“Yes, mistress!” he agreed quickly. “Do you have any physical or genetic preferences for the target group?”

Scarlett considered the question. She supposed she could not keep it a secret forever. “As a matter of fact I do.” She rattled down the list of body parts she would need. “Femurs, tendons,

heart valves, adrenal and thyroid glands....” Realization slowly dawned over the face of her subordinate.

Luke’s mouth parted as he expelled a breath. “You don’t mean to create...?”

Scarlett’s eyes became slits as she reveled in her plan. “That’s exactly what I intend to do. And it’s not just one... I want to make many of them.”

Luke wondered at the carnage that would proceed before his other task brought his attention back to the room. “I have news from the scouts we sent out.”

“Spill it.”

“The town is practically empty of Camarilla influence! Only a few have been spotted here or there over the last three nights. It’s as if the entire area has been opened for plunder.”

Could it be a trick? No, she had trained the spies herself. “Let’s do this then....” Scarlett plopped down on the concrete floor and stretched her legs sideways underneath her. “Leave some calling cards with the used bodies. I want Prince Tyson to know I’m here. I want him to know I’m coming for him. I also want him to know there is absolutely nothing he can do about it.”

“What of the Lasombra?” Luke asked.

Scarlett smiled. “Leave him in the dark. We don’t want him to interfere with my plans.”

“Yes, mistress!” Luke went to relay her commands to the rest of the pack.

Cillian clung to the stucco, opening the window to Amalthea’s room at the Washborne. Although

he was invisible, a shrewd pair of eyes watched him impassively from above, undetected on the outside of the building. He slipped inside silently, noiselessly, easing himself down on the floor. He then allowed himself to appear. This time he was dressed in a tuxedo – it went well with his Phantom of the Opera mask even though his skin was sloughing off on the inside. *Oh well... easy come, easy go!* Cillian had stolen it from a rental store last night. He was a hero, a super powered hero, a vampire in his uniform; the kind hearted and virtuous but misunderstood creature. So what if he had to do a little stealing now and then? It was all for the greater good and besides, the store was covered by insurance.

Creeping over to the bed, he gazed at the vision of loveliness. His Amalthea. After he Embraced her, oh the nights they would share. But wait, she was stirring.

“Amalthea, my darling, my love, I have returned to you.” His head stretched as he lifted his wart-covered eyebrows, causing a blister to pop.

Amalthea opened her eyes sleepily. “Oh, it’s you,” she murmured. “Have you brought me more of that drink?”

He struck a dramatic pose, extending a white-gloved hand. “I have it, yes indeed I do. But you must do something for me first. I need to know about some people. Spy on them and I will give you more of my special drink,” he rasped.

“Who?”

“Patricia Heron, Abigail Moore and Gabriel Montagne. You also need to discover the secret of the art museum.”

“Patty? She’s a friend of mine. I don’t like the idea of spying on her.”

“Tell her your dreams have stopped. She is worried about you. You must find this out, because...” he thought a moment then grinned. “It’s the only way I can save her life.”

“Save her from what?”

“From... from you,” he improvised. “You will wind up killing her, and many others. Murdering innocents and babies. But I can stop it. Only I can keep that from happening.” He knelt down and faded from view, then jumped to the ceiling. “He’s right,” came a whisper, echoing around the room. “Get the information, Amalthea.” The voice became more sinister and threatening.

Amalthea pulled the covers up tight around her and stared around the room horrified. She trusted Cillian because of the blood she had taken from him. So he had to be right. But this idea of spying on and murdering people was horrific. Her desire for more vitae was in conflict with her loyalty to her friend. Her thoughts raced as she wondered what she would do.

I dragged myself out of bed to get to the LTPD during regular office hours. The same smell of old papers and burned electronics greeted me. I checked in at the window and was told to go to an office on the second floor. On the way I passed ‘Sergeant Doughnut’ who had tried to help me a few weeks ago and went up the steps.

The lettering on the frosted window said “Detective Nikolaidis.” I knocked and heard a brash voice say “Enter!” The office was cluttered with folders, forms, books, boxes, and photographs. Corkboards covered the walls with clippings, charts, maps and hastily scrawled notes. The detective herself jumped up from a swivel chair and extended her hand which I shook. “Sabiya

Nikolaidis, pleased to meet you.” She wore a cowboy hat with a rattlesnake skin band, jeans, a printed blouse and a brushed leather vest.

Sabiya.... That name. Meg’s cousin? “Patricia Heron, likewise.”

“Any friend of Aurah’s is a friend of mine. I’m guessing you want to know more about the case. Take a seat there and I’ll fill you in.” She tossed a thick folder held together with a rubber band to the other side of the desk and resumed her seat in the swivel chair.

“The first we heard of this guy was a body that had washed up on the shoreline about two months ago. Only thing is this sicko had done exploratory surgery on the poor bastard and according to the medical examiner’s office, the wounds had partially healed over. That means it was done while he was still alive.” I opened the folder but found myself riveted to her account instead. “This guy had his liver, stomach and spleen removed.”

“Dear God,” I muttered, “while he was still alive.”

Sabiya continued her narrative with detached precision. “It gets better. Since that time we’ve found three other bodies. All show the same MO but with different parts removed. All show signs of healing after the fact. One had a lung and all calf muscles removed, leaving the skin behind. Another had his damned heart taken out. The third had his right side humerus bone removed leaving the tendons and muscle behind, as well as a frontal lobotomy.”

I wrinkled my face with revulsion. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to open the file folder at this point.

“How did they keep the poor souls alive after these disgusting experiments?”

“We’re pursuing leads in the medical community now with no results yet. All heart lung and kidney dialysis machines have been accounted for.” She paused and thought about that for a

moment before continuing. “According to forensics, all wounds were sewn together with standard scarlet sewing thread. A poker card was found on top of the latter three bodies- the ten of spades, the jack of hearts and the jack of clubs. We’re guessing the one by the shoreline was lost in the tide. No prints or DNA were found on any of the cards aside from the victims’. We checked for possible surveillance footage and came up empty.”

“Additionally, all corpses were completely drained of blood when they were found. We have a modern day Mengele on our hands. But the kicker is this.” She glanced up at one of the boards on the wall that was a large map of the entire county. Blue push pins were scattered across the map along with four red pins. “We’ve received twenty one missing persons reports since the time the first body was found. There is no evidence, no clues that point us to any of them. It’s as if they have just vanished off the Earth. The street beat has been wearing out shoe leather chasing all these cases down, and there’s not a single shred connecting any of them save one detail.”

“What’s that?”

“They all seem to have disappeared at night.”

The debriefing finished Detective Nikolaidis instructed me to go through the case file and examine evidence so long as it was not removed from its protective bags. She busied herself with paperwork and forms while I had the gruesome task of poring over the photographs and crime scene information.

“Why would someone want to remove body parts?” I asked as I went through the files, grimacing. “And why the thread and playing cards?”

“We have no freakin’ clue, ma’am,” she replied without looking up. “That’s why I was able to persuade the captain to let you in on the case. We’re hoping with some media attention that some witnesses will come forward to give us a few leads.”

I looked up. “You’re Meg’s cousin, aren’t you?”

Sabiya’s eyes contracted and her face flushed red. She jumped up from her desk and slammed her hand down on the file I was reading.

“What the hell has she been telling you?”

Oops.

“Jesus, sweet mother of God! She’s really going to get us all killed!” She flung the paperwork across the room and it scattered in the air. “Like I really don’t have enough problems with the proctologist from hell screwing people like an alien cattle mutilator gone bad, now I have to deal with the press in my own office and Meg is blabbing to anyone and everyone!”

Sabiya pushed my rolling chair back against the wall. Then she got in my face; the tip of her snakeskin hat brushed my hair. Perspiration was beading on her skin and her face had turned beet red. “Now listen,” she said quietly. “Tell me everything Meg has said to you or so help me, I am going to freaking explode.”

“Okay, okay,” I replied pushing myself back in the chair a little. I related the conversation I had with Meg in the park that day after church.

Sabiya turned away after I was finished and rubbed her temples. She seemed a little relieved.

“This is too much for you. It’s too big.” She shook her head and came back to me. “If we are

going to work together, you have to promise me you will never, ever mention again what Meg has said to another living soul. Swear to me. Lives are on the line here.”

“I swear,” I answered honestly. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. *But still, what’s too big?*

Sabiya breathed a sigh. “I don’t want to die. I don’t think you want to either. Just... please. A damned story isn’t worth your life.”

“Of course. Yes.” I gulped down my curiosity and forced it to stay unmentioned. I didn’t want to get arrested or lose my job.

“Good. Now let’s get back to work.” She collected the papers and I finished reviewing the case file. The details in the crime scenes were just as bad as Sabiya had related. They reported the deaths had occurred elsewhere than where the bodies were found. There was no blood at the scenes.

“Think the cards themselves have any special significance or meaning?”

“Probably, but I’m no profiler. Right now it’s a waiting game to see if any witnesses or other clues show up.” She finished scooping up her paperwork.

I looked back to the photos. The scarlet thread made the stitches look especially ghastly. They were wide enough that they were not sewn for the purposes of healing, just to keep the skin together. The blood must have been removed after the stitches were done for purposes unknown. I was glad I was not in the detective business.

That evening the police band radio was going nonstop with assorted crime chatter. As I was about to turn it off, another broadcast came through that got my attention. “North side. Murder at

the Washborne Hotel. Code blue.” Various cars called in responding; then I got a call from Sabiya. I opened the phone.

“Our guy just left another present.”

“Yes I heard.”

“You know where to meet me, then.”

I arrived in the parking lot soon after. Police cars lit up the sides of the Washborne with blue and red strobes. About a dozen uniformed officers were setting up tape, interviewing hotel staff and securing the area, with more arriving. Aurah was in the lobby among them, looking shaken.

“It was in my office when I arrived with some co-workers,” she told Detective Nikolaidis. Aurah held her arms around her waist and nodded to me when she saw me. “I didn’t see anyone come or go, but there is a surveillance camera outside in the hallway.”

“All right, you know the drill,” Sabiya replied with authority as she drew and cocked her gun, with others following. “Clear the floors first. We’ll meet up at the Observer offices.”

We stayed behind while they did their search and clear routine, listening to the radio as the LTPD relayed their progress. “Second floor clear! Third floor clear! Fourth floor clear!” Along the way they checked some people against the hotel register, then sent them downstairs to the lobby to be interviewed.

“Send up Ms. Washborne and Ms. Heron,” Sabiya’s voice came over the radio. We were escorted up the elevator and came out on the fourth floor hallway where the rest had gathered.

“Don’t touch a thing,” Sabiya ordered us as we cautiously went past the rose-filled vases.

The police photographer was the first to enter the room, stepping wide around the scene and taking many shots, the flashes bursting light from behind the open door along with the whine of the camera recharging. After he was finished, he ushered the rest of us in. The body lay across Aurah's desk, covered partially by a blanket.

"The surveillance system. Where is it?" asked Sabiya.

"In the lower section of the wall cabinet," said Aurah. The detective's second in command, a stoic sergeant, slipped on some latex gloves and opened the cabinet revealing a TV and an expensive sound system. The camera console was behind the speakers. He turned on the monitor and rewound the digital footage. There was nothing to be seen except a lonely janitor making his rounds. He finished his jobs quickly in each room and then departed with no reaction that anything was amiss. Finally Aurah and her staff arrived.

Detective Nikolaidis frowned, thinking as she watched the tape. "Rewind that to five minutes before Ms. Washborne arrived." After thirty seconds there was a slight movement in the frame. "Stop. Rewind it again, this time in slow motion." Sure enough, the inner door to Aurah's office closed a little just as the double glass doors at the entrance bulged slightly outwards. "They came in through the window," she surmised.

One of the officers went to check. "But it's locked from the inside."

"Forget it for now. Let's see what we have here," she came back to the draped corpse and carefully pulled back the corner.

When she removed the blanket those of us gathered gasped and stared at the victim as the police photographer punctuated the scene with flashes. Two officers covered their mouths and bolted

out of the room. Both of the man's eyelids had been sewn shut with concave recesses indicating the contents had been excised. His lips and ears had also been sewn together with the same scarlet thread, made more apparent by his pale grey skin. Across his forehead had been placed a playing card: the queen of diamonds. *The Red Queen!*

"See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil," said the sergeant.

"Why is it here?" asked Aurah.

Detective Nikolaidis turned to her, lips set sternly. "It's a warning," she said. I felt a shiver travel across my skin. *Whoever it is, they know about the paper's collusion with the police.*

Aurah was called in for a meeting with the LTPD captain. It was decided after some discussion to go along with the perceived threat and cease the newspaper's involvement with the Red Queen murders, for the sake of the staff who were very disturbed. The offices themselves were closed for four days for further investigation. We compiled our work and submitted it by computer so that the weekly edition could still go out without any mention of the menace. Soon however, the serial killer would be the least of my problems.

The book from Dr. Bleac arrived in the mail later that week. Attached to it was a note on the outside in a small envelope. The note read:

Dear Miss Heron,

The book is unfortunately written in ancient Hebrew. I don't have the time to do the translation myself; however, you may find a website which can do the translation for you through the Hebrew University in Jerusalem with the following web address. Good luck to you in your quest for knowledge.

Dr. Derrial Bleac

I powered up the computer as I looked through the dusty book for the woodcut. I had to be careful turning the yellow pages, they were all quite fragile. Fortune was with me, however, as I found the picture along with a relevant passage. I looked up and inserted the characters into the translator.

The translation itself was hard to piece together as there were no vowels and at times there were several translations for each word. I finally managed to assemble a workable, but rough approximation of the text. According to what it said, the shield leaning against the wall in the woodcut was placed there to mislead those who did not know what to look for. The necklace which Khalid had worn hidden underneath his shirt was allegedly a powerful magical artifact. It was defensive in nature granting the wearer immunity from “blood magic,” whatever that was. Additionally, it gave minor protection against wooden weapons. Like that did a lot of good in an age where bullets had replaced arrows and spears.

After working through the translation, I decided to make a package that would be opened by Amalthea in the event Khalid tried to kidnap me. It included an article to be posted on the internet naming him and exposing his precious magic necklace as well as his drugged wine operation. I hoped that might be enough leverage to make him back down. When I was finished writing the article with the instructions naming Khalid as my abductor, I put it with the book and wrapped it all up.

Then I received a phone call. Caller ID revealed it was Meg.

“Meg, how are you? I was beginning to worry.” I put the package aside.

“I think they’re on to me and I have to meet with you. I know I’ve been followed but I think I lost them.”

“Shall we meet at the park?”

“No, someplace more private. Meet me at the Fleur de Lis on the north side. I’m almost there now.”

“Ok, I’ll come right over.” I grabbed my stuff and drove over to the upscale eatery. I had sworn to Sabiya I would not talk about this issue with another living soul, but Meg was already in on it. And besides, I wanted to know what was really happening. Meg sat in a booth along the back corner by herself in the dim lighting. Her hair was a mess and dark circles hung under her eyes. I slid into the opposite side. We leaned together in conspiratorial whispers.

“My cousin may be the only thing keeping me alive,” she told me. “They’re on to you as well, Patricia. Were you followed?”

That alarmed me. “I don’t know.” I looked around the restaurant. Gabriel Montagne had entered and was seated at the far side of the establishment, but he had not seen me. I slid further into the booth. “I could blow the lid wide open on this little society of theirs. There are police cover-ups. I saw someone murdered in the street because he blabbed about something. They probably have their influence extending into the courts and other public services, maybe even the mayor’s office.”

Meg looked around then continued. “You have placed yourself in great danger. Sabiya told me you spoke with her. That was not a good thing to do. Her loyalty is with those who supply her with the drug she needs.” I recalled my previous conversation with Meg in the park.

I nodded. “I found out what the drug was. Something called vitae. They are slipping it into wine to have people ingest it without knowing.”

“No, listen to me! You don’t understand.” She hunched down even closer to the table and gestured with her hands, her eyes widening. “Sabiya has probably told her suppliers what you know. That makes you....”

“Hi, I’m Jenny; I’ll be your waitress today.” The waitress smiled as we both sat bolt upright and gasped. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Hot tea,” said Meg.

“I’ll have the same,” I added, playing with the menu, anxiety itching me. “Could you give us a little time before coming to take our order?”

“Sure.” Jenny left.

Meg continued, “You are at great risk because they now see you as a threat as well.” Penny Angel’s crazed utterance crept around in the back of my head. “You could be murdered like the victim you saw on the street, but I am their likely target. I’m going to tell you everything I know, in the event something happens to me.”

“Perhaps it would be good if you left town. We can’t trust the police, and you seem so isolated.”

Meg slumped forward as her tired eyes fell to the table. “I’m conflicted as that would involve leaving Sabiya behind and alone, but perhaps you are right.”

The waitress returned with our tea and we steeped it for a while before resuming our sensitive conversation.

“Last night she came to my apartment.”

“Sabiya?”

“Yes. She was going through horrible withdrawals. Cramping up and doubling over. Sweating. Beating on the floor and damaging the flooring underneath. Then Angel destroyed the garage door and came in with a police officer. They threatened me with swords and dragged Sabiya out with them.”

“Wait... Angel? Penny Angel? The crazy one dressed in all black?”

“Yes.”

“Was the officer wearing sunglasses at night?”

“Yes. You have met them?”

“I’ve had the unfortunate pleasure.”

“These people aren’t normal, you are right, but it goes beyond that. They’re not even human.”

She lowered her whisper even more and looked me straight in the eyes. “They are... kyuketsuki.” I shook my head not understanding. “Vampires.”

I blinked and shook my head. *No way.* “How do you know this to be true?”

“My husband disappeared five years ago. September 9th. I thought he had run off as no trace of him was ever found. After a few years I dated again, and I invited one boyfriend to my apartment. His name was Aaron.” She began to get upset and took a breath. I quickly got out a tissue.

“Thank you. Anyhow, instead of kissing me, he bit me on the neck. Then there was so much pain, but after it turned into pleasure. I fought through it, though perhaps I shouldn’t have. He... he must have felt sorry for me because he told me that Deacon Lyle worked for the vampires and had killed my husband because of what he knew. *Deacon again!* His fangs were still showing when he told me.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. She nodded slowly and took out a photograph from her purse. It was a close up of her neck with clear puncture wounds along the jugular.

“I took this picture later that night so that there would be evidence.” She looked deflated. “At least I’ve done some good by telling someone what’s happening.” The ramifications started running through my head as I considered the possibilities. “The vitae you mentioned. It is their blood. It is badly addicting and causes emotional changes. It makes you think they are your best friend.”

“It can also put you into a stupor.”

Meg took a breath and her eyes widened. “You took some?”

“No, but I’ve seen its effect on others.” I briefly explained to her what happened at the wine tasting party.

“Maybe, Patricia, we should both leave town.”

“I’m beginning to think that’s not a bad idea.”

Gabe was already gone when I left the Fleur de Lis. I tried to visit Amalthea at the Washborne but she was not in her room. I left the package I had prepared to be delivered to her with the front

desk attendant. I wondered if this creature who had been visiting her was a vampire. If so, she had to get out now!

I tried to call her but got an answering machine and just left a message for her. As I was driving home, I checked the mirror to be careful I was not followed. Then my cell went off.

“Hey, babe.” It was Gabriel.

“Hi Gabe. What’s up?”

“Remember that critter you saw out behind the pet shop? I just arrived at the gallery and it has returned.” I was still jittery from my conversation with Meg, but now I could get a picture of that thing and prove it was real. “Come in by the front entrance. I’ll let you in. I can see it from the balcony and don’t want to spook it.”

“I’ll be right over.” I turned at the corner and stepped on the gas. Buildings zoomed by. When I pulled into the lit parking lot, I could see Gabe standing by the glass doors. He opened them as I approached.

“Come on, I’m not sure it’s going to stay long,” he said as we rapidly ascended the stairs. When we got to the balcony I leaned over and peered. It was nowhere to be seen.

“See it? Where was it?”

“It was never there,” Gabe replied quietly.

“Hmm?” I asked when I turned around but when I did, his eyes were sparkling. They were shimmering there beautifully, almost like a kaleidoscope. The last thing I remembered before blacking out was Gabe whispering to me.

Chapter Six: Kiss of Death

When I came to, I didn't know where I was. Everything was black. I felt nauseated, lightheaded and so weak I didn't think I could stand. I blinked my eyes and blurry shapes emerged. I realized I was flat on my back on a hard surface. *Ugh.*

"You are waking up. Good." It was Gabe.

"What happened?" I asked as I swallowed dryly. I tried to get up and discovered I could not even lift my arms and legs. I managed to turn my head in the direction Gabe had spoken. He was standing over me, perhaps ten feet away. I lay on some kind of white mat. A viscous substance like oil covered my clothes; I could feel the wetness and a smell of... raw meat.

"You are dying, Patricia," he answered, a touch of sadness in his voice as he approached. "In a moment, I am going to ask you a question. I need for you to think carefully about your answer."

"Dying," I moaned. Yes. I felt like I was dying. My heart was not working right. I was in immense pain and I struggled just to breathe. My thinking was fuzzy. I could feel my life ebbing from me. I didn't know that Gabe was responsible for my predicament, not that I could have done anything about it. He just stood over me, looking down. Why didn't he help me?

"Ambulance," I muttered.

"It's too late for that. It would never get here in time," he answered, kneeling down now, watching me carefully. "You are bleeding to death."

"Bleeding," I responded weakly, turning away.

"Patty, I have a very important question for you. Can you hear me?" I could feel him tapping my cheek with his open hand as if from afar, and I fought to focus on what he was saying. He

leaned in close, the breath from his words on my face. “Do you want to sleep, or live?”

What kind of question was that? I tried to even consider it, but spots were dancing in front of me and I was quickly blacking out again. “Live,” I croaked.

“Then drink, and live!” he exulted as he bit his wrist. He put the open wound over my mouth. I felt the liquid pouring down my throat and it was like pure ecstasy infusing my entire being. My senses were fading up to that point, but the sensation felt like a cannon shot of lightning. My body spasmed involuntarily as my arms found an unknown strength, clamping down on his fist and forearm.

As pleasure flooded through my mind, another change was taking place, but on a spiritual level. I could feel it in my very soul which was like a precious, delicate yellow flower. As Gabe’s blood flowed into me, a chilling, bitter wind whipped through my very being. And the flower, my flower, my soul, wilted, crumpled and died. The edges of the petals curled up and dried, becoming brittle. Still, the freezing wind did not stop. It spread over, around, and through me, until I was as cold and icy as that biting current which enveloped me. My heart stopped and I felt a great sadness. This was countered by the physical euphoria that came from Gabe’s blood. It was an experience that words cannot describe.

My reactions were all without volition. I sucked on his wrist like a child on its mother’s breast. My eyes flew wide open through my tears as I drew greedily on that liquid font; the cold blood rushed through me like a hose of enraptured bliss gushing into me. My senses were so overpowered that they mattered little in comparison to this experience.

“Ok, stop,” Gabriel said. Forget that. I kept sucking. I was always willful, and I joined in with my reflexes to continue this intoxicating pleasure.

“Patricia, stop!” Gabe yelled, his voice commanding and urgent. Still I did not relent. My grip became a vice, my mouth latched onto his wrist like a giant parasite. My entire body became fixed on that sensation, gripping onto the source flowing into me.

“Stop!” Gabriel screamed as he pulled his arm back in an instant with the force of a supercharged pitching machine. I went flying across the large room like a blood-covered rag doll and landed on some steps in a clump, rolling to a stop.

“You are a most willful childe,” he remarked as he licked his wrist, his face a little paler than before. “You must learn to obey my directions for I am now your father, and am responsible for you.”

“You are my... father?” I asked dumbly. Aside from the afterglow of the Embrace ringing pleasure through my entire being, I was now seeing colors, different colors than I had ever seen before. Electric violets glimmered in thin ribbons off various surfaces. Invisible lines like those sometimes found in paintings illuminated in a soft glow around the room. Of more pressing concern was the constant pain in the pit of my stomach that felt like an angry mongoose was tied in a knot there. I curled up in a bloody ball. “Stomach ache.”

“Yes, you must be very hungry. Can you feel the blood inside you?” He turned to open a trap door in the floor behind him. “Wrenn, could you come up for a moment? We have to do a feeding.”

“It’s jumping around.” The last thing I wanted to do then was eat. Then it hit me. A feeding? I was... I was.... I looked up to Gabe. He saw my questioning, disbelieving look and nodded.

“Yes, you are a part of my family now. You were marked for death, but I cashed in a lot of

favors to save you.” Wrenn the kiosk lady came up the ladder and Gabe directed her around the canvas on the floor with a pointed finger. “Don’t worry, Bird. It will all come very naturally. Like riding a bike, only better.” He smiled.

Wrenn sat down on the floor next to me. “Hello Aunt Patricia. We were all wondering if it would come down to this.” She turned her head, pulled her hair back and presented me with her bare neck. As she did I could feel the blood in her body swishing through veins with the beats of her heart. It was as if they were thin, hollow tubes, radiating a kind of heat from a fading fireplace. The susurrations became a double bass beat, echoing in my ears.

Gabe spoke from nearby as I stared at Wrenn’s neck and felt a curious itching sensation in the top of my mouth. “Remember to take only a liter or so. No more or she could die.” My canines were growing; I could feel them tickle the top of my tongue. I opened my mouth as if to pop my ears on an airplane, but when I did it felt like a magnetic force pulled me towards her neck. My new fangs bit down right on the source of attraction and I was rewarded with a gusher of hot, steaming blood. *Ungh!*

It was a different experience than what had happened with Gabe. That was like the first powerful hit of some fantastic new drug, beyond any earthly experience. With Wrenn it was more like a deep, deep bounty of sultry liquid satisfaction. At once delectable and luxurious, blissful and indulgent, it was terrific... better than sex as I sucked and sucked on her supple neck. The treasure cascaded down my throat in a waterfall of warm pleasure. *Oh! Oh, that is so good.* After about ten seconds I felt the mongoose relax so I pulled back reluctantly.

“Good. I didn’t have to throw you across the room that time,” Gabe mused. He helped Wrenn get up and licked her on the neck where I had bit her. “Going to be ok?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“I’ll reward you later. Go get some fluids and rest in the spare room.” They shared a smile and she departed unsteadily back down the ladder. He retrieved a spray can of matte fixative from a table of art supplies and shook it a few times watching me.

I stood up feeling a little better but filled with questions. Furthermore my eyesight was still playing tricks on me, my hair was sticking out on one side and I was covered with drying blood—a complete disaster. I held my arms out laterally and looked at Gabe. He laughed heartily.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” he shook in merriment, one hand against his chest. “Patty, we all start out a mess. Go take a shower.” He nodded to a door behind me. “You’ll find soap, shampoo, a towel and one of my robes back there. Then we must have a long talk.”

I went to the bathroom and was horrified by my appearance in the mirror. My own drying blood dripped from my hair, face and clothes. My skin was different and my eyes had changed somehow. I didn’t want to look and went directly into the shower. After the shower I felt a bit more refreshed; the soap and shampoo left me squeaky clean and a bit more presentable. The freezing wind continued its silent zephyr through my empty heart. What had happened to me?

After donning Gabe’s terrycloth robe, I left the bathroom and went out into the split level open area which wound up being the third floor of Arts Haven. It had an oriental flair, bamboo ornaments and wooden floors, portraits of Gabe and a female companion, and a gas fireplace along the side wall. A long drapery covered the far wall along its length. Tiny four inch trees sparsely decorated some shelves and a medium sized conference table with chairs dominated the elevated section near the fireplace. A large golden rose design glistened from beneath the lacquer of the dark wood on the table.

The blood covered canvas upon which I had bled out my life was now hanging from a loose frame of wood near the gas fireplace where Gabe was standing. He was talking on the cell phone and glanced over at me when I came out. “Are you ready?” he asked into the phone, smiling. “You have a new sister. Yes, yes that’s right, it’s Patty. I’m about to debrief her now.” He patted the couch and sat down. “Okay, I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

He closed the cell and I went over to the couch and sat down next to him. The faint glowing lines in the room were insubstantial: I passed through one on the way. He put his arm around me and propped his feet up on a coffee table, looking at me in a wistful way. Why was I acting this way? I wanted to bolt out of there, but I was now a faithful dog, who could not help but love her evil master. *I did love him.* My emotions were filled with loyalty and trust, and yet, how could my cold, still heart feel this way? This dichotomy, this inner conflict was heightened by the physical pleasure of the Embrace along with the death of my soul. I leaned into him seeking solace. He had the answers I needed. The light from the flames danced around his face softly.

“The first few nights are always uncertain. This is our Clan’s haven, Bird. It is a safe place for you to stay. The way things are right now on the west coast, it’s a little bit like the Wild West, different from the way things usually are. There are power struggles among the different groups of vampires. We call ourselves Kindred.”

“Bird?” I asked.

“It’s a pet name... from your last name. I use the word with affection, *childe*.”

“I’m seeing things, lines and shapes that should not be there.”

“One of our family traits. They will fade in time, but not completely. You are a member of Clan

Toreador, and of all Kindred we are the ones who are closest to humanity in terms of our existence. We are the Roses among all others, filled with the desire to create beauty. But there are more important things to speak of first. Hold your questions until I am finished for both of our lives depend on what I am about to tell you.”

I nodded and he continued. “You need to be thoroughly familiar with a list of Traditions that we have before you will be allowed to go out and hunt on your own. It’s a small list, but you must promise to uphold them both in spirit and in letter to the very best of your ability. Failure to do so means death. I have not saved you to allow you to be irresponsible in our collective duties.” From the side of the couch he produced a folder. Inside was a paper upon which elaborate script was written. I blinked as the words played with one another, as if they had a life of their own. Gabe held out the paper and read aloud, explaining each part. I pulled my wet hair aside and lay my head on his shoulder as he read.

“The First Tradition: The Masquerade. Thou shall not reveal thy true nature to those not of the Blood. Doing such shall renounce thy claims of Blood.

You realize that if our existence ever became public knowledge, we would be hunted down to extinction. Those who remained would be placed into government laboratories for study. It would bring out the greed of mankind, with the worst sort having the power to become immortal. The decision and ability to Embrace would no longer be the exclusive right and choice of our elders and leaders, who have kept us safe for thousands of years. It could lead to the start of World War III, not that we’d be around to experience it. Millions of innocents would die. So we practice a Masquerade, pretending to be human to fit into society, and never allow outsiders to suspect our existence. Do you understand?” He looked at me with his vibrant blue eyes.

“Yes,” I replied, wide eyed by the revelation. “Self-preservation.” He nodded and continued reading.

“The Second Tradition: The Domain. Thy domain is thy own concern. All others owe thee respect while in it. None may challenge thy word while in thy domain.

Sometimes in larger cities, the Prince allows Clans to have a claim on land upon which hunting rights are exclusive. In the old days this served to keep inter-Clan warfare over limited food supplies from threatening us. A recognized domain also has certain privileges. The youngest neonate technically has the authority to order Kindred from other Clans to leave. Any who refuse break the Second Tradition.”

“Is Arts Haven your domain?”

“It is the domain of our Clan.

The Third Tradition: The Progeny. Thou shall only Sire another with the permission of thine Elder. If thou createst another without thine Elder's leave, both thou and thy Progeny shall be slain.

Don't ever, ever sire unless you have permission from the Prince, Bird. I had to get permission from Tyson, the Prince of Little Tokyo. Creating ghouls is another matter. Some places require permission and others don't.”

“Ghouls?”

“Human servants. Wrenn is one. They are made by giving Kindred blood without draining the body first. It creates an emotional bond called a blood bond to the Kindred.”

“I think that’s what Khalid el-Mazri is doing.”

“Really. We must talk about him later.

The Fourth Tradition: The Accounting. Those thou create are thine own children. Until thy Progeny shall be released, thou shall command them in all things. Their sins are thine to endure.

This is why I am responsible for all that you do, until you can be proven trustworthy in the community and released to take care of yourself.” He grew serious, looking into my eyes. “Be aware, I will destroy you if necessary to protect myself. It is permitted.”

Loyalty from my blood bond with Gabe poured out of me. I struggled against it, but could not help myself. Again, I was divided, both wanting to serve my master and yet repelled at the same time. “I will do all that I am commanded to do to keep the Masquerade so that innocents may not come to suffering.”

“Good.

The Fifth Tradition: Hospitality. Honor one another's domain. When thou comest to a foreign city, thou shall present thyself to the one who ruleth there. Without the word of acceptance, thou art nothing.

Whenever you go to a new city or region, you must make contact with the ruling Camarilla Prince and introduce yourself to him or her, asking permission to stay in his territory. Failure to do so makes your life forfeit.

The Sixth Tradition: Destruction. Thou art forbidden to destroy another of thy kind. The

right of destruction belongeth only to thine Elder. Only the Eldest among thee shall call the Blood Hunt.

If you kill another Kindred without leave, your life will be declared forfeit by the Prince.” He finished reading the list and placed it back into the folder, which then went on the coffee table.

“Good. I’d like you to memorize all six Traditions, word for word. We have about five hours until daybreak. You’ll be staying in my old coffin.” I chewed on my lip and he gave me a puzzled look.

“The words, they were moving,” I told him.

“Moving?”

“Yes. They jiggle around at times, tapping one another and playing tag.”

He smiled, pleased, giving me a squeeze. “You have the gift of writing as well as art. The blood is strong in you. I’ll teach you how to direct it later. Until then, can you still read?”

I nodded.

“Then do your best with it. Oh, and don’t get too close to the fire. You are a new and powerful being, but fire causes a bad reaction in Kindred and we really don’t need that right now.”

Gabe got up from the couch and pulled back a wall painting affixed on hinges, revealing an opening to an empty walk-in closet. I followed. Inside, against the wall was a half-opened coffin, lined with red silk, padded sides and a pillow. He came back and gave me a hug which I returned and departed through the trap door in the floor. I spent the rest of the evening memorizing the commands as instructed; glad he had taken the time to give me explanations.

At 6:00 am, my limbs grew weary and my eyelids heavy as I got up from the couch with the folder. I was exhausted. I went over to the closet and pulled the painting in behind me. Although completely in the dark, I could see well but only in shades of gray and black. I climbed into the coffin and pulled the lid shut over me. Then I drifted away into the darkness; cold, silent and dead.

On the other side of the city nestled among manicured lawns and lofty mansions, Prince Tyson Vox was having problems of his own. Tyson had always been a by-the-book Camarilla Ventrue. What he lacked in creativity he made up for in sheer determination. No amount of willpower, however, would change the course of events that had transpired against him in these recent nights.

The Gangrel had always been a wild card. Unfettered in the woodlands just outside the city, they raced and frolicked among the trees, running free and unhindered. Tyson had heard reports of Sabbat activity on the rise in the suburbs. He had warned them about straying outside the confines of the city limits, to no avail.

Then there was the newspaper story of Jeri Jaxxon, one of the Gangrel neonates who got caught by a reporter playing with an abomination, a giant spider of some sort. That was the last straw for Clan Gangrel. An example had to be set.

Rayne O'Connell was the acting Primogen of Clan Gangrel. She was a short-haired dervish with a fiery temper and an arrogant demeanor. Tyson had quietly ordered his Scourge to dispatch the woman as an example to the others. He never considered the consequences.

Rayne was popular among the Kindred in Little Tokyo, especially among the elders. When she was destroyed without warning, the effect was catastrophic. Elders began disappearing... leaving the city. Phones were disconnected, havens were left deserted and the greenest of neonates were left to fend for themselves. The only Primogen left were Gabriel Montagne of Clan Toreador and Derrial Bleac of Clan Tremere.

Even the Primogen of his own Clan had departed, the dirty little bastard! This was not good, not good at all. Tyson's leadership would appear weak and his judgment poor. There was no way he could order the elders back into his city. Even if he was successful in luring them back they would exercise their newfound political power to make him a puppet Prince, and that was something he would not suffer.

With the Sabbat encroaching, it would only be a matter of time before they found a weakness and attacked. Tyson needed to regroup and relocate to a city where his support was strong. Even if he remained and they somehow managed to repel the Sabbat, the Regional Prince, that massive ego-swilling twit, Antonio DeMark, would have his head. Yes, it was time to go. There were some loose ends to tie up first.

Tyson swept his hands through his long dark hair as he paced in the manor's library. The lines in his silk gray suit rose and fell as he waited for his second in command in Little Tokyo, the Seneschal Kayler Augustus. Footsteps approached down the hallway outside.

"Ah, there you are," Tyson nodded at his long-time colleague. Kayler was a large man with thick, muscled arms and a well-built physique. He wore a yellow dress shirt rolled up to the elbows, brown slacks and oxford shoes. Tyson browsed through different scenarios in his head then settled on a question. "How long have you been in service to me, Kayler?"

“Since the end of World War II, my Prince. That would be sixty years.” Kayler relaxed near a large yellow globe of the Earth that rested in a pivoting wooden stand.

“And in all that time you have served me faithfully.” Kayler nodded. “You have taken the blame for me in times of distress... you have corrected situations that required a delicate hand... and led the charge when more forceful action was required.” Kayler narrowed his eyes as though he wondered where this was going.

“I have decided it’s time to reward you. You have certainly earned it, and you certainly deserve it. The payment is within the keepsake box on the coffee table.”

Kayler took a few steps toward the table then paused, brows furrowed. “But, your Grace... isn’t that the box which is trapped with incendiaries? I’m afraid I must decline.”

Tyson lifted his chin. “It is indeed.” A smile twitched. “Ah, Kayler, it appears we have known one another for too long.” Kayler met his eyes and the two spoke wordlessly. At least the trap had been avoided.

“Very well then. The *true reward* is on the top shelf over there.” Tyson flipped his hand dismissively towards the bookcase. “It’s the one with the thin red binding. You fancy yourself a genealogist as I recall? Within that book lies the bloodlines of countless Kindred going back to the 1400s. There are some you have missed, I’d wager.”

Kayler’s attention went straight to the bookshelf. He crossed the room as Tyson turned his back to attend to some papers left on the desk. The Prince listened as the footsteps crossed the carpet and echoed off the polished floor. Closer... closer.... A metallic twang sounded from the case as Kayler attempted to retrieve the book. By then of course, it was far too late.

The heavy spring which was tripped by the lever fastened to the backside of the book brought the shelves together with a resounding crash. Embedded within the false books were thin wooden spikes, sharpened and as deadly as the day they were made. They were spaced one inch apart on opposite sides; one of them pierced Kayler's heart.

Tyson retrieved the sword from his scabbard behind the desk while Kayler hung suspended, paralyzed and in intense pain, but conscious. He couldn't even move his lips or eyes. "Kayler, you are far too predictable." Tyson sauntered around the table to address the other Kindred, taking his time. He examined the bookcase and swung back one of the sections as blood dripped from the contraption and pooled on the floor like a bizarre plinko game from hell. "You always knew it would come down to this." Kayler didn't answer.

"You see, you were the one who ordered the unauthorized execution of Rayne O'Connell. Or at least that is what everyone will hear. Thank you for taking the fall for me one last time old friend. Unfortunately, the penalty for unsanctioned hunts of the Scourge... is death." Tyson examined the edge of the sword before looking back at the unmoving Kayler. "I suppose in your mind right now you are screaming and railing against me... calling me a Pontius Pilate. Don't be angry with me," he shook his head and his lips curled back in humor. "As Pilate might have said, 'It's just politics.'"

Tyson drew his sword back and swung it in a sweeping arc towards Kayler's neck.

Unfortunately, the wooden spikes prevented the blow from separating head from shoulders completely. Blood squirted out from the severed veins, spattering Tyson's suit. Kayler's head lolled off to the side, meat and gore squeezing forth from the new aperture.

“How *dare* you?” Tyson raged as his nice suit was stained. “At least have the decency to die with some dignity!” He lashed out with the sword once more and was rewarded with a satisfying *thunk*. Kayler’s body turned to ash and fell to the floor, leaving the blood-stained set of ash covered clothes still hanging from the bookcase.

“I suppose it falls to me to have to clean up this mess,” Tyson muttered to himself as he went to retrieve the cleaning supplies. “A Prince’s work is never done.”

When I awoke the next evening I realized immediately something was very wrong. That biting cold was all through my body. I didn’t shake, but I was aware of it. Then I remembered what happened to me. So now I was a vampire. My humanity was gone. *My God*. I pushed up on the coffin lid to find the closet light on. Creepy – the coffin lid, not the light. Several outfits of mine which had been at the apartment now hung on the dowel above me. Hose, panties and shoes were neatly placed on a shelf. I left the closet and found a note on the coffee table.

“Dear Aunt Patricia, You’ll find some of your clothes in the closet and fresh blood in the mini-fridge. Your purse and make-up is in the bathroom. Wrenn.”

I noticed the blood covered canvas had been removed and went to the bathroom for a first good look at myself.

I hadn’t changed that much, although I was a shade paler than I used to be. My freckles had all but disappeared... but my eyes sparkled like sapphires. I leaned into the mirror to check myself out. The eyes definitely had something extra. I smiled, glad I could still see myself in the mirror and went to get some clothes before taking a shower. When I came out I dressed and went to

check on the blood. It was a typical blood donor bag, plastic with a short valve sticking out of it. I sniffed it and could feel my fangs grow. I didn't mind the cold temperature as pleasure once more rocked my world. Gabe was right; feeding on blood did very much seem like second nature to me now. The flowing liquid poured into me and left me sated and very satisfied.

I placed the empty bag into the trash can and wandered over to the couch where I double checked myself on what I had studied the night before, feeling confident. The cell phone went off in my purse. It was Amalthea.

"Hello Patty, turn off your phone?"

"Yes, I had a busy day." These new colors now radiated off the screen of my phone, something I was still getting used to.

"Let's get together tonight. I have some great news."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"No? Oh, say this is not so. Just for a little bit?"

"I really can't. I, ah...." I struggled to come up with a reasonable excuse. I've gone undercover on a story? Laid up sick? Found a new boyfriend? Been turned into a bloodsucking vampire of the night?

"Patty?"

I thought of Wrenn. "I have distant family in town." Well, that was true now, sort of.

"Who?"

“Oh, a second cousin. What’s your good news?”

“The dreams have stopped, and the voices, too!”

“That’s wonderful news!” I was happy for her. The trap door opened and Aurah came up the ladder. I gaped for a moment. *My boss was here!* What should I say? What should I do? Aurah nodded when she saw me on the cell and kept quiet. “I have to go now.”

“Well call me the soonest you become available, okay?”

“I will. Bye.” I closed the cell and Aurah sauntered over to me.

“Sister,” she said, her smile tinged with a hint of sadness.

“You know something that I don’t?” I asked flipping my wrist at her, cautious with my words. I had to be careful not to give anything away, just in case.

“Oh, pooh you silly thing! Gabe Embraced me a few years ago. You can speak plainly with me when we are alone.”

I blinked and gaped for a moment. “You? Embraced by Gabe? I... I never thought that....” I struggled for words as I tried to grapple with this new revelation.

“I know, I know. I was the same way. It’s all very new, and there is so much to learn. Got your Traditions memorized yet?”

“By heart.”

“That’s a good start. Gabe sent me here to answer your questions and also to tell you about our family. He also mentioned he may be unavailable for the next few weeks, on and off. Clan

business of some sort.”

“Oh.” I looked at her. “The roses outside your office – I should have guessed you might be part of our Clan.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t or I would not be doing my job and keeping the Masquerade, right?” She went over to the drapery covered wall and pulled on some cords, revealing the Pacific Ocean glimmering under a rising full moon. It was a vision of loveliness with my new senses. Tiny motes of light danced on the waves across the horizon as they winked and bobbed. I felt a little numb just watching them. Aurah nudged me and my attention was drawn back to the room.

“So tell me about Clan Toreador. Gabe already filled me in on how we are the artists and roses of the Kindred.”

Aurah smirked at my distraction. “We are. But along with that we have a family weakness toward great beauty. If we experience an emotionally moving piece of art, we can go into reverie, a sort of trance. We have to be on our guard against this because it leaves us vulnerable to attack or suspicion. The trance itself, though, is very pleasing. That is why we are also known as the hedonists or decadents among other Clans.”

“I see. Can you give me an example of it?”

“You started to go into reverie when you were looking at the ocean just now. I went into reverie once when I was listening to Handel’s Messiah. Fortunately I was at home. We Roses also comprise the social leadership which holds the Clans together. Not that there’s a lot of Kindred social functions going on in Little Tokyo right now.”

“Yes, Gabe mentioned something about this being the Wild West.”

“He was probably referring to the desertion of the city by most of the elders. They are lying low and refusing to be involved or gone altogether.”

“How is that bad?”

“Because it allows possible Masquerade violations to go unchecked. That’s a danger to all of us, and humans, too. Speaking of violations, there’s a sect of Kindred called the Sabbat. They are evil to the core. They don’t care about the Traditions, have wild powers that defy logic and practice ceremonies that would make the most hardened Camarilla’s blood curdle.”

I drew my brows together and stared. *Something that scares Kindred?* “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not. But let’s not dwell on it. Did Gabe tell you about our Toreador abilities?”

“No.”

“Oh, you are going to love this. As Kindred we can call upon the powers of our family blood. Did you feel something stirring inside you right after your Embrace?”

I remembered the stomach ache. “The mongoose? Yes!”

“What do you mean the mongoose?”

“I felt something curling around and thrashing inside my body. It caused intense pain and the way it moved reminded me of the way a mongoose will run around behind the back of a snake to strike.”

“Oh, yes, that was it. Your blood. We call it the Beast. It’s sort of like... an extra finger you can control – only it’s the blood inside you. Let’s try something simple.” I nodded. “At first it’s sort of like directing your subconscious. You have to concentrate to control it.” Aurah positioned herself in front of me. “Okay. Try to send that mongoose to your ears to amplify your hearing. Just be quiet and direct it there.

I tried to clear my mind and calm myself. Then I told it to move to my ears, visualizing. Move. Upward. To the sides of my head. There. I felt self-conscious for a second but then regained control. After a moment, I could hear the ocean outside swishing on the shoreline. The clock downstairs was ticking loudly. Air currents from the air conditioning system swished about in the room. Cars motored along out front. Aurah was scratching her dress behind her with her fingernail. “Stop that,” I said as I reached for her hand, laughing.

“Good, you did it on the first try.” Aurah squeezed my arm. “Gabe will be pleased when I make my report. You can also send the blood to your eyes, your nose... anywhere you can enhance the senses. Just remember, when it comes to our Kindred abilities, it’s all about the blood.

There are two other aspects of the blood that we excel in. In one, you send it to your heart. This allows you to influence the emotions of humans in the immediate vicinity. It’s sort of like being a Pied Piper.

My eyes widened in recognition. “That was what you were doing at Club Inferno when those admirers wanted to crash your party.”

“Exactly. It involves the same idea, controlling the blood. You’ll get the hang of it soon enough. Now, the other ability we have involves motion. With this, you send the blood to your muscles.” She started to lean and was suddenly behind me, my hair and clothes blown back by the sudden

movement.

I was amazed. “Can I try?”

She laughed silently and shook her head. “Let’s not until later. I don’t want you to accidentally run through the plate glass window. You probably wouldn’t be hurt too much from breaking the window and the fall afterwards, but we don’t want to make an expensive mess or break the Masquerade.”

I quickly agreed. “Okay. What else do I need to know?”

“Be aware though that if you overuse your Kindred abilities, your blood becomes wearied. Restless. Angry. This is especially true if you have not fed in a while. When you push too much you risk a violent reaction, where you lose control to the blood and go into a frenzy. You’ll become a raging madwoman attacking anything and anyone nearby. That’s why we call it the Beast. It nearly always results in a Masquerade violation if seen. So be sure to feed regularly and, if necessity dictates, you can then use your powers responsibly without fear of losing control.”

“Thank you. That’s very practical advice.”

“That’s what I am here for, sis. Oh, we Roses can grow our hair out – it’s one of the perks of being the beautiful Clan. It also uses blood and has to be redone nightly if you want it to stay, so most don’t bother with it as it’s an expensive vanity.”

“Who are the other Clans? I’ve had my suspicions about some of the people I have met.”

“There are seven Clans that are formal members of the Camarilla; the Toreador, the Nosferatu, the Tremere, the Brujah, the Ventrue, the Malkavians and the Gangrel, who are sometimes independent. Each Clan has its own Kindred abilities. Some of them are shared in common,

although it is generally not known between Clans what exactly those powers are. Each Clan also fills a role in our society. Who have you suspected?”

“Khalid el-Mazri, the owner of the Daily Grind. He’s been drugging people with tainted wine. It paralyzes them. He almost got me with it. One of his assistants, Serishen, seems unaffected by it.”

Aurah drew her brows together. “This is very disturbing news. Do you know what that means?”

“No, but I thought he was up to no good.”

“Khalid is a Setite in town, a slippery one at that. He convinced Prince Tyson that he wanted to join the Camarilla. But evidently he is making lots of servant ghouls and has Embraced this Serishen you mentioned without permission. We think he’s expanding his little power base in the vacuum, and your observation proves it. A blood hunt will surely be called.”

“That means he’s broken the Third Tradition, right?”

“That’s right. They are a vile group. I’ve heard rumors that they change into giant cobras to feed.”

I shivered thinking about how close I came to being a part of their slithering cult.

“Any others give themselves away?” Aurah leaned on the couch as I considered her question.

I didn’t want to implicate any members of the Camarilla from my investigation. It would be bad to come into a community with damning evidence and accusations of breaking the Masquerade.

“All I have are hunches. Nix Maruti from Scooters Auto Repair is one. She had a glare in her eyes that stuck with me.”

“You’re right, she’s Brujah. The glare doesn’t surprise me. That Clan is known for their violent temper and passionate opinions.”

“She looked like a caged tiger, only without the bars.”

“Yeah. Brujah can be pretty intimidating.” Aurah glanced out at the ocean, then turned back to me.

“Officer Wei and Penny Angel also seemed odd to me.”

“As they should. Penny is Malkavian. Wei is her ghoul. Their Clan distinction is that they have been touched in the mind during the Embrace. It leaves them with a warped sense of reality.

They are also called “children of the moon;” they are a little crazy. No one can wholly understand Malkavians unless they share their peculiar blood.”

“What about the spider monster I saw by the Bark and Bite pet shop?”

Aurah sighed. “I got into a little trouble with that. I published the story and then Gabe informed me that the Tremere could make just such a creature. They are involved in something called blood magic that can do all kinds of unexpected things. They are both respected and feared members of the Camarilla and guard their secrets with religious zealotry.”

Blood magic. So that’s what the necklace is for.

“Anyone else?”

“A large man named Deacon?”

“Deacon Lyle is a ghoul of Clan Brujah. He’s a punk, trying to make a name for himself with his Clan by being a bloodthirsty asshole. What they see in him, I’ll never know.”

But enough about that. After I speak with Gabe, I think he'll allow you to go and hunt soon and try to resume your normal life. We don't want anyone to suspect something from your disappearance. But there's one more thing we need to talk about."

"All right."

Her look grew serious as she ushered me up to the elevated part of the third floor where we sat down at the conference table. "Patty, I know that all these things are new to you. New things are exciting, but there is a downside that I don't think you are seeing." She searched for words and finally her grey eyes settled on me, imploring. "Forgive me, but I want to be totally up front and honest with you. We're dead, Patty." She lifted my hand and let it fall to the table. "Yes, we're conscious, but we're not alive. Not like we were.

We'll never see the sun again, ever. If the sun does catch you, you'll be destroyed, instantly."

She snapped her fingers in the air. "Like that." My mouth parted in shock. I had begun the process of accepting my current situation thanks to the blood bond I had with Gabe, but this was the first time I had been confronted with the repercussions of that twisting, freezing current that wound its way through my body and heart.

She continued. "We can't eat human food. It smells wonderful, but if you try, you'll get violently ill and throw up blood, which, by the way, is a Masquerade violation if seen. The only thing we can consume now is blood. That's it." I could feel my lower lip beginning to tremble.

"We can never bear children. That precious gift is gone. Forever." *No children!*

"Furthermore, because we are undead we are cut off from God. We are no longer human."

I couldn't bear it anymore and broke down crying, in deep, heaving sobs. I hid my face in my

hands as I leaned over the conference table, shaking. I felt completely and utterly overwhelmed.

Aurah scooted her chair over, gathered my head in her arms and whispered to me. “There, there little sister. We all cry at the beginning. It’s a horrible revelation.” She stroked my hair as I let myself go.

After some time I managed to calm down a little. I loved Gabe but hated what had happened to me... what I had become. This new existence seemed to be filled with dichotomies I could not and did not want to understand. Aurah left the table and returned with a box of tissues, which I used while she consoled me.

“It takes time to accept. We’ve sacrificed a lot, but with the Camarilla, we can lean on and draw strength from one another instead of being lost and alone. All the other Roses understand exactly what you are going through. You’ll meet them soon.”

I nodded and sniffled.

“And besides,” Aurah brightened with a weary smile, “it’s not all bad. With our longevity, if we choose to, we can really make a difference in the world for good, so long as we keep the Masquerade and the Traditions.”

That made some sense. We sat together and talked late into the night. It was good to get perspective from Aurah who had already lived several years through the process I was just beginning. She talked about her own struggles and how she had made peace with them.

Afterwards I felt a little better, although the grief from my own metamorphosis was still raw and painful. Aurah visited with me late each evening to check in and see how I was doing. Wrenn would also pop in after the museum closed to deliver a liter pack of blood and ask if I needed

anything.

Aurah suggested to me that I take a private tour of the museum after it was closed. I was amazed by the insights which flooded my mind with every new sculpture and painting I viewed. It was quite a different experience than the one I had when I breezed through with Amalthea before.

When I was still human. Each brushstroke proclaimed a profound statement. The lines of symmetry in the black metal of the samurai sword were perfect in the way they reflected the dim light. The shapes, colors and shadows of the exhibits not only spoke volumes in their own right, but also interplayed with others that were displayed nearby. To me, it was a night of exhilarating adventure.

Aurah knew just how to pull me out of my depressed mood. A few nights later she arrived with good news. “Gabe sent word that you’re allowed to go out to feed on your own and if that goes well you can return to your apartment.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Thank you, Aurah.” I hoped I could soon get settled in with a new routine in familiar surroundings.

“Also, Abi has inquired about her new aunt. She’s my ghoul. She wants to spend some time with you.”

I was released from my stay at Arts Haven. Abi came over to the museum to see me after Aurah left. She wore a flowing black blouse with fishnet gloves and silver bracelets. She looked distracted as Wrenn let her in through the back door.

“There’s somebody in the dumpster out back,” she said as she came in, looking in the direction of the alley. “He was staring at the windows but hid when he noticed me looking at him.” Wrenn

pressed her knuckles against her lips then went up to the second floor for a better view.

“I’ll check it out,” I volunteered. Probably some bum trying to find a place to hole up. The dumpster had flies buzzing around it and smelled of rotting waste, but when I lifted the cover it was empty. I checked the area but saw nothing that would arouse suspicion so I came back inside. Wrenn monitored from above.

“Whoever it was is gone,” I reported.

“Good, he was scary looking. Speaking of which,” Abi brightened holding up a bag. “Tonight is Goth night at Club Inferno. Wanna come?”

I smiled.

Goth is not my first choice for music or attire. It’s all a little depressing and foreboding for my taste, but it would be fun to get out and do something different. The bag held some extra clothes and after I had changed I joined Abi in the bathroom to get ready. We primped and fussed with make-up and hair. I had the idea to send the blood to the skin of my head and sure enough my hair began to grow.

Abi clapped. “Oh, I wish I could do that!” I found I could change the color, too, through my feelings while the blood was in my scalp, so I thought about Goth stuff and sure enough my hair and eyebrows turned a deep obsidian black. A slight violet sheen reflected from my hair as I arranged it into a side ponytail. It was perfect for the look we wanted tonight.

At 11 pm we walked over to Club Inferno, which was just down the street from Arts Haven. Others had started to arrive when we got there, dressed in various shades of grey and black. Inside the music was surprisingly low and the lights dim. A crew was making last minute

adjustments to the speakers and fiddling with instruments on the stage in the back of the building. A buzz drifted through the crowd suddenly as the entire club went totally black. Then dazzling lasers and effects were switched on as The Phantasmal Druids hit the stage in an unannounced appearance and the audience went absolutely berserk.

As the prelude to “Make My Karma” played, I saw the George Clooney lookalike a short ways away, the one who had ignored me at the company party. I approached him and allowed the blood to flow to the center of my chest. The guitar solo soared above the loud applause in a beautiful harmony. Everyone in a short radius turned to me with admiration, awe and wonder. This time I was the center of attention, and for a change it was the good kind. Even Greg Morris turned to me with the line “You’re the beauty in the flow,” as he performed.

‘George’ smiled at me and I gave him a come hither motion with my gloved hand as we went to a darkened corner of the club. He kissed me there full on the lips as I wrapped myself around him. After a moment I returned the kiss, this time on his neck. At least, that was the way it appeared. When I began to draw blood, something inside me became insistent... it was my own blood. I pulled wanting more and more. It felt so good, yet I became alarmed as my actions grew less voluntary. Desire, nature and self-control struggled inside me. *What if I take too much and kill him?* I finally forced myself to back off. Dark blood oozed out of two puncture marks. I quickly gave his neck a lick like Gabe had done with Wrenn and the two small marks healed immediately. He stood there dazed for a moment.

I glanced behind us and was relieved that no one had noticed anything amiss. Like riding a bike, maybe, but I had to be careful about going downhill. I needed more discipline. “Are you okay?” I asked, shaking him as he stood there. He nodded but leaned on my shoulder. “You look a little

weak, perhaps you should sit down.” I guided him out of the shadows to a table where Abi rejoined me.

Later in the evening Abi cupped her hands to my ear. “You did that like a real pro” she said as the band launched into “Forty Four More.” For the moment everything was going well, I was sated, and all was right in the world... for an undead blood sucking vampire, that is.

“It seemed really natural,” I replied, and I suppose to some extent it was. I was now made to take blood from the living to sustain myself. Humans ate meat. I took blood without killing, which seemed more humane. Although my reasoning was sound, something pestered me in the back of my conscience. I forced myself to forget it and enjoy the evening and surprise concert.

Chapter Seven: A Garden of Roses

I received a text message later that week as I was about to return Amalthea’s call. “My precious Roses: I am calling a Clan meeting tonight at 10 pm. Attendance is mandatory. This is serious business. Come to the back door of Arts Haven. Gabe.”

I put my plans to feed on hold and slipped into a pleated, peach Ms. Chleise summer dress so that I would not look shabby at my first Clan meet. After checking my look I drove over to the museum early so that I would not be late. Wrenn greeted me at the back door.

“Good evening Aunt Patricia,” she said respectfully. “They’re upstairs on the third floor in the haven.” She was dressed up too, in a little black dress so I was glad I had taken the time to look my best.

“Thanks.”

Several new people were there as I came up the trap door, removing my heels first before

ascending the ladder. They were seated around the rose-themed conference table. The woman in the wall pictures with Gabe was there also.

“Bird, come on over.” Gabe was wearing a dark gray blazer with matching light ash gray slacks, a striped dress shirt and black tie and was looking sharp. He gave me a proud nod and ushered me to the table. “May I introduce you to Byron Hammerer, Wynter Paine, and my wife Dominae. Everyone, this is Patricia Heron, my new childe.” Dominae got up and gave me a hug as the others gave various pleasant greetings.

“Welcome to the family, Patricia!” Dominae said. “Gabriel has been telling me about you and we’re all very pleased.”

“Let’s not give the neonate a swollen head dear.” Gabe murmured the aside and received a laugh from the gathering. “Remember she is new and the young are prone to mistakes.” Dominae gave him a sly smile and narrowed her eyes as Aurah and Abi came up the ladder followed by Wrenn. More greetings were exchanged and everyone sat down except Gabe who took a place at the head of the table.

“The reason I called you all here tonight is threefold: I want all of you to take extra precautions to ensure your own safety. Remember that in the event of any doubt, run. Don’t be a hero.” He looked over all of us gravely, his stern expression mixed with compassion. “I don’t want to lose any of you. There has been enough death already.” We all sat up a little straighter.

“The matter of greatest importance is that our enemies, the Sabbat, have somehow infiltrated Little Tokyo.” He leaned on the table with the palms of his hands. “With no dependable Nosferatu presence reporting in, they have managed to lay low and increase their numbers without being detected. I’m guessing that the missing persons we’ve heard about are being held

captive as a food supply. Try not to hunt alone; go in pairs whenever possible. And if you see evidence of Sabbat activity, text me as soon as you are out of danger.” He looked around the room making sure we all understood. I raised my hand.

“What would be examples of Sabbat activity?” I asked.

“Unexplained phenomena. Shadows moving of their own accord. Humans who have been drained to death and left with puncture marks. Sudden localized weather changes. Zones of silence when there should be sound.” Gabe rattled down the list and then added one more. “Oh, and twenty foot black rubbery tentacles that erupt from people or objects.” There was a pause as Aurah and Abi glanced at each other with uncertainty.

“That’s one you run away from,” Byron added.

“Indeed,” Gabe said. “Secondly, Prince Tyson has either gone missing or is unresponsive, along with the other elders.” Byron and Wynter whispered, conferring with one another at this news.

“We still have some Ventrue ancillae in town and I have informed them of the vacancy, but they have yet to decide whether they will claim the throne. In the meantime the Regional Prince, Antonio DeMark, has ordered me to report to him after this meeting. Dominae will be going with me. I don’t know at this time when he will grant me leave to return.”

Wynter expressed her displeasure. “I don’t like it. This may as well be an Anarch town, the way things are going.”

“That’s why I am enacting the following measures. I need for all of you to watch over our domain at Arts Haven while I am gone. We’ll rotate in shifts. Abi and Wrenn, you’ll take the daylight hours, and Byron, I’d like for you to get your ghoul working on this as well. You can

decide upon the schedule among yourselves. Make certain the alarm and escape shaft to the basement are activated in the event of an emergency. Wynter, you, Aurah, Byron and Patty will rotate during the evening hours, with each of you taking one night per shift.” He glanced at me. “As the low girl on the totem pole, you’ll be taking the first shift tonight.”

I nodded.

“The last piece of news we have Patty to thank for. The Setite who claimed he wanted to join the Camarilla has, in fact, broken the Third Tradition and is growing his nest at an alarming rate. I affirmed this just tonight before calling the meeting. Because Prince Tyson is missing, a blood hunt can’t be called in his absence. If you see Khalid, don’t try to stake or confront him. He’s an elder and has very powerful blood. Just try to avoid him and his followers. If he interacts with you, don’t give him any reason to suspect we are on to him. Oh, and there’s one more thing.” Gabe turned to me. He looked down at the table and pressed it with his fingers before continuing as his voice became soft; almost quiet.

“Patricia, I regret to inform you that Meg died earlier this evening. It seems you were not the only one she was talking to about us. One of the Brujah found out and did it to protect the Masquerade, and our lives.” He paused and frowned. “I’m sorry. I could only save one of you. But... I thought you should know. You deserve to know because you were her friend.”

All eyes turned to me and my chin wrinkled, thinking of the poor woman I had met crying outside the church. “We’re sorry, Patricia,” Wynter whispered. “It had to be done.”

“Doesn’t make it any easier,” was all I could say, looking away and biting back my words. *Oh, Meg!* My stomach felt nauseous and I shivered a little as I held back my tears. The bleak, arctic chill which ran through my heart became more apparent. *What had I become? Dear God, please*

help me! Please help Meg.... Maybe she was the lucky one. I felt like I was an accessory to murder.

“Are there any questions about what we’ve covered tonight?”

“Let’s just hope these Sabbat are not the Tzimisce,” Byron said, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest.

The meeting broke up and people mingled, socializing. Gabe approached me and put a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry about the bad news, Bird. Normally when someone is sired, a party is held to commemorate and welcome the new Kindred. The timing just isn’t good right now with everything going on. I’ll let the other Clans know of your Embrace so you are not mistaken for food or otherwise challenged.”

“Thank you, Gabe,” was all I could manage.

My shift went uneventfully, and I rested in Gabe’s coffin until I could get home the following evening.

Amalthea had left several voicemails so I decided to meet with her. We chose an Asian restaurant near the park, The Golden Wok. Tiny white lights strung in the trees outside glittered through the windows. I ordered the cashew chicken. Amalthea got the spicy pork with rice. The steaming, savory aroma taunted me with forbidden desires. I poked at it with a fork as we got caught up.

“So what have you been doing not at home all day?” Her French accent was a little thicker than usual. “I’ll bet you have been hanging out with Gabriel – he is cute!” She laughed.

I made up an excuse. “I’ve been very busy working on a story. It’s been taking up a lot of time

but I hope to be finished with it soon.”

She shook her head and looked at me, shoulders sagging. “Very well, if you do not want to talk about it, that is fine. You simply do not trust me.”

“No, Amalthea, it’s not that. I do trust you. It’s just that this thing is so complicated.”

“Then what has been happening to you, hmm?”

“Ok, I’ll spill it. Yes, Gabe and I have been seeing more of each other lately, and I have been hanging out with Abi, a co-worker.” Her attention perked up immediately as she sat up straight.

“My relationship with Gabe is completely platonic, though. I really have been working on a story that involves a serial killer and it has me completely un-nerved.”

“I was worried about you when you did not return my calls. Friends need to stay in touch, no? Eat some of your food, you are making me feel fat.”

I laughed and poked it some more. “I think I’ll take it to go; I’m not feeling very hungry. How are the dreams going?”

She looked to her right in the air and smiled before answering. “I’ll make you a deal... tell me about Gabe and Abi and I will tell you about my dreams.”

I shrugged. “Not too much to tell. Abi is a photographer on staff at the Observer. She likes to go out and sometimes hangs out at Club Inferno. Gabe is a complex guy, very intelligent and wise for his age. I get the feeling he likes his world ordered with all his ducks in a row. He has a wide taste in different forms of art and enjoys his profession running the museum.” She absorbed it all nodding.

“I also have to know one more thing, if I may beg your patience. There is a secret hidden away in the art museum, no? It is important, but is unknown. Perhaps a hidden room? A crime that has been covered up? A hidden treasure? Do you have any clue what it is?” She looked at me with pleading eyes.

I knew plenty of secrets but none I could reveal. She was getting close, much too close to something that could put her in danger, asking about my Clan mates and domain. “What in the world are you talking about?” I shook my head, puzzled. “And where did you get this supposed information that something is hidden at the museum?”

Amalthea looked at me wordlessly for a moment then began to cry. Tears poured from her eyes as she got up from her chair and ran from the restaurant.

I was now a little more than concerned. Something strange was going on and I suspected the answer lay with her nightmares. Or maybe they weren't nightmares at all.

When my next watch at Arts Haven arrived I searched the shadows outside from my vantage point by the windows. All the lights were off inside and I kept my enhanced vision up searching for the figure that Abi thought she had seen, or the spider monster. The moon was hidden by a low layer of clouds and crickets chirped away, blissfully unaware.

This time I was in luck.

He was creatively adept at keeping to the shadows. I spotted him lurking in the darkness next to the dumpster in the back alley where he had been seen before. He hopped from one shadow to another on both hands and feet, paused to be still or crept slowly and silently. He turned for a moment looking up to the windows and I backed away. If what I saw was true, he was absolutely

hideous. His skull was not shaped quite right. Wrinkles, bumps and blotches cast small shadows on the surface of his cracked and peeling skin.

The figure approached the back door of the building, the reinforced one, and I followed going out on the balcony to watch. Placing his feet against the wall, he pulled against the latch with incredible strength causing the steel door to bend and squeal in protest.

He had to be the one visiting Amalthea. It all made sense. He was trying to find information about me, my Clan and domain, and he was using Amalthea to do it. I wondered if he had bound her with his blood and made her his servant. But right now he was breaking into our haven, our domain, and it was up to me to stop him.

I exited the balcony and waited for him at the top of the stairwell. I could hear him trudge around below me as he approached the stairs. When he finally saw me, he jumped. I shivered as I got a good look at him: maggots crawled around the fissures of his face like tiny animated pieces of rice. The smell that accompanied him was completely revolting.

I experienced a most aggressive reaction to his undesired, illegal trespass. My fangs grew out almost immediately as I snarled at him. My body tensed, ready to fight and the blood went directly to my muscles. I flew halfway down the stairs in but a flicker of a moment and expressed my displeasure with a low growl. I was surprised by my new, involuntary instincts kicking in.

He must have realized his immediate danger because he bugged out quickly. I relaxed and allowed my blood to cool, then checked the back door on the first floor. It was bent and twisted out of shape from being forced. I called Aurah to let her know what had happened then sent a text to Gabe. Soon most of the Clan had shown up to review the damage.

Wynter was in charge while Gabe was out of town. She paced while I related what happened, her straight, black hair flowing behind her. “Nosferatu, had to be without doubt,” Wynter said after she heard the story. “Doesn’t sound like Scott though. That’s not the way he does things.”

“Scott?” I asked.

“The Nosferatu Primogen. He hasn’t been seen in Little Tokyo for over a month.”

Wynter and the others needed to know about the intruder’s possible link with Amalthea. “I suspect this Kindred, whoever he is, has also been trying to dig up information on us through a friend of mine, Amalthea. She’s been peppering me with questions about Gabe and asking about the museum.”

“Oh, when did this happen?” asked Aurah.

“Just last night. She’s an innocent pawn, but she’s being used. She told me she had nightmares of a hideous being that visited her.”

Wynter frowned. “That’s a Masquerade violation. Nosferatu are forbidden from allowing kine to see them in their true form.”

Byron spoke up. “Let’s hope *this* friend isn’t chatty like the other one.”

Pain and shame immediately flooded me as I closed my eyes and hung my head. I clasped my arms together as the memory returned. Poor Meg! *Dear God, please don’t let Amalthea share her fate.*

I heard Byron approach me. “Patricia, I’m sorry,” he said softly. I felt his finger under my chin and looked up. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.” Aurah approached from the side and gave me a hug,

which I needed. Wynter also gave me a brief hug.

“It’s all right,” I replied, trying to be brave. “You’re right... we need to keep the Traditions in order to survive.” I said the words trying to convince myself as much as make the situation better.

Aurah held my arm. “We understand, Patty. We really do.”

Wynter decided we should keep an eye out for the renegade Nosferatu in the city. Going into the sewers was out of the question, of course. Of more concern to me was Amalthea. She had been placed in a dangerous position, and there was a possibility she would have to be killed if it was discovered she knew things she shouldn’t. I couldn’t bear that. Unless... unless I somehow got Gabe to allow me to make her my ghoul, to protect her. I didn’t think I had the pull required to Embrace her, but Gabe did say that in some places permission to make a ghoul was not required.

Chapter Eight: The Revealing

The next chance I had, I called Amalthea. I had to find a way to keep her safe. She picked up on the first ring.

“Amalthea, we need to talk.”

“That’s just what I was about to say.”

“Are you at the hotel?”

“Yes. Meet me in the bar at ten.”

“I’ll be there.”

I drove over when the time arrived and found her there, sitting at one of the tables in a nearly empty bar. I sat down and we exchanged pleasantries and ordered coffee before getting down to the nitty gritty. It was a bombshell.

Amalthea narrowed her eyes and examined me. Not quite a stare, but like she was trying to read me. “I must confess, I was asked to spy on you by Cillian, the man in my dreams... the one who wears the mask. He told me things. That he would make me kill you or others if I did not do as he said.”

I nodded, figuring he was compelling her somehow. “Why tell me?”

“Because I could not bring myself to do it. I don’t think he means harm; he’s just misunderstood.

I had thought you were spying on me, too. That’s what he said.”

“Why would I do that?” She didn’t reply, just looked at me. I lowered my voice to a whisper.

“Please confide in me. Let’s get this aired out.”

“You want the truth? All right. I know everything!” she proclaimed, lifting her chin proudly. I raised my eyebrows, alarmed on the inside but remaining calm. Amalthea continued. “There isn’t only one person in this city wearing a mask, is there?”

“Many people wear different kinds of masks,” I countered.

“Yes, but only a small number are Kindred, no? Isn’t that the term you prefer? Or I could simply say ‘vampire.’ I know who and what you are.” I looked around to see if anyone had overheard then turned back to her.

“Shh!” I said quietly, holding my hand out flat and lowering it to the table, checking around us once more. Things had become much more serious than she realized. “How did you find out?” I

dreaded the answer for if I had done something that had betrayed the Masquerade, I would have to get her on the fastest bus out of town or we would both be killed. I lowered my head closer to the table and Amalthea followed my example as the conversation continued in whispers.

“He told me about you. About everyone to be honest, but mostly about you,” she replied with a grin.

“Cillian?”

“Yes.” I was a little relieved knowing I had not broken the First Tradition, but Amalthea’s awareness of my condition spawned a whole new set of problems. “You are a Toreador, right? You have a beauty now? A grace? Your eyes and skin are different than when we first met.”

She knew already so I told her the rest. “That is a trait exclusive to my family, you could say. But before we go on, you must know – you are in a crap load of trouble, Amalthea. You must promise me you will not, for any reason, use these new words you have learned about my kind in public.”

“Why?”

“Because our existence is a closely guarded secret. If word got out, we would be hunted to extinction. Also, most of the time when a human finds out about us, they are destroyed for purposes of self-preservation. Please promise me not to use those words again,” I implored her.

She leaned back and seemed satisfied. “I promise then.”

“Good, there is still the possibility you won’t be harmed. Tell me, Amalthea, has Cillian given you anything to drink?”

I knew the answer before she even said it.

“Oh, yes! It was the most *wonderful* stuff!” She smiled dreamily and looked up at the ceiling.

I nodded slowly. “Afterwards you felt closer to him, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“How many times has he given it to you?”

“Only once, but he promised me more if I would spy on you. I’m getting really anxious for more of it. Why do you ask?”

“Cillian has deceived you. What he gave you was no ordinary drink. It contained his blood. The more you take, the more like him you will become.”

Her eyes were grew wide as she put a hand to her mouth.

“And the more subservient you will be to his will. Then the door will slam shut and becoming like him will no longer be a choice for you.”

“You mean I will get addicted or something?”

“You already are,” I told her flatly.

Amalthea sat upright and shook her head in disbelief. She struggled to say something but no sound came from her pink lips.

I pressed my point home. “If you don’t get blood... from our kind... in about three weeks you will begin having withdrawals. You will be driven with pain to act in abominable, unspeakable ways. When did he give you this drink?”

“A little over two weeks ago. Then it is over for me.” She wrinkled her chin in disgust and her lower lip quivered.

“You are not completely bound to him if you have only drunk once, but you are still addicted to the blood.” I looked around once more and lowered my voice to a hush. “If you were to become bonded to another of my kind, his grip on you would quickly fade. You now have the incredible luxury of a choice, even in these circumstances.”

She looked up at me with renewed hope.

“I am petitioning my family for permission to sponsor you for an adoption of sorts. It’s a long process, purposefully so for our protection. In breaking the Masquerade and giving you blood without permission from his family, Cillian is behaving suicidally and is risking both of your lives.”

Amalthea shifted in her seat. “What should I do then?”

“Speak to no one about this and for God’s sake, don’t admit to knowing any of what we discussed tonight should you be asked. I’m going to see what I can do on my end to speed up the adoption process. Be wary of Cillian. He’s lied to you already. He could try to use his will to force you to drink, resulting in a permanent bond. And I don’t want you to end up a walking wart like him, or dead. It should be your choice, not coercion, deceit or manipulation that determines your fate, Amalthea.” I considered my own Embrace, how I had not been left with a choice.

Sleep or live?

She nodded, slowly absorbing the implications of how dire her situation was. I got up from the table and slung my purse over my shoulder. “Oh, there’s one last thing. Get out of this hotel and

move into your father's house for the time being. Do it during the daytime and don't come back."

I left thinking about what I needed to do to make things right.

Derrial Bleac's concern was proving to have merit. In New Hampshire, a lean, balding priest hunched over a computer while he mumbled about newfangled technology. Father John Mark Inglewood was housed by the foundation in a one hundred fifty year old, two story, brick building covered with ivy. Rain fell outside in the dark as he scanned for information or leads of any kind. His mind wandered as he thought back, to years ago, when he traveled to Boston for a surprise visit with his sister.

He was young then, having just received his ordination. It was spring, 1975. He bounced up to her door Saturday morning. Knocking, there was no answer. Her car was in the driveway. Strange. He rang the bell again and knocked more loudly and persistently. Still, nothing. He got out his spare key and fit it into the lock, turning the doorknob.

"Jessie?" he called out as he entered the house. Concern began to pace through his body, making him jittery. He dashed up the stairs to the bedroom. The memory replayed itself, burned into his heart, soul and mind. Her room was empty, the bed neatly made and unused.

"Jessie!" he called, going room to room, fruitless with each search. Finally there was only one part of the house left to search—the basement. He tried the light switch on the staircase. It wasn't working. Down into the darkness he went, feeling his way as his eyes adjusted.

A small seam of light from the opened door in the kitchen upstairs dimly lit the dusty, concrete

floor. He went past the washer and dryer to where the tools were stored and tried the light on the wall. It didn't work either. Going past a dark couch, he went to the window and pulled aside some heavy drapes. Sunlight streamed into the darkness, revealing the contents of the basement.

What he thought was a couch turned out to be, of all things... a coffin! Why would she have a coffin down here? That's so very odd, he thought as he bent and opened the lid, only to find Jessie inside.

She was ashen faced, her veins clearly showed through her skin. In but a moment though, her eyes flew open, pupils contracted to the size of dots and rage filled her face as the Beast within erupted in animosity. Going from sleep to overwhelming Beast in an instant left her unprepared to overcome her urges. Muscles knotted into cords as she leapt from the coffin to satiate her thirst.

She leapt right into the beam of sunlight dousing her brother. John Mark fell back in astonishment and fear, as Jessie turned to ashes before his eyes. His chin trembled as he saw what was left of his sister scatter, spreading out on the floor. "No!" He cried bitterly over and over as he rocked back and forth.

"No..." he breathed as he sat at his computer. A tear rolled down his cheek and he wiped it away. After collecting himself, he resumed his search.

"There," he said as his eyes narrowed. The large golden cross around his neck glinted from the light of the computer screen. He clicked on the link and was transferred to the electronic home of the Little Tokyo Observer. The cloister where he resided was paid for by the Society of Leopold, a little known mission of the Roman Catholic Church. It was in fact, a splinter group which had originated in the Inquisition.

The Very Right Reverend John Mark Inglewood was a specialist. He had devoted years of his life to study in occult works, but he was no exorcist. He was a vampire hunter. He had also trained others of his order, which was known for its idealistic zeal in his unusual arts.

John Mark clicked on the article and it opened up on the screen. He sipped some Orange Pekoe tea. “What have we here?” he asked as he looked at the headline. “The Monster of Little Tokyo.” He had encountered just such a creature back in ’84, in Munich, where he had slain it with fire.

“Hmm. No author.” Keeping his eyes on the text he reached for the buzzer. The intercom answered after a moment; the person’s speech was fuzzy, like an attendant in a drive-through window.

“Yes sir?”

“Isaac, assemble the team and please make reservations for us to travel to San Francisco tomorrow. Make it a morning plane if possible. I’ll arrange the customary diplomatic bags for our equipment.”

“Right away.”

John Mark leaned back and thought about the coming nights. They would be telling indeed. He would need to collect his wits and be sharp, for his form of warfare demanded the utmost in planning, preparation, tactics and execution. He would soon see what hellish spawn had surfaced in Little Tokyo.

The next evening I made a decision to be completely up front with Gabe. My hope was that because of the circumstances, Amalthea would not be marked for death. I considered my words

carefully then shot off the email.

Dear Father,

I hope things find you well wherever you are. We have all been keeping an eye out for Cillian with no success. I have news that may interest you. In an attempt to gain information on our Clan for unknown reasons, Cillian has bound a friend of mine, Amalthea, unawares. This concerns me greatly as he has broken the Masquerade and has spoken to Amalthea of his true nature.

Amalthea is being used as an innocent pawn in a game of intrigue she does not desire to be a part of. When I spoke with her I cautioned her about keeping quiet and I am confident she will not share her knowledge. It is because of her friendship with me that she became involved in this situation, so if anyone is to blame for her predicament it is me.

I would humbly ask that you consider my request to adopt her as my ghoul. It is not out of friendship or to spare her from the Nosferatu that I ask this; she would make a fine addition to the Roses.

I appreciate your taking this into consideration. Regardless, I will of course abide by your decision.

Patty

No reply was forthcoming. So I would have to wait while the clock ticked down before Amalthea began to have withdrawals. Would she go back to Cillian? I had no idea but my hands were tied. I would not share my blood with her without permission as Cillian had done. She

finally called a few nights later. She didn't sound too good.

"Patty..." she croaked when I answered my cell.

"Amalthea, are you okay?" I asked. I pulled my car over to the side of the road.

"I'm in pain," she whispered. I held the phone close to my ear, concerned. "I think I need blood... I feel horrible."

"Where are you?"

"At my father's house."

I got the address and made the trip to the suburbs on the south side of town. The house was situated in a cul-de-sac, a weathered but average home. Paint peeled from the wood siding and the lawn was overgrown with weeds and dead plants. No lights came from the house. I knocked on the door.

There was no answer. I tried the knob and it opened. Hunting humans in the dark was as easy as doing a crossword for me with enhanced senses, and I quickly located her on the second floor.

She was sprawled across the hallway, the cell phone by her side. "Amalthea!"

She looked up as I got there. Her eyes were puffy and grey. Sweat covered her head and she shivered there in the dark. It smelled like she had not changed clothes for a few days. "Bon soir," she breathed weakly. "Could you feed me? I'm not feeling so good."

"Still waiting for permission. But we need to get you to the hospital." I carried her out to my car and drove her to the Angels of Mercy ER where she was treated for dehydration and exhaustion and given a mild sedative. The doctors assured me her vitals all looked good so I gave them my

number with instructions to call me if her condition changed.

Chapter Nine: Traitor

Amalthea was discharged from the hospital after 12 hours of treatment. She left a message on my cell saying she felt a little better and was going to take a cab home. I considered calling her but decided to let her get some rest, instead.

As I got ready to go out, my heart felt subtly more distant from the concerns of humans. Yet my intellect and feelings had not changed. I yearned for love and acceptance. I still felt somehow inadequate.

I was divided about my new existence. Part of me liked having vampiric abilities. I would never fear from being mugged or raped. I could have any man wrapped around my little finger with nary a thought, just a little nudge from my vitae. I would be young forever, never growing old or infirm. Such power was intoxicating. And yet, there were Aurah's pragmatic concerns which still gnawed at my conscience. I would do well to heed her counsel, as well as that of other Toreador. I needed wisdom.

Father Mikhail might have some answers. I could not give the Masquerade away, certainly, but one never knew what might happen when the power of God was engaged. Father Mikhail was a godly man. There was an evening service in progress at Holy Sacrifice Episcopal. What does one do when faced with the fact they are... undead? My vitae stirred. I could feel a craving, a desire for the warm, red fluid which kept me sated. It was an earthly, guttural sensation, a base instinct arousing from the depths of my cold, dead body. I would have to feed later tonight.

My thoughts were hopeful as I drove to church. Maybe Father Mikhail would have some practical advice. Perhaps he could pray for me and my path would be made clear. I had enough time for a short visit before my shift began at the Toreador haven.

I arrived in the parking lot as people were heading out to their cars. The warm light from the sanctuary beamed into the night to welcome me, a beacon in a city of forgotten dreams. The sweet scent of incense drifted out the double doors and I felt a sense of peace and comfort as I entered. Father Mikhail was putting the incense burners and candles away. He turned and smiled at me with his kind, wrinkly eyes. "Patricia. I'm glad to see you. I had become concerned about you." He concluded his chores and joined me in the sanctuary.

I sat in one of the pews as he approached, fingering his stole which consisted of stained, spread handprints in different sizes and colors. "How have you been, dear? We've missed you here." He waved good night to the last to leave from the evening service and settled into the pew in front of me.

"Hello Father Mikhail." I smiled and reached out to grasp his hand.

"Cold hands, warm heart," he replied after he shook my hand.

"I've been okay, but the reason I am here is that I really need your prayers, and your advice." I looked into his calm, dark eyes. "I got involved in some sin that is over my head and now I don't see a way out." My thoughts were interrupted by an insubstantial shape that passed quickly across the high ceiling.

Curious, he turned, following my line of sight.

"What was that?" I asked. "It looked like a shadow."

“Moths, probably. But you were saying....”

“Yes, I really need some prayer, father. More than ever. I can’t go into the sin I am involved with, but I’m pretty sure it’s big. More than big, really.”

He considered. “Is there anything you can tell me? Confession is good for the soul.”

“I can tell you I’m in over my head. That much is certain.” I summoned up my courage and tried to explain my feelings in a safe way, feelings which I had repressed and refused to think about because they distressed me. “Father, I’m in such dire straits. I’m helpless with this issue. I fear for my mortal soul....” *If I even still had one.* I shook my head and looked at the carpet while my hair hung over my face and I played with my fingers. “And the worst part of it all is that I can’t talk about it – to anybody.”

“You can talk with God about it,” he replied.

“That’s true,” I said as I lifted my eyes.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a dark form as it flitted behind the organ. I stood up. Father Mikhail turned and stood with me, looking towards the back of the sanctuary. The door to the minister’s study opened and a man dressed in a cassock stepped out. I was startled momentarily by the unexpected entrance.

“Father Anton. You gave us a start.” Father Mikhail blinked rapidly and pulled at his collar.

“Patricia, this is my superior in the church, Father Anton Gregory. Father Anton, Patricia Heron, one of our flock.”

Father Anton was thin, pale and wore shock white hair to the collar. Sky blue eyes measured me as he approached. After giving me a careful once-over, he nodded and turned to Father Mikhail.

“Father Mikhail, would you mind waiting for me in the church office? I will only be a few minutes.”

“Oh... certainly, Father Anton.” Father Mikhail gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Please forgive me. Church business calls my attention. I shall be praying for you, Patricia.”

“Thank you, father.”

Father Mikhail departed and I retrieved my purse and was getting ready to go. Father Anton stood motionless in the aisle and stared at me silently which made me nervous.

“Father Mikhail is a wonderful priest,” I said, to break the tension which was tangible. “You are lucky to have him.”

Father Anton didn't reply. As I got up to leave, he spoke in a quiet voice. “You don't belong here.”

Then the lights went out and in the darkness something brushed my right leg, which sent shivers through my body. I recoiled in horror, jumping from my seat in the pew. As I did, what felt like curling, sinewy snakes entwined themselves around my arms and legs. I screamed into the black void which encompassed my senses, but no sound came out as they twisted and constricted around my limbs. Panic engulfed me as my fangs grew and I struggled to get away.

My craving for blood was magnified and I had a desperate urge to go along with my impulses and use the vitae which surged within me. I knocked over the pew behind me as I roared in silent darkness. I felt like a living cage as my vitae was literally jumping around, livid with a wild, unrestrained rage I had never before experienced. This raw, personified fury was tearing at me

from the inside out, and I knew I had to do something to keep from losing control to my violent nature.

I forced a moment of concentration wherein I asserted some self-control. It was very much a contest of will, a matter of self at opposition with instinct. An internal stare down took place in milliseconds. Words wouldn't do it justice.

My feral urges began to calm down. As it did, I realized something was wrong. I was in total blackness. This should not be happening with my new sight. Then the coils withdrew and the blackness began to fade. My sight began to return. Father Anton still stood there, now with crossed arms and furrowed eyebrows, his displeasure evident in his upright posture.

His soft voice seemed to punctuate rather than mellow his words. "Leave now, and never come back. This place is mine, and mine alone." His eyes burrowed into my soul. "If you ever return, you will be utterly destroyed."

"Yes, sir," I stammered, anxious to leave. I grabbed my dropped purse and hurried towards the exit.

"Tell your master to seek the Red Queen," he said to my back. "She seeks to spread seeds of chaos." I scurried out of there.

My thoughts raced as I drove back to Arts Haven. I was very lucky I was still alive. Father Anton knew I was Kindred, somehow. That was not good. My vitae seemed to have thoughts and a strong, bestial will of its own. Aurah said that it came out when low on blood, but she didn't mention anything about panic inducing it into action. Also, Father Anton mentioned the Red

Queen. I would have to tell Gabe about what Father Anton said soon, and Wynter as soon as I saw her. I was also concerned I would get in trouble for messing up.

Then I remembered Gabe's warning about the Sabbat. Zones of silence. Unexplained shadows. *Father Anton was Sabbat*. Vampires in the hierarchy of the church? The idea was both frightening and dreadful. I decided to write Gabe that night.

When I got to Arts Haven I went up the stairs to retrieve some blood from the supply refrigerator. That helped calm my fears about my vitae acting up again. I checked with Wrenn to relieve her of the daytime shift and learned that Cillian had yet to be spotted.

I was composing an email to Gabe about my run in with Father Anton around midnight when I felt a heaviness in the air. Thunder rumbled in the distance off shore. Cillian did not come skulking by the back door like last time, he crashed through the front plate glass windows in all his full, revolting glory. He wore rags and absolutely stunk of the sewers. I quickly deleted the email and turned my attention to Cillian.

"Breaking in again, or do you desire to speak with one of us? The doorbell would have been more expedient." I wrinkled my face as the putrid smell of offal wafted from him. He must have been completely deranged to break the Masquerade so openly.

"I am here to find whoever has been in charge of my Amalthea, Toreador!" he sneered.

"The one you left without direction? Without guidance? Without blood?" I countered, my voice rising with my accusations. "The one you took without permission, breaking every law we hold sacred even as you do now?" I glared at him.

"Don't *talk* to me about the laws or your precious Camarilla, neonate! Are *you* supposed to be

the wrath of the Camarilla? Phuh!” He snorted, sending gobs of some vile substance across the polished floors of the museum.

“The wheels turn slowly, Cillian, although by the uproar you’ve caused, I suspect the Nosferatu elders will want to speak with you soon.”

Cillian grinned, his mouth a decaying mess. “I’m about to walk out onto that street and raise six hundred sixty six types of hell! The wheels turn slowly? They better hit the gas!”

I could have attacked then and there, and possibly beaten him. But somehow I knew this was not the way it was supposed to be. I softened my voice and my tone. “Please don’t do this, Cillian.”

He turned from me and paused, then spun around and ripped open what rags were covering his chest. “Put a stake in me then! Destroy me!” he shouted. “Set me on fire! I no longer care... just make it stop! Just... just... just speak to me of Amalthea...” His voice trailed off as he slouched, staring at the floor. “What will become of her?”

I looked out the broken front windows and realized we could still cause a scene. “You could have killed her, you realize. If you want to hear of her, I will speak with you in the back alley.”

“She will not die,” he said, preceding me out the back entrance of the museum. “I gave her very little blood.” I followed at a distance to keep from being assaulted by his foul stench. We stopped by the dumpster and he turned. “Now tell me what you intend to do with Amalthea.”

“I have no set plans for her. It is my desire that she have a choice as to how she will live her life, if she survives.”

“You think to save her by binding her into your Clan of monsters? Of hypocritical, materialistic, back-stabbing, degenerate hedonists?”

“No, as I said, as far as I am concerned, it will not be by your deception and manipulation nor by my desire that Amalthea’s fate is determined. It will be by her choice.”

He turned from me and looked out to the ocean. “If you had any humanity left, you’d have her forget it all.” He waved a hand dismissively.

“But it’s okay to make someone your ghoul, and then leave them to wander the streets for three weeks without guidance or instruction.”

“All right, I regret it.” He glanced at me, then resumed his brooding. “I foolishly gave a girl a taste of something, just a taste. Now I want her safe from the world I selfishly dragged her into. But I had to leave. And then she disappeared. I assumed your kind would have the sense to have her forget me, forget it all. I don’t care. I don’t care about anything, anymore.”

“Why are you so bitter?” I asked.

He quickly spun to face me, his emotions pouring out. “Because you are damning the only thing I have left in this world! Let Amalthea forget... about all of this... this madness. I have no access to Kindred who can erase memories with a subtle power of the mind.”

“I will make you a deal, Cillian,” I crossed my arms, nodding. “I can make humans forget memories,” I lied as I looked him in the eyes. “You tell me everything you know about the murders, the missing persons, and the Sabbat presence in town, and I will make Amalthea forget about all that has happened.”

His lips parted and his eyes opened wide. “You would?” he asked, a small amount of hope emerging.

“Yes, but I warn you, I can tell when someone is lying,” I lied again. “Now tell me about the

Sabbat and what the hell has been going on around here.”

He considered for a moment. “So be it. It’s the Tzimisce. They’re building something.

Underground. Underneath the sewers.”

“The Tzimisce?” Byron had mentioned them at the Clan meet.

“Yes, they are behind the kidnappings and murders as well. The victims are being blood bound, then harvested of their organs to create... something with their fleshcrafting agenda. I know it’s a large operation, and they plan on attacking the city.”

Of course. They used the sewers as a screen to remain undetected and undisturbed.

“How do you know this?”

“They set up one of their fleshcrafting machines in my haven – a table of sorts, with a mechanism and metallic restraints. Terrible thing. I also overheard them talking about their plans. I have not returned since.”

“You knew about this and you didn’t tell? The whole city could be destroyed, you traitor!”

Cillian smiled; an eerie, sly smile. “I no longer care for anything besides my Amalthea. She loves me, and I would love her, were I still human.”

“You cannot find company among your own kind?”

“My kind are monsters.”

“No, Cillian. Kindred are whatever we choose to make of ourselves, and however we choose to perceive ourselves. One can be cursed with this existence, but one can also seek to do good. It is

the good we do for others that brings meaning to our existence.”

“Nobody understands that more than me,” he replied.

Chapter Ten: Vozhd

Cillian Sass departed, still deluded about himself. He had caused nothing but trouble and heartache. At least he'd not Embraced Amalthea. I sent a quick text off to Gabe detailing the new information I had discovered about the Tzimisce plot. Immediately following this the ground began to tremble beneath me. I thought it was an earthquake. The windows shook their panes and a loud rumbling resounded from the street as I struggled to regain my footing.

Dashing from behind Arts Haven, I saw this was no natural tremor but a split in the road, widening to part as if birthing a demon from the sewers. Then the street began to erupt with large sections of asphalt overturning. One of them seemed larger than the others; the earth itself vomited upwards in a tremendous roar of stone and dirt. As the debris landed, a massive creature crawled out from the hole.

It must have been 20 feet tall and was covered with hard bony plates and spikes. It held erect two massive claws as it pivoted its head from side to side. Unfortunately for the humans who happened to be nearest, their fate was sealed. The creature (which I have since learned is called a Vozhd) dispatched them with quick twitch efficiency, severing their bodies in lightning fast attacks. It lumbered around its red-sprayed playground for a moment before fastening its eyes on me.

I panicked and let out a short scream as it began to approach. I did what Gabe recommended and pushed the vitae into my limbs as the world slowed down. Moving faster than any human, I beat

a hasty retreat behind some buildings. There, I went through my options. I knew I couldn't just stand by and allow this thing to go free. I had to do something! Cries of pain and sickening sounds of walls, windows and people being ripped apart drifted from nearby apartments as those in the Vozhd's path tried to avoid death from the efficient killing machines that were appearing in several parts of the city.

I circled around behind the Bark and Bite pet shop and saw that the Vozhd, after realizing I was too fast to catch, was instead heading towards the hospital to intercept the flow of patients, doctors and nurses that were streaming out. Just then, a voice called above the din of humanity and destruction. "Heron!" It was Nix Maruti. She stood across the parking lot by the now empty LT Fire Department, vacated by hapless servicemen who were running for their lives along the shoreline.

I looked at an abandoned P-15 fire truck and glared, my lips curling. "Come on!" I yelled back and ran to the truck crashing through a window with my elbow. I climbed into the driver's seat and Nix piled in next to me as I destroyed the steering column cover with a vicious blow. Plastic flew through the cabin. "The ignition wires, right?" I had seen it on TV shows.

Nix nodded and reached over, hotwiring the mechanism as the engine roared to life.

I shifted into gear and punched the gas. We careened out onto the street, gaining momentum as the vehicle accelerated.

In a straight line ahead of us about 200 yards away was the Vozhd attempting to crash through the walls of the Angels of Mercy Hospital. I gunned it; the wind whipped my hair as Nix crawled through the passenger side window to stand atop the ladder. It seemed like we were going 80 miles per hour when we made impact.

The top of the extending ladder hit the Vozhd first, both crumpling and knocking the juggernaut over. The side of the truck slammed into the building in a screech of metal and stone as the overpowering multi-ton vehicle caromed into its body. The glass windshield shattered and I felt the front end lift as the Vozhd began to roll underneath. Its chitinous armor popped and cracked like a massive eggshell as we crunched over the top of it like a colossal rolling pin. An unearthly scream howled from under the chassis as the creature split apart.

Nix hopped down to make sure it was dead as the truck limped to a stop, steaming. “We won’t be that lucky next time,” she breathed as she sheathed her weapons. We both knew it was time to go. “Be safe,” she told me and we departed to the shadows. Nix went towards the law office buildings; I circled around behind the hospital and back towards the west side.

As I backtracked through the alleys, I heard faint screams coming from those unlucky souls who had met other monstrosities. I also heard automatic gunfire and the boom of artillery. I poked my head out and saw tanks rumbling down the street. Two of them were ganging up on another Vozhd. The National Guard had arrived. My cell began to vibrate and I saw that Gabe had left me a message. Retreating back into the alley, I found some shelter and flipped it open to read the text.

Bird,

Good work getting to the bottom of the Tzimisce presence. I have informed the Regional Prince and he was grateful for your intervention. Consider yourself released from my accounting. Also, should you still desire to bring Amalthea into our family as your ghoul, you have my blessings.

Much love,

Gabe

I quickly traveled the distance to Amalthea's house, blurring once more with unnatural speed and aided by the fact that the city had fallen under a power blackout. Loudspeakers echoed through the night. "Citizens, attention! Little Tokyo is under martial law. Stay in your homes. Any movement will be targeted and destroyed." *Like the Vozhd weren't bad enough.*

I figured it wouldn't be long before they had the entire city surrounded. Busting through the back door I found Amalthea on the couch in the living room, weak and shivering. I went to her and knelt down by the couch in the darkness. "Amalthea, I can help you this time, if you still desire."

"Yes," she whispered, so I sent the blood to my teeth. My fangs grew and I bit my wrist, offering it to her. She swallowed my cold blood there in that silent house and breathed a sigh of relief as she closed her eyes. "Thank you!" She kissed my cheek and hugged me tight.

"Are you ok to travel? We need to leave the city now."

She nodded and we hastily departed, heading away from where the action was taking place. The army was still busy with the other Vozhd that had been created, but as we got near Arts Haven, light flickered and a rumble issued from around the corner. There in the distance, a priest stood next to a tank that spat napalm into the art gallery. The roar was intense as the entire building was engulfed in flame. Spittle flew from the priest's mouth as he screamed into a megaphone.

"Immortal fools! Vampires! Foul, damned undead denizens of hell! Prepare to be sent back to your true eternal homes – the fiery depths of hell itself!

I, Reverend John Mark Inglewood, the servant of God, the cleanser of justice, the avatar of righteousness, the burning censer of the chaff of the earth, disinfectant of the most vile of

atrocities, expurgation of the most perverted, depraved and loathsome, purgatory of the most evil and immoral, suppresser of the most sinful and wicked....

In the name of my holy orders, I banish you once and for all and cleanse the Earth of your wretched existence! And the sulfur, smoke and brimstone, the fires which consummate your demise, yes, which ascend to the heavens from your wretched and unholy bodies shall be a sweet, savory and ambrosial fragrance!

You, being violations of nature itself, shall be remedied, rectified and corrected! The unnatural shall be excised! And the Earth shall be restored and expurgated from the cursed, infernal presence of your existence!”

Behind the roofs of the south side, light and ash ascended as half the city burned. Screams filled the darkness and smoke filled the air. People trying to escape the fire were gunned down. It was the worst night I have ever known. Man, woman, Kindred, child, monster... all dead. It was a massive American Waco crapfest, only on a much grander scale. We beat a hasty retreat towards the docks which were all dark and nearly deserted in the blackout. One of the container ships was getting ready to depart and I grabbed Amalthea as we leaped from the pier onto the forward decks. It was a simple matter to force the lock on one of the containers and, before long, we sailed away, stowaways, headed for a destination unknown.

Epilogue

We revealed ourselves after the ship was several hours away from the harbor. It was easy to make friends with the sailors with a little help from my Kindred abilities. We were just trying to survive the attacks like everyone else. I slept during the day and we explained it away as the genetic sun allergy disease. During the evening I visited the lookouts to talk about what they had

seen and learn about them and their ship, the Triad Continuum.

The ship was being mobilized to render assistance to the battered cities of Hurricane Katrina. The containers held building materials and relief supplies, generators, packed emergency food and trailers for FEMA. The trip down the south coast was a peaceful one in contrast with the night of horrors we had just experienced. The military crackdown and subsequent burning of Little Tokyo made few headlines in the aftermath of Katrina.

I considered the tragic circumstance of Father Mikhail who was most likely bound to the Sabbat Kindred, Anton. The very thought shook me. Positions of power inevitably draw corruption. And yet, didn't Father Anton try to warn Gabe about the disaster that was about to occur? *Tell your master the Red Queen seeks to spread seeds of chaos.* I decided not to tell Gabe about my run in with Father Anton unless asked. It was too late to do anything about it now.

We would be heading through the Panama Canal and docking in New Monroe, a sister town of New Orleans, Louisiana. I later received another text from Gabe informing me that Aurah, Wynter, Byron, and Wrenn had all died in the fires that evening, along with half the city. Nix somehow made it out alive. There was no word on Khalid el-Mazri, Penny Angel, Derrial Bleac or the others.

I stood on the deck of the ship after getting Gabe's message, thinking about all that had happened, holding back my tears. Reverend Inglewood's murderous fire had killed my new friends. The fire had surely started in his heart first. They had been so special, so vibrant; so full of life, hopes, dreams and ambitions. Now they were all gone... to what end? To satisfy the government's need to control? To quench one man's desire for vengeance and self-righteous anger? Such loss. Such waste. I didn't understand and I didn't want to. Waves passed under the

bow of the ship and got tossed aside effortlessly, like the lives of so many people who died tragically... thoughtlessly... without sense or reason. Just like my parents.

Abi kept in touch with Gabe and updated him on the aftermath in the city. Gabe informed me that she has since moved on with her life, but had one last update. The day after the catastrophe she woke up in the early morning dawn to find smoke clogging the air, still rising slowly above the city. The military were now out in full force. No traffic was allowed except for official business. Looking out the window, she had seen none other than Cillian scaling the side of the apartment building next to hers. He reached the top and held his arms wide to greet the sun. He screamed as his body flashed into embers then quickly turned to dust. As fitting an end as it might have been, it was a much quicker and easier death than the one he deserved.

Act Two New Monroe

The Power of the Prince

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Glossary for Vampire: the Masquerade

Neonates, Ancillae and Elders

Neonates- less than 50 years old, known for messing up

Ancillae- 50-250 years old They are considered to have picked up some wisdom and have a general knowledge of Kindred society, having proven their ability to survive.

Elders- 300 years+ The wisest elders sometimes avoid court positions, allowing others to take the brunt of the blame when things go wrong (as they often do.) They also like keeping a low profile, socially, having learned that the risks of court positions often outweigh the rewards.

Clan, Sect and Kin

Clans- Clans are families of Kindred that share common blood and abilities.

Sect- There are three basic Sects of Kindred (power groups) along with assorted Independents: The Camarilla, the Sabbat and the Anarchs.

The Camarilla- They have a monarchical style government/hierarchy. This is the group that Patty is involved in. They have a strict set of laws and social rules.

The Sabbat- The Sabbat don't care about the Masquerade, so besides not recognizing Camarilla authority, that's another reason they are despised. The Tzimisce and Lasombra are Sabbat Kindred. The Tzimisce were the Kindred who loosed the Vozhd on the city of Little Tokyo in Act One.

The Anarchs- A group of Kindred revolutionaries who reject Camarilla authority in favor of independent autonomy.

The Independents- The Independent Clans are just that. They have enough power in their own niche/location to not be challenged on their own limited turf and they don't subscribe to other forms of authority. Clans Setite and Giovanni are independents along with some smaller, lesser known Clans. Sometimes they have deals with ruling Princes in a city or region, to have a small group of representatives stay in the interests of diplomacy.

Kin are just that- all vampires. There are other beings of mythological origin, like the lupines. The far eastern influences that Valerie mentions are Quei Jin, oriental vampires that drink blood and have powers, but are truly different spiritual entities who were cursed for a different reason than Kindred.

Court Positions

Prince- Prince of the city, rules by the power to enforce his/her will; representative of the High Camarilla Council

Seneschal- second in command, rules in Princes stead when he or she is gone or unavailable

Scourge- the Prince's personal assassin; seeks out unrecognized Kindred in a city

Primogen- leader of a Clan in a city

Whip- second in command of a Clan; fills mundane duties allowing a Primogen to plot, plan, manipulate, etc.

Keeper- Kindred appointed by the Prince to oversee Elysium, a place Kindred socialize

Sheriff- Kindred appointed by the Prince to enforce the law/ the Traditions

Deputies- assistants to the Sheriff

The blood bond: an emotional, artificial connection that takes place when someone drinks a vampire's blood. One drink makes the ghoul view the vampire as a best buddy. The ghoul trusts them more and doesn't question as much. A second drink makes the imbiber super friendly towards the vampire. Trust is nearly implicit. One would do nearly anything for their master. Note that this is a one way relationship. It does not make the Kindred who donates the blood feel any differently. A third drink of vitae results in an artificial form of love, with all the synaptic responses and chemicals given off. Trust is beyond question in any circumstance. The blood bond basically produces a slave.

Praxis: The right of a Prince to govern; the Prince's claim to domain. This term also refers to the Prince's matters of policy and individual edicts and motions.

The Traditions:

1. The Masquerade- don't let humans know vampires exist
2. The Domain- Kindred owe respect while in another Clan's area
3. The Progeny- Don't make another Kindred without permission
4. The Accounting- Kindred are responsible for the actions of those they Embrace
5. Hospitality- when Kindred come to another place, they must introduce themselves to the Prince
6. Destruction- only a Prince may declare the life of Kindred forfeit

Character List by Clan



Clan Toreador These are the artists, the hedonists, “the Roses” among vampires. Their weakness is they fall into reverie, an enjoyable trance-like state when they experience great beauty.

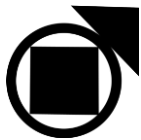
Valerie Moore- Primogen, narcissistic, annoyed

Harrison Smith- Harpy, elder, power bent

Mike Miller- Whip, ancillae, Casanova

Patricia Heron- protagonist, neonate, tiger lady, seeks restoration to humanity

Helen Gray- Seneschal, elder, lace trimmed, graceful, adored



Clan Tremere They are the scientists and researchers of the Camarilla, and the users of blood magic, a discipline used by their Clan which is not well understood by others, due to the fact that they never talk about their secrets with outsiders. The Tremere are generally mistrusted by other Clans due to their secrecy.

Dr. Nathaniel Timms- Primogen, plays with forbidden toys

“Lurch”- ancillae, silent, tall, thin



Clan Malkavian They are touched in the mind in the Embrace, and are sometimes referred to as “moon children” because of their peculiar perspective.

Hugo Bauer- Primogen, behind the scenes

Phillipi Zanekeis- Whip, overburdened

Benjamin Bixby- neonate, enthusiastic, improper, orange

Kanini Korson- neonate, searching for fiancé, double flaxen ponytail, fears boxes

Malcolm Donaldson- neonate, wanders too much, staked



Clan Brujah They are both scholars and rebels, passionate and violent. Known for their quick tempered and intense emotions, what they lack in organization they make up for in sheer tenacity.

Derek Chase- Primogen, elder, angry, social target, former lover of Valerie Moore

Sandra Martinez- Whip, cigar smoker, loves Sherlock Holmes

Jackson Edwards- neonate, bites off more than he can chew

Demetrius Johnson- neonate, knows no limit to test boundaries



Clan Ventrue They are “the Clan of Kings” as they traditionally hold the role of leadership among the other Clans. Also known as the “Blue Bloods,” they are the master capitalists, the lawyers, bankers, the ones who control, often behind the scenes. They are obsessed with efficiency and dedication.

Alexander Blaine- Prince of New Monroe, elder, ruthless

Stephen Reynolds- Primogen, elder

Neil Robertson- Keeper of Elysium (enforces the laws there,) elder, chess player

Margaret Haugen- Whip, elder, proper, easily offended

Cameron Morrison- elder, thin, goatee, mind controller

Caleb Titov- Deputy, ancillae, bully, manipulator

Claude Rainier- neonate (secret member of the Anarchs)

Joey Troncolli- neonate, card shark, squid food



Clan Gangrel They are a savage clan, the feral ones, closest among the Camarilla to the Beast, the wild, predatory nature inherent in all Kindred. Preferring their ties to nature over civilization, they are generally reclusive and independent.

Glen Browning- Primogen, ancillae, elusive

Patli Tizoc- elder, wise, harsh but “fair”

Mack Lewis- Sheriff, ancillae, Fu Manchu, cowboy hat

Jasmine Ledyard- Deputy, neonate, friendly, jeep taxi

Daniel Montana- neonate, fish out of water, mountain man

Zeke Moss- Deputy, neonate, usher at court



Clan Nosferatu They are the traditional rivals of Clan Toreador. They are cursed with a powerfully unnatural abhorrence, even as the Toreador seem blessed with magnetic charisma and allure.

Splasky- Primogen, elder, information gatherer, runs Kindred BBS

Bindle Jacobs- neonate, bully helper, putrid

Cillian Sass- spurned love interest of Amalthea from Act One, “phantom of the opera”

Others

Clan Setite- Khalid el-Mazri, Serishen Cagney and Expert Falworth

Prologue

Prince Alexander Blaine sat in his office penthouse atop the highest structure in New Monroe, the Winfield Building, which towered 40 stories above the surrounding cityscape. His financial portfolio was exorbitant, having existed for hundreds of years. That was but a fraction of the time Alexander himself had been around. He had survived wars, assassinations, vendettas and Kindred machinations of all sorts. Now he was at the top of the heap. He was a Prince of his own domain, his own city, and he ruled New Monroe with exacting discipline for he was of the Ventrue, the Clan of Kings.

The Camarilla elders were watching from afar, to see how he performed. For centuries Alex rose up the ranks in Paris, serving Clan and sect quietly, dispassionately and with ruthless efficiency. Conservative to the utmost, his world was black and white. He had ruled New Monroe over the last 120 years through the industrial revolution and the information age. He knew that soon he would be due a promotion, although in modern times that usually only came through attrition, when elder vampires slipped up and met final death. Such instances were rare.

The years had not been kind to him, not that he had changed much in appearance from the time of his Embrace. His changes rather, had been mostly internal – on an emotional and spiritual level. Alex barely had any humanity left in him at all. The choices he had been forced to make, the compromises he had sold himself for had stripped him of any morals or values we would consider to be normal. Human life meant less than nothing to him, Kindred life little more, only as a means to an end. Multiplied over many lifetimes, Alexander was the end result of his dark, evolutionary existence. He would have made Ebenezer Scrooge look like a saint.

The Prince was impeccably attired in a tailored, silk Italian suit, his ivory skin a feature common in those as old as he. Deep, jet black hair swept up across his head, a visible symbol of his black and white mentality. He was known as a man who did not like to be disturbed from his routine, yet here before him stood one who had done just that. His Scourge, a powerful Kindred charged with eliminating rogue vampires in his domain stood to the Prince's right. The Sheriff and Seneschal would not be in on this one. This instance required privacy.

Alexander continued to stare at the vampire, allowing his silence to speak of his displeasure. Finally he measured out the words, "Why have you been brought before me on this night?" He plucked a piece of lint from his sleeve. Someone would pay dearly for that.

Malcolm tried to keep from fidgeting as he searched for words which would not just please the Prince, but answer the question.

“I was looking for the Ventrue Primogen on a matter of importance,” he stated factually. “Mr. Troncolli, one of the neonate Ventrue, was responsible for the destruction of my ghoul. I’m here to resolve the matter with Mr. Reynolds. As you may be aware, the police have become involved and it is a matter which needs fixing.” Malcolm shivered and clasped his shaking hands behind his back.

Unfortunately for Malcolm, he had strayed into the wrong area, the basements of Winfield underneath the car park. The bound security staff which ordinarily watched the entrance was on break. Each thought the other was covering. Malcolm Donaldson had stumbled upon a highly secure area where scores of Kindred vampires lay staked, immobilized on slabs. It was underwater, naturally, kept that way to discourage prying eyes. Those held there were malcontents, Tradition breakers, those who had frenzied under the Beast and become a little too monstrous in appearance to be allowed to roam freely. They were to be used as shock troops, cannon fodder should a Sabbat uprising occur as had happened in Little Tokyo.

Malcolm knew he could not play the Clan card. The Camarilla absolutely hated it when Kindred used family traits as an excuse for their actions, and he simply did not have enough status to get away with it.

Alexander might find himself with an uprising of his own should it become common knowledge he was holding an entire population on ice. That was simply not going to happen. “What is more important than the Traditions?” the Prince asked, already knowing how this was going to play out.

“Nothing,” Malcolm straightened, agreeing with his Prince.

“Wouldn’t you say that you broke the Second Tradition by entering private areas of my residence uninvited?”

“No?”

“Stake him.” Before the ‘m’ in him could be pronounced, the Scourge had rushed forward and plunged a wooden stake through Malcolm’s heart. His body was thrown twelve feet across the carpeting just from the impact alone. Malcolm slammed against the back wall near the elevator, crumpled, inert and unmoving. His senses remained alert, though. His eyes continued sending images to his brain, his ears hearing all that was said. He was staked and paralyzed. Unable to do anything but stare at the ceiling, his thoughts would eventually descend into a virtual hell as he waited for the blessed sleep of torpor to claim him.

“Have him placed with the others,” the Prince commanded. “And deal with security. Send them a message.” The Scourge nodded and bent to carry out the tasks. Alex turned in his executive chair and steepled his fingers, staring out the windows of his penthouse suite into the night.

Chapter Eleven: New Monroe

The journey on the Triad Continuum took a few weeks, and it passed uneventfully. Amalthea and I spoke quietly between ourselves about the disaster that had unfolded in Little Tokyo. She had placed the rare book that I had received from Derrial Bleac along with the other damning papers revealing the Masquerade unopened in a niche behind the pantry. We did not think to recover them in our escape, but I felt confident they would remain safe for now.

I did receive an email from Gabe while at sea; every large ship had satellite communications for the crew to keep in touch with family. I opened the file and read it alone on the stern late one evening.

Dear Bird,

I received the news that you would be heading to New Monroe, Louisiana. That's Alexander Blaine's town. He's known for keeping a firm hand on things in his domain so be sure to keep the Traditions foremost in mind during your stay. The Camarilla there run things the way they were meant to be run, in keeping with the old school of Europe. I am confident you will represent us well. Be advised they take status seriously there. Things will be different from Little Tokyo.

I wanted to share with you some secrets of our Clan before you arrive, so that in the event you should encounter them, you will know what to expect. As you grow in experience and maturity in the new life I have given you, new aspects of our Clan blood may manifest themselves. These usually only come with discipline and practice. Because you are of the tenth generation of the sire of all Kindred, the potency of our blood is strong in you and you may be able to accomplish these feats sooner than expected. I would not have you accidentally stumble upon them unaware. Make certain you practice in absolute privacy, and do so only when you are sated with blood. Keep our abilities secret from all other Clans, as they grant us an upper hand when dealing with unexpected situations.

Of the three, "the quickening" is the easiest to explain. You will find greater speed, reactions and acceleration with continued practice. Any use of this skill beyond the

generic activation is considered a breach of the Masquerade if it is spotted in public, so bear that in mind.

The capacity to expand our senses also allows us to read a human's or Kindred's aura, or life force. Humans glow with bright colors; Kindred are always a muted grey. That can be helpful in knowing who you are dealing with. Kindred who have black streaks in their aura should be especially avoided. They have committed diablerie, the only offense higher than breaking the Traditions: consuming another Kindred's blood to the point of death, thereby absorbing their soul and gaining the Kindred's blood power and intensity. This perverted practice is usually found only among the Sabbat. Any Camarilla with this telltale flag would be hunted down with extreme prejudice and terminated by the most powerful among us.

An advanced technique permits our Clan to inspect inanimate objects and to feel psychic imprints left upon them by powerful emotions.

Speaking of which, the most concern I have for you is the ability to influence emotions. Never send the blood to your face while allowing malice, hate or anger to come to the surface. I can't emphasize this strongly enough, Bird. It is a Masquerade violation and allows the Beast to manifest in a dark, malevolent display of horror. We Roses are the symbol of beauty among all other Clans and any demonstration would certainly draw negative attention from the Nosferatu.

If you concentrate with enough discipline and resolve, you can temporarily make humans into willing servants. The duration of the effect is unpredictable, lasting anywhere from

an hour to a year. Afterwards the effects are reversed causing great animosity to rise within the subject, so it's a one shot deal.

With enough practice, one can even communicate telepathically or send an irresistible psychic call used to bring an individual to your location. These refined skills take many decades to perfect, but when conditions allow us to be reunited, perhaps I can give you lessons.

Enough of the teaching for now, although I would be remiss to allow you to be ignorant in these things. I wish you could be here with Domi and me but perhaps it is better for you to be elsewhere. Prince DeMark has requested that we stay, as he is facing the political repercussions of losing Los Angeles to the Anarchs *again* and Little Tokyo to the Sabbat. It's difficult to deal with the social drama that is taking place here in the midst of my grieving for our family, yet we Roses are the social glue that holds the Camarilla together. I have a responsibility to comply with my elders' wishes just as you do.

Therefore I must use all my wits, guile and charisma to keep this situation from degenerating into a nasty affair with dire consequences.

One last thing. I know you were Christian before the Embrace; however, I send you a word of caution. Prudence demands that you attend church no longer. Kindred sometimes have adverse reactions to hallowed ground, and I would not have you break the Masquerade out of ignorance. We are cursed, outcast, and separated from God. There is no undoing this state we are in, so it is better to accept it rather than become frustrated in our inability to change the situation.

Further, there are some individuals in church organizations who have keen powers of observation, such as this John Mark Inglewood you mentioned. They could recognize your true nature. He and his fellows are members of the Leopold Society, who are sworn to exterminate our kind from the face of the Earth. They have already murdered our family in Little Tokyo. I would not have them take you as well. Beware them and avoid them at all costs.

I regret that we cannot be together. Unfortunately circumstances are turned against us for now. I am however, encouraged that you escaped my little Bird.

Please give Prince Blaine my regards.

Much love, Gabe

I thought about all the things Gabe had told me. No more church. No more worship. Cursed and separated from God. What a hollow promise – life, at the expense of spiritual life. I looked out at the white foam being churned up by the propellers. It stretched back across the dark sea to the horizon in a milky trail pluming up in the wake behind us. The sky met the sea in an expansive unbreakable divide. The white foam was like my own situation in a manner. There was no way to go backwards and undo the ship's path through the ocean so that the trail could be removed.

Dear God, do you hear the prayers of vampires? Of the accursed? The damned? I pledge that I will never lie again, nor take any life, human or Kindred. Please help me find a way to return to my humanity, that I may be with You once again.

Nothing happened. No bolts of lightning, no startling revelations. Birds soared above the rear of the ship, banking and occasionally calling to one another in the dark sky.

I decided not to practice my Kindred abilities until I was safe in a haven where I would be assured of privacy. I clicked the cell phone shut as Amalthea came around the side of the forecastle to join me. She peered across the broad expanse of ocean to our left. "Have you seen it?" Her voice dipped down in pitch with her questions and statements, a peculiar French way of speaking.

I looked out and noticed something floating on the waters about a half mile away. It looked like boards of some kind, bobbing in the waves.

Amalthea pointed. "Debris washed out by Hurricane Katrina. We are getting near."

"The Captain told me we would be going upriver before docking. He expects us to begin offloading in the late afternoon. We'll be meeting some new people... relatives of mine, and more." I leaned on the railing of the ship, then looked back at her. "I'm glad you are with me."

The cool evening breeze played with her hair. "As am I. Had I stayed with Cillian, I would most probably be dead."

I nodded. "Or worse. But you're not. We'll be tested even more in New Monroe, but hopefully not running away from disasters, if what I have been told is correct. I guess our first order of business will be to find a safe place to stay. We left without a lot of warning."

"I have access to my father's account, so I should be able to find us a good location, if you wish, once I can get to a bank," she offered.

"You are a wonderful friend."

"Just returning the favor," Amalthea pulled her hair back. "You offered your apartment to me I recall, when I was going through so much difficulty."

We both went back inside to get ready for the next day. When I awoke the next evening the Triad Continuum was in the midst of its unloading operation and the sky was still pink with the setting sun beyond the horizon. We would spend the first few days and nights at a hotel while Amalthea acquired suitable long term lodgings. Meanwhile, I would somehow have to contact the local Camarilla so that I could make my presence known and ask permission from Prince Blaine to live in the city. The fact that Gabe knew him was a little reassuring, although I was still new at all of this.

Most of the city was on a slight rise from the banks of the river which was fed from the Mississippi, so there were no people stranded in buildings as had happened in New Orleans with the Superdome. We were both tired of wearing the same clothes and having to wash them over and over so after we checked into the Pecan Creek Inn, our first trip was to the New Monroe B-Mart which thankfully was open all night. (Not my first choice for fashion but it was better than nothing.) We spent about \$250 for a couple of outfits; jeans, blouses, two pairs of shoes and one nice dress apiece. After that it was time for me to visit some of the late night spots while Amalthea caught some sleep and got ready for the next day.

Where would Kindred go to socialize? I wondered as I walked along the strip near the hotel. After visiting a couple of bars I found myself at the end of the business district along the side of a sprawling park flanked near the center by a large wooded area. A few cars sat in a parking lot and off in the distance beyond a landscape of cut grass stood a small group of people gathered under a gazebo. I would do no hunting until I had been properly introduced—in a pinch I could always feed from Amalthea.

As I approached the lit platform, the conversation stopped and the trio turned to me. White wooden lattices framed the archway entrances and a warm yellow light illuminated them. A woman with short, dark hair and an olive complexion posed on a bench while the men with her studied me. One was the size of a professional football player and wore a leather motorcycle jacket. The other, an older Hispanic man was short, thin, and had long, black stringy hair. The woman and the senior gentleman wore long overcoats and all three had boots that looked as if they had seen some wear.

“Evening,” the woman spoke up as the others studied me. “You must be new here.” I didn’t realize I was sticking out. I suppose if I had to fight for my life I could use my Kindred abilities, but for now I would go along.

“Hi. What makes you think I’m new?”

“We’ve never seen you here before and you have no rain jacket or umbrella,” she observed. “I’m Jasmine. This is Zeke and Patli.” She glanced at the two men as Zeke walked to me with an extended hand, which I shook. He sniffed the air a little as he did so before turning back to Patli and nodding.

“You’re right, I arrived early this evening. Patricia Heron, pleased to meet you,” I replied.

Jasmine looked back towards the wood line. Zeke grunted and Patli smiled wanly glancing back over my shoulder with a look of approval. I turned to find another man coming up behind me, which gave me a start. I had no idea he was there. His features resolved as he came into the light. He was fit, wiry and had a glint of determination. His eyes had crows’ feet that wrinkled as he squinted into the light.

“That’s Daniel,” Jasmine added, smiling now also. “It’s nice to have a night with the stars out for a change.”

Daniel muttered a short “Ma’am” as he arrived, leaning against one of the posts.

Patli shifted and leaned forward. “You are in Gangrel domain, young Kindred.” So this was the reception committee, at least what I had blundered into. Daniel had evidently passed some test by tailing me unobserved as I entered the park. “I trust you have not come here to feed.” His thin brows drew together and the lines on his dark, weathered face deepened.

“No, sir,” I replied. “I need to find family and present myself so that I may be in compliance with what is required.” I used the common slang as we were still in a public place.

Patli nodded, his arms resting on his thighs. “It is good that you heed the law.” He looked me up and down. “You are of the Roses, correct?”

“Yes, sir.” I wondered how he figured *that* out.

“Please refer to me as Mr. Tizoc, Miss Heron. And you *have* been released?” I nodded. He turned to Jasmine. “She needs to get to the clubhouse to meet with Miss Moore.”

“I’ll take taxi duty,” Jasmine stood up.

“It’s a good thing we were here when you arrived,” Zeke stated. Jasmine gathered her purse.

Patli and he shared a glance as I considered what that meant.

“Oh?” I asked. They remained silent as Jasmine started walking back to the parking lot. There was an awkward pause. “Then thank you for your assistance and goodnight.”

“Goodnight Miss Heron,” Patli answered for them.

I hurried to catch up with Jasmine. She unlocked a Jeep in the parking lot and I got into the passenger side.

“That wasn’t the worst first impression I’ve ever seen. Not too bad, actually,” she fastened her seat belt as she pulled out into the empty street.

“Thanks,” I followed her example as we sped down the road. “May I ask what Zeke meant when he said it was a good thing you all were there when I arrived?”

Jasmine’s mouth turned down. “I’ll answer this question but really you should save the rest for your Primogen. What Zeke said had two meanings. The most obvious one was that it was good you did not attempt to feed within our domain and break the Second Tradition. The other is that there are... werewolves within the woods next to the park.”

“Werewolves?” I asked. Disbelief washed over me for a moment until that chilling breeze that never left my soul reminded me of my own undead status.

“We call them lupines. They have become used to us Gangrel; we have an uneasy truce. They have an incredibly violent reaction to Kindred and usually attack us on sight. So we try to leave one another alone. They don’t know your smell though and you would have sent them into a rage had you gone too close to the forest.”

“Can they hurt us?”

“Can they? One of them could destroy ten of us simultaneously!” Jasmine pulled into a parking lot of an upscale two story nightclub. ‘Lord Stafford’s Distillery’ read the glowing sign.

“Basically you could have put the rest of us at risk had you managed to provoke them, is what Zeke meant.” She pulled into a parking space. “No more free speech until we get to Elysium.”

I nodded and followed Jasmine across the parking lot. Jazz music drifted with a lazy beat from behind the lighted windows. The sign next to the door said ‘Food, Spirits and Live Music until 4am. Members only.’ We went up the stairs to the door.

A bouncer waited inside the heated lobby and opened the door as Jasmine entered. “Evening, Miss Ledyard,” he greeted her. The men inside all wore ties, some had jackets draped around the back of their chairs. Smoke rose from tables as the staff bustled about. The clink of glassware echoed beneath the music. The ceilings in this lodge-style club were high; ceiling fans swirled slowly in the thick air.

“She’s with me,” Jasmine said and began making her way around the left side of the club along the wall. As I followed several heads turned our direction. Jasmine waved and smiled and received a few in return. There was a large, carpeted L-shaped staircase in the corner of the building. At its foot was another bouncer and the sign ‘VIP’s Only.’ One gentleman was staring at us but looked away when I saw him. Prestige envy? If only he knew the cost.

We ascended the stairs and came to a landing with a single, heavy, carved wooden door. An ornate welcome mat stood underneath it. With a *snick* Jasmine pulled it to reveal a vast open level second floor. The music faded quickly when the door closed behind us.

Along the wall on the left were computer stations and desks along with a small bar. Various artworks were framed above the desks with small lamps illuminating each one and a placard underneath. On the far left were open doorways which led to offices, along with a fire exit. To my immediate right was a wrought iron coat stand which held several coats. Past that was a small stage with a magnificent white grand piano along with numerous microphones and a sound system.

The far wall on the right had a raised ornate throne that glittered with gold and jewels. In between the stage and the throne was a series of sofas and stuffed chairs arranged in a U shape facing away from us. A long coffee table filled the space in the center. Bookshelves along the wall were filled floor to ceiling with hardcover selections. Many of the spines were faded with age.

As we approached eyes turned towards us and conversation ceased. “Good evening Primogen, Keeper, Whips and company,” Jasmine announced as I stood by her side trying to look like I had my act together. I smiled and nodded. “This is one of yours, Primogen Moore – Patricia Heron. We found her in the park.”

A stunning woman in a red dress put out her cigarette and stood. “Thank you Jasmine,” she said, as she pulled her flowing dark hair behind her. “And please convey our gratitude to elder Tizoc and the rest of Clan Gangrel.” She reminded me a little of Aurah with her classic good looks and demeanor. Her kohl-lined eyes evaluated me keenly for a moment until her attention was pulled back to the room.

“Not a-noth-er neonate!” came the exasperated cry from a well-groomed man who slapped his palm to his face as he shook his head. I didn’t know quite how to react to this outburst so I stood silently and watched. Most of the others seated there looked over toward him except for a flaxen haired woman who stared at the coffee table, arms clutched to her sides as she rocked back and forth. Primogen Moore gave the man a stare from beneath her painted lids and received the response, “Oh, please!” from the foppish neonate-hater.

She ushered me into one of the side offices and shut the door behind us. She then sat behind an empty desk and smiled demurely. “What brings you to New Monroe, Patricia? Please be seated.”

I sat opposite her at the desk. “I escaped from Little Tokyo before it was consumed in flames, Primogen Moore. The ship I boarded with my ghoul was the Triad Continuum, which docked here.”

“Valerie, please, unless the circumstances require more formal address. Yes, I heard about that.”

She reclined back in the chair and crossed her legs. “The Anarchs are making the west coast a free for all carnival and a danger to the Masquerade to boot, not to mention the rising power of far eastern influences. So you are not one of the other Kindred from New Orleans looking for new hunting grounds?”

I shook my head and considered what she had said. The desertion of New Orleans by the populace in the aftermath of the flood had probably caused feeding issues and an influx of Kindred looking for a reliable source of blood. This realization dawned on me and I had an ‘aha’ moment.

Valerie noticed I was putting the pieces together. “So, are you an Anarch, or is your allegiance with the Camarilla?”

“I believe in and follow the Traditions of the Camarilla, ma’am.”

“Who is your sire?”

“Gabriel Montagne.”

“I’ve not heard of him but I’ll do some research.” She jotted down some notes. “Do you plan on staying here as a permanent home?”

“For the time being, yes, if I am allowed. My father is... assisting Antonio DeMark with duties and he desires for me to find a different place to stay until his assignment is completed.”

“DeMark?” She made a face. “Good luck to him. We’ll need to prepare you to meet the Prince then. The next court is in a week’s time. Have you been released?”

“Yes, I was released just before Little Tokyo fell into flames and necessitated my departure.”

“How long since your Embrace?”

“About two months ago.”

“That,” she said flatly, her eyes flashing wide “is preposterous!” I shook my head, dumbfounded.

“Being released in so short a time is almost unheard of.”

“All I know is I received a text, which I can show you.” I flipped my cell open and showed her the message. She glanced at it. “Perhaps it has something to do with my discovering the Tzimisce plot.”

“You discovered... a Tzimisce plot?” She reached out for my cell and looked at the message again.

“I tricked a rogue Nosferatu into revealing what he knew.” I muttered. “Unfortunately, it came too late to save the city.”

She sighed and muttered “DeMark...” then relaxed once more. “Let’s swap cell numbers while we are at it. Well regardless, you are here now and it appears you have been released. You do know the Traditions?” she asked as she placed my number into her cell and gave me her information.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered as I entered her number.

“Are you familiar with the laws of Elysium?”

“No. I have heard that Elysium is a place for Kindred of different Clans to gather. There was not much opportunity for that in Little Tokyo, given the circumstances.”

“So green,” she shook her head. “All right. Elysium is a place for Kindred to socialize without fear of using forbidden words or coming under attack. It is ground zero for our trade, which is to remind others what acceptable conduct among our kind is to be. By order of his Grace, the Prince, we have free speech here, in order to foster intellectual debate and consensus. Iron sharpens iron, as they say. One may even disagree with ones’ elders, although in a polite manner. Additionally, we are guaranteed free and unfettered access to and egress from these premises.”

“You will behave graciously and respectfully to all Kindred in Elysium. If any Kindred enter whose status is unknown to you, you will stand and introduce yourself at the first opportunity, with name, Clan and city of origin. Further you will not extend your hand unless the person you are being introduced to does so first. You are representing us and I will not tolerate screw ups. We Roses are here to make the Elysium social experience a pleasurable and satisfying one. Got that so far?”

So we are the butt kissers. “Yes, ma’am.”

She continued down the list of Elysium rules and expectations, ticking them off on her manicured fingers. “You will never engage in or initiate any form of violence within these walls, nor may any weapon be drawn. You will not for any reason feed near these premises. You will not cause any physical harm to Elysium itself by command of the Prince. Blood use is forbidden and will not be tolerated with the exception of the Nosferatu practice of concealing themselves to prevent others from becoming ill at the sight of them. Now, do you have any questions?”

“Yes, are there any special rules for the computers here? I noticed them on the way in.”

“The computers contain a link to a secure BBS which is both protected and monitored by Clan Nosferatu. There are message boards there for communication among Kindred who may not be available at the same time in the evenings. Private messages may be sent as well, although when it comes to electronics and the Nosferatu, nothing is ever truly private. You can find some history of our city there as well if you read the logs carefully.” She got out a card with a long series of letters and numbers. “Here’s the passcode to register as a new user. Destroy it after you have made your account. Anything else?”

I filed that tidbit of information away. *Electronics are not secure when it comes to the Nosferatu.*

“No, ma’am,” I replied with a hesitant smile.

“There’s no need to be worried,” she returned the smile. She spoke reassuringly though I found myself unnerved by the way her eyes were fixed upon me. “Just don’t screw up and follow the guidelines I have given you and you’ll be just fine.”

Valerie swished out of the office, her perfume trailing her like butterflies in the spring. I closed the door behind us and followed into the main room, where she made introductions.

The first was to the fair skinned, green eyed neonate-hater. With his looks and blonde hair, he could have been a TV weatherman. “Harrison, may I introduce you to Patricia Heron, a fellow Rose of Little Tokyo, California?” she intoned with a hand gesture, her voice silky smooth.

“Patricia, this is elder Harrison Smith.”

Harrison rose elegantly and lifted my hand without kissing it. “Enchanted, cousin,” he bowed slightly and smirked with an impish grin on his face. I thought he was mocking me but I went along with the act.

Valerie moved on to the next man, a young, clean-shaven fellow with dark curly hair and blue eyes. “May I present Phillipi Zanekeis, acting Whip of Clan Malkavian.” I glanced over at her at the unusual title.

Phillipi interjected. “Whips are second in leadership to Primogen. We perform duties such as assisting new arrivals and coordinating activities within our respective Clans. Welcome to New Monroe.”

I nodded but Harrison rolled his eyes. “Pleased to meet you,” I replied.

“Kanini Korson, neonate of Clan Malkavian,” she introduced the pig-tailed blond Texan who had been rocking herself on the couch. Her hair was more of a double ponytail as both clutches of flaxen hair went straight back. “She arrived just tonight, like you did.”

Kanini looked up like a whipped dog and I immediately felt sorry for her. “Hi Kanini, how are you?” I ventured, wondering if her fear was part of the Malkavian mental instability, like Penny Angel. She shivered once then nodded to me.

“No boxes. No more boxes,” she whispered.

Harrison immediately brightened up. “You know, come to think of it,” he said enthusiastically, “this entire room is like... one... big... box!” Kanini screamed and bolted from the couch running back downstairs. Phillipi gave him a slow glare then left as well, evidently to look after the panic-ridden woman.

“What?” Harrison asked, looking around innocently. Valerie ignored him as did the others, so I followed her example. Evidently being an elder gave one the status to be an ass without repercussion.

“Dr. Neil Robertson, elder of Clan Ventrue and Keeper of Elysium,” Valerie continued. A distinguished-looking older gentleman with salt and pepper hair and a light gray suit arose and offered his hand. I shook it.

“Welcome to New Monroe, Miss Heron.” He had an easygoing Midwestern manner and smiled warmly.

“Thank you Dr. Robertson,” I returned the smile.

Valerie made the next introduction. “This is Joey Troncolli, a neonate also of Clan Ventrue from New York.”

“How ya doin’” he asked rhetorically, smacking his gum. Joey wore amber glasses and had a toothy grin underneath his dark mustache. He stuck his hand out with the practiced rhythm of a politician. Then he brushed his dark jacket and straightened his tie before resuming his seat.

“You already know Jasmine of Clan Gangrel,” Valerie added. We exchanged nods. She sat down as did I and there was a pause before Valerie spoke up. “Any news of late?”

“I believe there may be a major operation in progress which will be announced in court,” Dr. Robertson offered.

“Oh?” Valerie asked, her eyebrows rising.

“Primogen Timms was in a special planning session with the Prince all last night. Sheriff Lewis was there with the Deputies and the Seneschal.”

“Is Clan Tremere meddling with magical artifacts *again*?” Harrison asked with a sigh. I suddenly recalled the magical Shield of Durer that Khalid el-Mazri wore.

“No, but this business... well, let’s just say I think it may be big. The Prince does not change his schedule for trivial issues. Whether it is the result of anything magical would be speculation.”

We all considered what Dr. Robertson had shared. “So tell me, Mr. Smith,” I decided to speak my mind, although in a polite way, as Valerie had asked. “Could you enlighten me on why neonates have earned your ire? Perhaps they have earned a reputation here and I could avoid a misstep.” I phrased the comments in a diplomatic way and got a nod from Valerie for that. Eyes turned to Harrison.

“Neonates are fools Ms. Heron,” Harrison replied quickly, his sentences punctuated with staccatos, nose elevated like a principal lecturing a student. “They lack the wisdom of years and breach the Traditions on a nearly perpetual basis, dropping like flies in the process. We’ve had a number of near catastrophes, all of them caused by outsiders like you who were Embraced like fish bred in a factory pond. It’s no wonder his Grace grants permission to sire so rarely. I suppose he will recognize the lot of you just to irk the rest of us as usually happens.”

“She’s Montagne’s childe,” Valerie interjected. Perhaps my sire’s name had status even if I did not.

Harrison snorted. “Montagne? Well, I suppose everyone is allowed *one* mistake!” He rolled his eyes again. I was offended at the man’s incredible rudeness and audacity but managed to keep myself together.

“Why did you move from Little Tokyo?” Jasmine asked, and everyone turned to hear my story. I repeated the basics, but left out the Tzimisce bit entirely. I didn’t want to give Harrison more ammunition.

“Why don’t we all tell Patricia a little about ourselves to help her feel at home?” Valerie asked.

“I’ll begin.” She smiled again with her ruby red lips. “I specialize in interpretive dance, but have some musical skills as well.”

Jasmine went next, her knee quivering as she tapped her heel on the floor. “I don’t have many skills aside from my knife, but I do like to spend time in the outdoors, despite the rain.”

“How very... practical,” Harrison observed. “I am an accomplished tenor and I favor operas. Napoleon, the massive git, passed a law requiring all operas to be screened and approved by the state. He was always late, requiring that the show stop for his entrance to fashionable applause of course, and always left early. I never sang in Paris again until after his exile.” I wondered if Harrison’s great age had something to do with his poor attitude towards others.

Dr. Robertson was nimbly manipulating a coin between his knuckles. “I prefer intellectual pursuits,” he stated, “like chess and other skillful endeavors. Perhaps you would care for a match sometime?”

Joey’s eyes widened as he silently shook his head as a warning. We all laughed. “I ain’t got no special skills; I’m just a regular Joe.”

“But you do card tricks,” Dr. Robertson interjected. “Very good ones, from what I’ve seen.”

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I do that a little.”

“I would wager that one could call you a card shark, Mr. Troncolli,” Dr. Robertson added. Eyes glanced back and forth between Joey and Dr. Robertson.

“Hey, don’t go killing off my livelihood with the newbies, Doc!” he chuckled.

“I won’t make any comparisons with Clan Ravnos,” Dr. Robertson replied with a slight smile. I had never heard about this new Clan, and I didn’t ask. It was best to just watch and observe. The rest of the evening was filled with small talk, and when I returned to the hotel at 5 am, Amalthea was fast asleep. I left her a note asking that the “do not disturb” sign be left on the door and crawled under the bed to await my own rest.

Chapter Twelve: Elysium

The next evening Amalthea was bubbling over with excitement as I pulled myself from under the springs, stretching. “Patty, you won’t believe the find I discovered today!” She hopped up and down, her little fists clenched together.

“Hmm?” I was glad for some good news.

“I found a house for lease, on a small rise and get this – it has a *basement!*”

“That’s wonderful!” I exclaimed.

“I saw it this morning as I was driving back from the Avis and the owners were just putting out the sign. It’s a six month renewable lease and they are waiting to hear from me to sign the papers if you like it.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Good job!” Amalthea and I had developed kind of a mother/daughter relationship since she had been taking my blood regularly. She deeply desired my approval and although I know the blood bond was chemical for her, she was still a very sweet and enjoyable person. Her skin had taken on more of a creamy tone since she started taking from blood me. She clearly enjoyed feeding time; I suppose it was much the same for her as when I was Embraced by Gabe. “I hope it didn’t cost too much.”

“No no! The house, you see, she is perfect. You will see.” She did a little dance and babbled as I gathered a change of clothes and went to the bathroom to prepare myself for the evening. “You are simply going to love it. It’s partially furnished and the rugs and floors and drapes are all just exquisite.”

Evidently my first stop tonight was going to be to see the new house. I didn’t want Amalthea to be left hanging in anticipation. On our way there she passed a thick white envelope to me. It was stuffed with one hundred dollar bills. “It is for you to use. You lost everything in the fire,” she told me as she drove. I knew she was just trying to show her appreciation to me, so I patted her arm.

“The house remains in your name then, Amalthea.” I hoped she wasn’t going to go overboard with her gratitude. “I want you to be financially responsible with your inheritance.”

“But of course,” she said. “Both house and envelope are a petite amount compared with my father’s estate.” She put her fingers together.

“Okay.” Moonlight flickered through tree branches as we entered a residential neighborhood. She pulled over in front of a two story midsize brick home. Ivy crawled along the side and large light gray shutters complemented the green foliage. White columns supported a front side porch on the first and second levels. It was a beautiful home. “Amalthea!” I exclaimed when I saw it. She smiled, pleased with herself.

A patterned stone walkway led up to the door which Amalthea unlocked. We walked beneath high ceilings and tread on polished wood floors stained deeply to bring out the grain. The walls were tastefully decorated with white and light green vines, continuing the theme from the outside. To the left was a dining room, tastefully decorated with a minimalist French theme and

to the right was the kitchen. Down the hall another doorway led to the basement and double doors opened into a large family room. An upright piano stood to the side. A large stone fireplace along with several stuffed, upholstered chairs complimented the other side, with a chandelier adding light from above. I couldn't believe our luck. I looked over at Amalthea with a gaze of awe, and she just smiled.

At the end of the hall was the back door and a stairwell which led to the upstairs bedrooms. The master bedroom had a large window looking out over the weeping willows in the back yard and into the city downtown beyond. The basement downstairs had a concrete floor with a sump pump for accidental flooding. The basement had no windows.

"I think I'll take the basement," I told Amalthea as I summed up the possibilities. "I don't want to take the chance of getting hit by the sun upstairs. When can we move in?"

"They are ready to sign tonight as soon as I call."

"Great. Can you get our things from the hotel? I have errands to do in Elysium."

"Yes! But could I go with you? There is not much to move." She pouted a little.

"Yes, ghouls are allowed to go there in the company of their sponsors, but I need to get recognized first. I have a meeting with Prince Blaine this Sunday and afterwards if everything goes smoothly I'll take you." I gave her a hug, which she returned. "Thank you for taking care of us. I don't know what I'd do without you."

She placed her hand over her heart and whispered "Then we help one another, for I have you to thank for saving me."

The house had an ideal location; it was five blocks away from Lord Stafford's, good enough for an early night walk which worked out well since Amalthea needed the car to get to the landlord's house. Along the way I passed a CMA bowling alley, KayDee's Fashions, several restaurants, a Daily Grind coffee shop, a movie theatre complex and a fitness club. As I passed the Dunk N Dine, I noticed Kanini Korson sitting at a booth through the window. She looked disturbed as she had last night, fidgeting and worried. I entered the restaurant.

The décor inside was classic New England diner, a change from the French influences around the rest of the city. Chrome bumpers adorned the counters and walls. Black and white checkerboard linoleum tiles spread out on the floor. A dark haired, unshaven man who wore jeans, a t-shirt and a raincoat sat across from Kanini speaking quietly when I got there. They both looked up as I arrived. "Hi Kanini, may I join you?" Her ponytails bounced as she nodded and the guy scooted over.

"It's okay, she's with us," Kanini whispered as I sat down.

"Jackson Edwards," he stated and offered his hand, which I shook.

"Patty Heron, pleased to meet you," I flashed my best smile. I turned to Kanini, my thoughts filled with compassion. "I came in because I was concerned about you. You had a rough time of it last night at the clubhouse, and I'm sorry you were treated like that."

"It's ok." She shrugged. "From what I heard, you received an earful from Mr. Smith, too. It seems like neither of us can catch a break."

I nodded.

“Had I been there, I would have decked him,” Jackson frowned. My jaw dropped and I glanced over at Kanini then back.

“You *do* know that no violence is permitted there whatsoever?” I asked. “It’s like, against the law.”

He clenched his jaw, then spoke quietly. “There are different kinds of violence and sometimes the only way of dealing with it is to respond in kind. Otherwise it continues.”

“He’s hot blooded,” Kanini interjected. I considered this for a moment and wondered if she meant Jackson was from Clan Brujah. Regardless, it was not something that I could mention publically.

“Why have you been so upset?” I asked Kanini. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

She considered a moment. “I suppose it can do no harm to tell you. My fiancé, Malcolm Donaldson invited me to New Monroe to join him. We were to be married.” She shuddered.

“When I arrived, he was nowhere to be found. It was as if he just... disappeared. Gone. It’s not like him at all.” She fidgeted with her hands again. “He was last seen two nights before I got here. We’re continuing to look for him.”

I frowned and gave her hand a squeeze. Rain began to fall outside the glass window.

“Here’s a picture he gave me,” she said, digging into her purse. Malcolm smiled from the photo, a young man with a thin face and beaming eyes. Jackson leaned in to look at it too. On the back was an inscription. ‘I love you, Kanini – Malcolm.’ I turned it back around and looked at his face again.

As I gazed at it, wondering what had happened to him, I felt as though a flashbulb went off in front of my face, only without the flash. An entirely different scene flickered before me replacing the view of the photo and diner. There was an image of Malcolm staked, leaning against a wall in a carpeted room, next to some elevator doors. Blood ran down his shirt from the stake onto the floor. His clothes appeared to be wet.

The next thing I knew, Kanini was tapping my hand. “Patty, are you ok?” I blinked and looked around.

“What happened?” I asked. They were both staring at me. My blood stirred slightly. I could tell that I had used some of my vitae in the process of whatever had just happened. I was no longer sated. Had I just used my abilities to see Malcolm? The picture certainly held powerful emotions for Kanini.

“You froze up for about fifteen seconds,” Jackson said.

“Oh, sorry.” I handed the picture back shaking my head.

Jackson gestured for me to get up. “I’m heading over to the clubhouse.”

I stood as he slid out. “I’ll be there shortly.” As I sat back down I remembered what Gabe had told me about not sharing knowledge of our skills with other Clans. However, it would be wrong for me to not tell Kanini information which might lead to Malcolm being found. I decided to tell her. “I may have some information about Malcolm. I don’t know whether it could help or not, but we can’t discuss it here.”

She jumped in her seat a little. “What? What is it? Don’t do this – this is important. Here, whisper it to me.” She scooted over in her seat and I joined her, cupping my hands to her ear as I

whispered what I had seen. I couldn't lie about it not being a Toreador ability, but I didn't have to volunteer the information either.

She nodded as I related what I saw. Perhaps the Malkavians have visions of a sort; I didn't know and didn't ask. "So it could be a tall building near the water?"

That was sort of a red herring although neither of us knew it at the time. "Could be."

"Thank you Patty, for sharing that with me. It's the first true lead I have had." She smiled with genuine happiness for the first time.

"It's okay, I'd do it for anyone." I meant it. Kanini excused herself after that. She probably wanted to see if she could find Malcolm's location. Couldn't blame her for that. I backtracked to KayDee's, skittering through the rain and after some browsing bought a fashionable but reasonably priced black raincoat along with an umbrella.

After that I walked the few remaining blocks to Stafford's. Businesses were picking up and traffic swished up and down the street. "Evening, ma'am," the doorman remembered me and offered to take my coat.

"No thanks, I'll keep it with me."

"May we get your name for the register, so that other greeters may recognize you?"

"Patricia Heron," I answered while he wrote it down. When he was finished I walked up the familiar staircase and opened the door. Elysium was empty. Well it was still early in the evening so I placed my raincoat and umbrella on the iron stand and went over to the computer terminals.

Powering up, it prompted me to create an account. I got out the card with the passcode that

Valerie gave me, and entered the information. When I logged in, the desktop screen had an icon I did not recognize titled “BBS.”

I double clicked it and opened up a menu with several options: Welcome, Message boards, Domains, Elysium, and Boon and Status Records were the highlighted hyperlinks. I clicked on Welcome.

Welcome Kindred to the New Monroe bulletin board system. Please be advised that the rules for Elysium extend to these forums, so take heed in your posts. Private messages are enabled, but the chain of command is to be observed in reporting instances which require official attention. (In other words, do not email his Grace or the Seneschal under any circumstances.) Otherwise, you are welcome to read, flame and enjoy.

Very truly yours,

Splasky, Administrator

Primogen, Clan Nosferatu

I clicked on Domains. There was a city map with color coded areas. Now this was stuff I needed to know. Clan Toreador was highlighted red in the fine arts district. Clan Gangrel was green and covered the park and the neighboring woods. Clan Ventrue was deep violet and occupied the downtown area. The rustic Donizetti Theatre was located with a star. Clan Brujah was light blue and located in a seedier part of the city, to the south among housing projects and rough bars. Clan Tremere was orange and located in the university district. Clan Nosferatu was light grey and highlighted over the city’s sewer system. Clan Malkavian was white and held a business strip to the east of the city. A fluorescent yellow patch was located over the cemetery. The note

said Samedi, independent. No trespassing. I had never heard of them so that was something I would have to ask Valerie about.

I made a mental note of the locations and clicked on Elysium. The rules that Valerie had gone over with me were listed there. Good to know. The pictures posted on the walls were part of a monthly contest for artwork to be displayed for the enjoyment of the community. According to what I read, all forms of art that could be displayed were eligible. Hmm. I looked up at them. One was an oil portrait of a beautiful woman framed by black lace and rose petals. The title was “Helen Gray.” Another was a color sketch in pencil of local wildlife featuring alligators signed by Daniel Montana. That was the Gangrel who had trailed me at the park.

The message boards stretched back many years. As I browsed through the posts, two notable entries stood out: one was a coup attempt by a Primogen of Clan Tremere, who ruled the city for a few months while the Prince was out of town. That span of time was filled with great turmoil until the elder was put down. The other was just a year ago. Clan Tremere was implicated in a fiasco where a magical artifact had threatened the Masquerade. That must have been the incident that Harrison Smith was referring to. At the end of the thread Prince Blaine had declared that hereafter all magical artifacts were forbidden. Posting was locked by Seneschal Gray. So she was the second in command.

The Boons and Status Records listed various Kindred, their Clans and whether they owed boons, or favors to other Kindred. Gabe had mentioned this to me once in passing. Because of the length of Kindred lives, the valued currency used was in boons, or favors. Money was fleeting – anyone could get interest at a bank, but a favor which could be cashed in was far more valuable, socially.

Beside Kindred names were titles and one or two word descriptors which were color coded.

Some were in all capital letters. The ones in red and capital letters seemed to be the worst.

“Derek Chase—loudmouth, elder, Primogen,” read one entry in red. “Patli Tizoc—

INSCRUTABLE, feared, elder” said another in green. I scrolled down the list to Clan Toreador.

My name was there. “Patricia Heron—unrecognized.” Hopefully that would be fixed soon.

I logged off and shortly after, Jackson and Kanini arrived. Rain pitter pattered off the roof above us softly as I waved. They put their raincoats on the rack and sat down on the couches with me.

As we were settling in, the door opened again and an older woman came in. She had a prominent nose and high cheekbones. Her hair fell in soft curls around her matronly face. Removing her overcoat, she wore a conservative grey suit with a matching skirt. I rose and went over to her as I had been instructed by Valerie. Kanini followed behind me.

“Good evening, ma’am,” I said receiving a nod from her. “I’m Patricia Heron, Clan Toreador from Little Tokyo, California.”

“Good to see the Roses have not lost their manners,” she replied neutrally. “I’m Whip Margaret Haugen of Clan Ventrue.” She repeated the process with Kanini and we both sat down again.

Ms. Haugen lingered there eyeballing Jackson. Finally she wandered over to where he was sitting on the couch, reading one of the magazines. “Who *are* you?” she finally asked after waiting a while, tapping her foot.

Jackson glanced up from the magazine, not looking too happy. I was beginning to get a bad feeling from this. “Who the *hell* are *you*?” he replied, leaning back into the sofa. A slow, malicious smile began to spread across his face. Kanini watched frozen, her mouth agape.

Margaret Haugen took a half step back and placed her hands on her hips, her features quickly becoming filled with ire. “How *dare* you, you insignificant twit!” she yelled. Thunder rumbled from somewhere above.

He baited her some more. “Last I knew, the Prince was not an uptight, anal retentive female who makes the Nosferatu look like beauty queens.” The gloves were off. Whip Haugen started shaking. Her skin turned deathly pale as she clenched and unclenched her fists. I looked on in utter horror; I dared not breathe a word! An expletive laden stream of obscenities exploded from Whip Haugen. It might have been funny had we not been there in the middle of it. Just as she was finishing, the door to Stafford’s opened and in walked none other than Harrison Smith. Wonderful.

He observed the tirade going on and quickly waded into the middle of it. “Margaret, what happened here?”

She pointed with a stiff arm to Jackson. “This rude neonate from nowhere has been insulting me non-stop since I arrived this evening. He has no respect for elders or the concept of status.”

Jackson cut her off. “That’s not true, she started it.”

Harrison took out a cell phone. “The situation is easily remedied,” he remarked calmly. He hit a button and placed the phone to his ear. “Hello, Derek? Harrison here. Yes, your presence is required in Elysium. One of your young cubs seems to have been pissing and chewing on the patrons. The offense was made against an elder, Whip Haugen, no less.” He paused a moment then smiled. “Of course.” He held out the cell phone to Jackson. “Your Primogen wishes to speak with you.”

Jackson took the phone, his bravado deflating by the second as the sounds of screaming came from the speaker. After getting an earful that lasted about 30 seconds, he muttered “Yes, sir” and handed the phone back to Harrison. Then he retreated to one of the side offices to await his fate.

“Hmph!” Ms. Haugen snorted after Jackson was gone. “These two did nothing to defend me from the uncalled for and inappropriate attack upon my person. Indeed, they seemed to enjoy it.” She looked over at us with disdain. Harrison lit up with glee as his eyes swiveled in our direction. I realized no amount of explanation would clear me from being involved in tonight’s crapstorm of failure, even though I had done nothing but sit there; I had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and that made me guilty. I would also probably receive a lecture in manners from Mr. Insult himself, the man who made Don Rickles look like a nice guy.

“I knew it! All it took was a little time for you to reveal yourselves as the fools you are!” he exclaimed triumphantly.

Poor Kanini just sat there. She was curled up in a little ball again rocking herself on the couch.

“The Three Stooges! That’s what I’ll call you! Curly, Larry and Moe!”

I rose. “I apologize for my inaction, Whip Haugen. Being new, I didn’t think it wise to involve myself in a verbal altercation.” She shook her head in disapproval. “If you will forgive me, I think I will exercise my right to leave and excuse myself for the evening.” I turned and went to the coat rack.

“We’re not finished yet, Miss Heron,” Harrison said behind my back.

I smiled sweetly and waved goodbye as I gathered my things and headed out the door. Leaving him behind was so very satisfying. I headed down the stairs into Stafford’s and toward the door

when my body began to move as though someone else commanded it. Instead of heading out into the night, my legs turned me around and I headed back up the stairs again. No! I was like a marionette on strings, just watching as I was being taken along for a ride. I really didn't want to face Harrison again, but could not help myself as I walked right back into Elysium and straight over to him. He was seated in one of the chairs now and I stopped right in front of him. My hair hung in front of my eyes and I felt angry, upset and humiliated.

“How nice of you to return, Miss Heron. If you are to become a member of this community, there are some things you must understand.” He spoke as if he were talking to a five year old. “You have an obligation to support those above you in status. That is the way our society works. You also have an obligation to respect elders, and that means me. While you are free to leave, and you are free to express yourself as you wish, you are not free from the consequences of your actions and inactions.” I realized that I now once again had freedom of movement. “As much as it pains me that we are members of the same Clan, you are also responsible for representing us. That means tact, decorum, proper etiquette and grace. You have failed miserably so far to live up to these standards and you can be sure that I will be letting everyone know it.”

Words choked in my throat. I wanted nothing more than to lash out at this evil, horrible man who delighted in the pain of others. Holding it all inside, I managed to whisper. “Will that be all?”

He nodded. I left for the evening and went straight home, head bowed, eyes on the ground. I was deflated and upset. Why couldn't things be more like they were in Little Tokyo, where Clan mates actually supported one another and worked together? I shook my head as the rain washed over me, not bothering with the umbrella. Furthermore, what had happened as I was trying to leave Elysium for the first time?

Then I remembered that Gabe had mentioned an ability used by our Clan. It was a powerful form of emotional influence that could be used to summon others against their will. That would explain why I turned back around when all I wanted to do was to get out of there. *But if that were true, that meant that Harrison Smith had used his Kindred abilities while in Elysium.* For one trying to instruct others in how to behave, he hadn't set such a good example. I mulled it over and considered what I would do. I should probably bring it up with Valerie, as she was the one who handled such matters.

My phone went off. It was Valerie. I veered over to an awning and opened the cell.

"Patricia, this is Valerie."

"Good evening, ma'am."

"I understand there was an issue that developed in the clubhouse tonight. This is not the start I was hoping for."

"Yes, ma'am. I failed to take action to support Ms. Haugen when she was insulted. Mr. Smith corrected me."

There was a pause. "I see. I'd like to see you in Elysium tomorrow evening to go over this as well as your introduction that will take place this Sunday." She didn't sound too happy.

"I'll be there."

"Good night." The phone clicked off before I shut the cell. I wondered what her reaction would be when I told her about Harrison using his Kindred abilities to make me return to Elysium against my will. Two strikes with one pitch. Or... maybe this could be an opportunity to hold it over his head as leverage to not be disrespectful to me anymore. I considered the possibilities.

I took the opportunity to get some more clothes at KayDee's just before they closed. Then I walked back to the house. The door was unlocked when I arrived. I would have to ask Amalthea to have some extra keys made.

She was ahead of the game, coming back in the early evening with an extra set. I practiced my blood use in the basement that night. The quickening, as Gabe called it, came easy to me. I would drop a yardstick on one side of the basement and discovered I could zip over to the other side, whip around the metal support and come back to grab it before it reached the ground. I tried it several times and on the last attempt I knew I was going exponentially faster as I caught it before it had dropped a few inches.

I felt my blood stirring afterwards and was hungry so I fed on Amalthea. She was a sport about it and leaned into me as I drew blood from her warm neck. I wrapped my arms around her neck and waist and swallowed as pleasure poured down my throat. I was aware of the desire for more blood but forced myself to pull away and licked the puncture marks closed.

We were both learning new things. When Amalthea was rewarded by a feeding from me, I usually wanted to be left alone afterwards, as she could get clingy after taking vitae. When I took blood from her, she would sit at the kitchen table while I heated up some soup. This became a tradition of sorts, a routine that was comforting.

As she sipped her soup, I told her of my experiences and cautioned her again about keeping the Masquerade. I also told her to be aware of my blood in her. Aside from being able to regenerate wounds and the inherent beauty that comes from my Clan, some of my abilities might manifest themselves in her, as she had been taking blood from me for a while.

The next night I slipped into my new strapless cream pant suit with a thin black belt and matching shoes which fit swimmingly and departed for my appointment in Elysium with Valerie. Amalthea had done some shopping herself and there was some new electronics in the house. A stereo was playing Christmas music and a computer was still in the box on the shelf in the basement workroom. I asked Amalthea to hold down the fort while I was gone and she enthusiastically agreed.

It was raining again when I slipped out the front door. Swimmingly might be an appropriate word as I looked out at water-soaked landscape. I popped the umbrella and started walking the blocks toward Lord Stafford's Distillery. When I reached a row of closed shops after the bowling alley, I had the unmistakable feeling of being watched. A set of footsteps had begun following me after I passed an empty alley. Not a good sign.

My stalker was closing on me, matching my steps on the sidewalk, pacing me. A mugger? Perhaps. They would be sorry they messed with me. Before he could reach me I turned into a shadowed alley tossing my umbrella aside, then braced myself against the brick wall, waiting for the person to strike. A thin, balding guy came right around the corner, following me. I grabbed him by the right arm and slung him up against the wall which must have hurt as I didn't hold anything back. He accelerated into the brick next to me unprepared for his unexpected ride. I was ready to fight or flee then as we both sized each other up.

He wore a soaked, grease-stained bright orange tux jacket of all things and a dingy pair of overalls underneath. Sneakers with no socks squished underneath his feet. His hands were dirty and thin hair straggled down one side of his head. He recovered and looked at me, then held out

his hand. "Hello, there!" he said like the world's most outgoing optimist. "I'm Benjamin Bixby of Clan..."

"*Shut up!*" I whispered harshly, pushing him up against the wall again. "Do you want to get us both killed?" He fell silent for a moment. "What the hell are you doing sneaking up on me like that?"

"Sorry, I didn't want to attract any attention," he whispered back to me. "I arrived here just this evening." He glanced around conspiratorially.

"Let me guess, you don't know where to go?"

"How did you read my mind like that? You should be a Clairvoyant headpiece."

Dear Lord, a Malkavian. I shook my head. "Go to Lord Stafford's Distillery down the street and ask to see Phillip Zaneke. He can probably help you out." *If you don't sneak up on him as well.* I pointed out the way to him and backtracked, heading to the bowling alley where I freshened up inside the ladies room. My hands and outfit were now dirty and my hair was wet. Thankfully my raincoat had taken the brunt of the damage.

I cleaned up as best I could and pulled my hair into a ponytail. Thirty minutes later I arrived at Elysium. Good thing I started out early. Jasmine was there as well as Dr. Robertson. Benjamin had made it and was involved in a conversation with Whip Zaneke when I arrived.

Phillip frowned when he saw me and called me over to where they were seated on the couch.

"Miss Heron, is it true that you accosted my Clanmate on his journey here?"

"I gave him directions to get here, but yes, sir. Did he tell you he was about to blab his proud affiliation with your Clan to the public before I pushed him into the wall?"

Benjamin looked as guilty as a puppy that had soiled the carpet. Phillipi glowered at him. “No, he did not. Is this true?” Benjamin’s big eyes began to get watery as his nose and lips started to twitch. Phillipi pointed to one of the office doors where they both retreated. I was beginning to get the idea that the offices were the equivalent of a Kindred woodshed.

I introduced myself to several people I had not met before. Dr. Nathaniel Timms, Primogen of Clan Tremere was quiet, direct and polite. He asked a few questions but didn’t speak much about himself. Much like Derrial Bleac, Nathaniel was conservatively dressed, with a bow tie, vest and old fashioned pocket watch. Caleb Titov was another neonate from Clan Ventrue like Joey. He was from Scotland of all places, not Russia or one of the Slavic countries. I also met Whip Sandra Martinez of Clan Brujah. She was a cigar smoking, leather wearing, tough-as-nails girl with a butch haircut and reminded me much of Nix.

“You should come by the park again, Patty,” Jasmine said. “We sometimes gather there to talk about things and just hang out.”

“Thanks, Jasmine, perhaps I will.” I could see how the idea of socializing without the fear of making a misstep would be attractive.

“Just make sure you don’t go past the gazebo,” she reminded me.

“Excuse me, please,” Caleb muttered as he got up to retreat to one of the empty offices, opening his cell phone as he left. He had left once already and I was beginning to wonder what he was doing. Oh well, I had enough on my own plate without being concerned about others. It was best to just observe quietly even though that did not work out too well for me last time.

“You made the news, Miss Heron,” Dr. Robertson mentioned. Eyes glanced towards me and he looked at the computer.

Whip Martinez chewed her cigar. “Try not to get on the Harpy’s bad side, honey.”

“Good to know, thank you.” I went over to log in.

The message boards had some recent activity, the latest post from Harrison Smith. It was titled The Harpy Report, December. A black and white image of a radio tower, the kind used by RKO Pictures was at the top of the post. The message “Harpy Report” in jagged letters was being broadcast from the tower.

Dear, dear, dear. Where do I start this evening? I know you all are bursting at the seams to hear the latest faux pas, bloop, blunders and nono's that we all should strive to avoid, lest we cause ourselves and our Clan to be seen in a bad light at best, or at worst, endanger our community and threaten all therein.

Before we get started some may ask the question, why are we bothering with social etiquette and niceties when our backs are against the wall under threat from lupines, crazed despots and magic wielding cults set to end the world? Here is your answer: the Traditions are not just social niceties, and they are not just about etiquette. Indeed, they are like a mirror in some ways... a test if you will, to perceive your attitude and see how dedicated you are to the Camarilla. I suppose you could say that my job is to observe and interpret, socially, how well Kindred measure up to that test. If you are not fully committed to each and every one of the Traditions, my advice would be for you to admit the Anarch that you are, pack your bags and leave town immediately, as there is no place for you here. Better yet, if you consider any of the traditions to be "flexible" subject to be

dropped and added or reinterpreted at any time, then just join the Sabbath and the rest of us can dispose of you as is truly fitting.

Speaking of bad manners, three neonates running about like blind mice had the ill-conceived notion that it is acceptable to be rude to an elder in Elysium. I'm speaking specifically about Jackson Edwards, Patricia Heron and Kanini Korson, to be known hereafter as the Three Stooges. Yes, Mr. Edwards decided to be the judge over those who are centuries older than he and become a name-calling hack. Tsk, tsk, Jackson! Miss Heron and Miss Korson sat idly by and figuratively smacked each other about the head while allowing this grievous offense to go unchallenged, in silent approval of the aforementioned treatment. As a result, Miss Heron and Miss Korson will both owe Whip Haugen a minor boon while Jackson Edwards owes her a major. Congratulations!

By the way Mr. Johnson, when you tap ashes onto the Elysium floor in defiance of his Grace's explicit orders, then say "Let him come and get me" in response to objections, that's not really the kind of attention one wants to gather, hmm?

Other mundane news finished up the report. Jasmine Ledyard and Caleb Titov were congratulated for their appointment as Deputies to the Sheriff's office. So now it appeared I owed a minor boon to Whip Haugen. I put boon into the search engine and came up with this entry:

"Why should I purposefully enter into a boon agreement?" Boons can be a good thing. Boons show the Kindred's willingness to participate and interact in our society. When the boon is paid off, all know that the Kindred is one who keeps his word, and status increases. Boons however, like most currency, are two sided coins. If one disrespects

those to whom he *owes* boons, his status nose dives exponentially in relation to the level of the boon. The Kindred becomes known as a *whelcher*, one to whom the coin of our society has no importance. Simply put, he loses the trust of the community. Isn't that right, Mr. Chase? Boons can be made between individuals, from an individual to a Clan, or from Clan to Clan.

I might add here that the practice of simply "sitting" on boons (to enforce respect) is discouraged, and can eventually lead, if done purposefully, to the diminished value of said boon. Normal exchange of currency is desired, and what makes the currency valuable. We would encourage you to offer boons and take others up on them, within reason! By helping one another, we better ourselves and the community works as it should.

Have you noticed Kindred acting out of line, socially? Impertinent? Rude? Disrespectful? Behaving in a manner to endanger us or flaunt our laws? Send me a text. *We love* pointing out what *not* to do, so that all may benefit! Additionally, if you see any Kindred demonstrating exemplary behavior, let me know about that too.

So it looked like I should keep my eyes peeled for opportunities to pay off the debt. Logging off, Benjamin and Phillipi were coming out of the office as I sat down with the others. Benjamin walked over to me, his lips drawn into a pout. "I apologize for forcing you to protect the First Tradition from my actions," he said, head bowed as Phillipi looked on.

"No worries," I replied easily. "Live and learn." That got a nod from Phillipi, and they both sat down on the opposite side. Just then Jasmine's cell phone went off. She opened it and looked down at the screen and her eyes went wide.

“Gotta run!” She jumped up from the couch and ran over to the nightstand as Caleb came flying out of one of the offices. Instead of going down the staircase, Jasmine had a card out which she swiped across the lock on the emergency VIP exit near the throne and they both quickly left via the fire escape.

“Sounds like trouble,” Nathaniel said, then his cell phone went off, too. He touched two fingers to his head in salute then departed as well. Valerie entered from Stafford’s just as Dr. Timms was leaving via the emergency exit.

“Ah,” Benjamin exclaimed, when he saw Primogen Moore. He jumped up from the couch and walked efficiently over to Valerie, who was hanging up her coat. “Hello,” he said with enthusiasm as he stuck out his hand.

“No!” came the correction from Phillip. “Your name, Clan and city!”

He thought for a moment as Valerie waited patiently. “Ah. Benjamin Bixby, Clan Malkavian, Provo, Utah.” Valerie backed up at the P in Provo which was heavily punctuated and introduced herself. Then she looked over to me.

“Ready?”

I nodded confidently and followed her into the now vacated offices as she swished in front of me, hips swaying. I was eager to get this over with. She closed the door behind us and seated herself behind the desk. “What happened?”

“With regards to last night,” I asked, making sure we were on the same subject. “I failed to intercede when an elder, Whip Haugen, was insulted.”

“And why?” she prodded me.

“I was unfamiliar with the customs here and made the wrong choice. I tried to err on the side of caution rather than mess things up even worse.”

“Stop,” she said holding up her hand. “You are defending yourself. Just... stop.” She closed her eyes and shook her head while I lapsed into silence. “Just listen to yourself. You are an unrecognized neonate, with no cards to play, much less even show.” Her look grew cold, her voice rising. “I’m as much displeased with your self-justification as I was with your disappointing showing last night. In fact, you have *already* incurred a boon debt and left *me* to try to explain your actions to others!”

What could I say? “I’m sorry ma’am. I was wrong.” I looked down at the desk, upset. “I guess the difference between Mr. Smith being rude and Jackson Edwards being rude is status.”

“Finally she gets a clue!” she exclaimed to the walls before turning back to me. “Status is everything. Our job as a Clan is to make things run smoothly. You need to start getting a lot more on the ball if you are to survive here. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, on to the issue directly in front of us: your presentation to the Prince.” She took a breath and calmed down a little. “Typically after court the Clans line up in order of status to present new Kindred. Don’t avert your eyes. He doesn’t care for that and believes it is a sign of deception. Don’t speak until spoken to and keep your answers short and to the point. He doesn’t like to waste time chattering with petitioning neonate Kindred he does not know. You will refer to him only as ‘my Prince’ or ‘your Grace.’ Don’t fidget and answer his questions truthfully and you should be fine. Got all that?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, is there anything else we need to discuss this evening?”

“There may have been another breach of Elysium etiquette. In fact, two.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, after the incident with Jackson and Ms. Haugen and Mr. Smith was... pointing out Kanini’s and my own deficiencies, I decided to exercise my right to leave. As I was going down the staircase I felt an inexplicable urge to return to Mr. Smith.” I filled her in on what happened and my suspicions.

She pressed her lips together after she heard my account and whispered, “You think he might have used his blood to bring you back.”

“Yes, and in doing so broke the law about blood use in Elysium as well as refusing me unfettered egress.”

She thought about this some. “There are closed circuit cameras that record all activity in Elysium. If this truly happened, then I suppose what you could do if you want to pursue it is to take it up with the Keeper. However, you should know that Harrison saved the entire city just five months ago.”

No wonder the prima donna is acting like he’s untouchable. “All right, thank you Valerie. I may do that.”

“I have to meet up with our Whip tonight so don’t screw it up again,” she cautioned me. “Have you met him yet?”

“Not yet.”

“We’ll have to fix that. I think you’ll like him.”

Thankfully the meeting was over. We went back out to find Whip Martinez and Dr. Robertson still there along with Benjamin Bixby and a Kindred I had not met yet, elder Cameron Morrison of Clan Ventrue. He was thin as a rail but dressed impeccably in a silk Italian suit with a matching tie and shoes that shined like a fortune. A sharp goatee and dark, arched eyebrows completed his appearance. I approached and introduced myself to him and he replied in a most proper manner. “How do you do, Miss Heron? It’s nice to meet a new Rose.”

Valerie left shortly after that so I wasted no time. “Dr. Robertson, do you think I might speak with you privately about a matter regarding Elysium?”

He agreed and unlocked a previously unopened room along the side, the Keeper’s personal office. I related what happened and he mulled it over. “I’ll be certain to give the tapes a look. If what you are saying is true, what would remedy the situation?”

“I’d like a boon, from him to me,” I answered.

He nodded, expecting the response, smoothing his gray mustache. “I’ll be honest – without absolute proof, that would be hard to make stick. Technically it’s just your word against his. But let me see what we can work out. Close the door on the way out, if you would, please.”

I smiled, hopeful to no longer be the dart board for target practice. Speak of the devil, Harrison was leaving his coat on the rack as I left the Keeper’s office.

“If it isn’t the Black Rose herself?” he taunted as he approached the couches. Dr. Robertson was still in his office, reviewing tapes of the night in question. “Where is the Moonbat and the

Presumptuous Punk to round out the terrible trio?" It seemed like he wasn't going to stop until he had stained our names with everyone in this new community, which was a shame.

"Black Rose?" Cameron asked.

"An indiscretion in Elysium. It's in the Harpy Report," Sandra explained. Benjamin hopped up from his chair and nimbly dodged the table like a young Dick Van Dyke to stand in front of Harrison Smith. "Here we go again," Sandra observed with a smile.

My brows creased as I observed Benjamin's apparent exuberance and the reactions of some others there. Of all the Malkavians I had known, each seemed sick... tragic...flawed in one way or another. I wondered if they were anguished by their mental state, or even if underneath, there lurked something darker in the shadows of their minds.

"Benjamin Bixby, sir!" he grinned. "Clan Malkavian. Provo, Utah!" Harrison looked at him with a mixture of shock, disgust and amazement.

"God, that orange is certainly an offense to the senses," Harrison replied before completing the introduction to get the puppy-like Braxis to move on to someone else. Meanwhile I gathered my coat; I just didn't care to be around the man anymore for ostracizing me.

On the way home I noticed Kanini and Jackson in the Dunk N Dine again. I went in and Jackson slid over for me. "Sorry for the trouble we got in," I told them as I sat down.

"No, no, it was my fault," Jackson said shaking his head. "You didn't do anything wrong, neither of you." Kanini nodded and we sat there for a moment.

"Well, there doesn't appear that there's anything we can do about it now," I conceded.

“Horse squeeze!” Jackson answered. “I’ll be damned if I ever set foot in that place again. Fool me once, shame on you....”

“Same here,” Kanini added. “I’ll not go back there if people are treated the way we were.”

“That’s perfectly understandable. I got called into a meeting tonight so I had to go.” I frowned and thought about the possibilities. I could not blame them for feeling the way they did. I considered sharing with them about what Harrison had done but decided not to discuss it until a resolution came about. “Kanini, are there any new leads in your search?” I asked quietly.

“Some. We’re checking out the buildings one at a time for clues. It’s a slow process.” Kanini seemed perfectly normal tonight, not bothered by her private terrors.

“Well let me know if I can help, ok?”

She nodded. The rain started while we discussed what was happening in New Orleans and by the time we finished it was a downpour. I got home that night, wet but with a small amount of hope that things would change. Instead of practicing my blood use, I decided to work on my writing skills, which had not seen any use since Little Tokyo. I sat down at the living room table with pen and paper. The words flowed out and played with one another, and the more I thought of the story that was emerging, the more animated and energetic they became.

Soon it was apparent that the words were forming a Christmas poem, in the manner of “The Night Before Christmas.” I finished the work, naming it “The Night Before Christmas for Kindred” and set it aside turning my thoughts to God. *Can You hear me, Lord? Please help me. Help me to return to humanity once more. Deliver me from this... this condition. Forgive me for my sin. I don’t want to be shackled to this malicious group of vampires any more.*

The chilling hollowness which echoed through my soul did not cease. My heart remained dead still. My thirsty desire for blood remained. Who would have knowledge of how to reverse this condition? The Tremere. They were the keepers of forbidden and secret knowledge. Sneak in to their haven in the university? Oh heck no. I suppose it would do no harm to just ask them. There was nothing more I could do at this point in time.

Chapter Thirteen: A Monster for Christmas

Amalthea and I got into a rhythm in our daily schedule. She did the shopping and household maintenance during the day, and I got to know New Monroe at night. I visited some clubs including Macabre, the local hot spot. I avoided Elysium the next few nights and the evening approached for court.

All Kindred in the city were expected to attend court which met monthly. It was held at the old Donizetti Theatre downtown. I preened with a new dress and comfy black slingbacks and drove over early to make sure I was not late.

The front façade of the theatre was made of framed glass, stretching up perhaps 15 feet. Zeke Moss was at the door and opened it for me when I arrived. I shook out my umbrella before entering.

“Evening, Miss Heron,” he said and I gave him a nod and a smile, thanking him. The interior doors opened up into a wide auditorium. Heavy draperies decorated the walls; the high ceiling curved across the top in creamy beige illuminated from the sides. Cushioned red fold-down chairs were arranged in sections with banners hanging from above. Each banner held a heraldic symbol. I recognized the roses held in a gloved hand from one and descended until I had reached the appointed section, leaving my umbrella and coat draped over one of the seats. No other

Toreador had arrived yet, but groups of Kindred milled around speaking quietly. I recognized Primogen Timms and strolled over to him.

“Primogen Timms, good evening,” I said as he and two others I did not know turned to me at my approach. He introduced me to two other Tremere and I followed the formal introduction as taught by Valerie.

“First court, hmm?” he asked. “Terrible thing, the fiasco in Little Tokyo.”

“Yes,” I rubbed my temple. “It was. I haven’t heard any word other than from my own family of those who survived or perished.”

He frowned. “We have received no word at all as of yet. It seems to have been a complete loss for nearly all those who were unfortunate enough to be involved. Tragic.”

“Yes.” I thought of all I had known there and the menace that had destroyed them. They seemed like easier times in some ways, or perhaps it was just the idea of being innocent and naïve.

“Actually, I had an inquiry for you, Primogen. I wondered if I might meet with you some time at your convenience. It’s not an important matter, just something I have been thinking of.”

He wrinkled his nose and raised an eyebrow. “Well, if you are recognized this evening, I don’t see why not. Here is a pass card you may use at the New Monroe University Memorial Library.”

He got out a card with a magnetic strip which I placed in my purse. “Please feel free to come visit us. We work hard but enjoy an occasional diversion. When you arrive, wait downstairs in the atrium until you are called on and someone will be with you.” He looked up the aisle. Valerie had entered along with a young man at her side.

I departed and went back to the Toreador section where we met up. Kindred were starting to stream into the auditorium now and I gave Kanini a wave when I saw her, which she returned. Valerie flowed down the aisle in a long aqua dress, her arm resting in her escort's elbow. "Good evening, Primogen Moore. You look absolutely beautiful tonight."

She looked pleased. "As do you, Patricia. New dress?" I nodded and she turned to the smiling gentleman next to her. "Mike, this is Patricia Heron of whom I have already spoken. Patricia, this is Whip Mike Miller of our own Clan." He extended his hand with a warm greeting.

"Hi Miss Heron, I look forward to working with you." He wore dark brown dress slacks and a tan dinner jacket with a complimenting dress shirt and tie.

"Nice to finally meet you," I answered and the pair turned to Harrison who had just arrived, dandied up in a ruffled shirt and long-tailed black tuxedo, strutting as if he were ready to perform in an opera.

"Ah, Primogen Moore, Whip Miller, Miss Heron, it's so nice to see you all this evening." He made brief eye contact then they began to speak of the most recent rumors that were going through the community. I was glad no one mentioned my name. We seated ourselves and waited for the meeting to begin, while Harrison and Valerie traded acknowledgements with various people as they passed by.

Mike turned to me as groups formed then dissolved, as others took their seats. "I noticed you talking to Primogen Timms as we came in. That's good—make yourself known and of course, show proper etiquette and always be respectful. Be positive and a good listener and you'll do fine. You know the Traditions, right?" I nodded. "Good."

The whispering hushed and people in the back of the auditorium began to stand. We followed suit and the Prince and Seneschal proceeded down to the stage. Prince Blaine looked regal, his stride purposeful. Pale skin and jet black hair framed his staring eyes as they scanned the crowd. Seneschal Gray wore a long white silk dress trimmed with lace. She looked just like her portrait in Elysium, blond hair trailing down her shoulders. In the silence, someone on the other side of the center aisle was heard asking, "Who's that?" All eyes turned towards the offending section where Clan Brujah was seated. A few Kindred wiped their lips or coughed quietly to keep from being seen smiling at the affront. I saw across the way that Whip Sandra Martinez was glaring angrily at someone.

Mike gave me a heads up nod looking over to the Brujah section and shook his head no, a clear warning of what not to do. The royal couple ascended the stage where a huge man stood by a pair of thrones, a wicked looking curved sword strapped to his side. The Prince removed his coat and handed it to Helen, who had received a hangar to place it on. It was then taken by an attendant who came from the wings and placed it on a rack behind the thrones. The Prince took hold of the armrests and relaxed into the high backed throne. Then we all took our seats.

His eyes surveyed the gathering almost mechanically, and his movements were minimal. After a moment he took a breath and began to speak, his voice projected by the acoustics of the stage. "It wearies me that once again, my direct intervention is necessary in order to set matters aright, matters that should never have escalated to the point they have reached. Whip Martinez, you are representing Clan Brujah this evening." The statement was not meant as a question, but Sandra stood up immediately.

"Yes, your Grace," she responded.

“Do you know where Demetrius Johnson is tonight? He is not present with you.”

“No your Grace, the last we heard from him was last week.”

Prince Blaine surveyed the audience, the silence sinking in. “Actually, he is here, although not in a manner that he expected. If you would please.” He motioned to the bodyguard who I later discovered was the town Sheriff, Mack Lewis. Mack nodded and walked to the left side of the stage, stroking his fu manchu. He disappeared behind the curtain then pulleys were heard as the curtains opened to their full extent. Behind the curtains stood a white upright screen on a tripod. A large urn sat beside the screen. Prince Alexander looked toward the back of the auditorium and Zeke Moss activated a projector. A narrow beam shined down on the stage. In the flickering light lay a Kindred, staked and shackled on a concrete floor. He wore shorts and his chest was bare. Dark beard stubble and greasy black hair framed his face which was frozen in a mask of horror. Alexander motioned with a finger and narrated with a quiet voice as the film began to play. “You might recognize Demetrius Johnson, of Clan Brujah. As you are aware, we are all vulnerable to the effects of fire. Fire is actually a quick form of oxidation. What happens...” he paused for a moment, “when Kindred are oxidized slowly?” A pair of hands with a brush entered the screen and began to paint a fluid across the exposed skin of the man, from toes to head. The film then lapsed into stop motion as Demetrius’ skin began to be eaten away, followed by the muscles underneath. A collective gasp came from the audience and I felt people around me squirming and shifting in discomfort. Demetrius twitched back and forth as his muscles were dissolved in a macabre show of puppetry. Steam rose from his exposed tissues as his body literally disintegrated before our eyes. I recoiled in my seat, scarcely daring to believe what I was seeing.

Dear Lord!

But the spectacle was not yet over. The film slowed down back into real time and the hands appeared once more to remove the stake. Demetrius screamed and his emaciated body shook as it turned bleach white. Mike whispered next to me “He’s using blood to heal himself.” Skin began to inch its way back across the exposed muscle tissue. Then the tormenter reinsterted the stake into the partially healed man and the entire process started again. I averted my eyes but could not help looking back in morbid curiosity. Flesh gave way to muscle. Muscle gave way to tendon then to bone. The viscera and internal organs were exposed then eaten away. Each segment was punctuated by the man’s unearthly twitching. Finally he shuddered once and his entire body collapsed into ash and spread out on the concrete.

“I had Mr. Johnson taken care of as a reminder that my decrees are to be adhered to and not taken lightly. It took him forty two hours to finally expire. I believe his exact words in Elysium were ‘Let him come and get me.’ That... is... *exactly*... what I have done.” He paused again to let it sink in.

“You may be seated, Whip Martinez.”

I sat up a little straighter as Sandra sat back down, gripping the armrests stiffly. The room was now deathly quiet and the Prince continued his speech, still with minimal motion allowing his words to carry the impact he desired. “I trust that placing what is left of Mr. Johnson in Elysium as a reminder is not required. On to other pressing matters.”

I resisted the urge to look over at Harrison.

“Recently the Sheriff’s office conducted a raid that eliminated a threat to the Masquerade. The Cult of the Aqueous God was summoning extra planar creatures through the use of a forbidden magical artifact. Before the cult could be eliminated, they had managed to complete a ceremony

in which they brought over a form of intelligent squid. I'm informed this creature is three stories tall, and thus is itself a danger to the Masquerade, as it would incite increased observation on our city. It is for all purposes very much akin to the Kraken of ancient myth.

Primogen Timms has outlined a plan by which we will take care of the matter.” Prince Blaine clasped his hands together; the simple gesture an exclamation. “The Kraken, and I use that term only for descriptive purposes, can be lured to a shoreline destination where it will be ambushed, trapped and destroyed. We will pose as cult members until it responds to a call, presumably to summon others of its kind. The lighthouse has been suggested as a location and I find that satisfactory – it is both remote and isolated, with one road providing access.

Electricity is the creature's weak spot. Clan Tremere has staves which can inflict the damage, but they will need time to charge. Our goal will be to protect these conductors until they can be simultaneously discharged. Clan Brujah will coordinate the attack groups. You will be informed of your role through your respective Primogen. Because of the magnitude of the threat to the Masquerade, we must move quickly. The operation will be carried out tomorrow night. Be ready.

That concludes my discussion for this evening. Are there any Clans that have business with the court?” He went through the Clans and one by one the representatives of each stood and stated they had no official business, with the exception of Clan Malkavian.

“Yes, we do,” Whip Zaneke stated.

“State your business,” the Prince declared, ratcheting his eyes on Phillip.

“Malcolm Donaldson is still missing. We have attempted every means to locate him to no avail. His ghoul was killed and as you are aware the police involvement which took place as a result

had to be quietly swept under the rug. We are concerned that, should he still be alive and in the city, he may pose a threat to the Masquerade.”

Kanini’s mouth dropped open but she remained silent.

“So noted,” the Prince replied. “Let it be known that a hunt is declared for the missing Kindred. He is not to be killed, but captured alive. Is there any other business?”

“No, your Grace.” Whip Zaneke remained standing until the Prince gave him a nod.

“We’ll now take petitions,” Prince Blaine stated and the audience began to stand and mingle quietly, discussing what had transpired. Valerie gathered us together to inform us of what part we would play.

“We’ll be the reinforcements tomorrow,” she told us as we leaned close. “If any fall, we are to replace them in order to protect the chargers. Otherwise we work defensively to support the front line, Clans Brujah, Ventrue, and Gangrel. Patty, you have no combat experience, but your job is no less important. You’ll be on crowd control. You must allow no one to pass the road and possibly see what is to occur.”

“I’ll make certain it’s secure,” I told her and received a nod. I was much less assured I could do this job than my false confidence conveyed. What if my abilities didn’t work and I screwed up, leading to a Masquerade violation? Valerie pulled me back to the present.

“Good. Ready to meet the Prince?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Not really.

A line had formed leading up to the stage with the Primogen and their respective neonate candidates. Clan Ventrue went first and I saw Joey being questioned by the prince. He was approved by a wave of the hand and the next group went up. Clan Malkavian was ahead of us in line. I saw Kanini and Benjamin accompanied by Phillipi as he quietly instructed the pair. Valerie stood by my side silently, occasionally exchanging a heads up or blown kisses with others who passed by.

The Malkavians stepped up to the stage when it was their turn. After receiving a nod, Phillipi made the first introduction. “Your Grace, may I present Kanini Korson, of Houston, Texas. Miss Korson, Prince Alexander Blaine.” The Prince fixed a withering gaze on her and she shrank down, shivering. I felt bad for her, with what I presumed was a compulsive preoccupation with fear.

“Why have you come to my city?” Alexander asked, his voice flat.

“I came to be with my fiancé Malcolm Donaldson, your Grace,” she squeaked.

“What is the Second Tradition?”

After stammering a moment she managed to get it out. “Thy domain is thy own concern. Others owe respect while there.”

“You are recognized. Next.”

“Your Grace, may I present....”

“Benjamin Bixby of Provo, Utah! How ya doing?” He grinned and stuck his hand out prompting the Sheriff to unsheathe his massive sword with a *‘shing!’* Phillipi buried his face in his hands

and began to shake his head. The entire theatre turned to watch the spectacle unfolding. When the Prince did not shake Benjamin's hand, he then snapped it up smartly into a military salute.

The Prince narrowed his eyes and he appeared to sigh, if that were possible. He turned laboriously towards the Sheriff. "Have them thrown from the roof of the building," he said, before turning back and stoically ignoring the circus act occurring before him.

"With pleasure!" Mack growled as he grabbed Benjamin and dragged him off the stage.

"Am I done? Can I hold your sword? What's your name?" Phillipi followed.

Valerie whispered into my ear with glossy crimson lips. "Clan weakness is no excuse for a lapse of etiquette. That was a failed introduction, which is rare. They'll survive, but he's in a mood now so don't screw it up, or I will personally run you out of town." We walked up the steps to the stage. I met the Prince's eyes when we stopped as instructed. Those grey orbs seem to stare right through me, eliciting shivers on the back of my neck. His brows were locked together in displeasure. After a moment, he nodded to Valerie. "Your Grace, may I present Patricia Heron of Little Tokyo, California. Miss Heron, Prince Alexander Blaine."

He waited a moment more, perhaps to see if I was going to speak up and break the silence, ruining my chances of being recognized. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally asked "Why have you come to my city?"

"Your Grace, I fled the destruction of Little Tokyo. My sire bade me stay here if possible." He probably already knew all about me, but it was all part of the test.

"What is the role of the Scourge?" he asked.

What? That wasn't one of the Traditions! No one told me I had to know all the positions of the court. Oh flip! What was I going to say? I summoned up all the meager knowledge I had gained, all that I had heard. I knew that the Scourge was in charge of destroying rogue Kindred in a city, but was uncertain if the position had other duties. I couldn't hesitate too long, though or I was screwed.

"Your Grace, the Scourge is the hand of the Prince. He is the one who carries out the Prince's will," I answered, hoping I was close.

The Prince raised his eyebrows slightly as if in a prompt for more, but then just filled it in.

"Close enough. The Scourge kills unrecognized Kindred. You are recognized. Next!"

I waited until I got off stage and then my legs nearly buckled with relief. Mike was there waiting for Valerie and me. "Congratulations on being recognized, Patricia!" he said smiling.

"Thanks!" I gushed. "It's good to get it out of the way."

Clan Brujah followed after us. Jackson was unsuccessful in being recognized, although he was not thrown from the roof. We spent about twenty minutes socializing, although many left immediately following court. There had been about eighty or ninety Kindred there. Mike and I exchanged cell numbers and I went back home, half excited, half relieved. There was still tomorrow night to think about.

Late that evening or early the next morning really, I wrote Gabe a long email detailing all that had happened. If the Kindred here were any indication of how difficult things could be, I was glad I was not in DeMark's domain.

Claude Rainier adjusted his tie and shirt collar, making certain it was absolutely straight. Checking the crease on his slacks, he reported in for duty. Things had changed in the Winfield Building over the last few weeks. The entire night staff had been “fired,” and now he, along with the rest of the remaining staff had been promoted and were pulling long shifts until new staff could be “recruited.” One of his colleague’s sisters had called him worried about where he was. The same was true for the rest of the night staff. They had all been destroyed. No one dared mention the missing employees. Police were nowhere to be seen despite desperate pleas from concerned relatives.

Claude was a neonate of Clan Ventrue, but he was no longer Camarilla after what Antonio DeMark did to his wife. In a foolish game of politics, the Regional Prince had snuffed out his beautiful Anita in order to set an example for a mistake DeMark himself had made. Such was often the case when scapegoats were needed, and the loss of his beloved had changed him completely. He left DeMark’s city and traveled to Los Angeles where he was recruited to the Anarchs by Burt Gonzales. After Claude’s training was complete, he was dispatched to New Monroe where his identity and motivations were unknown.

The Anarchs believed in self-determination. Much like the American colonies in the Revolutionary War, they were determined to cast off the yolk of oppression and do away with the corrupt Camarilla. These Kindred had won some victories on the southern California coast and had established their own territory which was contested by the Sabbat and the Camarilla.

Now he was in a position to make a difference. The security disk which had recorded Malcolm Donaldson’s trespass had been left out when the entire staff on duty had been called to a special meeting that fateful night. Claude had found the unknown disk lying out in plain sight when he

arrived early for work that morning. Placing it into the computer, he saw what he never should have seen. The Ventrue were efficient to the point of neurosis, but they did not have a security camera monitoring the security room itself.

After his shift ended at 5 am, Claude drove to the post office box and dropped off the snail mail. It was addressed to Burt Gonzales and detailed what he had discovered. Soon, he could have some vengeance against those who practiced murder on a whim.

The next night I arose shortly after sundown and began to get ready immediately. Amalthea could tell I was hurried. “Patty, is there anything I can do for you tonight?”

“Yes, I’m going to need a ride to the coast very shortly,” I told her. “It’s important business.” I gave her a serious look.

“What is going on?” She scuttled after me like a puppy who does not want their master to leave.

“We are going to try to put down a threat to the Masquerade,” I replied. There was no use in getting her upset with the details. If we were successful, I could tell her afterwards.

The clouds were rolling in low like billows of dark drain cleaner pouring across the sky. After Amalthea dropped me off I made my way down the coastal road until the turn off for the lighthouse. Others had begun to gather as I approached. The light house door swung open in the wind; evidently someone had already been inside to secure the structure from witnesses before tonight’s event.

Cloaks were passed out as part of the ruse of the ceremony meant to trap the Kraken. Valerie saw me and came over.

“Patricia, just past the hill is an abandoned farmhouse on the road you came down.” She pointed up toward the top of the rise. “That will be your checkpoint. Don’t let anyone past the hill.” She had to nearly shout as the wind was picking up and the waves were already crashing into the shore behind us. I nodded and went back to my assigned position.

I found the farmhouse I had passed earlier and sure enough, it blocked the view of the lighthouse and Kindred assembling around the outside. Light rain began to fall, pattering off the roof and spotting the ground around me. I could still see the cloaked figures below gathering in a semi-circle outside the lighthouse. Two of them came up the hill just before the ceremony was to take place. I could identify one of them by his orange tux.

Wind whipped my hair as they arrived. Phillipi gave instructions. “Now listen, if any vehicles try to make it past you, you are to throw yourself through the grill and into the engine compartment in order to incapacitate the vehicle. Then take care of any passengers. Understood?”

Benjamin nodded. I hoped Phillipi wasn’t being literal, and that Benjamin wouldn’t mess it up for us. Phillipi went back while Benjamin, bored already, browsed around seeking items of interest. He was attracted by an old TV antenna which had been on the roof at one time, now gathering weeds.

I watched the proceedings down below while standing at the corner of the run down farmhouse to help shield myself from the rain. Eight staves were now planted in the ground with small groups of 8-10 Kindred around each. Behind me, Benjamin had stripped the top off the antennae and was now using the base as a drum major’s baton, marching back and forth across the road. As I turned back around, a huge wave struck the shoreline sending spray skyward. It looked like the old films of depth charges being set off close to the surface. Suddenly the Kraken appeared.

It was unbelievable. The massive creature completely dwarfed the three story lighthouse as it erupted from the sea, gripping the stone with eight foot wide tentacles. The rain began to pour now as the figures threw off their robes and drew swords. The Kraken lurched out of the water and glanced back and forth malevolently with curled, horizontally slit pupils before it lashed out with its tentacles.

One came down directly on top of someone, smashing him completely. I thought it might have been Joey Troncolli. The ground trembled and a moment later his scream echoed up the hillside. The beam at the top of the lighthouse went out as the building shuddered beneath the weight of the behemoth. Light was beginning to flicker from the tops of the staves, though, illuminating the groups slashing, hacking and dodging, their long shadows dancing in syncopation.

One of the tentacles had been cut through on the far right. Someone howled like a wolf as the fighting continued. Then, headlights appeared on the road. I ran out into the rain waving my hands as the vehicle drew close, slowing down. I knocked on the passenger side window. An elderly couple looked out at me, concerned, as they rolled down their windows.

“There’s trouble down there,” I warned them when out in front of the headlights came Benjamin, still marching and pumping his makeshift baton off his chest. He came around the driver’s side while the hapless couple gaped at him.

He stuck the antennae through the window across their chests, his eyes maniacal with whatever delusion he was entertaining at the moment. “How would you like to buy some *timeshares*?” he asked, leering and leaning in, putting himself into the personal space of the driver.

The poor guy shoved the car into reverse and got out of there. When the tail lights were out of sight, I went back to my vantage point. Wind and rain whipped around the corner of the

farmhouse and the boiling clouds marched by overhead at a faster pace. The light from the staves was now getting much brighter. Then in a flash, electrical arcs jumped from the staves into the air striking the Kraken. Its limbs curled up, thrashing, sizzling and shaking. The entire creature spasmed and lost its hold on the building before it gradually slipped back into the water.

“We did it!” Benjamin yelled behind me. That’s when the explosion happened. I saw Benjamin brilliantly illuminated in a pane of broken glass before I was hurled into the side of the house as a deafening blast stunned me. He had been holding his makeshift baton up high in celebration; not a good thing to do during a thunderstorm at the top of a hill. As I looked up, the red hot antenna was spattering in a puddle sending up a thick cloud of white steam. A black patch in the road marked where the bolt had struck. Nothing was left of Benjamin save a burned piece of his empty orange tux and some sneakers.

My ears were ringing. Some Kindred came up the hill to see what happened. They were flush with victory, despite the losses. I explained to them what had happened, giving Benjamin the credit for turning the car away. I was yelling as I still could not hear my own voice. One of them got out a cell phone and called Phillipi. As for me, I didn’t have much stomach for sticking around. I left that night, slogging through the rain. Benjamin may have been a freak, but he didn’t deserve such a death. Falling like flies, indeed.

On the way home I sent the vitae to my ears and sure enough it cleared up the ringing and healed my temporary wound. Why didn’t I tell him to be careful? I should have said something but I was too busy watching the spectacle. I shook my head and allowed the rain to wash over me.

Dear God, have mercy on him. He, and Joey and whoever else died this night. Hell, even the

Kraken. There were so many deaths, with so little reason. I suppose the Masquerade has to be upheld, but at what cost?

I must have looked pretty bad when I got home because Amalthea went into a tizzy.

“*Mademoiselle!* What has happened? You are a mess!”

“It was a mess,” I told her. “Fetch me some clean clothes, please. I need to take a hot shower, and then I’ll probably want to feed. Also, could you make a fire in the fireplace?” The shower warmed my body and felt good and Amalthea’s blood which I drained into a coffee mug made me feel even better. I put on a bathrobe and we sat in the easy chairs in the living room while I gave her the basics of what happened that evening. I told her about the Kraken but left out the gory details. I drank the blood and allowed the fireplace to further dry me. My fangs grew out but at this point I didn’t care.

“So this Joey and Benjamin, they are both dead?” she asked.

“Yes. I don’t know if there were any others. I didn’t stick around to find out.” I shook my head.

“You must promise you will be extra careful from now on. I would hate for something to happen to you as well!” She touched my hand.

“I’ll try,” I said looking into the flames. “I suppose it was just bad luck.”

I spent the next few nights at home, glad to be away from the drama and pressure of Kindred society.

Then Valerie called. “Patricia, are you all right?”

“Yes, I suppose I’m still a little shell shocked from what happened on Monday,” I told her.

“Well, as you know Saturday is Christmas Eve. I’d like for you to be at Elysium that night, if not before. We usually celebrate with entertainment.”

“I’ll be there,” I told her, not really looking forward to being roasted over an open fire again. Ah well, I suppose I could not put it off forever. What’s the worst that could happen, I thought as I imagined being yanked back down the staircase by a giant hook the way they used to do during vaudeville acts.

Thursday upon my awakening Amalthea came down the steps. “Patricia, a package has arrived for you. It’s from Gabriel.”

“Oh thank you, Amalthea. I’ll be right up.” I washed and threw on some clothes and some color, then joined Amalthea upstairs. It wasn’t just a package. It was a large shipping crate. The carrier had managed to get it through the door and into the dining room where it lay next to the table. ‘*This Side Up*’ read the print. Fabric straps with winches fastened the top along with nails which we worked through gradually. *Had Gabe mailed himself to me?* Stranger things had happened.

Finally the top came open and the sight took my breath away. Inside was a Plexiglas coffin, lined with pink silk and matching pillow. Intricate curved filigrees decorated the metal frame and in the top was a carved delicate frosted rose. A note was scotch taped to the lid. It read “My dear Bird, I wish you the merriest of Christmases. With love, Gabe.”

Amalthea was jumping up and down clapping her hands. “It’s *so* beautiful!” she exclaimed.

“It is,” I agreed, smiling. “Get the address from the lid. I’ll need you to swing by the post office tomorrow morning with a next day delivery.” I manhandled the coffin down the stairs and onto the pool table platform which had been previously occupied by a mattress. What should I send

him? I had money, but Kindred didn't really value material things. Gabriel liked art. An idea struck me. Among the things I had purchased with my walking around money was a calligraphy kit. Elders probably value old style handwriting – it was a lost art form in the age of computers and fonts. Perhaps a copy of my first poem, framed on parchment? It was fitting. I worked at the downstairs counter for about an hour and when I was satisfied, wrote a note to go with it.

Amalthea purchased a beautiful frame, with a thin veneer of gold showing through the black stain.

'To Gabe, from Patty and Amalthea' I wrote. 'Merry Christmas!' We both signed it and stuck it to the glass. That done, I decided to relax with a peaceful evening at home. Amalthea told amusing stories of her life in France and of her adjustments in coming to America. I considered going to visit Primogen Timms, but that could wait until after the holidays. No doubt they were busy recouping from the raid at the beginning of the week as everyone else was.

The fatal night arrived; tragic to think of Christmas Eve in that way, honestly. I had considered splitting town, just leaving with Amalthea to avoid Harrison Smith and his one man war on neonates. The problem with that was I would have no idea what I was getting into. What if we went to a Sabbat town without knowing? Or went into an area with lupines? At least here I was recognized by the Prince and would not have to go through that process all over again. And Amalthea had already sunk a lot of money into our leased house. There was nothing left to do.

"Amalthea, get ready and wear something nice. You are going with me to Elysium tonight." She jumped for joy and immediately burst into a long stream of French.

“Qu’est-ce que je dois porter ? J’ai besoin de nouvelles chaussures et je dois m’assurer que tout est assorti juste juste ! Merci! Merci!” She began sorting through her wardrobe in a mad frenzy smiling from ear to ear.

“Just get ready like you are going to church, dear,” I tried to calm her down. “Remember not to speak unless spoken to, and do not for any reason stick up for me. I can handle whatever comes our way.” We both finished dressing. I wore a classic little black dress with red accessories; Amalthea wore a long sleeved, light tan cashmere sweater dress.

When we left the house I was unprepared for what greeted me – snow! In Louisiana! Small white flakes drifted quietly through the air illuminated by streetlights. We both went back inside and exchanged our raincoats for something warmer. Traffic was sparse as we passed the familiar blocks to the Speakeasy. The cold night air was crisp, but it did not curb my sense of unease as we reached our destination. The doorman met me at the top of the steps. “Merry Christmas, Miss Heron,” he smiled and bowed.

“Merry Christmas to you as well,” I returned the smile and pointed at Amalthea. “She’s with me.” The bouncers here were probably bound to ensure trust. I considered what weaknesses that might expose but dismissed the thought and went up the staircase.

I was early tonight. Dr. Robertson and Caleb Titov were there, along with a few others I had seen but not yet met: Primogen Reynolds of Clan Ventrue and Primogen Splasky of Clan Nosferatu, and another Nosfertu named Bindle. Thankfully both Sewer Rats were masked. Dr. Robertson made the appropriate introductions and Daniel, the young Gangrel I had met at the park, entered after that, frowning as though he would rather be someplace else. Other ghouls were there, hanging behind their masters like assistants to movie stars. Tinsel draped the frames of artwork

on the walls and origami snowflakes hung from the ceiling. A Christmas tree stood beside the couches. On the coffee table in the center sat a new plaque along with several items which drew my attention.

There lay a deck of cards, a swatch of orange fabric and a sheathed dagger. The plaque read ‘In memory of Joseph Troncolli, Cristopher DeBrabant and Benjamin Bixby. Gone but not forgotten.’ It touched me and I was glad their sacrifice had been remembered.

Kindred entered in pairs and small groups over the course of the next hour and a half. Someone turned on the stereo system and Christmas music played quietly in the background.

Mike Miller gave me a hug when he arrived and took a place behind the bar where fresh blood was being served. I was just beginning to think this might not be a bad evening after all. Then Harrison Smith arrived.

After making the rounds he straightened his jacket and went over to Daniel, who was sitting on the couch quietly. He had been reserved all night, responding to questions with a nod of his head or short simple greetings. “So there he is,” Harrison exclaimed triumphantly. “The Kindred who thinks he is a werewolf!”

Conversations died down and Daniel glowered from beneath furrowed brows as the taunting continued. “Will you go into a frenzy by sniffing the air, hmm? We’d best all be watchful!” Harrison enunciated his words with razor precision.

I frowned but kept my thoughts to myself. This was childish. It was like schoolyard bullying, all over again. Caleb and Bindle chimed in with teasing comments. Perhaps the howl I heard during the fight with the Kraken had come from Daniel, I thought.

Daniel had his hands curled into fists as he sat there taking it. Finally he got up and left, a silent storm brewing over his head as he was jeered by the few who made sport of him. Merry Christmas, indeed.

Slowly conversations resumed. I stood by the bar near Mike who hopefully would watch out for me. Amalthea hovered, watching and listening, copying the manners of other ghouls there. I was proud of her for being well behaved. Valerie arrived and was greeted with enthusiasm. She had presents for all the Roses. Harrison got a riding crop which he snapped against his leg throughout the rest of the evening. Mike received a silk bow tie which he quickly knotted above his pressed white shirt. I received a small bottle of blood-brandy for which I was grateful.

Then the Seneschal, Helen Gray came through the door to cheering and applause followed by a contingent of men who hustled what looked to be liquor boxes to the bar. She traded air kisses with Valerie and some of the elders, and then Dr. Robertson procured a second smaller throne and placed it next to the empty one on the platform. Helen reclined gracefully into the chair and regarded us all with a loving demeanor as we gathered around.

“The Prince wishes to extend a safe and merry holiday greeting to you all. We are thankful for your sacrifice and dedication to keep the Masquerade safe in his city, as well as those who could not be here tonight. As a gesture of goodwill, he has had blood-wine flown in from France to be shared with you on Christmas Eve.” She smiled as another round of applause followed.

Mike busied himself behind the counter serving drinks.

“Are there any who desire to entertain tonight?” she asked, her bright eyes glancing around the crowd. I hesitantly raised my hand and she turned to me. “Our youngest one has a gift to share with us. How very precious!”

“It’s just a poem, of sorts.” I shrugged as I fetched the slip of paper from my purse, smiling self-consciously. The spotlight was on me. Would it turn into the searing light of shame? “It’s a simple thing, really. It’s another take on *The Night Before Christmas*. It’s called *The Night Before Christmas for Kindred*.”

I unfolded the paper and began to read. Heads tilted and everyone listened. I got a laugh at the right spots, thankfully. At one point Harrison muttered “A Rose with her first work of art...” Valerie nodded in response, smiling.

The Night Before Christmas, for Kindred

‘Twas the night before Christmas, in mid-winter time,
Not a creature was stirring, not even the kine;
Our lives were displayed by Elysium with care,
In hopes that our Prince soon would be there;

The Malkavians were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of foreign suns danced in their heads;
My ghoul in her evening wear, and I in my dress,
Were all dressed up in our Sunday best.

When out on the street there arose such a roar,
I sprang from my chair and ran to the door.
Through Lord Stafford’s I flew down the stairs,
The Kindred behind me still unawares.

The moon on the snow gave a luster so keen,
I thought for a moment this must be a dream.
When what to my wondering eyes be displayed?
An exquisite stretch limo, with a long motorcade.

With Miss Gray driving in beauty and lace,
I knew in a moment it must be his Grace!
More rapid than eagles his faithful they came,
And he whistled and shouted, and called them by name;

“Now, Chase! Now, White! Now, Reynolds and Timms!
On, Moore! On Splasky! On all Primogen!
Now Browning! Now, Robertson! Now whips one and all!
On Smith! Now dash away! Dash away all!”

As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane flee,
They whisked ’round the building, all smiling with glee.
So up to the fire escape the coursers they flew,
With a load full of blessings, Prince Alexander too.

And then, in a twinkling, we ran up the stairs,
Cursing and swearing to be the first there.

As I reached the stair top, and was turning around,
Through VIP entrance, his Grace came with a bound.

He was dressed impeccably, from his head to his toes,
As he glanced at the Kindred, expectation arose.
A bundle of blessings he had flung on his back,
Our needs he provided, for nothing we lacked.

His eyes – how they twinkled! How ivory his cheeks!
Any who displease him truly are up the creek!
His demeanor was calm, his expression was cool,
What a present his visit on this Christmas Yule!

A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Told me not to worry; I'm already dead!
He spoke to us all, and went straight to his work,
We gathered to listen, like Scots in a kirk.

Wisdom and knowledge, he gave to us all,
To strengthen and protect us, lest we should fall.
His countenance was radiant, his words did inspire,
To Clan, Sect and Kin, one and all, vampire.

And laying his finger aside of his nose,
Giving a nod, to the fire escape he arose;
He sprang to his limo, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.

But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
“Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good-night!”

When it was done there was a scattering of applause and murmurs of “well done” and “very nice” along with nods of support. Helen smiled with approval and clapped along with the rest. “May I have a copy of your poem so that I may share it with the Prince?” she asked. “I’m sure he will like it.”

“Certainly, ma’am,” I replied and handed the folded paper up to the front. I started to say something then I realized better and clamped my mouth shut. But the action was not unnoticed and she called me on it.

“You would speak? Please Patricia, have no fear. What is on your mind?”

“I am hesitant to speak but yes, there is something on my mind. Are there any neonates here besides Daniel and myself?” I glanced around the room. Bindle glowered at me but gave a slow nod. There was no other response. “I was concerned about this. Several others have spoken to me. The reason they are not here is because they have been ridiculed to the point of being afraid to come lest they continue to be objects of derision. I myself almost did not come tonight. And if

they do not come, how will they learn to interact with the community in a positive way?" I was careful not to mention the source of the harassment, but evidently this was already well known.

"Har-ris-on?" Helen said the name in a way a parent might who has caught a child stealing cookies. "You know better than to play with toys until you break them. This has happened before."

"My sincere apologies My Lady," Harrison bowed contritely before the Seneschal. "My zeal in correction has been taken in the wrong way. I assure you I will be more careful in considering the sensitivities of others." Helen nodded wisely and turned back to me.

"You were very brave to bring this matter to my attention. We share your concern that all recognized Kindred should feel welcome here." I breathed a sigh of relief and Amalthea beamed at me like I had just scored the winning touchdown at the Super Bowl.

Mike Miller performed some stand-up comedy after that, telling mortifying tales of humiliation while juggling bottles and pouring from them in an astounding act of balance and timing. Valerie did some interpretive dance which held us all spellbound. Harrison took a seat at the piano and amazed us with his vocal and musical skills. The evening was a success with one small exception, but I had one more thing to do.

I went over to one of the desks and logged into the BBS. Clicking on status, I scrolled down to where the Toreadors were listed. Patricia Heron—TATTLETALE, poet, recognized. On the one night I did something good for a change, Harrison ruined it. I sighed and logged out. Amalthea and I left the party shortly afterwards. Perhaps the picking would stop, for myself and for others. I was glad for that, at least.

When we got home, I asked Amalthea to make a fire in the living room and wait for me while I went to assemble my thoughts. When I was ready, I went into the room and sat down in one of the chairs before the fireplace. “Amalthea, I greatly value your loyalty and friendship. You have done all I asked you to do, without one complaint. You were well behaved tonight in the company of strangers and you made me very proud. However, there is something that I need for you to understand.”

She looked like a whipped puppy, as if she had let me down. “Just... just listen. It’s not anything bad. You have not disappointed me in any way.” I shook my head and looked at her in compassion. “I just need for you to grasp the truth in what I am about to say. It’s important to me.” She nodded and I continued.

“You seem to look up to me and I’m honored that you do. You need to realize that I’m an incredibly flawed individual! I mess up frequently... I almost wasn’t recognized in court. I already owe a boon to Whip Haugen. You have no idea what it’s like to be a vampire. It seems like a good thing, but it’s really not!”

Her eyes popped open as she struggled to digest what I was saying.

“I don’t want you to put me on a pedestal, Amalthea, or to desire to be like me. In spite of my powers, it truly is a cursed existence! Why? Because I am separated from God! In the end, that’s all that matters, and I’ve been stripped of that opportunity. I’m separated from my humanity as well and all the basic, essential parts of life that I used to take for granted.” My grief came pouring out and we both began to cry.

“What will you do?” she asked as she grabbed some tissues from the side table and passed me one. I realized my blood was her heroin, and I could not in good conscience allow this to

continue forever. Our friendship was sick; while I valued it and thought the world of her, our relationship was twisted by chemical dependency. Like many things Kindred — false love, false powers, a dependence on blood which seemed to mock the blood Jesus shed, our relationship was something that would eventually have to end.

“I need to find a way to become human again... I don’t know if that is even possible, but it is the only hope I have left.”

“Will you ask me to leave?” she asked, her face crestfallen.

“Not yet. We still have a ways to travel together. But the time will come, and it may be soon. Ever since Little Tokyo, since I have become a part of this dark world, I have seen people die around me. Friends, people I trusted... people who were just victims of circumstance. Meg... Aurah... Sabiya... Benjamin.... I would never forgive myself if harm were to come to you, or worse, if you were Embraced to share my fate.”

We got up and hugged, still crying. I retired early that night, emotionally drained, not bothering to feed.

Chapter Fourteen: The Price of Knowledge and Status

The night following Christmas day I woke up with a plan. It was time to visit Primogen Timms. The rain from the day had stopped but I grabbed my rain jacket on the way out just in case. The university district was on the west end of town so I took the car. I pulled into the empty parking lot at Memorial Library; all the students were still gone for Christmas break. Good enough. I looked up at the four story building and ascended the wet concrete steps to the entrance way. The glass doors were locked. Peering through I saw no one attending the front reception desk.

I got the pass card out that Primogen Timms had given me the night of court. I slipped it through the reader and was rewarded by a small green light. Past the foyer a wide space opened up. A remarkable indoor park lay inside, with towering shelves of books rising four levels towards the glass skylight which ran down the center of the building. A small brook gurgled down throughout the lower level. I walked along a stone lined path to the center of the indoor park and sat at one of the benches there.

I was certain I had been noticed by the Tremere before I had even ascended the concrete steps. I wondered if the library used the same air circulation technology that was found in Arts Haven, to keep the humidity from getting to the books. So I waited.

And waited.

Several hours passed. There I was, in a foreign domain as an unannounced visitor. There was no burden of hospitality that needed to be observed, technically. It's not like they just sat around all evening waiting for visiting Kindred from other Clans to show up. I considered grabbing a book from one of the shelves on the lower level. It's not like they were being used. Instead I relaxed and considered my words, mentally rehearsing how I would present my inquiry to the Tremere.

Finally an open elevator began to descend from the top floor with an attendant. I stood and crossed over to where it eventually stopped. The man didn't speak at all and reminded me of Lurch from the Addams Family. Tall, thin and gaunt, he was probably deadly if the staves I had seen were any indication of Tremere power. They were the enigmatic keepers of "blood magic," and could do all sorts of horrific things. Khalid el-Mazri the Setite was immune to it, wherever he was, if he survived the fires.

We crossed a walkway across the dizzying heights of the pavilion. At the end of the walkway inset into the walls was a set of bound oak double doors. They opened of their own accord and we proceeded into an office within. Primogen Timms was seated behind a large desk filled with books and papers. He wore a silk paisley vest over his dress shirt and dark slacks. Lurch departed the way he had come.

“Greetings Miss Heron. I am curious as to what brings you to our sanctuary this evening. Please be seated.” I started to but my attention was drawn to an intricately carved cane that leaned against the side of his desk. It was *so* beautiful! The patterns and images along its sides were immaculate in their presentation, the jewel atop the haft perfect in its ruby symmetry. It was like the cane itself had encompassed my entire world leaving me with a warm, buzzy feeling all over.

Primogen Timms watched as I stared unresponsively at the cane. A smile grew across my face and I started to drool. I was going into reverie, and he smirked as he reached out for the artifact. “Pardon me,” he said as he placed the distraction behind the desk. “I had not intended to leave it out in plain view.”

I snapped out of it and wiped the spittle from my chin, embarrassed. He gestured to the simple wooden chair in front of the desk.

I pulled my raincoat underneath me as I sat down trying to compose myself. “Thank you for seeing me, Dr. Timms. I will get straight to the point as I know your time is valuable.” He nodded, hands clasped on the desk. “I wanted to know if you might have any knowledge of removing the Embrace and restoring humanity to a Kindred.”

He lifted his chin, then leaned back and regarded me. “So that’s what this is about.” He didn’t look surprised; perhaps I had not been the first to ever inquire about reversing the curse. “You

are asking the wrong question, Miss Heron,” he replied neutrally. “Yes, I could order my acolytes to spend thousands of man hours combing the archives on your behalf. And yes, I could cash in boons that are owed to me by various Tremere Primogen in other cities in order to get an answer for you. The question is not what I can do for you, but rather, what can you do for me in return? Even if such knowledge existed, it would be exceedingly rare and therefore require immense compensation, considering the nature of your request. I know you as an intelligent and talented Kindred, Miss Heron, but not terribly wise or prudent, considering that you already owe Whip Haugen a minor boon. Being new in the community and a neonate besides, you don’t really have much to offer me, do you? I assure you a poem would not suffice in the least.”

I nodded, understanding his position.

“I am not a betting man Miss Heron, but if I were, I would not bet on long shots.” He smiled a brief smile, not totally annoyed but not satisfied either. “So perhaps you could pay another visit when you actually had something... *quite* substantial to offer me in return.”

“You are of course, correct Primogen Timms. I shall do my utmost to acquire something more than quite substantial for you and your Clan before I request another audience.” That received a nod of satisfaction from him. Lurch reappeared at my left side.

We left the office and descended back to the main floor where I was left to leave the library of my own accord. This certainly threw a screw into the works, but no one ever said attaining the impossible would be easy. I pondered this new dilemma as I drove home that evening.

The next night I decided to take the Gangrel up on their offer and visit the park again. I felt very little motivation to make Elysium a rose garden of enjoyment as Valerie desired. Jasmine and the rest of Clan Gangrel struck me as level headed, not prone to the games the others played. I

arrived early in the evening and parked in the parking lot, then walked up the path that wound its way up the hill. A lone figure in the gazebo stood silhouetted against the light, staring out into the night. It looked like Daniel. He watched my approach and raised a hand when I arrived.

“Evening, ma’am,” he greeted me with a nod when I arrived.

“Hi Daniel. You can call me Patty if you like.” We both sat down on the wooden benches on the inside of the platform. “I’m sorry that you were mistreated in... in Stafford’s. If it’s any consolation, Harrison was called out by Ms. Gray after you left and they were told to go easier on us.”

He smiled a little bit, as though imagining how that went down. “Well, that’s dandy. I’m feeling a little bit like a fish out of water in more ways than one.”

I leaned forward. “That’s exactly the way I feel. It just seems crazy sometimes, the way they demand respect but have so little of it for others!”

“Yeah.” He leaned back.

“The sketch you drew of the alligators was very well done. I saw it on the wall with the other artworks.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. “That’s the first kind word about it I have received.” He scratched the back of his neck. “What brings you here?”

“Just the opportunity to talk without fear of repercussion, even with the concessions,” I answered.

“I would guess the fires of Little Tokyo made your escape more than just a walk in the park.”

Daniel seemed like someone I could relate to. I felt comfortable talking with him. “Yes, the Tzimisce there made things a little more complex.”

“Sabbat? The bastards!” He shook his head.

“So what brought you here? You’re sort of new, like me.”

“I’m here at the request of my sire. I’m used to the mountains of New Mexico – spent the last fifty years there, on the peaks. The eagles and animals got to know me.” He looked off into the distance in remembrance. “Then, the Chief—that’s my sire—asked me to come here to learn more of Kindred society. The humidity, rain and flat ground really rubs my fur the wrong way, aside from some of the elders. Patli is harsh but fair. He’s a straight shooter.”

“I can imagine!” I answered. He perked up a little and I saw that some people were approaching from the parking lot. Daniel stood as our conversation died down and waited for them to approach. His face wrinkled for just a moment before he sat down again.

“Company,” he said the word in a distasteful way. I sent a little blood to my eyes and realized it was Caleb and Bindle coming up the hill.

“Good evening,” Caleb chimed out, making a show of breathing the night air when he arrived.

Bindle sneered at me. I remained silent.

“What are you doing here?” Daniel asked quietly.

“We’re here to socialize of course.” Caleb checked his watch and then flipped his cell phone open and snapped it shut. “This seems to be the place to gather, hmm? Oh. *Good job* during the raid the other night.” His sarcasm was not hidden too well, but he could claim he was trying to compliment Daniel should he be questioned.

Bindle posed a question to himself. “What do you call a lupine and Kindred cross breed? A Lupid. That rhymes with stupid, Miss Heron. Perhaps you could start a poem with that. Hee hee!” he snickered, rasping. Why did all Nosferatu seem to have a grating voice?

Daniel looked past the taunting twits who just could not leave well enough alone. A smile flickered from him as two new individuals approached. Jasmine and Zeke. They would not suffer this to continue.

“Perhaps you should be moving along, gentlemen,” Daniel suggested as the new Gangrel arrived. The wind picked up and whipped across us with a gust. Everything was silent for a moment before I heard a crunch from the wood line.

Zeke’s eyes widened like he had seen a ghost. “*Run!*” Zeke yelled, as he and the others turned and sprinted towards the parking lot. I vaulted through the opening and joined them, pushing the blood to my muscles as I did. Howls echoed from the woods, sending shivers down my neck.

Daniel’s voice came from behind me. “I’ll delay them!”

Zeke turned his head briefly as he sprinted down the hill. “*Daniel no!*” But he kept running as Daniel took his stand. I turned as well and spotted two huge, furry shapes loping out from the trees. Each seemed as big as the gazebo itself. Muscles bunched on their tremendous limbs in strong knotted cords as they flew across the grass toward us. Claws the size of kitchen knives ripped up the turf behind them. Their lips were pulled back against snapping jaws revealing sets of pointed teeth easily bigger than a man’s head. Even more striking were their eyes: feral, wild, white and glaring wide in anger. I continued sprinting down the slope, my clothes and hair whipping behind me in resistance. The others had a head start and were nearing the parking lot. I heard the *lump-lump* of heavy footpads behind me, gaining.

Jasmine jumped into her jeep and tore out of the parking lot as Caleb and Bindle grabbed onto her vehicle and did nosedives into the back seat. Zeke had kicked his motorcycle into life and I leapt onto the seat behind him as he growled “Hold on!” and revved the throttle. I grabbed him for dear life as we burned rubber. The beast managed to slash at his back tire and I felt the bike sway as wheel argued with pavement. Sections of rubber and yellow sparks kicked out behind us as the werewolf finally gave up the chase, perhaps feeling its territory had been defended. I looked behind us and the one that had followed had ripped into a car, flipping it like a toy as it slashed through metal and glass.

“Daniel?” I asked as Zeke wrestled with the handlebars.

“He’s gone,” he shouted, shaking his head.

“Damn it!” I wanted to cry. I just hugged onto Zeke in despair, shaking. Hair fluttered in my face as we ground our way down the street. I tried to force myself to keep from falling apart. Two blocks down, he turned into an apartment complex and pulled out his cell.

“Mack? Zeke. There’s been an incident at the park. Daniel is toast. We’ll need a cleanup crew. Right. Give it fifteen minutes and they should be gone. Okay. We’ll be there.” He got off the bike. “We’ll need to report to the Sheriff’s office for debriefing.” He hit his keychain and walked over to a Mustang which beeped in response.

“Your vehicle was parked there?” he asked as we sped downtown in sparse traffic.

“Yes, it was the four door sedan.”

“It was probably trashed along with Caleb’s wheels. They can smell Kindred from miles away and anything can set them off. The Ventrue will take care of the repairs. Not good to bring in cars ripped open by claws.”

I called Amalthea and asked her to get another rental for us. After a short while we pulled into the parking lot for a high rise office building, checking in with a guard at the security booth first. “*Winfield Building*,” the sign read.

The lobby was opulent; high tinted glass walls allowed the night inside. Indirect lighting illuminated a large marble kiosk. Leather furniture was arranged in groups around the perimeter. Jasmine, Caleb, Bindle and Mack Lewis were there waiting by one of two special access elevators. Mack inserted a key into one, next to a call button.

We went up to the 5th floor and exited out into a wide office space. Mack led us into a back office and shut the door behind us. An armory hung along the entire back wall. Swords, Kevlar armor and some exotic-looking weaponry hung next to lighter caliber weapons and explosives.

We all sat down in chairs arranged around a polished oak desk. “Let me hear from the Deputies first,” Mack said as he slid into a chair, tipping back his cowboy hat. “What the hell exactly happened?”

Jasmine began the briefing. “Zeke and I arrived at the gazebo. Caleb and Bindle were just outside and Patty and Daniel were seated inside. The wind shifted and the lupines must have been at the tree line, because they gave no warning. Then we ran.”

“I could smell Miss Heron’s perfume from outside the gazebo,” Caleb added. I opened my mouth but said nothing, shaking my head. I had applied a small amount, but Daniel was not there to refute what he said.

Jasmine raised her finger. “But she was there before on her first night here and raised no response. On the other hand, Bindle was there, just outside the platform.” She gave Mack a knowing look.

Mack leaned forward. “You are aware, Mr. Jacobs, that your ability to mask your true form does not extend to lupines. That includes your scent.” I realized immediately the stench of his rotting, decaying, undead body might very well have sent the beasts into a rage. Everyone looked over at the Nosferatu.

Bindle blinked with his eyes wide. “Err, no I was not aware of that particular drawback.” He gulped. “I try to avoid lupines at all costs.”

Mack closed his eyes and rubbed his brows. “This is a massive screw up and I am going to have to make a report to the Prince on this tonight. Is there anything anyone else has to add?” He looked over at Zeke and me. “Patricia? Zeke?”

“Nothing to add, other than the fact that Daniel stayed behind of his own accord to slow them down, in spite of protests,” Zeke said. “His life should not be accounted to the others, as he had the chance to flee as well.”

“So it will not be a matter of the Sixth Tradition then?”

“No.”

Mack nodded with satisfaction before adding “Sorry for your loss, guys. Daniel had integrity. He showed it in the raid.” He looked over at me. “Patricia?”

Caleb was simmering there in his chair, regarding me coolly. I knew he was waiting for me to spill how they were treating Daniel, in violation of the Second Tradition. How I wanted to shoot him down the toilet of oblivion after he implied the entire fiasco was my fault! He sure had it coming! I pressed my lips together and looked away. “Nothing to add, Sheriff.”

“Very well. The park will be off limits for at least a week until a final decision is reached by the Prince. Any other directives will be communicated to your respective Primogen. You are dismissed.”

Zeke dropped me off at the house after that. I trudged to the door and shambled inside, my feelings finally coming to the surface. I managed to make it to the basement before coming completely undone. I shuddered and began to cry in great heaving sobs. *Why God? What is the matter with this world where the good are destroyed and evil is celebrated? What the hell is wrong with these horrible people?*

“*They’re dead already,*” came the unbidden thought.

Just like me. I cried some more and finally spent, went to rest early. It was a terrible, terrible night.

The vehicle was returned after a week’s time, so at least that was taken care of. Then, I was in Elysium one night listening to tales of exploits from various Kindred that had no doubt been told hundreds of times when Caleb entered. Greetings went around and he sat down with us, checking his cell phone as usual.

During a pause, he looked over at me and said “Miss Heron, would you be interested in an opportunity? If you do well I would put in a word for you with the Sheriff’s office. Perhaps you could become a Deputy.” I raised my eyebrows because the statement came out of nowhere. Maybe he was trying to show me a kindness after I didn’t turn him in for breaking the Second Tradition. “I have too many tasks to complete at the moment and this job is an easy one.”

I didn’t really care one way or another. However, maybe it could be a way to get a little status in the community... to show I was useful at something besides being sent away for crowd control. “What’s the task?”

“There are some missing monkeys at the New Monroe Zoo. Some suspect it may be related to Sabbat activity. The job is to search the cage and surroundings for clues. Some Roses are adept at this sort of thing, I understand.”

He must be referring to my ability to pick up emotional echoes, I thought. Something didn’t seem quite right about it though. I smelled a rat. Why would the Sabbat be involved with missing monkeys of all things? Still, this was my first opportunity to gain status. I felt I couldn’t pass it down. “Sure, I can do it for you.”

“It needs to be done tonight.”

“Well, I guess I better be going then.”

“I’ll meet you in the parking lot. You’ll need some equipment.”

Fortunately I had driven the car this evening rather than walking over. Caleb handed me a sawed off shotgun and holster from his trunk. “Better safe than sorry.”

I nodded and placed it in my own vehicle. I hoped I would not have to use it. I went back to the house and changed into a dark t-shirt and black jeans. The holster was slung back over my shoulders and then the shotgun went under my raincoat. I checked a map of the zoo online and got a general idea of where the monkey cages were.

I had never been in this part of town. It was opposite the wooded area of the park. Traffic was sparse but a fog was settling in which made me drive slowly. The visibility was perhaps 40 feet. I parked in a lot across from the zoo and walked over.

The fog there was settling even heavier. I considered my options as I watched a flashlight cut through the wet air past the gated entrance. If I tried to influence the guards with my blood and claimed that I had lost my purse in the zoo, they might just tell me to come back in normal operating hours and could identify me if anything went wrong. I didn't do daylight. Besides, I didn't lie anymore. The fog could be used to keep me hidden. Slip in and leave quietly. That seemed to be the best plan.

I waited until the light showed again. The guard was making his rounds every fifteen minutes. I followed the stone wall to the corner of the property and started climbing. Manicured nails were not meant for this kind of work. I could not see the top, but finally managed to make the ascent. It was about twenty five feet high, I guessed. The top was a foot wide with crumbly stone cement covering the surface. I looked out over the area and saw nothing but fog. Even my night vision wasn't doing anything for me. All right, I'd go along the wall until I noticed a landmark and make my way to the cages from there.

I walked carefully along the ledge, but my trust in the concrete was misplaced. One entire section gave way beneath my right foot, and I tottered precariously for a moment before slipping.

I reached out with a free hand and grabbed the ledge, but the ledge crumpled in my hand, and then I fell with a piece of rock in my hand.

Oof! That wasn't fun. Fortunately I was made of tougher stuff than I had been as a human. I picked myself up and sent some blood to the part of me that was bruised. Stretching, I walked downhill in a grassy area. But something wasn't right. I looked around seeing nothing but fog which surrounded me. Then out of the mists, a great pair of yellow eyes emerged.

The huge beast leapt at me, swiping with a claw and biting. I had no time to react besides lifting up my arm defensively. I felt my arm break as easily as a snapped pencil, then the creature threw me to the ground. The pain! I managed to roll and get back up.

It was a fully grown tiger; it was absolutely huge. Vampires produce a much stronger fight-or-flight response in animals than humans do but I was having my own right then. With a useless left arm there was no way I would be able to climb back up the wall. If I used the shotgun, the guards would be alerted and the mission would be over, besides killing an animal that would draw an investigation.

I felt trapped as panic began to overwhelm me. The tiger roared with an angry, low rumble as it circled and snarled, its eyes wide and focused on me. Chills down my spine combined with the distress from my wound; I realized I had only one choice left.

I forced the vitae into my limbs and started to run. It chased me. The slippery grass was causing me acceleration problems and the tiger managed to get in another swipe, turning me around as my coat and back were ripped open. I continued running blindly in pain into the thick darkness.

I managed to leave the tiger behind but by now I was bleeding heavily as the beast inside me stirred. It was not happy but my own focus was on survival. My fangs were now fully extended of their own accord. Primeval rage roared inside me, and I fought to retain control as I flew across the fog-shrouded grass.

After what seemed to be forever in a sheer stroke of luck the wire gate of the entrance to the tiger pit appeared out of the fog before me. I headed for it to find it locked with a padlock. In an act of desperation, I began hammering it with my one good fist, flinching as I fought to get out. The tiger had an easy time of following my flowing trail of blood and was now attacking my back and legs again. Still, I kept bashing the lock. Finally with a crack it fell apart into pieces. I fell through the gate and was turning to close the door behind me. That was the last thing I remembered before I passed out.

Fortunately, Patli Tizoc found me and saved my life. I didn't know it, but the zoo was also Gangrel territory, and he was most displeased that I had disrespected his domain. I had caused a major problem to put it mildly. The consequences could have led to a breach of the Masquerade had I been discovered by zoo workers.

Patli placated the tiger, Lacy, and carried my broken body to a secure location. He was about to break it some more. I'm thankful I was unconscious because he literally sawed me in half at the waist. Daniel had said he was harsh but fair; I guess this was the harsh part. How I was kept alive during this gruesome surgery, I don't know. He then had my severed body dumped into a burlap bag and delivered to the home of Valerie Moore.

Chapter Fifteen: Apologies

I awoke in a bedroom, the covers drawn up over my chest. An intense, stinging pain from my waist reminded me of what happened at the zoo, and then I noticed the missing limbs through half-closed eyes. Where my hips and legs should be the bedcover was flat. I winced and that alone hurt. Gently, carefully, I pulled myself up on the bed a little with my elbows until sharp stabs reminded me I should try to be still. Aside from that the beast inside was jumping around, hungry for blood. Giving up and trying to ignore the mongoose as I called it, I looked around the room.

Beige patterned wallpaper covered the lower half of the walls. Thick drapes hid what I supposed were windows. To my left and right were nightstands and a medium sized TV stood on a cart on the opposite wall. Then the doorknob turned and Valerie came in, her painted face marred by anger behind a cold, placid exterior. She looked at me and walked around the bed silently with a brown paper tote bag, the type used when shopping. I decided to shut the hell up, remembering what she told me last time about attempting to defend myself.

She retrieved a donor's blood bag from the tote and flung it towards me on the bed, then turned away from me and opened the drapes by the window. Looking out into the night, she said quietly "Do you realize what you have done?"

I waited a moment for her to continue, and when she did not I ventured, "Probably not all of it. I know I screwed up." I left the blood alone, for now.

She nodded a little, still facing the window. "You should be dead three times over now – once from the tiger, once from Patli and once from me." She waited a little and then fetched some more ammunition from the bag. "You made the news, you know." She drew a newspaper from

the bag and let the bag drop empty on the floor. The paper joined the blood bag on my bedspread. I reached for it and opened it to the front page.

TIGER FEASTS ON ESCAPED MONKEYS

Some monkeys at the New Monroe Zoo found out the hard way not to play with a tiger's tail. After escaping from their enclosure, curiosity got the best of them when they decided to explore the open space habitat for the top predator. When staff found them, all that was left was their blood on the tiger's fur. Both monkey and tiger exhibit will be closed while zoo management conducts a safety review. We managed to speak to the park's director [story continued on page 11]

"Do you realize what you have done to me?" she asked as her voice rose in pitch and volume. Now she was warming up, her hands balling up into fists. "I had to answer to Patli for what you have done. *I* had to apologize for your feckless... stupid... ignorant... foolish... Tradition breaking actions! Our entire Clan is in the crapper now thanks to you! *I* had to arrange for your ghoul to be taken care of. *I* had to arrange the newspaper article to cover for your idiocy, and *I am having to take care of you now!*" She grabbed the drape and squeezed it, shaking before forcing herself to calm down.

She spun slowly and faced me, still livid but under dubious control. "Do you know I had to go to an execution the night you were at the zoo?" She nodded at me, staring. "Damned *Mike*, may his soul rot in Gehenna, blabbed all about himself to his mortal sex plaything. She in turn told her girlfriend and all three of them were beheaded in a specially convened court which Prince Alexander had to take care of *personally!*"

Oh crap. No wonder she was in such a bad mood. She continued her ranting. “Why am I surrounded by such fools? Why can’t just I send them away when they arrive? Must I bear the burdens of ill-gotten inbreds that don’t understand *six simple rules*?”

Finally she turned back to me. “As for you, you are under house arrest until such time as you have recovered. Your regeneration should take about four weeks. Your blood has already been taken and will be delivered to your ghoul once a week. As a result of your escapade, you now owe a life boon to Clan Gangrel. I hope you choke on your weighty debt and die as a result!”

“For whatever its worth, I’m sorry,” I whispered. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.

“It’s not worth much!” she retorted and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Whew. That was... intense... and I was screwed. I had broken the Second Tradition by causing a scene in the Gangrel domain. I was in the zoo, without permission, and had interfered with their operations. It didn’t matter that I was trying to help the Sheriff’s office, or that I didn’t know the zoo was Gangrel territory. I was trying to obtain a little status, but the entire affair had backfired.

I drank the blood that had been left behind. My fangs grew out before I even reached for the bag. That settled my own blood down and I sent some of it to my waist where it itched for a while.

If I wasn’t executed, I would surely become a pariah. Depression settled over me like the fog of that fateful night, along with the anxiety of what unknown rejection and shunning lay ahead.

Dear God, please forgive me for my sin. Deliver me from this situation let me find a way to return to you. Help me, please! There were no answers to the cold, dead prayers coming from my cold, still, undead heart. I finally broke down into tears and cried late into the night, the pain from my sobs adding to my remorse.

The next evening I began to consider my situation more objectively. There was nothing I could do about the past now, aside from get better and maybe look at a way to pay back the Gangrel, little by little. I doubted I would ever save one of their lives; such opportunities were rare and even then, what could I do? Warn one of them about an incorrect use of punctuation?

I managed to turn my torso enough to open the nightstand and found the remote control, a legal pad and a pen. I retrieved them, settled in for my forced stay and started to write. Valerie came in on a nightly basis to check on me, and although she greeted me mostly with silence, she seemed to seethe a little bit less. She also brought blood and checked on my small, thin legs which were beginning to grow out. After a week, she brought me news as well.

“You have had numerous inquiries since you’ve dragged our name through the mud. Kanini and Amalthea have both called your cell phone, as well as Gabriel.”

Oh no. The last thing I wanted was for Gabe to be drawn into this mess. I suppose he would have found out one way or another. “What did you tell them?”

“That you would be unavailable until you were released from my custody and no longer a threat to the Masquerade.”

“I see. Thank you for taking their calls. What will happen at the end of the four weeks?”

“I’ll take you to Stafford’s and present you to the community in Elysium. News of your escapade quickly spread through the city so you’ll probably have an audience. I *expect* you to show the proper contriteness and submission in all your dealings there, and elsewhere.” She glared at me with the word ‘expect.’

So I was not to be executed. “I shall follow your directions,” I told her. “I... I wrote a poem, expressing my sorrow over what occurred. I was considering a public reading as a form of apology.”

Valerie extended her hand and I could not reach so I left it on the edge of the bed, halfway down. I expected criticism but she only read through the words, hiding her reactions. “It’s a start,” she finally stated when she had finished. “I’ll contact Patli and make the necessary arrangements. Make no mistake Patricia, this will make no dent in your life boon whatsoever. You’ll be paying \$10,000 back in pennies. You are on the very edge, status-wise. If there are any more screw ups, I’ll disavow you and ask the Prince to take your head.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered quietly. She left me alone with the quiet room and I wrote some more.

The four weeks passed slowly. I was always unimpressed with TV network programming, more so now with the reality craze of 2006. I tweaked my poetry a little and satisfied, made a final copy. My legs finally grew to normal size in the third week, with help from the nightly feedings and my regular blood use. I was able to get up and walk around now, and often spent the nights reclining in a chair listening to a radio or watching the news.

The night of my public apology arrived. Valerie came into the room with the nice little black dress from my closet at home as well as some shoes, panties, hose, my purse and cell phone.

“Get ready,” she said dropping them all on the bed. “We leave in 45 minutes.”

I did. We drove over to Stafford’s. The silence inside her luxury sports car added to my unease.

We were greeted by the door ghouls and I followed Valerie up the stairs. She was showered with praise and lavished with affection upon entering, along with a few ‘I’m so sorry about what happened’ and other statements of sympathy.

Harrison naturally had to rub it in. “You really shouldn’t play with tigers.” I swear his smile spoke volumes from his malevolent heart.

“Evening, Mr. Smith,” I responded, averting my eyes. Mercifully, that encounter did not last long. I greeted the assembled Kindred in the proper order of status and got some cool nods. It seemed as if all the power players were here tonight; the upstairs space was standing room only. Kanini was there and she whispered in my ear that she wanted to meet with me later. I nodded and Valerie stepped up on the small stage next to the piano.

“As you all know, recently there was a transgression of the Second Tradition which was committed by my Clanmate, Patricia Heron. She is here tonight to make her apologies.”

I ascended the platform as Valerie stepped down. Looking out into the audience I saw various responses. Some looked dubious, others calm, still others wondering what I would say. “I suppose things like this are never easy,” I began. “However my actions have brought great distress and disrespect upon Clan Gangrel and my own. I most deeply and humbly apologize. I’ve written a poem expressing my heartfelt sorrow over the events that occurred that night.” I had memorized it but withdrew the paper anyhow in the event I should have a lapse. It would not be good to forget the words of my apology. The lights dimmed and stage lights warmed from the ceiling. I noticed Harrison working the dimmer switches near the entrance before I seemingly stood alone on that small stage, speaking out to the audience.

A Tale of Lament

By Patricia Ann Heron

(with thanks to Edgar Allen Poe)

One fog-filled night I sat apart, not knowing that my breathless heart,
Would willfully weep a great and heavy sigh,
Whilst I trod to take my place, I slightly quickened my lowly pace,
I knew only that I must try, to fulfill my duty lest I die.
“Duty bound,” I whispered, “I must comply -
To do my duty, lest I die.”

I looked out, as if into a fog-filled night, squinting to see what lay ahead, with determination and resolve impressed upon my features.

I crouched there in the murky soup awaiting time to recoup,
A fraction of acceptability.
Little though, was I to know, the velvet curtains soon would draw closed,
And loves last lingering would be lost – lost to days of yore.
Oh would that things could be the way they were before!
It’s all lost to days of yore.

My face melted into despair and I clasped my hands to my chest yearning for intercession.

I glanced up over the high spiked gate, waiting the time that I must wait,
Then scabbled scaling skywards towards the wall.
Once atop the granite tower, I paused peering, squinting downwards.
Looking o’er the vast expanse, I saw nothing that should cause distress.

The fog itself was no distress; it hid me in its soft caress.

There was nothing there; just emptiness.

As I deftly descended down, my handhold broke and with a frown,

I struggled with the hold as it tore free.

Swiftly sailing up to meet me, came the ground and oh, how sweetly

Did my body rush to embrace that plain of earth,

Slowly crumpling did my body greet the earth,

This just the beginning of my dearth.

Once inside I was now free, to meet my goal, to go and see

The missing monkeys I'd been tasked to find.

Just a touch to cage and door, my mind illumined, then once more,

All would be finished, my burden done, my chore complete

That's all I wanted – to have my chore complete.

The ground then rumbled, trembling, beneath my feet.

I looked to the ground, then up, my black-lined eyes widened dramatically in fear.

The largest eyes you'd ever seen then pounced on me, I held my scream,

And pulled my lifeless limb from 'neath its jaws.

Blood beckoned burning from my bones, my speed increased, my senses honed,

That thick, warm fog that hid me, that welcomed me, was now my foe.

It curtained me, enveloped me, ensnared me, that nameless foe,
Where exit lay I did not know.

I ran blindly, groping, seeking, refuge from pursuing beastling,
Away from razor claws and baited breath.

Then from the fog a silhouette, a gated entrance I had met,
As I leapt upon caged doors, with a padlock it was held fast,
Escape... denied, from a simple padlock that held it fast.
Death's dark shadow had come at last.

*I gripped an invisible cage door rattling it, only to look down with disappointment to see the lock
firmly holding it shut.*

Renewed fury then did claim me, with one good fist I hammered vainly,
At the simple lock that held my key.
Stabbing, striking to be free, each bloody blow struck back at me,
Shredded, severed, sliced asunder, as beast into me tore.
'Til metal breached and crumpled, 'twas no more.
I hurled myself through open door.

I fell forward onto the front of the stage and continued, lying prone.

One would think I had survived, with renewed hope I sought to strive,
To make my way from tigers deadly den.
From the pan into the fire, I found that then I was now mired,
Powerless, prostrate, prone – I could not move.
No will was left for me to move.
A feeble joke for fate to prove.

I lay there empty, mute, alone, my body quiet like a stone,
As memories of times past did pass me by.
Then in sorrow, moveless, weeping, of my sin I was now reaping.
Loves last lingering had been lost, lost to days of yore.
Oh would that things could be the way they were before!
It's all lost to days of yore.

Slowly, a single tear formed in my eye. It accumulated and flowed down my cheek, until gathering, it dropped to the platform with a tiny drip. Then... silence.

I got up from the stage and a scattering of applause came just as the lights went up. Patli moved forward, nodding. “Your apology is accepted young lady.”

“Thank you, sir,” I replied. “However, I’m not quite finished yet.” I looked over to Harrison and he dimmed the lights again. “Daniel Montana sacrificed himself so that I and others could get away in the park. He spoke to me the last evening of his life and I have written a poem in remembrance. It’s called ‘Mountain Man.’”

Daniel Montana was a mountain man,
And a mountainous man he was,
The strength of his will, and the depth of his heart
Stood fast in the heavens above.

On the peaks he strode through moonlit troves,
On velvety indigo snow,
'Neath blinking starry skies, civilization he despised,
His love was for his abode.

*I swept my hand across the audience, describing the mountain snow, then allowed my eyes to
pan across a brilliant winter sky with wonder.*

O'er summit he'd roam, like an ambling stone,
Surveying all he could see.
Where eagles dare and foxes 'ware,
He was home in that aerie sea.

But one day as is often the way,
His life was about to change,
For his sire had come under midnight sun
Over the windy mountain range.

"Childe you've been free to stay and see
Fair nature unrefined.
But now explore some distant shores
And learn more of our kind."

So off he went with his pack and tent,
To the oceans far away.
He finally arrived and would there abide
In the city to make his stay.

The land was flat, the humidity moist,
It was a swampy, soupy mess.
Not pristine where the air was clean,
And his mountain soul could rest.

He met them all that night in the fall,
In Elysium fair and true,
Though some distained; still he refrained,
Keeping his peace anew.

To the trees in silent breeze,
Where crickets chirped their tune.

He would retreat, but soon did meet,
The bluest of blue moons.

They gathered there, in the park square,
Seeking some fair sport.
To put him down, to make him pay,
They were not the pleasing sort.

Upon the man they descended and
Abused him with words most fowl.
But all froze still, with a frightening chill,
At a cacophonous howl!

Eyes alarmed, they were disarmed,
The lupines were at hand.
"You get away, and I will stay,"
He turned to make his stand.

His nails grew, he snarled and through
The tree line came the beast!
It howled again and loped at him,
One man to fill the breach!

Then they engaged, both were enraged,

It was an awful sight.

Claw to claw and fang to fang,

They battled through the night!

The others ran, their selfish plan

Of evil turned awry.

No longer did they speak ill of he

Who for their sakes had died.

So when those new or green to you

A tempting target makes,

Remember when you were once green too

And correct for instructions' sake.

For it is not depravity, but to humanity

That we must erstwhile cling.

In truth we all have a part to play

In the grand scheme of things.

O'er summit he'd roam, like an ambling stone,

Surveying all he could see.

Where eagles dare and foxes 'ware,

He was home in that aerie sea.

When the lights went up I saw that Jasmine was crying. There was more light applause. Patli spoke again. “You honor our fallen Clanmate with your words. It is appreciated.”

A commotion erupted from the back. “She lies!” Caleb Titov stepped forward with Bindle, pointing an accusing finger. “We never used abusive words! Your version in no way represents the truth of what happened, deceiver!” The entire crowd paused a moment. It was my word versus theirs, and my word was worth nothing.

Patli turned to them, his eyes narrowed. “Really?” He looked back and forth between the two, who stood defiantly. He pursed his lips. “I heard a different story from the birds in the park.”

Now all turned back to the duo. Bindle rasped, “Our words were misconstrued, is all.” Rather than drive the nail in by quoting them word for word, I let well enough alone. It would get me in more trouble to confront them regardless of whether I was speaking truth and that was something I could not afford.

The crowd broke up and Patli ushered me into one of the back offices for a private chat. “Miss Heron, have you reached the potential for using the blood to gain advanced speeds?” he asked after he closed the door.

I realized I had on the last attempt in the basement. “Yes, sir, although only once in practice runs. I think I could do it again if I tried.”

“I want you to show me how you have accomplished this.”

“Certainly. If you could come by the house tomorrow night I can show you.” I gave him directions to the home Amalthea and I shared and he departed. It wasn’t like he was getting a brand new ability – he already knew about the quickening and that Toreadors had access to it. I was just sort of... helping him with his training. I thought about it and bit my lip as I exited the room. I sure didn’t want to let Gabe down. I had done enough already.

Most Kindred avoided me for the rest of the evening, pariah that I was. People were polite for the most part, but when I spoke, I received no more acknowledgement than a nod. I felt alone even in the midst of so many. I had just poured my heart and soul out on the stage and it counted for nothing.

On my way home I got a text from Kanini. She asked me to join her at the Daily Grind, which was open late. I replied and told her I would be there in a short bit.

I opened the door and found Kanini sitting in a booth along the side wall. The familiar spices and scents of the franchise greeted me. They were especially pungent with my heightened vampiric senses. I slid into the booth and ordered a house coffee to go, more to warm my hands with than anything else. After the coffee arrived, Kanini whispered, “Patty, can you help me? I have exhausted all my leads and still can’t find Malcolm. I brought some letters he wrote, and a locket he gave me.”

I listened to her but something was distracting me. I realized there was a cloying smell beneath the spices. I sent blood to my nose, careful to avoid the rest of my face and took a deep sniff. Masked by the spices was a horrible smell. It seemed somehow familiar but I could not place it. I frowned then turned my attention back to Kanini who was looking puzzled. “Oh, of course I can help you but not here. In fact I think we need to leave right now.”

“Why?”

“Call it intuition,” I replied as we got up from the table.

“You could have used a little intuition at the zoo,” she muttered. I looked down at the floor, flooded with hot shame. Kanini saw the pained expression on my face. “I’m so sorry, Patty. I didn’t mean it. Please forgive me.”

I could see that she was genuine and forced a smile. “It’s okay,” I replied, even though it hurt. I almost forgot to pay and leave a tip and went back to leave some money on the table.

We walked to my house and Amalthea greeted us. “Welcome back!” she exclaimed, and hesitated when she saw Kanini but gave me a big hug anyway which I returned.

“Thank you, Amalthea. This is Kanini – she’s safe.” Kanini was eyeing the house interior and it seemed her paranoia was about to return but she pressed on and entered anyway, scooting inside and quickly turning back around.

“I know you’re probably brimming with questions but I must ask for your patience a little while longer,” I told Amalthea as she collected our coats. “Kanini and I require some privacy in the living room for a while. Could you wait for me upstairs?”

“*Oui, madame.*” She nodded and hustled up the stairs smiling, clearly glad I was home again.

We sat down at the table and Kanini got out some letters and a locket. All of them were written by Malcolm, except for one which was a back and forth note written over time. “Is this your writing?” I asked pointing to the erratic script.

“Yes,” she whispered, concerned. “It usually looks better but when I write to him it comes out all

jagged.”

“I see. Well, let me try to find him again. There’s no guarantee this will work, you know.” She nodded and I placed my hands over the items spread out over the table. I tried to quiet my mind from all the things that had happened to me. Nothing happened. I picked up the locket and wrapped the chain around my hand. Then the flashbulb effect occurred and my vision changed as had happened previously.

I saw the same scene with Malcolm that was there before. I knew it would not last long so I tried to get a better look at the surroundings, turning this way and that with my perspective. Although I could not turn around, I could pan a little within the limits of my sight. The top of the elevator had an old fashioned dial that went down from 40. Also the make of the elevator was embedded into the polished steel frame near the dial. After a moment, the vision disappeared. Kanini was looking at me in a funny way. “How long was I out of it?”

“You were staring into space for about five minutes,” Kanini said.

I fetched a pen from my purse and quickly wrote down the new information on a yellow sticky pad.

“This is what you saw?” I nodded then explained the word and the dial.

“Thank you, Patty!”

“It’s quite all right, Kanini. I hope you find him.” I closed the door and went upstairs. Amalthea was brimming with questions and I answered all of them, but didn’t go into too much detail about the attack at the zoo. I just wanted the night to be over with.

Chapter Sixteen: Opportunity

Patli showed up at my house the next evening. I took him downstairs and showed him my catch-the-yardstick method. I also managed to elevate my speed on two occasions. He tried it without success, then turned to me, weathered hands clasped before his lips. “You’re not just sending blood to your muscles.”

“No,” I answered. “I think it’s different.”

“Explain.”

“I think somehow I’m able to send the blood to certain muscle groups, subconsciously.”

“So the key is to direct the blood more specifically.” He tried once more and was successful on the first attempt. He was a blur as he traversed the basement floor. His jacket flapped and snapped loudly behind him.

I smiled. “That’s it.”

Patli didn’t thank me or wish me a good evening. He simply placed a worn fedora on his head and departed quietly.

Part of my penance to Valerie was having to show up in Elysium four nights a week. I was not particularly keen on it. People put down my writing, they insulted me, they asked what new animals I was going to hurl myself at. If I gave a compliment it was rebuffed, if I made a comment it was ignored. The Gangrel for their part were at the very least respectful to me and did not join in with childish games that others played.

The nights proceeded with one boring stretch after another – listening to Kindred brag about the

past, spread gossip or lie about one another. I would lie in my own way by smiling at their cutting remarks and pretending to be interested when, in fact, I was repulsed.

One night, Sandra Martinez was going on about a subject near and dear to her heart: her favorite authors and why they suited her. She took a puff on her cigar and shook her short hair. I didn't join the conversation but listened to what she said as rain pattered on the roof of Elysium.

"Therefore, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is by far, hands down, the best author I have read in my wide experience," Whip Martinez concluded. She blew out smoke. The others all concurred – Valerie, Phillipi, Jasmine and Caleb, who had recently been promoted to Whip after Margaret Haugen left town.

"Oh, yes, I absolutely agree," Caleb nodded. "Well said Sandra." He smiled.

"A wonderfully delightful synopsis!" Valerie reclined catlike on one of the couches, as her dark hair flowed over the corner of the furniture.

"I can see your point, Whip Martinez," Jasmine nodded. It was Bootlicking 101 again.

Theoretically, exchanges of different ideas in Elysium were encouraged. In practice, that was far from the truth. Those with status were always right, and others who wished to "climb the pole" played their parts and awaited their turn. This dichotomy of how social position was determined irked me like an itch I could not reach.

A momentary pause settled over the room. Slowly, all eyes turned to me. I flipped my still wet ponytail behind me, the others unaware that my new habit was a way of "flipping off" my superiors without them being the wiser. Valerie flicked her kohl-lined eyes in my direction.

"Miss Heron, do you have an opinion on what Whip Martinez said?" The others looked slightly

bored, like they wanted to get my answer over with.

Wheels turned as I considered my response. Toe the line of political correctness, or speak truth? A vague hint of a smile creased my pink lips as I tapped my fingernail against my cheek. I turned and regarded first Valerie then Sandra, choosing my words carefully. “Although he was a master of mystery, Doyle hated Holmes. He hated the character so much that he purposefully penned his death. Holmes represented all that Doyle was not, and his popularity was something that annoyed him severely.”

The room grew deathly silent. Sandra sat forward on the edge of her seat and began verbally abusing me while Valerie shook her head no and Caleb frowned. “What the hell kind of writer are you, you idiot?” she screamed. Spittle flew from her mouth. “Only a fool would disrespect the great works of Arthur Conan Doyle! Your inadequacies no longer surprise me, bitch! You are not worthy to question a great author, not that you would be familiar with a grammar school education in literature.”

I slunk back into the couch and into anonymity again, while Sandra continued fuming. Oh, that felt so good! I did not dare tell her to “check it,” because she would have hit the roof, literally, and I didn’t want defacing the Elysium to be blamed on me. Truth had little to do with conversations here. Personally, I think Sandra just hated being shown up, whether or not I was right. Things calmed down again and Sandra eventually left just as the keeper, Dr. Robertson showed up.

Footsteps came up the stairs and we all turned to look at the door to see who else would arrive. A figure opened the door, well built and wrapped in a still-dripping raincoat. He turned and looked around the room, then at me.

“*Father!*” I exclaimed, leaping from my seat and running across the room to hurl myself into his arms.

“My little Bird...” he whispered into my ear. “My little Bird...” He held me close and rocked me back and forth. “Ah,” he looked up over my shoulder. “Kindred, good evening. Primogen Gabriel Montagne, formerly of Little Tokyo. I am here to request asylum while I am in town for two days.”

“Welcome Primogen Montagne, your request is noted,” Valerie answered. “I’m Valerie Moore. We spoke on the phone a few weeks ago. I shall inform the Prince of your arrival and request at our council meeting later tonight.”

I was crying now, the emotions from the past few weeks boiling over and overwhelming me as I held him in my arms. Then Valerie said “As you may have heard, your childe is in desperate need of direction. Perhaps you could... talk to her and help her out?”

I cried even harder at Valerie’s words.

“Thank you, Primogen Moore. Yes, I have heard and that’s exactly what I plan to do.” He buried his head in my hair and kissed me, whispering again. “Come, Bird. Let’s go somewhere and talk.” He took my hand after I put on my coat and waved to those in the room. We walked down the stairs together and out into the wet blackness of the night.

It took me a while to get myself together. Rain fell on us as we strolled back down Empire Avenue. It felt so *good* to be with someone who understood me, someone I trusted, at least to the extent that Gabe understood me and was on my side. “There, there Bird,” he whispered into my ear, his arm around my shoulders. “You are strong, childe. You have my blood and the blood of

our lineage in you. Let's go somewhere we are sure not to be overheard." He looked down the street at the few pedestrians and cars out that evening. The rain felt cleansing as it baptized my hair and ran down my back.

"I know just the place." Sepulcher was a nightclub that played loud music well into the night, and there was a place atop the roof sheltered from eyes and ears. The rain splished beneath our steps, reflecting the cold white light of streetlights and the signs of merchants.

We reached our destination and headed around to the back alley. It was empty. We ascended the side wall lithely to our perch in the shadows, a U-shaped section high on top of the roof.

Gabe opened with an easy topic. "Have you heard from anyone else in Little Tokyo since the purge?"

"No," I replied. "There was very little chance for escape. I... I saw Arts Haven being destroyed. There was a flame throwing tank."

Gabe grunted. "The others probably gathered there just before it was surrounded and torched."

"I should have been there as well. I was running away from one of the Vozhd. It was a horrible night."

"It's one of the reasons the Camarilla exists. To keep us and our secret safe, and to oppose others like the Tzimisce who would destroy the Masquerade and start a new world war. What happened after that?"

"The National Guard was everywhere, it seemed. Amalthea and I were assisted by a power blackout which helped us escape to the docks."

“I see. I sent Domi back after martial law was rescinded to scout and see what she could find. She found Nix Maruti who reported that no one was left.” He shifted to face me. “So what upsets you here, my young one? I have only sketchy reports. Start from the beginning.”

“It started out all right, I suppose. Upon our arrival we found a safe place to stay. I presented myself to Valerie and was eventually acknowledged by the Prince at court. One of our Clan, an elder, Harrison Smith, saw fit to shame and insult other neonates and myself for insignificant and imagined offenses until he was corrected by the Seneschal.”

“That’s Clan loyalty for you,” Gabe said dryly. “He always was an ass.”

I nodded. “That lasted for a little over a month. I wrote a Christmas poem that was well received, the one I sent you.”

“It was beautiful, just like you are.”

“Thank you, the casket was a wonderful present.”

“You’re welcome.”

“It was after that when things went wrong. Deputy Titov asked me to assist the Sheriff’s department with a minor assignment: investigating some missing monkeys at the zoo. He said that if I did well, he’d recommend me for a place on the force. I thought it might be a chance for me to make up for the poor reputation I had acquired thanks to Harrison Smith. Eager to help out, I gladly accepted.” I looked down and pulled wet hair from my eyes then continued.

“The thing was, the zoo was part of Gangrel domain even though the zoo itself was not marked on the city map of domains in the BBS.” Gabriel raised his chin understanding where this was leading. “The night was dense with fog and I had the unfortunate luck to fall off the crumbling

outer wall into the tiger habitat.”

“So that’s how the life boon came about.”

“Yes,” I whispered, shame dripping off me like the rain.

“It took me a month to recover, but after that nothing was the same.” I held my fingers up to my mouth and winced. “It seems like most here simply despise me now. I don’t know how I can go on like this. It’s so hard to suppress my feelings all the time... to paint a smile on my face and act like everything is okay, even though nothing could be further from the truth. And then... to owe a life boon besides!” I shook my head and tears brimmed in my eyes. “I tried to show remorse with an apology, but nothing seemed to work.”

“Oh, Bird,” Gabe scooted over and hugged me as I clenched his arms. “How I wish I could have prepared you for this. Our Clan in Little Tokyo was so very, very unique. What happened here makes me miss them all the more. The Machiavellian games that Kindred play in order to keep blame from their own hands can be cruel. This is nothing though, compared to the way things are in Europe.” He smiled a moment and leaned back, lifting my chin with a gentle finger. “But I have good news for you.”

I looked up and blinked. It didn’t seem like anything could help the situation I was in.

“As long as we live, Bird,” he smiled once more at his own play on words, “there are always new places to go, and new times to start over. There are new friends to make and new opportunities to remake one’s life. And we live for a *very* long time.”

I thought about this and began to smile. Gabe always knew just what to say. The heavy clouds that surrounded me seemed to lift, and I saw things from a different perspective. He was right.

As long as I had existence, there was hope. Hope that my debt might eventually be paid off. Hope that I might become human again and reconciled with God. What did I really care about the opinions of Kindred who cared for nothing aside from their precious status? I was glad I had not become like them. “Thank you, Father!” I exclaimed and threw my arms around him. He returned the hug with a great big squeeze.

“Well come then, Bird. Let’s go to your haven. I have yet to extend my greetings to Amalthea and the night grows long.”

We rose and made our way to the back side of the building and after checking descended down the side via the rain pipes. For the first time in the longest while, everything was right in the world again. After we left, a very wet and very cold black cat on the adjacent roof opened its eyes and arose, padding off into the night.

We sauntered towards the residential district holding hands. On the way we passed a little antique shop, KayDee’s, and the Daily Grind. Gabe paused shortly afterwards.

“What is it?” I asked after the sudden halt as my hand was pulled from behind. I could see he was in deep thought, looking left and right without moving, brows furrowed.

“Come,” he finally whispered and we accelerated our pace. When we were a distance away, he leaned into me and told me what had his attention. “That Daily Grind back there? Our old acquaintance, Khalid el-Mazri is there.”

“Khalid el-Mazri! The Setite!” I whispered back. That’s what had caused the horrible smell in the coffee shop. His snake oil permeated underneath the pungent spices and aromas. He had been in the process of expanding his cult of slithering serpents in Little Tokyo when the Tzimisce

attack occurred. He could very well be up to his old tricks.

“You had best inform Ms. Moore at your soonest opportunity. The Prince needs to be notified of his presence.” I nodded and we walked silently through the drizzle. Large trees filled with Spanish moss leaned over us, standing sentinels before the old, balconied houses behind them.

Shortly thereafter we arrived and walked up the familiar stone steps. Amalthea opened the door at our approach. “Good evening—ah! Monsieur Montagne, it is so good to see you again,” she reached out to hug us both. “Please come in out of the nasty wetness. Let me take your coats. The fire, she is prepared in the living room. I will fetch Mademoiselle’s private stock.” She busied herself with our coats and bustled about.

Gabe handed over his coat. “Dominae sends her greetings. We hope to be finished with Prince DeMark’s business in the next few months.”

As we were touring the house my cell phone went off. It was a text message from Kanini.

Found the building! Going to investigate tonight and find Malcolm. Thanks for your help.

I sent a quick reply wishing her luck, then turned back to Gabe. “What excellent news. Please send our love. Thank you, Amalthea. You are welcome to join us if you wish,” I smiled as Gabe and I went into the living room where a fire crackled and sparks flew up the chimney. Strangely, one of the vases on the mantelpiece had fallen and shattered. Small pieces of tinted glass were scattered about the base of the fireplace.

Amalthea’s voice came from the hallway. “The glass, I heard it break downstairs just before you arrived.” She came into the room with two snifters and a small bottle of blood-brand— the gift Valerie had given me for Christmas—a cork remover, dustpan and brush.

I puzzled over why the vase had fallen. It had sat there on the shelf since we moved in with no trouble at all. Gabe removed the cork from the bottle and smelled the liquid. “Nice vintage. So, what else has happened since the problem at the zoo and your recovery?”

Amalthea finished sweeping up the mess and returned to join us as I took the offered glass from Gabe. “Elder Tizoc asked me to provide him with assistance training with the quickening, and I was obliged to comply. It seems like the Gangrel are the only ones left in the city treating me in a respectful but cool manner.”

“They don’t want their life boon to go to waste should you decide to say screw it all and become a whelcher. That proficiency will go directly to the rest of Clan Gangrel here. Don’t mention your other abilities to them if you can help it.” He glanced at me then sipped his drink and closed his eyes in appreciation.

“I won’t then. But the thing that troubles me is that even though I gave it to them, it hasn’t affected the level of the boon at all. I thought our Clan talents were treasured secrets.”

“They are.” He frowned and thought about it. “Bird, a life boon is a difficult thing. The training you gave Patli does count, but it will take years of service to work it down to a blood boon. From there, you can whittle it down to more manageable levels and you will then be known as one of very few who have paid a great debt. That alone will cause your standing to increase greatly.”

“I see,” I replied, not too happy with the prognosis. I didn’t want to have to swallow shame for years. I took a sip of the vitae and my fangs grew out involuntarily. I smiled sheepishly as Gabe laughed.

Amalthea grinned mischievously. “What I want to know is when you are going to use your

Toreador wiles to get yourself a boyfriend,” Amalthea teased, giggling.

I shook my head at the unexpected comment. “Oh, you are *so* going to pay for that, girl!” Gabe and Amalthea laughed.

“Actually, I have thought about it.” I took another sip of vitae to help muster the courage to verbalize my thoughts. “I’ve decided I don’t want to get involved with a mortal. It would be wrong to get them caught up in this world we are involved in. Also, Mike, the Toreador Whip was recently executed due to that very same situation when it caused a breach of the Masquerade.” Gabe nodded.

“I was interested in Daniel. He was quiet and strong. Gentlemanly and yet driven. Talented. But he was Gangrel and I knew that we were just too different. His affinity was to the wild and my own to art. He died from a lupine attack.”

Gabe patted my hand, his eyes looking through me just as they did on the balcony of Arts Haven. It seemed like a lifetime ago. “There will be time. I’m glad you are not pushing it and making a mistake in the process.” He polished off the drink, then stood. “Heavenly. Is there anything I can do for you while I am here? I still have an appointment tonight and then I will have to leave early tomorrow evening.”

I thought about it. “Is there a safe house we could go to in case things get bad? I don’t expect another incident like what happened in Little Tokyo, but...”

“Done. My lawyer leased an apartment here in town just off campus in preparation for my visit. I’ll only be using it tonight, but the place is mine for six months. I’ll have a key sent to you. It pays to be prepared and I’m glad you are being prudent.”

Gabe gave me a tight hug and Amalthea a kiss on the forehead. He left after that and I realized how much I missed him. The time I spent with him reminded me of the good old days, even though it was only a few months. I called Valerie and made arrangements to meet her in Elysium to report the presence of Khalid.

The next evening everyone in Elysium blew off my greeting. It was becoming a regular thing, and I ignored it as always. I didn't suppose my 'disrespect' the previous evening with Sandra helped me much, but it sure did feel good to speak truth instead of bowing to egos as usually happened. Valerie was there waiting for me.

"Please excuse me for a moment," she told the others. She then rose gracefully before giving me a 'this better be good' look. I followed her into one of the side offices.

"What can I do for you, Miss Heron?" She reclined in a leather office chair and clicked her nails on the desk.

"I have strong reason to believe the Setite elder Khalid el-Mazri is in town, ma'am, at the Daily Grind." I felt like fidgeting but put that feeling down and tried to appear calm. I was doing the right thing by notifying them of a potential threat, wasn't I?

She regarded me, raising her eyebrows. "And did you see this Setite in public?"

"No, ma'am. His odor was present in the establishment."

"Had it occurred to you that a snake may have somehow gotten into the kitchen? We *are* in Louisiana, you realize."

"He ran a Daily Grind in Little Tokyo and his family owns the chain. I was uncertain what the scent was at first, but my sire positively identified him last night. He recommended I bring it to

your attention.”

She digested that with a silent O. “I see.” She drew a cell phone from her purse and hit a speed dial number, then smiled at me in that half friendly, half angry sort of way. “Yes, hello my loved one! Yes, and you? Excellent.” She listened a moment. “I have one of my Roses with me, and she reports that we have an independent in town.” I waited silently, not daring to use my enhanced senses to eavesdrop on the other half of the conversation. I gathered she was speaking to Helen Gray. “Yes, he’s a Setite according to the report.” She glanced at me, her face neutral, listening. “I see. All right. Kisses! Bye.” She snapped the cell phone shut and put it back into her purse.

“Your assumptions were correct Miss Heron, and you did the right thing this time. The Setite has already declared his presence to the Prince and has received protection in this city. But now that we are together I have another matter I would like to discuss with you.”

Her face became a little more serious and her posture became more upright. She was going into correction mode. “Your treatment of Whip Martinez last night is not what I am expecting from you. It was a severe break from your expected duties.” I was in for another lecture. I decided to agree with everything she said in the hopes that it would end sooner.

“You are lucky you did not end up with another boon to pay.”

“I apologize,” I said meekly, flipping my ponytail back.

“Save your apologies for Sandra. I expect you to make things right with her then next time you see her. I am guessing your outburst has something to do with the way you have been treated around here lately, is that so?”

“I’ve been... frustrated by that, yes.”

“Why do you think many here are giving you the cold shoulder?”

“They hate me because I broke the Second and have earned a life boon?”

She relaxed a little and her voice became softer as she leaned back. “No dear, they don’t hate you.” *Yeah, right.* “They are trying to teach you the value of conforming to our social structure. You have broken the community’s trust. Don’t you see? When you show adherence to our rules of status and etiquette for a period of time, say a year or so, then they will accept you and you can take your place among us as a valued member of our society.”

One thing I knew... *I didn’t want to be like them.* I realized Valerie was trying to be nice to me, to explain so that I would understand. But she didn’t understand my burning desire to be human again and to leave this all behind. “Thank you for the explanation.”

“Come, let’s go and bring the sweet fragrance of the Roses to others who are here tonight, hmm?” We sashayed out into the common room. Primogen Reynolds of Clan Ventrue had arrived as well as Harrison Smith.

Harrison rolled his eyes when he saw me enter the room. “How did your visit with your sire go last night, Patricia?” he teased. “Perhaps you were successful at breaking into yet *another* zoo and now you owe *another* life boon?”

I ignored the taunt and addressed his approach instead. “It must be... so very easy to make fun of neonates, Mr. Smith.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice.”

Valerie gave me an affirming look and the conversation then went into trivial things. I pretended to listen while something nagged at me. Khalid el-Mazri. What was he doing here? He couldn't have followed us; we were stowaways on a ship. Then it hit me. *The amulet! The magical Shield of Durer. What is the one thing that Clan Tremere salivates over? Magical artifacts. And this one granted immunity to blood magic! It would be a tempting morsel if ever there was one. If I could get it, that would be payment for disclosing the knowledge of how to become human again.*

But how in the world was I going to get it? The possibilities ran through my head. One: The guy never took it off. Forget about taking it by force. He was too powerful and besides, the magic helped protect him. Two: Forget about getting Amalthea to try to steal it while he sleeps in the day; he probably keeps cobras in his haven. Three: If I told Clan Tremere about it, they would probably just take it for themselves and I would be back to square one. Four: Set him on fire? No! *Think, Patty!*

What if I could get some serious dirt on him? I could blackmail the hell out of him and get him to hand it over willingly. That was the only answer. Put a video feed in the alley behind the Daily Grind? Perfect! Then I could try to catch him breaking the Masquerade, which would make his life forfeit. As the details filled themselves in I began to smile, and silently clenched one fist in triumph.

All these thoughts flashed through my head in a moment and I was brought back to reality by the smiling and disingenuous Harrison Smith, snapping his fingers at me. "Have you joined Clan Malkavian, Miss Heron?" he asked.

Phillipi shot him a disapproving look.

"No... no...." I replied, still preoccupied by my epiphany. "Forgive me please, I meant no

interruption.” I looked down to examine my lacquered nails.

“Well since you did interrupt and since I am curious, we would all like to know what exactly is more important than our discussion.”

I shook my head as I noticed ‘he’ had suddenly become ‘we.’ “With all due respect, I’d prefer not sharing that, sir,” I said with as much deference as I could muster.

“Oh yes you *will*, Miss Heron. You see, I am an elder. I am above you in status as is every person in this room... and I *demand* that you share with all of us what you were thinking just now!”

For once, I had him. “Why Mr. Smith, I am surprised at you,” I exclaimed. “The Prince himself has established that these Elysium grounds should be a haven for free thought and free speech. That you should think your own desire supersedes the word and will of the Prince seems displaced. Your status is not higher than the Prince.”

Now all eyes turned towards him.

“You little tart!” he sneered. “You think to quote the rules to *me*, one who has outlived you by centuries....”

“She’s right, Smith.” Reynolds’ interruption caused the room to quiet. “She takes liberties by comparing your status with the Prince.” He glanced at me and narrowed his eyes with disdain. “But she does have the right to keep her thoughts to herself here in Elysium.” He turned his Swedish features back towards Harrison.

The chess game had taken another twist. Then Harrison’s face lit up with childish glee. “Unless, of course, the request is made from a member of Clan Gangrel, to whom she owes *a life boon!*”

His head bobbed with those words. “Oh this shall be amusing indeed!” he quipped musically as he pulled out a cell phone and began to punch in numbers.

I wasn’t going to stick around for that. “Sorry to disappoint, but it’ll have to be business before pleasure tonight.” I gathered my coat at the rack. “I grow bored with these... unproductive games. Good night and have a pleasant evening.”

“You can be sure to read all about this in the next Harpy Report!” Harrison chided across the room at my back. “I have even more inspiration to let everyone know just what a fool you are!”

I sighed and headed down the steps. What had I ever done to deserve *him*? Perhaps not letting him get to me, or at least giving the appearance of it was the best way to handle things. I had more pressing concerns, namely getting my plan into motion. I walked back to the house, driven by thoughts racing through my head. I took a wide berth around the Daily Grind, just in case, and it started raining before I arrived, which didn’t concern me in the least.

“Amalthea, we have work to do,” I told her grinning like a Cheshire cat as she opened the door. She hopped into motion, filled with questions and eager to assist in any way. “We need to go downstairs for this.” We pulled up stools at the work counter and I grabbed a yellow legal pad to write on, which I handed to Amalthea.

“All right. The plan is to blackmail Khalid el-Mazri into handing over his precious magical amulet.”

Her mouth dropped open and she clapped her hands together. “*Mon dieu!*”

I nodded and filled in the details on my planned cloak-and-dagger operation, as the surveillance work from my cheating ex-boyfriend came in handy. “I’ll need for you to get hold of some

computer equipment tomorrow: two laptops, a pinhole camera, a wireless router, one 9 foot cable for the camera, a cordless drill and some diamond bits, an electrical splicer, five thumb drives and some black electrical tape. We'll also need a paper map of the city. I guess you can acquire most of these normally, but for the pinhole camera you'll need a specialty store. We'll have to use the yellow pages as I don't want any electronic trace to come back to us. Pay for everything in cash."

Amalthea scribbled furiously as I went through the list. "This, I can do."

I went through my mental check list and continued. "After tomorrow I'll need you to make a trip back to Little Tokyo. Remember that package I gave to you, the one I told you to keep safe?"

"Yes! It is still back in my father's house, behind the cupboard."

"Inside is a book and some papers that break the Masquerade. Tear the papers up and burn them, then flush them down the toilet. Bring the book back to me. It is very old, so be sure to take care of it. I need it intact."

She nodded enthusiastically. "May I ask, what is all this for?"

"It's for a higher cause," I replied. Khalid was in a bind. He didn't have a domain in the city where he was allowed to hunt. I don't think he would want to feed inside his business either. The alley behind the Daily Grind was another situation altogether. Maybe, if I was lucky, this would work out.

My thoughts were interrupted by a massive crash upstairs. We jumped and whirled around towards the staircase, then looked towards one another. I wondered if we had a burglar. I sent the blood to my ears and listened, placing a finger to my lips. Nothing.

We carefully crept up to the main floor. In the living room, we saw the cause: the massive etched mirror which had once hung on the wall had come down, hit the piano and sprayed broken glass across the room. I put my hands on my hips in frustration and stared at the mess, frowning.

Amalthea stared in shocked silence.

“Go upstairs and get some rest. You’ll need it tomorrow. I’ll clean this up,” I told her.

I dragged in the large trash can from outside and began to pick up the pieces. During a break I examined the wall the mirror had fallen from. All three bolts were still secure in their places.

They had not budged. Likewise, the frame in the mirror was still intact as well as the sockets for the bolts. So what had caused the mirror to fall? It was just like the vase the other night. I finished cleaning up and left the mirror frame and trash can outside for collection.

I tried to call Kanini to see how her search was going but got a recording that stated the number was not working. That was odd. I frowned and hoped she was alright.

Chapter Seventeen: Let’s Make a Deal

The next night Amalthea had gathered all the items on my list. An auto repair shop sat directly behind the Daily Grind, perfect for my needs. I wanted to install the surveillance system as soon as possible so that we didn’t miss any possible chances. We went there just before closing.

Amalthea was to be the decoy.

“Pardon me, sir, could you help me please?” Amalthea put on her helpless French blonde act like she was born to it. “The car you see, she is making a noise and I don’t know what to do.” She bit her nails and fretted.

The mechanic frowned. “Ma’am, I’m getting ready to close. Could you bring it back tomorrow?”

Amalthea twisted in place and turned on the charm. Perhaps some of it was due to my Toreador blood in her. “Could you not at least look at it? Please?” She stretched the word out.

“Okay. Let’s see what we got.” While the mechanic was under the hood, I slipped around the corner with my handy knapsack and hopped up into the top shelf of tires stored along the side wall.

When she started the engine, it was miraculously fixed. “You have done it! I don’t hear the knocking anymore! Thank you, I shall be sure to bring it back if I hear it again.”

I didn’t have to wait long after for the guy to lock up. As he went to the alarm I peered over the tires and focused on his movements. I sent the blood to my eyes and everything in the shop became much sharper and distinct. 13715. That was easy. After he left I got a marker out of the knapsack and wrote it down on my arm, then got to work after deactivating the alarm.

I stood on top of the row of tires and pushed up on the drop tile ceiling. Setting the computer equipment aside, I got out the drill. This would be the tricky part because there was no way of knowing if anyone was on the other side of the wall in the back alley. The thing made a horrible racket but I pushed into the mortar and soon had a hole through the wall, pointed down towards the alley behind the store. Hopefully the mechanic wouldn’t notice the few small pieces of paint and concrete. I found an electrical line along the wall above the ceiling and pulled it free, then used the crimper and an extension cord with the end cut off to splice my way in. I secured it all with electrical tape then began to set up the system.

The laptop powered up nicely. I connected the pinhole camera, checked to make sure it was working and set it to “night mode.” It showed a perfect view of the back alley behind the Daily Grind in shades of gray. I connected the wireless router so that Amalthea could come by during

the day and download the previous night's security feed. Finally I set the program for "timed record," two pictures every second in the evenings. I double checked everything to make sure it was working then set the laptop to mute so it wouldn't give itself away.

As I was doing the last check my cell phone started vibrating on my hip. It was Amalthea so I flipped it open. She wouldn't call me if it wasn't important.

"Thank God, Patty!" A crashing sound rumbled in the background. "The voice! It is back!"

"What?" I asked, not immediately making the connection. "Where are you?"

"At the house! Please come quickly!" There were more crashing sounds and I knew this was something serious.

"Keep yourself safe. I'll be there soon." I tried not to worry as I made sure the preparations were complete. I put the ceiling tiles back into place, grabbed my knapsack and after checking through the windows to make sure the coast was clear, entered the code, turned on the alarm and dashed out of the garage.

I made a beeline for the house, cutting across yards. I pushed the blood into my muscles as well, and the world sped by. If this was what I thought it might be, it was a disaster. Cillian Sass, the Nosferatu who nearly tricked Amalthea into becoming his hideous companion used to speak to her late in the night invisibly. He had allegedly been turned to dust after greeting the sun the morning after Little Tokyo burned. If he was back, it meant trouble for the city of New Monroe.

The door was unlocked when I reached the house and I heard glass breaking and noises crashing into the walls coming from inside. When I opened the door the temperature dropped sharply like the inside of a freezer. I found Amalthea in the hallway shivering and clutching herself as objects

swirled in the air about the living room. The chairs and side tables were overturned and the standing floor lamp had been knocked over giving the room a strange perspective with shadows on the walls. Cillian's voice grated through the air. "Liar!" A table lamp came flying out of the room in my direction and smashed into the wall behind me breaking into pieces. "Foul... wretched... cursed deceiver!"

I spoke calmly to Amalthea. "It's all right. We'll take care of it," I said trying to keep myself from flipping out. I had no experience at all with handling paranormal phenomena. I flinched and my muscles tensed as objects moved of their own accord. One thing I did know is that because it was Cillian, he could still break the Masquerade as he had done before. That made him a danger. I flipped out my cell phone but got no reception when I tried to hit the button for the Sheriff.

Poor Amalthea was hunched over, shivering. I had to get her out, so I wrapped one cold arm around her shoulders and walked her towards the front door. "Amalthea, I need you to do something. There is some kind of electrical interference going on. Take my cell, get away from the house and try to contact the Sheriff, Mack Lewis. His speed dial is 9. Tell him who you are and what is happening. He'll know what to do. I'll stay here and deal with this."

She nodded and scurried out.

The piano flipped over with a resounding crash, the wires voicing their prolonged displeasure. Books began to fly off of the shelf to join the rest of the debris orbiting the room in their macabre dance. Cillian's voice faded in and out. "You bound her after you promised you wouldn't!"

"I promised it would be her choice," I answered back. In response, the lights flickered eerily and frost began to condense on the floor and furnishings. I dodged the TV as it flew by. It crashed across the floor.

“Traacherous, backstabbing, deceitful, poisonous thorn!” He materialized briefly floating in the air and goosebumps rose across my skin as he looked even more horrendous than he had in life. His skin was burned, discolored, peeling and open. His appearance radiated a palpable rage, anger and revenge. I gasped in horror.

The flying objects, the freezing air and the materialization of Cillian Sass had me terrified, upset and jumpy. I dragged one of the overturned chairs into the corner of the room and hunkered down behind it, hoping to avoid more flying objects while I waited for help. The chandelier came crashing down as sparks flew from the torn wires. After several minutes which seemed like hours, I heard a vehicle pull up out front and quickly exited the living room to open the door. Good. Mack and some others were piling out of a shiny black van. “In here,” I waved.

The Sheriff was accompanied by Derek Chase, Cameron Morrison, Caleb Titov, and Jasmine Ledyard. They all came into the living room at a rapid pace.

Mack turned to me and looked me straight in the eyes. “Wait in another room until we are finished. Do not under any circumstance open these doors. We are not to be disturbed.” He meant business so I nodded and went to wait in the kitchen.

Amalthea had probably been told to scam. I sat down at the table and listened to voices and crashing noises coming from the sitting room. Then a blue light flashed in the window. I went to see what it was. Five squad cars pulled up outside my house, lights blazing like the Fourth of July. It must have been a slow night for them. They surrounded the black van and officers piled out.

What was I to do? Mack told me not to interrupt them, but I couldn’t just let the police blow their operation wide open. I ran to the living room doors and yelled “Cops!” then went out the front

door, closing and locking it behind me as I went to stall the police. The officers ran up the stone walkway as I furiously scrambled trying to come up with an excuse to keep them out without lying.

“Everything is okay officers,” I smiled calmly. “Some furniture was... being moved and it sort of dropped, is all.” Dang nosy neighbors! Then more crashing noises came from behind me and I turned back, my hopes dimming.

“Probable cause!” A thick-shouldered cop yelled and they all surged past me towards the front door, the Flight of the Valkyries practically playing along with them.

The door opened and they were met by Cameron Morrison, smirking like one of the Three Musketeers who has the upper hand. His arched eyes widened and got a little brighter, as if a light were shining on them. “This is a false alarm,” he told them quietly, confidently. They all just paused and looked up at him. Oh my goodness he was messing with their heads! “There is nothing wrong here,” he continued. The officers nodded their heads silently. “You need to call dispatch and let them know everything is all right.” The light faded from his eyes and they all turned around and headed back to their squad cars.

“Evenin’ ma’am,” one of them tipped his hat to me as he left. I looked back at Cameron in amazement. His smile flickered above that thin, pointed beard. He held the door for me and I went back inside the house. The group was just exiting the sitting room as I entered.

“He’s toast,” Mack tipped his cowboy hat up on his head as we met in the hallway. Caleb wiped a hand across his forehead. Jasmine looked weary but gave me a smile and a pat on the arm.

“Thank you Sheriff and thank you all.”

“Not a problem when it comes to the First. That’s what we are here for.” Mack hitched his thumbs into his belt loops.

“Could one of you call my phone? Amalthea needs to know it’s okay to come back now.”

“Business first,” Mack stated. “Both of you have to come in for a debriefing. I have to write up a report. We’ll pick her up on the way.” We did just that and proceeded to the Winfield Building in the heart of New Monroe to answer questions in the Sheriff’s office. Mack inserted a key into the wall next to a call button and we waited for a short while.

“What’s the button for?”

“To call us if we are needed,” he replied quietly. The dial rotated down and the elevator opened in its stainless steel frame. We entered and took the lift up to the 5th floor.

We went straight to his office, the one with the weapons and armor arranged on the walls. Mack and the others sat down. “I think I’d like to speak with the ghoul first, before we hear what you have to say if you don’t mind, Miss Heron. Jasmine, please escort her to your office.”

I gave Amalthea a confident assurance. “Just tell them the truth and it will all be fine.” I left with Jasmine and found her office decorated in a tasteful if folksy way: a stuffed rattlesnake perched on her desk ready to strike; pictures of country music stars were displayed in glass on the paneled walls, including one signed by Johnny Cash. One frame held a sketch of Louisiana birds, drawn by Daniel.

“Think it will take long?” Jasmine asked.

“Not unless they go back in history too much, no. If he manifested for you, you know he was a breach of the First waiting to happen.” She nodded her head in agreement.

After a few minutes Derek Chase came to the open door, knocking. “We’re ready.”

Sheriff Lewis motioned for Amalthea to go with Jasmine as I entered. After I sat down, he began the questions. “Make sure you leave no details unmentioned. I’m speaking with the authority of the Prince. Now, when did the spirit first make his presence known here?”

“A vase fell off the shelf by itself when my sire, Gabe, came to visit. I now suspect it was Cillian, but that by itself was not concrete evidence. Later a mirror fell off the wall and shattered in the same room. The next time things started happening I had Amalthea call you. He manifested and confirmed his involvement.”

Mack swiveled in his chair. “Did you bring anything from Little Tokyo that could act as a focal object that he might use to find you?”

I shook my head. “Aside from Amalthea herself and our clothes, no. We stowed away on the Triad Continuum.”

“How did you know he was a threat to the Masquerade?”

“His appearance was enough, anyone could have seen or heard him, but even when he was alive he appeared to Amalthea unmasked. I was concerned he might reappear in a public place.”

“Why did his spirit follow you here?”

I thought about it. “I believe he was angry with me because I tricked him. Amalthea chose to go with me instead of stay with him in the burning city. He considered her his lover and property.”

Caleb leaned forward and interjected his own spin. “So because you angered him, he came to this city and threatened to break the Masquerade?”

I countered. “The last I knew, angering Kindred was not a breach of the Traditions.” Oh crap, I knew as soon as I’d said it that I sounded defensive.

Derek Chase stood and pointed a finger in my face. “You *will* show *respect* to the representatives of this office!”

They all looked at me. “Sorry,” I whispered, not really meaning it. I flipped my hair behind me. “I just disagree with your logic. If you piss me off, and I go do something stupid, you are not to blame for my....”

“Shut the hell up, Heron!” Mack cut me off, disgusted.

Derek sat back down and Caleb folded his arms, leering. Mack pressed his lips and rubbed his chin, not looking too pleased. “All right. Here’s what’s gonna happen. I’m putting a gag order on everything that went down tonight. You are not to discuss this with anyone without my personal consent. Also, should any other paranormal events occur, you are to call me at once.

Understood?”

“Yes, sir. For sake of reference, what should I say if someone of higher status like my Primogen asks about what happened?”

“They will be notified through the proper channels. Remember to follow my orders to the letter. We’ll be in touch if necessary.” I nodded. “Derek, have Jasmine drop them both off at Elysium then come back here. We need to have a meeting.”

“Right.” The debriefing was over and at least I was being released. We went down to Jasmine’s office and she was once again the taxi service. The rain had begun to fall and the wipers on her Jeep went back and forth. “Truckin’ the Time Away” came on the radio.

“Patty, I never had a chance to thank you for your memorial for Daniel. It touched me,” she said softly.

“It was the least I could do. And if there’s any way I could be of service to you, please let me know.”

“I will. I know you want to work on that life boon.”

We arrived at Stafford’s and she dropped us off. Scurrying inside, we were greeted by the doorman. “Amalthea, could you wait for me at the bar? I just want to run upstairs to see if Kanini is here tonight.” Her face fell and I had to reassure her. “It’s *not* you.” I leaned and whispered in her ear. “I’m concerned others might involve you to try to provoke me. Really. It’s okay – I’ll be right back.”

I hurried up the stairs to find Harrison Smith, Valerie Moore and Dr. Robertson there. “*Oh, it’s you again,*” Harrison looked up with a bored greeting.

“Good evening, Ms. Moore, Mr. Smith, Keeper. Sorry to interrupt you, have you seen Kanini tonight by chance?”

“Kanini? She’s gone with the wind, and good riddance! She was nothing but trouble.” Valerie shook her head.

“What do you mean?” Valerie reached over the coffee table and picked up a hand written note. It was written in a stilted, jagged pen.

Dear Friends,

I have found Malcolm and he is alive and well in Toronto! I leave tonight to be reunited

with my love. God speed to you all,

Kanini Korson, Clan Malkavian

It didn't seem to me to be like her to just take off. Her cell was turned off and furthermore, she had mentioned that she only used this form of handwriting when she was writing *to Malcolm*. What was going on? I read the note over again and looked at the paper. It was obviously a set up. I didn't dare attempt any blood use here in Elysium so I put it back on the coffee table. I wrinkled my lips to one side, riddled with anxiety.

Amalthea and I returned to the house that night by way of cab, rather than walking through the rain. The living room was still a mess, but I could take care of that later. I didn't want anything to go wrong with my plan after the work we put into it. I went over it with her one last time downstairs.

"Ok, you have the tickets for tomorrow, right?"

"*Oui.*"

"What is your main objective?"

"To return with the book intact."

"Right, and to destroy the papers that went along with it." She nodded confidently. "By the way, we've been ordered to not discuss what happened here tonight with Cillian. Not one word. That's what the Sheriff said. I was pleased with the way you have handled yourself through this mess."

"Thank you, but what if he returns? I've already been through so much and...."

"No.... No," I reassured her. "Sheriff Lewis told me Cillian was toast. He's gone for good."

Amalthea hugged me with relief. Tears slipped down her cheeks. “The nightmare is finally over,” she whispered.

I rewarded her that night with a feeding. Her eyelids fluttered as she drew cold blood from my wrist. I was bothered by her reaction to drinking my blood, although I had seen it many times before. I didn’t know if she would encounter obstacles in Little Tokyo that would prevent her from returning on schedule and didn’t want her to go into withdrawals while away.

I sent Amalthea upstairs to get some rest while I thought about what had happened that night. In retrospect, I made a realization. I remembered my last conversation with Cillian in Little Tokyo. He had been right, and I was wrong. It was morally wrong for me to bind Amalthea to myself, even as it was wrong for him. It didn’t matter that she was going through withdrawals. She would have eventually recovered and moved on. She probably would have thought I had died in the Arts Haven fire. Thought I had died? *I’m already dead.*

Kindred are not whoever we think we are, and our purpose is not justified by whatever noble excuse we make for ourselves. We are cold blooded predators and blood drinkers. I resolved that night to see things through and become human once more, even if it meant my demise. I was also determined to set Amalthea free, once and for all.

My concerns for Amalthea on her trip were for naught, for she came through with flying colors. While she was gone I received a package from Gabriel’s lawyer in the mail, with the spare key for the safe house and the address where it was located. My haven was public knowledge now and it was reassuring to know I had a place to go if it was needed.

When I awoke the night after Amalthea had returned I found a note left by my coffin. “It worked!” she had written in big letters on the page. I tried not to get my hopes up as I called her

down to join me.

She brought with her the old book on magical jewelry, the one I had acquired from Derrial Bleac in Little Tokyo and her portable laptop. “Wait until you see!” she exclaimed, hopping with excitement as she powered up her computer. She clicked on the surveillance footage and fast forwarded to the time stamp of her discovery. We both leaned forward to watch.

Images began to play on the screen. Khalid had come out from the back door of the shop into the alley at midnight with a teenager dressed in working clothes from the Daily Grind. The young man appeared to be spellbound as he stood unresponsive to his surroundings. Khalid then began a horrifying transformation, his body stretching and elongating as he metamorphosed into a massive 18 foot cobra. He leaned forward and his split tongue began to flick in and out, cutting the boy’s neck as he lapped up the blood before distending his jaws to encompass the boy’s neck. That alone might not qualify as a Masquerade breach, but a man passed by the end of the alley. He paused and looked in, then took off running like any sane person would. Khalid was in deep trouble.

“Amalthea,” I said, my eyes fastened to the screen, “get those thumb drives for me.” I watched the images again. Khalid had no clue he had been spotted. It would be a nasty surprise but one which could not be helped.

Amalthea came down and I began copying the incriminating evidence onto the portable thumb drives. “Here’s how we are going to work it,” I told her as we huddled together conspiring.

“Tomorrow night I need you to be stationed by the postal box in midtown. If you don’t hear from me by 8:30 pm sharp, you are to drop three thumb drives in packages addressed to Kindred at Lord Stafford’s and ready to be mailed. Then, you are to go to the Winfield Building and ring the

buzzer at the elevator. Deliver one more to the Sheriff or one of his Deputies.” She understood immediately what I had in mind.

“I’ll need you to cross state lines tomorrow and open a bank account with a safety deposit box where we will store the necklace if we’re successful. Now go get some sleep, sweetie. You’ll need it tomorrow.”

I retrieved the electronics from the auto repair shop in the early morning hours without complications. Rain was coming down in sheets and that made it easier as few people were out.

The next evening Amalthea waited for me upstairs. “Everything has been done as you asked,” she reported.

“Good. Oh, and there’s one last thing I need for you to do. If you don’t hear from me and have to make the deliveries, leave town and don’t come back. It will mean that things have gone south and you will not be hearing from me again.” My expression was serious.

Her jaw dropped open and she looked at me in disbelief.

“Now, there,” I told her as I gave her a hug. “I’m just trying to be a realist. If he would do all these other things there’s a possibility he will attempt to kill me in which case I will have very little chance. He’s an elder; he’s incredibly powerful. Even Gabe told me to avoid him. I think though that everything will be all right. Just be sure to do as I ask or my death will have been in vain.”

She sat up straight and kept herself together. “I shall not fail you.”

“That’s my girl. Now let’s get this done.” We had previously synchronized the time on our cell phones and I gave Khalid a little time to get ready and arrive at his shop. Amalthea departed and

I showered and dressed. At 8:10 pm, I grabbed my umbrella, raincoat, purse, and laptop case and headed towards the Daily Grind. I arrived at 8:20 with minutes to spare.

I called Amalthea to make certain both of our phones were working, then opened the door, making a copper bell ring as it swung.

The familiar scents and atmosphere of the place returned to me. Spices, coffees, teas and herbs surrounded me as well as that repulsive hint of snake oil, a horrible, musky smell. I approached the counter and the cashier tonight, a high school girl with red hair turned to help me. "What can I get for you?" she asked.

I couldn't help but smile. "Would you please inform Mr. el-Mazri that a guest is here inquiring about him? He'll want to see me; I'm an old acquaintance."

She disappeared into the back and shortly Khalid came out. He looked just like I remembered him with his ring of salt and pepper hair, bald pate and craggy eyes, which widened in recognition when he saw me. The beads of his amulet showed through his pressed shirt and my lips twitched in anticipation.

"Miss Heron! This is indeed a delightful revelation! I had thought you lost to the tragedy of times past." He came around the counter and shook my free hand. "Oh." He could feel my cool palm which told him of my change.

"Mr. el-Mazri, I am glad to have made it past that fate. However, another matter brings me here; something I thought would be of great importance to you. I patted the case of the laptop with my hand. "Perhaps we could step outside for some privacy?"

"My office is available," he countered graciously, extending his hand towards the back of the

store.

There was no way I was going into that snakes den. “Outside, please. My time is extremely limited.” *And so is yours.* I exited the front doors and went to the side of the store under the roof extension which protected us from the rain.

Curious, he followed. “It seems the Roses have gotten to you. Pity.”

I looked around to make sure no one was about then opened the case and flipped up the top. He looked on as I hit the play button. As the scene began to scroll in slow motion Khalid’s face changed dramatically from cordial pleasantry to outright rage. “*What is the meaning of this?*” he hissed as his face turned dark red.

Panic gripped me, but I was committed now. “You are hosed, Khalid,” I switched over to his first name. “That is, unless I make some phone calls in...” I checked my watch. “Less than five minutes.”

“You mean to blackmail me?” he whispered, his brows coming together as knots formed on his forehead. His pupils started to change shape.

“Yes, I learned *so much* from you back in Little Tokyo.” My delivery was businesslike and undaunted. “The kidnapping, the drugging, the forced blood bonds, the unlawful sirings.... I have need of your amulet, Khalid.” I added a little chutzpah to it by shifting my posture and holding out my hand. “Hand it over.” I stared him in the eyes.

His eyebrows arched as he became absolutely livid. “*Never!*”

“Not a problem whatsoever, then!” I replied cordially, snapping the lid and case shut. “See you around... maybe!” I smiled and walked out into the rain.

“Wait!” he snapped, hurrying to catch up to me. His whole body was shaking as he loosened his tie. “You’ll pay for this, you foul, scheming, duplicitous...” He could not even finish the sentence. With trembling hands he held out the necklace to me. I went to take it but his grip suddenly became like a vise and he pulled me towards him using the necklace as a tether. “You have no idea of the consequences you have unleashed!” He breathed words of malice only inches from my face. His tongue was starting to split and his eyes looked completely alien now, vertical slits against yellow corneas.

I felt weak and I nearly fainted right then from shock. Summoning up all the courage I had, I faced him off. “Things would not go well for you either, should something happen to me or should I fail to make this phone call. The clock is ticking.”

He dropped the necklace in my hands and turned to go, still shaking with fury. I walked briskly away, depositing the treasure into my jacket pocket. When I was past the corner and on a side street I got out my cell phone. “Amalthea, it worked! Meet me at the house.”

“I am so relieved. I’ll be there.”

Khalid raged as he circled around to the back side of the Daily Grind. *How dare she?* The tiny hole in the upper wall of the auto shop seemed to taunt him as it peered down, now glaringly evident. He jammed the key into the lock and turned it forcefully as he shoved the door out of the way.

Serishen Cagney was in the stock room along with Expert Falworth. They jumped up in alarm at both his sudden entrance as well as his countenance. Khalid glared at them with slit pupils. “Give

me a few minutes in the office to cool down,” he growled. “I’ll need to speak with you when I’m done. See that I am not disturbed.” With that, he went into the manager’s office and shut the door behind him.

Paperwork for the business lay neatly piled on the desk. Daily Grind operation binders lined the shelves and a three foot square safe sat bolted to the floor in the corner. Khalid sat down in the swivel chair to sort out his thoughts as he rubbed his lips with his fingers. The Shield of Durer was his most cherished possession, given to him as a gift by his Sire in the 1840s, just before he had met his final death. Not only did it have emotional value, it had protected him from being staked and the wretched Tremere several times. Everything had been going so well in New Monroe; the Prince had accepted his petition to remain thanks to his Camarilla connections. Now, Patricia Heron had shown up out of nowhere and seriously screwed everything up. To think he had once considered making her part of his elite cadre.

He’d seen it happen before. Whenever the Roses got their clutches on anyone, they immediately begin to manipulate those around them and become corrupted little bitches and bastards in order to score social points with their peers.

Now Khalid had to come up with a plan to destroy the damning evidence and get his family heirloom back. He puzzled over his predicament as he gradually calmed down. What were Patricia’s weaknesses? Moreover, what things did she consider to be of paramount importance?

Slowly, realization dawned on him. No, not things. Yes. This idea had real possibilities. Pieces began to fall into place and he knew it had a good chance of succeeding. First, he would need information and some help from his little family in New Monroe.

Khalid exited the office looking much better. His gait was no longer stressed, but peaceful. His

appearance had returned to normal. Seri and Expert stood, but he gestured for them to sit back down. He poked his head through the doorway to the kitchen. “Two empty cups with some lids, please. Also, we’ll need some privacy for 30 minutes. Thank you.”

He returned with the cups and sat down at the staff table. “I have some bad news for you. I’ve been compromised. Seri, you remember Patricia Heron from Little Tokyo? She has managed to acquire pictures of me breaking the Masquerade. Furthermore....” Khalid took a moment to verbalize his thoughts. “She has used this information to blackmail me and steal my necklace, which as you know is a priceless artifact. I can’t say I’m entirely without blame; it was my own lack of diligence that allowed her to get away with it.”

Seri leaned forward. “I’ll kill her.”

“No, Seri, we can’t do that.” Khalid smiled. “At least not yet. I have a plan, but it will mean sending you into possible danger. I would rather die than risk either of you harm, my cherished ones.”

Expert shook his head. “We’ll do it,” he answered, sharing a glance with Seri, who agreed.

Khalid’s craggy eyes beamed with fondness. “Your dedication and loyalty touches me. Very well. We’ll need to expand our family. More specifically, we’ll need muscle: police officers, martial arts instructors, anyone who is trained in physical coercion.”

Khalid bit his wrist and squeezed it as the dark vitae drained into the cups, staining the insides with deep, red, liquid compulsion.

I went back to the haven in a roundabout manner, making sure I was not followed. Amalthea

opened the door for me and I double bolted it shut, then went downstairs. There I removed the magical artifact from my jacket pocket. Its silvery surface gleamed in the fluorescent lighting.

“Ah, what is it?” Amalthea bent over to get a better look.

“A lot of heat,” I glanced at her. “On your way to the bank tomorrow, I want you to hire a moving company and get us to the safe house. Bribe them if you have to. Use the rest of the petty cash.”

We took pictures in the basement. I smiled holding up the amulet dangling between my fingers. Additionally I did some rubbings of its surface and took some very small scrapings which I deposited into clear, labeled food storage bags. I decided to wait until the following evening to visit Dr. Timms. That would give Amalthea time to get things done. I put the coffin back into the shipping crate and attached a latch on the inside I could reach to pop the top.

The next evening Amalthea informed me she had made arrangements for the move but they could not come until tomorrow morning. That was fine. We didn't have a whole lot aside from my coffin, the computers and our clothes. The lease on the house had been prepaid in full, so the fallout from the trashed sitting room could wait for another four months. I got ready for my visit with Primogen Timms. I picked out a black and gold patterned floral dress by Liv Miles and was soon driving over to Memorial Library in the crisp, cool air.

I arrived and slipped the pass card through the lock, where I then entered the deserted lobby. The same brook gurgled down the center of atrium, the same open architecture stretched up to the top of the roof. This time I did not have to wait long. Lurch came down on the platform silent and sullen as ever. I wished him a good evening but he did not respond. I wondered what Primogen Timms' reaction would be to my offer.

We whisked up to the top of the air conditioned building. Stars shined down through the skylight as we walked across the clear catwalk. The large, oak double doors opened of their own accord revealing Dr. Timms seated at his desk, dressed conservatively with dark dress slacks, buttoned white pressed shirt and vest. “Good evening Miss Heron, won’t you please sit down?” he offered. His expression was one of dubious skepticism. His acolyte left.

I got out the old, thick book Amalthea recovered and placed it on his desk. He reached over with an appraising eye and opened it, perusing the contents. He frowned a little, looking through the pages. “It’s certainly a rare find to be sure, but hardly enough to consider your request.” He shook his head smiling in derision.

“Turn to the bookmark,” I suggested.

Curious, he opened the pages to the silk ribbon and began to scan the contents with the accompanying woodcut. “Why, it’s the fabled Shield of Durer,” he stated recognizing it immediately. “A magical amulet lost centuries ago when the Germanic elder Durer the Fist was diablerized by his progeny.” He looked up at me and shook his head again. “You don’t expect me to believe....”

I allowed a wry smile as I took the photographs out and placed them on the desk before him. They were followed by the rubbings and scrapings I had taken the previous night. His eyes widened as disbelief turned into astonishment. He stood and snatched up the picture of me dangling the amulet between my fingers and smiling into the camera as his jaw dropped. “This is remarkable! You... you have it with you then?”

“I am not a fool, Dr. Timms. You will not see it until I get my information.”

He began to speak rapidly to himself in his excitement. “There are tests to be performed, experiments to be... why, Miss Heron,” he said as he resumed his seat while a grin spread across his face. “You are certainly full of surprises. We will begin work on your request immediately.” He paused. “But there is one small condition.”

There was always a catch. He knew he was getting a steal. “What might that be?”

“No one can know of our arrangement. No one. If any word of this leaks, all bets are off and I will deny most stringently any involvement with you.”

The Prince would be displeased to know the Tremere were dabbling with magic again, after his explicit ban. “I agree to your conditions.”

Timms stood. “I think that concludes our business. Don’t stop by until we call you. It would raise questions.” He began to tenderly gather the materials on the desk, his hands shaking. The doors opened and Lurch escorted me back to the atrium.

I returned home feeling triumphant; finally something had gone right. I would soon be getting the knowledge of how to reverse the Embrace. Then I could have hope for my future. Amalthea and I would be hidden tomorrow at father’s safe house. All that was left was the waiting.

Splasky flipped open the cell phone in his private alcove within the sewers of New Monroe. Blue light reflected off his mottled, wrinkled skin as he fixed his beady red eyes on the caller ID. Well that was interesting. The new Setite elder was already trying to establish connections here in the city. The snakes were not known for being the most reliable source of investment, but it might pay to hear what he had to say. “Yes?” he answered, knowing he already had the upper hand.

“Splasky, please,” Khalid spoke from his office in the Daily Grind. His soul was vexed by this neonate who had managed to get the goods on him. He knew he would have to act quickly to eliminate his rival, get his amulet back and find and destroy any evidence that was left.

“Speaking. What can I do for you this evening, my scaly, serpentine secessionist?” Nice touch.

“I am... it appears you already know. I happen to have come upon an opportunity which you would consider mutually beneficial.” Khalid tried to spin it.

Ha! He knew it. They always came crawling to his Clan whenever they were in need of information, usually in dire circumstances. “What is the nature of your proposal?” He would wait a while before applying the screws to this pitiful plaything.

“I require information on a Kindred of little interest and less importance. The Toreador neonate Patricia Heron.”

“What kind of information?”

“I need to locate her immediately, and find her possible haven.”

Splasky leaned back in his seat. This kind of negotiation was almost too easy. “Ah, you are mistaken with regards to her importance. She’s at the top of the hit parade for nearly every Kindred in the city. Everyone wants a piece of her to redress her numerous wrongs. You would have to get in line to get the goods on her.” He began punching in the information he would need into the terminal.

Khalid rubbed his bald pate. The stress of this evening was getting to him and time was of the essence. “Name your price.”

Splasky smiled. “For skipping ahead of everyone and getting the information without delay? A blood boon.”

“I’m not a fool, Splasky. A major and no more.”

“Two major boons.”

“One major boon from an elder is no small thing, Primogen.”

“The price stands at two major boons. I have already lowered the rate.”

There was a pause. “Bah! Done!”

“Miss Heron currently spends her days at a two story brick house on Myrtle Avenue. However, her sire recently paid a visit to the city. His lawyer rented out a duplex on the east side. Here are the addresses.” He rattled out the information.

“Anything else?”

“Yes. Be sure to register the boons in Elysium the next time you stop by. It wouldn’t pay to have someone with... information to get on your bad side.” The phone hung up with a click.

“Hahahaha!” Splasky laughed as he shut his cell. Being Nosferatu never got old.

The next evening when I woke up I pushed up on the lid and reached out to release the lever which held the top of the packing crate in place. The new apartment was dark. My extra clothes had been packed against the side of my coffin and used as cushions for the computers which were nestled in between. Good girl! Amalthea was not around which was a little odd, but perhaps

she had gone to get some food or was out getting necessities for the new location. Boxes were neatly stacked against the side wall and I familiarized myself with the new place. The apartment was two bedroom, two bath, with a family room and full kitchen. Shades covered each of the windows but I peeked outside. Off in the distance I saw the spire of the University Memorial Library poking up from nearby houses.

As I started going through the boxes my phone vibrated. I didn't recognize the number but perhaps it was Kanini with a new phone. I answered. "Hello?"

The voice sent chills up my spine. "Missing something?" the voice asked. "A friend or colleague, perhaps?"

Chapter Eighteen: Rescue

"Gutter snake! What have you done with her?"

"I want my property back Miss Heron. Immediately."

"It's no longer in my hands. It will take three nights to get it back."

"You have until sunup the morning after tomorrow night. Otherwise, things will not go well for your friend."

I hung up and cursed myself. I should have expected him to pull something like this and been prepared for it. Maybe there was a way I could find Amalthea before the time had passed. I had two days to find and rescue her from Khalid. If I took the matter to the Primogen Council, the Prince would probably send out his Scourge. Khalid would be toast, but the deal with Nathaniel Timms would fizzle as well as my quest to regain my humanity. However, if I could not find her on my own, she would be killed, or worse. *Patty, how do you get into these messes?*

I went outside to the car. Her purse was still inside. As I was retrieving it, my phone buzzed again. It was a different number, so I answered. “Hello?”

“Miss Heron,” a low voice whispered from the other side of the line. “Good evening, this is Primogen Splasky.” I heard squeaking and scuttling sounds in the background that absolutely made me squirm with thoughts of roaches and mice. “I have this tidbit, this juicy morsel that I thought you might be interested in.”

Lord, of all the times to contact me he had to choose now. “Look Primogen Splasky, I don’t mean to be impolite, but I’m really busy and I don’t have time to wheel and deal.”

“Even if it involves your precious little ghoul?”

“How did you know about that?” I asked incredulously.

“Ah dear, it would be bad form to give away company secrets.”

Of course, the Nosferatu have the phone lines monitored. “Well, look. I don’t have anything I can give you. My status is all shot to hell with this life boon hanging over my head.” I realized I was still outside and checked to make sure I was not overheard. *Phew.* I went back into the apartment with Amalthea’s purse.

“We have given it some thought and decided that we could extend this to you on credit, for a favor to be paid in the future, of course.”

Talk about a deal with the devil. There was no way I wanted to be indebted to those creeps. “I tell you what. Let me think about it and give you a call back if I’m interested.”

“It’s a *bargain* price. Only a pair of minor boons.”

“Yeah, thanks. Good night.”

I hung up and started going through Amalthea’s things, hoping for a clue. Clothes, papers, music CD’s... nothing. In her purse I found makeup and junk. In the bottom was a small plastic holder, the kind used for keeping lottery tickets. Instead of lottery tickets though was a letter, written in French. What could it be?

I sat down and held it between my fingers, closing my eyes and concentrating. After a moment, I felt blood being used and the flash-without-light occurred. For a split second I saw memories- memories from France.

Amalthea’s father was a member of a gang of bank thieves, Le Societe Nationale from Marseille, which had been notoriously successful. After her high school graduation, he began to get nervous he would be caught, and left Amalthea and her mother to travel to America with his hidden wealth. I got the gist of the note, which said he had to leave Amalthea and her mother behind in order to protect them from the gang, which he had double crossed.

So this note was all that was left of him, aside from his inheritance. How sad and painful it must have been for their separation. It explained the small fortune Amalthea had acquired and her reluctance to discuss her past, but I was no closer to finding and freeing her from Khalid’s dark plans.

On a hunch I got out my cell phone again. I found Splasky’s number on the incoming call list and hit the return option.

“Miss Heron,” he replied like a car salesman trying to close a deal. “Have you given our offer some more thought?”

I winced from the scuttling noises in the background and tried not to sound too eager. “Actually, I was calling to thank you for your offer, but I have already found out where she is.”

“Found the Daily Grind warehouse, did you?” *Oh yes!* I clenched my hand and did a fist pump.

“Will you need some assistance with negotiating the return of your ghoul? We have a full range of services available.”

“No thank you. Good evening, Primogen.”

“Good evening, Miss Heron.”

Now to track down the warehouse address. Splasky might figure out what happened afterwards, but I was more concerned with Amalthea’s immediate safety. I soon had the location and was on my way by foot towards the docks. The streets were for the most part, empty – the way I preferred it late at night. Graffiti crept along the sides of empty warehouses as I approached the waterfront. Quiet susurrations drifted from the shoreline beyond two story buildings. The gated entrance was well lit; I avoided the guard and went around the side, following a chain link fence around the perimeter. Finding a spot where the fence was not attached along the ground, I bent it upward and crawled underneath to enter the facility.

Warehouse 7013 was a building used by the Daily Grind Corporation to store dry goods before being shipped to franchises throughout the region. A white van sat parked outside the front entrance. Three men stood under a sole lamp post, smoking. They were probably ghouls who awaited their payment. I skirted around the outside of the building cloaked in darkness. Pausing, I checked the windows on the sides with my enhanced senses. After a short reconnaissance, my search was rewarded.

Amalthea was tied up, trussed against a thick wooden chair, blindfolded, in the middle of a large room. An odd contraption was taped against her mouth, part of which appeared to be a funnel. What could that be for? As I watched in horror, Khalid himself entered the field of view. He pushed her head up and placed his arm over the device. They were force-feeding her vitae, attempting to break our blood bond! This was horrible. The serpent's blood could not break it completely, considering the time she had been in my charge, but if I did not act quickly, her allegiances could shift. He wanted his amulet back; would he go so far as to Embrace her?

I circled around the rear of the warehouse, noting a window that entered into an office. Perfect. I closed the distance quickly and forced it open, creating only a little noise as the lock popped off the wooden frame. Desks, shadows and geometric shapes stood silent in the darkness of the small room. A dim red glow from power strips made long silhouettes against the walls. I slowly crept towards the door and bent down, looking underneath the crack. Now Khalid was feeding from one of the ghouls. Serishen Cagney, his childe from Little Tokyo, leaned against a table. They would not expect a rescue attempt so soon, on the very same night. I surveyed the situation from my hidden vantage point.

I glanced back at the open window. If any breezes came through my scent would carry under the door and my cover would be blown. I crept back and closed it. If I needed to flee, a busted window would be the least of my worries. I then went around turning off the power strips in the office. Amalthea was in this mess because of me – because of my selfishness. She did not deserve to be bound to me and the Toreador any more than she did Cillian and the Nosferatu or Khalid and the Setites. She certainly did not deserve being Embraced and having to suffer through the condemned existence I was only now just beginning to understand – a never ending

political life of futility, oppressive societal condemnation and the drinking of the blood of innocents.

I turned back and a tall cabinet caught my attention in the corner of the room. No way, girl, you seriously can't be considering that. Tomorrow was Sunday. No one would be coming into the warehouse. If I waited until just before dawn, Khalid and Seri would have to leave to make it to their haven in time. Did I dare spend the day tomorrow sleeping inside the cabinet? If I rescued Amalthea, they would expect me to hightail it out of there. She could make her way to freedom during the day, and I could slip away at sunset before Khalid and the troops could arrive. It would be tricky timing, at the very least. Perhaps they would leave early, and I would not have to hide myself on the premises at all. I opened the standing closet to find it nearly empty; just custodial supplies. I nodded silently. This would be it then.

I went back to the door and resumed my stake out. Turning up my enhanced eyesight and hearing, I listened in to the conversation.

"There we go, drink up, young Rose." It was Khalid. He stood in front of Amalthea's chair. Her head lolled back in ecstasy. My fangs grew out and my vitae stirred. I was a little parched after using my abilities tonight. "Your mistress has done me a great wrong. We just want to even the scales a little, hmm? Nothing wrong with that."

"I want to stake her out for the sun!" Serishen hissed.

"Temper, temper, Seri," Khalid corrected her. "We can't be saying such things in front of the little Rose ghouls here that could be repeated to the Camarilla. It would make her life forfeit." He caressed the back of her neck with a cold reptilian hand. He had no plans to spare either of us, I

was certain of that. Amalthea leaned into the caress. The Setite's powerful vitae was coursing through her veins, making her respond both physically and mentally. I squinted and snarled, gritting my teeth.

The rest of the night proceeded uneventfully. Khalid had not considered that Amalthea herself knew the location of the amulet. They discussed tactics and I learned of the traps they were setting for me as well as the bound guards that would be protecting her. Too bad she wouldn't be here.

At 5:00 am, Khalid told Seri to get the servants from outside. I glanced back towards the window. The sky grew light at the horizon. "A reward for a job well done," he told them as he drained a small amount of vitae into three small paper cups for them to sip from. "I want you at your most vigilant today. If the police come, you are to take our guest to the van out back and exit via the closed access road. Bring her to the pit, and watch over her there until I awaken."

They must have pulled the van around from the front; I lithely exited through the window and found it around the corner. They really should lock their vehicles, I thought, as I opened up the driver side door and popped the hood. I pulled one of the battery cables until it snapped in half, then carefully shut the hood once more. Climbing back into the room, I peered under the door to find the whole entourage had gone out front for final instructions. It was time.

I called the blood to my aid. As I sent it to my muscles, the whole world seemed to slow down. I opened the door and ran for the chair that held Amalthea. My hair whipped behind me as I traversed the warehouse with just a few steps. Grabbing both Amalthea and the chair, I turned and sprinted back towards the room I had come from. I shut the door then turned and grabbed the

chair from opposite sides, pulling. The heavy wood splintered beneath my assault and Amalthea ripped the blindfold from her eyes.

“Amalthea, you must go *now*.” I opened the window and gave her directions to the opening in the fence. “Find a safe place and don’t come back. I promise you I will be safe.” I opened the closet.

“Patty!” Tears began to form as she hesitated, her eyes pleading not to leave me. Then after a moment, she turned and fled through the window.

I lay back in the safe darkness of the closet, still and quiet, getting drowsy already. Then soon... footsteps and shouts. They had discovered Amalthea was missing. The outer door of the office burst open as sleep claimed me.

I awoke in the closet slowly, realizing the precariousness of my position. In enemy territory and low on blood. Not good. I would have to make a rapid escape. If I were wounded, I might go into frenzy. I opened the doors of the closet preparing to leap out the window to find my only path was blocked. Khalid stood before me. His golden yellow eyes emanated waves as he stared at me. They became larger as I fell. Down... down... down into the void of his gaze. I tried to move, but could not. I was completely frozen, putty in his hands. Even my eyes were stuck on his slit pupils, which had encompassed my world. I just stood there with my jaw agape as he hefted a plastic two gallon tank of gasoline, before placing it back on the floor.

“I did give you a chance to return my amulet, Miss Heron. Pity, really, about the warehouse, but I’m sure insurance will pick up the tab.” He smiled and lifted a wooden stake with his other hand. “I know where your havens are and I assure you they will both be thoroughly searched this

very night. Your evidence will be destroyed and my property will be returned. And as for your ghoul... Amalthea is it? What a fine French wine she will be... and a future Setite as well! She'll be mine... all mine... a serpent on the vine in body, mind, soul and spirit. And your foolish plans will have brought you to utter ruin."

He was just bringing the stake up to my chest when my peripheral vision caught movement in the darkness under the desk in the corner. I was surprised, but could not look at what was going on back there. I was still transfixed by Khalid's powerful glowing eyes. Neither could I betray what was happening behind him. Khalid was taking his time, trying to find the perfect spot for my stake when Amalthea, her face a mask of fury, reared up from the shadows and plunged a broken chair leg straight through his back.

His eyes registered shock for a split second before they glazed over and he fell to the floor, torpored. I stumbled forward, now free. Relief flooded over me as Amalthea straightened up, her chest heaving. She spat on Khalid, and then whispered. "Fate, she is a strange mistress, no?"

At that point the goon squad arrived and I had some targets to vent on. I pushed my vitae and activated the quickening once more – at this point I didn't care. My internal ferocity raged inside of me while I exacted a little vengeance of my own. The first guy pulled out a handgun in slow motion. I grabbed his wrist and twisted it until it snapped, then swept his leg with a swift kick. With a crack his shin flailed in directions it was never meant to go as he began his inexorable fall to the floor.

Amalthea was pummeling another ghoul, smacking him around and ripping out his hair. She seemed to be moving much faster than they were. A little quickening of her own perhaps. When he tried to block her she brought up a powerful knee to the groin.

I was behind the third guy before he could even turn. I gripped him over the shoulder and was draining his blood before he could even react. I didn't want to, but I stopped after he passed out. That gave me some strength and my own internal battle eased. I fed from the others repeating the process until I felt better and they were both unconscious. I licked the wounds closed when I was done.

I crushed their cell phones and placed them in the back tank of the toilet. We hauled the unconscious guards out to the van where they wouldn't be found without a search. Then we went back in to deal with Khalid.

Amalthea kicked the tank of gas over, splashing him with the fuel. I thought of sparing him, but realized Amalthea was right. He would bring death, or worse, to countless others. He had already attempted to increase his den in two cities. He would likely repeat his previous behavior.

Certainly I was not innocent in our conflict. But if he was allowed to live, he would eventually find us both, and destroy us.

But then I remembered something – my pledge to God never to kill another. “Wait.” I held up a hand to give myself a moment to think. Even if it meant my life, if it meant never being human again, this was something I could not do. “We need to take him to Prince Blaine. If we don't we'll break the Sixth Tradition and our lives will be forfeit.” Plus, maybe if we turned him in we could get them to ignore us for a while until I found the answer I was seeking.

I grabbed the kerchief from his pocket before stepping out the window. Amalthea pulled her car around as I attended to the van, erasing my fingerprints from the sabotage I had committed earlier. I retrieved Khalid's gasoline soaked body and placed it in the trunk, thrusting the chair leg deeper into his chest for good measure. I nodded to Amalthea, and she, not being covered

with flammable liquids, lit the fire in the warehouse with a cigarette. The fireball was spectacular. We zoomed away into the night, fire alarms blaring in our wake.

Chapter Nineteen: Trial

We raced through the streets, Khalid tucked away in the trunk. I gave Amalthea's hand a pat as we left the docks district, the cold light from lampposts flickering above through the windshield.

"Cell phone?" I asked her. She reached underneath the seat and pulled out my purse. I pressed the Sheriff's number and waited for the reply. Some Kindred were late to rise in the evenings.

"Speak," came the non-committal reply as Mack picked up the phone.

"Sheriff, this is Patty Heron. We have a breach of the First. I have the proof as well as the offender incapacitated in my trunk."

"Who is it?"

"Khalid el-Mazri, the Setite."

"Report to the Winfield Building immediately." Amalthea had thought to bring along a thumb drive with the evidence, so we didn't have to make a detour. Soon we were heading downtown. Taller buildings rose on the skyline until one rectangular glass structure rose above the rest.

An immaculately dressed man in a business suit stood next to the entrance booth to the VIP parking lot. He motioned us to take the car to the lower level where a freight elevator awaited. Another business man clad in a dark jacket, shirt and tie stood sentry there. A curled wire climbed his neck to behind his ear. I pulled Amalthea's car into the space and we waited. The large sliding doors came down behind us with a resounding clang and we began to rise. And rise.

It took maybe a minute for us to reach the top of the shaft, although it seemed longer. Finally the doors opened in front of us and I pulled out. To my surprise, Valerie Moore was there as well as Sheriff Lewis, Derek Chase, the elusive Glen Browning of Clan Gangrel, Cameron Morrison and several Deputies.

This must be serious business, I thought, to rouse the Primogen so early from their slumbers. Valerie shot me a cautious glare as I parked the car. For a moment, she looked genuinely scared, then the look passed. A handful of unknown persons descended on the vehicle from all sides as I stepped out. Deputies Jasmine Ledyard and Caleb Titov were conspicuously absent. A flurry of activity occurred at the rear of the car as the trunk was popped. They were all spending blood, I thought as I watched the proceedings. The chair leg had not dislodged from Khalid's chest during the trip however and he was hauled from the space unceremoniously and carried towards a stairwell. The elders followed and Valerie approached Amalthea and me.

"You will have to wait here while business is conducted, Miss McMahon, and *you* are to come with me," she said sternly, although her tone was unnecessary; I had every intention of complying. I nodded and followed the entourage up the stairwell.

We entered a lavishly appointed chamber with chandeliers, thick draperies and a small stage along one side. A collection of perhaps twenty ornate armchairs faced the stage. Large, old oil portraits lined the walls and a tall throne of gold shined down on us in illumination from the stage lights. Prince Blaine and Seneschal Gray exited from the wings of the stage and the silence grew deafening. Sheriff Lewis dragged Khalid's motionless form up on stage and took his place beside the Prince, who then seated himself. Splasky appeared out of nowhere, standing in the midst of the audience.

All of us sat and the Prince waited for a few moments before speaking. “Who disturbs my rest, and steals my time this evening?” he asked, his face a blank slate. All eyes turned towards me. I rose from my seat and addressed him.

“That would be me, your Grace,” I said with a lowering of my head, keeping my eyes upon him as was his preference.

“Explain,” he stated, his eyes glaring down on me as if to smite me where I stood.

“It was a matter of the First Tradition, your Grace. This flash drive contains the evidence.” I held out the small external port. The Sheriff nodded and one of the businessmen took it from me and handed it to him. A small laptop was quickly produced as a screen rolled down on one of the side walls, covering one of the portraits there. The clip began to play, showing Khalid transforming into a giant cobra, along with the witness who ran from the other side of the alley as he saw him feed.

“So, I grant you safety and protection in my city, and this is how I am repaid,” the Prince stated, turning his head to address the motionless but aware Setite. “Remove the stake, so that he may speak before judgment is passed.” A liter packet of blood was produced and held between his lips as they prepared to remove the stake. My fangs grew within my mouth, which I kept shut. Khalid shuddered as the stake was withdrawn and bit down on the packet, pulling the liquid from within and draining it quickly. He stood and straightened his blood and gasoline tainted clothes as best he could, then addressed the Prince.

“Your Grace, this matter is easily explained,” he began, staring at me from the stage. Prince Blaine became a little more rigid in his chair, straightening his back. I suddenly realized that if

Khalid spilled the beans about the amulet being magical, this would wind up being a double execution. Khalid extended his arm and pointed an accusing finger at me. Fear began to creep up my back and my lower lip started to quaver. I crossed my forearms and hugged my waist. I thought that my life was over. “It was due to the meddling of *that* woman, Patricia Heron, that caused this whole....”

“I.... Do.... Not.... Care... about your petty vendettas,” the Prince interrupted him. His icy expression did not flicker or change in the slightest. A steely glint of light reflected in the Prince’s eyes for a brief moment as he fastened his gaze on the Setite. “We are well aware of the circumstances surrounding the events of the last few nights, and they all pale in comparison to the Traditions, on which we all depend to survive.” The Prince glanced towards Splasky, who nodded silently. “Sheriff. Mark the human witness in the video for termination. Let his blood be on the head of the one who committed the breach.”

I kept my expression carefully neutral, although inside my heart was overwhelmed with sadness. How cruel and callous to steal, kill and destroy innocents in the name of survival. “Yes, your Grace,” Mack replied.

Khalid began to speak again. “I was set up...”

“The time allowed for you to speak is over,” the Prince said, his voice still measured but a little louder. Khalid made a move in the direction of the throne and before anyone could do anything, the Prince’s eyes lit up like twin spotlights and the rest of the room seemed to fall into a dark haze. I felt palpable awe surrounding the stage centered on the throne. “Most.... Unwise.... Sheriff, stake the offender.”

Things returned to normal and Mack quickly took control of the prisoner, thrusting the chair leg through Khalid's chest with a savage blow. Khalid returned to the floor, in torpor once more.

The Prince turned his eyes towards me, now, and I wilted under their assault. "Miss Heron, in return for your favor in apprehending this violator, I grant you permission to remove his head to confirm your dedication to the Traditions." He knew right where to hit me. I considered and then knew what I had to do.

"Your Grace," I began, thinking how I would phrase my reply. Carefully! "I regret that I cannot do as you request and humbly submit myself to your judgment." Gasps of shock and astonishment came from the assembly. I knelt and bowed my head, keeping my eyes on him as I lifted my hair from the back of my neck. He looked away towards the walls of the chamber in an expression that said '*Why me?*' then shifted his eyes towards Valerie.

"A most stubborn and willful childe, is she not?"

"Yes, my Prince," she replied, her eyebrows arched in ire.

"Indulge me in explaining your suicidal fantasy, Miss Heron, in refusing an honor afforded to you by this court."

"Your Grace, I have taken a vow before God not to take the life of another," I said quietly, telling the truth.

"You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you are still human," he observed.

"I am no longer human; I realize that, although I cling to the humanity that is left within me."

He considered me for a long moment and then, at last, nodded. "I would speak to this foolish presumption as an example for others who might take altruism to its empty extreme. There is both promise and danger in your position, Miss Heron. The danger is that you will not kill, even to protect all of us present here this evening." He spread his arms amongst the assemblage, still seated. "You will change this position before you leave tonight. We cannot tolerate weakness in thought or deed in any form when it comes to our mutual survival. Your selfish and deceitful vow allows the pendulum to swing much farther to one side, jeopardizing the other." He thought for a moment and then continued. "The promise is that we all must hold fast to what is left of our humanity, lest we become overwhelmed by our bestial nature, and perish. Let all observe my own humanity with the following edict: for discovering and apprehending the criminal Khalid el-Mazri of Clan Setite for crimes against the Praxis, the sentence of death for your heretical thoughts is suspended. You will immediately inform the Sheriff's department should any activity you discover violate the Masquerade, or any of the Traditions, so that justice may be carried out. Additionally, I order you to report to Primogen Moore for further... *instruction*... at her direction, so that you may possibly comprehend the fallacies of your position." He motioned for me to rise.

I got up off my knees. "Thank you, your Grace." I would try my best to follow the Traditions until I left New Monroe, which would hopefully occur sooner rather than later. I suspected that Valerie and the other Primogen would attempt to drill my brain somehow to ensure my cooperation and mitigate their poor handling of me. Perhaps they would try to force me into a blood bond against my will. For them, it was all about appearances and the power they held.

"Sheriff, take care of this stain upon my city," the Prince ordered, glancing down at the Setite. A large, curved scimitar was produced and shortly thereafter Sheriff Lewis removed Khalid's head,

with a brief howl of anguish from Khalid himself. The body flashed with a reddish light from within and quickly turned to ash in a moment. The pile continued to smolder as the smell of benzene, dust and snake oil filled the room.

Prince Alexander rose from his seat, all standing as he did, and exited the courtroom stage, the Seneschal in his wake. The room began to fill with talk as Valerie Moore called me over. Her words were coated in venom. “Once again you snatch defeat from the jaws of victory!” she chastised me. “All you had to do was kill that Tradition breaker – but, no.” She sighed and pulled back her hair, the toll from keeping her Clanmates in line showing in the creases around the corners of her mouth. “You will make yourself available to me when I call.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied. The same gauntlet of men in business suits then entered the room and escorted me back down the stairs to Amalthea and the parked car. I pulled it into the elevator and we descended down in silence. Amalthea was perceptive and her lingering gaze told me she knew my meeting had been tense. We exited the building and sped out into the night.

Chapter Twenty: Lore

Amalthea turned to me after we were well away from the building, speeding down the highway.

“What happened?”

“It turned into a mess,” I explained. I didn’t want to go into it too much. My thoughts still needed sorting out. I was very, very lucky to still be alive. My reputation for making messes had been cemented in the Kindred community, but that no longer mattered to me. My only hope, my only goal, was to be human again, so that I might be reconciled with God. But other needs required my attention first.

I fed on Amalthea that night, telling her to get some fluids and rest after-ward. I wrote out a letter to Primogen Timms, suggesting a means of contact to counter the intelligence gathering efforts of the Nosferatu.

Dear Dr. Timms,

For reasons of my own I am in seclusion for the time being. I will be out of contact for the foreseeable future. If and when you are ready to finalize our arrangement, place a lit candle or lamp in one of the third floor windows facing east.

Regards,

Patricia Heron

I folded the letter into an envelope and placed it out for Amalthea to find in the morning, with directions to have it delivered to Doctor Timms at the University Library. That being done, I left for a walk.

The streets were quiet tonight, in contrast to the anxious thoughts that troubled me. What was Valerie going to do with me? Everything was fair game, short of taking my life. She had to deal with a great loss of status among her peers because of my actions, and she would be looking for revenge. I changed my course and criss-crossed back yards until I reached the rear entrance of the house that until last night I had occupied. Taking my cell phone, I erased all the speed dial numbers and removed the memory chip and battery, dropping it into the grass behind the back steps. Crickets chirped blissfully in the foliage.

As I was getting up a figure emerged from the darkness beside the porch, startling me. The man, tall, dark and clean shaven with his impeccable black suit, looked at me as moonlight reflected

from his dark eyes. It was one of the Ventrue from Phaeton Tower. “Miss Heron,” he whispered approaching, “I am a friend. I overheard what they plan to do to you, but we cannot talk here. Come.” I followed behind him at a distance, careful that this might be a trap. After a short walk, we entered a wealthy neighborhood, each yard ringed by trimmed, tall hedgerows. Brick walls flanked the sidewalk.

I didn’t like being led around by a stranger and decided to change the destination. “Here,” I whispered and hopped over the brick wall into the space under a hedge row between yards. I was wary of an ambush, at least until I could determine his motives. He crawled in behind me and knelt down, observing our surroundings.

“All right,” he breathed. “My name is Claude Rainier, and I am a member of the Anarch movement.” *An Anarch!* I’d heard of them; knew that the name was used as an insult among the Camarilla. They were revolutionaries who rejected authority in the desire to elevate individual rights and self-determination. “So now you hold my life in your hands.”

“I’m here,” I replied quietly, ready to use my blood in a moment. He looked serious and didn’t appear to be false. “Spill it.”

“There is a dark secret that resides within Winfield.” Claude’s lips curled and quivered as he whispered passionately. “There are many Kindred that reside in the basement there. Staked. Unmoving. Captive and unresponsive. They are starving and unable to feed, in a permanent state of torpor... locked there forever until used or just... forgotten. Your friend Kanini discovered her fiancé had been sent there, and was condemned to share his punishment.” I shuddered and backed away among the branches, as much from the revelation of the horror as of its certainty.

My brows drew together, trying to comprehend the evil that could devise such a fate. Poor Kanini – what a horrible end! Claude glanced around a bit more under the hedges, then looked back into my eyes. “I overheard Miss Moore speaking with the others after you left. They plan to put you ‘on ice’ as well. The Kindred there are kept to be sacrificed to the Sabbat in the event of war. I wanted to warn you, for you deserve no such end.”

My instinct told me that he was telling the truth. “Thank you for warning me, Claude. I’ll hopefully be in the process of leaving town soon.” I crawled back towards him and whispered; one sensible voice... in a city filled with evil and violence. “Be sure to get the word to your compatriots on the west coast. This is one of many wrongs that needs to be addressed.”

“Plans are already in motion. Be safe, Patricia. Trust no one.”

He left me there sitting on the ground in the hedges. I was emotionally numb from his revelation. After he was gone I finally answered him, whispering to myself. “There is only One whom I trust. And He... He is the one who loved me first, to whom my fate is tied.” It took a moment for me to realize the crickets had stopped chirping. The bushes were absolutely still. Not a breath of wind whispered in the air. A small bird in a nearby tree took flight, disturbed. I looked up and realized I should be on my way too. There were a lot of things to be done if I was to survive.

I left the hiding place behind and started to head back home, making sure I was not followed.

The tears began to flow as I walked alone on the empty streets. I dabbed at my eyes with my sleeve and tried to keep myself together. I was reminded of Stalin after the Red Revolution.

People who were different, who did not conform to the party line simply disappeared. Twenty five million of them. The Nazis were much the same way in their co-operative guilt. And now I

was marked with the condemned. I whispered a prayer for Kanini as I walked, that she might be safe until the night she was freed.

I cut through some back yards to save some time, but as I came around the corner near my old house, I noticed something was different. A shiny black van was parked down the street nearby. It looked like the same one the Sheriff arrived in when the spirit of Cillian was causing trouble. I looked up at the windows. The lights were all off inside, but shadows darted about the upper floors, curtains wafting aside in their hurried wake. A shiver of fear ran up my body and I shook in spite of myself. The elders had wasted no time in their desire to force me to take my medicine. I backed away from the corner of the house on the other side of the street and began to run, back the way I had come. They were looking for me, to stake me and take me away. They didn't realize I had been tipped off.

I turned around and ran in the opposite direction, the dark landscape blurring behind me. I skirted through the shadows for three blocks until the residential area opened up into a strip mall. The clouds released their burden above me and I took to the roof as it began to rain. It was a celestial downpour, and I was thankful that it hid my tracks and scent. I jumped down on the other side of the strip mall and made my way home the long way around. I avoided the main streets and soon the welcoming back fence of the Willows greeted me. I leapt over it and rushed up to the duplex. I had to be strong now, for Amalthea's sake.

"Amalthea, wake up," I called after I entered, bolting the door shut. I was a wet mess, trailing water after me as my boots squished noisily. She appeared shortly thereafter, sleepy-headed with her hair in disarray. "It's time," I told her, sitting down on an unopened crate.

We both settled down. Amalthea clasped her hands in front of her and looked at me with distraught eyes, expecting bad news. She was right. I gave it to her straight. “Amalthea, Valerie and the elders have placed a death warrant on my head. They intend to stake me and leave me on a slab beneath the ground for eternity.”

She inhaled a quick breath, and clapped a hand to her mouth. “Further, I am currently in defiance of the Prince’s orders to report to her upon request. In Little Tokyo, I saved you from Cillian. You recently saved my life. It is time that we parted ways, for they would use you in order to get me, much as Khalid did.”

She gulped and began to sob. “Can’t I stay with you?” she asked, but there was no choice left. Tears fell down her cheeks.

I cried with her. “There, there, sweetie,” I reassured her and gave her a hug. “There is still one day of service in which you may wind up saving me—one last time.”

I gave her the letter I had written to Primogen Timms and the instructions for its delivery.

“Tomorrow, you must get the amulet from the bank and bring it back here. Close out the account and bring all remaining funds here as well. Leave \$5,000 out of it for my traveling expenses.

Then you must leave town for good. Be sure to be gone long before the sun sets. If it were up to me, I would recommend you leave this dark world I have selfishly brought you into. Fly back to France and get checked into a rehab clinic. The need for *Kindred vitae* will be great, but your will must be greater. Continued involvement will only lead to your ruin, this I know. However, I leave the final decision up to you.”

“I shall do all that you ask,” Amalthea replied through her tears, shaking her head.

“Good... good.” I wiped her tears away, then my own. “A few last things. I’d like for you to use your cell phone to leave a message for me. Tell me you purchased the train tickets I desired. Then get rid of your cell. That might keep them busy for a few nights.”

“Now, is there anything we missed, any way they might be able to track either of us electronically?” We both pondered for a while. Then Amalthea snapped her fingers. “The car! I think it has a lojack.”

“Let’s see what we can do.” Amalthea jumped into some clothes and followed me outside. I popped the hood and disconnected the battery. I considered sending the blood to my ears, but then decided on my eyes instead. This was a different form of skill than the heightened senses I used to read the garage key code. Colors changed and the world took on a different appearance altogether. A brick pink haze lit up the sky through the rain. Faint glowing came from the outlines of the trunk hatch. I opened it and after a little searching found a small box which was the cause of the emission. I soon had it detached.

“Let’s drop this off outside the dump. We only have two hours until sunrise.”

“Shotgun!” Amalthea laughed musically and smiled, as she jumped into the passenger side like a superhero sidekick while I reconnected the battery. We drove through the rain with our windows open, the wipers alternately sloshing extra water on us as we completed our final mission.

It was nearly sunrise when we came back, and Amalthea gave me one last hug before going to dry off and get ready for her tasks. The drowsiness of the day then hit me and I dragged myself to my coffin, to sleep the dreamless sleep of the undead.

When I awoke the next evening, I found the amulet on top of one of the crates, along with an unsealed letter.

My sister and friend,

I wanted to take a moment to express my eternal gratitude for the care you have shown me. I owe you my life, and shall live up to your charge to separate myself from the influence of those who are evil. I believe I shall take your advice and return to France. Your dedication to your morals in the company of those who spitefully use and discard those around them is an example that I shall follow.

I attempted to withdraw the remaining funds, but my bank accounts have been frozen. The safety deposit box was not affected. I have enough to get home without accessing my father's account. I dropped your letter off at Memorial Library today, and they told me Dr. Timms had been out of town but was expected to be back later this week. I'll leave the rental car at the airport.

I know what you ask of me is for my own good. Thank you, and bless you, from the bottom of my heart. I shall remember you always.

Love, Amalthea

I read the letter and pressed my lips together. I had done the same to her as her father had, separating myself to protect her. Finally all the emotions of the past few days came out and I cried uncontrollably, holding myself as I wept bitterly.

After a while I finally collected myself. I found a lighter on the fireplace and burned the letter to ash in the bathroom sink. Turning, I stepped into the sparse kitchen and looked out the window into the dark sky. Stars twinkled there, like tiny memories in the night. In spite of the circumstances, I realized that as long as I had life, I had hope. A smile found its way to my face, as I paused in contemplation.

I left the window and went back into the living room. No phone, internet or electronic trails betrayed my presence. I showered, changed and placed the amulet in the bottom of my purse, underneath the liner. I set aside a set of black leather pants, a cotton T-shirt and my rain jacket for the meeting with Timms. As I applied my makeup, I wondered how I would escape town. There was a cheapo “Buy Here Pay Here” car lot that was open late into the evenings, but that was no good without money. I wasn’t going to use my ability to sway emotions to commit grand theft auto. I was glad that Amalthea had managed to get away. Being low on cash would not matter if the Sheriff’s department managed to catch up with me. Would Timms be back already? Ironically, I was depending on his greed to finish sealing the deal.

Crickets greeted me as the glass door to the second story porch slid aside. Looking around, all seemed restful. I hopped up to the roof and ascended the steep side to the apex. Looking west, I spotted the University Library, the tower lit up with floodlights. I zeroed in with my enhanced eyesight, watching for details. It seemed so normal to me now, to just use the blood, to direct it within my body with mere will. I saw no flickering lights, so I descended and went back inside, to wait alone with my thoughts.

If Valerie and her entourage had done their homework, the crap was probably hitting the fan at the train station right now. Messages would be dispatched; those trains that had already left

would be stopped and searched. The fact that Splasky was not a part of the Sheriff's department and that Nosferatu jealously guard their information was turning out to my advantage. I turned on a clock radio that had been left behind by the former tenants. Sure enough, when the news started the lead story was of a major sting operation against drug smugglers using the sleepy town of New Monroe as a hub. Cops would be crawling all over, possibly with a description of Amalthea and myself.

I decided to spend the night in seclusion until the heat died down. Perhaps with a little luck they might think I was already long gone. "*One night at a time*," I thought, as I sat down and tried to relax. The rest of the night passed with a little music and Border to Border AM with late night talk show host Gary Naugle. "Werewolves are Real!" was the topic. If they only knew.

Saturday night it was drizzling as I once again scaled the roof for my last check at 2am. I was rewarded by a flickering light in one of the office windows of Memorial Library. Finally! I climbed back down, grabbed my satchel into which I placed a change of clothes and my laptop and departed, hoping not to return.

All was quiet as I traversed the campus, pass card in hand. Soon I reached my destination. The waiting in the atrium was almost unendurable. After two hours passed I figured I would have to sleep at the duplex one more time before leaving town. Finally the lift came down empty. I entered, was whisked up to the top floor, and soon stood before the desk of Primogen Timms. He gestured for me to sit down as the double doors behind me closed of their own accord. "Been busy impressing the elders lately, Miss Heron?" he asked, half sneering. I ignored the question and waited patiently. He continued. "I have the information you desire."

Now came the tricky part. "Regrettably, the price has gone up, but only slightly."

He squinted and his mouth wrinkled up like he had sucked on a lemon. I seemed to have that effect on other Kindred. “Fifteen thousand dollars, cash, in assorted bills.”

“You!” He rose halfway out of his seat as veins stood out on his head. I was alarmed but he regained control of himself, with a smile followed by a chuckle as he sat back down. “You have a lot of *nerve*, Miss Heron. Why should I not just turn you into the Sheriff’s office right now?”

“Because you have just as much to lose as I do, should our arrangement become known, and you know it. We are both in a mutually assured game of destruction.” I had him cornered.

“Touché, Miss Heron. Very well. Do you have the amulet?”

“When I receive the money, and the information, then yes, I will.”

He stood and went to a corner of the office to pull on a cloth rope. I heard a bell ring and shortly thereafter an acolyte came through a hidden doorway in one of the bookshelves. Timms whispered to him and a few minutes later he came back with a briefcase. Timms then handed the briefcase over to me. I checked out the money and dumped it into my knapsack with a nod.

“Please understand that what you are about to hear is forbidden knowledge. My Clan retains the exclusive rights and use of it. They would be most displeased should they discover you had accessed it.” He paused for a moment. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes. Please continue.”

He leaned into the desk. “The information you seek which is rumored to return a Kindred to human existence is called Golconda.

When the Progenitors still roamed the Earth, and I speak now of the founders of Kindred bloodlines, there was among them one known as Saulot. Saulot discovered the way to Golconda after traveling to a foreign land in the Far East and receiving enlightenment. He grew a third eye after this and taught the path to his Clan, the Salubri. You may wonder why you have never heard of the Salubri. They have been made extinct.

Saulot stole secrets from the founder of our Clan, Tremere himself. Tremere eventually found him and diablerized him to pay for his treachery, and our Clan has regarded the Salubri as enemies to be destroyed at all costs ever since. Of course, the point is now moot with their extinction.”

“What vampiric skills did the Salubri practice?”

“They practiced a lost art of blood healing, but according to the Tremere records, they used this as a cover to steal souls, a most diabolical practice. The healing ability itself was completely useless, unless one has no powers of regeneration. Any other questions?”

“Where did you get this information?” I asked.

“It cost me several boons, Miss Heron, so I hope you appreciate it. The historical information came from the Vienna chantry. The only Kindred who might have more information about the Salubri would be those who remember such ancient nights — the elders of Vienna. They are truly ancient. Their representatives, any of whom would make Prince Alexander look like a green, frail schoolboy on the first day of class are not to be trifled with. Make no mistake, Miss Heron. We American Kindred are the minnows. *They* are the sharks and they have been entrenched in their positions for a very long time.”

“Very well then, Dr. Timms, it appears our business is concluded.” I retrieved and then handed over the amulet. Timms cupped the artifact with care, then looked up at me slyly. “Oh and by the way, Khalid el-Mazri underestimated me. Don’t make the same mistake.” I nodded and turned my back to him, displaying more confidence than I felt as the doors to the walkway opened silently in front of me.

I exited the library that night exhilarated and feeling a little better about my prospects. My plan was to visit the little car dealership I knew of near the tenement quarter. I kept off the streets and the drizzle had me soaking wet by the time I arrived back at the apartment. It was time for a change of scenery.

Chapter Twenty One: The Power of the Prince

Prince Blaine and Seneschal Gray proceeded down the aisle as all stood to pay homage. The Prince’s eyes absorbed details, missing nothing. Or so he thought. Valerie Moore appeared distracted; she was fidgeting and glancing back towards the entrance. Alexander took the stage and removed his coat before seating himself in the golden throne with the Ventrue crest. He waited until the assorted tie straightening and dress adjusting were finished. The Prince then turned his eyes to the Toreador section. Valerie and Harrison were the only ones there.

“Primogen Moore,” Alexander stated flatly. She stood up immediately. “One of the Roses from your garden is unaccounted for.”

“Yes, your Grace. She is no longer at her house and refuses to answer her cell. I had hoped she might be here tonight....” Her voice trailed off. Harrison nudged her hand with a knuckle

looking up with expectation. “Your Grace, I believe Mr. Smith has a proposal.” The Prince removed his right hand from the armrest and gestured for him to stand.

With a nod Harrison proceeded. “Your Grace, please don’t trouble yourself with directing others to fetch those whose idiocy and pride keep them from fulfilling their commitments to you. May I have your permission to... have her come directly so that her appearance is assured?”

“Very well,” he replied, the cold steam gathering to a boil underneath his calm, controlled exterior. The foolish girl would be executed tonight. “You may both be seated.” Harrison sat down and closed his eyes, concentrating. After a moment he mouthed the words *Patricia Heron*, and smirked. In his desire to correct the young neonate and provide an example for others to heed, Alexander had missed the fact that one other Kindred was missing. It would have surprised him. The Ventrue Primogen Stephen Reynolds would bring it up as business at the end of court, but other events were unfolding that evening as well. Alexander launched into a monologue expressing his displeasure.

I was getting the last of my things ready for the trip to Fort Lauderdale. Planes would not do as they either departed too early in the evening for the trip to Europe or arrived too late in the morning, due to the loss of 7 hours of time. I had to avoid sunlight, so it looked like it would be another voyage by boat. Everything was packed and ready to go. I just had to get my keys and purse.

I was suddenly stuck by that same compulsion that had gripped me the night of Jackson’s argument with Whip Haugen. I spun around and walked right out the door, leaving it wide open

in the wet night air. *NO!* Down the steps my legs took me, though I fought with every fiber of will to stop. *No, no, no!* Harrison Smith had called me, and I was being forced to travel to the theatre to face the Prince and an entire city of pissed off Kindred after trying to skip out on court.

I gave up resisting which was futile. Then I started praying. *Dear God, please don't let it end like this. Walking into the hands of my enemies without choice. Not my will, but Thine be done.*

Please be with Amalthea, and protect her. Let her, at least, escape my fate. Send angels to her to help her. The buildings passed slowly as I sauntered down the sidewalks. Like a valley of death they stood like silent sentinels on either side, watching unmoved. The rain came down then in a steady pour and I could do nothing but continue on, soaked to the bone.

Claude Rainer had waited for this moment. Tonight was the appointed hour. Burt Gonzales had instructed him to set the staked Kindred free tonight, during court. Claude had ostensibly reported to the Winfield Building to work as part of a drill for the bound security staff. He answered his cell phone exactly as planned while at the monitoring station. It was Burt, of course.

“Hello? Yes, Mr. Blaine!” Claude straightened as he practically jumped to attention. His eyes darted at the others while they all paused wide eyed in awe and fear. “Send them all home? Yes sir! Right away sir!” He listened for a while longer then hung up the cell and looked at the men shaking his head in amazement.

“What is it?” one of them finally asked.

Claude played his part well. “I overheard about a secret shipment coming in from Canada tonight. They have their own security team. He has told us all to go home and wait for further instructions.”

They scrambled to follow orders. Someone got on the radio to communicate with the others who were stationed at different parts of the high rise. “All staff – report to communications at once! This is not a drill. Hurry!”

It was the perfect plan. With all Kindred required to attend court, no one was left to defend the roost. The ghouls were chemically and emotionally bonded to be loyal. Claude locked up and followed the rest of the staff to their cars. He pulled out of the parking lot and drove around the block only to return three minutes later. He went back to the security booth and shut down all the computers and monitors, then for extra measure went to the main junction box. It didn’t last long.

Down the stairs he went into the flooded basement. It was pitch black with the exception of dim, reflected ambient light that peered through the water. Some emergency lights had turned on to show the exits. Hollow sounds reverberated as evaporated water condensed on the ceiling and dripped down. Perfect. There under the dark waters were black stone shapes. Cement slabs with figures on them. All staked. All silent. All waiting. The enslaved, the depraved, the enraged. The innocent and the guilty. They would get their freedom tonight, and more. Justice would be done. They had suffered enough.

Malcolm and Kanini were the latest to join the condemned, and as such they were the closest to the exit when Claude swam over to remove their stakes before going on to the others. The weak light shining through the water was a beacon and soon they ran from the building, hand in hand,

together again. Shortly afterwards the evening would become a fright fest of horror downtown as scores of hungry, ravenous, angry vampires spread into the night and descended on an unsuspecting populace to feed.

Jacob Jones was just beginning his shift that evening. His tanker was set to refill ten gas stations tonight. The roads were mostly empty and his stomach was full, so that was fine. Regrettably, it had just started raining. Figures. Damn town. He turned up the volume on his favorite country station and slowed down for a red light at the intersection ahead.

As he waited, a young couple came running up to the cab. The young man wore a white dress shirt ripped across the center of his chest. He wondered if they were in trouble as he rolled down the window. The man had a wild look in his eyes as he said, "The sidewalk needs a hug." Then Jacob's world descended into madness as he opened the door blubbering and fell from the cab. The pavement reached up and grabbed him as asphalt wrapped around him in its gravely embrace. Malkavians have that effect on people when they desire. Jacob would survive and the insanity would soon wear off, but by then it would be too late.

Kanini and Malcolm swung into the empty cab of the truck. "Tonight is court," Kanini said as she looked into her beloved's eyes.

"Damned straight," Malcolm said as he shoved the 18 wheeler into gear and stepped on the gas.

I had been walking for perhaps fifteen minutes when Donizetti Theatre came into view on Empire Avenue. My inexorable pace led me closer and closer to the place where I would meet my end. The rain had let up a little and now it was just sprinkling as my legs did their thing. I

spent some more time in prayer, thanking God for my life and asking forgiveness for the creature I had become.

A tanker truck fishtailed in front of me nearly leaving the street. The back end was going too fast to follow the front. As it screeched around the corner, I saw Kanini in the passenger side of the cab. It had to be her, with her trademark blonde double ponytail. I tried to wave but couldn't. She passed in just a few seconds and the truck was now barreling down the road towards the theatre.

Malcolm went through the gears, accelerating. He knew this act would be his last, but it was fitting. He would not be allowed to survive anyway, so why not go out with a bang to show the Prince *his* displeasure for a change. You bad, bad prince! That Kanini was with him only made it all the sweeter.

The truck jumped the curb and continued to accelerate as it teetered precariously on one side. The glass walls on the outside of the building presented no obstacle whatsoever. It happened in a moment—the entire tanker truck careened into the main auditorium, through the reinforcements, drywall, electrical wiring and support columns.

The wrecked wall structures pierced through both hulls of the tank. The truck had slowed only slightly, but the gasoline inside, propelled by inertia, spewed through the breach in front in a torrent of liquid disaster.

Phillipi Zaneke glanced back at the sound of the crash and actually had time to think how nice it was for Malcolm and Kanini to come to court. Now he would not have to report them missing.

Malcolm and Kanini were slammed into the front of the cab when they crashed through the walls of the theatre, running over Zeke Moss in the process. Malcolm was treated to a sight through the broken windshield that made him smile in the last moment of his existence—the look of surprise on Prince Alexander Blaine’s face.

As severed wires scraped the hull of the tanker they ignited the spraying fuel and the entire contents exploded, turning the inside of the theatre into a giant pressure cooker. Everyone survived the initial concussion wave, but the flames and fuel that came with it were inescapable. The fiery conflagration expanded like a gigantic white-orange flower blooming, turning all it touched to ash.

I could do nothing but watch as the truck barreled into my destination. A brilliant flash of light occurred, then the entire roof of the building lifted into the air. Fire roared from the front and emergency side exits in massive plumes. Then a *boom* shook the entire city as the ground trembled. I fell over hitting the sidewalk as control returned to my limbs, then looked up in awe and wonder.

Traffic—what little there was—came to a halt on the road as people got out of their vehicles to witness the destruction. I heard a siren in the distance. We all watched transfixed as the blast continued to rise up slowly in a glowing mushroom cloud, piercing the cloud cover and lighting up the sky.

A good Samaritan got out of his car to help me to my feet. He was a dark haired, balding, bearded fellow. “Are you ok, miss?” he asked, concerned.

“Yes. Could you give me a ride back to the Willows?” I pointed back in the direction of the apartment.

“Sure. Come on.”

Epilogue

The good Samaritan whose name was Carl was kind enough to get me back to the apartment and wait while I collected my things. I found them just as I had left them with the doorway still open. After getting dried off I gathered a few more sets of clothes, the knapsack with the money, one of the laptops, my purse and keys and locked the door behind me.

I arrived at the late night car dealership just before closing. With the help of my vitae I persuaded the dealer to give me a good deal on a cheap, used reliable sedan for cost, a little over four grand. Soon after filling up and picking up a road map I was headed down I-10 towards Florida.

I wondered about all those who had died in the massive explosion at the theatre. Alexander Blaine... Valerie Moore... Harrison Smith... they were all gone, and with them, my death warrant. Evil surely follows after evil, if not sooner than later. The Kindred who had been staked had been let loose, no doubt Claude's doing. With no hierarchy to control them, a power vacuum would likely emerge. Was another Little Tokyo developing? Perhaps.

In afterthought the events that occurred in New Monroe seemed like raindrops falling in a pond. One event affected others in unseen permutations. The arrival of Khalid el-Mazri... my rejection of Camarilla authority... the detainment of Kindred and their release.... There were many other unknowns that factored into the big picture, I was sure. Would the waves that started here travel across the Atlantic? I didn't know.

The worries and concerns that had troubled me ebbed as the dotted lines passed by. My shoulders relaxed as if a great weight had been lifted from me. The miles rolled by and the distance I put behind me encouraged me. A new path lay ahead. I felt renewed with the wind in my hair and the past now resolved. In retrospect, I think that God had answered my prayers. Now I had to hope that Clan Salubri was not wholly extinct or that evidence remained behind of the path to Golconda. All I could do was try.

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The Third Remnant

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Cast of Characters

Humans

Ben- reservation specialist

Captain Everson- Captain of the Euroluxe

Angie Henderson- lead stewardess on the Euroluxe

Paxton Smith- gopher

Father Leonard Allen- member of the Leopold Society

Alma and Boro Heinz- owners of the Nataso House

Father John Mark Inglewood- officer, the Leopold Society

Eckert Spindler- paranoid driver and ghoul, Clan Malkavian

Frank Alt- ghoul of Clan Toreador, addict, hopeful composer

Amalthea McMahon- Patty's friend and former ghoul

Kindred

Clan Toreador

Patty Heron- protagonist

Verner Bubalo- Whip, Croatia

Veronica Bianchi- Primogen, Vienna

Max Kominski- Whip, Vienna

Zil Herzog, Luciana Antropov, Geoffrey Kreismann- Vienna Kindred

Dustin Heinrich- Prince, Vienna

Clan Tremere

Chandler Evans- Whip, New Monroe

Nathaniel Timms- Primogen, New Monroe

Walter Hartmann- High Regent, Vienna

Finnaeus Knutson- Whip, cowlick

Zarkov the Gargoyle- former childe of Thomas the Jester

Clan Ventrue

Marko and Annette Curkovic- Croatia welcomers

Jan Pieterzoon- elder

Lady Marie Duval- Seneschal

Clan Nosferatu

Tancredo Olivetti- truthsayer, misshapen

Curafferum Senner- Primogen

Clan Malkavian

Malkav- Antediluvian

The Matron- (aka the Oracle) mist shrouded boat traveler

Thomas “the Jester” Dern- Primogen, wily, intelligent

Heidi and Sophia Hutto- twin sisters, Embraced because they were spinsters at the age of 28

Professor Matteus Salzberger- Whip, poor fashion sense

Felix Puschmann- neonate, in over his head

Edna the goat- Felix’s pet and the Clan’s unofficial mascot in Vienna

Qiang Tam- thin blood

Clan Gangrel

Khenan- aquatic Gangrel

Beckett- Kindred historian

Clan Brujah

Theo Bell- Archon

Clan Salubri

James Peck- leader of the Third Remnant in New Sanctuary Refuge

Reg Cushing- healer

Harry Rosen- driver

Prologue

Chandler Evans fetched the petty cash from the storage vault. Acolytes passed by in their robes, scurrying to complete their duties in the Tremere chantry. Curiosity itched at him. The neonate Toreador had visited before and had produced a most intense reaction in his Primogen. He had seen the telltale signs – excitement covered by feigned indifference...the clenched jaw... the protracted grip... the wandering eyes... planning something. Plotting. Coveting.

Dr. Nathaniel Timms had taken a trip abroad shortly after that. It was unannounced and most unexpected. Now Timms was back and Chandler had been asked to retrieve a substantial sum of cash from the vault for... what?

He carried the requested amount to his superior's office where the doorway concealed by a bookshelf on the opposite side stood ajar. He lay the briefcase on Timms' desk and retreated back to the chantry proper. He was the Whip, second in command among his Clan in New Monroe. Although naturally loyal to a fault, he could not help but think that something was amiss. He retreated a few steps down the hall then lingered, looking back at the closed exit. Perhaps he would wait a while longer and listen by the crack, just to make sure everything was in order. Opportunity did not come knocking very often in these secluded, quiet halls. Moss softened his steps as he crept back to the doorway.

He heard the muffled voices of Timms and the visitor, Patricia Heron. Pulling the blood to his finger he whispered and allowed the wood to bend just a smidgeon so he could see through to the other side.

Timms was telling her about Golconda—the imagined journey of their ill-fated enemies, the Salubri. It was forbidden knowledge! The traitor! No one was allowed to know the Clan's

secrets; religious, blood magic or otherwise. The High Regent in Vienna must be notified.

Chandler scowled and listened closely, making sure not to miss a word.

The woman took out an amulet and Timms reached for it. Chandler allowed the blood to wander to his eyes. He gasped at the aura that appeared. Bloody hell, the thing was brilliant with magical energy! So not only was Timms breaching the trust of the entire Clan, he was procuring forbidden magic in direct disobedience to the orders of Prince Blaine.

Chandler turned and departed down the hallway towards the communication room, a smirk slinking across his face. He would out his superior tomorrow night in court. What a scene that would be! Nathaniel Timms the traitor would surely meet final death. And he, Chandler Evans would then ascend to the leadership of this chantry as was his rightful place. Once he had set things right, who knew where that would lead? From Primogen to Regent? He could hardly contain his glee at his good fortune. He skipped for a moment as he proceeded down the hall.

Chandler went directly to the plant connected to the Tremere headquarters in Vienna. Grown from a shoot, it shared the same DNA as its parent. Steeped in Tremere blood, this was how they circumvented the electronic eavesdropping efforts of the Nosferatu. He washed his hands in the basin then scooped up the stylus and scrawled a quick message on the back of one of the leaves.

Timms compromised. Sold Toreador neonate Patricia Heron privileged and confidential Tremere secrets. Witnessed firsthand. Awaiting orders. C. Evans

He plucked the leaf from the small tree and set it afire in the brazier. On the other side of the world the message was appearing, but they were still in daylight so it would take a while to get a response. With some luck he would be rewarded both from Prince Blaine and the High Regent. As fate would have it, tomorrow night would be his last. He would never get the satisfaction he

desired.

Deep within the ground under Jerusalem, lay an ancient settlement, covered by time, rock and sand. Before the Jewish people were established there, it was as old as civilization itself. Long forgotten in the years that had passed like layers in a cake of dust, some chambers of this pre-historic settlement had survived. They had been hewn out of the bedrock itself. With little rain to provide any trickle down erosion, the empty cavities had remained undisturbed through the ages. Some of them were not completely empty, though.

On a dais built up from the floor lay an oblong stone container. The sandstone coffin had been cemented together with mud, then sealed in much like later generations of Egyptians would seal in their kings from the sun, air and elements, unaware of the true origin of their protective burial rites.

Within the coffin lay a powerful vampire. Malkav was a childe of Enoch, who in turn was the childe of Caine, the very first vampire. Malkav was touched—he was insane—and this insanity passed through his blood to the entire line of his Kindred descendants. Although he was deep in torpor, his subconscious remained active. It was this limited awareness that allowed him, on certain rare nights when the moon was in the right place, to contact those who shared his blood. Older Kindred referred to this as “The Malkavian Madness Network.” Some whispered that Malkav had incorporated his body into the crust of the Earth. Others denied the very existence of the Antediluvians themselves, equating their legends to late night stories of the boogey man used to scare younger Kindred and keep them in line.

There, inside the stone coffin, on a face that had not seen light since near the time of man’s birth,

he lay unmoving like the stone itself. Dust covered his cold skin and ancient robes which had decayed to a layer of threads. Then, in the black silence... eyelids fluttered.

Chapter Twenty Two: MS Euroluxe

The miles passed underneath me and reports came on the radio of a terrorist attack that had occurred in New Monroe. I adjusted the tuning and turned up the volume to listen as the static of AM radio crackled over my speakers.

Tensions have exploded in the sleepy city of New Monroe in a night of madness as dozens of random attacks have been reported across the city, against both citizens and law enforcement. Local police mobilized with officers pulling double shifts late into the night and early morning. The consensus is that gang violence is to blame, with the displaced homeless of hurricane Katrina venting rage against their sister city, which escaped major damage due to the slight elevation above the surrounding areas. In related news, Donizetti Theatre was completely destroyed in an act of terrorism that has not been seen on US soil since the Oklahoma City bombing. Authorities have yet to report on any casualties and the private owner of that city landmark has not been located for comment.

The captive Kindred were free now, but at what cost? I twisted my lips to the side as I thought about it. Just like the Camarilla rolling over innocents in their crusade to uphold the Traditions, the Anarch Movement had its issues as well. What could have been done to prevent this catastrophe from happening? Exile to a remote land? The issue was more complex than I had answers for. Kindred viewed themselves as above the concerns of humans in every aspect. Individually and collectively they had the power to enforce their will so long as the secret of their existence remained hidden. I shuddered remembering Gabe cautioning me about the

holocaust that would occur should the genie escape from the bottle. Wasn't there a way that Kindred and humans could just leave one another alone? Or was it how the Camarilla viewed it – an evolutionary system with vampires at the top of the food chain?

And yet, God was still in control. Perhaps I should do less fretting and more trusting. At 1 am I passed through Alabama and into Florida, feeling a little safer from my narrow escape. The destruction of Katrina and the manipulation of the Kindred that plotted my demise were still fresh in my mind, yet with the distance behind me I felt released from the fetters that had chained me. Amalthea was safe. I swelled with relief at that. I hoped she was able to get into a detox center. She'd need one if what I saw in Little Tokyo happened again. I thought of all the others that had died. Kanini... Jasmine... Mack... Valerie... Harrison... Alexander.... I doubted anyone had missed out on court. What happens to vampires when they die? Eternal damnation? Or some other tortured existence, as in the case with Cillian Sass?

My thoughts then took an odd turn. Back to the Garden of Eden. What was it? The other tree. The fruit. The fruit of eternal life. God had banished Adam and Eve after they had partaken of the apple of the knowledge of good and evil so that they could not also eat from the other forbidden tree. Were vampires the result of the other forbidden fruit? Eternal life... a curse? I didn't know.

I thought back to when I was first Embraced. I had desired a life filled with ease, extravagance, beauty and eternal youth. Instead what I found was strife, deception, pain and trouble. But now at least I had a chance. A thin one, true... but it kept me going.

At 3 am I pulled off on the exit into Tallahassee. The B-Mart was easy enough to find. B-Mart is the low rent store for Kindred like myself. You don't have to hightail it out before they close and

the prices are low enough that we can afford to shop there. I purchased a pay-as-you-go cell phone and a debit card to go with it, along with a cell phone charger for the car cigarette lighter, some traveling clothes and a set of luggage.

As I was fiddling with the cell phone packaging outside the store, a man approached. “Hey, girlie. Got a light?” He was a big guy, maybe 6’1” with a ruddy complexion, short hair and thick eyebrows. He followed me out of the store into the parking lot. I picked up the pace and sent the blood to my eyes to check him out. When I glanced back at him his aura was a field of vivid colors. Human, then. The panic that started to envelop me broke with a wave of relief. This was a stark contrast to the way I would have felt before my Embrace. He was stalking a predator.

He broke into a slow jog to catch up to me. I started pushing my cart faster. When I reached my car I heard him growl, “Purse and keys, now!” Oh, this scum desperately needed a lesson.

The parking lot was probably videotaped. I didn’t want to just beat him up, in spite of the fact that he really deserved it. That would just put me on the radar of the police. My goal was to get to the coast tomorrow so I could then make arrangements to get to Vienna.

He came up behind me as I sent the blood directly to the center of my chest. When I turned he was just behind me holding a gun, but when he saw my kaleidoscope eyes his jaw dropped. “Put that gun away!” I frowned. This punk was going to be dinner. He nodded, bewildered, and put the gun back in his jacket pocket. Meanwhile I took two paces and turned him around so that my back was towards the store and gave him a kiss on the neck. I suppose it looked like he was getting a hickey. Blood cascaded down my throat as I swallowed liquid pleasure. In spite of his smell I drained him until he could not stand. I followed the kiss with an undercover lick and helped him to sit down. He just sat there, dazed. I gave him a vicious slap across the face that

caused his head to rock back and hit the pavement.

I hurled my purchases into the car and got out of there. Back on the highway, I was safe again. If there were any Kindred chefs, this guy would not have been on the kosher list.

After a while I pondered whether or not to notify Gabe that I had survived the massacre in New Monroe. On one hand, I might need his help/influence in my dealings with European Kindred. On the other, I was trying to leave this life and become human again. The trip to Vienna was out of necessity. Better to allow him to think I had perished than to invite more entanglement down the road. Would he seek me out and kill me if I found a way to become human again? I mulled it over. There was the Masquerade to protect, and he would not Embrace me a second time. I didn't want to leave it up to chance. It was settled then.

After traveling for 90 minutes and charging the cell phone battery I spotted a truck stop and pulled off the exit. I found a cozy spot along the side and parked to activate the cell. After some run around I had it up and working and went online to check ships bound for Europe. I debated whether I should go by passenger ship or container vessel as I put in the search query. I certainly did not want to travel in a bilge like a sewer rat. I thought of the hideous Nosferatu and shuddered. *Disgusting. Just see what's available.*

A passenger cruise offered the advantage of a ready supply of blood and of course human company. The Toreador are adept at mixing with humans without arousing suspicions. Then again, I would have to contend with no passport, visa or reservation at the docks. A cargo ship would lower my profile and reduce my chances of being tracked, but I preferred traveling in nicer accommodations.

After putting the information into the search, I was in luck. The MS Euroluxe was scheduled to

leave Fort Lauderdale the day after tomorrow enroute to Seville, Cartagena, Rome, Athens and Croatia. That meant I would have to travel quickly to get there in the early hours of the morning. I took a change of clothes and went to take a shower in the truck stop facilities, coming back refreshed. The sun was beginning to lighten the horizon, so I checked to make sure I was not being watched as I hopped into the trunk and closed the lid. Not as comfortable as a coffin, but it would protect me from the sun.

I awoke with a start, almost banging my head against the top of the trunk. *Whoa*. Close call. I chalked it up to spending a day in the heat of the trunk, then checked the time on my new cell. 6:45 pm. Good. Time to start rolling.

I decided to go just slightly faster than the flow of traffic. No need to get a speeding ticket or have to use blood to avoid one. Traffic was light, particularly after midnight and I made good time. I looked up the location for the berthing area with an online road map and got directions. As I traveled down the peninsula, I was amazed at how flat the terrain was. The land just stretched out like a sheet in all directions.

I arrived in Ft. Lauderdale at 4:10 am. The MS Eurolux would be docking today for a 24 hour turn around. I checked into a chain hotel and requested a room for a day sleeper. They were only too happy to take my money.

After securing a room, I went down to the docks which were buzzing with activity. Forklifts burdened with pallets streamed up and down the pier. Workers loaded their cargo of food and supplies onto the ships. Men in hard hats spoke into walkie-talkies coordinating the frenzy of activity. I walked up to the embarkation desk. A young, tanned guy with a retro 80's haircut manned the desk. His name badge said "Ben."

“Good morning,” I flashed him a smile which he returned.

“Morning, ma’am, would you like some coffee?” he asked, pausing from his work at the computer terminal.

“No thanks, but perhaps you could help me in another way. I need to secure passage on the MS Eurolux departing tomorrow.”

“Oh,” he replied, a twitch of his lips said there might be a problem. “These cruises are booked months in advance. I wish I could help, but let me at least look it up.” He began clicking his way through the menus. After a minute, he looked up. “It’s booked solid. The only way we could get you on is if there was a no show at the last minute.”

“Who has the authority to over-ride the reservation list?” I tilted my head to the side, my earrings swaying.

“The captain of the ship, I suppose. I’ve heard of it happening, but it’s not normal procedure.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow, then,” I replied with satisfaction. It was 5:20 am and time for me to get back to the hotel. I placed the do-not-disturb sign on the outside of the door before retiring for an uneventful day of sleep.

The next evening I did some last minute shopping for some new, dressier clothes before heading to the terminal. I didn’t want to spend the whole trip with just jeans and casuals. I picked up a blue v-neck evening dress and some black heels and hose to go with it. I also got some traveling essentials and a tour book on Austria.

Ben was just coming on shift at 9:30 pm when I visited the embarkation desk. “Hello again,” he said as I set my luggage down. “I hope you can get a spot, the Eurolux is a great cruise.” He

started going through the menus again and shook his head when he was done. “Still no cancellations.”

“Get the captain for me, please,” I smirked at him. So, this was how it was going to happen.

“Oh, I really can’t. He so busy with....” He paused mid-sentence as I sent the blood to my chest.

I wondered if my eyes sparkled like Gabe’s and Aurah’s did when they did it. The effect was remarkable. Ben changed his mind. “Uh, sure, one moment.” He picked up a walkie-talkie.

“Captain to the main terminal.” After a beat the reply came over the radio.

“Everson here, what is it?”

Ben pushed in the button. “Captain, your presence is required at the terminal for a reservation problem.”

“I’ll be down shortly.”

Captain Everson was a short, thin middle aged fellow. He wore thick black glasses and walked with quick strides. Crisp, straight creases went down his ironed uniform. His slightly annoyed expression changed as he approached the desk into one of helpful pleasantries when he saw me.

“How can I help you tonight, Miss...?”

Remember, you don’t lie anymore. “Patricia Heron. I need to book passage to Europe on this cruise.” He opened his mouth and I sent vitae once more to my heart. “I need a stateroom as well, single occupancy.” I might as well go in style.

“I wish I could, the rooms are booked.” He was struggling between duty and desire. I didn’t know it at the time, but he was also trying to resolve another unknown issue altogether.

“Don’t they overbook like the airlines do? Certainly a captain with your influence can make a few changes. Please?” I smiled.

He looked into my eyes a moment longer then made a decision, logging into the computer to make the changes, muttering to himself. “Put the Morrisses... Veranda suite 904, the Lincolns get Ocean View 721, and the Cardins into Interior Standard 633. The Stenners get put on standby.” He looked up. “That will be \$ 7,499.”

“Of course.” Good thing I asked for extra money from Primogen Timms. I got out the cash from my knapsack and handed it over to Ben, who printed out my boarding pass. Getting on board was one thing; I didn’t want to steal or rip them off.

“Your passport, please?” the captain asked.

“I’m special. I don’t need one.” I grinned.

“Let me assist you with that luggage.” Captain Everson picked up my bags as we breezed through the employee’s entrance and straight up to the gangway of the ship. Lights from windows stretched off in the distance across the water, reflections rippling in the darkness.

“Could you ask your steward for my turn over service to be done on the evening shift? I’m a night owl and besides, the sun and I don’t get along.”

“I’ll make sure the arrangements are made,” he assured me as we exited the gangplank.

“Scandinavian?” I asked.

“I’m from Norway. Ah, here we are.” We passed through a spacious entranceway. Polished marble floors spread out with high columns stretching up to a curved ceiling. Indirect lighting

illuminated carved brown trim and beige walls, tastefully decorated with classical paintings. A large board displayed the ship's itinerary and fresh flowers and plants accented the sides of the circular room.

A svelte brunette in ship uniform ceased her clipboard chat with a coworker and came over to us as Captain Everson set down my luggage.

"Patricia, this is Angie Henderson, my head steward. Angie, this is Miss Heron, she'll be checking in early and staying in Triton suite 1104. Angie will see to all your needs. Oh, and Angie, she'll need an evening turn down service. If you will excuse me, I have to oversee loading operations." He saluted us with a grin and departed.

"Nice to meet you," she shook my hand. "Not many get a personal escort onboard by the captain," Angie smiled as she went back to the check in counter. She punched a button and spoke into the intercom. "Paxton to boarding."

"Is this your first visit with us?" Angie retrieved a credit card-style room key and handed it to me. I handed over my boarding pass in return.

"This is my first cruise... well, passenger cruise." I shrugged and returned her smile.

"You are in for a treat then." A young man with black, buzzed hair then arrived. "Miss Heron, this is Paxton, the concierge for the Triton suites. Could you get the luggage for us, please?"

Paxton gave a brief hello and grabbed my things while Angie escorted us to my room, giving a tour on the way. "To our right is the casino. It doesn't open until we are in international waters, twelve miles out to sea." The room was vast and filled with slot machines, glass, tables and chandeliers. All the lights and machines were turned off giving the space an empty, haunted

quality.

Angie showed me where the dining room was, and recommended the midnight brunch in the Neptune Lounge, which was a private eating area for suite guests only. After going up an elevator and walking towards the bow even more, we finally arrived.

Paxton opened the door for me and carried my things inside. “Just push the buzzer should you need anything.” He pointed out a button just inside the door. “I’m at your service.” With that and some final welcomes, they both left.

I turned to take another look at my surroundings. The room was spectacular. It was open, spacious and elegant with a full bath beyond the bedroom. Large, fuzzy bathrobes hung from the closet door, and a variety of scented soaps and lotions waited for use. Now *this* was the way to travel! I quickly filled the tub, turned on the TV to a soft rock channel and was soon relaxing to warm, soft, sudsy bubbles as the water jets caressed my skin.

After an hour of just letting go I put on the bathrobe to explore the rest of the suite. Ship stationary and a gold plated pen and pencil set waited on a counter before a comfy but sturdy chair. Inset into the wall at the counter/desk was an internet connection jack and electrical outlet. A bookshelf stood next to the bed stocked with classics as well as the newest bestsellers. Polished wood brackets kept the books from falling off the shelves at sea. Statuary as well as trimmed plants decorated the nooks and corners of the suite.

On the other side of the bathroom I found a mini kitchen. Shame I could not put it to good use. A complimentary bottle of champagne waited chilled inside the fridge along with sliced fresh bread and a selection of meats, cheeses and condiments. I closed the fridge and went to the sliding double doors to the balcony. Pulling aside the drapes I went out onto a spacious deck. Deck

chairs for lounging flanked a drink table. The docks buzzed with activity below as the ship prepared for departure tomorrow.

I finished up the evening by reading part of my book on Austria. I checked out a map of Vienna. If New Monroe was any indication, the city would be divided into districts based on Clan domains. Clan Toreador would be found near buildings for the arts, Ventrue in the business district, etc. I was glad I took two years of high school German; hopefully it would come back quickly. On a thought I called Paxton and he arrived after a few minutes, looking a little sleepy.

“Paxton, do you think one of your crew might be able to swing by a store and pick up some German language software for me before we leave tomorrow?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see to it that it gets done.” I gave him two \$100 bills and told him to keep the change. Good thing I saved one of the laptops from the Khalid eavesdropping operation. It was nestled in my knapsack with the money. With that I put the do not disturb sign on the door, closed the sliding doors to the outside deck and drew the curtains, then waited for sleep to claim me.

I awoke the next evening and could feel the floor underneath the bed shifting ever so slightly. We were at sea then. After getting dressed I noticed some papers had been slid underneath the door. I gathered them and sat down to read.

One was a handwritten notice from Paxton. The requested software was available from the check in/info desk. Okay. Another paper requested a time for my turn-down service with a list of boxes to check. I chose 9 pm as I would most likely be enjoying evening activities at that time. I’d prefer the early morning hours to myself. Another form requested my home town. The ship had a print shop that could produce daily newspapers from around the world and it was included with

Triton suite services. I had to choose the San Francisco Ledger as the LT Observer was now gone along with Aurah and the Washborne Hotel.

After going through the papers I was startled by a persistent knocking. “One moment,” I answered as I went to open the cabin door. Captain Everson waited outside, along with Paxton and another crewmember. “I hope you will forgive the intrusion,” the captain said adjusting his glasses, “but your presence is required. The Matron needs to speak with you.”

“The Matron?” I asked, puzzled. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“All will be explained with time. If you would accompany us, please?”

I was suspicious, but I had not done anything aside from arranging my passage. I went to get my purse and then we set off. Crew members saluted and gave a wide berth when they saw the golden shoulder boards and bill of his hat. Captain Everson returned the salutes, smiled and shook hands with people as he passed, occasionally giving compliments and recognizing former passengers. Down, down, down we went through stairwells until we passed through a door that said “Employees Only.”

Uniformed crew bustled in the ship’s laundry, pressing sheets on a row of steam machines that folded and stacked them in one operation. Huge washers and dryers worked late into the night to prepare linen for the next day. The noise of the laundry caused the deck to vibrate under my feet.

In the back of the room past the washers and dryers was a latched, oval metal door, like the kind in submarines. Spray painted in red across the front were the words: *Verboten! No Admittance.* I was beginning to get a bad feeling about this. Captain Everson unlatched the door and ushered me through with a wave of his hand. I stepped through, but the door shut and locked behind me.

Now I was starting to get anxious. The bare metal walls were painted black. Short, thick candles squatted on seams coming out from the walls. They flickered with a dim yellow illumination as my eyes adjusted. The corridor went eight feet down then made a ninety degree turn to the right. The temperature dropped as I advanced and I noticed more candlelight coming from up ahead as I went around the corner. The corridor opened up into a squared off 15 x 15 foot room. There on the opposite side was a middle aged woman with curly brown hair. She was seated on a throne, a circlet of moths perched on her brow. Fog descended around her spreading out on the deck and thin shimmers pin wheeled slowly through the air, much like heat waves refracting light in the desert. So this was the Matron.

I sent the blood to my eyes and sure enough, her aura was a dim gray with no colors. So she was Kindred, or at the very least, supernatural. “What are you doing on my ship?” she asked, her voice agitated.

“I’m seeking passage to Europe,” I answered quietly.

“Name and Clan, please. Remember your manners.” She seemed to be staring through me and I turned around to see what was behind me. Nothing. I turned back. “Patricia Heron, Clan Toreador,” I answered. I remembered that same stare from Penny Angel, back in Little Tokyo. *She must be Malkavian.*

“You have brought danger aboard my ship. I would not have you hunting my guests or crew. But... perhaps an arrangement can be made.” Her voice softened. “You must perform a service for me and follow the laws of my Domain.”

“What could *I* do for *you*?” I asked as I put my hand to my chest.

She looked at me and lifted her head, considering. Fog continued to roll out from her across the floor. “Humility is a virtue, young one. What is your destination in Europe? Why do you go there?”

I answered honestly. “I’m going to Vienna, where I seek....” *How do I put this?* “Resolution.”

“Then this meeting was destined. You must take this box to the Prince of Vienna.” She motioned to a thin, polished wooden box next to the throne. It faded in and out of the fog that descended from her. “The contents are meant for him alone.”

I nodded. “I’ll take the box to the Prince of Vienna,” I agreed. I wondered what was inside it. *A firebomb? A cache of diamonds or ancient artifacts?* I dismissed the thought and concentrated on the negotiation taking place. “May I ask what your laws are so that I am sure not to offend?”

She nodded. “You may not use any Kindred abilities on my ship. You have already influenced my captain. I will forgive that one instance only because it took place offshore. I will not tolerate my ghouls being manipulated.”

“Yes, ma’am. I apologize. I was unaware that....”

“I realize you were ignorant at the time and this is why you were not destroyed,” she answered.

“You may not feed from my passengers or crew. They are mine and mine alone.” I nodded wondering how I was going to get through the voyage. I didn’t want to frenzy, but maybe if I locked myself in the cabin I could preserve the blood I had left and make it through.

The Matron continued. “There is a priest on this voyage. Father Leonard Allen. He is a hunter of our kind. He is to be avoided. I would not have scrutiny invited here.”

My eyes widened as I remembered John Mark Inglewood and the horrors of Little Tokyo. “I

understand and agree.”

“You may not tempt fate by playing any games of chance or using the machines in the casino room. They are meant for humans alone.”

Tempt fate? Well, Malkavians were a strange bunch. Nothing lost there as I hadn’t planned on using them anyway. “Of course.”

“Also, I have a message for my kin in Vienna.”

“Okay,” I replied.

It wasn’t like she pressed her hand to my temples or anything. Her eyes merely changed and she just gave me... *a look*. Those dark pupils became intense in a way that words don’t describe. Immediately my mind was sent spinning as her eyes seemed to engulf me.

It was like I had a strange dream, but closer to a vision. I never dreamt any longer since my Embrace. Instead I spent my days hibernating in unwaking darkness. I understood we didn’t have REM brain activity, but something closer to suspended animation rather than sleep.

The setting for this disturbed vision was the moon, of all places. It was silent. Deathly silent. The deep sea of space was jet black, making the stars and landscape stand out all the more. A dim purplish haze covered the curved horizon. To my left, the haze seemed to extend out into space and narrowed into a long, thin straight line. Oddly, the powdery surface also had a slight purple hue. *Some kind of grape cheese?* Shadows on the surface were stark; rocky outcroppings and even grains of fine sand cast stretched, black silhouettes across the white landscape.

In the distance was a spiraling maw. It must have been 200 meters across, perhaps even more. Waves of force seemed to corkscrew into it. Figures faded into view across the scene without

features or faces, struggling in slow motion to escape the hole in the distant landscape. Each of them were, inexorably, pulled silently into the whirling maelstrom. Furrowed rows of powder marked their backwards progress as new shapes formed to replace the ones being pulled in.

Then just as suddenly as the vision came it disappeared. The Matron's gaze drifted down to the floor and a rambling utterance came from her lips. "The time prophesied is now at hand. The fate of the Ravnos is coming again. Coming for the descendants of the moon. The father knocks on the door and the children will answer. The carpet will be destroyed unless the light is broken." She looked up at me again.

I wasn't sure what to say. "Anything else?" I was just glad the experience was over and I was not left stuck on the moon.

The Matron leaned to her side and lifted the box, which she held out to me. It was a little larger than a TV dinner box. "You are dismissed." I heard the latches on the door turning behind me. I took the box with a nod and backed up until I had left the room. Then I turned and went back down the corridor. The captain and the others were still there, and they escorted me back to my suite.

The wooden box was polished mahogany, I thought. It was simply made, with brass hinges and two brass swinging latches. There was no lock. It was meant for the Prince, so I would not mess with it while on board, certainly. I stuck it into my knapsack.

I was too late to buy a swimsuit at the ship's store, so I went to the check in desk to pick up the software that was waiting. I might as well bone up on my German. I relaxed on the patio as I studied. I had forgotten how they cram words together to get other meanings.

Hochsgeschwindigkeitsbegrenzung means maximum speed limit. Hoo boy. Around midnight I

had another knock on my door.

It was Paxton. “A gift from the Matron,” he stated. He hefted two large boxes of frozen burger patties, a sealed envelope was on top. I took them all to the table in the center of the suite and set them down.

“Please pass along my gratitude,” I told Paxton before he nodded as he closed the door. I opened the envelope first. I didn’t eat meat so the burgers were not going to help me much. The note inside was written in boxy letters. It read:

Do not debark for Austria from Rome. You would not survive and my gift would not reach its destination. Journey from Croatia instead.

It wasn’t signed, but still the information was good to know. Don’t go to Rome. It would make my journey longer but better safe than sorry.

I checked the burgers and was pleasantly surprised to find 12 liter packs of blood! (They were chilled, not frozen.) Now *that* was a good gift. I smiled and got one of them out before placing the rest in the refrigerator. As I picked up the pack I wondered if the Matron had mixed some of her own blood with the rest in the blood packs. I was still cautious as I didn’t want to develop a blood bond. That would not be good. I allowed my fangs to grow and punctured the plastic, sipping, waiting for my feelings to change. Was the Matron an awesome lady now? Was she a rock star I wanted to serve? Nope. My caution, although well placed, was rewarded and I sucked the container dry. Sated, I settled in for a quiet night of relaxation.

I pondered the meaning of the Matron’s cryptic words. What was the fate of the Ravnos? I had heard the name only briefly in passing while in the Elysium in New Monroe. I assumed they

were a small splinter Clan of Kindred from Europe. She had the moon part right from the vision, but who were the descendants of the moon? Malkavians? It could be a reference to their lunacy. What was the spiraling maw? There was no carpet so I had no idea what that was about. Penny Angel's prophecy had all come true; the Red Queen was the leader of the Tzimisce during the riots of Little Tokyo. There was no Sheriff or law. The parts had become whole as ghouls were horribly transformed into the Vozhd. I considered asking for an appointment to see the Matron again to ask her about the Ravnos and the carpet, but figured I had best leave well enough alone. I didn't want to offend her somehow and ruin what goodwill I had already received.

The next night I decided to go to the Neptune Lounge for the meet and greet I had been invited to. I cut the tags from the blue v-neck evening dress I had picked up my last night in Ft. Lauderdale and gussied up in preparation. I was pleased the dress matched my eyes. I placed the knapsack in one of the empty drawers so that it was out of sight. I didn't want to tempt anyone with large amounts of cash. Then I grabbed my purse and left for the party.

Polished, patterned teak flooring spread out through the spacious room. Paintings of Neptune and other sea-related motifs decorated the sumptuously appointed lounge. Electric wall sconces lit three sides while the fourth was open to the ocean through sliding glass partitions. The moon reflected off the sea far below us as quiet music piped through the air. Several stations served food and appetizers. There was a sushi bar. One sign proclaimed that blowfish was being served.

Men in sport coats and women in dresses milled about talking and mingling. Angie and Paxton were there, out of uniform but still wearing nametags. Angie wore a classic black dress; Paxton looked sharp in his tuxedo. Captain Everson wore a black version of his uniform which made the gold of his shoulder boards and cap stand out all the more. I received a program for the festivities

from the hostess and glanced through it as I strolled through the entrance. There was a meet and greet followed by a private performance of stand-up comedy, then dancing and music from a live band.

The bar itself was a thing of beauty, blue and violet rays glistening through glass and ice. The colors slowly changed as they reflected through and off the clear surfaces. Bottles shimmered in their bath of light, and I found myself smiling at the enchanting display. A buzz filled my head with delightful numbness. *Oh, no. I was going into reverie! Not here... not now!* I tried to look away but was glued to the cascading, glimmering lights that danced in front of me, my enjoyment increasing by the moment. *Oh yeah....*

Thankfully Angie bounced in front of me blocking my view. “Hello Patricia, how are you doing this evening?” I snapped out of it, looking like an airhead in the process.

“Oh... ah, great!” I allowed my stupefied smile to relax into one more cordial. “I’m really enjoying the cruise.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” she replied. “You should try the sushi and get a drink – they are all on the house.”

“I may do that,” I answered with a nod. Angie went to mingle with some other guests and I turned around, only to bump into a man who was standing directly behind me. As we both recovered, I noticed he was dressed in all black, except for the small white square at the base of his throat. His features reminded me of a thin version of Ernest Hemingway.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he said taking a half step back. “Father Leonard Allen, how do you do?” His hair was short, straight and grey as was his trimmed beard. He stuck his hand out for me to

shake.

What do I do? The one man on the entire ship of over a thousand people I wanted to avoid.

Perhaps he had seen me staring at the bar in stupefied bliss? As soon as I shook his hand with my cold dead one he would be onto me, if he wasn't already. I scrambled for an excuse. I looked into his smiling, dark craggy eyes and then down to his hand. A thick, gold ring adorned his third finger. "S-O-C-I... P-O-L-D" went around the band, a red gemstone centered in the middle.

I allowed my nose to scrunch up and lifted my head. The good father's face went from pleasant reception to surprised defensiveness as his eyebrows flew up and his arm went reflexively into a protective posture. I lifted my hands and let loose with a forced sneeze that would have made Harrison Smith cringe and the Nosferatu rejoice. "*Achoo!*"

"Oh!" I said mortified, holding my hands out in front of me, splayed. I had made a scene and others turned to watch. "Excuse me, I have to go to the ladies room," I blubbered as I placed one hand over my nose. The hand was quickly retracted and I made a safe retreat trying not to look in the direction of the bar.

"Did you see that?" I heard one of the women say as I shouldered my way through the rest room door and went to the sink. After cleaning up and washing my hands, I slipped out and went back to my suite. I didn't care if I was a pariah for the rest of the trip; at least I had dodged a bullet.

Deep within the bowels of the ship, the Matron was dealing with other issues. The Malkavians' warped sense of reality was their vulnerability some would say; to others it was their strong point. The fog which rolled perpetually from her was nothing new. It was a very rare side effect

of the Embrace. Most Kindred who exhibited this extraordinary manifestation did not survive – they were too great a risk to the Masquerade. She had done the best she could to deal with the flaw, having found a way to both remain out of sight and continue existence.

At issue were the whirls in the air, which were new. They had only happened once, in the presence of her visitor on ship, but she was concerned they would return. Malkavians across the world had strange things happening to them that night. For those awake, their aberrant perceptions had for a short while manifested in reality. They experienced strange anomalies which occasionally occurred, but observers nearby recognized what they had seen as well. Their powers had for that short time been increased, exponentially, then decreased. Like waves emanating around the globe, Malkavian Kindred who slept had nightmarish visions. For the few eldest who had knowledge of the prophecies in the Book of Nod, this meant only one thing.

I stayed in my suite for the rest of the evening and watched TV. The next night I found a copy of the San Francisco Ledger outside my door. I managed to get to the ship's store early in the evening to purchase a bathing suit which suited my tastes. I spent time on my private deck under the stars submersing myself in the German language, which was coming a little easier.

After several days travel, the night arrived when an evening excursion would take place. I was looking forward to this as I had only tried skin diving once. The cruise company leased a section of a privately-owned speck of land north of the Canaries; Madeira Island. I went down to the debarkation point keeping my eyes peeled for Father Allen. He was not around, thankfully. We were directed to board a small boat for the trip to the island. I got priority seating with my VIP pass and after a bumpy ride which reminded me of a slow motion roller coaster, we went down

the ramp to the island.

A full size pit barbeque was going, the smoke from the food wafted around the campsite in a sweet, savory aroma. Music was playing and it looked like they were going to have a limbo contest as well as other games of skill. Staff had scuba gear ready for rental, but I was not PADI certified so I would just go with a mask, snorkel and fins. I didn't need the snorkel but wore it anyway for appearance sake. I strapped a waterproof flashlight on my wrist.

Rather than waddle out to the shoreline like a wobbling penguin I got into the water first and then put on my fins. Small waves lapped at me as they came ashore, the spray salty on my lips. I checked my light and then pushed off into the surf.

I found that I had to hold air in my lungs or I would naturally sink to the bottom. As I swam out from the shoreline I noticed a small reef further out and down below, perhaps 50 feet away. The shapes of fish darted about in the darkness, briefly illuminated in bright colors by my flashlight. Regrettably, as I drew closer to get a better look, they all as one made a mad dash away from my location. Clearly I could not hide what I was from these animals.

I followed the reef along the side of shoreline. More fish swam away, panicked. What a shame. Well, the flowing plants and scenery were relaxing, so I kept swimming. After I had gone perhaps 250 yards, my flashlight caught a reflection of something in the depths, beyond the reef where the fish were fleeing. It was long, gray and large... and approaching. I turned off my flashlight and sent the blood to my eyes, drifting there on the surface.

Fish glowed blue in the underwater landscape, but flashed yellow as they panicked and swam away. They lacked the swirling multicolor pattern of humans. That made sense, they were alive although not human. The reflection I saw had a dim gray glow. This was wrong; no color meant

it was some kind of undead. *Oh no.* It looked like a shark, but had an unusual narrowing before the head and jawbone. Two large black eyes looked at me. But this should not be – sharks don't have binocular vision like the eyes of an owl or human. The thing exposed its teeth and chomped water. I grimaced around the sides of my snorkel and tried to put some distance between us.

The creature then accelerated rapidly towards my position. I pushed blood into my muscles as I dove from the surface and beat a hasty retreat, kicking as hard as I could to make it to the shore. Water streamed past me as it pulled on my hair and snorkel. I checked behind me and saw that it was gaining.

The dark sand underneath me got closer and with a final push I washed up on the shoreline in my own wake, slipping off my flippers and running a ways inland. Turning, I saw that the creature was now floating chest high out of the water. It furrowed some skin between its eyes and snarled, revealing a twin set of wide fangs in what only could have been a threat display. I pulled up my goggles and watched as it slipped into the water once more.

Holy smoke! I checked around once to make sure my flight from the water had gone unnoticed, then gathered my fins and returned to the campsite. I had had enough excitement for one evening and was thankful it didn't turn out worse. Whatever it was, it was upset with my presence.

Perhaps my interaction with the fishes is what set it off. Either way, I knew better now than to go exploring into places unknown. I had to be more careful and mindful of my surroundings. I would not have Zeke Moss to alert me of what was happening behind my back.

I took the next ferry back to the ship and left the barbeque and music behind. I felt relieved when we docked and I was assured the underwater Kindred, whatever it was, would no longer be a threat. Did the Matron know about the undead shark-thing stalking the waters on the island? She

would not like it if he was feeding on her guests. Perhaps he fed on fish or other marine life. The Matron had enough to be concerned about without my making a nuisance of myself. My Malkavian host was a Prince, in a manner of speaking on the MS Euroluxe. Her crew of ghouls took care of her and she, in turn, ruled supreme, cruising from port to port.

Malkavians could be a strange bunch. My thoughts turned to Benjamin Bixby and Penny Angel. Why not write some weird poetry as a gesture of remembrance for Kanini? I didn't want to go into how she died in New Monroe. Other Camarilla Kindred would see her actions as treasonous, but I didn't blame her. She had saved my life in her act of self-sacrifice.

So what was the difference between Kanini and Malcolm (I supposed he was the driver) destroying the Kindred of New Monroe and the Tzimisce, military and John Mark Inglewood destroying those I grew close to in Little Tokyo? Motive, perhaps, and my own perceptions. In truth, I suppose I didn't know enough in either situation to judge. It was better left in more capable hands.

I dropped the thought as I slipped my pass card into the lock of my suite. I tried to relax to get my creative energy engaged. *Who is the author of the strangest, most peculiar ideas?* The writings of H.P. Lovecraft were most odd. He created a mythos involving other worldly creatures; beings that were so alien they created madness in those unlucky souls who managed to get a glimpse of them. I wondered if this madness was similar in its effect to the Malkavian affliction. His stories were awash with irony; the investigators were hosed if they were successful. Better that they should fail and not be subject to the insanity that would be inflicted on them.

That was good inspiration. I went online and checked out some fan pages. Among his works was

a story about an ancient city that would rise from the waters of a murky lake on certain ill-fated, unlucky nights. I thought about it and finally settled on the idea of a crater lake, nestled up high in a mountain. The ideas flowed from one to another. The rhythm and timing came together and I enjoyed using some obscure, quirky words. *Fetid! Haha!* After a while I had the poem mostly finished in one night.

I finally put my writing away to get ready for the morning. Just before pulling the covers over myself I looked over at the drawers under the shelf. *What is in that box?* It itched at my curiosity. I shook my head and decided again to let it be until I was off the ship.

The next night we entered the Mediterranean Sea, passing through the rocks of Gibraltar. I was fortunate enough to get a view of them. Silhouettes of dark rock stretched up to the sky as we slipped by under the stars. Simply majestic. The moon glinted off the water just so... and I remembered back... back to when Aurah had bounced into the upper room at Arts Haven and called me sister. She had pulled back the curtains and I was spellbound by the beauty of the Pacific Ocean with my new vision. It seemed now to be a time, a place... so far away.

I got dressed up for an evening performance of *The Odd Couple*, something I had been looking forward to. When I left the room, I found a couple waiting outside my door. Both were dressed formally as well. They whispered, arguing. The older gentleman shook his head with his arms folded, his shrilly little wife spoke with her hands on her hips. Her bright red lipstick did not go with her light skin.

“*There she is!*” She spun around and glared at me as I stood there like a deer in the headlights.

“You’ve got some explaining to do, thief! How did you get *our* cabin?”

I came very close to using blood. I smiled self-consciously and apologized. “I’m terribly sorry,

I'm sure there must be....”

“I don't want to hear any excuses! Just give us our room back right now!” The woman continued on screeching like a banshee and flailing her hands, so I slipped my arm inside the door to hit the buzzer for Paxton. I hit it several times.

I listened quietly and nodded, letting her words wash over me without reaction. Paxton showed up in two minutes flat and I spoke to him over the noise. “These guests appear to be upset. Perhaps it's something you could handle?” I had to work hard to keep myself from smiling. Poor Paxton. The lady had a legitimate reason to be upset, but not to cause a scene.

I felt bad as I shook my head and chuckled my way to the theatre. Bad Patty! I was used to dealing with every sticky situation with my vampiric abilities: the reservation to get aboard ship, the used car dealership, even the jerk who tried to rob me in the parking lot. If I were to be human again, I would have to start relying less on using blood and more on just being myself... *and trusting God more.* So I decided to avoid using them if at all possible so as not to be as dependent as I had become.

Halfway through the performance an usher appeared at my side. “Miss Heron? The captain has requested your presence. I got up from my seat, grabbed my purse and walked with him up the dimly lit carpeted aisle. It took a few minutes to reach the navigation deck. The ship truly was huge.

We arrived at Captain Everson's quarters aft of the wheelhouse. “Very good, thank you Stanton.” He closed the door behind me and gestured to a chair where I sat down. He adjusted his glasses and plopped behind the desk where rolled up charts and a thick pile of the ship's paperwork waited for his signature. A weathered, spoked wheel hung from the wall behind him.

Family smiled from photos behind glass enclosures.

“Miss Heron,” he began, looking at me over the top of his frames, “I have been told that you were warned of Father Leonard Allen. Have you done anything, anything at all, to provoke his suspicions on my ship?”

I explained the sneeze and my departure to the ladies room. Aside from that I had no contact with him. Everson leaned back breathed a sigh of relief. “I saw the very end of that, yes, although I wasn’t sure what had happened. Hmm. It appears our inquisitive guest has been too curious for his own good.” He drummed his fingers.

“What do you mean?” I asked, not understanding.

“Father Allen was arrested after he was caught trying to hack into the ship’s guest records. He had the equipment, the programs, everything he needed to compromise our systems. He is currently being held in the brig and will be dropped off at our next port of call with the local police.”

“Oh! Well, I’m glad you caught him.” I thought back. Was there anything I had done that might have tipped him off? No. I had forgotten at the party that I had started to go into reverie.

However, Father Allen had approached me from behind and so therefore, had not seen anything.

“Come with me then. I need to explain this mess to the Matron and I want you with me in case she needs to ask you some questions.” I nodded and we went down through the ship again to the laundry, where machines thrummed with noise and the deck shook to the vibrations. I hoped the Matron would not do the Malkavian mind trick with me again. Once was enough.

Through the hatch we went, into the steel candlelit room with the fog. She was sitting there on

her throne, just as before. Captain Everson bowed before the elder and I followed his example. He quickly explained what had occurred and summarized what I had told him.

She rubbed two fingers against her temple as she regarded me. "Is this the way it happened?"

"Yes," I replied, just as I remembered the lights at the bar. "I was distracted by the colored lights, but only for a few seconds. I don't think it was noticeable."

Everson swiveled his head at me as his eyes bugged out from behind the lenses but kept silent.

Oops. The matron considered this and nodded her head before turning to the captain. "So. The hunter seeks information. Bring. Him. To. Me." Everson left immediately.

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that. What was going to happen to him? Blood bonding?

Thrown overboard? Drained and flung into the furnace? Sure he wanted to kill me, or at least my kind, but that didn't mean we had to become savages. I winced, thinking of the possibilities.

The Matron saw my apprehension. "You are concerned he will implicate you in a transgression?"

"No, ma'am. I am concerned with his well-being."

"Mercy to one's enemies is a trait some consider foolish. Others deem it a mark of innocence. Have no fear young Rose." She leaned forward. "His disappearance would raise unnecessary questions. He will be made to forget most of the trip. I'm beginning to think you have a good soul, Patricia Heron. Stay that way."

"If I may, I have a question before I leave...." I let the proposition hang in the air, waiting for her approval.

“Speak.”

“Back on the island, I had an encounter with an undead man-shark. He seemed... most displeased with my presence.” I tried to phrase it nicely.

Her head went back in recognition. “You encountered an aquatic Gangrel. Yes, they are very territorial. You were lucky to have survived.”

“I have never heard of such a thing.”

She gathered her thoughts. “Each Clan, each line of Kindred has their own strengths and weaknesses, this you know. When a Kindred... indulges in their own peculiarities too much... there are sometimes unexpected consequences. A Malkavian’s twisted mind becomes the landlord instead of the tenant. The Toreador’s hedonistic reverie becomes an addiction. The Gangrel become a part of their environment instead of sojourners through it. The fate of the one you saw is the end result of such indulgence. Like children in a candy shop, they become saturated with their own desire.”

“Thank you for explaining it to me.”

“You are welcome, young Rose.”

After a delayed and prolonged flight from America, someone else was celebrating a small victory. Amalthea McMahon had made it through her detoxification process exhausted but alive. It had taken one and a half weeks of sheer hell. She had suffered convulsions, wracking pain, sweating and sleeplessness, followed by thankful lapses into fitful exhaustion. The clinic workers had to double the thick leather straps that held her down, but now she was waking up from

twenty-four hours of restful, peaceful, blessed sleep. She had lost twelve pounds in the process but now she sat in bed in a fluffy beige robe eating a light breakfast. One poached egg, a half glass of orange juice and a piece of buttered toast sat on a tray.

She was ravenous but her stomach had shrunk during the time she was going through withdrawals. She had not been able to keep any food down during the process, which was something she never wanted to go through ever again. Her convalescence was in an exclusive rehab in Nice in the south of France.

Amalthea lit a cigarette from a pack provided by the staff and forced herself to hold the smoke down as she tried to relax. The news was playing on the TV, with headlines of a terrorist attack that had occurred in the United States. She reached for the remote and turned up the volume. The anchor rattled off the report with the obligatory notes of concern in his voice and demeanor.

“Last week unidentified people drove a petrol tanker into the vacant Donizetti Theatre in New Monroe, Louisiana. The resulting explosion destroyed the historic landmark and fire crews battled the resulting blaze for five hours before it was finally brought under control. One firefighter was hospitalized after his breathing gear malfunctioned, but is recovering. No other injuries or casualties were reported. The age of the building and lack of conformance to current codes played a part in the total loss of the structure.”

Amalthea’s mouth made a small “o” as she watched the report. Oh, no. The attack occurred on the last Sunday of the month, the night scheduled for court. That could only mean one thing. Patricia was dead. Her friend and mentor, whose sweet, sweet blood she still longed for, was gone forever. Oh, Patty!

Amalthea listened to the rest of the report, shaking her head. It looked like her past had been severed, permanently. Perhaps this was the way Patty would have wanted it. Yes, she was sure it was. There would be no more adventures, no more rescues from Setites and covert surveillance ops. No more nights before the fireplace or visits to Elysium. But with that there was no more codependent relationship. No more dependence on blood. No more association with the evil that Patty and she herself had become involved in. It was time for a new start. She clicked the power button on the remote and held her hands to her mouth to cry, shaking with tears.

Chapter Twenty Three: Hospitality

As the voyage of the Euroluxe continued, ports of call passed by quickly. Although I couldn't go on any daytime excursions, I saw the lights of the shoreline as we left each city, sparkling like jewels twinkling from shore. I discovered there was a German CNN, so I tuned it in from my cabin and that helped immensely. After several days we reached Croatia. When I awoke, we were docked at a terminal in the port town of Rijeka. A downpour caused passengers to hurry back on board. I gathered my suitcase and knapsack and set out to speak with Captain Everson.

I found him in the circular entrance lobby where I had first met Angie, making sure all guests were accounted for as they checked in. "Captain, it looks like this will be where I depart." I lowered my voice. "But I'll need your help one last time to get past customs – both for myself and for the package the Matron has asked me to deliver."

He nodded. "Yes, I was informed. I have a way, but you may not like it." His plan was to jump overboard after we cleared the docks. An industrial area lined the shore nearby, and the plants were shut down at night with little security to deal with.

When I was ready I had the forethought to put my things into large ziplock bags provided by the kitchen staff. I wore my jeans, sneakers and a collared cotton shirt, figuring those would be easiest to clean after my dip in the ocean. It was 1 am when we cast off. The summer storm had fortuitously continued and rain came down from the heavens leaving the decks and the shoreline empty. Hefting my small suitcase, I took a deep breath so I would not sink like a rock, and jumped.

I had that floating feeling as I accelerated towards the water. With a smack I hit the surface and started paddling for the shore. The suitcase and knapsack provided good buoyancy. Finally heaving myself out of the water I stood there for a moment, a complete soaking mess. I must have been a sight as I squished along the road in the rain, suitcase in hand.

My destination was a small bed and breakfast a few miles away in a better part of town that I had researched the previous night with a travel guide. Warehouses and maritime businesses quickly gave way to downtown buildings. Closed shops lined the sides of the streets filled with overpriced wares and mementos for purchase by travelers. Some vendors specialized in marionettes, beer mugs and national sports teams, all dimly illuminated behind dark windows. The total lack of human activity made the sleepy wet town of Rijeka seem surreal as I wandered past closed up market stalls.

At last, a little sign by the road confirmed I had arrived at the Nataso House. Cream siding and white shutters reflected dimly through the night rain. I rang the doorbell. After a moment I heard some shuffling inside and a light went on. A woman came to the doorway dressed in a fluffy robe and slippers. She took a quick look at me, soaked with my luggage, and ushered me inside, whispering quick concerns in Croatian.

She had shoulder length dark hair which was slightly tousled. One eye wandered from time to time so she was not always looking directly at me. “Thanks,” I smiled and squished into the small entranceway which doubled as a lobby.

“Američki! Ah. What happened? Did your car break down?”

“I wish it were that simple. I’m Patricia Heron.”

“I am Alma. This is my husband Boro.” A man stood in the hallway at the rear of the room, bare-chested and hairy in his pajama bottoms. He gave me a nod and put something away behind the corner which might have been a gun.

“Would you have a room open for two nights? I’m a day sleeper and really need to get some rest.”

“Yes!” She snapped her fingers at Boro who grunted and went behind the counter. He opened a ledger while I dug into the knapsack and nimbly removed my purse from the plastic bag. After registering and plopping down three \$100 bills, I was shown to an upstairs room.

Boro went in ahead of me and turned on the lights. The walls were sparse but clean, white and cream like the exterior. Alma bustled in with extra towels and then left.

I took a quick shower then rinsed out my salt water drenched clothes and shoes which I left hanging over the curtain rod to dry. The shoes hung by their laces. I removed everything from the knapsack and luggage and left them both open to dry out as well. To my satisfaction very little seawater had gotten into them from my midnight swim. The large ziplock bags were folded flat and the remaining money was placed underneath my clothes in the closet.

It was 4:20 am by the time I had finished getting ready for the morning. I closed the blinds and drew the curtains over them. Finally my attention went to the mahogany box the Matron had given me. *Technically, I never promised I wouldn't look inside.* Pulling aside the brass fittings, I opened up the box.

Black velvet cushions lined the interior. On the left side was a crumpling piece of paper. No, it wasn't paper... it was more like some kind of homemade parchment. Lines showed where the fiber of the thin material had come through. Both faded and yellowed, the sides were all cracked and worn. A thin layer of dust that had evidently flaked off the paper itself peppered the black velvet around the sides. Small, faded letters in a language I did not understand went across the page, which was approximately 5"x 8".

On the right hand side was something altogether unexpected. It was a golden dove in flight, attached to a thin chain. I reached out and lifted it from the case. It felt heavier than it appeared. Made of a double layer of polished metal, it was beautifully simple and elegant. The shadows that reflected from the metal made the bird appear to change shade as it hung in the light. I pulled on the clasp and attached it behind my head. The dove hung there, wings outstretched, nestled underneath my neck. I smiled, reminded of the dove of peace that greeted Noah after the flood, as well as the dove that had descended on Jesus during his baptism. *Hope.* I decided to wear it until the time arrived to present it to the Prince.

The next evening I woke up feeling better. I was one night's journey away from Vienna. It was there I would seek my return to humanity or die trying. Either way, it would bring closure. The clothes I had hung out were dry, but still needed a good wash after being in the ocean. As I finished packing everything away there was a knock on my door. It was Alma.

“Patricia, you have visitors,” she announced from behind the door. I was jarred from the unexpected news. *Was it immigrations that had discovered my illegal entry to the country? Sabbat? One of many enemies I had made that had caught up with me?* Thoughts of doom threatened to seep into my previously optimistic evening. I put my hand over the dove, now underneath my shirt. Might as well get it over with. “I’ll be there in a minute,” I said through the door.

A middle aged couple waited for me in the lobby. The man had curly, jet black hair that covered his ears and a wide beard stretched down to his chest. The woman was petite and blond and wore an old fashioned blouse with a long black skirt which stretched to her ankles. They waited quietly as I got to the bottom of the stairs and the man held up a hand. He spoke an unknown tongue at first. After I identified myself as American, he lapsed into stilted English.

“We are the ride you requested.” I thought furiously, as I had made no such arrangements. Who could they be? After an awkward pause I had the insight to send the blood to my eyes. Their aura was grey; no color. Ah, I nodded in understanding. They were the local reception committee of the Camarilla. The Kindred who lived in these communities for decades and even longer knew the city and its people very well. A stranger slugging through the rain with luggage in the middle of the night would certainly be noticed. I went back to fetch my things and things Alma walked with us to the door.

“Please come back and visit us again!” I told her I would and we piled into a sky blue minicar. I had to duck to fit into the rear seat, while the front passenger seat crowded up against my legs. The pair kept looking around like secret service agents, checking to see who might be watching.

We drove back the way I had come last night, crossing several side streets until coming to a brick-faced two story business. The sign out front said “Marko Curkovic,” and the window displayed quality fitted suits and dresses. The driver, who I took to be Marko, unlocked the door while his companion stayed at the entrance before coming in herself. I was ushered inside and we went to the back of the shop and up the stairs.

The door at the top led into a living room of sorts. Polished antiques decorated the surfaces of several sitting tables and old paintings lined the walls. The place smelled of dust, like a grandparent’s house with knick knacks and ceramics lined up on shelves. The woman glanced at Marko as he turned and looked at me with expectancy, so I set down my luggage and introduced myself. “Patricia Ann Heron of Clan Toreador, Little Tokyo, California.”

They smiled a little at that, nodding their heads. “I am Marko Curkovic of Clan Ventrue. This is my wife, Annette, also of the Clan of Kings. We were told you made a sloppy arrival on the shore last night. You should be more careful in how you choose to cross borders. The Prince of Croatia asked us to contact you instead of sending his Scourge. Why are you here?”

“I am passing through on my way to Austria. I assure you I had no plans to feed here without consent. I am willing to present myself to the Prince to fulfill the requirements of the Tradition of hospitality, if necessary.”

“What is your business in Austria?”

I thought about it. I did not want to get bogged down explaining my journey to Kindred who would not only question my motives, but might keep me from my goal. “I bear a gift for the Prince of Vienna,” I replied.

They glanced at one another as if to say, ‘Does she know what she’s getting into?’ “It is not often we get American Kindred here,” he informed me, picking up the phone. “Most often it is we who depart for your shores in search of upward... mobility.” He dialed in a number. After a brief conversation he hung up.

“The Toreador Whip is on his way over to take charge of you. In the meantime, please make yourself comfortable.” He gestured towards an old, high-backed couch against the wall.

“Thank you so very much for your consideration and welcome,” I sat down carefully on the antique furniture. Annette said something to Marko in Croatian. He considered her words and turned back to me.

“Aside from your...” he searched for the word, “uncustomary entrance, you have shown the proper forms and respect expected from visitors here, which does not always happen, especially from American Kindred. For that, we offer you dinner.”

“Why thank you.” I supposed it would be bad manners to decline the offer. Besides, I didn’t know if or when I would be able to feed again. Marko disappeared downstairs.

Annette sat down next to me and folded her hands. “What is life like in America? Is it as bad as I have heard, with the Sabbat and Anarchs?” Her eyes searched mine, inquisitive. Perhaps she was a neonate as well.

I tried to phrase my answer diplomatically. “It is... difficult, at times. One must be extra cautious. From my own experience, in some places there is too little law, while in others too much, if that makes any sense.”

She listened and made a circular motion with her wrist. “Could you be more specific?”

I considered the question before phrasing my reluctant response. *I don't want to give the impression of being anti-Camarilla.* “It would be... imprudent of me to speak of the situations I have been through. One must live there to understand.”

“Imprudent?” Annette asked.

“Inappropriate.”

“Ah.”

Footsteps sounded from the stairs and I turned to see a teenage girl accompanying Marko. She looked to be about seventeen, with dark pigtails braided behind her head. She glanced at me briefly before taking one knee and offering her neck. I felt a little bad for her, relegated to the role of servant, slave and food supply all in one. As my fangs grew of their own accord I thought of Amalthea and wondered how she was doing. That thought was interrupted as warm blood flowed down my throat in a current of pleasure. I closed my eyes and sucked in rhythmic cadence to my swallows, each one an indulgent thrill of gratification. After I was finished I licked the twin holes shut and smiled, a little self-conscious of my fangs which stuck out.

The wait was not long. After about fifteen minutes, I heard a knocking downstairs. Marko gestured for me to follow, so I grabbed my suitcase and descended the creaking wooden stairs. Outside, a strikingly handsome man stood next to a black car. Clean shaven and strong jawed with auburn hair, he looked like the cover of a romance novel... until he spoke.

“Get in the car,” he ordered. I thought of Gabe’s comment about Clan loyalty and slid into the leather bucket seat on the left side after placing my luggage in the back. It felt odd being on the left hand side and not having any controls there. My Clan rep started the vehicle and pulled out into traffic. “Whip Verner Bubalo,” he stated with a heavy accent and little emotion. He kept his eyes on the road. “What is your business in Croatia, Frau Heron?” He pronounced his w’s as v’s.

“I am passing through to Vienna.” Verner blinked then glanced at me.

“Vienna! Business?”

“You could say that I suppose,” I replied.

He half laughed as he turned back to the road, sneering. “You must be a fool.”

“Perhaps, but I do as I am asked by my elders,” I answered quietly. *Well, most of the time... when they are not busy trying to destroy me.*

Verner squinted as he changed gears forcefully which pushed me back in the seat, keeping his eyes on the road. I had pissed him off. “You would do well to be less arrogant!” I figured that being American and a neonate besides I had two strikes against me already. I probably stuck out like a neon-lit sign that said ‘no status, no recognition.’

“Forgive me, Whip. I simply wish to depart for my destination.” I kept my voice calm and polite, my demeanor submissive. My goal was more important than immediate satisfaction, and I didn’t want to screw this up, although the process grated on my nerves. The payoff didn’t take long.

He waited a bit more. “Very well. What can we do to assist you in this foolish errand, neonate?”

“I’d like passage to Vienna before the night is over, if possible.”

“That means you will go by train. You will take the blue line, but we must hurry if you are to make it in time.” He accelerated and soon we were zooming through the night traffic. “We have an understanding with the operators for such occasions. Use the password *regierende Gruppe*.” I recognized the word as closely meaning ‘the hierarchy.’ We drove in silence a little more before he pulled up to the passenger drop-off at the train station. Verner pulled my sleeve as I retrieved my luggage from the back seat. I ducked back in.

“If it were me,” he held my eyes for a moment... “I would not go.” I realized he was concerned for my safety. There was no shame in self-preservation. I looked back at him.

“I know,” I replied through tight lips. With that I turned and headed into the station.

The train ride into Austria proceeded uneventfully. I bounced and swayed as the passenger car meandered towards my destination. The password had worked without a hitch. The conductor had passed me by and continued on to other passengers without a word. I checked my watch as we pulled into the Vienna station. 4:23 am. Harsh lights glared through the windows from the depot and I stood with the other passengers to disembark. The late-nighters sleepily shuffled down the steps in heavy jackets, murmuring German phrases. As I stepped down, I noticed a woman staring at me from across the concrete plaza. She had a pale, shadowed face made more dramatic by the stark lighting. Long, loose black curls framed her pallid features and draped down onto a grey raincoat. As I paused, she extended a hand and crooked a finger at me, beckoning.

Perhaps Whip Bubalo had called ahead informing them of my impending arrival. Or perhaps they were informed of my arrival by other means. Regardless, I responded to the request and traversed the station. The mysterious woman nodded wordlessly to me with her icy blue eyes and

turned to ascend the steps, her heels clicking. The viscous scent of oil and garbage drifted on a chilling breeze as we neared the top. I followed her silently and properly, not speaking until addressed by this ancient Kindred.

A sleek, silver vehicle with tinted windows and a satisfying engine roar waited for us, idling at the passenger pickup. The driver opened the front side door as we approached and I slid into the offered seat. The woman took a back seat next to a gentleman dressed in a business suit and tie. The three exchanged looks with one another and we pulled out into the street. “Say nothing until we arrive, thin blood,” the man in the back spoke from behind me. I turned and glanced at him, lowering my head in submission. A chill went up my spine. He was clean shaven and stern, with short, neatly trimmed straight dark hair, short bangs and dark eyes. As streetlights passed they flickered shadows across his face like an old-fashioned movie theatre. I had the feeling if I had done anything, said anything wrong, he would have given the others the sign which meant I was to be destroyed.

I turned back and glanced at the driver. He was short and stout, with thick fingers that gripped the steering wheel. A beret topped his round face above bushy eyebrows. We rode in silence until arriving at an ornately decorated large stone building. Well, building might be an understatement. It was huge. The sign outside read “Kunst Handwerk Beherrschen Museum.” White lights illuminated large stone columns which lined the front. The lawn was immaculately trimmed with topiaries and fountains. A stone canopy rose in graceful arches from the central section of the vast front garden. A guard at a back entrance waved us through and soon we were parked in a spacious garage next to a loading bay.

An elevator in the parking garage went up. We exited into a red and black tiled corridor sparsely lined with gold framed portraits. The men nodded and peeled off a separate way, towards a set of wooden double doors lined with carved roses. The carvings were lifelike and looked very old. I accompanied the woman past a turn as she got out a card, her heels clicking on the polished floor. Sliding it into the slot, she opened a door into a storage room of sorts. She flipped the lights as she entered and I saw crates of many sizes with packing material scattered about.

“I am Primogen Veronica Bianchi,” she announced as she went to a standing lamp and manipulated something with her fingers. A small section of the wall swung aside, revealing a safe. “You have much to explain, neonate.” She removed her raincoat to reveal a shapely black dress printed with large roses.

“Thank you, Primogen Bianchi. I am... glad to be among my own blood now that I am here.” I placed my luggage and knapsack on the floor.

“You have caused quite a stir here, Frau Heron. We were divided whether to allow you to live or to simply let the Scourge have you. Veronica glanced at me once neutrally with her cold eyes as she went to the safe lock, dialing numbers. Retrieving a sheaf of papers in a folder, she tossed them on a crate. “Important Kindred, their Clans, and the domain boundary lines within the city. You will have this memorized before you are allowed to leave the room. I trust you know the Traditions?”

“Yes, Primogen Bianchi.”

She evaluated me with her cool gaze for a moment before deciding on a course of action. “How long has it been since you have fed?”

“I fed last night, m... my lady” I almost referred to her as “ma’am,” but held my tongue. The bastardized American version of the French title might not be appreciated.

Her eyes fastened on mine momentarily, unblinking. “Dinner will be sent tomorrow then. Court is four nights hence, and I want for you to be ready to meet the Seneschal. We have much to discuss.”

“Thank you, Primogen. I shall be ready.” *The Seneschal?* Perhaps the duties of court were delegated here.

Veronica headed towards the door. Click, click, click. “Good night, one of my blood,” Veronica whispered in German as the door closed shut behind her. The door closed with a snick and I was alone. There was not much time before sunrise, maybe an hour or two. I sat on one of the crates and began to study the thick document.

The current Prince of the city was Baron Dustin Heinrich, of my own Clan. The Seneschal was Lady Marie Duval of Clan Ventrue. The list of names and titles was long, and there was a small photographic quality sketch of each one next to their listing. Probably illustrated by a Toreador artist. Nearly all of those listed were elders. I buried myself in my studies.

Chapter Twenty Four: Plots

The Very Right Reverend Father John Mark Inglewood relaxed in an Austrian villa, headquarters of the Leopold Society, International. He was glad for the timing of this sabbatical as his work was both demanding and stressful. It was similar to a military career—months of research and boring days followed by moments of sheer terror. The elimination of vampires was a work

devoted to God though, in the service of humanity which was blind to the threat that walked in its midst.

Sunlight beamed through the skylight window, illuminating the comfortable living room. Plush tan chairs surrounded a long coffee table, upon which sat various publications from the Roman Catholic Church for those in service. In the rear of the building were accommodations for those training to enter his order. The instructors were most proficient in their work. They had been trained by him.

John Mark sipped from a cup of Orange Pekoe tea as he read *Europe Today*. He wondered about the explosion that occurred in New Monroe. It didn't seem to have the marks of any Islamic agenda, and the authorities were clamming shut about the driver of the petrol tanker, who was found alive away from the scene. The FBI had allegedly whisked him away to a private safe house somewhere citing national security. John Mark clicked his tongue. For now, this incident belonged to his second in command in the states.

He rubbed a free hand over his bald head. Footsteps approached the front door and it opened to reveal a gray haired priest with two bags of luggage. John Mark placed the paper to the side and went to greet his colleague with a warm smile. "Leonard, I'm so glad to see you again."

Father Allen clasped the hand and gave John Mark a hug. "It's good to be here. I'm glad we could arrange to have our visits coincide." The villa steward arrived to take care of the luggage, one of the perks of the retreat.

"How was the cruise?" John Mark asked as they wandered towards the comfy chairs.

“Thank you, Albert,” Leonard said to the steward. “Good enough,” he replied, slumping into the cushions. “Although I didn’t sleep well towards the end. I had a bad dream.”

“Oh dear,” John Mark said. “Work?”

Leonard nodded. “I dreamt of an elder vampire. She was surrounded in shrouds of mist. She didn’t seem happy to see me.”

“As it should be, old friend!” John Mark’s eyes wrinkled with crow’s feet. “Next time remember to dream up a flame thrower that can turn the creatures into flaming, screaming pyres. That will put the fear of God into them!”

They both shared a laugh. “So tell me about Little Tokyo.”

“Ah.” John Mark leaned back. “I had to get Governor Townsend to tell the commanding officer to give me what I needed. His exact words were ‘Do it unless you want your men to become shish kabobs.’ The major was quite upset; he broke his clipboard, but it was good in the end that I received the help I requested. I believe there were two opposing vampire factions there, which made our job much easier. The majority of the National Guard took care of the creatures which erupted out of the ground and secured the streets. I commandeered a flame throwing tank and found a whole clutch of undead holed up in the art museum. They didn’t last long.”

“They do seem to turn on one another in surprising consistency.” Father Leonard smoothed his trimmed beard.

“Indeed. An empire turned against itself cannot stand.”

Haus de Hexe was a small castle just outside the Vienna city limits. By day it was a monastery, catering to tours and generating goodwill with the government and populace. The monks were all bound to their masters to ensure privacy. Underneath the ground, however, a catacomb of chambers held the seat of power of Clan Tremere. There the leaders of the pyramid, the apex of all Tremere authority ruled over their sanctuary with absolute power and complete seclusion. Whip Finnaeus Knutson sat at his desk, going through reports from the heads of various research sections. Finnaeus adjusted his half glasses as he poured over the daily paperwork, his deep brown eyes scanning for signs of irregularity. A cowlick stood up where his hair parted, an annoying independent clutch of hair that seemed to have a mind of its own. He used gel whenever he attended court.

There were departments for different Tremere paths of Thaumaturgy. One dealt with the elemental blood disciplines: the arts of manipulating fire, water, weather and electricity. Another encompassed mental capacities, keen specializations that produced unearthly powers such as telekinesis and teleportation. Still others dealt with spiritual effects and the power to alter plants and other living things.

One report was troubling. Rats had once more tunneled into the lower levels underground. They could be used by the Nosferatu as spies. Biopotestus had done it again! He would have to have a talk with Administrator DeRamus. This would be a black mark on his record. There was no one ready to take over the section, at least not with the skill that DeRamus had, so it looked like he would retain his position for the time being.

Finnaeus next went to the ghoule reports, going over what had occurred when the sun was out. Ah, the banality of administrative paperwork. No one else could be trusted with the sensitive

nature of chantry operations so it fell to him to get everything done. *Figures!* One record caught his eye. Just last night, an American Toreador neonate had arrived in Vienna. That by itself was out of the ordinary, but the name was what stood out. Patricia Heron. Wasn't she the one who had compromised Timms? The one who had obtained privileged, confidential information that was the *sole* property of Clan Tremere? The thief who had not only brought down a respected elder but also compromised Tremere security? There would be hell to pay. Not only was she on the wanted list but had the audacity to show up in Vienna, right under their very noses!

He took the report from the pile and started downstairs, through the sliding doors marked with mystical sigils. Acolytes scattered at his approach. One didn't move fast enough so he assisted him – into the wall. Down, down, down the earthen ramp through the antechamber. A rat scurried along the side as the enraged elder passed through. He pointed at it with a finger and it squealed as a small fiery inferno engulfed it, leaving a black grease mark on the floor. Through the wide thaumaturgy chamber and finally into the sacrosanct offices of High Regent Walter Hartmann.

Hartmann was involved in research of his own specialty, the Hearth Path, the blood magic that influenced plants. He could open portals that allowed Tremere Kindred to pass through the trunks of trees, unobserved, over vast distances. He also taught the ability that allowed innocuous plants and vines to become animated, fearsome guardians over chantries. He was dressed in the robes of his rank, a crimson cloth decorated with arcane symbols and a golden shawl. Hartmann bade him enter and leaned back to listen to the concerns of his second. After hearing what had been discovered, he considered the situation, furrowing his curly dark brows.

“The Toreador will be protective of their own blood, more out of defending their reputation than any allegiance they feel towards the neonate. Have the Nosferatu see what they can dig up on the offender. Find out if she has any weaknesses.”

“Yes, High Regent. If I may be so bold, should we capture her...” Finnaeus left the sentence unfinished, but Walter knew where this was going.

“Continue.”

“Might we devote the resources to performing... the new ritual? I feel I have mastered the necessary requirements.” The administrative demands placed on Finnaeus had cut into his research time, much to his dismay.

Hartmann pursed his lips. Recent advances into the craft that produced their Gargoyle servants allowed them now to use the ritual on new Clans. Before the transformation could only be used on Nosferatu, Gangrel and Tzimisce Kindred. Now a new prototype process had been discovered which was not limited to Kindred with ties to a bestial nature. This was all quite secret, naturally, as Gargoyle transformation had been outlawed by the highest Camarilla authority, the Inner Circle.

The first was Zarkov the Malkavian. Zarkov had found incriminating evidence that pointed to a Masquerade breach by one of Clan Tremere’s acolytes. Rather than play the game, he turned the evidence in, resulting in the destruction of the foolish offender. In retaliation, they had staked and kidnapped him and used him for the experimental process. The result was a new form of Gargoyle that lacked the power and claws of previous versions. Instead, it was wildly unpredictable in combat, using tactics and dexterity never before seen in previous versions. A

Toreador Gargoyle would be interesting indeed. Would its speed be concentrated? Such a creature would be impossible to defend against. They would have their own perfect assassin, if this was the case.

“Have you finished the second study of Toreador blood?”

“Yes, High Regent.”

“And the results were the same as initially found?”

Finnaeus nodded. “Both the blood studies and the transformation womb passed the tests.”

“Hmm. We shall see. Make the arrangements with the Nosferatu, and let me know what you find out.”

“Yes, High Regent.”

In a different domain on the far side of Vienna, underneath the clockworks, another powerful Kindred was making plans. The Malkavian haven was once a sanitarium; now it was a private estate. In an upstairs room, the aforementioned Kindred sat at a desk, writing. Grime crept down green tile walls in the surgeon’s prep room that now served as an office. Hugo the thylacine, a stuffed, striped Tasmanian tiger, stared across the room unblinking from his mounted perch. A reclined table held leather restraints; electrical wires led from the top, sides and bottom of the contraption. A large tattered Rorschach ink blot test hung limply from the wall. Jeremy the brain floated in yellow fluid, unattended in a dusty glass preservation jar. *Those were the days.* Like a double minded man, some parts of the estate were well looked after; others, less so.

Thomas “the Jester” Dern had risen to the Primogeniture of Clan Malkavian after his sire had perished in the First Anarch Revolt of the late 15th century. Most of the Kindred in Vienna had changed little over the centuries. The games that they played and the behind-the-scenes conspiracies that went on were predictable; they had been repeated many times and could have been scripted.

Thomas narrowed his eyes as he wrote, pondering. He had heard about the new Rose from America. That was not altogether unusual, but his attention had been drawn to *where* in America she was from: New Monroe. The entire affair brought back gut wrenching feelings of pain and loss. It was not bad enough that his first childe, Zarkov had been kidnapped and destroyed by the bastard Tremere. *Damn them to oblivion!* How they lied through their teeth about it to the Prince!

He remembered the night it happened. The elders were all assembled at a Primogen Council meeting; many Clans had multiple representatives there. The Prince himself, Dustin Heinrich, had made a rare appearance to preside over the allegations. They were gathered in the Ventrue haven, a compromise which allegedly offered neutral ground for disputes.

Glass gleamed from the walls and ceiling of the Ventrue office. Fluorescent lights beamed down, the glare subtly but thoroughly covering all those assembled like parts in a factory production line. Prince Heinrich glanced around the table at the power players seated, then turned to the Tremere contingent. The Nosferatu truthsayer, Tancredo, sat by the Prince’s side. “Tell us Primogen Hartmann, did you or your Clan have anything to do with the death of Thomas’ childe, as he claims?” All eyes turned to him.

“No, my Prince,” he shook his head with a low bass rumble as his bushy eyebrows drew close together. *The childe was not dead – merely transformed!* He twisted the dagger and added some salt to it. “Perhaps the Malkavian Primogen mistook him for a letter and had him sent away.” Thomas was in danger of losing control, which was exactly why the Tremere were baiting him. The Malkavian forced himself to calm down.

“So you had nothing to do with his disappearance?”

“Why would we bother with the runt when we have so much more to be concerned about?”

Thomas noted Hartmann did not answer the question.

“For all we know, Herr Dern is being paranoid with his bent accusations.” Hartmann sneered, then softened his voice, sounding more helpful. “But, I am confident for Primogen Dern’s sake that in the future Herr Zarkov will be no more trouble.” He finished with a patronizing nod towards Thomas, who was flexing his hands beneath the table.

Tancredo leaned towards the Prince and whispered, “Veritas.”

Thomas pulled his hands from under the table and leaned forward rising out of his seat, whipping an accusing finger at Hartmann. “I don’t know how you are doing this...” Then his voice changed and became much more menacing. The lights in the room appeared to darken for a moment, and Thomas’ eyes glazed wide in a frightening display of unspeakable insanity. “...*But you won’t get away with it!*”

As one the concerned elders leaned back from the table, away from the Malkavian. Would he lose control and fry their brains? Just as quickly as the threat escalated though, things returned to

normal. “Your Grace, may I have your permission to be excused?” Thomas adjusted his tie. “I would not want to make any rash decisions. I withdraw my complaint.” Oh, how he seethed on the inside, but this was a score that would have to wait to be settled properly.

The Prince agreed and Thomas left the meeting, bruised but not broken.

Thomas shook his head and came back to the present. Now his second childe, the darling from Texas was missing in the conflagration. She had been sent to his cousin in Dallas for education and safekeeping. Desmond Whittaker was known for his gentle but firm hand in training those of his Clan for higher aspirations. She had then followed her lover to New Monroe. Reports were scant in the aftermath. Information was hard to come by, an unusual circumstance in the information age. No Nosferatu were left there, although he supposed representatives had been sent to delve into the records left behind in the sewers to see what could be gleaned from them.

It was a rare gift to be granted the privilege to sire these nights. Beyond the gripping loss that he had to suffer was the additional stigma that the death of his childe would be seen as a bad omen.

Thomas Dern would not be allowed to reproduce again. The gears in the attic above him continued to grind like a giant metronome, never ceasing in their plodding mechanical steps.

Ctch... ctch... ctch... ctch....

Heron was the key. What had happened to his childe that fateful night? He didn't want to try to request the information at court, where others would discover the pain at the loss of his progeny and use it to provoke him. It was best to make other arrangements. “What do you think, Jeremy?” he asked the buoyant bubble of gray matter. Whatever response it made was only heard in his own mind. Or so he thought. Thomas nodded and signed the document. “Oh, shut up!” he said to the desk, which always contradicted whatever the brain said. Stupid. Then the entire room

had to chime in and offer their opinions as usual. He ignored the ruckus and affixed a wax seal to the paper. He then called for a ghoul messenger to dispatch the letter to the Roses' museum. The old ways had their own advantages.

The Nosferatu, the Clan of revolting refuse had to be frustrated by the lack of electronic communication in Vienna. They had fallen back to the old ways of gathering information as well. They would know that there was communication, but aside from that, nothing, unless they dared used telepathy to read the minds of elders. They wouldn't read the mind of a Malkavian, that was too risky, but the degenerates of Clan Toreador were another story.

Eckert hastened up to the second floor—he had been summoned by the master. What could it be? The luminous Primogen, the enlightened one (no pun intended) held out a sealed paper. “Deliver this to the Kunst Handwerk Beherrschen Museum.” A courier mission! Oh joy, oh sweet divine! Perhaps he would be rewarded when he was finished. His mind salivated at the prospect, but not literally. He accepted the sacred parcel and scurried out to the garage.

He waited until the entire street was empty. It was early in the morning, just past midnight, so traffic was sparse. Looking back and forth, were there any eyes? Spies were everywhere, just waiting for him to make a mistake. He pulled out... but no! A vehicle had just turned onto the street down the road, and now it was following him.

Just relax. Relax. It was probably a coincidence. Go the speed limit. That's right. Eckert dared a glance into the rear view mirror. *The lights are getting closer! What should I do what should I*

do? Perhaps the follower was a diversion to keep him from noticing glinting corneas reflected from the shadows.

He hunkered down in his seat to keep the other car from noticing him and made a turn on his route to the museum. Peeking up he looked into the side mirror. The other car was turning as well! The twin headlights from the pursuer looked like great glowing eyes, getting closer... closer.

Finally Eckert ducked completely down in his seat and took his foot off the gas pedal, drifting. If the occupants of the other vehicle had looked over, they would have seen what appeared to be an empty vehicle driving itself down the street.

The vehicle passed by and Eckert breathed a sigh of relief. Driving was bad enough with traffic signals beaming strange energies at him with their colored lights. He turned into the museum entrance and was waved on by the guard after informing him of his mission. Pulling around the back, another uniformed security officer directed him to park and he was escorted inside to a reception room.

Whip Kominski arrived shortly thereafter and accepted the sealed note from Eckert on behalf of his Clan. "Please wait here for our reply," Max told the ghoul. Had it been from another source he might have considered putting the page up to a light to read what was inside but the Malkavians were rather harmless... for the most part. Down the polished corridors he walked until arriving at the office of Primogen Bianchi. Knocking, he was ushered inside.

The office was decorated in a mixture of the finest furniture, decorated by Toreador artisans who specialized in woodworking. Glassy surfaces reflected from cabinets and chairs, with a deep

reddish grain showing through. Black cushions were hand crafted from the softest leather. Two paintings from Rembrandt adorned the walls, scenes of family life in the 1600s. On the Primogen's desk sat a carved ivory swan, resplendently idle as it posed at home on its wooden pond. Red roses perched in a frosted glass vase on the other side. An empty throne etched in gold with the Toreador crest sat behind the desk empty, lording over the subjects of art that populated the room. Creamy beige gave the walls a natural backdrop to counter pose the opulent office which gave Max a thrill each time he visited. Veronica was reading on couch as he entered.

She held out a manicured hand into which Max handed over the sealed note. "What might this be, hmm?" Veronica raised her eyebrows as she sliced through the wax seal. She scanned the page quickly then read it aloud.

Greetings Primogen Bianchi,

We have learned of the arrival of your Clanmate Patricia Heron in Vienna. We would speak with her at your soonest opportunity. Should you make her available at the institute before court we would consider that payment for the major boon which is owed by you to our Clan. Of course, she will be treated with all due respect and I trust that this transaction will remain discreet as part of the fulfillment of the boon. Let us know your decision.

I am, Thomas Dern

Primogen, Clan Malkavian

Veronica wet her lips. Well, *something* was going on. It must be important to be worth a major boon. The neonate had just arrived and already she was deep in political mud. This did not please

her. Still, she could not pass up an opportunity to rid herself of the debt that had languished over her head for too long.

“What do you think?” she glanced at her Whip.

“Send her to them and find out what the jester wants. Then use that as leverage as a return on our investment. Discreet does not mean silent.”

Veronica slowly spread her red lips into an evil, pleasurable smile. “Ah, Max, this is why I need you. We’ll need to debrief the stripling before sending her for a visit with the moon children. Take care of that and inform the ghoul that we accept the terms of his master’s agreement. He can send a car tomorrow evening.”

Max nodded and left to carry out the tasks.

She picked up the phone and shook her head. This American was starting to become trouble even before her presentation. With a sneer she dialed the number for the Nosferatu. “Mr. Senner, please. Tell him it’s Miss Bianca.”

Meanwhile, Curafferum Senner was having a busy night. Everyone and their cousin wanted to know about the neonate newbie. He had received a request from the Crown for the information which had been obtained from the New Monroe network. He couldn’t get a boon from it, but it was a wise investment to obtain goodwill from the court whenever one could.

The bastard Tremere of all things wanted the information as well and he was able to get a minor boon from them. Why was this Kindred so important? He went over the files again which had

been sent to the Tremere and Toreador. She had been involved in a fiasco with the Ventrue Whip and owed a minor boon from that, as well as gotten the attention of the Harpies. She was recognized by Prince Blaine, but shortly after that was labeled a tattletale and then wound up owing a life boon to Clan Gangrel after breaking the Second Tradition.

She disappeared for a month before being seen in Elysium again, apologizing for breaking the Second Tradition. He reviewed the entire, long-winded performance, hoping to gain some insight into why the Tremere were interested. God, Roses are so hard to shut up. They just go on and on!

Nothing there. Her sire, Gabriel Montagne visited New Monroe after that. After a month of no relevant occurrences, the Sheriff's office had received orders to apprehend her. Her ghoul, Amalthea McMahon traveled from New Monroe to Paris. A deluge of message traffic occurred. Then all the crap hit the fan. She was not in court and the rest was history.

Perhaps there was something in what was *not* there. Hmm. The Tremere Primogen, Nathaniel Timms was not accounted for in the week leading up to the catastrophe. *Ah, ha!* What was that about? Something happened. A tryst between a Rose and a Blood Mage? Had she somehow managed to get one of the Tremere into a blood bond? *Oh ho, that would be rich!* Not only would it have embarrassed the entire Clan, but their precious, vaunted secrets would have been compromised. That had to be it! The Clan that could do no wrong had been played a fool by a neonate no less, and now they were scrambling to cover it up! He wondered if he could spin that he knew more about it than they suspected, and how much that would be worth – a major boon at the least! He rubbed his hands together greedily.

Shortly after midnight the next evening I awaited the pleasure of Clan Toreador in Vienna, still in the storeroom. The polished box with the decaying page lay hidden among packing materials in one of the crates. I had finished memorizing the information on local Kindred when the door opened and the driver from last night came in. He wore grey slacks, expensive Italian shoes and a silk waistcoat over a solid pressed dress shirt. His beret sat off one side of his head like a cat that was too lazy to get up. I stood and greeted him, hopeful to be set free. "Good evening sir." I lowered my head and performed a small curtsy.

The stout man grunted in what may have been a grudging assent of my greeting. He spoke in short, clipped phrases. "Whip Maximilian Kominski." He extended his hand. I shook it and awaited instructions. "Please sit, Miss Heron," he gestured towards the crates and sat across from me. He began peppering me with questions, testing my knowledge. "What is the Fifth Tradition?"

"Honor one another's Domain," I replied. "When thou comest to a foreign city, thou shalt present thyself to the one who ruleth there. Without the word of acceptance, thou art nothing."

"List the elders of Clan Nosferatu. Lord Pieterzoon orders you to use a Discipline in Elysium. What do you do? List the Primogen of each Clan. What non-Camarilla Clans have a presence in Vienna? What are the boundaries of the Domain of Clan Brujah? What elder has a mole on his right cheek?"

I answered the questions calmly, although on the inside I was a nervous wreck. I held my hands in my lap to steady myself. It went on for a good five minutes. I was satisfied when he was done. There were a few I did not know, but overall I remembered what I had studied the previous evening.

“You still have work to do,” he answered neutrally when he was finished. That may have been the highest praise he could give me at the time. “I think you may be ready to be introduced at the next court, three nights hence. Here is the English translation of our forms of conduct so that you may respond properly should any choose to speak or interact with you.” He tossed another folder on the crate. “Have them memorized by tomorrow.” He jutted his jaw out to one side and lifted his head, so that he was looking down his nose at me. “Now we get to the heart of the matter. After it was learned you were coming here, we did some research. You had fallen into great disfavor in New Monroe, no?”

“Yes, Whip. I mistakenly ventured into Gangrel Domain and was eviscerated by a tiger.” *And Patli Tizoc as well.* ”I owe them... a life boon.”

“As we suspected. You are a great embarrassment and disappointment to our Clan, not to mention a hindrance, Miss Heron. We would be sticking our necks out, literally, to grant you safe haven here. Who is your sire, and why do you force yourself upon us?”

Crap. I couldn’t just blurt out that I was here seeking Golconda. The Toreador here didn’t seem predisposed to assisting me and I could find myself on the way out before I had even managed to make any progress at all. Then I remembered a quote from scripture: *The fool utters his whole heart, but a wise man keeps it in until afterwards.* “My sire is Gabriel Montagne. I am here at the request of an elder Malkavian, one known as the Matron.” Well, that was one of the reasons I was here.

He digested that for a moment before beginning a line of impossible questions regarding what happened in New Monroe. “Who was the driver of the truck that destroyed the theatre?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why weren’t you destroyed in court along with the others?”

“I was on my way there but was running late.”

“Why didn’t Prince Blaine do something about the security issues in New Monroe?”

I shook my head and shrugged.

“Why was the Sheriff unsuccessful in apprehending you, and why were you on the wanted list in the first place?”

I suppose I was a bit overwhelmed at the time. Kominski wasn’t getting any responses because he was asking the wrong questions. I was getting frustrated with his accusations, some of which had merit. Finally I lashed back. “How should I know what the Sheriff’s problem was? Or what was in the minds of the elders of that city? You are acting like I have all the inside answers but I don’t!”

Whip Kominski stood and pointed one of his thick fingers into my face. “Watch your tongue, whelp, or I’ll call the Scourge and have him waiting outside these doors within the hour!”

I looked away. “Yes, sir,” I whispered.

Kominski stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind him. *That went well.* Why did it seem that most elder Kindred all had a stake rammed up their back sides? After an hour the door opened again. This time it was Primogen Bianchi. I put down the folder and folded my hands into my lap.

Veronica waited a few moments before speaking, just watching me. “Whip Kominski was not pleased with your cooperation...” She strolled slowly between the wooden boxes of the storeroom, her voice silky smooth.

“I apologize, Primogen Bianchi.” I didn’t offer any excuses or elaboration.

She traced a red fingernail along the top of a crate. “He feels you were being evasive.” She paused then continued. “There may be a way for you to make up for it, given... unusual circumstances.” I sat up a little straighter. She had my attention.

“Tomorrow, early in the evening, you will be sent to the Malkavians. Do you remember the name of their Primogen?”

I nodded. “Thomas Dern.”

“Correct.” She continued her circuit around the room. “Either he or one of his Clanmates will interview you. I will need a full report upon your return of everything that is said. Everything that you see. What do they want from you? What are their motivations? Why is this arrangement to have you visit their domain so important to them?”

Important? Did they know about the vision the Matron had shared with me? “I will do all I can to be observant.”

“Be sure to please their desires, within the Traditions of course. You have a lot riding on this.”

“Yes, Primogen Bianchi.”

She seemed to relax a little then. “I don’t know why I am doing this, but I will grant you probationary status until you are judged at court. You are restricted to the museum and its

grounds, but will have the benefit of attending our own haven here so you may meet others of our Clan.”

“Thank you.”

“I will need your dress size and measurements, for your attendance at court.”

I rattled off the measurements forgetting that they use centimeters instead of inches, but Veronica did not seem to notice.

“Follow me then, and I’ll introduce you to the rest of your cousins.”

We sauntered out through dark hallways accented by carved wooden panels into a new area of museum I had not visited before. Framed double doors lined with elaborate rose carvings opened into a wide parlor. Victorian fabric couches lined the walls. A highly polished oak floor reflected light from several chandeliers. A fire churned slowly in a large fireplace. Stuffed animal heads gazed mutely from the walls. In the center of it all was a ten foot briefing table surrounded by rolling leather executive chairs, with a small group of Kindred including Whip Kominski. The conversation ceased as they all turned towards me.

They gave me the once over before turning back to one another in various gestures of disapproval. Eyes rolled under fluttering lids and mouths flattened in nuanced harmony. Their dismissal was all very low key, but they knew what they were doing and they knew I was aware of it. It was simple cruelty for the sake of cruelty itself, perhaps out of spite or boredom. I was the new toy that they were to play with – I pretended not to notice.

Then Primogen Bianchi made the introductions, stylized with precise movements, expressions and patterned speech. Each Kindred there had a long list of titles, none of which mattered to me. There was Zil Herzog, a wild-haired waif. Luciana Antropov wore elaborate jewelry, and Geoffrey Kreismann regarded me with dark brown eyes. They each greeted me in turn, placidly, as one would greet an illegitimate cousin. Being of “thinner blood,” I was socially well below the status of my elder Clanmates, especially in a society that had not changed in hundreds of years, if not millennia.

“You are from New Monroe in America, correct?” asked Zil, her thin lips perking.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“That’s Alexander Blaine’s city.”

“Yes.”

“Runs a loose ship, I hear.”

“I... I really can’t comment.” A loose ship? That tyrant? Public executions, crushing dissent of any thought or form, staking Kindred of your own city for eternity? Yeah.

“Ha ha ha!” she laughed at my discomfort, and the others grinned.

Whip Kominski directed the conversation back to business. “You are familiar with the forms of court?”

“Yes, Whip. We would arrive at the Donizetti Theatre and assemble in our respective Clan areas, under banners bearing our insignia. All would stand for the procession of the Prince. Naturally, one remained silent unless addressed. A speech regarding activity in the city was usually held,

thereafter followed by calls for Clan business, and presentations of newly arrived or Embraced Kindred to the Prince for acknowledgement.”

“Lots of those, I would wager,” Geoffrey murmured. I looked at him without understanding for a moment before I realized he’d made a cutting reference to the number of Kindred Embraced in the new land.

Max turned his pug face towards Veronica, brows lowered. “They’ve Amerikanized court,” he observed, sneering.

“Yes, it appears so.” She turned to me. “Things are done the proper way here, Miss Heron, with Clans assembling in antechambers and filing into court in the order of status. We Toreador enter after the Tremere, who always enter first. A proper standard bearer along with court proctors and barristers accompany each Clan. Also, Kindred enter in order of status in each Clan.”

“Which means you will be last in line,” Whip Kominski finished. “It’s much more formal than your chat and gab sessions. Be *sure* to be on your best behavior or I will cut you down myself.” He punctuated the remark with a slow stare.

The thoughts of various come-backs tantalized me before I replied smoothly, “I shall be, Whip, I assure you.”

“Good!” He smiled then and the atmosphere relaxed.

“Please excuse us, Roses,” Primogen Bianchi beckoned Whip Kominski as she left the room. Zil and Luciana asked me questions about my past, and about Kindred life in the states, which I obliged.

I retreated afterwards to the isolated safety of the storage room. I had considered and even had permission to take a self-guided tour of the museum. However, I didn't want to fall into reverie, which surely would have caused my Toreador cousins to antagonize me even more.

Primogen Bianchi later directed me to move into a guest bedroom that held a proper bed and coffin. There was a bookshelf stuffed with classics, a flat screen TV and computer, desk and chair. I remembered to get the hidden box and paper before leaving as I didn't want them to get locked inside the storage room. I was glad to have reasonable accommodations now, and kept to my room for the rest of the night.

Chapter Twenty Five: Garden of Nightmares

Early the next evening after I had showered and dressed, there was a knock at my door. Whip Kominski was there, brows creased. "You will come with me," he said tersely. As we walked back towards the garage he gave me directions. "You will discover as much as you can about the Malkavian motivations for having you there, as well as any secrets and aspects of their daily operation. Be subtle in your inquiries, for if they think you are gathering intelligence they will clam up and your chances for success will diminish," he spat out the words. "Is this understood?"

"Yes, Whip Kaminski. I will try." I felt like I was working as a spy in the depths of the Cold War. I didn't like it. The Vienna Toreador had not treated me with anything approaching hospitality. Primogen Bianchi was the lone exception; she was cool, aloof and professional. I suppose over the course of the evening I would discover why they wanted me there, but I wouldn't do any digging to assist my rude relatives.

A thin, balding man was waiting in a four door black sedan with the engine running when we arrived. I settled into the passenger seat and Max put his hand on the car door as he leaned into the compartment. “Per our agreement... make sure she is back by sunrise.” He gave the driver a stare and slammed the door shut as I quickly pulled my dress out of the way.

“Hello, Miss Heron, I’m Eckert Spindler,” the driver said as the he pulled the car out of the parking lot. The man drove like a maniac and I quickly buckled my seatbelt as we slung around the corner. His eyes darted about wildly as he alternately hit the gas then the brake at every conceivable obstruction. After jolting me around for ten minutes like a safety mannequin on a roller coaster we finally arrived at a medium-sized mansion. The gates to the driveway opened electronically and we catapulted through the opening only to come to a screeching halt at the turnaround. The mansion itself looked to be built in the 1930s, with high windows staring out blankly from gray plank siding. Iron bars covered the windows of the top two floors of the three-story building and lights were on in a few of the rooms. Yellowish curtains hid behind a lit ground floor bay window. The grass looked like it had seen better days. A sign was affixed to the railing of the front porch which translated as “Institute of the Normal.” My eyes went from the sign up to a large clock perched on a small tower above the third floor. It looked odd; the six was to the right of center at the bottom. Oh, well.

A simple door opened as we climbed the steps to the front porch. Thomas Dern stood in the doorway. He looked very much like the drawing I had studied; raggedy brown hair to the shoulders, light olive skin, a hook nose and a mole on his right cheek. “Please come in.” He waved a hand behind him into a quaint living room where several other Kindred waited.

A fishbowl held a large hermit crab that hunkered over a pile of small bones. A painting hung from the wall next to the stairs going up. Couches surrounded an oval patterned brown rug that was worn and a little faded. An old TV with rabbit ears sat silently against the wall.

“May I introduce Professor Matteus Salzberger. Matteus, Patricia Heron.” Thomas spoke with a slight British accent. The good professor wore a tan suit with wide lapels and a gaudy tie. Thick, wide sideburns completed the outfit. He looked like he came out of a bad B movie from the 70’s, although his demeanor was quite pleasant.

“How do you do, Miss Heron?” he asked with a bow.

“Well enough, thank you,” I replied.

“This is Heidi and Sophia Hutto. Ladies, Patricia Heron.” They were twins, both pretty in a waiflike way. They wore loose pastel peasant dresses puffed out at the sleeves, Sophia in peach and Heidi in lavender. Sophia had her ash blond hair up in a bun; Heidi’s darker hair cascaded over her shoulders.

“Good evening,” they said at the same time, in accented English.

“Thank you for speaking my native language; nice to meet you,” I replied in German. They looked at one another the way twins sometimes do.

Thomas gestured to the anxiety-stricken driver. “You have already met Eckert Spindler, my ghoul.” Eckert saluted me with a flourish. “Where is Felix?”

Matteus leaned towards me in an aside. “Felix is our young neonate. He’s an adopted American. We took him in even though he’s of a very late generation. A breath of fresh air he is, although it

appears right now he's not too reliable." Just then we heard sounds of running come from the back of the mansion. The double tap sound of running flip flops came from the back of the mansion.

Felix came skidding around the corner. He looked like a teenager; blue jeans, flip flops and a t-shirt with Vice President Dick Cheney in a malevolent pose leveling a shotgun. Felix hurled himself at the feet of Thomas sliding across the wooden floor. The twins took a step back to keep from getting wiped out. Felix's eyes were wide and he looked desperate. "Primogen! Forgive me but there is a matter that requires your immediate attention!"

"Now, now Felix." Thomas ruffled his hair. "What has you so upset?"

"I was feeding earlier this evening and I took too much. I didn't want him to die... so I... I..."

The expectations were immediate. Thomas shook his head no, but that didn't change the answer.

"I gave him some of my blood to save his life."

Not only had Felix broken the Third Tradition by siring without permission, but he may have created what is known as a true thin-blood, a vampire so removed from Caine that they have no disciplines or ability to reproduce. While saving the man's life was admirable, it created a whole quagmire of a problem for Felix. He could be summarily executed.

"Well, where is he? What did he look like?" Thomas asked.

"I don't know. He was Polynesian." Matteus squinted his eyes and mouthed the word *Pol-i-nees-ian?*

“Well, get out there and look for him! The rest of you go and help. I only have our guest for one evening so I have to make the most of her limited time here. Report back in three hours.”

Professor Salzberger organized search areas based on where the newly created Kindred was last seen and they all quickly departed.

“Forgive the disruption Miss Heron, things here are not usually so upsetting. Please come with me.” We went up the staircase in the back of the room. The painting on the back wall had a plaque that said “Gothic Dangler.” We went to the second floor and entered a room decorated like a psychiatrist’s office. A half couch with an arm rest on only one side flanked a cushioned chair. A desk with a pile of papers and an old lamp with green lampshade stood against the wall. A wooden swiveling chair with wheels listed to the side, not looking too reliable. A dusty clock powered by pull weights hung on the wall.

“The reason I asked for you....” Thomas paused mid-sentence and looked back at the couch. He waited. Thomas then went over to the couch and sat down. I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on so I stood there just inside the office door.

“Please don’t mind. Come in and take a seat anywhere, Miss Heron.”

I sat in the cushioned chair as it looked sturdier than the one next to the desk. I didn’t want to break any furniture by accident. I felt a little odd taking the seat which was traditional for the therapist but sat and waited for Thomas to begin.

“Patricia. You are the only Camarilla Kindred to escape the Sabbat attack on New Monroe,” Thomas began. He clearly assumed the destruction could not have come from within the

Camarilla. “My childe, Kanini Korson, has not been heard from since. Do you know of her? Of her fate?”

Kanini... my friend, the neurotic, double ponytailed Texan whom I tried to help in her search!

Thomas was her sire. So that’s why I was here. I leaned forward. “Yes, I knew her. She was my friend.”

“One of the Three Stooges?”

“Yes! I had forgotten about that but yes, she was—she, Jackson Edwards and me.” Thomas had been doing some digging on his own. “She was looking for Malcolm, her fiancé who had gone missing. I tried to help her.”

“I knew that they were close. What happened?” Thomas leaned up on one arm and looked back at me.

My memories went back to those last days in New Monroe. I chose my words carefully. “I was informed by a source that I prefer to leave nameless that a terrible tragedy was underway even before the night the theatre blew up. Prince Blaine was keeping scores of Kindred staked underneath the Winfield building. They included those who had crossed the lines of political expedience and were to be used as shock troops against the Sabbat.”

Thomas looked puzzled. “Why were they not used to keep the Sabbat in check?”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t the Sabbat. Kanini discovered that Malcolm had been staked and placed under Winfield as punishment for some unknown offense. When she did, she was condemned to share his fate.”

“Then she still lives!”

“No,” I replied sadly. “The story does not end there. Are you sure you want to hear this? It might not be to your liking.” I could feel my shoulders sagging to accompany my heart. This was the first time I’d verbalized the events that transpired. I wrung my hands in my lap.

“Tell me.”

“The night of court....” I thought about how to put this. “The night of court the Kindred who had been staked were released. They were set free, but not by the Praxis. As I was walking down Empire Avenue, I saw Kanini in the passenger side of the gasoline truck that rammed into Donizetti Theatre. It passed by me as I was approaching the building. I suppose Malcolm was driving, but that is only a guess.”

Thomas leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. He was not angry at me, nor did he question my version of events to clear his child. “Kanini,” he whispered. A tear formed on his cheek and rolled down the side. “I’m so proud of you. You stood up against a corrupt Prince, and won.”

“She saved my life in the process, of that I am sure.” I didn’t really care whether he charged me a life boon now or not. We both missed her. I wanted to give credit where it was due.

After a moment Thomas sat up. He looked at me with gratitude and managed a weary smile.

“Thank you for sharing that with me. It clears up quite a few questions. At least now I know. The entire operation smacks of the Anarchs. You are not an Anarch, are you?”

“No, sir.”

He chuckled. “Even if you were, your secret would be safe with me, as is the true cause of the incident that occurred in New Monroe. So, it appears I am in your debt. Would a minor boon suffice?”

This came as a surprise to me. I didn’t really care for Kindred politics, though. What I could use were some answers. There was no one I could trust in regards to delicate matters. Like my eternal soul and my diminishing hopes of returning to humanity. “Could I ask *you* some questions instead?”

“Well but of course, unless they infringe on Clan-specific issues! Ask away, I shall help you as best I can.”

I sighed inwardly and allowed myself to relax. Perhaps I should start with simple things and work my way up to the Salubri. “I met an elder Malkavian who was called the Matron on my way over from America. She wore a wreath of moths and a heavy fog issued from her in all directions.”

Thomas grew animated. “Wait. A heavy fog do you say? What did she look like?” I gave him a description and he nodded. “You’ve met the Oracle! She’s been gone for many years, but I am pleased she still survives these nights. Plying the seas from port to port hidden in the bowels of a ship you say? She always was most shrewd and wise.”

“She shared a vision with me and made an utterance.” That statement made Thomas do a double take. He motioned for me to continue and I did, sharing with him the vision of the odd purple moon and faceless souls being sucked into a maelstrom. Then I tried to remember the words of the utterance. “The fate of the Ravnos is coming for the children of the moon. The children will

answer the door unless the light is broken. There was something about a rug being unwoven. She also gave me a box to bring to the Prince of Vienna.”

“A box?”

“Yes, there is a very old page inside. The sides are all turning to dust. Can you tell me what all of this means?”

His face grew concerned as he furrowed his eyebrows. “The utterance and vision I will have to take counsel on, but it does not concern the Toreador or yourself. I think all three together, including the page, are interconnected. Do any of the Roses know of this gift you bear for the Prince?”

“No, I hid it in the haven.”

“Good. Don’t tell them. If it’s what I think it is, it is very valuable. They would steal it from you and insist you lied about it. Then they would punish you for lying, for it would expose their agenda. If I were you, I would hide it on my person and present it in court to the Seneschal, who would then have to hand it over to the Prince.”

That sounded just like something they would do. Thomas’ advice was sound. “Can you tell me about the Ravnos? Are they a Clan of some sort?”

“They are indeed. Travelers, most of them, from Eastern Europe. Vagabonds. Their blood has the miraculous ability to form powerful illusions. They are very, very tricky and never to be trusted. There are rumors that the founder of their Clan woke up from torpor two years ago and

the members found themselves irresistibly beckoned to him. He allegedly destroyed most of them before being put down, and *that* took some doing.”

“Why would an ancient vampire summon and destroy his own progeny?”

“Who knows with the Antediluvians? Perhaps the only way to sate their hunger is to drink Kindred blood instead of human. In any event these are all whisperings. The Ravnos themselves were rarely seen, but now they’re all gone. Some are said to still exist. Perhaps the rumors of their elder’s awakening were started to explain their disappearance.”

Here we go. “Speaking of still existing, that brings me to the reason I have come here to Vienna.” Thomas leaned his chin into his hand and propped an elbow on one knee. I took a breath to speak and let it out. “I need to discover if any remaining remnant of the Salubri have survived, as I would like to contact them. Failing that, I need to locate their records.”

Thomas sputtered. I might as well have told him I was a meatball sandwich, not that that would have made sense to him. “How does a wet-behind-the-ears neonate come into possession of such rare and antiquated knowledge?”

“I made a trade.”

I could see the gears turning. He narrowed his eyes in a way that said I had been underestimated.

“You *do* know they have three eyes?”

My mouth parted in astonishment. Three eyes? What kinds of monsters were they? How could soul-devouring three-eyed Kindred have found the way to Golconda? To becoming human

again? I could not understand it. Perhaps the third eye was a warped Malkavian perception. Still, I had to persevere. I chewed my lip and looked over to Thomas. "Can you help me?"

"Hmm." He got up from the couch and began to pace back and forth across the room, rubbing a free finger over his mole. "I *may* have a contact who *might* know something." He stopped and pivoted towards me. "I tell you what I'll do. What is your field of art among the Toreador?"

"I'm a poet."

"Excellent. Write me a poem about taxis and I will help you."

"Taxis?" I asked incredulously, my brows rising.

"Yes. Taxis. I believe I met Caine once. He was a taxi cab driver."

Well that was totally nuts. But... whatever it takes. "All right. I'll do it."

"The poem must be presented to myself and my Clan before you leave this evening. They are expected back in a few hours, so you might want to get started." He opened one of the desk drawers and got out some paper and a pen. "And make it a good one. It has to be worth my while in order to procure this favor for you."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Thomas, please, unless we are in court. I'll leave you to your work." He left the office and I sat down on the unsteady wheeled chair and found it sufficient for support. Sliding into the desk I drew the papers over and put the pen to my lips. Taxis, huh? Let's see what we can do. The clock behind me chimed out the hour. It rang ten times. I put pen to paper and began to write.

After a few hours of work I looked over the poem. It accomplished what I was aiming for in a whimsical but black-humored way. I folded it up and went back downstairs to the living room.

Thomas was seated on the couch with Professor Salzberger. “Finished?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“Matteus, fetch the others. We are going to the garden to be entertained.” Matteus departed and Thomas led me through a 50’s style kitchen complete with Formica countertops. Out through the back door we entered a huge courtyard surrounded by high stone walls. The grass here was well kept and thickly grown, contrasting with the patchy and unkempt front yard. A weeping willow tree stood next to a small pond. I didn’t know if they grew naturally in this part of the world or if the tree was a transplant. Lily pads floated serenely in the water. A half dozen stone statues of knights in armor stood guard along the outer walls. Each held a metal sword, saluting silently in repose.

As we descended a slight decline towards the pond, a goat bleated at us with an unearthly human shriek. It started to run away, then its legs locked up and it fell to the grass tumbling like a monopoly piece being rolled across the board. “That’s Felix’s pet,” Thomas said with a chuckle. “Pay it no mind.” Sure enough, the goat got up like nothing had happened and retreated to the corner of the enclosure.

The sisters soon joined us with Matteus in tow, and Felix came after that, shaking his head as a result of his search. Thomas admonished him. “You are welcome to join us for the presentation, but I want you back searching after it is finished. We need to find him before *they* do.” His eyes

flashed white and he looked downright scary for a split second before his face went back to normal. I didn't want to get on his bad side. Eckert arrived last.

Felix nodded with a "Yes, sir!" and the entire group sat down on the grass cross-legged in front of me. I stood before the pond and extracted the paper from my purse. "I've been asked to write a poem on taxis. This one I call, 'The Midnight Taxis.'" They all settled in and I began to read.

That jaunty jalopy, how it zips! How it goes!
In a blur it confers its good fares to their goals.
Like bees in a beehive, they buzz through the streets!
These yellow-clad fellows, on their daily beats.

In wintery slush piles, they slide and they skid,
Like run-amok bumper cars on the street grid.
Picking up passengers with nary a word,
And dropping them off again, shaken, not stirred.

I gave them a smirk, glancing up through my lashes knowing what was to come.

But sometimes at night, these checkered chauffeurs,
Change their agendas—a strange thing occurs.
Not plowing through snowpiles and picking up sheeple,
They pick up the snowpiles and plow through the people!

I figuratively plowed into the grist of the story.

The sidewalks are filled, and all should beware,
An extra ten points for that wheelchair!
The jaywalkers spray with a fine crimson mist,
What a fine pastime, as their bumpers are kissed!

They began to enjoy it, shaking their heads and smiling as I described hapless imaginary pedestrians.

The street cops, the vendors, the road repair crew,
That smack on the ass was long overdue!
The blue hairs, the cyclists, the three-piece-suit lawyers,
They rush through them all, these avenging destroyers.

Careening about wildly, sliding into their foes,
Spinning and winning their bid to oppose.
The running and screaming, as onward they sweep,
Collecting their payback—Honk! Honk! Beep! Beep!

Then sure as it started, they all start to pause,
The taxis return to their regular jobs.
So if you are looking for a ride down the street,

'Ware the night taxis, who are looking for meat!

They clapped when it was finished. A fog had begun to move into the area, rolling in slow motion over the stone walls.

“Very well done, Miss Heron,” Thomas said.

“Encore!” Professor Salzberger called and was soon joined by the others.

“Thank you,” I said. “I do have another.” They immediately hushed. I was actually enjoying this time with the Malkavians. “But it’s scary. I mean, really scary.”

“No, no... that’s fine. We want to hear it,” the professor said. The others nodded.

“Okay,” I agreed and they settled down. I got the poem out I had finished on the cruise. “This one is called ‘Crater Lake.’” I cleared my throat and began whispering the story.

Once in a distant, foreign land,
Where ne'er did step the foot of man,
There sits aloft a crater lake,
Festering in a restless state.

And on that mountain's jagged sides,
Carved steps, inhuman, do arise,
Like scars across a disfigured face,
For legs of a fetid, alien race.

Heidi and Sophia scooted together. I gestured to the grass, pointing out the steps, disgusted.

On viscous banks mired in woe,
An unknown story has been told,
Of shadows fleeting, dim and gray,
And things forbidden for one to say.

Vapors bloom there in the night,
Seeping with unholy might,
To hide the secrets that there lay,
Scents of foul and dark decay.

The fog continued to roll in becoming thicker, adding a helpful atmosphere to the story. I ceased whispering and continued the recital in a normal volume.

One midnight hour I traveled thence,
Ascended steps of pestilence,
And viewed a sleeping scene of old,
Under full moon it did unfold.

For on this eve the stars aligned,
Illumined murky waters brine,
Astral figures sequenced right,
For this one rare and hideous night.

I looked up gazing into an imagined starry sky, now hidden by low clouds.

Around that lake within the mists,
Came shambling, oozing, living cysts,
That danced around that gruesome scene,
I crouched and hid lest I be seen.

From the depths of ancient time,
They quivered to some unheard rhyme,
And as they did, the lake did clear,
I crept out from my ledge and peered.

I pantomimed looking over the edge with my free hand and allowed my eyes to dart about. The Malkavians listened, raptly.

Then stirring in the deepest depths,
A glimpse of movement therein leapt,
Within the waters there did rise,
An orb of growing, swelling size.

From the surface, then discovered,
A giant, floating eyeball hovered,
It surveyed its worshipers, with
Malicious stare and silent curse.

Round the bank the eye did go,
Slowly bobbing to and fro,

Rounding corner, it turned to see,
Then paused and focused right on me!

I accelerated my pace and volume.

To my horror, now insane,
The entire congregation came,
Up the hill towards my site,
I turned and leapt into the night.

Falling down the mountain side,
I bounced and tumbled to reside,
At mountains base where fading sight,
Did claim me in that awful night.

Slowing down once more, I relaxed my words and came to the conclusion.

When I awoke, it was all gone,
That mountain and its hellish spawn,
I swear this story is all true,
That none of it was construed.

So if you go to foreign lands,
Where ne'er doth step the foot of man,
Beware that midnight mountainside,
Where nightmare and this realm collide.

When I finished I was met with silence. They all sat there staring in abject horror. The goat screamed again from the back wall for some reason. Finally Felix lifted his hand and pointed with one finger behind me. *Point, point!* I turned around expecting to find nothing but empty space, the way I had with Penny Angel and the Matron. Instead a shock went through my entire body. There, floating along the edge of the pond in the fog was a massive white eye, one and a half meters in size. It was staring at us. I jumped, screamed and ran simultaneously while chaos ensued.

I got to the wall and turned. Eckert was already long gone, lost in the fog somewhere. Thomas pulled something from his belt, perhaps a short knife. The sisters were still on the ground, trembling. Both Matteus and Felix were lifted into the air, levitated by the eye. Their legs flailed as they struggled with nothing to resist. As I watched, they were hurled back towards the mansion with great force.

Then the statue standing next to me caught my attention. I shook my head, but knew what I had to do. The only Kindred in Vienna that had showed me anything remotely resembling kindness were in trouble. For all I knew, it was partially my fault. I sneered and ripped the sword out of the statue's hands. Then I pushed the blood to my muscles and flew across the lawn, headed for the edge of the pond and the back-side of the offending creature.

Wind bit into my face as I traversed the distance in a matter of moments. I leapt across the water and splashed into the pond bringing the blade over my head with a vicious swing. Thomas stabbed at the eye from the front as the edge of my sword came around. The blade sliced through the sclera and continued through. Good, I thought for a fraction of a second, before a wave of clear, goopy fluid erupted from the eye in front of me and covered my whole body. Well, except

for my feet and ankles which were in the pond. Then the rest of the Malkavians joined in pummeling and punching until the eye deflated and lowered into the pond like a great, white whoopy cushion.

Thomas looked at me. “We really should do a wash before returning you to Primogen Bianchi.”

Back at the mansion, I sat in the living room in a borrowed robe as I waited for my clothes to go through the washer and dryer. My shoes had dry hand towels stuffed inside. Felix had gone back out to look for his missing child. Matteus and Thomas sat on the couch across from me. Heidi tried to relax in a faded yellow side chair and Sophie leaned on the armrest next to her sister.

Thomas was ecstatic. “How was it that you caused the eye to appear, Miss Heron? It was quite the performance. Amazing! I have never seen anything like it!”

“I don’t know,” I replied, confounded. “The eye was not part of the act.”

“It wasn’t?” he asked. “Then how did it get there?”

“I believe I have an answer,” Matteus suggested. We all turned to him. “It is as I suspected. Our Malkavian abilities are being augmented in a series of waves. The eye was a manifestation of our subconscious minds.”

“How is that happening?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know... yet.” He squinted, thinking. “But I have suspicions. It is too early to conjecture.”

I gestured with an open hand, palm up. “I’m sorry, everyone. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“Now, now my dear, there’s nothing to worry about,” Thomas reassured me. “I should say we haven’t had that much excitement around here in a hundred years. And I might add, you have earned that little favor we discussed.”

That brought me much needed hope. “When do you think you might talk with your contact?”

“Soon. In the meantime, I don’t think I would discuss the ‘eye incident’ with your Clan. I don’t think they would understand.” Matteus silently mouthed the word no, twice, in an elongated fashion as he shook his head. “Feel free to tell them about Kanini though. She’s the primary reason for your visit and they would eventually figure it out, anyhow.”

“All right. Is there anything I can do to help Felix?”

“Felix has to learn a lesson in responsibility. I hope it is not a hard one.”

“I see. One last thing. Is there any way I could get a different driver to drop me off at the museum? I’m concerned about having an accident and don’t want to be delayed before sunrise.”

“Edna is our backup driver. I’m afraid though, that the events this evening may have traumatized her, and I don’t want her legs locking up while she’s driving.” *The goat is the backup driver?* I blinked. “However, just drive the car back yourself. I’ll have Eckert pick it up tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Thomas.”

“You are welcome.” Thomas turned back to Matteus and they both shared a smile.

Chapter Twenty Six: Court

When I arrived back at the museum Whip Kominski was waiting under the roof of the garage. It had been a long night and he paced as he waited for me to park the car. It was four am and I was pretty exhausted.

He waited as I came in from the parking lot and beckoned me to follow. I did so, feeling the dampness of my flats, which had still not dried completely. We entered an office near the lounge where I had met Zil and the others. It was sparse and utilitarian, not filled with objects of beauty like much of the rest of the haven. An old violin case rested against the wall.

He sat down behind a desk and I remained standing. He did not tell me to sit down, so I did not presume. The beret was draped over a coat rack. “Tell me about the Malkavian haven and the contents of your conversation there. You were gone most of the night.”

“We started with introductions. I spent the first part of the evening meeting the Malkavian Clan. There was Professor Salzberger who wore dated clothing and....”

“I already know about the members of the Clan itself. Get to the meat of it. Why did they want you there?” He drummed his thick fingers on the desk in a patterned rhythm, like he was playing a piano.

“Primogen Dern wanted to ask about his childe, Kanini Korson. I confirmed that I knew her in New Monroe and that she died in the explosion.”

“Mmm hmm,” he said, getting out a pen and a yellow legal pad, then scribbling out notes on the desk. “And this took seven hours?”

“No, although he asked lots of clarifying questions, like what activities Kanini was involved in before the night of the explosion.”

“Like what?”

“She was looking for her fiancé who had disappeared, Malcolm Davidson. I tried to help her. I was able to give her some assistance by reading the emotions left on a photograph he gave her, with limited success.”

“Not in public I trust?”

“It happened once in an all-night restaurant, the Dunk N Dine. I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Did you cause a breach?”

“No sir. Kanini and the other Kindred who was with us, Jackson Edwards, said I only stared at the photograph for fifteen seconds.” He scribbled some more. I stood there patiently and flipped my ponytail back. “The second time I tried to help, we were both safe in my haven.” He looked up at me then continued his notes.

“What else did you find out there?”

“Primogen Dern was saddened by the confirmation of Kanini’s death. The ghoul, Eckert Spindler, drives like a madman. The backup driver is a goat named Edna, I suspect.”

“All irrelevant,” he added although it was relevant enough to write it down. He shook his head at me with a frown. *Good.* “Did you think to ask to be taken on a tour of the haven?”

“No Whip Kominski, but at one point we went out to the courtyard.”

“What was there and what happened?”

“The courtyard has six statues of men in armor holding swords. There is also a small pond and a goat. I recited poetry to entertain them.”

“Which poet did you quote from?”

“I read my own material. They appeared to be appreciative.”

“Brav-o,” Whip Kominski commented dryly. He clapped three times and added, “The Toreador poseur entertains mindless fools.” He went back to his notes and said, “That will be *all*, Miss Heron.”

It takes one to know one. “Thank you, Whip,” I said, trying to keep my voice respectful. I didn’t want to get involved in a complicated mess. I left the office and went back to my bedroom. The page which was to be presented to the Seneschal was still there in the box. I took the bottom drawer out of a bureau and slipped the box and page into the space underneath.

Then I knelt placing my elbows on the bed and began to pray, silently. *Dear God, please have mercy on me and forgive me, I pled. This situation I am in is my fault... for this... this thing I have become. I earnestly desire to be reunited with you. Do you want me to continue to try to find this dead Clan that steals souls? I don’t know anymore. Forgive me for turning my back on you. Amen.*

I reclined into the coffin and pulled the cover shut to wait for the next evening. It could not come soon enough.

When I awoke, the night for court had arrived. Shortly after coming out of the shower there was a knock on my door. "Come in," I said.

A cleanly shaven young man with green eyes and a page boy haircut entered. He carried a large foldable plastic container that was used to store and carry clothes, which he laid on my bed. His movements were slow and his affect heavy. He knelt next to the bed, presenting his neck. "I am here for your needs, Frau Heron" he said in a monotone, looking up at the walls and ceiling.

I was about to oblige, but then a thought came to me. What if I were to fast? The beast inside my blood would not like it. It would make me more likely to go into frenzy. But perhaps it would benefit me spiritually. I thought about it and quickly decided. "I am not hungry enough at the moment. What is your name?"

"Frank Alt."

"Go your way, Frank."

"Yes, Miss Heron" he said as he got up and walked out the door. His demeanor made me sad. He was like a drug addict who had to perform duties in order to get his fix. Like Amalthea. I wondered if she had made it to rehab.

The contents of the container had the weight of a heavy comforter and surprised me. Inside was a large Victorian dress, with layers upon layers of fabric. It was deep red with black accents for the Toreador Roses; the neck and cuffs were high and frilled with lace. Ankle high shoes were included; they shined with wax but were spinster-like in their lace up boot style.

I figured out which layers to put on first. The corset was a pain. I pulled up on the strings from behind my back while looking into the mirror. It was like tightening up the laces on an ice skate. Finally I wrapped the whole thing in front and then behind again and tied it off with a bow knot. Thin ribs wrapped around me keeping me from bending over properly, but it wasn't too bad.

Then came the undergarment and the petticoat. I attached the hoops and wormed my way up through the fabric. Pulling it taut around me I finally got to the dress. I finally managed to drape it over the petticoat and then looked over at the shoes. *Oh, crap.* Somehow I managed to bustle up the hoops around my waist and sat rigidly on the edge of the bed to put them on.

After putting on my earrings and makeup I was ready, almost, in spite of the ruffled lace getting in the way of my hands. I remembered the page from the Matron and folded it against my chest under the dress. Good thing I didn't perspire. The entire operation had taken almost an hour, and I felt confined when I was finished.

I opened the door to go to the lounge. Outside Primogen Bianchi was waiting on me. She was dressed in a more elaborate but similar Victorian manner. Also, her dress was deep black with red and white accents. She turned and clucked her tongue as she came over. "You are not used to such clothing... let me help you." Evidently she was the good cop and Max Kominski was bad, but I knew he got his orders from her. She smoothed my hair out over my collar and extended the lace at my wrist even more. How was I supposed to do anything? "We do things the formal way in Vienna. There." She smiled. "Much better. It is time we made our way to the limo."

The doors on the side of the long limousine opened both towards the front and the back, allowing easier access for our broad dresses. The others were already there, talking quietly. They all wore black as well, which made me stick out like a sore thumb. I took a seat along the side in the

Failmobile—there was plenty of room—and looked out the windows at the gathering clouds in the sky.

There was little talk during the trip. Cold stone buildings passed and eventually we pulled into the grounds of a walled-in property downtown. It was an old church. Security guards flanked the entrance as we drove through. Dim lights illuminated some of the windows and the rain began to fall as the limo pulled up. We piled out and skittered over to a side entrance.

There was a dry, dusty smell that greeted us as sometimes occurs in old buildings. Down the hallway was a large foyer. The only source of illumination came from candles. Other Clans had already arrived and groups gathered, quietly socializing before the time for the procession came. Everyone was dressed up formally, with long coats and wide dresses predominating. I felt like I was in a vampiric “Gone with the Wind.” Veronica and Max went off to converse with some other elders and I sort of stood there, silent and alone, with some occasionally pointing at me and whispering. I would turn to see, but when I did the looks and the gestures would cease. Then footsteps approached from behind me and I turned to find two unhappy Kindred staring at me. I recognized the two as elders of Clan Tremere, Walter Hartmann and Finnaeus Knutson. I performed a curtsy, which wasn’t easy, and introduced myself.

Finnaeus narrowed his eyes as he addressed me by title. “Tell us, neonate, what price did Timms settle for, hmm?” His voice rose as he stepped towards me pushing the forward edge of my dress back.

I really wasn’t ready to have the evening start off this way. “Good evening, gentlemen. What do you mean?” I looked around for the elders of my Clan but they were still across the room.

Finnaeus folded his arms. “You know exactly what we are talking about. You are in possession of forbidden knowledge, which is the property of Clan Tremere.”

“What knowledge?” I asked, biting my lip.

Primogen Hartmann spoke staccato, his deep voice cold and menacing as he stepped up as well.

“Don’t play the innocent game with me!” His face turned beet red as he spat out his words.

“Timms came to us seeking privileged information, and then you miraculously survive and arrive here from the same city!”

“I... ah... I...” I stuttered as I began to back away. By now heads were beginning to turn from all around. This was not going well.

Hartmann continued advancing as his words became quiet. “We know of your meeting with Timms. How you *compromised* him... how you ruined his reputation and his good name! Tell us now what he shared with you or I will personally see to it that you are destroyed before this night is done!”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I stood there horrified for a few moments. Hair was lifting on the back of my neck and all I wanted to do was run away. Then an intervention occurred.

“Herr Hartmann! What are you doing with our newest Rose?” It was Primogen Bianchi approaching. Her lips were thin and her eyes absolutely blazed with fury.

Both men relaxed and produced warm smiles, turning to my elder. “Just greeting her, Primogen Bianchi. We have a vested interest in her presence. Miss Heron was impolite with us.” *What incredible liars!*

Veronica snapped, “You will leave her discipline and instruction to me!” Whoa. Talk about claws. This was a conflict I didn’t want to be in the middle of.

“Of course, Primogen.” They both gave me one last stare before departing. I had never seen an elder confront another one publicly. Perhaps they had committed some faux pas by assailing me without notifying her first when she was only a short ways away.

Veronica turned to me, still fuming. “Did you disobey my instructions regarding proper etiquette?”

I shook my head. “No, Primogen.” *Not yet.*

“Very well. Come. It is time to queue.” She turned toward where lines began to form. Wooden staves topped with gold Clan shields were produced by Clan officials. I took my place at the end of the Toreador line and waited. Wind instruments began to play a dirge as the Tremere filed into the sanctuary. They entered solemnly before taking places in front of their seats.

Then it was our turn. Violins sang a song of sadness and love as they swept up and down the scales. As I entered the main room, hundreds of votive candles flickered from each side lighting the entire chamber in a dim yellow glow, holding back the gloom from the rain outside. The source of the music was also revealed: a small orchestra sat in a semi-circle near the front.

We remained standing as other Clans filed in. The Ventrue paced down the main aisle to deeper strings, a regal and soaring piece befitting monarchs of the Clan of Kings. The Brujah were accompanied by drums, the booming tympani and the rapid snare accenting one another. The Malkavians entered to brass instruments, as they marched in unison and precision down the aisle.

Two large thrones were set up on the altar stage, on a wheeled platform. One was gold and elaborately decorated with carved lions on the armrests. Rubies glinted from the framework of the high-backed chair accompanying red cushions. Next to it was a silver throne, slightly smaller, lined with sapphires and violet cushions. When all the Clans had entered, the musicians, many from Clan Toreador, filed out and took their places with their respective groups. Whip Kominski was among them.

Then a retinue of hooded men filed out from back stage. They all wore hardened leather armor and carried swords attached to their hips. One of them had armor lined with gold filigrees; the captain, perhaps. They took positions standing on either side of the thrones. Then the Seneschal, Lady Marie Duval, came out from a vestry trailing a flowing purple cape. A silver crown rested on her brow over coiffed blonde hair. Her dress was elegant in simplicity, a counterpoint to her regal and commanding presence. In her hand was a jeweled scepter, the symbol of Clan Ventrue. Lady Marie settled down into the silver throne crossing her legs and then we all took our seats.

She spoke in German as she addressed the cities Kindred with measured poise. "This night brings us together in uncertain times. You may remain assured that we are in control of both our present state and our destiny." She turned the scepter in her lap. "This is why adherence to the Traditions remains paramount. The weakness of believing in the myth of the final nights... of rumors, prophecies and false revelations has no place in our midst. The elders assembled here

have survived wars, treachery, and Princes both skilled and those less capable, for hundreds of years for a reason. Trust their judgment and leadership.”

As Lady Marie spoke I felt nervous, like there were eyes in the back of my neck. When I turned, I saw Primogen Hartmann staring right at me. I spun back around, distraught.

Lady Marie looked over at Primogen Bianchi. “Primogen, you have an announcement?”

Veronica stood up. “Yes, thank you, Seneschal. Three nights from tonight we will have our annual Spring Soiree at the Toreador haven. There will be dancing, music and of course the opportunity for revenge from last year at games of skill, wit and chance. No Ravnos are allowed to participate in any of the games I’m afraid.” She smiled and received a laugh from the audience. “Further, I’m pleased to inform you that the William Tell Archery Contest will be reinstated after the debacle that resulted from a few years back.” This was greeted to hearty applause. “In order to participate however, you must provide your own ghoul.”

“Will the ghouls be treated humanely? We need to be responsible in our care for them.” The man had a blasé appearance as he folded heavily muscled arms of ebony. I recognized him as an elder, Theo Bell of Clan Brujah. According to the other Toreador, he was rumored to be an archon, one of the Camarilla’s private assassins, and therefore extremely dangerous.

“We are assured that none shall perish, and we thank you for your concern,” Veronica said with a slight bow. “Additionally, I have just received confirmation that Lord Byron will be coming out of seclusion to attend.” That got a positive response from the throne and a scattering of applause before she looked up and received permission to sit down. I had no idea that the poet who was ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’ was also a vampire.

“Are there any other announcements before we proceed?” the Seneschal asked.

This is it, then. I wet my lips and took a breath. “Yes,” I said standing, which threw the crowd into a veritable tizzy.

When the tumult died down, Veronica whispered in a not-so-quiet voice, “What foolish notion possesses you to speak?” At this, Thomas rose from his seat slightly, a grin stretching from ear to ear as he bowed to Veronica before resuming his seat. Everyone saw it, and everyone knew she had been played.

Lady Marie held out her hand to Veronica then looked at me with half closed eyes, her shaded lids speaking displeasure. “If it is more important than these proceedings, neonate, it had better be good.” She pointed the scepter at me before holding it with both hands.

I nodded. “I bear a gift for the Prince of Vienna from the Matron of Clan Malkavian, also known as the Oracle.” With that I pulled out the folded page from my dress and held it aloft. Whispers echoed from the walls as Kindred murmured. Whip Kominski looked like he wanted to strangle me.

Before Lady Marie could respond, one of the panels at the back of the stage opened up behind the throne. Eyes stared and mouths opened. The guards whirled before resuming their stand at attention. Kindred stood to their feet and turning, Lady Marie also stood. For coming through the panel, wearing kingly garments and a heavy red cape trimmed with white was the Prince, Dustin Heinrich.

His skin was deathly pale. Brown curly hair rimmed his neck. A thin nose and thinner lips sat above his narrow jaw. He strode towards the golden throne emotionless, the entire sanctuary

filled with silence. Behind him through the panel came a hideous man, clearly Nosferatu, who lurched along to catch up. Tancredo was not hard to miss. Nothing about him was right. His eyes were not in quite the right places. One arm was longer than the other. His face looked like it had melted like wax then re-solidified.

The Prince seated himself and called out. “Beckett.” A solidly built Gangrel with scraggly hair and John Lennon glasses made his way to the aisle. He approached me with a look of curiosity. I handed over the page. The assembled Kindred sat down.

Beckett adjusted his glasses to look through the reading lens. After a moment he exclaimed, “I hadn’t thought it could be possible, but it appears to be... authentic!” He glanced up at me over his glasses. “Was it folded when you received it?” I shook my head no and he frowned and continued looking over the document, holding it up to the dim yellow light diffused around the sanctuary. “The fibers of the page are in all the right places... and the handwriting is the same as is the age and fading of the ink.” He adjusted his jacket and took off his glasses, looking up to the throne. “My Prince, I am pleased to announce that this is genuine. It is a heretofore unknown segment from the legendary *Book of Nod*.”

I had no clue what the *Book of Nod* was, but the name sounded biblical in origin. *Nod... where have I heard that before?*

Prince Heinrich showed no change in emotion, which was detached, but he did lean back into the throne. Beckett asked, “If I may translate?” and received a nod. He donned his glasses once more and then read the passage slowly.

Beware the nights when new stars appear. Amaranthine will follow red, even as the prophet follows the trickster. The father will consume his childer; his hunger is insatiable. The cloth will be unwoven unless the star is extinguished. Let mercy and understanding sit upon those who understand these words.

There were some murmurs when Beckett finished. Prince Heinrich's dark eyes wandered over until settling on where I stood. "Patricia Heron," he pronounced through his remarkably thin lips, which trembled as he spoke. I had totally forgotten that the necklace I wore was part of the gift that was intended for him, and would only realize it much later. My heart filled with fear. Condemnation pursued me. He would probably have me executed. I pressed my lips together and was ready to accept my fate. *Your will, Lord.*

"Yes, your Grace."

"You will answer my questions."

I nodded silently.

"You escaped the burning of Little Tokyo and traveled to New Monroe, where my cousin, Alexander Blaine and all his subjects were destroyed. You alone survived. Are you a harbinger of death to our kind? Do you bear any curse by way of mage craft or sorcery? You will explain the atrocities that befell those places, as well as any part you had in them." He finished and glanced over to Tancredo, who stood beside him.

I didn't know about the cousin part. Prince Blaine was from Clan Ventrue and Heinrich was Toreador. Perhaps they had been earthly cousins from his human life. "As far as I know, I am neither cursed nor affected by any sorcery or magic," I responded. "I have no recollection of

meeting or speaking with anyone involved in the arcane arts.” Tancredo watched me closely; the Prince was unreadable.

“Little Tokyo was destroyed by the Tzimisce, who had tunneled underneath the sewers as a means to avoid detection. When the National Guard imposed martial law, they used flame throwing tanks which set fire to half the city. I escaped on a ship with my ghoul.”

The Prince rubbed his chin and I continued.

“As for New Monroe, the city was brought down, not by the Sabbat, but from within. Prince Blaine had scores of Kindred staked beneath the Winfield building. They were set free by Kindred who desired... *not freedom*... revenge. I was late for court and saw the truck as it careened down Empire Avenue, destroying the building and all inside.”

Prince Heinrich frowned. “Did you play any part in assisting those who committed this act?”

“No, your Grace.” *I didn’t help Claude Rainer but I didn’t turn him in either. Being hunted by the Sheriff’s office tends to erode trust in authority.*

Prince Heinrich looked over to Tancredo, who whispered “Veritas,” with his misshapen lips.

“Very well. Until it is determined that you bear no curse, this Praxis will deny recognition, and all the benefits that proceed thereof. You are confined to the Toreador haven until the next court, where the Seneschal shall re-evaluate your status.”

Relief flooded over me as the Prince directed his attention elsewhere. I was safe but still unrecognized, fair game to any underhanded schemes that might be sent my way.

“Primogen Bianchi,” he stated, and she stood immediately.

“Yes, my Prince.”

“The neonate will not be punished for this irregularity. She was performing a service for me.”

She nodded and we were motioned to sit down.

Oh, *how desperately* I wanted to look over and smile sweetly at Max Kominski, but I was a good girl and kept myself in check. The Prince extended his hand and Beckett dutifully brought the page to him. As Prince Heinrich received it a Kindred burst through the back doors, running halfway down the aisle. Everyone turned to see the late arrival. Some of the guards on stage handled the grips on their swords. The new man’s clothes were in tatters; a windbreaker, collared dress shirt, and slacks dangled from him, grimy and in disarray. Two guards ran after him from the doors which had been kicked open.

It was the thin blood. It had to be. He was not Polynesian but in fact Chinese, although that didn’t matter now. When he had been embraced, the Malkavian blood had rent his mind with a powerful, complex form of megalomania. Drawn to court by sheer instinct, blind luck or other means, he shrieked, “*I am Qiang Tam!*” He pointed an accusing finger at the Prince. “And I demand both crown and throne as the rightful ruler of this city!”

I looked at Tam and could not help but think that he would be destroyed. He was innocent. He didn’t ask to be fed on; didn’t ask to be embraced. Yet here he was, another worthless pawn, about to be run over helplessly by the blind juggernaut of the Camarilla.

“Kill him!” the captain yelled and swords were drawn. Was there nothing I could do? Nothing I could say that would persuade his life to be spared?

I shook my head. I could not stand by and do nothing. I was silent when the witness who observed Khalid el-Mazri's transformation was condemned to death in Prince Blaine's court. I was determined not to let it happen again. "Wait!" I yelled, half climbing out of my seat. I stretched my open hand towards Qiang and the guard who was hefting his sword in a backswing glanced at me... for just a moment. I turned my head towards the Prince and words failed me. I had no status. No merit. I wasn't even supposed to speak in court unless called on, much less plea for someone's life. Fortunately, the Prince had not rendered judgment on the intruder yet. Prince Heinrich focused his dark eyes on me and the words suddenly came to me, as if out of nowhere. "He may know something."

Prince Heinrich considered this. What I didn't know was that the phrase had more meaning to the elders there, that this Kindred might be more than just a mad, potential usurper who had no chance of succeeding. They knew the prophecies were more than just fiction. They knew that events were beginning to come to fruition, just as they had stated. There may very well be another series of final nights, another Gehenna, when Antediluvians rose from their sleep and consumed their progeny in a mad, last gasp.

"Take him away to be questioned," the Prince commanded. Tam struggled but was quickly staked and hauled unceremoniously away. Heinrich stood from his throne. "The gift bearer will be forgiven *once*," he looked at me and held up a finger, "for her lack of protocol in court. You will personally see to her instruction, Primogen Bianchi." With that, the crowd rose and he and Tancredo filed out back through the opened panel which closed behind them. Veronica didn't seem to be having a good night, but then again, she was with me.

The captain of the guard glared at me. *Get in line behind the others who want me dead.* There was motion from the Ventrue section and the stern Kindred who had ridden in the back of the sleek silver vehicle when I first arrived in Vienna was recognized by Lady Marie. Jan Pieterzoon.

He rose primly from his seat. “I heard mutterings coming from... selected individuals... after the ‘prophecy’ was read. I would remind this assemblage that the Seneschal’s word is *law* when she speaks in the place of the Prince. That means that any idea of entertaining the thought that these foolish predictions have merit is strictly forbidden!” He surveyed the assembled Kindred before sitting down again. His timing was unfortunate.

“My God!” the cry came from the foyer. Only those with seats close enough to the aisle (like myself) were able to see what was happening.

“Speak!” came the command from Lady Marie. The two guards who had messed up allowing the thin blood to crash court were both pointing up into the sky.

“A comet flares.... A comet in the heavens. A purple comet!” *The Amaranthine star!* Pieterzoon absolutely seethed.

Chapter Twenty Seven: Ball and Chain

I felt that the elders were denouncing the prophecies in order to retain control. That was to be expected. After court was over, Kindred mingled and the desire to satiate curiosity must have been itching as we all traveled back to our respective havens. No one dared look up or even mention the comet, at least with the Toreador. It was like a great unspoken, but inconvenient

truth suspended in the sky. On the trip back I got out a compact and powdered my nose and spotted it out the window in the mirror.

When we got back Primogen Bianchi scolded me in her office. It wasn't a happy experience. I had deliberately set out to get the page to the Prince without going through the proper channels. Then I had interrupted court and defied the captain's orders, squaring him off against the Prince's wishes in the process. I apologized and she banned me from participating in any activities that would take place in the upcoming soiree. That was fine with me, as it would just be another opportunity to mess up. I tried to act disappointed.

Lessons with Primogen Bianchi were to begin after the soiree. If I had failed to learn how to behave properly, she would either ask the court for my destruction or call the Scourge directly and just kick me out of the haven. But I *was* behaving properly. They were all just being uncaring, destructive murderers and bastards.

The fate of the thin blood would be arranged behind closed doors with politics determining the outcome. Perhaps he would be spared if Felix were indebted to a life boon, much as had occurred with me. I wondered if my intervention in court would sway Thomas to renege on his pledge to assist me in finding the Salubri. I hoped not.

The next night in a deep chamber underneath Haus de Hexe, Primogen Walter Hartmann and Finnaeus Knutson were briefing their operative on a mission. They were hunched together over a round, stone table engraved with arcane sigils. Hartmann spoke his instructions slowly with his

deep rumbling voice. “You will only have one chance to get this right. Ten minutes will be your maximum time frame to locate the target. If you are caught, you will destroy yourself. We will deny any involvement. Is this understood?”

The nameless acolyte nodded silently under his hood.

“Where will the gate appear?”

“One mile west of the target location.” Only his lips moved.

“What if the local Scourge spots you but you have time to make it back to the gate?” Finnaeus asked.

“Immediate self-immolation,” came the reply.

“Very well,” Hartmann concluded. “We appear to be ready.” The trio stood and walked from the High Regents’ outer offices to the Hearth Room. Numerous plants sat in potted planters located around the circumference of the chamber, each connected to different chantries throughout the world. A lit brazier was kept stocked with hot coals giving the air a bitter, smoky aroma. Low light came from 5 inch globes positioned around the room. The globes themselves were costly to produce in rare materials; thus they were found only in the High Regents office and here.

In the center a thick, medium sized tree sprouted up through the floor, spreading branches up and across the high ceiling. This was no ordinary plant, however. In most trees the phloem, the tissue that carries food down from the leaves is located in the center of the stem. Rings of this tissue counted the years. This tree carried unearthly yellow veins visible through a pallid, unhealthy outer bark that was pale and slightly translucent. The plant had been twisted through Tremere

magic and pulsed slowly, carrying thick liquid up from unhallowed ground where it received a different kind of nourishment.

Hartmann stood before the tree and began the incantation, using gestures to open up the intra-dimensional space. Lines of smoke trailed from his hands and arms. Finnaeus stood back and watched the intricate process. Finally, a thin line opened up in the bark. The opening revealed not wood, but lines of dark, patterned force. The opening continued to spread beneath Hartmann's motions, and when it was wide enough the trusted acolyte/agent passed through.

The first part complete, Walter and Finnaeus pulled up some chairs on the moss-covered floor to await the outcome of the mission. "What do you think his chances are?" Finnaeus asked.

"Good," Walter replied. "Much of it is sheer luck. Are the defenses of the city in the right place at the right time? Will he be noticed by human eyes, or will a wild animal betray his presence? We have done what we can. Now we wait."

"I assume the standard protocol will be used?"

"Yes, after the operation is complete. Fifteen years of service in the chantry after which the new neonate will be eligible to be introduced as a transfer from out of town."

Finnaeus nodded and they sat silently, watching the opening for the hopeful, expected outcome.

The agent stepped away from a trunk on the outskirts of a forest. Wet air swept by and stars winked down from the canopy over him. Crickets chirped, but stopped at his appearance in the shadows. He paused to get his bearings. Yellow light came from an opening in the distance

between the trees. He checked to make sure his homemade flare was in place. It contained a lethal combination of white phosphorus and magnesium oxide.

Memorizing the position of his escape route, he made his way towards the light. A lit, open courtyard faced the tree line. The agent could not believe his luck as he approached. The target was sitting there, alone in the courtyard. He immediately recognized the curly blond hair. There was no need to even infiltrate the compound – this was going to be easy!

He flitted silently from tree to tree, approaching the victim's back side. Then with a hand over her mouth, he quickly pulled the unsuspecting human from behind and carried her into the forest. Hands and arms struggled with futility against his powerful grip. He carried the target quickly making sure the flailing legs did not leave any drag marks. The only thing he left behind was a tipped white plastic chair.

When they were a sufficient distance away, he pinned her to the ground with a thump and began to feed from her neck. Her protests began to fade. Her arms fell, too weak to struggle. Her heart began to labor from lack of blood. Now the helpless female was at the point of death.

He bit his wrist and placed the wound over her mouth, giving it a squeeze with his free hand. The reaction was instant. Her undead eyes flicked open with a wild glare and she began to swallow.

That's right, he thought. Drink, young vampire!

The Tremere experience was quite different from the embrace of other Clans. Instead of being flooded with powerful feelings of pleasure, her emotions faded away. Gone, gone, gone. She still had the prerequisite trust bonding with her sire, but replacing the human capacity for love was... something else... a stirring of curiosity. An intellectual desire. The Tremere as a group were not

known for their ability to emulate humanity. It was a lost cause, a sacrifice for their dedication to their precious blood magic.

“Come!” He hauled her to her feet.

They staggered through the forest until reaching the gate. Holding her hand he stepped through the tree and pulled her behind him. They came out in the Hearth chamber.

Walter greeted the appearance of the acolyte and the target with a nod of approval and a bag of blood for the neonate’s first feeding. He closed the gate and glanced at his second. “Finnaeus,” he said, “I think your plan is going to work.” Finnaeus allowed a slow, twisted smile to creep across his lips. Oh how sweet the fruit of revenge!

The nights leading up to the soiree were filled with decorations, planning and preparations. I was tasked with helping the ghouls move furniture around and arrange the physical locations for events to spec. We cleaned the ballroom twice, then waxed the oak flooring which shined like a mirror when we finished. I didn’t mind doing the physical custodial jobs and helping to organize them at times. It kept me out of the way of the other Toreador and also kept me from being a target, at least for a while.

Early in the morning the night before the soiree, we got a well-deserved break. The orchestra had rehearsed earlier in the evening and everything was finished. We retired to a break room of sorts and I got to listen to the ghouls sit around and talk. I suppose it was the same sort of thing that happened with custodians all over the world... with one exception.

Frank Alt, the one who had brought me the ball dress before court, kept glancing over at me. I wondered what he was thinking so I just asked him directly. “Something on your mind, Frank?”

The rest of the ghouls looked over as Frank considered his response. “Yes, in fact there is, Miss Heron.” He worked his lips around as he summoned up his courage. “I was wondering... since you helped us set up in preparation for the event... if you could help us in another way... if you could help me.”

I wasn't sure I liked the way this was going, but the proverbial cat was out of the bag so I might as well see it through. “Could you be more specific?” Did he want help in leaving the service of vampires and didn't know how to do it?

I noticed the others were advancing onto the edge of their seats in anticipation. Frank leaned forward. “Might you be able to share your blood with us?”

The request hit me like a brick. They had taken my kind demeanor as a sign I was an easy mark. I blinked and tried to control my response. “Do you have any idea what would happen to me *and to you*, if I consented?”

“No,” he replied, but he looked like he had an idea.

“I would be destroyed for blood bonding another Kindred's ghoul. I'm on very thin ice already. You would probably be destroyed for violating your master's will. In case you haven't noticed, the Kindred here in Vienna don't have a whole lot of tolerance for screwing up.”

He looked disappointed. “I know... I know. I was just wondering.”

I shook my head in disbelief and rejection. “You must go to your master or mistress with this request. Don’t you have any aspirations? Dreams? Do you have any clue of the opportunity that is yours to just reach out and grasp?” I stretched out my empty hand in emphasis.

“Yes!” he responded. “I want to be a great composer. I want to write music that will capture the heart of man. Only...” he took a breath and sighed. “I am waiting for approval to be Embraced. Then, I will have the blood of your Clan to boost my talent and eternity in which to perfect my creations.”

I didn’t understand people who seemed to think that being a vampire was so wonderful. “You don’t understand. It’s not a gift, in spite of appearances. *It’s a curse!*”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Frank replied, “you have the...”

I lowered my head and stared into his eyes. I was starting to get upset. I had never really had the opportunity to verbalize my deep feelings about my Embrace with anyone since New Monroe. It was a subject I was passionately opinionated about. I could be labeled an Anarch for not toting the official line, but this misconception, this lie grated with irritation on my nerves. “*It’s fake!*” I spat it out interrupting him and everyone there jumped a little. “And I know better than you *exactly* what it is! Yes, you get some talents you didn’t have before. It’s. Not. Worth it. It doesn’t mean anything! Would you become Judas Iscariot to your very soul for a piece of sounding brass? For a hollow, meaningless clanging cymbal?”

“I apologize for offending you, Miss Heron. It’s just that....”

“Save your apologies, Frank.” I tried to relax and put them at ease. “Rather, just search my words. See it in my eyes. See the truth in what I say. It’s there. And should I meet some dire fate... should I just disappear unexpectedly one night... remember them.”

Loud footsteps proceeded up the hallway. “Patricia? Is that you?” It was Primogen Bianchi. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you.” We all stood.

The ghouls looked at one another in apprehension wondering if I was going to spill the beans in order to get into Veronica’s good graces. They needn’t have worried. Then again, would they turn me in for a chance at an extra feeding?

“What are you doing here among *the blood bags*?” she asked with a dismissive gesture.

“Just chatting after a long night’s work, Primogen.”

“The sun is going to rise soon and you were unaccounted for. I grew concerned. Come. It is time to retire.”

I felt drowsy as I finally reached my room. Tomorrow was the Spring Soiree. I said some prayers at the bedside before retiring. *Dear Father, Please help me. Have mercy on me. Help me return to humanity. Thank you for your love and forgiveness, even though I’m not a part of it anymore. Amen.* The events that would occur tomorrow night would change everything.

The mongoose in my blood stirred when I arose the next evening. It was hungry. I was hungry. Hungry for blood. I longed for that sweet satisfaction in my throat and stomach. I would not be getting any satisfaction during my fast in spite of the risk of frenzy. Frank brought me the dress I

was to wear tonight. Thankfully, it didn't have any hoops. I declined the offer of blood and Frank left.

The dress was deep crimson crushed velvet, with many layers and folds, like a stage curtain. Poofy shoulders and long white gloves completed the outfit. I left my room for the decorated haven, where Zil and Luciana waited. I greeted them with a quiet "Good evening," and was met with silence. It could be worse.

Guests began to arrive. They mingled in groups according to status, the eldest Kindred generally keeping to their own, with an eye on their Clanmates as they whispered among themselves. Many of the men wore tri-corner hats and white wigs. The women had their hair up in elaborate hairdos. My own hung down with no adornment or special style.

The Captain of the Guard, shining in his polished, gilded armor huddled with the Nosferatu Primogen, Curafferum Senner. Beckett, the Kindred historian, mingled with Jan Pieterzoon and Theo Bell. Primogen Bianchi was whispering with a clean-shaven Kindred who wore a satiny sky blue jacket with matching pants. He looked like a grown up "Blue Boy." Thomas Dern arrived with his own Clan. I wondered if Walter Hartmann and Finnaeus Knutson would try to confront me again, but they kept to themselves. Various ghouls lined up along the side walls, with some circulating among the guests offering themselves as refreshments.

Lady Marie arrived and all talking ceased. We bowed and curtsied low as she entered the room, resplendent in a beautiful white dress accented with lavender lace. Then music resounded from the orchestra in the ballroom and we filed in for the first event.

Baroque music swelled and pitched in rhythm as pairs quickly formed on the dance floor. I thought I heard a harpsichord in the background. Flutes and violins rose high above the melody in counterpoint. Dresses flared as women spun, meeting and backing away from their partners. The men strutted in syncopation, tails following. I was surprised to see Lady Marie had actually paired up with Thomas Dern for the first dance. Perhaps a deal had been struck with regards to the thin blood.

Primogen Bianchi danced with Blue Boy with divine precision and grace. I wondered if this new Kindred who was not listed in the folder I had to memorize was in fact Lord Byron. Applause for the dancers and the orchestra filled the intermissions as new partners were chosen. After five dances, the winners were named. Veronica Bianchi and Jan Pieterzoon were selected as most skilled, to more polite applause.

Then Geoffrey Kreismann thumped a staff at the entrance to the side lawn. “The games of wit and skill are now open!” he announced. “The William Tell Archery Contest will be held outside. The chess tournament is now starting in the Toreador haven.” Groups broke up and dispersed. I wandered outside to see the archery, but the spectacle quickly became distasteful. It was like watching a traffic accident as ghouls fell from horrible wounds. Kindred spectators actually applauded the brutal display as living targets soiled themselves in terror. *Dear Lord!* I didn’t want to stick around for this.

I went back in to watch the chess games instead. As I passed through the entrance, Primogen Bianchi and an entourage were seated on furniture to the left, talking. I tried to make my proximity wide enough that I did not interrupt their conversation. I certainly didn’t mean to.

As I passed, Blue Boy called after me with his proper British accent. “Excuse me, miss. Miss!” I had to stop and turn, curtsying and bowing my head. He started peppering me with banter trying to get a reaction. “I couldn’t help but notice you walked right by us with nary a word or glance. Are you too good for our company? Perhaps you think yourself a princess. What cold cephalopod crawled up your nether regions, hmm?”

They all laughed at the comments. I whispered “Forgive me, sir” and departed, flipping my hair back as I left. Since when did disgraceful rudeness become acceptable humor? As I approached the chess tables where small groups had gathered to watch, a movement from the window caught my eye. I looked and could not believe what I saw. Amalthea! She waved to me and smiled, then beckoned me with one hand to come outside. What was she doing here?

Many thoughts went through my head as I went to the emergency exit door. At first I was excited, and could not wait to reconnect with my friend. Then I began to wonder – what if she was here to ask for my blood once more? I didn’t want to get in the way of her recovery.

“Come! Hurry, we haven’t much time” she breathed in her quaint, French accent as she turned and broke out into a jog that became a run. “It’s just behind the dumpster.” I followed her as best I could in my heavy dress. Wow, she was fast. Perhaps she still had some leftover traces of my blood. The dumpster came into sight around the corner of the grounds. The two long ends were open as Amalthea passed through inside. I followed her but the door in front of me swung closed when I was halfway through. “No!” I heard her yelp as I reached the closed exit. Then the doors to the entrance clanged shut when I turned around, leaving me inside the smelly, dark metal enclosure. Extra metallic *clitching* sounds informed me the locks had been secured.

What had just happened? Amalthea had been used somehow to lure me into a trap. The promised person/object she had wanted me to see was a ruse. “*Amalthea, run away!*” I yelled through the metal walls, but did not receive any response. I didn’t have my cell phone with me, so there was no way I could contact Primogen Bianchi. The use of telepathy was well beyond my ability, and low on blood as I was it was not a considerable option.

So I sat down on the floor and began to bang on the side wall in Morse code. S-O-S. After a minute I heard a truck backing up to the container. Beep, beep, beep it went as the engine rumbled. Maybe the driver would hear me, so I banged all the louder. The beeping stopped with a jolt that shook the entire container. Then it began to lift on one end and I was sent skidding around inside. I realized the driver of the truck had to be part of the set-up. It was too coincidental. There was no way of unlatching the locks from the inside so I was left with nothing else to do but continue my SOS from inside the dumpster. I prayed my unheard vampire prayers, asking God for help.

The trip took about twenty minutes as the truck reverberated through the city of Vienna on late night streets. The truck then stopped and began to back up again. I heard the back doors unlatch as the entire container tilted backwards. Perhaps if I tried I could leap out the top of the exit and get away. I started to sprint as the back doors opened, only to find myself running into a wide, gaping metal chute into the ground. I could not stop and fell headfirst, plummeting down... down... only to smack into some hard surface that felt like concrete. *Ow!* I lifted my bruised head and robed figures were chanting at me, making movements with their sleeved hands. A heavy lethargy overwhelmed me. It was the last thing I saw that night.

Back at the soiree, Thomas Dern was looking for the Toreador neonate without success. He tried the arm wrestling matches, the card games and the “Did They Do It?” storytelling venue with no luck. After searching the grounds and oddly finding no trace, he spotted Veronica Bianchi socializing with the Tremere elders. He approached with a respectful greeting, which was returned.

“Good evening. I was wondering if you might have seen Miss Heron? The last I saw her was at the dancing competition. She seems to have disappeared.” He stroked his mole absently.

“That is most odd,” Veronica replied. “She’s restricted to the grounds and was not to take part in any of the activities. Perhaps she has retired to her room.”

“No, I have already checked with the staff.” Thomas shook his head.

Walter Hartmann glanced at Finnaeus and then offered his thoughts. “Who knows with neonates? But wherever she is, I’m sure she’ll be... no more trouble.” Finnaeus smiled.

I’m sure she’ll be no more trouble? No more trouble! Thomas had to fight himself to keep from sending the man screaming into his own worst nightmares right then and there. He rigidly balled his hands into fists as his arms locked out straight. With a swift bow he turned and walked away, quivering in madness and outrage. *How dare he use the same words when he lied to the Prince about destroying his first childe? How dare he?*

It was time then. So this was how it would go down. Tonight he would play his trump card. The night of reckoning. The nuclear option. Oh, yes, how sweet it would be. The bastards would pay for their treachery. There was no doubt they had abducted Patty in much the same way as they had done with Zarkov. He could feel it in his bones. Tonight, the wheels of karma would be set

in motion for some dearly needed payback. The beauty of it was, Thomas would barely have to lift a finger himself.

Thomas left the soiree early and Eckert drove him back to the institute. He went to his office on the third floor, and to the locked drawer of his desk where the simple key to his plan had lain undisturbed, for years. The residents of the office erupted in protest. “*Shut up,*” he croaked glaring about, and the room fell into silence. Gathering a few slips of paper with simple numbers jotted down and a roll of coins, he left and went down to the bicycle in the garage. It wasn’t often he used one of his most powerful abilities, which rendered him completely unnoticed to any watching eyes. The skill altered the minds of those who tried to see him, a natural aspect of his nature.

Thomas felt his blood drain as he immediately became thirsty. He went to the garage, took out a bicycle and began to pedal out to the suburbs. Nearly all Kindred in the city were at the soiree, so it was unlikely he would be spotted in any event. After pedaling for 35 minutes he reached his destination: a closed gas station with a lone, isolated phone kiosk. Thomas pulled out the paper and the coins. He altered his voice to become a character he’d once portrayed in a play; the bitter detective, Wilhelm, his preferred alias when working with this contact.

Wilhelm looked at the first sheet, then dialed the number. He heard the click of the phone pick up at the other end, but no response. This was expected. “This is Wilhelm. There is a Kindred in need of your assistance. Her name is Patricia Heron.” Wilhelm rattled off a description then added the kicker. “She has been kidnapped by Clan Tremere. I suspect they have taken her to Haus de Hexe. I know the danger that you face there, but I wouldn’t have called were it not important. Assist her however you can.”

There was a pause from the other side of the line, and then, “Understood.” Wilhelm hung up.

He got out the second sheet of paper and looked at it, his anger simmering. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” he muttered to himself as he inserted the coins and dialed the number.

It was 4:30 in the morning when the phone rang in the villa. The trainee on duty answered the phone. “Hello?”

The voice on the other end growled “Get me the leader of the Leopold Society. I have very limited time and he’ll want to take this call.”

“One moment, please,” the trainee answered as he placed the call on hold. He ran for John Mark’s quarters and burst through the door, knocking. “Father Inglewood— a phone call!”

John Mark hurled himself out of bed. “Wake Father Allen and send him to the office.”

“Yes, sir!”

John Mark strode quickly to the office and flicked on the lights, then turned on the tracer and the recording device. When Father Allen arrived, John Mark pointed at the other phone and mouthed “On three.” He counted with his fingers and at the appointed time, they both picked up the phones.

“Yes?” John Mark asked.

The Kindred on the other end whispered “I have in my possession a most rare opportunity for you... the location of the headquarters of Clan Tremere. This is no trap, it is a genuine offer. There is a price, however.”

The two hunters glanced at one another. John Mark asked “What might that be?”

“There are two vampires who I believe have been kidnapped by Clan Tremere. If they are still alive they must not be harmed. They should be allowed to flee should you come across them.”

“Of course,” John Mark lied. “We agree to the terms of your request.”

“The first is Zarkov. He is easily identified from the others there by a bump on the left side of his forehead. The other is Patricia. She has shoulder length brown hair and was last seen wearing a red ball gown.”

“I will instruct my people to avoid harming them and will allow them free exit should they be spotted,” John Mark replied.

“Very well. The location of Clan Tremere is a monastery known as Haus de Hexe. I suspect the complex is underground. Be wary of Tremere magic. They will fortify themselves or move to another location if you wait too long.” The phone hung up with a click.

“Did the trace get through?” Father Allen asked. Both men went to the computer screen.

“Yes,” John Mark answered. He zoomed in on the map. “Looks like a public phone at a gas station.” He looked up to the trainee on duty. “Wake the rest of the compound. We’ll need to start packing immediately if we want to get to Haus de Hexe with some time while the sun is still out. Also start charging the containment unit. It takes four hours to fill up.”

“Yes, Father.”

John Mark leaned on the counter and rubbed his eyebrows. “What do you think?” he asked Father Allen, looking up at him.

Leonard raised his eyebrows. “A house divided....”

“Indeed.” Jean Mark nodded in agreement.

Chapter Twenty Eight: Preparations

When I next became aware of my surroundings, I found myself inside a cage in an earthen cavern of sorts. My hands were manacled behind my back with chains. The room was dim but light flickered from a distant passage. As my eyes adjusted, I saw what appeared to be tire tracks in the floor. The chute I came down was gone. Perhaps I had been moved to another location. I wondered what happened to Amalthea and hoped she had gotten away.

Whispers traveled down the corridor. I picked up the words “ceremony tonight” but the rest was lost as the sounds retreated. I tested the chains that held my wrists and found a bit of slack in them. I managed to lift my legs up over my wrists and pulled the rest of the fabric though.

Standing, I examined the cage. Pivots underneath the floor allowed the bars to swing down on three sides. I tried to reach underneath the platform where my wrists were secured to the bars, but was unable to find the release. I didn’t have the aberrant strength that some other Clans had, so I would not be able to bend steel bars or break the chains Cillian Sass style.

I slipped out of my heels and took off the white gloves. Perhaps I would be able to use them somehow, like MacGyver. I don’t think he ever had heels and white gloves to work with, though.

I recognized the robed figures I saw at the bottom of the chute. When I had taken the Shield of Durer to Nathaniel Timms, an acolyte dressed in similar robes had brought out the extra money I had requested from a panel which opened in the wall. That meant I was in the hands of the

Tremere, and they had made good on their promise to make me pay for “stealing their knowledge.” I would be missed at the museum, but Primogen Bianchi would just rather have reported me to the Scourge or Sheriff for violating the terms of the Prince’s conditions than send anyone out to find me. Besides, I didn’t think the Tremere would want the other Clans to know they were abducting Kindred from their own Domains. No, that probably meant this was to be a one way trip.

I sat back against the bars with my legs curled underneath me, awaiting an opportunity to escape.

During the previous day at the villa, all the preparations had been completed by mid-morning. Holy swords imbued with a carbon silver alloy were issued and waited sheathed in their scabbards. They had been blessed by Pope John Paul II himself. The bulky ceramic containment vessels had been charged and loaded onto the bus. Other contingencies were accounted for and ready. Almost.

The trip to Haus de Hexe was a four hour drive. Unfortunately, there was a weak spot in the metal of the radiator of the bus along the back wall. It had flexed and bowed over time becoming progressively fatigued. Now the pressure it would have normally contained became too much and the weak spot ruptured, spewing green fluid all over the hot engine. Steam erupted in front of the driver in a billowing white cloud. The sweet smell was immediately apparent to all the hunters on board. Something had gone wrong with the radiator. The bus pulled over to avoid ruining the engine.

John Mark cursed his bad luck as the bus rolled to a stop. He pulled out a cell phone to arrange for a tow to the nearest facility that could accommodate them. The news from his

driver/mechanic was worse. The problem was not a hose that could be replaced, nor a seam in the radiator which could be welded. The damage required a full replacement; a difficult prospect on a Sunday morning.

John Mark was not deterred. He had connections – in this case, the commander of a nearby NATO base. After they exchanged words, the military mechanics and shop were mobilized. A tow vehicle was on the way. And if they didn't have a radiator that fit, they would force one in and make it fit. John Mark hung up and relayed the news. He sat on the bus with his men, counting the hours.

Thomas Dern rested well the day after the soiree. He might get put on the Red List if his actions were discovered; he might even get hunted down by the Archons. But he would have his revenge. That was enough. He arose early the night after the soiree and began his evening routine in the third floor office.

It was interrupted by a knock on the wall outside. "Enter," he said and Professor Matteus Salzberger came through the open door.

Matteus squinted, fidgeting. "Thomas, I have news. I had hoped to see you last night, but the time grew late."

"Please, come and be seated. You look agitated, old friend." Concern creased the lines on Thomas' face. *Was his plan uncovered already?*

Matteus sat down, practically squirming. “You recall the vision of the Oracle, the one that Miss Heron shared with us? We must speak with her again, to see if there were any details unmentioned.”

Thomas shook his head. “I don’t think that will be possible. Why do you ask?”

“The vision... the moon where it took place... it wasn’t the moon at all. It was the surface of the comet! It was real. It was the Amaranthine star itself.”

“Then the line of haze that stretched off into space....”

“Was the tail of the comet,” Matteus finished.

Thomas set his chin on his closed fist. This was not good... not good at all. “What of the maelstrom?”

“I fear that question more than all the elders in Vienna. If my suspicions prove correct, it is a representation of Malkav himself. It is a manifestation of his id, his mind. When he awakens, he will consume us all in a genocidal act of self-preservation. The prophecy is coming true.”

“Then there is nothing we can do. We are doomed.” The realization shocked Thomas. He shook his head trying to fathom the end of his undead life after centuries of existence, his eyes now wide and glazed.

“I considered the implications last night while waiting for you. I have an idea, but it’s a long shot.” Thomas’ wild eyes shot over to Matteus, fixed on him. “It concerns the new page found from the *Book of Nod*. I believe I have an interpretation.”

“Go on.” Thomas was raving in his madness, Matteus had seen it before. But with madness sometimes comes insight.

“The prophecy states that the cloth will be unwoven unless the light is extinguished.” I believe the cloth represents the descendants of Malkav. If the light can be extinguished, if the comet can be destroyed, we can be saved from obliteration.”

Thomas’ eyes searched unseen possibilities. How does one destroy a comet? They had no access to rockets or satellites like Clan Ventrue. No, the answer had to be through unconventional means. The answer was there. It had to be. He searched through patterns of thought that were as random as a cascading fall of water from a high precipice. What was it? What was the connection? Then in a flash, the missing piece revealed itself. “Matteus...” he said as he licked his lips. “The waves of force that affect our abilities, causing our reality to manifest.... When have they occurred?”

The professor squinted his eyes, recalling the dates. “The first time was the evening of the sixth. Then it happened again on the thirteenth. The last time was the twentieth, when Miss Heron came to visit and the eye manifested. That means the next time it is supposed to happen....”

“Is tonight!” Thomas shook as he lifted his head up. His eyes ceased wandering as they focused on his colleague. “You used to be a hypnotist. I’m going to call on those skills this evening.”

Thomas stood, and Matteus rose with him. “Assemble the Clan! I want every Malkavian within driving distance here before midnight.” The professor dashed off to relay the command.

It wasn't long before two acolytes came down the passage, walking softly on the dirt floor. I stood and asked them what was going on, but they did not answer. They took positions on either side of the cage and one of them released a small lever under the platform.

Then my entire cage was wheeled down a series of long ramps, deep under the ground. Jagged stone held back the earth as we descended down. Down into the depths. There were four long ramps in all, each ending in a platform with a 90 degree turn. Torches flickered along the sides guttering in a queer blue light, fed by Tremere magic. There appeared to be no source of electricity down here. A heavy steel rebar mesh was stapled into the ceiling above and along the sides. At the bottom the passage opened up into a large room with many exits. The walls here appeared to be normal sheet rock, the lower halves decorated with wooden panels. A deep, black-red carpeting covered the floor. Hallways went off in myriad directions in what I could only surmise were part of a sprawling underground complex. In front of me on the far wall was a wide set of double doors. They reflected with a dark gold in the flickering blue light, and were decorated with geometric shapes and mystic symbols.

One of the acolytes, the same one who released the lever under the platform, stood before the doors and uttered some phrases in a foreign tongue I did not understand. He waved his hand and the doors opened outwards with a *snick*.

A vast expanse extended upwards as I was wheeled into a huge octagonal room. High, open archways led to different areas along the sides. Four tall, curved, stone columns traveled up the sides of the chamber. Strange mosses glowed neon blue in rectangular planters, and twisted, sickly yellow vines gripped the walls until they met an arched ceiling high above. The floor here was patterned stone with cabalistic symbols. Some substance that resembled frosted glass was

used as filler between the patterns on the floor. A powder of some sort was spread in a trefoil design over parts that joined the glass sections together in a pattern. Primogen Hartmann was there, along with Finnaeus Knutson, both dressed in black robes with small, yellow sigils decorating the seams and edges.

In the center of the room was a horrifying bowl-shaped object, crafted from flesh. It was three meters wide; thick veins weaved under and through the tissue. A glossy, clear substance collected in a pool at the bottom and covered the rims and sides. Just looking at it caused my stomach to turn. Four braziers surrounded the gelatinous, oozing vessel; each smoked with red hot coals. My enclosure was wheeled into the patterned floor next to it.

Hartmann paced around the outside of the circle as he spoke to me. “There’s no need to fear your Clan will discover your abduction and imprisonment, Miss Heron.” His features became malevolent as he strolled towards my cage, staring at me. “Even if they do, you’ll be long gone before then.”

Finnaeus directed the acolytes to place two large planters on either side of the cage. Spiked creepers curled up into the air from the vessels. Then Hartmann spoke cryptic words as he gestured at the pots. The vines grew, coiling and twisting, squeezing my arms and legs and biting into me with sharp thorns through the thick cloth. It felt like I was being impaled by a dozen hypodermic needles. I cried out in pain as thorns pierced my skin.

The acolytes activated a mechanism under the platform and the iron bars fell away to the sides with a resounding clang. The ceiling folded back behind me. They retreated outside the circle after they were finished. “How poetic,” Hartmann said. “The Rose has been entrapped by thorns.”

Finnaeus silently laughed. He made a key turning motion at me and the chains fell away. He then turned and whispered to the Tremere acolyte who was closest. "Is she coming? Good." He looked up past the cage and I heard someone approaching from the antechamber behind me.

Twisting around, I saw something that filled my soul with dread. It was Amalthea, dressed in the robes of an acolyte! She walked over to Finnaeus and smiled at him, displaying two shiny fangs before turning to face me. No! My hopes for my loyal friend were crushed as the realization of what had happened hit me. I sagged down as my heart grew heavy and my strength ebbed away.

The street outside the former sanitarium was jammed with cars parked against the curb. The large, walled courtyard with the pond and stone sentries was similarly filled. The Clan meet truly was a convocation of the bizarre, with all types of personalities gathered to show mutual support. Edna had a lot of company, and she shrieked her displeasure at the proximity of so many Kindred. The Scourge and the Sheriff would eventually show interest, but not until later in the night. For now, the scene had been set and Thomas had his audience.

A desk and chair had been brought out from the second floor office (the one from the third floor certainly would have complained) and placed on the patio at the top of the rise just behind the mansion. On it was a microphone and stand, an electric fan, a small light and wires leading away to speakers and a power supply.

The Malkavians had separated into groups in the yard, generally separated by home territory. Old friends met and whispered quietly of times past, while old rivals also squared off. Former lovers tried to avoid one another. Someone got pushed into the pond.

Thomas grabbed the microphone and tapped on it, causing a whine of feedback that resounded, then left when he moved it a little further away from his body. “Your attention please,” his words echoed across the courtyard. “Thank you for your attendance at our hastily-called family gathering. Your purpose here is simple. Tonight we are going to attempt an experiment. There is no guarantee of success, but I do have the guarantee of your comradeship and helpful participation, for which we are grateful.”

“The purpose of this experiment is to destroy *that*.” With one hand he pointed into the sky at a 45 degree angle. Heads turned to see the purple comet suspended in the heavens. “We are going to see if the subconscious is truly as powerful as has been speculated. To that end, may I introduce my second, Professor Matteus Salzberger.”

“I don’t want to be a chicken!” someone said from the audience.

“No one is going to be made into a chicken, I assure you,” Thomas replied with a smile before handing the microphone to Matteus.

Matteus seated himself at the desk. The small light behind the fan made his face and image flicker in the darkness as he spoke into the microphone. “I want you to relax. Sit down or lie down on the grass and close your eyes.” His voice was soothing and slightly monotone as he pronounced the words slowly. “You are getting sleepier. As you relax, I want you to imagine an invisible, weightless balloon attached to your hand by a string. As it lifts, you feel your hand becoming lighter and lighter.”

Hands began to lift among the audience. “Lighter and lighter. Higher and higher. Yes, that’s it. In a moment, the balloon will begin to move your hand towards your face. When it touches, you

will fall into an even deeper sleep.” He paused. “Now it’s moving... bringing your hand closer to your face. Closer... closer... *SLEEP! SLEEP! SLEEP!*” He snapped his fingers next to the mike in time with his commands and the audience as one went into a deep hypnotic trance.

“Now we are going to take a journey. You may see things which disturb you but have no fear. Nothing will be able to touch or harm you. You will be present only as observers. We are going to travel through air and space to the purple comet. Imagine accelerating faster and faster, up through the atmosphere. The horizon is receding beneath you. The sun pokes out from behind the black shadow of the Earth, but it cannot hurt you. Its rays pass harmlessly through you, for they have nothing to reflect against. It is only your viewpoint that is changing, not your location. Faster, faster you go! The comet is getting larger and larger. Finally you have reached the surface.”

“It looks very much like the moon here. The surface is powdery, and has a lavender color, with thin, dark shadows. The entire comet is made from rocks and condensed gases which are frozen solid. Every rock, every crystal has natural lines of fracture. They are weak places between molecules where they are easily separated. See them. Imagine them.”

Looks of horror began to appear on various Malkavians in the audience and Kindred began to cry out in fear and desperation. It was the powerful mind of Malkav. The maelstrom was starting to pull them all into itself to consume them. The faceless forms, just like in the vision, were dragged towards the swirling maw.

Finnaeus took Amalthea’s hand as she approached. “Your former ghoul was quite useful to us as

bait, Miss Heron.” She lifted her head proudly. “Now that she has delivered you to us, she has the privilege of serving Clan Tremere and becoming one with us in service as well as in blood.”

“*Monster!*” I sneered. Anger toughened my resolve as I struggled to stand. He had destroyed the companion and sister I had once known. Amalthea was no longer free. She was now undead.

Her soul was now as cursed as mine was. Oh, that she could have avoided this fate!

“I grew nauseous of the cloying, sweet perfume of the Rose’s blood,” she retorted. Hartmann left the circle and Amalthea sauntered over to him, her pink lips now tainted with poisoned words.

“It was like an artificial sweetener; a colored, watered down imitation of false appearance. It was nothing compared to the *power* that flows through my veins now!”

Hartmann nodded at Amalthea. “Speak for yourself, Toreador. We know how you lured Nathaniel Timms into breaking his oath with our Clan. With honeyed speech and treacherous lies you seduced him into revealing our secrets. We tried to bargain with you, but you left us with no choice. And now... now you are going to pay the price for that theft.”

“You plan to kill me?” I asked.

“Oh, no!” he replied feigning insult, lifting a hand to his chest. “No, not at all! That would violate the Sixth Tradition, destruction. The Prince, you see, he has a truthsayer and we certainly wouldn’t want to get caught in any... impropriety, would we? Do you see this container made of flesh?” He gestured to the shiny, bowl-shaped monstrosity which sat in front of me. “It’s not just a flowery decoration. It’s a womb... one made specifically for Kindred. This one is for you.” He left the circle and looked up into the buttresses high above. “Zarkov? Would you come down here, please?” I heard the heavy flap of wings resound and a massive creature landed on the edges of one of the columns with a *thump*. It was at least seven feet tall, with wings which folded

behind its back and a flexible tail which swayed about. It appeared to be made of stone.

Finnaeus took over from there. “You see Miss Heron... we are going to transform you into a Gargoyle.” He nodded to himself and continued, approaching me. “It’s quite a painful process, I assure you, and the change is permanent. Your mind will be magically erased. You will have no memories of your human or Kindred life. It will all be gone.” Closer still, he came until he stepped up on the platform and stood in front of me. I turned away, shivering, as goose bumps raced up my skin.

A smile crept sideways across his face. “Your will, your every desire, all remnants of your former self will be stripped from you. With your body changed and every vestige of your past gone, you will become a blank slate – a true *Tabula Rasa* in every sense of the word. And then you will serve the Tremere as a slave. An unthinking, unblinking slave... for the rest of eternity.”

“No!” I struggled against the vines which moved slightly but then held me tighter. *Dear Lord, save me!*

“Let the ritual commence!” Hartmann announced. Amalthea and the other acolytes moved further back from the circle set in the floor. Finnaeus stepped off the platform and began to chant and weave his hands. A cold, glowing gas began to drift off of them as he recited the mystic formula.

Chapter Twenty Nine: No Way Out

Up above, a group of men in a travel bus had stopped outside the front gates of Haus de Hexe. Darkness cloaked the streets and not a sound was heard except the whistling evening wind. Black clouds gathered ominously overhead, slowly toiling as they prepared to unleash a downpour. The

men wore matching outfits of Kevlar armor, and piled out of the doors to open hinged compartments underneath the seating area. John Mark Inglewood did a last minute check to make sure everyone was ready. Four men wore twin cylindrical tanks strapped to their backs. The tanks connected to hoses, which in turn led to long steel tubes with hand grips. Tiny flames glowed from the ends of the sticks. A two man team directed by Father Leonard Allen maneuvered the bulky containment vessel on wheels. A large iron frame supported three heavy ceramic cylinders in the center. White mists escaped from the seals at the top and flowed down the sides. A large brass fire swivel and nozzle, like the kind found at the top of fire truck ladders stuck out the front, completing the apparatus. A dozen more men wielded holy swords. Long knives with wooden blades were tucked into their belts.

John Mark looked over the men, trying to find words which would inspire them. “This is it, then. Do your jobs, just like we practiced. Follow orders and whatever you do, don’t get separated. Have faith in each other, and in God. I’d say he who sheds his blood with me today is my brother, but you are already far more than that. We’re here to shed the blood of those who would threaten innocents! Let’s move out.”

The bus then restarted. The driver, an important part of their escape plan should it come to that, pulled back a little and accelerated right through the iron gates, forcing them aside. The group began to climb up the hill towards the entrance.

Matteus quickly addressed the faltering crowd. It was in this moment that a wave of supernatural force washed over the assembled Clan. The reality in their minds began to manifest, reinforced by Matteus’ confident, steady narration. “There may be a small storm on the surface of the

comet. Ignore it. Its voice is weak, and getting weaker. It cannot touch you or affect you. As you are not there you are immune to any attempt to subvert your attention or purpose. Your mind is impervious; it is an impenetrable shell. Concentrate on the lines of fracture.

You see them splitting and separating. The entire comet is shaking at a frequency which is causing it to come unglued. Rocks and icy gases are coming apart and floating free. The dust on the surface is rising slowly into space all across the horizon.”

The comet began to break up. Millions of new facets of the frozen ball exposed themselves to the warm light of the sun. As that occurred, the icy gases that kept the traveler together sublimated and became vapor once more, forcing the pieces apart against the weak gravity that held it together. Like a collapse of dominoes, the comet spread out and began to dissipate.

The hunters approached an isolated door in the front of the monastery, unseen. It appeared ordinary, but John Mark knew better. Two gnarled vines crawled up the wall on either side. John Mark held up a hand signaling a stop. Pointing at the two plants, he directed the team. “Flames,” he whispered. Twin jet streams of fire spouted, lighting up the faces of the men who were set in grim determination. The plants began to dance and twist horribly in macabre animation. Finally they fell lifeless to the ground.

John Mark approached the door and removed the golden crucifix from his neck, the burnt smell of charred vines still in the air. He whispered a prayer and pressed the cross into the wood. It hissed as smoke spewed from the contact. A glowing aura flashed briefly from the outline of the entrance, then vanished. John Mark looked back at the others.

Matteus looked up into the night sky and saw the expanding purple bloom minutes before the approaching storm front blotted it out. They had done it! The Amaranthine star had been destroyed! Malkav would remain asleep, and would not awaken to destroy them. The prophecy had been avoided. The nights would remain safe for now.

He smiled and returned his attention to the sleeping audience. The smile faded, then returned in a more devilish, impetuous, and mischievous way along with a glint in his eye. He brought the microphone up to his lips. *“You are all now barnyard chickens....”*

I was helpless – there was nothing I could do. *Your will, Lord.* Rage began to well up within me. It was different than just being upset. This was a passionate storm, an indignant fury... not at the fact that this was being done to me, but that it was being done at all. I stood up straight, the pain from the thorns now fueling my defiance. This was the ultimate rape, the elemental removal of my very being. As the hurricane built within me I began to shake; my lips curled and I let loose with a scathing curse.

“I rebuke you in the name of all that is holy!”

Up until then I had forgotten about the necklace I still wore. The little dove which hung suspended from my neck was indeed magical. It was meant to protect Kindred from the power of faith; no one had any idea what would occur if used by one *with faith.*

All the prayers which had been spoken against the wearer since it had been turned from its true purpose had been mystically absorbed into the tiny icon. The prayers of the good and the bad... of malevolent schemers and blessed nuns... usually in the last moments of their existence had all

been saved... until now.

A blast of wind lashed through the subterranean chamber. Hair flew around my head as the storm whipped about. The lines of powder which had been laid out in a precise pattern were completely blown away. Flapping robes pulled the Tremere to the floor. A ritual book which rested on a stand flipped through its pages before lifting up and hurling itself against the wall. The braziers overturned sending glowing coals scattering across the floor as sparks were lifted into the twisting air. The Gargoyle which had been resting on its perch was knocked to the floor. Some of the coals rolled against the side of the artificial womb and the fluids which pulsed within and glazed the sides immediately caught fire. All the lights in the chamber were extinguished except for the flames coming from the prototype Gargoyle transformation chamber which now burned like a rotten fruit, curling and smoking as popping and hissing noises came from it. Then as suddenly as the tempest came, it was gone.

"The preparations – they are ruined!" Finnaeus cried. Just then came a loud, continuous intermittent buzzing from upstairs.

Without a sound, dim light shined out from a crack in the front doorway. Then swords came out with a metallic ring as the group stormed inside. Flamethrowers ashed the unlucky acolytes who were the first to respond as images painted the walls with shadows of their deaths. Their screams echoed throughout the building. The men spread out in a tactical formation going from room to room spreading death, flame, and destruction. Any who made it past the flames were countered by sacred, slashing blades which burned as they passed through undead flesh. Vampires were immediately identified by their aversion to fire, while Tremere ghoulish monks rushed headlong

into the slaughter. As the cataclysm spread to more private areas of the complex, whole libraries of the rarest arcane knowledge were set aflame where they continued to burn. The buzzers continued their blaring objection to no effect.

Hartmann's eyes went wide as his thick eyebrows climbed his head. "We are under attack!" He pointed to the exit as he rolled to his feet. "Go to your stations." The entourage hustled through the antechamber and up the ramp, while the Gargoyle flew up to wherever he had come from.

As the others left, Finnaeus turned back to me and pointed an accusing finger. "And as for *you*... we are not finished with you yet." Amalthea was last to leave.

"Amalthea, wait..." I called to her, then looked back behind me. She was following the others, but paused mid-stride. I was stuck there, still grasped by the vines of the plant. "For the sake of what we once meant to one another, let me go." She just turned and stared at me wordlessly, no longer the person she once was. The fearless woman who had staked Khalid el-Mazri and saved my life... the loyal friend who had driven with me in the rain with the windows down to take the lojack to the dump... the laughing, bubbly companion I had known was now gone forever. She turned her back and walked out of the room, leaving me alone.

Upstairs the fighting continued, although the hunters had lost a few men in suicidal, frenzied attacks. Others sheathed their swords and picked up the flamethrowers to continue the advance, and those behind replaced them. Hartmann had picked up a few acolytes on his way while Finnaeus had gone to collect the remaining Tremere for a last stand show of strength. When

Hartmann reached the scene of the fighting, he bared his canines at the hunters snarling like the undead horror he was, then called to his servants. “Get them my faithful!”

With a whoosh and a loud crash which split the marble flooring Zarkov the Gargoyle landed in the center of the room. “Flames!” John Mark ordered. All four hoses converged on the stone creature as napalm covered it in flaming, orange death. Zarkov, confident and utterly unstoppable, emerged from the fire, unscathed.

“*Now!*” John Mark screamed.

The flamethrowers quit mid-stream, peeling back, and the entire unit split down the middle. Father Leonard Allen and his crew brought the containment unit up to bear. The ceramic urns contained liquid nitrogen with a heating element at the bottom. When the switch was thrown, electricity surged through the coils, causing the liquid gas to expand rapidly as it changed states of matter. A streaming torrent of negative 300 degree cold came shooting out of the nozzle covering the Gargoyle in a frozen cloud. The containment unit reared back against the pressure.

After a few moments the cloud dissipated but Zarkov, now covered in frost, was frozen solid and could do nothing. John Mark stepped forward with a battle cry and slammed the hilt of his sword into the Gargoyle’s chest. It burst asunder, showering the floor with pieces of inert rock.

Then Finnaeus arrived with reinforcements and the two groups collided in melee, flame and death.

John Mark rushed towards Hartmann, who was staring at him and invoking his blood magic, passing his hands in somatic movements.

Amalthea returned to the chamber with one of the torches from the other room. She looked at me dispassionately and said, "With this, my debt to you is paid. You may expect no more from me." She touched the torch to the vine stems at the base of the pots and each time the plants screeched, shriveled and unraveled, setting me free.

"Thank you," I whispered. I held her eyes and for just a moment I could see the old companion on the inside, the one hidden inside the Tremere blood. Then just as quickly she was gone. It was the last time I would ever see her.

Up the ramp I ran in bare feet, trying to find an escape route. I was following the widest corridors when I heard fighting ahead. Fire and the clash of steel came from a central junction. If there was fighting, they had to come through a breach. That was going to be the way out, then.

Hartmann finished the incantation and John Mark became a living scarecrow of flame. A horrific scream came from the priest, but he continued running towards his nemesis. Hartmann took one step back and then realized he had no avenue of escape. As one they came together, burning man and elder vampire. John Mark was blinded by rage, fire and pain but he grabbed the robed Primogen in a bear hug and they collapsed on the floor together.

Hartmann immediately went into frenzy as the flames burned his body and began to spread. He buried his fangs into John Mark's neck and began to feed voraciously, but the flames proved too much. Both vampire and hunter let loose with screams of mutual torment that even caused the fighting to pause. In a moment Hartmann's body had turned to ash. Then, there on the stone floor John Mark finally succumbed to the fire which had consumed his body with a whimper, crackling and smoking. He collapsed on top of the ashes beneath him and died.

The battle was turning against the hunters through sheer force of numbers. I had to get through the room in order to escape. I could see that this wasn't going to happen, enhanced speed or not. Then I noticed an alternate way out. On the side of the room a curved set of stairs rose upwards into the ceiling. Better to make a run for it while they were distracted. As I dashed behind the melee, Finnaeus spotted me.

“*Get her!*” he screamed.

Thankfully I had a head start.

Thunder shook the walls as I ran up the stone spiral staircase, Finnaeus and the others in hot pursuit. The stairs wound up and continued to climb. They did not seem to end! Finally I reached the top. A lone door stood in front of me. *Please don't be locked*, I breathlessly prayed as I turned the knob and entered the room.

I quickly spun and shut the door, flipping the lock. Turning, I saw that the upper room was round with curved stone walls, perhaps twenty feet across. A prayer candle enclosed by glass burned quietly on a paper strewn desk. Christian symbols decorated the rest of the room. An icon hung on the wall nearby, next to a cross. A stained glass window of the crucifixion reflected flickering light off its panes behind the desk. A small desk plate with scripture sat atop the papers. A conical roof sloped over my head. There was no exit.

I spun around slowly, the finality of the situation settling into me like a thick, chilling fog. So this was where it was to end. Footsteps pounded up the steps and a deluge began to rain down on the roof above me. I had come so far. I surveyed the symbols of my faith and approached the desk to look at the little plate. It read “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

I looked up to the crucifixion once more as lightning illuminated the stained glass window from behind. As... lightning... illuminated... *the stained glass window!*

I took one step and launched myself headlong over the desk and across the gap as Finnaeus and his entourage blasted through the door. The stained glass tinkled musically as I crashed through the net of soft metal which bent like clay and curled around me. Darkness enveloped me as screams of outrage were left behind. I hung there suspended in a cascade of tiny colored sparkles.

Then gravity took control and I accelerated quickly towards the back of the monastery below. The wind whipped around me furiously as my stomach lurched in directions I never knew existed. I hit the roof at an angle which probably kept my bones from shattering, and slid, bounced and twisted in pain until I finally rolled into a crumpled heap against the wall which surrounded the compound. Rain fell in sheets around me as I struggled to stand.

I started to climb the thick wall which was now chest high from the top of the roof, struggling as my many-layered gown was soaked. As I rolled atop the parapet, blood began to seep from my skin. It pooled on my dress even in the rain as though it had a mind of its own, forming a thin stream... going... up! I felt weak as I glanced up and saw the dim shadow of Finnaeus Knutson in the broken tower window, fingers clawed as the thin red line of my blood flowed into him.

I began to run along the wall, the rain pouring over me like a giant faucet. My dress was weighing me down like a ton of bricks, spots began to dance before my eyes and to top it off, the mongoose in my blood was ready to rip me apart from the inside out. Finally I reached the edge and toppled over to land with a *splat* in the mud. I was free now and out of sight of Finnaeus, although bruised and weak.

Just as I was about to get up, I heard a stern voice. “There she is, get her!” I had barely reacted to the sound when I saw a silhouette right above me. He raised his hand and an incredible pain pierced my chest. I stared up into the pouring sky in agony, unblinking and unable to move. Two figures loomed overhead in my peripheral vision. I had been staked.

Chapter Thirty: The Discovery

They had me, whoever they were. I had escaped from the Tremere trap in the tower only to be staked and kidnapped by unknown Kindred who were lying in wait outside the compound. I felt hands grabbing me and shoving my body into the back of a gray van. Steps splashed around the outside and then I heard doors slam shut. “Hurry, Martin!” one of them said as I stared, soaked, at the dark ceiling, the rain now pounding on the roof. The engine started and we trundled away before hitting some pavement and accelerating, hidden from view by the high stone wall.

“James will be pleased, don’t you think?” the driver asked.

“Possibly, if we can actually pull this off,” was the response. “Take a right here.” My body rolled in the back of the van as it turned, causing the intense pain to renew itself as the stake was first pushed one way, then the other. I screamed in silence, unable to make a sound as I now watched water from my hair pool underneath my head. The metal floor bumped, jumped and swayed as we traveled... somewhere.

After some time, I felt us slow down. The rain ceased and we pulled to a stop. The back door was opened and I was pulled from the van into a small warehouse of some sort. I was placed in a wooden chair. A bright light emanated from the other end of the workshop. My sodden, blood stained dress clung to me, draining.

As my orientation now faced the light, I noticed figures standing in the glare out of the corner of my eyes. One of the two men from the van stepped up to me and placed his forearm in my mouth. “Are you ready?” the other one asked.

“Yes, he replied.”

The other guy pulled the stake from my chest. *The pain!* My fangs grew immediately as I clamped down hard, my face distorting in agony. Blood gushed down my throat as I simultaneously bit, screamed and convulsed. The man whose arm I was biting into also let loose with a yell. After a few moments I was back in control of myself, thankful to be free of the stake but in the control of some other group. Were these the Archons? They were supposed to be assassins, not abduction specialists. Whoever they were, I was more or less at their mercy.

Others were approaching from out of the light. A few of them wore headbands. A thin bearded man, washed out by the lights behind him stepped in front of the others. “State your name and Clan, childe.” His voice seemed calm and peaceful.

I *really* didn’t want to get returned to Primogen Bianchi but it was not like I had a lot of choice. I was tired of running. I was tired of biting my tongue and being treated like dirt. Tired of this fruitless quest that was never going to end. “Patricia Ann Heron of Clan Toreador,” I croaked, squinting into the light.

“Reg, take care of that wound.” One of the men behind him, a bald fellow with a square jaw and determined countenance stepped forward and placed his hand on my chest, covering the gaping hole that went through my heart. His palm felt warm as my skin itched, moving of its own accord underneath. When Reg withdrew his hand, the wound had miraculously healed and the pain disappeared. I looked up. There was only one Clan I knew of that had the power to heal others.

But that must mean....

The bearded man took a few steps forward, his face resolving. "I am James, and we are the Third Remnant of Clan Salubri." He looked behind him and continued forward, the others following. Lean, chiseled features framed his soft, brown eyes.

My jaw flew open and I was at a loss for words... for a moment. "I have been seeking you!"

"We know. We've been informed."

"I, I was told you all had... three eyes," I stammered.

"Some do. For others, sometimes the eye is spiritual," he said, tapping his forehead. "But tell us, why were you looking for us? We took a chance on the possibility you might try to escape and had watchers stationed."

"I desire Golconda, so that I might be returned to humanity and reconciled with God. Although the Tremere said that your Clan steals souls."

His eyes wrinkled in a way that spoke compassion. "We sometimes steal souls from the devil, if it can be put that way."

"But we are damned! We are separated from God!"

"Patricia," he said.

My mouth moved for a moment but nothing came out. I sat there silently pleading, begging for an answer... for help. James looked at me a moment longer. "Patricia, you are a woman of the Christian faith. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in the holy one of Nazareth?"

“Yes!”

He nodded slowly. “Then know this. The power of God to forgive is greater than any sin... any condition... any circumstance in which we might be found. Neither death, nor life, nor undeath, nor unlife, nor any power or thing can separate us from God’s love.”

My lower lip began to tremble with the enormity of this revelation. Tears sprung unbidden from my eyes. When I thought I had been outcast and alone... He had been there all along. My heart, which minutes ago had been impaled and dead, leapt within my chest and began to beat once more.

Shaking, I rose from the chair and approached James. He opened his arms and I fell into him and gave him a hug, which he returned. The others there gathered around us.

“It’s all right, Patricia.” He spoke quietly into my hair. “You’ll need some time acclimatizing, before we hold an official welcome. The Golconda path in its many forms is always a difficult journey, and a reason to celebrate when fruitful.”

I took a deep breathe, as salty tears fell past my smiling lips. I was shaking. James held me close, allowing me for a few moments to release unspeakable cries of joy. “*Thank you, Lord,*” I finally managed to pray. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” I whispered. The frigid zephyr which had engulfed my soul since the night of my Embrace was gone. The mongoose was now almost silent, but in its place was a familiar but nearly forgotten pang: hunger.

I pulled back. “And thank you all!” I beamed at each of them and they smiled back with weary eyes.

James started walking me towards the floodlights in the back of the warehouse. “We have a

place for you here among us, Patricia. We understand what you have been through. Together, we help one another and the whole becomes stronger through our mutual support.”

James looked back behind me. “Reg, do you think you could assist Patricia to the kitchen?” He then turned to me. “Please excuse me. I have to check on our scouts to make sure they have all arrived back safely, then I’ll need to debrief them. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

I nodded as Reg took me by the arm. “You’re starting to warm up already,” he remarked with a grin. I almost choked up again, but managed to stumble forward. “After we get you something to eat, we’ll do a medical checkup. I feel good, though, that you’ll be fine.”

The others filed through a different exit in the back, talking among themselves, I supposed towards the living quarters. Reg and I entered a medium sized kitchen and I sat down at a cafeteria-style table. I thought about what had happened this evening... Amalthea’s tragic Embrace, the Tremere’s evil plans for me, and my subsequent escape and safe harbor among the Salubri. I began to cry again. Sorrow and joy mixed together in a bittersweet moment, mingled with more tears.

I got a napkin from the holder and Reg wiped at his eyes as well while he got some chicken soup from a cabinet which he then put on the stove. *Much like I used to do for Amalthea.* He sat down at the table as the soup warmed up. My stomach growled loudly, which caused us both to break into laughter.

“Oh dear,” I said, waving my hand at my face, which felt flushed with embarrassment. I realized I had missed all these human sensations so very much.

We settled down, and Reg leaned across the table. “A faith-based Golconda path is something

special indeed. You are only the second person I have ever known to have completed a faith-based Golconda pilgrimage. You are truly blessed by God.”

“I feel truly blessed,” I agreed. “Might I ask you about your own journey, and who the other person is?”

His face grew serious as he glanced down at the table before looking back up. “I’ll answer your questions, but you must know before I answer that to ask others about their Golconda path is... something which isn’t done here in New Sanctuary. A few of us, due to the intensely personal nature of their return to humanity, are forbidden from speaking of it.”

My eyes widened. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Reg replied. “Consider it similar to a monk’s oath of silence, at least regarding that part of their lives. The other person I mentioned is James, our leader. He’s quite open about it, so I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” He then looked off behind me towards the kitchen walls, with a pained, distant stare, which drifted up towards the ceiling. “Imagine if you would, a ladder, seven miles tall. The ladder is made from bundles of uncooked, brittle spaghetti. The ladder exists in the midst of a storm. A howling gale. Imagine climbing that ladder through the maelstrom.

Each rung, each step, was a choice regarding my own humanity. A decision. A solemn vow. Over and over again, never turning back. One misstep meant doom. Somehow, and I still don’t understand all of it, I finally made it to the top.”

“Wow,” I breathed, amazed by his story. “I think Reg, that you are truly blessed as well.”

He smiled. “I’d agree with that. I think we all are, one way or another.”

Epilogue

Morning arrived and I saw the sun rise for the first time in what seemed like... forever. The warm, orange rays burned and stung, but did not consume me. The Third Remnant of Clan Salubri was actually a collection of different bloodlines, Salubri included. The Golconda path was an archetype of a spiritual journey. Not everyone who started the path found the end they sought. For me, faith was the key.

It was explained to me later that one of the reasons for the feud and genocide of the Salubri was that they knew of such a fundamentally transformative process which the Tremere did not control. At least, that was from the Salubri point of view.

As for me, my own journey resulted in... change. My body temperature remains cool at 78 degrees, well below normal. My pulse is about 50 beats per minute, and I still need to take blood intravenously about once a month. Similarly, my breathing is at a much slower rate than normal. I guess Golconda is a path of a return to humanity, although there are lingering consequences for the choices I made: I grow sleepy in the daylight hours but not lethargic, so I still remain nocturnal for the most part. I can consume small amounts of food and liquids now. I never thought soup would taste so good.

While my change has been remarkable, the journey is not finished. I'm not fully human. I have been informed that I've merely taken a first step, a baby step, on this new way before me.

I'm in seclusion these days with a collection of others who have followed the Golconda path. Our location I can't reveal for security reasons. I don't go out a lot, but the tradeoff for safety and preservation is understandable. The freedom of being able to relax and just... breathe... is more than I ever could have hoped for.

I've learned that our lives, our very humanity is precious, to be cherished. It is a beautiful gift given to each of us by our Maker. It is not something to be taken for granted.

I write this as a testament for any who might find themselves where I once traveled, that they may find encouragement, comfort or hope. When the darkness of our lives threatens to consume us, the light of love shines out all the more clearly.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the Lord for granting me time to finish this story, first in the rough draft and then in the laborious process of many rewrites. The primary purpose of this work is to show the love of God in the midst of a bleak, shadowed world. I hope I have approached that goal.

I'd like to thank the originators of the World of Darkness setting, Mark Rein-Hagan and all those who helped him at White Wolf and elsewhere. The world you created is extraordinarily rich and filled with opportunity for the creative process. This work never would have been started without you. Thank you.

I'd like to thank my mom and dad who offered me encouragement and support over the years it has taken me to finish the story. Thank you for your interest, your love, and your steady confidence in me. I love you.

I would like to thank Connie Wadelich for her editorial advice as I struggled with making the story cohesive. Your contribution was essential in polishing the rough edges which I struggled with. Thank you.

I would like to thank all those who have prayed for me as I worked through the final draft. To all my facebook friends from years past and to the prayer group of Calvary Chapel Second Life, thank you.

I'd like to thank Matthew Ward and the Second Chapter of Acts. When I felt stumped and was uninspired to write anything at all, joining with your praise to God helped me get through some sticky spots and helped me to persevere.

I'd like to thank Matthew Dawkins, Linda Orfale and Jordan Rosenfeld for their editorial insights in helping to finish the novel.

Finally I would like to thank you, the reader. Patty began as a simple thought, an idea that grew and blossomed into something bigger than the character herself. I hope you have enjoyed Patty's journey as she struggled to become human again, gaining understanding in the process of her trials. There are many comparisons and meanings one can glean from this story. I'll leave their interpretation for you to decide.

Appendix

Arts Haven Review

Arts Haven is a gallery of fine art located on the western shoreline of Little Tokyo, facing the bay. It features first class amenities including an indoor reflecting pool that can double as an Olympic-sized hot tub for relaxing. Arts Haven also has a state of the art air conditioning and humidity control system that keeps the air at levels necessary for preserving artwork, as well as a spacious lounge with a wall-sized glass observation port for observing the Pacific Ocean.

In my third article reviewing the businesses of Little Tokyo, I spoke with Gabriel Montagne, co-owner of Arts Haven with Dominae Desmoulins. He showed a gentlemanly charm by stating "After you," with slight flourish as we went to the bench to sit down. I found that gesture quaint and welcome, in an old-fashioned sort of way- it complimented his fashionable taste in clothes and rugged good looks.

Patricia Heron: How did you get into the art gallery business, Mr. Montagne?

Gabriel Montagne: Well let's see, it had a lot to do with my own personal collections; that combined with Dominae's. It just made sense to share them with everyone who had the desire to see and admire them.

Patricia Heron: I see. Did you create your own works, or collect the works of others, or both?

Gabriel Montagne: A bit of both, though before we truly opened, we removed our own personal works. It was a good idea to feel out the city to be certain the neighbors wouldn't get offended.

Patricia Heron: How long have you been collecting art?

Gabriel Montagne: In years, I can't say- I'd be lying in the answer because I don't remember. I just know I've been collecting art since the first time I knew what beauty had to offer.

Patricia Heron: Well said. What form of artwork do both you and Dominae like to create? Oil paint, sculptures, mixed media....

Gabriel Montagne: We are both more into painting, though I do occasionally work with my hands, sculpting smaller pieces.

Patricia Heron: Next question: I noticed a wide array of styles in your gallery- impressionism, abstract, romanticism- which style do you like to collect the most and why?

Gabriel Montagne: I favor no one true style. If I did, that would weaken the comparison to the others for me and I wouldn't play favoritism just to say I admire one over the other, when I only admire them all in different ways equally. It's like children, if you will... I'd never pick a favorite.

Patricia Heron: Do you have a central theme for the works you collect?

Gabriel Montagne: Not truly. It goes back to the previous question; play no favoritism and you are open to anything.

Patricia Heron: How can art benefit the esthetic enjoyment of the citizens of Little Tokyo? I know this question is a little hard, but it's important to let people know the advantages of an appreciation for creative expression.

Gabriel Montagne: It's a good thing to ask and simple to answer. Emotions. It's why many do the art they do, out of an emotion, out of an expression. The city is nothing without diverse emotion; with everyone thinking or feeling the same, we are but sheep.

Patricia Heron: Last question- Do you have a favorite painting, perhaps one kept out of view for your own personal pleasure?

Gabriel Montagne: I do. I'll keep the name secret since she'd want that, and you are interviewing me. It's of a woman on a beach, watching the ocean at sunrise.

Patricia Heron: Wonderful answer, Mr. Montagne. Thank you for your time.

If you have not been to Arts Haven yet, you should treat yourself to this delight of creativity and muse. It's definitely an experience that's worth the visit!

Patricia Heron

Columnist, Little Tokyo Observer

Daily Grind Review

The Daily Grind in downtown Little Tokyo offers a respite from the gritty, black-topped streets and gridlocked traffic with a charming atmosphere of relaxation and olfactory ambiance.

Recently, I sat down with the owner Mr. Khalid el-Mazri , and spoke with him about his quaint and pleasant little shop.

Khalid smiled a charming smile as I sat down with him. He was an impeccably attired and gracious host.

Patricia Heron: My first question: What kinds of coffee, tea, and other beverages do you offer here?

Khalid el-Mazri: Perhaps it would be easier if I give you one of the menus? Perfect timing as they are recently updated. Keep in mind, this list is extensive, but we only choose a few select items each day, fresh from the bakeries.

Patricia Heron: I see, so you prefer quality over quantity- very nice for your customers.

Khalid el-Mazri: As you can see, we have a lovely list to choose from.

Patricia Heron: My second question: What made you decide to go into this business?

Khalid el-Mazri: My father owned a cafe in Marseille. I learned from him the craft, the art of coffee.

Patricia Heron: So you are carrying on his tradition, a family thing....

At this point several patrons came in. Mr. el-Mazri took the time to serve each one of them individually. Actions speak louder than words, and in this case, he showed that service and customer satisfaction were more important to him than publicity, which impressed me. After serving the patrons with various forms of aromatic ambrosia, we continued our conversation.

Patricia Heron: Third question: Do you import your coffees and teas, and if so, from where?

Khalid el-Mazri: My father, in Marseille...and then ...I studied in Egypt of course. That is where I truly learned the business...much more than father's little cafe could offer, hmm? It was there I learned... and still today, where my coffee comes from. Arabic blends, to answer your previous question dear.

Patricia Heron: Ah.

Khalid el-Mazri: I get my coffee direct from Cairo, where I visit to ensure the quality is up to... standard, hmm?

Patricia Heron: What of the teas and espresso?

Khalid el-Mazri: The teas we source from around the world dear; for instance, my fresh jasmine comes direct from only India. Of course, my espresso is of either the Arabic grind or preferably from France.

The decor there is comfortable and cozy. From the flickering warmth of the double-sided fireplace to the cushioned sofas, one is immediately relaxed by the peaceful ambiance.

The menu at The Daily Grind includes various types of daily coffee blends, along with espresso and cappuccino. Additionally, they serve hot chocolate latte, steamed flavored milk, and a wide assortment of teas, including jasmine tea, English breakfast tea, and Bazi tea.

Besides these delightfully pleasing drinks, The Daily Grind also offers many foods, with six different kinds of cake, seven appetizers, and muffins, ice cream, brownies, cinnamon rolls and fresh fruit for a sweeter palette.

Consequently, I have found The Daily Grind to be an outstanding place to relax, unwind, and enjoy the evenings. Perhaps you will, too.

Patricia Heron, Columnist, Little Tokyo Observer

A Golconda Story

Patricia Heron was an inquiring and intelligent but naïve journalist in the fictitious town of Little Tokyo, just north of San Francisco. She witnesses a murder, but then gets drawn into a deeper mystery when the crime is covered up. An addicting new drug, vitae, is controlling people while citizens across the city disappear only to return as mutilated, partially-healed corpses. Her plight increases exponentially when she becomes personally involved and finds her very life in peril. Indeed, she loses her life in a macabre transformation and begins to question her faith, her courage and her very soul.

A Golconda Story follows the journey of Patty Heron as she seeks answers that take her across the globe. It touches upon the themes of what it means to be human. Tragedy. Loss. Hope. Sacrifice. Love. This novel is the culmination of many years of work. The author resides in Georgia.



For reviewers of A Golconda Story

Here is some background info for the story, without any breaking spoilers.

A Golconda Story is 141k words and a little over 500 pages long. The plot is organized in the form of the Hero's Epic Journey, popularized by Joseph Campbell. From beginning to end the novel took 7 years to write.

I was lucky to be able to hire Matthew Dawkins (The Gentleman Gamer) as setting editor back in 2016. You will find some merits which are not canon (such as some Toreador being able to grow or color their hair for blood points, and Setite blood which can paralyze their prey.) I found his help invaluable not only with keeping the setting true to its roots, but also incorporated some of his suggested plot points which made the novel better.

A Golconda Story is divided into three acts, so it could almost be thought of as a trilogy. The first act and the first third of the second act were loosely inspired by free form role play.

The main character, Patricia Heron, has a defined character arc as she changes through the novel as a result of her experiences. I'm very pleased with the way it turned out.

Some parts of the novel come from my background as a Science teacher, such as the idea of having a vampire burn slowly via accelerated oxidation, as found in act two.

The novel is written from both third person omniscient and first person points of view. This allowed me the flexibility of offering the best of both worlds. Readers glimpse some behind-the-scenes machinations, allowing the world to seem bigger and more complex, while first person segments give a more intimate and personal account, drawing the reader into Patty's experiences. Changes in perspective are denoted with asterisks ***** between lines.

The fourth wall, where the character addresses the reader is broken only once in the novel, purposefully, in the introduction.

The novel was written with the average reader in mind, not for VtM fans only. As the character learns new things about being Kindred, the audience learns along with her. Thus, there are glossaries and character lists for when setting specific dialog is used.

Finally, I am pleased to say that I think A Golconda Story is a polished work, and I believe Matthew would agree with this. Each line, each paragraph has purpose. Every word was deliberately chosen. The read flows well, and this in turn engages the cinema-of-the-mind. "The words must flow."

I do hope that you all enjoy what I have come to call "the ride." I look forward to whatever thoughts you may have about it.