

the beast within

a vampire: the masquerade™
anthology edited by stewart wieck



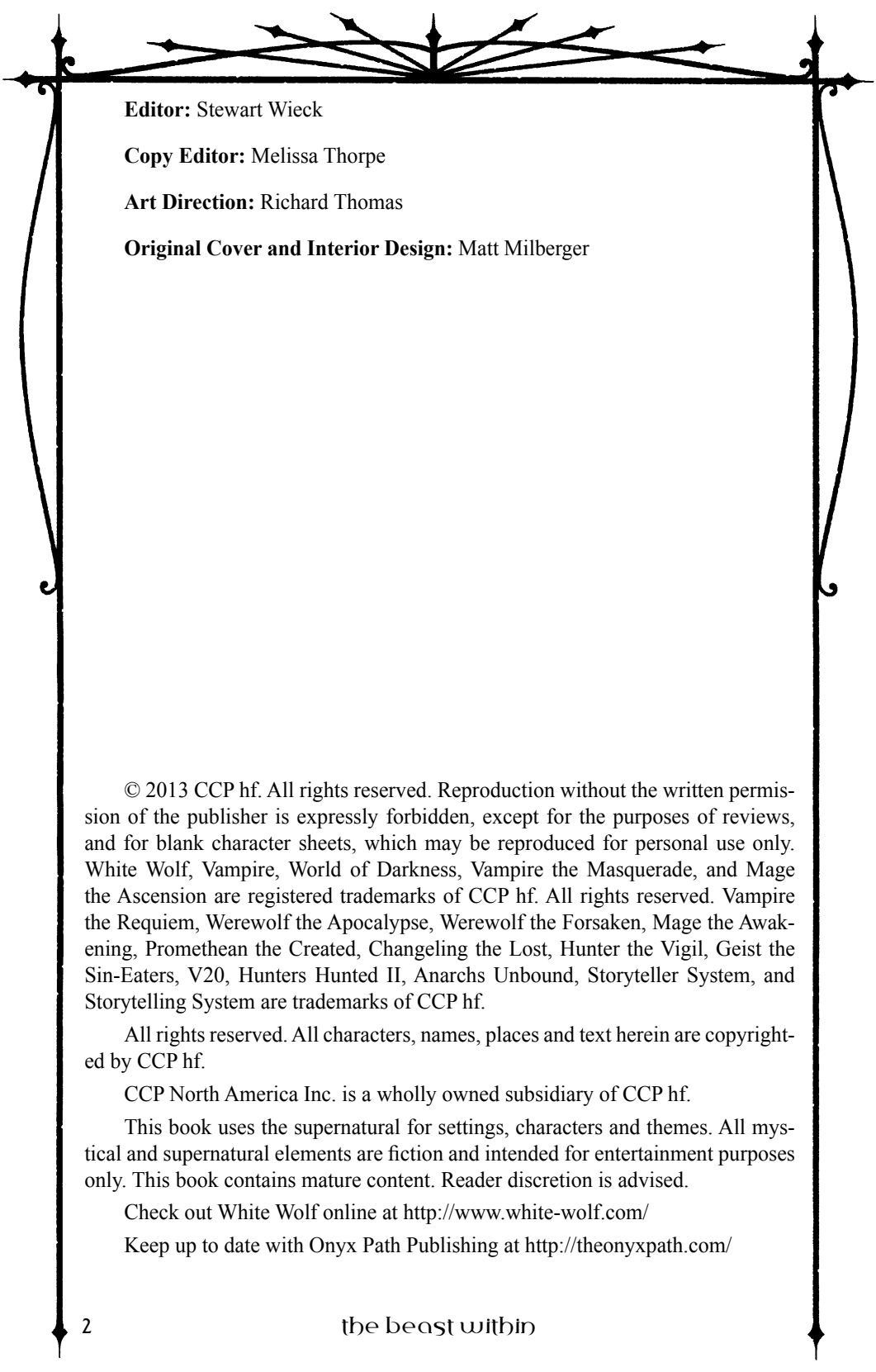
VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE

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VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE



Editor: Stewart Wieck

Copy Editor: Melissa Thorpe

Art Direction: Richard Thomas

Original Cover and Interior Design: Matt Milberger

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The scarlet Letters

by Scott H. Urban

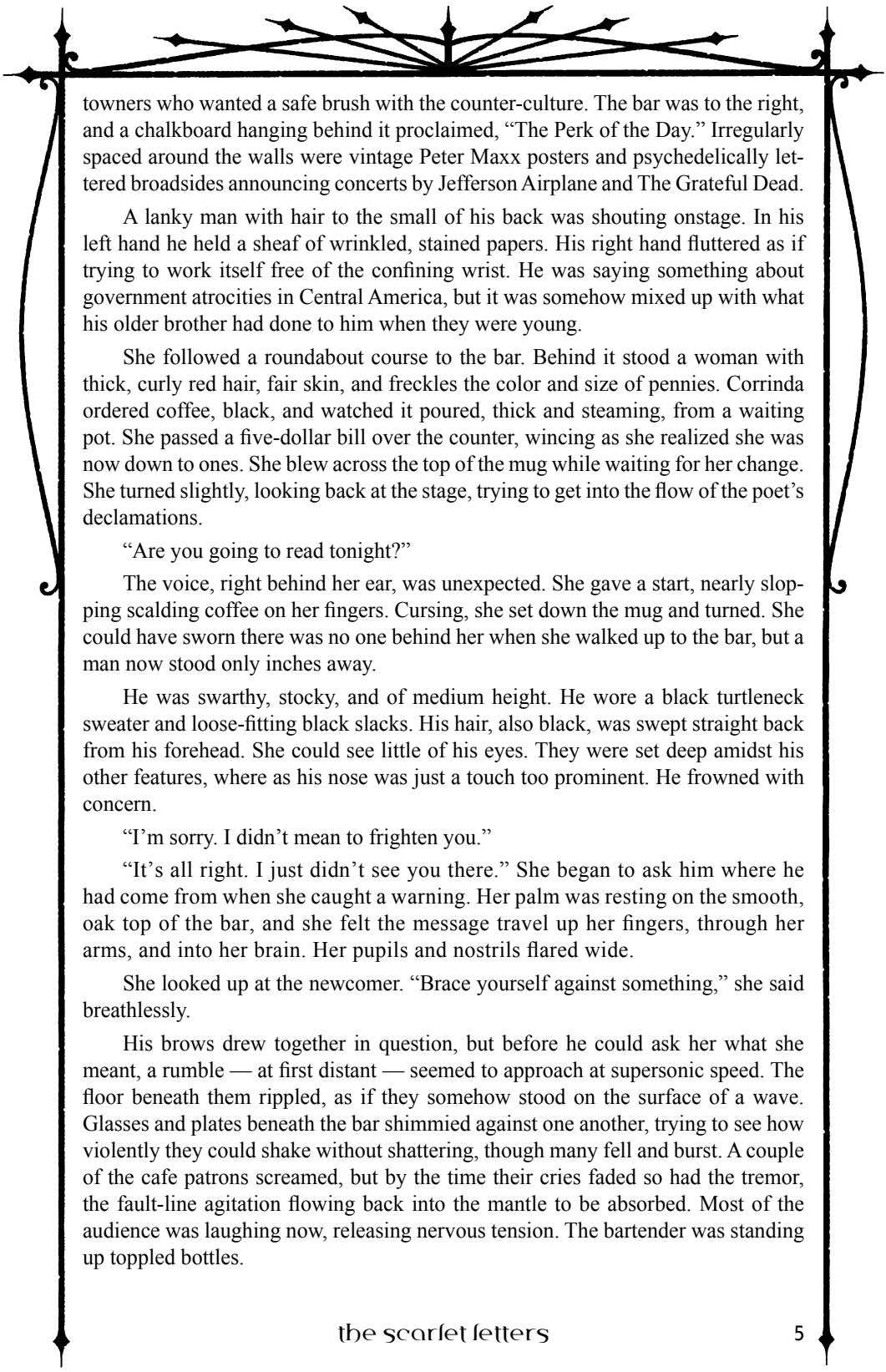
The fog was just beginning to roll in as Corrinda found Café Prague. Thin white wisps crept around corners like sentries for an invading army of oblivion. Emerging from the mouth of an alley, like something born of the mist, came a huge dog of uncertain breed. Surely he's too big to be someone's pet in the city? she wondered. The canine ran across the road with an easy lope, not even giving a sniff in her direction, and was swallowed back up by the enveloping shadows of a narrow side street.

Over her head, a sputtering neon sign caused the fog to glow in a blue nimbus. She could still see where someone, many years ago, had painted the name of the coffee house on the tall front window, using varicolored daisies and asters to give shape to the letters. Only in Haight-Ashbury, thought Corrinda, where the flower is in power. A handwritten sign taped to the window's lower left corner read "Open Mike Poetry Reading — 9 PM Until ???"

Corrinda brought herself close to the glass. As she did, another face approached her. She gave a start, then realized it was her own reflection. The bruise under her right eye was only now beginning to lose some of its purplish bloom. She winced and wished she had learned to use make-up somewhere along the line.

A plywood stage rose on the other side of the window. Two interior spotlights mounted on the ceiling were aimed at the stage. Someone was onstage speaking, but the glare prevented her from determining whether the person was male or female. She took another step and pushed open the door.

In all her 15 years she had never been to San Francisco, but she immediately felt more at home here than she ever had in Homily, some 500 miles to the north. The atmosphere was thick with smoke. It hung in spiraling coils like the thin ghosts of snakes. Her nose detected not only tobacco, but also cloves and pot. Ten circular tables, each with five or six chairs and most of them occupied, filled the center of the room. Ten additional chairs were lined up against the left hand wall. The patrons seemed divided equally between gray-haired day-trippers who had somehow missed the word that the '60s were over, and khaki-shortened out-of-



towners who wanted a safe brush with the counter-culture. The bar was to the right, and a chalkboard hanging behind it proclaimed, "The Perk of the Day." Irregularly spaced around the walls were vintage Peter Maxx posters and psychedelically lettered broadsides announcing concerts by Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead.

A lanky man with hair to the small of his back was shouting onstage. In his left hand he held a sheaf of wrinkled, stained papers. His right hand fluttered as if trying to work itself free of the confining wrist. He was saying something about government atrocities in Central America, but it was somehow mixed up with what his older brother had done to him when they were young.

She followed a roundabout course to the bar. Behind it stood a woman with thick, curly red hair, fair skin, and freckles the color and size of pennies. Corinda ordered coffee, black, and watched it poured, thick and steaming, from a waiting pot. She passed a five-dollar bill over the counter, wincing as she realized she was now down to ones. She blew across the top of the mug while waiting for her change. She turned slightly, looking back at the stage, trying to get into the flow of the poet's declamations.

"Are you going to read tonight?"

The voice, right behind her ear, was unexpected. She gave a start, nearly slopping scalding coffee on her fingers. Cursing, she set down the mug and turned. She could have sworn there was no one behind her when she walked up to the bar, but a man now stood only inches away.

He was swarthy, stocky, and of medium height. He wore a black turtleneck sweater and loose-fitting black slacks. His hair, also black, was swept straight back from his forehead. She could see little of his eyes. They were set deep amidst his other features, where as his nose was just a touch too prominent. He frowned with concern.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"It's all right. I just didn't see you there." She began to ask him where he had come from when she caught a warning. Her palm was resting on the smooth, oak top of the bar, and she felt the message travel up her fingers, through her arms, and into her brain. Her pupils and nostrils flared wide.

She looked up at the newcomer. "Brace yourself against something," she said breathlessly.

His brows drew together in question, but before he could ask her what she meant, a rumble — at first distant — seemed to approach at supersonic speed. The floor beneath them rippled, as if they somehow stood on the surface of a wave. Glasses and plates beneath the bar shimmied against one another, trying to see how violently they could shake without shattering, though many fell and burst. A couple of the cafe patrons screamed, but by the time their cries faded so had the tremor, the fault-line agitation flowing back into the mantle to be absorbed. Most of the audience was laughing now, releasing nervous tension. The bartender was standing up toppled bottles.

“It wasn’t the Big One, folks,” the lanky poet onstage announced, “so God must be telling me it’s all right to finish my poem.”

The man in black focused his attention on Corrinda. “You knew that was coming. You knew it before it happened.”

She nodded, using a wad of napkins to mop up coffee that had spilled from her mug. “Sometimes I ... catch things. I think of it as catching because I know there are messages flying around us all the time, out here” — she used her finger to point in 10 different directions — “and sometimes I just happen to be in a position to pick them up. It’s like catching a baseball blindfolded. Most of the time you’ll miss. But if you hold your mitt just right, you might catch one pitch out of a thousand. Sometimes I learn things about the past. Sometimes I learn about the future. Sometimes I know what another person is thinking right at that moment.”

“What a gift to possess.” The stranger smiled. “You have been blessed.”

Suddenly she looked down and bit her lip. “You wouldn’t think so. Not if you’d caught ... some of the thoughts I have.”

He nodded, accepting that without question. “So. As I was asking you before San Andreas interrupted, are you going to read tonight?”

She felt the blush rising on her cheeks. “I wanted to. Is it so obvious? It’s the reason I came, I guess. But now I’m not sure. I don’t know if my stuff is good enough. I don’t know if it ... sings.”

“Ah.” His eyebrows rose slightly. “Are you the new Belle of Amherst?”

She quickly shook her head. “No. Nothing like that. I write more about ... the darker side of life.”

“Emily understood that as well. She knew Death would stop for her and take her to the Narrow House. But that’s beside the point. I would like to hear you read.”

“I’m afraid I’ll make a fool of myself ...”

He nodded at the stage. “You couldn’t do any worse than that one. You may get some applause. You may even feel like doing it again.” He looked her up and down appraisingly, and she discovered, much to her surprise, she didn’t mind. “What’s your name?”

She hesitated. She had no idea who he was — for all she knew, he could have been a mugger, a psycho, a serial killer. She could lie, make up a name — but then she realized she would never see him again after tonight anyway.

“Corrinda. What’s yours?”

He repeated her name in a low whisper. It had always seemed awkward before, but in his voice her name became something exotic and glamorous.

“That’s different. Very beautiful.” He glanced at the stage. “Go on up there. Before you can talk yourself out of it.” The audience was clapping, seemingly with relief, as the lanky poet stepped from the stage.

She made her way between the tables, feeling as if she were walking toward a sacrificial altar. She had to keep swallowing. Stepping onstage, she turned toward

the audience. The spotlights in her eyes jarred her, but she felt relieved she didn't have to look into any faces.

"Ummm." She brought her hands up nervously, brushed her hair back, then laced her fingers in front of her. "My name is Corrinna, and ... I write poetry." Someone over to the right coughed. "OK." She didn't put her poetry on paper. The 20 or so pieces she had composed that she was satisfied with she had committed to memory. Now she almost wished she had then written them down so that her hands would have something to do while she recited.

The words came, tremulous at first. Sweat dotted her forehead, prickled under her arms, but she gained confidence with each minute, her voice becoming increasingly stronger and firmer. She spoke of a mother's love turned into something venomous when the mother abandoned the family. She was able to take a stepfather's abusive and incestuous advances and turn them into something tragic, while they yet remained repulsive. She sang of an anger frustrated because there was nothing at which to strike. She mourned for dreams that were bittersweet to begin with because they could never come true. The lights, the audience, Café Prague itself evaporated; she spoke in a void, a place white yet without illumination, where words were the only things to console her. She was surprised when she reached her last word; it brought her back to the mundane. She blinked, now seeing patrons hunched forward in their seats, silent — waiting for her to continue.

"Ummm. That's it. Thank you."

She stepped from the stage and was taken aback at the applause that erupted around her. She was certain it was a mistake; they must have been clapping for someone who just entered. She headed for the door. Well, you did it, she told herself. You shared your poetry with the world. Now you have to figure out what to do with no money and no place to go home to.

She was just about to slip outside when an arm shot across her path — not touching her, but barring her exit.

"That was incredible!" It was the dark-haired man from the bar. "Please don't leave just yet." Flecks of purple and black swirled in his eyes, now revealed in better light.

"I ... I really have to go."

"At least come finish your cup of coffee. I was saving it for you." He removed his arm, ushering her back to the bar.

She blinked several times, clearing her eyes, then nodded and preceded him to the back of the café. Now on the platform a woman sporting Marine-cropped hair, tattered T-shirt, and camouflage pants avowed she was a "feminist-revolutionary-lesbian," and she began to stomp on the plywood in time with her poetry.

"I could almost believe the Muse had descended and spoken through you." He picked up her mug and handed it to her.

She shook her head. "Please. It wasn't that good." She accepted the coffee and took a long sip.

“You underestimate yourself. Your poems are emotional and touching, but not maudlin. You can trust what I say. I’ve been . . . condemned to follow beauty.” He leaned forward, peering intently at her face. “Your poems. Some of them come from life, don’t they?”

She couldn’t meet his unflinching gaze. “All of them.” She dabbed at the hated tears with the already-soiled cuff of her military-surplus jacket. “When no one would listen to me, hold me, I found poetry. For the first time I had a world that accepted me and made me feel safe. The Romantics, the Symbolists, the Beat poets . . . They seemed to understand the hurt I felt. They had fought against the unfairness of the world, and although they may not have won any battles, they did leave some beauty behind.”

“It never ceases to amaze me. Humans’ ability to hurt each other . . .” He brought his hand up near her cheek but refrained from actually touching her. “Monster I must be . . .”

“Lest monster I become,” Corrinnda finished.

For the first time, the man seemed rattled. “Where did you hear that?” he demanded.

Corrinnda’s eyes darted left and right, as if she had done something wrong and now sought an exit. “It’s a line from a poem,” she said hastily. She reached into her jacket and pulled a thin book from an interior pocket. “In this book.” It was smaller than a hardback, with an ash-gray cover and the title in a bold, red typeface:

The Scarlet Letters

by

Virgil

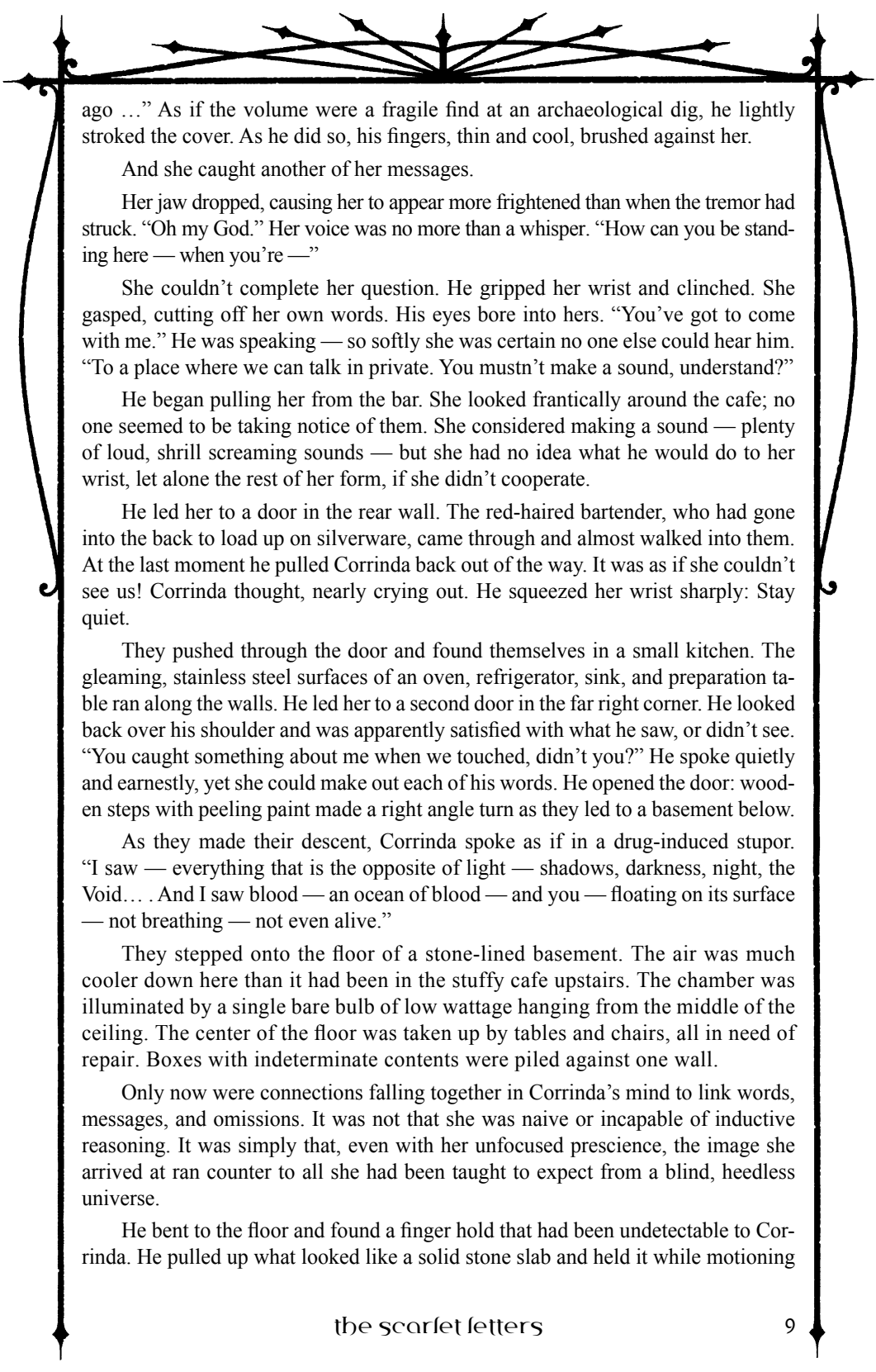
At the sight of it the man’s eyes narrowed, almost as if it were a poisonous snake suddenly discovered too close. “By the blood!” His voice was nearly a hiss. “Where did you find this?”

She didn’t know whether to drop the book, put it back in her pocket, or give it to him. “I — I bought it in a used bookstore. They usually only carry trashy romance novels, but one time I found this . . . It was only two bucks, and I really liked the poetry. Have — have you read it, too?”

He ignored her question, as he had all her others. “Would you consider selling this to me?” His voice, up until now calm and resonant, quivered, as if its possessor were an alcoholic suddenly denied the bottle.

“I — I don’t know.” She looked at the chapbook uncomprehendingly. “It’s my favorite. They’re poems in the form of letters from a vampire to a mortal. They talk about the horrible Embrace of darkness . . . the uncontrollable thirst for blood . . . and the eternal longing for a final release. It depicts a world of night and shadows and death — more beautiful and more terrifying than our own world. It’s a world I wanted to enter . . . I felt like the poet had read what was written in my soul . . .”

The stranger was so focused on the chapbook it seemed he had forgotten her presence. “Damnation! I thought I had rounded up and destroyed all of these years



ago ...” As if the volume were a fragile find at an archaeological dig, he lightly stroked the cover. As he did so, his fingers, thin and cool, brushed against her.

And she caught another of her messages.

Her jaw dropped, causing her to appear more frightened than when the tremor had struck. “Oh my God.” Her voice was no more than a whisper. “How can you be standing here — when you’re —”

She couldn’t complete her question. He gripped her wrist and clinched. She gasped, cutting off her own words. His eyes bore into hers. “You’ve got to come with me.” He was speaking — so softly she was certain no one else could hear him. “To a place where we can talk in private. You mustn’t make a sound, understand?”

He began pulling her from the bar. She looked frantically around the cafe; no one seemed to be taking notice of them. She considered making a sound — plenty of loud, shrill screaming sounds — but she had no idea what he would do to her wrist, let alone the rest of her form, if she didn’t cooperate.

He led her to a door in the rear wall. The red-haired bartender, who had gone into the back to load up on silverware, came through and almost walked into them. At the last moment he pulled Corrinda back out of the way. It was as if she couldn’t see us! Corrinda thought, nearly crying out. He squeezed her wrist sharply: Stay quiet.

They pushed through the door and found themselves in a small kitchen. The gleaming, stainless steel surfaces of an oven, refrigerator, sink, and preparation table ran along the walls. He led her to a second door in the far right corner. He looked back over his shoulder and was apparently satisfied with what he saw, or didn’t see. “You caught something about me when we touched, didn’t you?” He spoke quietly and earnestly, yet she could make out each of his words. He opened the door: wooden steps with peeling paint made a right angle turn as they led to a basement below.

As they made their descent, Corrinda spoke as if in a drug-induced stupor. “I saw — everything that is the opposite of light — shadows, darkness, night, the Void... And I saw blood — an ocean of blood — and you — floating on its surface — not breathing — not even alive.”

They stepped onto the floor of a stone-lined basement. The air was much cooler down here than it had been in the stuffy cafe upstairs. The chamber was illuminated by a single bare bulb of low wattage hanging from the middle of the ceiling. The center of the floor was taken up by tables and chairs, all in need of repair. Boxes with indeterminate contents were piled against one wall.

Only now were connections falling together in Corrinda’s mind to link words, messages, and omissions. It was not that she was naive or incapable of inductive reasoning. It was simply that, even with her unfocused prescience, the image she arrived at ran counter to all she had been taught to expect from a blind, heedless universe.

He bent to the floor and found a finger hold that had been undetectable to Corrinda. He pulled up what looked like a solid stone slab and held it while motioning

her over. "Sit down and swing your feet inside. You'll feel rungs. Climb down carefully. You'll be all right. This used to be a rum-runner's storage room during Prohibition."

She thought once more about bolting for the stairs but knew the time for that was long gone. She sat on the trapdoor's lip. "You wrote those poems, didn't you?" She peered at him so intently her gaze might have seared the flesh from his skull. "You're Virgil. The one who led Dante into Hell." She looked down into the dimly lit opening. "Should I abandon all hope?"

He wouldn't turn from her stare. "Haven't you already?"

She had no answer for that, and began to climb down.

• • •

At the bottom, she hugged her arms to her chest and waited for him to lower the trapdoor and descend. The chamber in which she stood was a mixture of the contemporary and the archaic. It was slightly larger than the main room upstairs. There was soft track lighting around the perimeter of the ceiling, but the primary source of illumination came from a pair of elaborate candelabra on a heavy oaken trestle table perhaps ten feet long. Aside from the candles, the table supported teetering piles of books, scattered papers, and a bottle or two of wine. In a far corner stood a huge bed with Mediterranean-style headboard and footboard. There were four or five photographs to either side of the bed. Corrinda stepped closer and examined them, her eyes growing wide with disbelief as she did so. The photographs all depicted Virgil with other people, some of whom she thought she recognized. "God! That's Jack London! And that's you and Kerouac — outside City Lights bookshop!"

Virgil nodded. "Can I get you something to drink? I keep some wine down here for my infrequent ... guests."

"No thanks." She sat on the edge of the mattress and looked up at him. "London died in 1916. *The Scarlet Letters* was published in 1955. But you can't be any older than 35 or so. How can that be? How can you walk — when I can't feel any pulse of life inside you?"

He had turned away from her so that she was addressing his back. "Corrinda, you are not the only one who writes from personal experience." His words came haltingly, as if it pained him even to say them out loud. "You must understand that those poems describe my life — if what I wake to each evening can be called a life." He whirled on his heel toward her once more, hands outstretched as if imploring her to believe him, and she shrank back on the bed reflexively.

"There are those who live only by night. I don't just mean thieves and gang-bangers. There are things most people don't believe in ... things they laugh at, because their laughter conceals the fear they feel in their hearts."

"So the Kindred — the vampires you wrote about in the *Letters* — they do exist."

She shook her head in wonder. "Have you ... been here ... since the Roman Empire?"

He couldn't hold back a self-mocking chuckle. "No, I am not the Virgil of the *Aeneid*. I had another name once, but I haven't used it in decades. I was born in Sicily in ... well, the year wasn't in this century; let's leave it at that. I traveled across the States and wound up in San Francisco. I became a correspondent, sending stories to various European newspapers."

"How did you get like this?"

He stood by one of the photographs, running his fingers over the smooth glass. "In 1914 the Old Gringo, Ambrose Bierce, decided he wanted to cover the Mexican Revolution. The cynical bastard joined Pancho Villa's band. He didn't know what he was getting into. He was embraced by a south-of-the-border Cainite — he never knew his Sire. It seems fitting that the author of *The Devil's Dictionary* was transformed into one of the Damned.

"He made his way back to San Francisco, the only home he had ever known. We knew each other from our newspaper days in the 1890s. He found me and made me one of his progeny." Virgil rapped his knuckles against the grainy black-and-white image of a seated man with salt-and-pepper sideburns and mustache. The man's expression indicated he didn't think much of sitting still for the camera.

"Bierce was as bitter in death as he was in life. He said, 'All of life is a rehearsal for death and I must have made a poor understudy, for I have died, and yet here I walk.' It wasn't for long, though. He just couldn't help making enemies. He enraged one of his own brood, who slew him some 60 years ago."

"This is incredible." Corrinda had absently knotted the fingers of her free hand in the bed sheets. "You're telling me some of the most famous people in America have become vampires?"

Virgil arched one of his eyebrows. "I'm only giving you a hint of the truth. I don't know it all myself. I try to stay out of clan maneuvering. I don't want to run afoul of Prince Jochen and his politics. I once got myself in enough trouble, over this." He tapped the little book Corrinda still held.

"What happened?"

"I am of the Kindred Clan Toreadors. We are ... drawn to the aesthetic arts. I have always watched over Bay area writers and poets. During the '50s, I began keeping company with some writers who were determined to express themselves in innovative styles no one had used before. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder. They resisted what authority told them. They experimented, with both their bodies and their minds. They held readings that captivated me as nothing I had ever heard before. I spent time with them, spoke with them, read their work — never revealing my true nature, of course.

"They inspired me. I had written poems and stories before, but only for my own amusement. But I decided I wanted to capture the essence of what I had become. I wanted to portray both the wonder and the grotesqueness of the Masquerade — immortals doomed to feed off others to satisfy the cravings burning inside. I wrote them in the form of a series of letters to a mortal. I had the poems published

privately and distributed in bookstores around town. I couldn't see them purchased during the day, but I understand they were quite popular at the time." He looked at Corrinnda's book as if he couldn't quite believe he had produced such a thing.

"But of course, I had gone too far. I had broken the facade of the Masquerade. The prince was outraged, and nearly called a Lextalionis — a Blood Hunt — upon me for making public secrets of the Kindred. Crawling on my belly, I swore that no human would ever take my poems as truth. I had to promise to retrieve and destroy all copies of *The Scarlet Letters*. I've been tracking them down for three decades... Yours must be one of the few remaining."

Tears glinted in the corners of Corrinnda's eyes. "I'm only human ... but I know what you feel. Your poems are too lovely to destroy. They described exactly what I felt when I wanted to ... damn it, kill my fuckin' stepfather!" She reached out suddenly and grabbed Virgil's sweater. "Please! Make me one of you! Take me too! Embrace me — do whatever it takes ..."

With an animalistic growl he stepped back, freeing himself. "No!" he snapped. "You don't know what you're asking! Only now is Jochen close to forgiving me. He's even attending a party here tonight."

She slid from the bed to her knees on the floor. "I do. I understand..."

"Fool! If you had the slightest notion what it is like to stalk your own kind, feed off their blood, you would run screaming from me! I've only told you as much as I have because I need your book and I owe you an explanation for what I'm about to do. I'm going to ... touch your mind. It won't hurt you. You'll forget we ever spoke, and you'll forget you ever read a book called *The Scarlet Letters*. You can go back home and —"

It was her turn to shout defiantly. "No! I don't have a home anymore! My mom left us three months ago. Last weekend my stepfather came into my room in the middle of the night. He was walking in a cloud of sweat and smoke and beer. He ... slipped into bed with me. He said ... it wouldn't be wrong because we weren't really related. When he touched me, I caught a warning from him. He was going to rape me until he tired of me, then he was going to kill me. I pushed him away, and he slapped me, hard."

She gestured at the bruise under her eye. "I shoved him again, and he fell back, smacking his head on my nightstand. While he was unconscious, I grabbed his money and whatever I could stuff in my pockets. I ran into town and waited until I could hop the bus."

"Surely you have some other family to turn to —"

"There's nobody! I picked San Francisco because I knew there were poetry readings here, and I wanted to share what I had written with other people. But now I don't know what I'm going to do. I can only sleep in the bus terminal and wash up in the public restroom so long. There's no way I'm gonna turn tricks for some crack-freak pimp." Her words were distorted, catching in her throat. "I could wait on tables, but where am I going to live? I mean ... I'd be better off jumping from the goddamned Golden Gate Bridge!"

Virgil scowled. "What a typically adolescent thing to say."

"Please." She dropped the book and folded her hands. "I caught something else from you, when we touched. I know why you left home — why you traveled to America."

"Stop it!" He almost seemed frightened of the girl at his feet. "You're not to speak of —"

"You were beaten too, weren't you?" She brought her hands to her neck. "See, we're two of a kind. We understand each other." She undid the top three buttons of her blouse. "Here. I won't cry. I won't back out. Write me into your lines. Make me part of your poem. I want you to. Put your teeth in me. Kill me." She arched her head back, waiting for the strike.

His lips were pulled back. His incisors had descended instinctively, involuntarily. His hands came toward her as if rising through tar. Then he spun away, tearing himself from the sight of her pale, exposed flesh. "I can't! It's forbidden! If I embraced you, Prince Jochen would have me staked for the dawn!"

"Fine." She sprang to her feet and bolted toward the table. "There's nothing left for me anymore." She grasped one of the wine bottles by the neck and smashed it against the edge of the table. The crystalline shatter shredded their eardrums. "If you won't take me, I'll do it myself."

"Stupid bitch!" Virgil cried, starting for the table, but even with his preternatural celerity, she was too quick for him. She brought the jagged point of turquoise glass up underneath her jaw and jabbed —

Both of them were screaming. Their positions from just a few minutes ago were reversed: Corrinnda was now wavering on her feet; Virgil was on his knees, his arms outspread, looking up at her in shock. The sight of blood gently pulsing from her neck brought the Beast close to the surface. He felt himself hovering at the edge, a fraction of an inch from lunging at the thick red wash flowing down her shoulder.

"I love you ... for helping me read tonight," she managed to say. "I want to ... give you part of me..."

Eyes blinking rapidly, she walked behind the table and slumped against the wall. She bent forward from the shoulders and cupped her left hand between her small breasts. A warm rich flow coursed down her neck, spilled down her chest, and pooled in her palm. She brought up her right hand and dipped her forefinger in the deepening well. She then put her finger to the wall and began to write — her finger the pen, her blood the ink, a poem her message.

If I die, let it be with you.

The words were not as beautiful as she wanted them to be. Some of the letters ran, and some were difficult to make out. She had a hard time keeping on a horizontal line, and the words near the end of the line began to slope downwards.

Hold me close while the world falls in on me.

"Corrinnda!" Virgil's mouth drew down at the corners. "There's a way for me to stop the bleeding! You can still return to the world where you belong —"

Whisper my name as the darkness rises

She didn't know if she could keep going now. The blood was overflowing her cupped palm and dripping to the floor below with heavy wet splashes. She had to consciously focus her eyes in order to see. "Shhh. It's all right." Her words were slurred. Her tongue felt thick and unresponsive.

And I fall into the dream that never ends

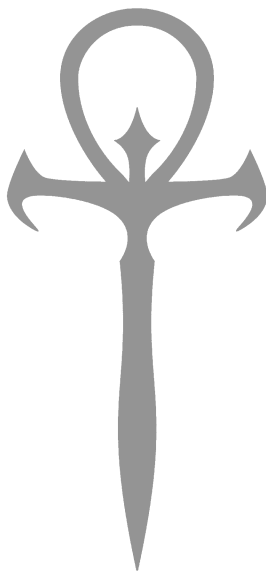
Her legs wouldn't stay straight any longer; it felt as if her bones were dissolving, leaving only the cold stone to support her. Some of her hair caught in the still-damp letters and trailed downward, red, as she slid to the floor. "Damn it! Damn it!" Virgil violently brushed away crimson tears. "You're going to cost me ..."

He scrambled to her side as her eyelids met a final time. He took her hair in his left hand and lifted her head. He brought his right wrist up to his mouth and savaged it — taking out his frustration on his own flesh rather than hers. Thin drops of deoxygenated blood welled up from the inside of his arm. He wiped them across her lips.

"Drink. Drink well and come back from death, knowing you've cursed me."

There was a flutter against his skin. Her lips, like an infant's, smacked pleurably. A small pink tongue darted into the red stains and licked. He felt suction as she began to actively nurse his arm, and the feeling that flowed through him was the closest to sexual ecstasy he was capable of experiencing anymore.

"They will make me pay for you," he said aloud, more to himself than the small form curled embryonically at his knees. "Oh, how they will make me pay."





The voice of the Hummingbird

by S.P. Somtow

Huitzilopotchtli.

It was the will of the god named Hummingbird that our people should cease to be a wandering people, a desert people, an impoverished and simpleminded people, that we should journey down into the rich green valley at the world's heart and claim its lakes and forests for our own, and rule over all the nations of the earth. We were a people with a grand and glorious destiny; we had been called to a special covenant with our god; and if there were things that our god commanded us to do which, to those who did not share our special relationship with him, appeared brutal, cruel, uncompassionate, it was only that we alone could see the higher purpose; that we alone were charged with the guardianship of the knowledge of the secret workings of the universe.

It was the will of the god named Hummingbird that I should be the one to hear his voice and bear his message to my people; that I should lead them from the wasteland into the place where they would build the greatest of all cities, set in the center of the world as a turquoise in a circlet of gold. And it came to pass that I spoke, and the people obeyed, and we sealed our covenant with our own blood and the blood of the countless conquered. This was as it should be. Our people had been chosen.

Later I would come to understand that there were others, people no less proud than our people, no less confident of their moral rectitude, no less certain that the salvation of the entire universe lay in the application of secret knowledge that only their tribe possessed; there was even, across the great ocean to the east, a people whose god had called them to cross a great desert and seal a covenant and conquer and build a great temple. We Mexica were not, after all, unique; we were merely a repeating pattern in the wheel of history; and our history was not even the only wheel that was in motion at the time.

We didn't even have wheels then, anyway. After a dozen centuries I suppose one might be forgiven a few anachronistic metaphors. I learned about wheels a long time after the covenant was broken, in San Francisco.

I learned about the other chosen people from Julia Epstein.

...

There is a gap of about 500 years in my existence. One moment, the fire was raging in the streets of Tenochtitlan, and I was watching the stars fall from the sky, and cursing the silver-clad man-beasts called Spaniards who had blundered into shattering the equilibrium of the universe. Then, in a blink's breadth, it seemed, I was lying in a glass case, an exhibit in the San Francisco Museum, being pointed at by a petulant youth.

That I might have slept for a time — a century or two even — would not have been surprising. I had done that before, though only of my own volition. I had slept all the way through the conquest of the people of Tlatztlhuatec; I knew it would be dull; they were little better than cattle. But there were no signs that I had been in suspended animation. No cognitive disjunction. No sensation of falling, falling, falling into the bottomless abyss.

The room was gloomy; it had been designed to simulate the rocky chamber in which I had been found. There was no daylight. Torches flickered, yet they did not burn; the fire in them was cold and artificial.

Even lying under the glass, unable yet to move more than the twitch of an eyelash, fighting the inertia of the dreamless sleep, I was aware that the world had become far stranger than I could have imagined. The youth who stared down at me was a mongrel; he had the flat nose and dark skin of the Mexica, but there was also something about him that resembled the man-beasts from across the sea. He had no hair save for a crest that stood unnaturally tall and was dyed the color of quetzal feathers. His robes were of animal hide, but black and polished to an almost reflective smoothness. He was not utterly inhuman — his ears were pierced at least — but from them hung, upside-down, a pair of those silver crucifixes that symbolize the man-beasts' god, whom they call Hesuskristos, who is in reality Xipe Totec, the flayed god, as Hummingbird once revealed to me in a dream.

He called out to a companion; this one's tufted hair was the color of fresh blood, and he wore a silver thorn through his left cheek. The language, at least, I knew, though the accent was strange and there were unfamiliar words; I had taken the trouble to learn the language of the man-beasts. There are two dialects; one, spoken by the black robes, is called Espanol; the other is the language of their enemies, known as English. It was the second of these I heard, in a boyish voice muffled by glass.

"Dude! It says he's been dead for 500 years."

"Pulled him out of the foundation of a 50-story office building after that big Mexico City quake. Yeah, perfectly preserved and shit. A hollow in the rock, a natural vacuum."

"Yeah, I saw it on *20/20*."

"Did you see that? He moved, dude!"

"Yeah. Right."

Five hundred years, but that was impossible! Hummingbird himself had told me that in a few short years the world would end in an apocalypse of blood and fire. How could 500 years have gone by? Unless, of course, the world had already ended.

That would explain the surpassing alienness of my surroundings. Even the air smelled strange. Even the blood of the two boys, which sang to me as it pumped through their arteries, exuded an unaccustomed odor, as though infused with the pulped essences of the hemp and coca plants.

The one with the crimson hair said, “No, dude, I ain’t joking. Look at him, man, I swear his eyelids are like, flickering.”

“You shouldn’t have dropped acid at the Cure concert last night. You’re still blazing, dude.”

I turned my head to get a better view.

“Jesus Christ!” they screamed.

So the world had ended after all. The time of Huitzilopochtli was over. There had been a fiery apocalypse — my memories had not deceived me — and we were now well into the World of the Fifth Sun, foretold to me by the god, and a new god was in power, the hanged god whose name those boys evoked, Hesuskristos.

I was full of despair. I did not belong here. Why had I been suffered to remain alive? Surely I should have been destroyed, along with the city of Tenochtitlan, along with the great pyramids and temples and palaces of my people. Could the gods not have been more thorough? But then that was just like them; come up with the grand concepts, leave their execution to imperfect mortals. I raged. My heart gave a little flutter, trying to bestir itself from its age-old immobility. My fury fueled me. I could feel my blood begin, sluggishly, to liquefy, to funnel upward through my veins like the magma through the twisty tunnels of Popocatepetl.

Soon I would erupt.

I lashed out. I heard shattering glass. The smells of the strange new world burst upon my senses. Then came the Hunger, swooping down on me as an owl on a mouse in the dead of night. No longer muffled, the rushing of young blood roared in my ears. The odor was sour and pungent. I seized the first creature by the arm, the one with the quetzal-feathered hair; the second, screaming, ran; I transfixed the prey with my eyes and filled him with the certainty of his own death; then, drawing him down to me, I fed.

I do not know how long we lay together, locked in that predatory embrace. His blood was youthful; it spurted; it permeated my pores; I drank it and I breathed it into my lungs; for a fleeting moment it brought back to mind those nights of furtive, unfulfilled encounters in the chill desert night; the burning curve of a young girl’s thigh, the aroma of her liquidizing pubes. Those were the times before the god called me, when I was mortal and barely man.

At length I realized that I had completely drained him. I let go and he thudded on the polished floor like a terra-cotta doll. It was then that I became aware of a noisome clanging sound, a whirling, flashing red light, and men in strange blue

clothing who brandished muskets of a sleekly futuristic design as they surrounded the plinth on which I lay. The boy who had fled stood beneath an archway, babbling and shivering and pointing at me and at his friend's desiccated corpse.

Perhaps, I decided, it would be more prudent to play dead for a little while longer.

...

I awakened in another chamber. It was lined with leather bound codices of the kind the black robes favored. The room was lit by candlelight, and I sitting on a wooden chair. I tried to move, but I had been bound with ropes — metal ropes, artfully strung, and padlocked, the way the Spaniards keep their gold. Across an immense desk, cluttered with the artifacts of my people, jeweled skulls and jade statuettes and blood-cups, sat a woman.

She was of man-beast extraction, but not unattractive. I had never seen a woman of their kind before; they had brought none with them from their country, which was perhaps why they had become so ferocious. She was sharp-nosed, and had long brown hair. When she spoke to me, it was, to my amazement, in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica people.

"I'm Julia Epstein," she said. "I'm the curator of our Latin American collection. Would you care for a little blood?"

"I'm quite full, thank you," I said.

"In that case, you might want to start telling me what the hell is going on. It's not every day that a museum exhibit gets up and starts attacking the public. Who are you?"

"It's not proper for me to give my name to you, a man-beast."

She laughed. "Man-beast! I know you Aztecs used to think that the Spaniards and their horses were some kind of hybrid monster, but times have changed. We drive automobiles now. I think it's safe for you to tell me your name. I'm not going to acquire any mystical power over you. Besides, you're just going to have to trust me; I'm the one who talked the cops into believing that that punk's story was just some kind of acid-trip fantasy; they have him under wraps now, the poor child, deciding whether to get him on murder one."

"Very well," I said, "I am Nezahualcoyotl."

"And I'm Santa Claus," said Julia Epstein, frowning. "So you say you're the Nezahualcoyotl, who claimed descent from the great gods of Teotihuactn, the greatest poet, musician and prophet of the Aztecs, their first great ruler, a man who was an ancient memory when Moctezuma was king and the Conquistadores swept over Mexico?"

"You are well informed," I said.

"Well, why not? It's no harder to believe that than to believe that an exceptionally well-preserved mummy, just dug up from the newly discovered catacombs in Mexico City, and my museum's prize exhibit, would get up, walk around, attack a few punks, and drink their blood. And to think that I dug you up with my own hands."

“So it is to you that owe my continued existence.”

“If you want to call it living.”

“What else would you call it?”

“You’re a vampire.”

“I’m unfamiliar with that word.”

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit, Nezzzy. I know everything about you guys. I can’t get anyone to believe me, but I’ve gathered a shitload of information. Yeah, I’m an archaeologist, sure, but vampires are kind of a hobby with me, know what I mean? And this city’s crawling with them. I know. I’ve got tons of evidence: clippings, photographs, police files. Tried to sell this shit to the *Enquirer*, and you know what? They rejected it. Said it wasn’t, ah, convincing. Convincing! From the people who did the “Alien Endorses Clinton” story and the piece about the four-headed baby! Let me tell you what really happened. They found out about it. They’re everywhere. Big cities mainly, but even the smallest town has one or two. They’re running everything. Your worst nightmare about the Mafia, the CIA, the Illuminati, all rolled into one. They read my submission and they squelched it! Sounds pretty damn paranoid, doesn’t it? Welcome to the quack pot world of academia.”

“But what is a vampire?” I said. I was beginning to feel the Hunger again, just a prickle in my veins. Normally the blood of a whole young male would have kept me going for days, but it had been so long. I glanced down at myself, saw my papery skin, knew it would take a few more feedings to restore me to the semblance of life.

“A vampire?” said Julia. “Why, you’re a vampire. You drink blood. You live for a long, long time. You are a child of the shadows, a creature of the night.”

“True, but — are you saying that there are others?”

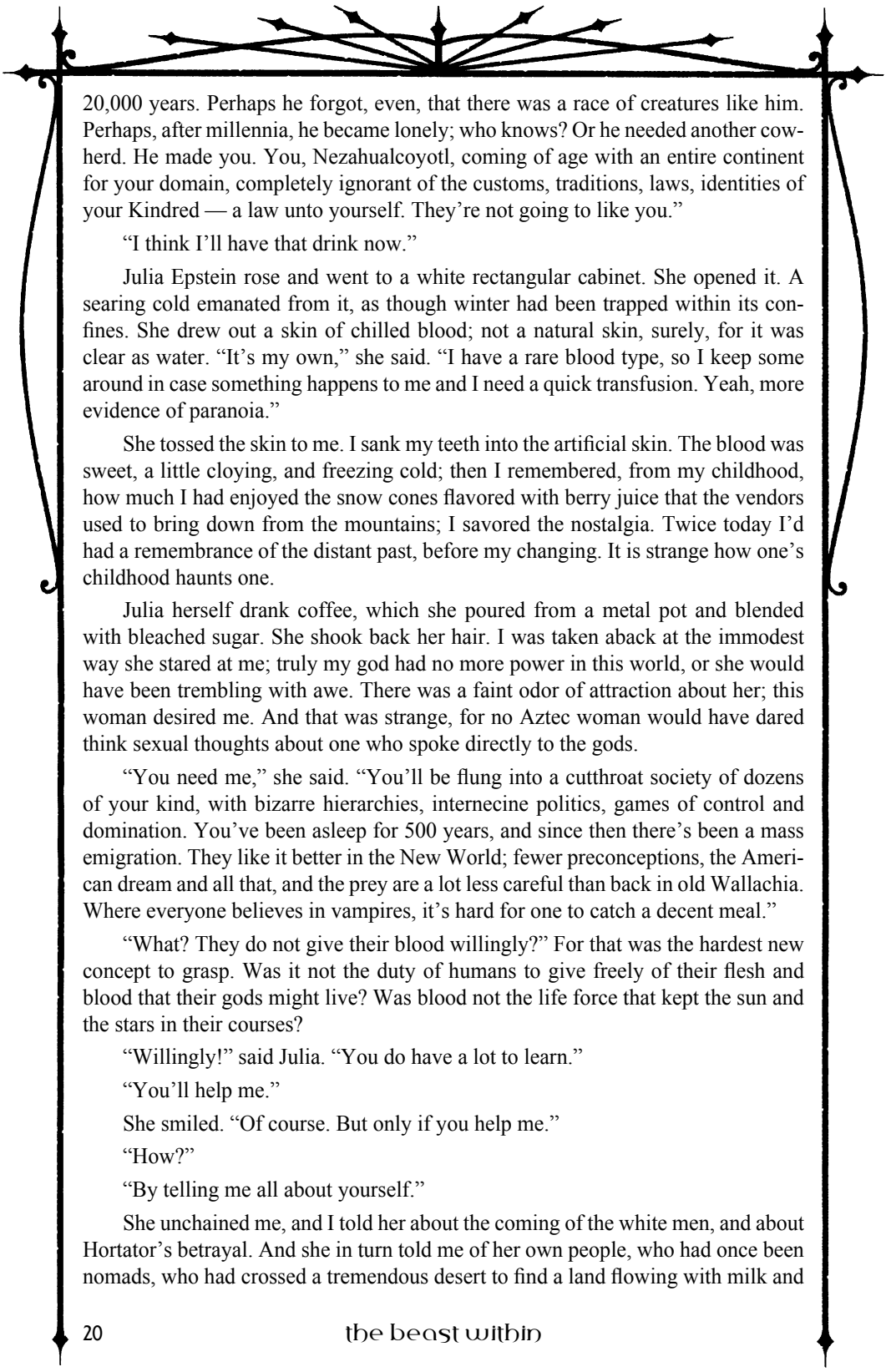
“Are you saying that there aren’t others?”

“There was one other.” It pained me to think of my young protégé, the one who had betrayed King Moctezuma to the man-beasts, the one whom the black robes called Hortator, which signifies, in their language, the man who beats the drum to drive the galley-slaves who row in the Spaniards’ men-o’-war, because of the drum he stole from me, made from the flayed skin of the god Xipe Totec himself, the one I thought would succeed me, but who instead had destroyed my whole world. “There was the god at first. He called me to his service. I had thought to hand on the power to another, but ...”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my friend,” said Julia. “There’s a whole network of you people. You have your tentacles in everything. You run this whole planet. You’re in Congress. In the U.N. In the damn White House, for all I know. And all top secret. Don’t worry. I won’t give you away. They have a certificate on file that says I’m a paranoid schizophrenic; so who’d believe me anyway?”

“Even among the white men, people such as I?” It was hard to grasp.

“The New World was a universe unto itself in 1453. Maybe you were the only one here. Maybe your god came over the Bering Strait, nurtured his secret alone for



20,000 years. Perhaps he forgot, even, that there was a race of creatures like him. Perhaps, after millennia, he became lonely; who knows? Or he needed another cow-herd. He made you. You, Nezahualcoyotl, coming of age with an entire continent for your domain, completely ignorant of the customs, traditions, laws, identities of your Kindred — a law unto yourself. They're not going to like you."

"I think I'll have that drink now."

Julia Epstein rose and went to a white rectangular cabinet. She opened it. A searing cold emanated from it, as though winter had been trapped within its confines. She drew out a skin of chilled blood; not a natural skin, surely, for it was clear as water. "It's my own," she said. "I have a rare blood type, so I keep some around in case something happens to me and I need a quick transfusion. Yeah, more evidence of paranoia."

She tossed the skin to me. I sank my teeth into the artificial skin. The blood was sweet, a little cloying, and freezing cold; then I remembered, from my childhood, how much I had enjoyed the snow cones flavored with berry juice that the vendors used to bring down from the mountains; I savored the nostalgia. Twice today I'd had a remembrance of the distant past, before my changing. It is strange how one's childhood haunts one.

Julia herself drank coffee, which she poured from a metal pot and blended with bleached sugar. She shook back her hair. I was taken aback at the immodest way she stared at me; truly my god had no more power in this world, or she would have been trembling with awe. There was a faint odor of attraction about her; this woman desired me. And that was strange, for no Aztec woman would have dared think sexual thoughts about one who spoke directly to the gods.

"You need me," she said. "You'll be flung into a cutthroat society of dozens of your kind, with bizarre hierarchies, internecine politics, games of control and domination. You've been asleep for 500 years, and since then there's been a mass emigration. They like it better in the New World; fewer preconceptions, the American dream and all that, and the prey are a lot less careful than back in old Wallachia. Where everyone believes in vampires, it's hard for one to catch a decent meal."

"What? They do not give their blood willingly?" For that was the hardest new concept to grasp. Was it not the duty of humans to give freely of their flesh and blood that their gods might live? Was blood not the life force that kept the sun and the stars in their courses?

"Willingly!" said Julia. "You do have a lot to learn."

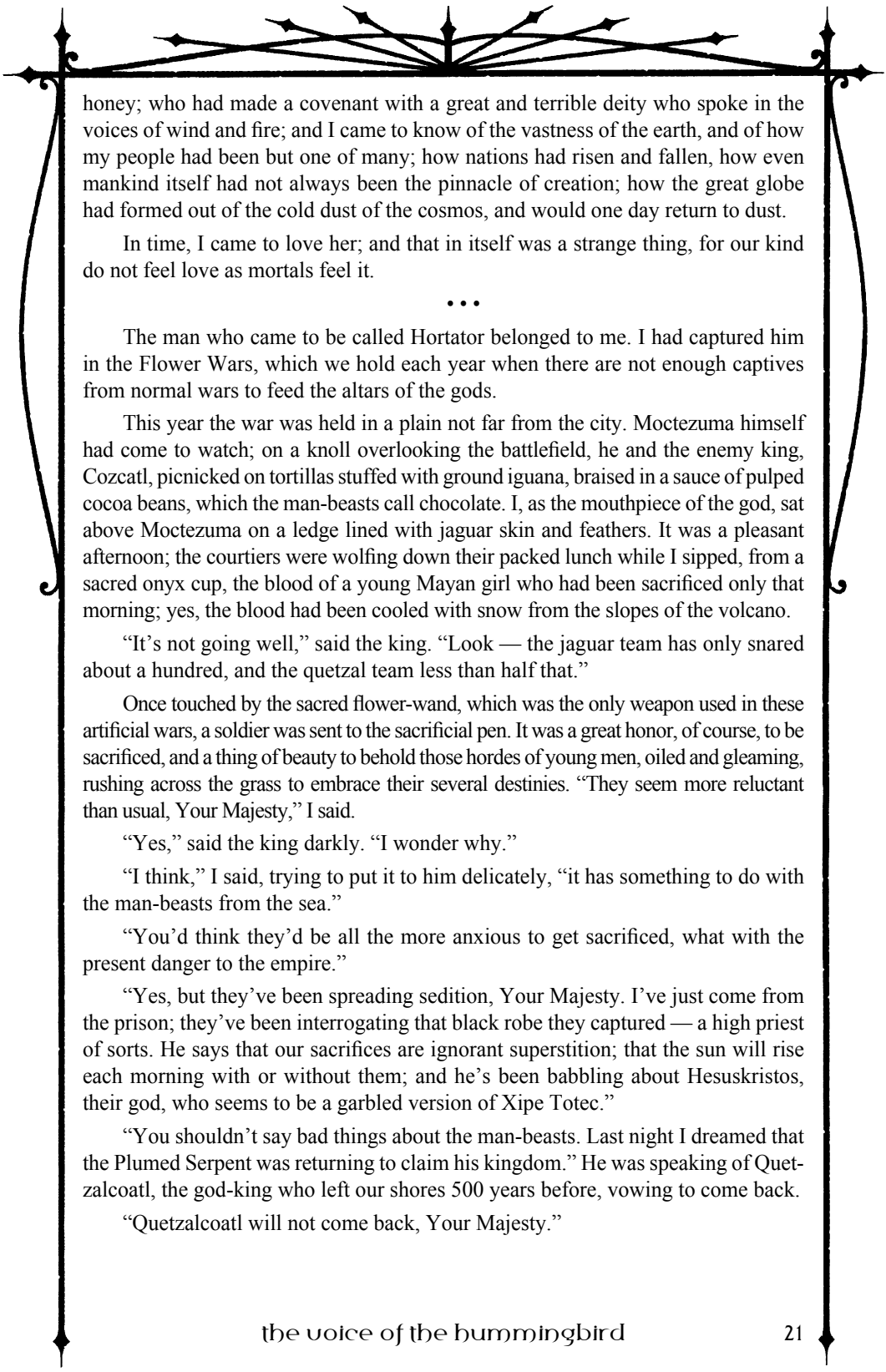
"You'll help me."

She smiled. "Of course. But only if you help me."

"How?"

"By telling me all about yourself."

She unchained me, and I told her about the coming of the white men, and about Hortator's betrayal. And she in turn told me of her own people, who had once been nomads, who had crossed a tremendous desert to find a land flowing with milk and



honey; who had made a covenant with a great and terrible deity who spoke in the voices of wind and fire; and I came to know of the vastness of the earth, and of how my people had been but one of many; how nations had risen and fallen, how even mankind itself had not always been the pinnacle of creation; how the great globe had formed out of the cold dust of the cosmos, and would one day return to dust.

In time, I came to love her; and that in itself was a strange thing, for our kind do not feel love as mortals feel it.

• • •

The man who came to be called Hortator belonged to me. I had captured him in the Flower Wars, which we hold each year when there are not enough captives from normal wars to feed the altars of the gods.

This year the war was held in a plain not far from the city. Moctezuma himself had come to watch; on a knoll overlooking the battlefield, he and the enemy king, Cozcatl, picnicked on tortillas stuffed with ground iguana, braised in a sauce of pulped cocoa beans, which the man-beasts call chocolate. I, as the mouthpiece of the god, sat above Moctezuma on a ledge lined with jaguar skin and feathers. It was a pleasant afternoon; the courtiers were wolfing down their packed lunch while I sipped, from a sacred onyx cup, the blood of a young Mayan girl who had been sacrificed only that morning; yes, the blood had been cooled with snow from the slopes of the volcano.

“It’s not going well,” said the king. “Look — the jaguar team has only snared about a hundred, and the quetzal team less than half that.”

Once touched by the sacred flower-wand, which was the only weapon used in these artificial wars, a soldier was sent to the sacrificial pen. It was a great honor, of course, to be sacrificed, and a thing of beauty to behold those hordes of young men, oiled and gleaming, rushing across the grass to embrace their several destinies. “They seem more reluctant than usual, Your Majesty,” I said.

“Yes,” said the king darkly. “I wonder why.”

“I think,” I said, trying to put it to him delicately, “it has something to do with the man-beasts from the sea.”

“You’d think they’d be all the more anxious to get sacrificed, what with the present danger to the empire.”

“Yes, but they’ve been spreading sedition, Your Majesty. I’ve just come from the prison; they’ve been interrogating that black robe they captured — a high priest of sorts. He says that our sacrifices are ignorant superstition; that the sun will rise each morning with or without them; and he’s been babbling about Hesuskristos, their god, who seems to be a garbled version of Xipe Totec.”

“You shouldn’t say bad things about the man-beasts. Last night I dreamed that the Plumed Serpent was returning to claim his kingdom.” He was speaking of Quetzalcoatl, the god-king who left our shores 500 years before, vowing to come back.

“Quetzalcoatl will not come back, Your Majesty.”

“How do you know? Am I not the king? Don’t my dreams have the force of prophecy?”

“You may have dreamt of him, Your Majesty; I, on the other hand, was his friend.” It was because he lost the land in a wager that he had been forced to cross the ocean to look for a new kingdom, though that part of the story never made it into our mythology.

“So you say, Nezahualcoyotl. You say that you’re a thousand years old, and that you personally led our people out of the wilderness. That sort of thing is all very well for the peasants, Nezahualcoyotl. But I’m a modern king, and I know that you often use the language of metaphor in order to enhance the grandeur of the gods. No, no, I’m not blaming you; I’m a mean hand at propaganda myself. It’s just that, well, you shouldn’t believe your own —”

It would not do to argue. I finished my blood in silence.

“Anyhow, I think we should have a bit of propaganda right now, Nezahualcoyotl. Why don’t you go down there and lead the jaguar team personally? Give them a bit of that old-time religion. Stir up their juices.”

“Sire, at my age —”

“Nonsense. Guard, give him one of those flower-wands.”

I sighed, took the wand, and went down the hill.

The war was being conducted in an orderly fashion. Seeing me, members of the jaguar team made a space for me. I gave a brief and cliché-ridden harangue about the cycles of the cosmos; then it was time to charge. Boys banged on human skin drums; musicians began a noisy caterwauling of flutes, cymbals, and shrilling voices that sang of the coming of Huitzilopochtli to the Mexica. The armies ran toward each other, chanting their war-songs, each soldier seeking out a good quarry. I too ran; not with supernatural swiftness, but like a man, my bare feet pounding the ground. Above us, the whistle of the atl-atl and the whine of flower-tipped arrows. The armies met. I searched for a suitable captive that would honor the god. I saw a man in the farthest rank of the enemy, more child than man, his limbs perfectly formed, his eyes darting fearfully from side to side. There was someone who saw no honor in dying for the god! I elbowed aside three pairs of combatants and came upon him suddenly, looming above him as he ducked behind a tree.

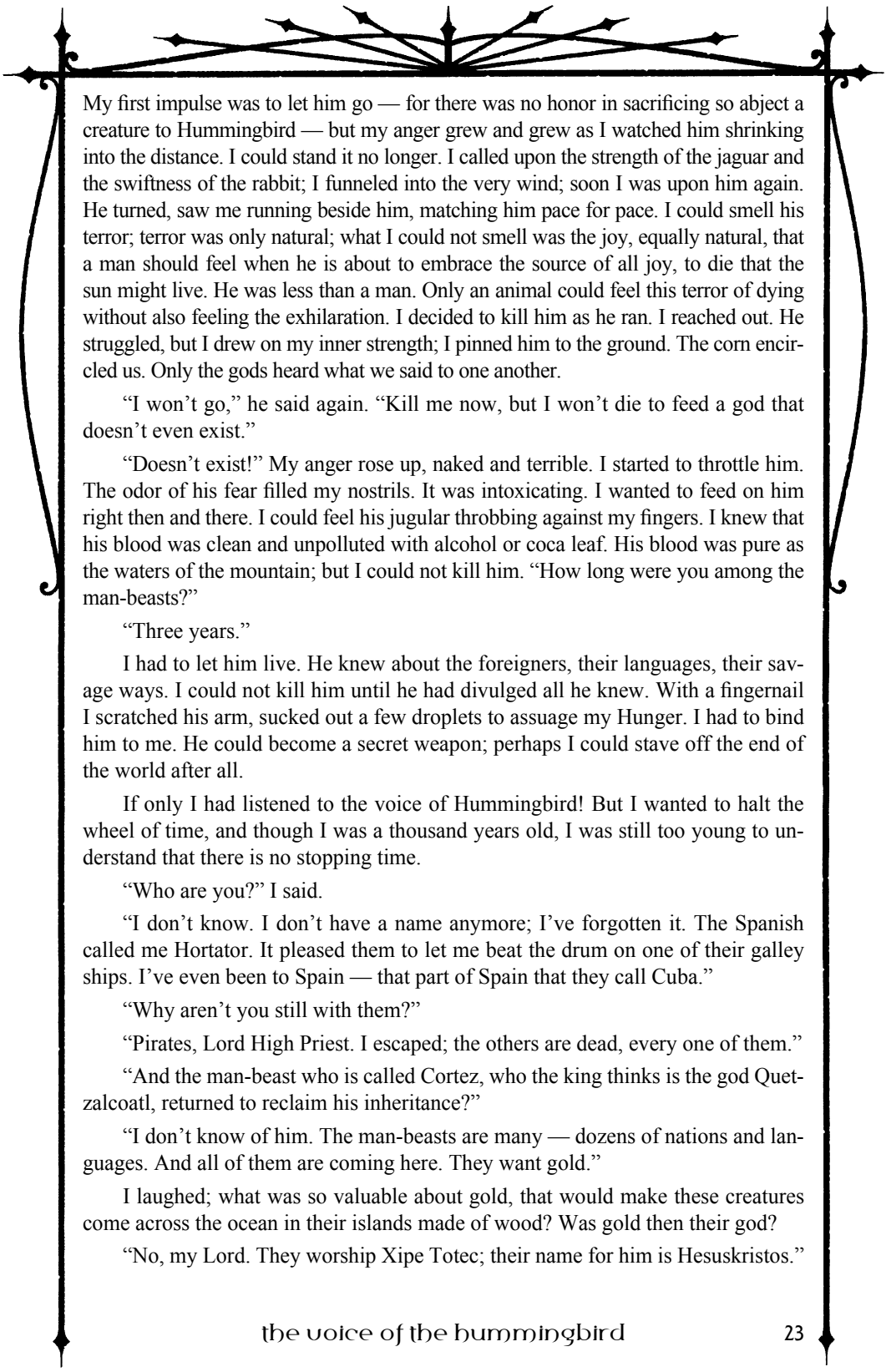
“I am your death,” I said. “Give yourself up; give honor to the gods.”

I touched him with the flower-wand. He glanced at it, took it, stared me defiantly in the eye.

“I won’t do it,” he said.

I knew then that he had been polluted by the preaching of the man-beasts. A fury erupted in me. I said, “Why have you been listening to them? Don’t you know that they’re only human beings? That they bleed and die like ordinary men?”

But he began to run. I was surprised by his speed. He leaped over a bush, sprinted away from the mass of warriors toward a field of maize that bordered the battleground.



My first impulse was to let him go — for there was no honor in sacrificing so abject a creature to Hummingbird — but my anger grew and grew as I watched him shrinking into the distance. I could stand it no longer. I called upon the strength of the jaguar and the swiftness of the rabbit; I funneled into the very wind; soon I was upon him again. He turned, saw me running beside him, matching him pace for pace. I could smell his terror; terror was only natural; what I could not smell was the joy, equally natural, that a man should feel when he is about to embrace the source of all joy, to die that the sun might live. He was less than a man. Only an animal could feel this terror of dying without also feeling the exhilaration. I decided to kill him as he ran. I reached out. He struggled, but I drew on my inner strength; I pinned him to the ground. The corn encircled us. Only the gods heard what we said to one another.

“I won’t go,” he said again. “Kill me now, but I won’t die to feed a god that doesn’t even exist.”

“Doesn’t exist!” My anger rose up, naked and terrible. I started to throttle him. The odor of his fear filled my nostrils. It was intoxicating. I wanted to feed on him right then and there. I could feel his jugular throbbing against my fingers. I knew that his blood was clean and unpolluted with alcohol or coca leaf. His blood was pure as the waters of the mountain; but I could not kill him. “How long were you among the man-beasts?”

“Three years.”

I had to let him live. He knew about the foreigners, their languages, their savage ways. I could not kill him until he had divulged all he knew. With a fingernail I scratched his arm, sucked out a few droplets to assuage my Hunger. I had to bind him to me. He could become a secret weapon; perhaps I could stave off the end of the world after all.

If only I had listened to the voice of Hummingbird! But I wanted to halt the wheel of time, and though I was a thousand years old, I was still too young to understand that there is no stopping time.

“Who are you?” I said.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a name anymore; I’ve forgotten it. The Spanish called me Hortator. It pleased them to let me beat the drum on one of their galley ships. I’ve even been to Spain — that part of Spain that they call Cuba.”

“Why aren’t you still with them?”

“Pirates, Lord High Priest. I escaped; the others are dead, every one of them.”

“And the man-beast who is called Cortez, who the king thinks is the god Quetzalcoatl, returned to reclaim his inheritance?”

“I don’t know of him. The man-beasts are many — dozens of nations and languages. And all of them are coming here. They want gold.”

I laughed; what was so valuable about gold, that would make these creatures come across the ocean in their islands made of wood? Was gold then their god?

“No, my Lord. They worship Xipe Totec; their name for him is Hesuskristos.”

When I escorted my prisoner back to the pen, it was getting late. Moctezuma was bored and listless; Cozcatl was annoyed at having lost the war, though it would hardly have been good manners for him to be victorious over his sovereign lord. The two kings applauded as I approached them, and bade me eat with them; they had a fresh haunch roasting. "Excellent meat," said the king. "She was good in bed, too."

"You did her great honor, Sire, to inseminate her, sacrifice her, and eat her, all with your own hands."

"It was the Queen's idea, actually; she had been getting uppity. But what have we here?" He eyed my captive with interest. "A powerful-looking fellow; I didn't know you had it in you to bring in so fine a specimen."

He cast his eye about for his obsidian knife; when the king particularly favored someone, he was apt to sacrifice him on the spot. I had to think quickly to protect my source of information. "Your Majesty," I said, "the god has told me that this man is to be the next Unblemished Youth."

"Oh," said the king, disappointed, "we'll have to wait until the big ceremony, then." To Hortator he said, "You're a very lucky young man; you'll have the best in food, drink, and women, including four holy brides; until you're sacrificed, a year from now, you'll be worshipped as a god. Even I will have to bow to you, though you mustn't get any grand ideas."

"Yes, Sire," said Hortator. I could tell he was grateful for his reprieve. Perhaps, in time, I would be able to wash away the silly notions the man-beasts had planted in his mind. A year was time enough, surely, to persuade him to look forward to being sacrificed properly.

• • •

"You were planning to deprogram him!" Julia said, having by then become somewhat drunk. I myself was on my second skin of blood; my appearance was far less corpse-like than it had been in the exhibit hall.

"I'd better take you home with me," she went on. "At least until you figure out what you're going to do with yourself. I mean — no credit cards, no social security number, no car — you could be in for some culture shock."

I was not sure what she was talking about, but a few hours later I was numb from confusion. I had ridden in a thing called BART, which is a cylindrical metal wagon that runs through tubes under the earth; I had been driven in a horseless chariot across a bridge that seemed to hang on wires above the ocean; I had seen buildings shaped like phalluses, strutting up into the sky; and the people! Tenochtitlan at its most crowded had not been like this. San Francisco — named, so Julia told me, after a nature god of the Spaniards — was a hundred times as crowded. There were people of many colors, and their costumes beggared description. In my feathers, leggings, and pendulous jade earrings, I must have looked a little odd; yet no one stared at me. This was a people accustomed to strangeness.

At length we reached Julia's home, an apartment within one of those tall buildings, reached by means of a little chamber on pulleys which seemed much more

efficient than stairs; I could see that I was going to enjoy the many conveniences of this alien world.

Her home was an odd little place; she lived alone, without parents or children, without even any servants; and the apartment, though crammed with laborsaving devices, was little bigger than a peasant's hovel, and considerably more claustrophobic.

We had been there for only moments when she thrust herself at me. Her blood was racing, and scented with erotic secretions. She kissed me. I tasted blood on her chapped lips. I pulled away. "Be careful," I said. "I don't have the same desires as you. I don't feel lust. Not like that."

"Then teach me the other kind of lust."

"I'm afraid you would not like it."

"Yes, yes, I know the desolation, the loneliness of eternity. I don't care! Don't you understand? I've always wanted to be a vampire. I've never been able to get this close to one before. Not for certain. I'm a historian. I want to get the long view. I want to see man's destiny unfold, bit by bit. I hate being a human being."

"It's not what you think it is." How could I tell her about those flashes from my childhood, those faded images that still haunted me with their unattainable vividness? My world is a gray world; only the infusion of blood brings to it a fleeting color, and that only a simulacrum of color, awakened by long-lost memories; now, 500 years beyond the end of the world, I had become even more of a tragicomic figure. How could this woman ever know, unless I made her know? And then, poor thing, there would be no turning back.

I did not want to make her like me. I had tried that once. It had not eased my loneliness. And my creation had betrayed me. But the woman could be useful. For now I would pretend to hold out the possibility that she might one day become immortal.

"Make love to me," she said.

She smiled a half-smile and beckoned me into an inner room. There were mirrors everywhere. With great deliberation, she began to remove her clothing. There was a pleasing firmness to her, though she was not young. An Aztec woman of her years would have been worn out, her fists hardened from pounding laundry or tortillas. It would be necessary for me to go through the motions of lovemaking. In the end I did not mind. She had been menstruating.

Afterwards, I lay on the bed and watched her sitting at the mirror, painting her face. She opened a drawer and took out a gold pendant in the shape of a crucified man. Suddenly I understood why I had not perished along with the rest of the world. I had unfinished business.

"Where did you get that amulet from?"

"You recognize it, don't you?" She stood up, clad only in the pendant and her long dark hair. "I'm afraid you're not the first vampire I've dated. Actually I wasn't entirely sure he was one, until now. They don't make a habit of telling. But you've just confirmed it."

“I have to find the person who gave it to you.”

“I’ll take you to him,” she said.

...

Once more we crossed the bay in the steel chariot; once more my memories came flooding back.

They had seemed insane to me, those man-beasts; there were only a handful of them, yet they scoured the land as though they were an army of thousands. In only a short while they had conquered a city but a day’s journey from Tenochtitlan. But in the palace of Moctezuma there was a strange calm. I did not know why. Each day, I sacrificed the requisite numbers of victims at the appropriate hours; I did nothing that dishonored the gods.

Except, of course, for the little lie I had told my king; it had not been Huitzilopochtli who had commanded that the man Hortator be consecrated as the Unblemished Youth. I had said so to ensure that the man would survive and remain useful to me. It was not the first time I had invoked the voice of the Hummingbird to bring about some personal decision. When one has been the mouthpiece of the god for centuries at a time, there are times when one’s identity becomes blurred. Besides, what harm could it do? Hortator was the perfect choice, even if the god had not made it himself.

I visited him each evening in the compound sacred to Xipe Totec, where the four sacred handmaidens dressed him, bathed him, and tended to his sexual needs, for he was no longer free to walk about the city at will. He was, indeed, unblemished, a prime specimen of Aztec manhood, lean, tall, well proportioned, and fine featured. The god would be pleased when the day came for him to be flayed alive so that his skin could be worn by the priest of Xipe Totec in the annual ceremony that heals and renews the wounded earth and brings forth the rains of spring. There was only one thing wrong with it all; the Unblemished Youth did not seem particularly honored by the attention. It was all most unusual, a sign of the decadence of those times.

“I don’t want to do it,” he told me, “because I don’t believe in it.” For a non-believer he was certainly reaping its benefits — being massaged by one handmaiden, being fed by another, and the gods alone knew what was going on under the gold-edged table behind which he sat. “I mean that it’s no use; the blood of human sacrifices isn’t what makes the sun rise each morning; the god of the man-beasts is clearly more powerful than Huitzilopochtli even as Hummingbird was mightier than the gods who came before. I don’t mind the pain so much as the fact that I’d be dying for no reason.”

“You’ve been poisoning the king’s mind, too, haven’t you?” I said. For Moctezuma seemed to have lost all interest in the future of his empire.

“I am the Unblemished Youth,” he pointed out. “It was your idea. And as you know, that means that my advice comes from the gods..”

“You hear no voices from the sky!” I said. “It’s all pretense with you.”

“And what voice from the gods told you that I was to be kept alive to teach you the ways of the white men?”

He knew I had lied. Only one whose mind had already been tainted by the man-beasts’ ideas would even have imagined such a thing. “But I do hear voices,” I said.

“Then let me hear one too.”

“All right.”

I told him to follow me. We took a subterranean passageway — for he could not be seen to wander the streets of the city — that angled downward, deep under the great pyramid of Huitzilopochtli. The walls were damp and had a natural coolness from the waters that seeped underground from the great lake of Tenochtitlan. Hortator stopped to admire the bas-reliefs which depicted the history of the Mexica people in their long migration toward the promised land; there were sculptures in niches in the stone, some decorated with fresh human skulls or decaying flowers, some so weathered that they could no longer be identified, being the gods of unremembered peoples who had long since been conquered and assimilated by the Mexica; many parts of the tunnel were ill-kept; our torches burned but dimly here, far from the outside air.

At length we reached a chamber so sacred that even King Moctezuma had never set foot within it. It was guarded by the god of a civilization far older than ours — Um-Tzec, the Mayan god of death, whose skull-face was etched into the stone that blocked the entrance.

I whispered a word in the long-forgotten Olmec language, and the stone slid aside to reveal the chamber. Hortator gasped as he read in the flickering torchlight the calendar symbols and the glyphs that lined the walls.

“But —” he said, “this is the lost tomb of Nezahualcoyotl, your namesake, the first great king of the Aztecs!”

I smiled. I held up my torch so he could see all that the room contained — treasures of gold from ancient cities — magical objects and amulets — and a great sarcophagus, carved from solid obsidian.

“The tomb is empty!” he gasped.

“Yes,” I said, “it is, and always will be, by the sacred grace and will of Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird of the Left.”

“The black robes told me of creatures like you. I’ve never seen you eat; you seem to subsist on blood. You’re one of the undead, a creature of the devil. You sleep by day in your own coffin, and by night you prey on human blood.”

I laughed. “What strange notions these man-beasts have! Though I admit that I have sometimes taken a nap inside the sarcophagus. It’s roomy, and very conducive to meditation.”

I showed him the treasures. Every one of them had an ancient tale attached to it, or some mystic power. The ring of concealment and the jewel for scrying the past. The great drum fashioned from Xipe Totec’s skin, which, when beaten,

confers the power of celerity. “Feel it, touch its tautness. That is your skin too, for you are Xipe Totec.”

“There is only one Xipe Totec, who gave his life for the redemption of the world, who was killed and rose again on the third day.”

“I’m glad the Spaniards haven’t robbed you of that truth!”

“On the contrary,” he said, “they taught it to me. And they say that theirs is the real Xipe Totec, and yours is an illusion, the work of the powers of darkness.” He pulled out an amulet from a fold of his feather robe, and showed me the image of Hesuskristos; a suffering god indeed, nailed to a tree, his torso cruelly pierced, his scalp ripped by thorns. “It is an admirable god,” I said, “but I see no reason why, accepting one, you must heap scorn on the other.”

“Oh, they are not so different, the new gods and the old. The black robes have sacrifices too; they burn the victims alive in a public ceremony called auto-da-fe, after first subjecting them to fiendish tortures —”

“Wonderful,” I said, “at least they have some of the rudiments of civilization.”

“I did not say their god was better, Nezahualcoyotl; only that he is stronger. Now show me how your god speaks.”

“I will need blood.”

“Take mine,” he said.

I took my favorite blood-cup, carved from a single, flawless piece of jade, and murmured a prayer over it. I did not want to scar the Unblemished Youth; I knelt before him and pricked him lightly in the groin with the fingernail of my left pinky, which I keep sharpened for that purpose; I drained an ounce or so into the blood-cup, then seared the wound shut with a dab of my saliva. The drawing of blood caused the man to close his eyes. He whimpered; I knew not if it was from pain or ecstasy. I called on Huitzilopochtli, drained the blood-cup, tossed it aside. The warmth shot through my ancient veins, pierced my unbeating heart; it was a bitter blood, a blood of destiny. I emptied out my soul. I waited for the god to speak.

And presently it came, a faint whisper in my left ear, like the fluttering of tiny wings. I could not see Huitzilopochtli — no one has ever seen him — but his still small voice lanced my very bones like the thunderous erupting of Popocatepetl itself. The world has turned in on itself, said the god, and the fire of the sun has turned to ashes.

“But — what have we done wrong? Didn’t we slaughter hecatombs of warriors to your glory? Didn’t we mortify our own flesh, build pyramids whose points grazed the very dwelling places of your Kindred?”

The god laughed. The cosmos dances, he said. We are at peace.

In my trance state I saw Hortator standing before me, no longer in the consecrated raiment of Xipe Totec, but naked, nailed to a tree, the skin scourged from his back, the blood streaming from his side and down his face, and I cried out, “You abomination! You travesty of the true faith!” and I rushed toward him. When I was

with the god I was more powerful than any human. I could rip him in pieces with my bare hands. I had him by the throat, was throttling the life from him —

You will not kill him, said the god. All at once, the strength left my hands. Instead, you will make him immortal.

“He doesn’t deserve —”

Obey me! He too is a prophet, of a sort. Do you not understand that he who rises to godhead, who creates a world, a people, a destiny, plants inevitably within his creation the seeds of his own destruction? All life is so — and the gods, who are the pinnacle of life, are as subject to its laws as any other creatures.

It seemed to me that I no longer understood the god as clearly as I had once, when I came down from the high mountain to bring his message to a tribe of wanderers. His words were confused now, tainted. But he was the god, and I obeyed him without thought. I knelt once more before Hortator, and I began to feed, mindless now of damaging his flesh, for I knew that he would never have to suffer the rites of Xipe Totec. I fed and fed until there was no more blood at all, and then, slashing my lip with my razor fingernail, I moistened his lips with a few drops of my own millennial blood, blood that ran cold as the waters under the earth.

I cried out: “Do you see now the power of Huitzilopochtli? I have killed you and brought you back from the dead; I have awakened you to the world of eternal cold ...”

But Hortator only laughed, and he said to me, “I heard nothing. No hummingbird whispered in my left ear. The black robes were right; your gods do not exist.”

“My gods have made you immortal!”

“I am already immortal; for the black robes have sprinkled me with their water of life.”

I could not understand what had happened. Why had the god commanded me to make him my Kindred, then allowed him to mock me? Why could Hortator not hear the voice of the deity when it reverberated in my very bones? The very fabric of the world was unraveling. For the first time in a thousand years, I was afraid. At first I could not even recognize the emotion, it was so alien; it was almost thrilling. I reached back farther and farther through the cobwebs of memory. I saw myself as a child, scurrying beneath my mother’s blanket, fleeing the music of the night. With fear came a kind of melancholy, for I knew that I would never again truly feel what it was like to be alive.

Once, it seemed, I walked with my god; daily, hourly I heard his voice echo and reecho in my heart. Then came a time when he spoke to me but rarely, and usually only in the context of the blood-ritual. And now and then, I began to speak for him, inventing his words, for the people did not hear him unless I first heard him; it was I who was his prophet. Was it those little lies that had made my god abandon me now?

I cried out, “Oh, Huitzilopochtli, Huitzilopochtli, why hast thou forsaken me?” But the god did not see fit to respond.

...

We stopped at a bazaar to buy clothes more suitable to my surroundings. Julia picked out some black leggings which could be pulled over my loincloth, shoes made from animal skins, and an over shirt of some soft white material; she paid for the items with a rectangular plaque, which the vendor slid through a metal device, after which she made some mysterious marks on a square of parchment.

Then we drove on to another part of the city, one where the buildings were more ornate, not the monolithic towers of stone and glass I had seen before. We stopped in front of a low, unpretentious-looking building; Julia bade me follow her.

Inside, the surroundings were considerably more ostentatious. There were paintings, a floor covered with some kind of red-tinted fur, the pieces joined together so invisibly that one could not tell what animal it had come from. The place was full of all manner of people, jabbering away in many accents, though I did not hear anyone speak Nahuatl; perhaps my native tongue had gone the way of the language of the Olmecs.

We stood, a little uncomfortably — for though no one questioned our being there no one made us welcome — and I began to notice a pervasive sickliness in the air — the sweetness of putrefying flesh that has been doused in cloying perfume — I knew that it was the odor of the dead—I knew that I was in the presence of others of my kind — not one or two but dozens of them. What had happened in the past 500 years? Had I been reborn into a world of vampires? Again fear flecked my feelings, the same fear I had felt when I doubted my gods for the first time.

“Your friend is sometimes to be found there,” Julia said. She pointed to a door, half-hidden by shadows. “Go along. I’ll stay here and have a glass of wine.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

“I can’t,” she said. “No human being has ever come out of that room alive. But if you’re really what I say you are, you won’t have any trouble. That room,” she went on, her voice dropping to a whisper, “is the Vampire Club.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“I’m not supposed to know.” Her eyes sparkled. I could see that she loved to flirt with danger; that was why she was so obsessed with my kind.

I put aside my fear. I had to confront Hortator. Already I knew that he was close by. From the dozens of clamoring voices in the building, my attenuated senses were able to isolate him. I could even hear his blood as it oozed through his veins; for every creature’s life force pulsates to a personal rhythm, unique as a fingerprint, if one has only the skill to pick it out.

I was becoming angry. I stalked to the door and flung it open. There came a blast of foul and icy wind. I stepped inside and slammed the door shut. There was no mistaking the odor now. I descended steep steps into a tomblike chamber where several outlandishly attired men and women sat deep in conversation, sipping delicately from snifters of blood.

“Rh negative,” said one of them disgustedly, “not exactly my favorite.”

“Let me have a sniff — *pe-ugh!* Touch of the AIDS virus in that one; oh, do send it back, my dear Travis.”

“Whatever for? I think it lends it a certain *je ne sais quoi*,” said Travis, “that ever-tantalizing bouquet *de la mort* ...”

Two other creatures looked up from a game of cards; their faces had the pallid phosphorescence of the dead; their eyes glittered like cut glass, scintillant and emotionless.

A slightly corpulent man, sumptuously clothed in velvet and satin, waved languidly at me. “Heavens,” he said, “what a surprise! We don’t get many Red Indians here.”

“Get him out of here,” one of the cardsharps hissed. He was attired like one of the Spanish black robes.

“Yeah, dude,” said a young man, of the type Julia had described to me as punk. “Or card him at least.” He cackled at some incomprehensible joke.

“Whatever for? He’s obviously one of us. Either that, or he’s in desperate need of the services of an orthodontist,” said the man in the velvet.

“We don’t know him,” said the other card player, a woman, whose hair stood on end and fanned out like the tail of a peacock, and who wore a full-length cloak of some thick, black material.

“Perhaps we should ask him who he is. See here, old thing — very, very old, I’m afraid — I’m Sebastian Melmoth, your humble host. And you are?”

“I am Nezahualcoyotl,” I said, “the Voice of the Hummingbird. I’m looking for a certain person. He calls himself Hortator.”

“Oh, I see. Well, you really mustn’t get to the point quite so fast; it’s not very dignified, you know. Let a century or two go by first.”

“I have let five centuries go by.”

“Perhaps you’d care for one of our sanguinary cocktails?”

“I’ve already supped tonight, thank you.”

“And might I ask you what Clan you belong to?”

“I know nothing of Clans. If you won’t tell me the whereabouts of Hortator, please direct me to someone who can.”

“Are you an anarch?” asked the woman with the peacock hair. I could only look at her in confusion.

The other card player rose and sniffed at me. “Unusual bloodline,” he said. “Not a pedigree I’m familiar with.”

“Now look here,” said Sebastian Melmoth, “he’s obviously a vampire. But he doesn’t seem to have the foggiest notion about how to behave like one. Tell me, Nezy old chap, if you were in fact to find Hortator, what would you do?”

“I shall kill him.”

The others began to laugh at me. I felt like some peasant on his first trip to Tenochtitlan. “Why do you mock me?” I said.

“Well!” said Sebastian Melmoth. “That’s simply not done anymore. Not without the consent of the prince. Who doesn’t even know who you are, so I don’t see why he would grant your request.”

It was then that I heard his voice. “Kill me?” The voice had deepened with the centuries, but I still recognized it. There he stood, towering over Melmoth, in the full regalia of a Mexica warrior, the jaguar-skin cloak, the helmet fashioned from a jaguar’s head, the quetzal plumes, the earrings of gold and jade. Behind him there hung a life-sized painting of the white men’s Xipe Totec, the god nailed to a tree; a soldier was hammering a stake through his heart; a beautiful woman watched with tears in her eyes.

“Kill me?” he repeated. “Why, Nezahualcoyotl?”

“Because you tried to kill me!”

“That was a foolish thing. I admit it. I placed too much credence in the Spaniard’s superstitions. I know now that you’re not that simple to kill. In fact, you look very well for someone who hasn’t had a drop of blood in half a millennium.”

“You are part of the old things, the things that should have died when the world ended. I understand now why I have been preserved by the gods. It is so that I can take you with me, you impious creature who twice refused the honor of a sacrificial death. I have been sent to put an end to your anomalous existence so that no part of the Old World will taint the New.”

“Did your god tell you this, old man?”

Suddenly I realized that I had heard no voices from the gods since awakening inside the glass box in the San Francisco Museum. There was no more certainty in me, there was only ambiguity and confusion. My grand revelations no longer had divine authority. Perhaps it was true that they were the hallucinations of a madman. Perhaps if I had my votive objects I could summon back the voice of the hummingbird — the sacred blood-cup, the drum, the gold-tipped thorns for piercing my own flesh.

“Huitzilopochtli!” I cried out, despairing.

“You fool,” said Hortator. “No god brought you to this place. There is no divine plan. It was I who told Julia Epstein where to dig. It was I who chose the moment to bring you back out of the earth. It was I, not Huitzilopochtli, who summoned you hither!”

“Why?” I said.

“Oh, don’t imagine that I want to renew some monstrous cosmic struggle between you and me. It’s much simpler than that. Buried with you, in the chamber at the heart of the pyramid, there were certain artifacts, were they not? Magical artifacts that will enhance my power. Your coming back to life along with the items I need is something of an inconvenience, but I’m sure you won’t last long, because you simply don’t understand how things work in this new world, this age of vampires.”

• • •

Then it was that the memory of the apocalypse returned to me, bursting all at once through the wall I had erected to shield myself from its pain. I could not bear

these creatures of their future, with their petty rules and their ignorance of the great cycles of the cosmos. I turned and strode away, taking the steps two at a time until I reached the Alexandrian Club, where Julia was sitting nervously at a corner table.

“Where did I come from?” I screamed at her. “How did you come to possess my body? And where are the artifacts I was buried with?” I had to have them. I had to try to summon Huitzilopochtli. Surely I would hear his voice again if I went through the ritual of the sacred blood-cup.

“Quiet now,” she said, “you’re making a scene.”

“I have to know!”

“Yes. Yes. But not here. It’s dangerous for me.”

We drove into the darkness. San Francisco sparkled with man-made stars. A thousand strange new odors lanced the air: frenzied copulations; murderers and thieves skulking through the back streets; and the blood music, singing to me from every mortal inhabitant of the city, from within the topless towers of stone came the pounding of a million hearts, the roar of a million bloodstreams. Oh, one could be a glutton in this city, if one were a creature such as I. No wonder they had congregated here.

“I told you,” said Julia. “Things are different now.”

“What did Hortator mean when he said that he had summoned me back from the dead — by telling you where to dig?”

“Oh, he was being melodramatic. But he did drop a few hints.”

“Before or after he made love to you?”

“You’re not jealous, are you?”

“Of course not.” I was silent for a while. The woman had a way of baldly confronting me with the truth. I didn’t like it. I loathed the very idea of a city crammed with vampires, living by complex rules, observing silly hierarchies. But what could I do? The car raced over the bridge once more; Tenochtitlan too was a city of many bridges, a floating city. San Francisco was like a bloated, savage parody of my vanished kingdom.

Julia said, “I’ll tell you, if you like. We have a series of weekly lectures at the museum. Hispanic studies, you know. Hortator came to a few of them. He would ask penetrating questions. Then he started telling me things. There was a big earthquake in Mexico City, you know. The Velasquez Building was leveled to the ground. He told me — convinced me — that there was a major find hidden beneath it, a secret room, he told me, next to a secret passageway. He told me he’d seen it in a dream. I laughed when he drew me a map. Well, that was the thing, you see. We had been using sonar to excavate those tunnels, and the computer scan matched his drawing to the centimeter.”

“And you found me there.”

“You were lying in a massive obsidian sarcophagus. You had a stake through your heart. I assumed — foolish me — that because of that, you were quite, quite

dead — too many Dracula films, I suppose — so that it would be safe to put you on exhibit.”

...

Memories of the apocalypse ...

The king in all his splendor. This time not on the crest of a grassy hill, watching a pretended battle, but atop a pyramid of stone, looking down on the conquistadores as they swept through the city in a river of blood and fire. Man and beast conjoined now, the man-things glittering in their silvery skins, the beasts whinnying and pawing the pathways paved with the dead, arms and legs flying in the air as the cannonballs smashed through stone and adobe and human flesh.

And I beside him, I the mouthpiece of the god of the Mexica, aghast and powerless, raging. “You didn’t have to play dead for them. They’re just mortals. You’ve treated them like gods.”

“They are gods,” said Moctezuma. “There was nothing I could do.”

Hortator had poisoned his mind. He had fed Moctezuma a diet of his own bad dreams, told him that the Spaniard was indeed Quetzalcoatl.

I looked into the eyes of my king; and I saw such sadness, such desolation that I could not bear it. It must be a terrible destiny to be the one chosen to preside over the end of the universe. Was there no way to turn back the sun? No. Beside us as we sat, each one wrapped in his private melancholia, my deputy priests were grimly carrying on the day’s duties, plucking out the hearts of victims who waited in an endless queue that stretched all the way down the thousand steps and into the conflagration in the market square.

“Don’t tell me that you accepted the word of this man-beast as the word of a god!” I cried.

“Wasn’t it?” the king said. “In truth, I felt a certain wrongness about it all.”

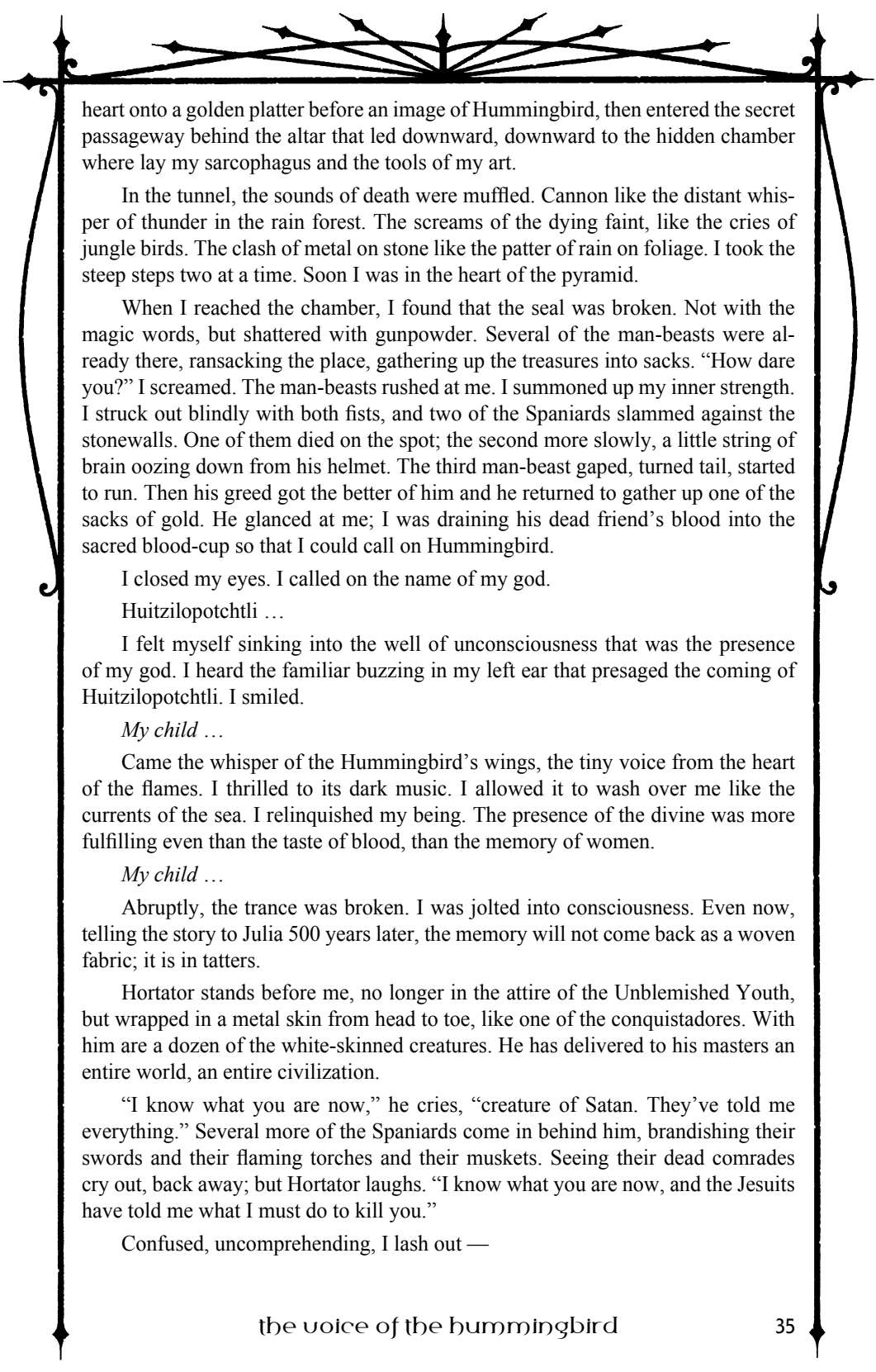
“Then let me call on Hummingbird to turn back the tide of time!”

“What difference does it make now?”

“Majesty,” I said, “when the king himself no longer believes in the old truths, how can the earth sustain itself?”

“Perhaps I’ve been a little distracted,” said the king. He was wavering.

I knew that I could not stand idle. I left the king’s side; I entered the sacred chamber behind the altar, whose walls were caked with the blood of 10,000 human sacrifices. I paused only to suck the juices from a fresh, still-palpitating heart that one of the priests handed me. The soldiers were hacking off the limbs of the still convulsing victims, casting down the arms and legs, as has always been the custom, for the poor to dine on. The sight of the city’s daily routine being carried out even now, on the brink of utter annihilation, would have moved me to tears, except that I had shed none in a thousand years. The priests worked quickly and efficiently, up to their elbows in coagulating gore. I hardly looked at them; I chucked the drained



heart onto a golden platter before an image of Hummingbird, then entered the secret passageway behind the altar that led downward, downward to the hidden chamber where lay my sarcophagus and the tools of my art.

In the tunnel, the sounds of death were muffled. Cannon like the distant whisper of thunder in the rain forest. The screams of the dying faint, like the cries of jungle birds. The clash of metal on stone like the patter of rain on foliage. I took the steep steps two at a time. Soon I was in the heart of the pyramid.

When I reached the chamber, I found that the seal was broken. Not with the magic words, but shattered with gunpowder. Several of the man-beasts were already there, ransacking the place, gathering up the treasures into sacks. "How dare you?" I screamed. The man-beasts rushed at me. I summoned up my inner strength. I struck out blindly with both fists, and two of the Spaniards slammed against the stonewalls. One of them died on the spot; the second more slowly, a little string of brain oozing down from his helmet. The third man-beast gaped, turned tail, started to run. Then his greed got the better of him and he returned to gather up one of the sacks of gold. He glanced at me; I was draining his dead friend's blood into the sacred blood-cup so that I could call on Hummingbird.

I closed my eyes. I called on the name of my god.

Huitzilopotchtli ...

I felt myself sinking into the well of unconsciousness that was the presence of my god. I heard the familiar buzzing in my left ear that presaged the coming of Huitzilopotchtli. I smiled.

My child ...

Came the whisper of the Hummingbird's wings, the tiny voice from the heart of the flames. I thrilled to its dark music. I allowed it to wash over me like the currents of the sea. I relinquished my being. The presence of the divine was more fulfilling even than the taste of blood, than the memory of women.

My child ...

Abruptly, the trance was broken. I was jolted into consciousness. Even now, telling the story to Julia 500 years later, the memory will not come back as a woven fabric; it is in tatters.

Hortator stands before me, no longer in the attire of the Unblemished Youth, but wrapped in a metal skin from head to toe, like one of the conquistadores. With him are a dozen of the white-skinned creatures. He has delivered to his masters an entire world, an entire civilization.

"I know what you are now," he cries, "creature of Satan. They've told me everything." Several more of the Spaniards come in behind him, brandishing their swords and their flaming torches and their muskets. Seeing their dead comrades cry out, back away; but Hortator laughs. "I know what you are now, and the Jesuits have told me what I must do to kill you."

Confused, uncomprehending, I lash out —

He dodges my blow, leaps across the sarcophagus, seizes the drum of Xipe Totec and begins to pound on it, a slow relentless rhythm. I scream. He pounds. I lunge. He leaps, each leap drawing more celerity from the power of the drum. He flies along the walls, he twists, he turns, he is a whirlwind, a tempest —

Huitzilopotchtli! I cry out.

No answer. I reached into the profoundest darkness of the well within. Where was my god? I see Hortator bearing down on me, brandishing a sharpened wooden stake.

As though from infinitely far away I seem to see the stake rive my stony flesh, rip apart my ribcage, pierce my heart ...

Huitzilopotchtli!

Huitzilopotchtli!

Then, and only then, the god responds. The pyramids above us start to tremble. Cracks appear in the ceiling. Rocks start to rain down.

“Flee!” cries Hortator. I hear, through the fog of pain, their footsteps, metal clanking on stone. I hear some of them cry out as the cave-in crushes them.

I clutch at the wooden stake. But it is too late. I feel its leaden weight within me, feel it still the sluggish pump that is my heart, I feel the blood slow from a spurt to an ooze. I feel my heart muscle tighten around the unyielding wood like a vagina. I feel violated. I feel powerless for the first time since my changing. Then, all at once, I am spiraling downward toward the long sleep of ultimate forgetting.

• • •

And now, another underground passageway, another secret chamber. Five hundred years in the future, in a world I did not belong in, I stood with Julia Epstein among the shelves and shelves of artifacts of my people, all labeled, boxed, marked in white paint in the strange curlicuish script of the man-beasts.

Crate after crate I ripped open. “What is it you’re looking for?” said Julia. “This is valuable stuff — you can’t just throw it around like it belonged to you.”

“It does belong to me.”

“Half a millennium ago. But they’re priceless antiquities now. And they haven’t been appraised by the insurance company yet, so —”


I saw a tattered quetzal-feather robe that had once belonged to King Moctezuma’s grandfather. I saw my sacred blood-cup, chipped now. I lifted it from its box...

“Careful with that thing! It dates back to Olmec times.”

“I know. I made it.”

She was silent for a moment. “The drum!” I said. “There was a drum fashioned from human skin.”

“I’ve seen that,” she said, “in Hortator’s apartment.”



So that was how he had made it out of the collapsing tunnels — with the power of celerity conferred by the drum of Xipe Totec! I was furious now. He had no right to my ritual objects. I was more determined than ever to exact revenge. Perhaps he thought I would be a useless anachronism, but I would teach him not to usurp my magical tools. They had told me at the Vampire Club about new laws that forbade the killing of vampires without permission from some prince, but what did I know of princes? What did I care? I was more ancient than any prince.

But even as I spoke, we heard the sound of shattering glass, and the high-pitched wail that I now knew to be an alarm that would eventually summon the museum's security. Then came a distant thumping sound, uneven, like a fibrillating heart. I knew that sound well. The hollow pounding contained in it the scream of a dying man.

“Hortator!”

“Why do you have to go on fighting him?” Julia said. “Don’t you realize that the war between you two has no meaning any more?”

“Julia, I must have a little of your blood.”

She closed her eyes, craned her neck, bared it to me as a warrior bares his heart for the sacrifice. “I need the blood,” I said, “so I can summon forth the voice of the Hummingbird.”


“There’s no voice,” she whispered. “It’s in your mind, the right brain speaking to the left, a hallucination of godhead. Don’t you understand that people don’t see visions and hear voices anymore? You come from the age of gods; we live in the age of consciousness; it’s not the god who commands us anymore, it’s we ourselves, our ego, our individual being. People like you, people who still hear the voices of gods, they put them in insane asylums now.”

What was she telling me? It made no sense. How could humans exist without prophets to transmit the commands of the gods? How lonely it must be for them in this future; to be like little islands of consciousness, not to be linked to the great cycle of the cosmos; to be not part of one great self but merely little selves, with little, meaningless lives. I could not, would not live that way. I took her in my arms; I made a tiny incision in her neck with my little fingernail; I drew a thimbleful of blood into the sacred cup; deeply I drank, and as I drank I prayed: Huitzilopotchtli, Huitzilopotchtli, do not forsake me now.

Hortator burst into the chamber. The alarms were screeching. “The rest of the treasures of the room have now been brought to San Francisco,” he said. “That’s why I told Julia where you could be found. I need the other ritual objects. I need the powers they can bestow on me. As for you, you’re just a historical oddity.”

But I could feel the strength of Huitzilopotchtli course through my flesh.

As Julia, faint from her bleeding, sat, dazed, on my old sarcophagus, still in its wooden crate, Hortator and I battled. He threw me against the wall; I lacerated his face with my fingernails; he whirled about me, pounding his drum, my drum. Each of us drew on his dark powers. A mortal would not have seen us battling at



all. He would have felt now a tremor, now a flash of light, now a ripple of darkness. I leaped onto the ceiling, I sped along the walls, defying the earth's pull with my speed; but Hortator was equally swift. His fangs glistened in the man-made light. We fought hand to hand on the lid of the sarcophagus where Julia still lay. We tumbled on the concrete floor of the storeroom, and still the siren wailed.

"I'll really kill you this time," Hortator shouted. "The black robes told me a stake through the heart would kill you. I know better now."

And still I had not heard the voice of the Hummingbird. It was beginning to dawn on me that there was something to what Julia said; that perhaps this was no longer an age of gods. The last time the god had spoken, had he not said, Do you not understand that he who rises to godhead, who creates a world, a people, a destiny, plants inevitably within his creation the seeds of his own destruction? I did not understand then, but I understood it now. My existence showed to ordinary men that there was something beyond mortality; but beyond my own immortality, there was also a kind of entropy. In being granted the ability to see the grand scheme of the universe, to live for centuries and know the higher purposes of mankind, I had also learned that all, even the most sublime, is vanity. I was full of despair. How could I belong to this future? How could I live amongst dozens of creatures like myself, arcane hierarchies all selfishly struggling for domination over one another? I knew that Hortator would hound me to my death. I could not live in a world where I could not hear the voice of my god.

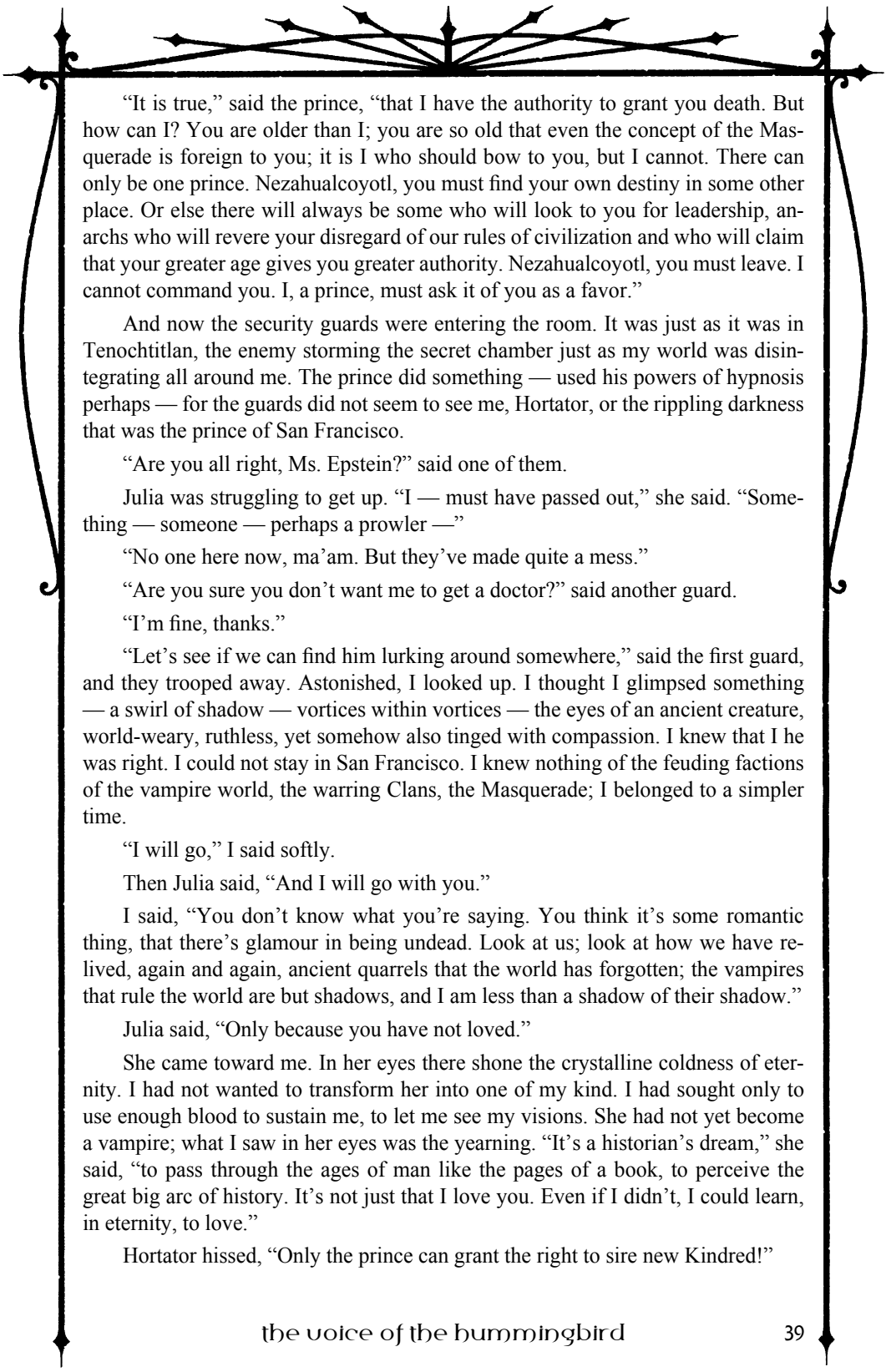
We had battled for what seemed like days, but I knew that only seconds had passed; so quick were our movements that time itself had seemed to stand still. He had me pinned to the ground. I felt not only his weight but the weight of this whole bizarre new universe. And with a free hand he continued to drum, frenzied now, his eyes maddened, his lips frothing. I waited for him to drain me of all my blood, to desiccate me, to consign me to the well of oblivion forever.

Then, at that moment, the siren ceased. Hortator relaxed his hold on me. A shadow had fallen over us. I smelled the presence of another Kindred. I could feel the concentrated power, a puissance that nearly matched my own.

"Prince," Hortator whispered. He stepped back from me, then fell to the floor in supplication. I could not see this prince, so thoroughly had he cloaked himself in magical darkness. But I knew him in the shadow that suffused the air.

"Oh, Nezhualcoyotl," said the prince, whose voice was as reverberant as a god's, "what am I to do with you? You have arrived in this city, yet you do not even come to pay homage to me as is our custom; and already you've created all sorts of controversy. The Vampire Club talks of nothing else but you. You're an anomaly; you challenge our most basic assumptions about our people's history."

I said, "I did not mean to offend you. My quarrel with Hortator is an ancient one, and not your affair; and I see now that the things we quarrel about have become irrelevant. I have no real desire to live. Let Hortator take my ritual objects and grow in power; and let me return to the earth."



“It is true,” said the prince, “that I have the authority to grant you death. But how can I? You are older than I; you are so old that even the concept of the Masquerade is foreign to you; it is I who should bow to you, but I cannot. There can only be one prince. Nezahualcoyotl, you must find your own destiny in some other place. Or else there will always be some who will look to you for leadership, anarchs who will revere your disregard of our rules of civilization and who will claim that your greater age gives you greater authority. Nezahualcoyotl, you must leave. I cannot command you. I, a prince, must ask it of you as a favor.”

And now the security guards were entering the room. It was just as it was in Tenochtitlan, the enemy storming the secret chamber just as my world was disintegrating all around me. The prince did something — used his powers of hypnosis perhaps — for the guards did not seem to see me, Hortator, or the rippling darkness that was the prince of San Francisco.

“Are you all right, Ms. Epstein?” said one of them.

Julia was struggling to get up. “I — must have passed out,” she said. “Something — someone — perhaps a prowler —”

“No one here now, ma’am. But they’ve made quite a mess.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to get a doctor?” said another guard.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Let’s see if we can find him lurking around somewhere,” said the first guard, and they trooped away. Astonished, I looked up. I thought I glimpsed something — a swirl of shadow — vortices within vortices — the eyes of an ancient creature, world-weary, ruthless, yet somehow also tinged with compassion. I knew that I he was right. I could not stay in San Francisco. I knew nothing of the feuding factions of the vampire world, the warring Clans, the Masquerade; I belonged to a simpler time.

“I will go,” I said softly.

Then Julia said, “And I will go with you.”

I said, “You don’t know what you’re saying. You think it’s some romantic thing, that there’s glamour in being undead. Look at us; look at how we have re-lived, again and again, ancient quarrels that the world has forgotten; the vampires that rule the world are but shadows, and I am less than a shadow of their shadow.”

Julia said, “Only because you have not loved.”

She came toward me. In her eyes there shone the crystalline coldness of eternity. I had not wanted to transform her into one of my kind. I had sought only to use enough blood to sustain me, to let me see my visions. She had not yet become a vampire; what I saw in her eyes was the yearning. “It’s a historian’s dream,” she said, “to pass through the ages of man like the pages of a book, to perceive the great big arc of history. It’s not just that I love you. Even if I didn’t, I could learn, in eternity, to love.”

Hortator hissed, “Only the prince can grant the right to sire new Kindred!”

But the prince said only, "Peace, peace, Hortator; will your anger never be slaked?" And then — and I could feel him fading from our presence as he spoke — he said, "Do what you wish, Nezahualcoyotl. Be glad. We will not meet again."

• • •

I have returned to Tenochtitlan. It is a gargantuan madhouse of 20,000,000 souls, but it is still called by the name of my vanished tribe, the Mexica. My official title is Meso-American Studies Advisor to the San Francisco Museum Field Research Unit, Mexico City. Julia and I have a charming apartment; one side overlooks one of the few areas of greenery in the city, the other one of the worst slums.

Julia tells me that a philosopher named Jaynes has written a book called *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. It is a book that explains how, in the ancient world, men did not possess consciousness of self at all, but acted blindly, in response to voices and images projected by the right side of the brain, which they perceived to be the direct commands of gods, kings, and priests.

It is a strange world indeed, where people see no visions, and where a book has to be written explaining away the gods in terms of ganglia and synapses. I do not like it. I do not like the fact that I have been cut off forever from the divine; that I am no longer a prophet, but merely one vampire among many.

Yet the city does have its charms. Its nightlife is thriving and decadent; its music colorful; its alleyways quaint and full of titillating danger. And then there are the people, the descendants of my own people and the Spaniards who overcame them. Julia and I often make time to enjoy the inhabitants of our new home.

There are many poor people here. They pour in from the country, seeking out a better life; often they end up working as virtual slaves in huge factories that pump out cheap goods for their richer neighbors to the north. Sometimes they become gangsters or beggars. Sometimes they find a charitable person to take them in, as domestics, perhaps, or live-in prostitutes.

But sometimes, ah, sometimes, they vanish without a trace.



power

by Don Bassingthwaite

The telephone's shrill scream startled Emily enough that the scalpel she wielded with delicate precision skipped wildly. The cold blood of the dead man on the table trickled out over her fingers. She pursed her lips with frustration and reached for something with a broader mouth than the simple, institutional water glass that stood ready on the edge of the table.

Her fingers closed on a stainless steel basin. The falling blood struck the metal with a sharp, almost musical patter as she stripped off her latex gloves and strode across the room. She got the phone on the third ring.

"Morgue."

"Miss Grange..."

"Doctor."

"Sorry, Dr. Grange. This is John, upstairs. There's someone here to see you."

"What does he want?" She glared at the dead man on the autopsy table. The flow of blood was slowing already — he had been dead almost too long. She picked up the phone and walked back towards the body, the extension cable slithering over other sheet-draped tables. "I'm not expecting anybody."

"He says it's family business."

Emily cradled the telephone receiver between her head and shoulder and used her free hand to press down on the corpse's belly. Under the pressure, more blood spurted into the basin. "Tell him to use the usual door."

She heard John repeat the information. There was a new voice in the background, one with a French accent. John spoke into the phone again. "He doesn't know where it is. He's a distant cousin."

A grimace struck her face. "Is he tall, black hair, gold-rimmed sunglasses? Wearing a jacket with an orchid in the button-hole?"

"I don't know what kind of flower he's got..."

Of course not, Emily thought. She moved her hand to the body's chest and pressed again.

"... but that sounds like him."

Damn. "Tell him where the usual entrance is. I'll be waiting for him." She hung up without waiting for a response. Leaving the telephone balanced on a nearby body, she picked up the basin and carefully poured its contents into her glass. Then she settled down to wait.

It had been 12 years since Emily's Embrace, and her abrupt reassignment to night shift forensic pathologist in the San Francisco Medical Examiner's Office. Twelve years as a vampire, and in that time, she had gotten to know almost all of the Kindred in San Francisco. There weren't that many vampires in the city who had French accents. Only one would have the nerve to identify himself as a "distant cousin," a member of one of the clans that lingered on the fringe of the Camarilla. And he had come himself — his "business" must be important. The visit was almost welcome. Very few Kindred regularly came to the Medical Examiner's Office in the Hall of Justice. Even fewer came to her domain in the basement of the north wing. Most vampires sent their retainers when they had business with Emily, and the business was always the same.

Cover up the mistakes. Hide the stray evidence that popped up from time to time when a vampire lost control and killed someone. Provide death certificates that listed a more mundane cause of death, and make sure the body was disposed of cleanly. She was an important link in the Masquerade. The prince had praised her work.

Her fingers tensed on the glass and she had to set it down before she broke it. The prince's words were empty. She deserved more than this! Her domain was the Medical Examiner's Office, her subjects the Medical Examiner, the other forensic pathologists, and a few of the regular police. No one respected what she did. She was a lackey, a convenient service to be used when it was necessary and ignored the rest of the time. The other Kindred shunned her. Some important link! This was not the future a bright, ambitious medical school graduate had seen for herself. It wasn't even the future a more mature forensic pathologist, 48 but still ambitious, had seen in the first weeks after her Embrace by Clan Ventrue.

The sudden sound of the door buzzer wasn't enough to surprise her this time. "Come in, Jean-Claude, the door's unlocked."

"Can't you come out?"

Emily ground her teeth in frustration. "My equipment is in here." She pushed herself to her feet and began preparing another autopsy table. There was a burst of obscene French from the corridor. She smiled coldly. "I'm waiting."

The door burst open. Two large men staggered into the room. Between them, they bore a bundle wrapped in a bloodstained sheet. She motioned them to put it on the table. "Jean-Claude?" she called.

The vampire rushed into the room as though passing through the doorway was some kind of torture. He had a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, as if he

smelled something bad, and his eyes darted wildly around the room. He dismissed his servants with a curt gesture. They filed silently out of the room and closed the door behind them. Only when they were out of the room did he remove the handkerchief from his face. "How can you stand this place?"

"It's necessary. And you get used to it," she replied tightly. "If it bothers you so much, don't breathe."

"I'm not. But the smell is still... everywhere! It sticks to everything. I'm going to smell like a corpse when I leave!"

"You get used to it," she murmured. More loudly, she said, "You're the first Setite I've had come to me."

Jean-Claude frowned, the expression creating deep furrows in his handsome face. "The Followers of Set," he muttered with something that sounded like shame, "do not normally seek out the services of others."

"Not normally?"

"I would prefer you to keep my visit here to yourself." He pulled back the sheet to expose the corpse he had brought. "He was one of my followers."

It was the body of a young man, perhaps in his early 20s, the ragged remains of his clothing plastered to his body with blood. He had been handsome, she supposed. His skin was deeply tanned, his muscles tightly defined, his remaining features clean and classical. But his death had been ugly. His body was almost a tatter of slashes, scratches, and bites. One of the deeper puncture wounds had probably destroyed something vital before he could die from loss of blood. Blood still seeped from some of the cuts. The body was fresh. The blood would be fresh, barely cold, still with the tang of life...

Emily realized that she was licking her lips. The glass of blood she had drained earlier stood nearby. She grabbed it and drank deeply. The blood was stale, the death older, but it would serve to keep her mind on the task at hand. Jean-Claude was staring at her with a look of disgust on his face when she lowered the glass.

"That was revolting. How can you drink dead blood?"

He looked as if he might throw up. Emily considered taking another drink to see if he would but thought better of it. She set the glass down before turning back to the corpse. "You didn't come here to discuss my feeding habits. What happened to him?"

"A... ceremony got out of control at the temple." He shrugged. "My other followers attacked him."

"What with?"

"Knives. Pieces of broken glass. Their teeth and nails. It happens occasionally. With some drugs, a group can turn ugly like that." Jean-Claude snapped his fingers for emphasis.

Emily pulled the blood-soaked sheet away from the body completely. "If this happens 'occasionally,' I'm surprised I haven't seen you in here before."

“Most times it doesn’t end in death. I try to make sure of that. A dead follower is of no use to me. This time it happened too quickly. He was dead in seconds.” He shrugged again. “What can you do with him?”

She picked up a clipboard and pen. “Usually, I can list the death as a suicide, but I don’t think that’s going to work this time. I’ll have to call in the next-of-kin, have them identify the body, then convince them it was a mugging or something. We’ll cremate the body afterwards.” She tapped the pen against her teeth in thought and nodded to herself. “That should work. What was his name?”

Jean-Claude glanced down at the bloody body. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does. I have to put a name on the death certificate and I have to find his next-of-kin. Who is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“He was a new recruit to the Temple.” He picked up a flask of distilled water. Emily was surprised to see that his hand was shaking. “Someone brought him in for the first time last week. A lot of my followers try to maintain their anonymity. I usually let them for a while.”

“Did he have any ID on him?”

“Someone stole his wallet.”

Emily was tempted to throw the clipboard down in frustration. She held on to it. Jean-Claude was nervous, desperate for her help. She might be able to gain something useful out of this transaction. “Then whom did he come with?”

“I don’t know. All my followers ran. They’re loyal to the temple, though. They won’t tell anybody about it.”

“I don’t care about your followers! Isn’t there anything you can tell me about him?”

“No!” Jean-Claude snapped back. “That’s why I need your help! I don’t know who he is, I don’t know who brought him, but if anyone is looking for him and can connect him with the temple, I’m in trouble! I need you to cover for me, you blue blood...”

“That’s enough.” Emily straightened and glared at him coldly. Internally, she glowed warmly with victory. “Don’t forget that you do need me. It’s going to be a little trickier, but we can still do it. You’ll owe me, though. There’s going to be a little bit of confusion tomorrow morning. We have an unidentified body next door ready to be cremated. One body under a sheet looks a lot like another body under a sheet, especially when the toe tags have been mixed up.”

“And the death certificate? The next-of-kin?”

“The death certificate will be very ordinary. It will say that he died from a stabbing during a mugging.” She shrugged exaggeratedly. “The body is found on the street and brought in late. I make some preliminary notes and then leave the autopsy for the day crew. Some idiot cremates the wrong body, we sack him, and I’m forced

to fill out a death certificate based on my notes. The next-of-kin won't matter at all, although I'm sure they'll turn up eventually."

"Someone could still trace him to my temple."

"We say that the body was found somewhere dark and nasty but not too far from somewhere with lots of people. Somewhere he could have wandered or been lured away from. A nightclub strip. I have some influence with the officers who patrol a suitable area. They'll remember finding the body and they'll have the reports to prove it." She smiled reassuringly.

"But what if he wasn't the type to go to a night club?"

The smile wavered but didn't disappear. "Jean-Claude, if he was the type to go to your temple, he was probably the type to go to a night club occasionally. Even if he wasn't, I suspect that he would have lied about where he was going anyway. If he told anybody at all. Relax. It will work."

Jean-Claude looked relieved. "This stays quiet?"

"It's foolproof. No one will ever find out. Just remember — you owe me a favor."

"Absolutely! Emily, I could kiss you!"

"A favor is fine."

"Anything! My temple is at your disposal!" He virtually danced out the door.

Emily watched him go. When he was out of sight, she permitted her smile to grow wider and more predatory. Jean-Claude was not the most powerful or widely respected vampire in San Francisco. Most of the Kindred loathed him, in fact, but he did have connections. And a favor owed was a favor owed. This was her chance to reach for a bit more respect from the other Kindred. This was what she deserved!

Her eye fell on the corpse Jean-Claude had brought, and she smiled again. If she was only going to incinerate it, she would be a fool to let the blood go to waste. She dipped her finger in the blood and touched it gingerly to her tongue, testing for the taint of vampire vitae. Not long after her Embrace, another vampire had tried to trick her into a Blood Bond by putting his own blood into a corpse. She certainly wouldn't have placed Jean-Claude above suspicion of doing the same thing.

The corpse, however, was clean. Emily whistled with happy expectation as she picked up her scalpel. She had fresh blood and, more importantly, she had Jean-Claude.

...

"What happened, Barr?" Emily reached back into the car and pulled out the black bag she carried to crime scenes. The flashing lights of a multitude of police cars and ambulances tinted the entire scene red. She hated field calls, but at least she got to the bodies quickly.

"Drug gang mostly, Dr. Grange." The lieutenant squirmed under the weight of the bulletproof vest he carried, then set it down altogether. "Might have been some cult activity — I heard chanting or something. Some gangs are like that. You felt

that big quake a while ago? That happened while we were going in.” He opened the door into the gang’s warehouse hideout for her. “After you.”

Emily stepped past him. It was surprisingly quiet inside. Barr fell into step beside her, his face grim. An ambulance crew was taking a wounded officer out on a stretcher. He murmured weakly and reached out for Barr as they passed. Barr held on to his hand for a moment, then let him go. One of the ambulance attendants caught Emily’s eye and shook her head with resignation. The man on the stretcher had lost a lot of blood. It was obvious that he would be dead before morning. The smell of the dying man’s blood, the smell of a great deal of blood, was heavy in the air. She was glad she had fed before coming.

The center of the warehouse was clear of crates. This had been the scene of a gun battle, dirty and brutal, in the close quarters. Barr dismissed the two constables who stood guard. Emily knelt to examine one of the several bodies lying scattered around the area. “How many of them were there?” she asked.

“These ones and about 10 more that got away down into the sewers.” Barr indicated an open trap door nearby. “We’re looking for them now. They were tough bastards — just stood right up to it.”

“How many wounded?”

“On their side? Not a one. They only left the dead behind.”

She looked up at him. “And on ours?”

“Just Long.” He struggled to maintain a stolid face. “Everyone else got off lucky, but Long took one in the chest. Cop-killer bullet, must have been. Cut through his vest like butter.”

“Wasn’t he under some sort of cover?” Emily opened her bag and pulled out a syringe.

“He was being a damned hero. Said he was going to take out the big man. I was near him. He pumped four good shots into that son of a bitch but they took him down anyways.” He regarded the bodies of the gang members sourly, then cursed loudly and slammed his fist into the side of crate.

Emily turned to look at him evenly. “Barr, why don’t you go back outside. I only have to get some blood samples. You don’t have to stay.”

“I have to...”

“Go.” She locked eyes with him. His will was strong, but hardly strong enough to resist her. His mouth moved on its own for a moment, then he smiled and laughed.

“Sure, why not!” He turned to leave. “I’ll just send the Forensics crew on in when they get here.”

“Oh, I’ll probably be finished before that.” She almost smiled herself. It was so much simpler to do what she had to without the idiots from Forensics fumbling around in her way. It was fairly standard to take blood samples at the scene, but not her usual two or three from each body. One of the first things she had done after her Embrace was condition the Forensics crew to arrive on the crime scene a good 30 minutes late. Foren-

sics had since become legendary on the police force for their tardiness. And no one else really wanted to be around when a forensic pathologist was working.

Emily took a syringe of blood from the first body, transferred it into a capped plastic vial, labeled it, and placed it carefully in her bag. She filled another and then moved on to the next body. Each gang member could provide her easily with two vials of blood. Three was greedy, and Forensics, for all their stupidity, might notice. Once the bodies were in the Medical Examiner's Office, she could take as much blood from them as she wanted.

At least the cause of their deaths was obvious. All of the gang members had come down in a hail of police bullets. Most lay in a cluster near the trap door to the sewers. She ran her hands through their clothing quickly, then stared in surprise at the ring she pulled from the pocket of one gang member.

The head of a cobra with exaggerated fangs stared back at her. The symbol of a Follower of Set. She double-checked the other bodies. Two others wore similar rings on their fingers; the third wore one beside a St. Christopher medal on a chain around his neck. All Followers of Set, but mortals.

"Emily..."

She whirled. The voice came from nearby, from a narrow gap between two large crates. There didn't seem to be anyone there, but even as her eyes wandered away there was a flicker of movement. Jean-Claude appeared from out of the shadows, propping himself upright against the cases. He was bleeding from a number of gunshot wounds. Four, she realized. The blood that fell from the wounds turned to dust before it hit the floor.

"Help me," he begged her, "Take me out of here." He stepped out away from the crates and managed a few steps before he fell. Even so, he continued to drag himself towards her.

Emily kept her distance from him. He desperately needed blood, and a desperate vampire wasn't picky about where he got it. She tried to think as she moved away. He was virtually at her mercy. If she wanted to, she could probably capture him easily. The prince had been unsuccessfully hunting for the Setite temple since the first rumors of Jean-Claude's arrival in San Francisco had begun to circulate. If she presented Jean-Claude to Jochen van Nuys at his court, she could become the toast of Kindred society.

However... she bit her lip in thought. Jochen van Nuys knew about Jean-Claude himself. He hated him in fact. Even the most accidental encounter between the two of them inevitably resulted in harsh and icy words, though nothing more. The prince had never moved against Jean-Claude personally. Rumor in the Kindred community had it that he regarded it as simply too dangerous. Was presenting the Setite to him likely to change that? And what if Jean-Claude escaped or was set free? Emily had no illusions about the treatment she would receive from him. She had already invested in him by covering up for him. If she saved him now, he would be very firmly in her debt.

She pulled two vials of blood from her bag. "Drink these." She rolled the vials carefully across the floor to him. Jean-Claude pounced on them like a cat, although the coordination necessary to open the vials seemed to have eluded him. He simply put the ends of the vials in his mouth and bit down until the plastic shattered. The fact that this caused more damage to his abused body didn't appear to matter to him. He swallowed the blood and the bits of plastic together. The worst of his wounds began to close.

"More!" he gasped, "Please, Emily! Give me more!"

Reluctantly, she pulled out two more vials and rolled them to him. This time he got the caps off and drank more neatly. When he finished, he was still gaunt from lack of blood, but his wounds had healed. Emily risked coming closer. She almost panicked when he jumped at her and wrapped his arms around her, but then she realized he was hugging her.

"I never thought I would be so happy to see a Ventrue. We were conducting a ceremony and the cops came..."

"Quiet!" She pushed him away. "Tell me later — I don't have you out of here yet."

"I'll go through the sewers!"

"No! They're searching them already, and they're armed. You aren't strong enough to fight them. I have a better idea. Don't go away!" She pushed another vial of blood into his hands. "Try to leave the bodies alone."

She walked quickly back out of the warehouse. Most of the ambulances were gone now. A few waited behind to carry the bodies back to the morgue. Forensics had finally arrived as well and was chatting with the remaining police officers as they unpacked their equipment. She picked one of the ambulance attendants at random. "You. Get a stretcher and a body bag and come with me."

"My partner..."

"Can warm up the ambulance. You don't need him. Come with me." Emily let a trace of ire creep into her voice. "Now." The attendant didn't question her again. Once they were back inside the warehouse, she stopped and made sure that he wouldn't remember anything about what was going to happen.

Jean-Claude was pacing nervously when they returned. When he first saw the attendant, he stiffened. She realized that the hungry vampire probably only saw the man as a source of warm blood and hastily stepped between them. "He's your escape, not your supper." She pulled the body bag off the stretcher and unfolded it. "Get in."

"You must be joking." Jean-Claude regarded the heavy black plastic with undisguised loathing and poorly hidden fear.

Emily crossed her arms and shook her head sternly. "It's the only way you're going to get out of here without arousing suspicion about where you came from. I can control one or two mortals, but not the 10 or 12 that you would have to walk past outside. You barely have the strength to walk anyway."

The Setite crouched down beside the bag. “It stinks like a corpse,” he muttered resignedly.

“It should.”

“Isn’t there any other way to do this?”

“No. Besides, you’ll only be in it for a few blocks. I’ll follow in my car. The ambulance will stop once we’re away from here and I’ll take you the rest of the way with me.

He slid his foot inside as if stepping into a sleeping bag. “Where are we going?”

“Back to the morgue. I have blood there.”

“Marvelous.” He wriggled down into the bag and stared up at Emily as she tugged the zipper closed. “More corpses.”

“Be thankful — you could have been one yourself.” She gestured for the attendant to help her. Together they lifted the bag onto the stretcher. “Be quiet and hold still once we get outside. We’ll go out the side door to avoid everyone.”

“You’re a wonder, Emily.” Jean-Claude’s voice was muffled. “You are wasted working alone with the dead.”

She grimaced, though she knew he couldn’t see it. “Tell me about it!”

“No vampire has helped me this way before.”

“It’s not coming free.” She nodded for the attendant to start forward. She didn’t want to run into the Forensics crew on the way out.

“I know, but... I mean, I’m almost sorry for dragging you into this thing with Doc Michaels.”

Emily stopped, stunned. A cold chill ran through her body. The attendant kept going, and she had to take several quick steps to catch up to him. “What thing?”

“You don’t know?” He sounded surprised. “Doc was blackmailing me. Turns out the young man I brought you last week was a favorite vessel of his. He wanted revenge and a cut into my drug deals. He said he knew where the temple was and that you helped me. I didn’t believe him. He must have tipped off the police. He said he was blackmailing you, too.” He paused, then added, “Until Doc said that, I was wondering if you had betrayed me.” There was the hint of an edge to his voice.

If Emily hadn’t already been dead, her heart would have stopped. She reached out and touched Jean-Claude through the bag. “No. I didn’t. You’re going to be coming out now, so be quiet. I’ll be right back — I’m going to take the ambulance with you.”

She felt numb inside as she ran around the building to the ambulances. “Doc” Michaels was a vampire of her Sire’s generation. One of her Sire’s blood siblings, in fact. One of the prince’s brood. He had his fingers in virtually every hospital and large clinic in the city, and she was the only other vampire in San Francisco with the medical training to understand how potentially powerful that made him. Her little domain in the Medical Examiner’s Office brushed up against the bulk of his empire. Every time Doc stirred, Emily got shaken by it. If he knew about her deal-

ings with Jean-Claude... she swallowed, abruptly aware that she might be playing right into his hands. Jean-Claude might not know it, but Doc Michaels' long fingers even extended into some of the ambulance companies. It was the only way out of the warehouse, though. She crossed her fingers and prayed that this ambulance crew was nothing more than what they seemed.

It wasn't hard to spot the ambulance attendant's partner. As she had suggested, he had the ambulance running, ready to leave. He sat in the driver's seat, hands tapping the wheel in time to music on the radio. Emily walked purposefully up to the passenger door and opened it. When he glanced up, she caught his gaze and held it. "Go to the side door," she instructed him, climbing into the passenger seat, "then help load the body there into the back."

She leaned her head against the cool glass of the window, letting the ambulance driver carry out her commands. How could Doc have found out about her? One of Jean-Claude's followers? No, he had sworn they wouldn't talk about the murder. Except that Doc could be very persuasive, especially when he had a scalpel in his hand. Jean-Claude? The Setites were devious. But why? He was in the same trouble as her. Could Doc have discovered his dead vessel and somehow Embraced him? Not likely. The body had been cremated right on schedule the morning after Jean-Claude had brought it to her.

At least she knew why Doc hadn't actually contacted her with a blackmail threat like the one he had delivered to Jean-Claude, Emily realized bitterly. It was Jean-Claude he was after. He would have little to gain from blackmailing her. There was no prestige in running the Medical Examiner's Office, even though it was the only large medical-related institution in the city that he didn't control. There was no power either, really. It was without status and without power, just like her. She was beneath his notice. She choked back tears of blood. No Kindred, except Jean-Claude, took any notice of her at all. Yet if Doc Michaels were suddenly to disappear, she would be the only one in the city who would really be able to replace him effectively. And he didn't even think she was worth blackmailing...

The plan seemed to spring fully formed into her head, jerking her upright with the force of its entry. Emily pursed her lips tightly as she thought. Doc had played himself into a losing position. She turned to look at the ambulance attendants as they loaded Jean-Claude into the rear of the ambulance. "Take me to a phone booth."

A dog skittered out of the way as the ambulance accelerated.

•••

"Emily?" Doc Michaels called as he stepped into the morgue. "Are you here?"

Emily was pleased to note that his nose wrinkled in distaste at the odor in the room. She had turned the ventilation system off when she arrived several hours ago. "I'm here," she said quietly, in her smallest voice. She stood up from her desk and came around in front of it to greet him. Sitting behind a desk was a position of power — she wanted him to perceive her as weak. "Please. Come in."

He continued to stand in the doorway. "Perhaps it would be better if we went somewhere more comfortable?"

"I don't want any of the others to know about this. I can't go out." She stepped back as if she were nervous, and accidentally bumped into a corpse on a gurney. The room was packed with them. "Does anyone know now?"

"I haven't told anyone about your call." He started to step away from the door, then stopped. Emily wondered if he was suspicious. "My car is just outside though — and very private."

"No!" She forced a note of panic into her voice.

"Very well then." He walked completely into the room, twitching violently as the cramped conditions forced him to edge between two more corpses. "I must admit, your message last night mystified me. You sounded frightened. It's no secret your Sire and I are not on the best of terms, but the Followers of Set? Why would you think I..."

Emily saw Jean-Claude appear from the shadows by the door only a second before he leaped at Doc. The Ventrue's words ended in a sudden grunt of surprise as Jean-Claude tackled him. "Now Emily!" screamed the Setite, "Now!"

Her hand went almost automatically to the nearest sheet-draped corpse and felt for the sharp stake that was hidden there. There were several others like it around the room, since she had had no idea exactly where she would be when the time came to act. She almost had the stake in her grasp when Jean-Claude and Doc Michaels crashed into the gurney and spun it aside. Emily was left with only a sheet in her hand. She dived for another stake.

Doc Michaels had been an old man when he was Embraced. He still looked like a kindly, grandfatherly family doctor. Unfortunately, physical appearances meant little among the Kindred. Jean-Claude seemed young and strong, but the old man was matching him blow for blow. Emily had suspected that would happen. The two vampires rolled over and over on the ground as they fought. She couldn't get a clear chance at Doc. At the same time, she didn't want to try to separate them physically for fear of being drawn into the fight. She saw only one thing to do. When their struggle brought them close to a gurney, she tipped its dead burden off and on top of them. The two sprang apart instantly, repulsed by the corpse. Jean-Claude actually retched. Doc snarled and coiled, preparing to leap at his distracted attacker.

The stake went into his back and through his heart with a kind of dry hiss, as if she were stabbing a desiccated mummy. Doc Michaels shrieked and tried to lash out behind him. His fingers caught at her clothing, then fell away loosely as paralysis spread through his body. He tumbled to the floor. A horrible expression of rage and shock was frozen on his face.

Emily bent down and lifted him, careful not to dislodge the stake. He was surprisingly light. She held him with one hand as she opened one of the drawers that lined the wall of the morgue. It almost felt as if she were tucking a child into bed when she laid him out on the cold metal. Doc Michaels made a very natural-look-

ing corpse, as if he had only recently died. Suddenly, she felt her Hunger rising. Ventrue were very particular about the source of their nourishment. Emily had discovered quite early that her Embrace had left her with a cruel and ironic need for cold blood taken from dead bodies. The body of a vampire was as cold and as dead as a body could be. She brushed Doc Michaels' collar aside to reveal his neck. The temptation was strong to drain the life out of him, to make the transfer of power complete. Very strong. She bent down, lips drawing back from eager fangs.

Jean-Claude grabbed her from behind and pulled her away. "No!"

"Let me go!" She struggled against him, but he held her firmly. "I want his blood, Jean-Claude. I need it!"

He twisted her around so that she could no longer see Doc Michaels' body. "You need him more! What if you need something someday? Information? Kill him now and all you will have done is commit Diablerie! Is it worth it?"

Emily pressed her Hunger back down. He was right. She relaxed. "Let me go." He did. She walked purposefully over to the drawer and slid it shut with a resounding slam, then looked up at the Setite. "Thank you."

"It would have been foolish to destroy such a resource."

"As foolish as attacking him prematurely? You were only supposed to close the door and lock it from outside."

"He knew something was wrong."

"I could have dealt with it — the bodies in the room unnerved him. I could have had him staked before he did anything." She sighed and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. The blood was hers and not Doc Michaels'. Somehow she had split her lip in the struggle. "It doesn't matter now anyway. Did you get your followers and servants gathered back together?"

"Yes. I was fortunate."

"Take your people back to his haven. Make it look like it was broken into. Make it look like a Sabbat raid. That should keep everyone paranoid for a while. It will take the heat off us. Take care of anybody in his car, too. And remember, Jean-Claude, you owe me very big."

"What if someone comes looking for him?" Jean-Claude indicated the drawer that contained Doc Michaels.

Emily pulled a ring of keys from her pocket and locked it. Then, with a grunt, she broke the key off in the lock. The drawer was officially empty and they had no shortage of other drawers for real bodies. No one would worry about fixing that lock for a long, long time.

...

Emily picked up the telephone before the second ring. "Morgue."

"Congratulations! I understand the prince has just confirmed you as guardian of Doc Michaels' affairs."

“That’s the easy way of saying he doesn’t understand which end of a hospital the patient goes in, Jean-Claude. But thank you. It’s actually going to take several weeks before I have complete control.”

“What are you doing now?”

“Paperwork. They just brought in the body of a suicide from earlier tonight on Montgomery. He jumped from halfway up the Russ Building. Very messy.”

“Still hard at work. You don’t have to do that any more.”

She laughed. “I’ll let the day crew handle this one, but I do enjoy my work sometimes. And so do you. What do you want?”

“You know me too well. There are five coffins on a boat coming into harbor the day after tomorrow. Can you arrange to have them taken past customs without being opened?”

“You’re racking up favors-owed, Jean-Claude. And you’re not the only one now.”

“Just the first. It’s good to have friends in high places.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you, Emily. I owe you.”

“You owe me a lot.”

“Good night, Emily.” Jean-Claude hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. A slow, evil smile spread across his face as he picked up a serpent-head ring from his desk. He had sent flowers to Constable Long’s funeral. He always liked to reward his followers for their loyalty, and Long’s fatal self-sacrifice in shooting him right on cue had been invaluable. It lent an air of truth to his story about the “surprise raid.” He wondered if poor, innocent Doc Michaels felt the same oblivion as Long. The old Ventrue had almost given away his ignorance before Jean-Claude had been able to silence him in the morgue. He kissed the ring, then addressed it as if he were addressing the follower who had so recently worn it.

“We have her, Long. We have her.”



Darkening of the Light

by Bill Bridges

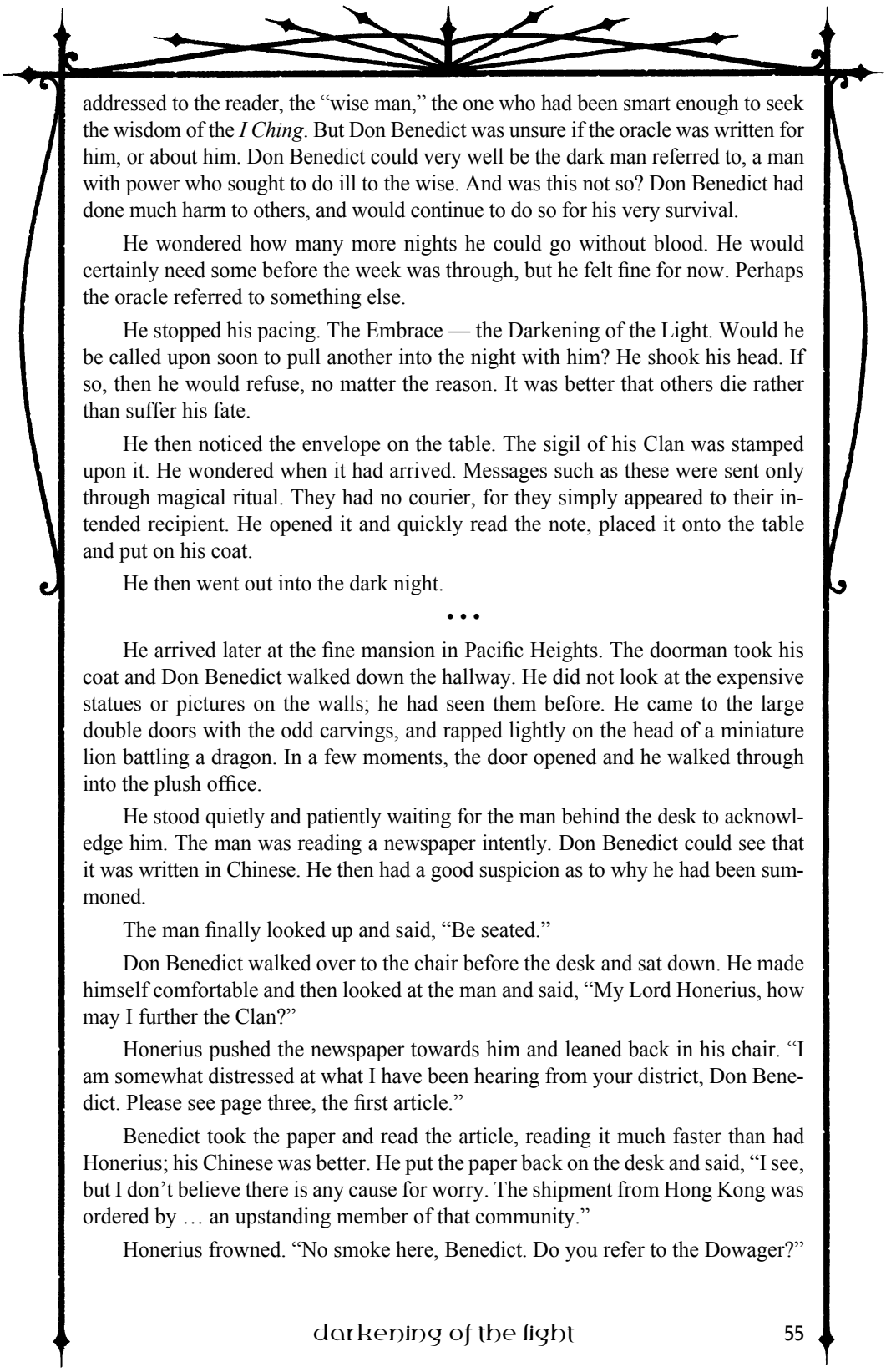
The sun had sunk below the earth, darkening the light in the world of men.

Heaven was obscured by the night and the forces of the dark came forth. This was as it always was and always would be. The continual cycle of yin and yang, light and dark, day and night. Ever changing, ever staying the same. Don Benedict knew this from long experience. But tonight, for the first time in many years, he was unsure of the future.

Before him was the parchment paper where he had written the hexagram. The yarrow sticks lay bunched to the side, having done their part in the divination. Don Benedict stared down at the result of the oracle and was worried. It was the Ming I, the Darkening of the Light, or the “wounding of the bright.” Earth above, fire below. There were no moving lines, no clues towards further elaboration. The Judgment advised perseverance in the face of adversity. It spoke of a man of dark nature in a position of power threatening the “wise man.”

He stood up and began to pace. Only half an hour ago, he had risen after the setting of the sun. As usual, he dressed himself and then brought out the *I Ching, the Book of Changes*. Not a night passed in which he did not consult its wisdom. This was not so much out of a need for guidance as it was a desire for greater understanding of the book’s mysteries. He felt that if he could unlock its secrets, all the answers to all the questions about the Orient could be had. He was not Oriental himself; he had been born in Mexico. Years spent among the residents of Chinatown, however, had wakened in him an interest in the Chinese and their ways. This was not out of a desire for power, unlike the pursuits of many in his Clan, but a quest for solace.

As he walked about the room, encircling it like a impatient tiger, he thought about the hexagram and its possible interpretation. He had been unnerved when, while throwing the stalks, the earth had begun to shake. It was a series of tremors that passed soon, but Benedict was sure it had colored the reading. He thought about the hexagram and its possible interpretations. Normally, the oracles in the book were



addressed to the reader, the “wise man,” the one who had been smart enough to seek the wisdom of the *I Ching*. But Don Benedict was unsure if the oracle was written for him, or about him. Don Benedict could very well be the dark man referred to, a man with power who sought to do ill to the wise. And was this not so? Don Benedict had done much harm to others, and would continue to do so for his very survival.

He wondered how many more nights he could go without blood. He would certainly need some before the week was through, but he felt fine for now. Perhaps the oracle referred to something else.

He stopped his pacing. The Embrace — the Darkening of the Light. Would he be called upon soon to pull another into the night with him? He shook his head. If so, then he would refuse, no matter the reason. It was better that others die rather than suffer his fate.

He then noticed the envelope on the table. The sigil of his Clan was stamped upon it. He wondered when it had arrived. Messages such as these were sent only through magical ritual. They had no courier, for they simply appeared to their intended recipient. He opened it and quickly read the note, placed it onto the table and put on his coat.

He then went out into the dark night.

...

He arrived later at the fine mansion in Pacific Heights. The doorman took his coat and Don Benedict walked down the hallway. He did not look at the expensive statues or pictures on the walls; he had seen them before. He came to the large double doors with the odd carvings, and rapped lightly on the head of a miniature lion battling a dragon. In a few moments, the door opened and he walked through into the plush office.

He stood quietly and patiently waiting for the man behind the desk to acknowledge him. The man was reading a newspaper intently. Don Benedict could see that it was written in Chinese. He then had a good suspicion as to why he had been summoned.

The man finally looked up and said, “Be seated.”

Don Benedict walked over to the chair before the desk and sat down. He made himself comfortable and then looked at the man and said, “My Lord Honerius, how may I further the Clan?”

Honerius pushed the newspaper towards him and leaned back in his chair. “I am somewhat distressed at what I have been hearing from your district, Don Benedict. Please see page three, the first article.”

Benedict took the paper and read the article, reading it much faster than had Honerius; his Chinese was better. He put the paper back on the desk and said, “I see, but I don’t believe there is any cause for worry. The shipment from Hong Kong was ordered by ... an upstanding member of that community.”

Honerius frowned. “No smoke here, Benedict. Do you refer to the Dowager?”

Benedict looked annoyed. He did not enjoy forthright speech. It was vulgar. “Yes, my Lord. She informed me long ago of her intent to order a sleeping berth from her homeland, one which would allow her to rest in style.”

“If that were so, then the coffin would have been empty.” Honerius said. Benedict raised his eyebrows. “Whatever was in that jade coffin destroyed Harris as he attempted to investigate.”

“I do not understand. That was to be the Dowager’s —”

“Is it possible this Dowager lied to you?” Honerius interrupted, staring at Benedict intently.

“The Dowager does not, of course, tell me everything. But she would not have risked such a grave error as this. I suspect this is as much of a surprise to her as it is to us.”

Benedict was silent for a moment as he thought, while Honerius watched him. He finally asked, “What do we know of the vampire that exited the coffin?”

“Next to nothing. We know he — it — is skilled in ritual, for it cleverly covered up its actions from scrying. Once Harris had opened the coffin, it was instantly upon him. It made quick work of him and fled into the city, leaving the opened coffin behind. The coffin is now in our possession, and members are attempting to gain what information they can from it. No luck so far.”


“The Dowager must know by now. I must go see her and explain.”

“Explain, Benedict? It is not your job to explain!” Honerius slammed his hand loudly onto the table. “You must demand an explanation. This is directly in conflict with the accord we made with her. I have so far been able to keep this from the ears of other parties, but I do not know for how long. I want this situation wrapped up before then!” He pointed harshly at Benedict. “It must not be known that Clan Tremere cannot enforce its control over Chinatown! We cannot have foreign Kindred entering the city without our permission! If this happens, van Nuys will attempt to control the situation himself, and our Clan’s power base will be set back drastically.”

“I understand, Lord. I will handle the situation immediately,” Benedict said.

“See that you do.” Honerius sat down and leaned back in his chair. “I have not been very strict with you in the past, unlike other members of this Chantry. I saw that it would hinder your relationship with Chinatown and your contacts there.” He began to idly fondle a heavy paperweight before him, a miniature globe modeled after a medieval map, except adapted to the modern earth’s curvature. “I have allowed you extraordinary secrecy concerning these contacts of yours. If you wish to maintain the freedoms you have had, then act quickly and correctly in this. You have the strength to represent the Clan, both martial and occult; you know your place in the Pyramid. You cannot expect promotion without obedience to Clan laws. Do not forget that you are one of us, Benedict. Now go.”

Benedict stood up and bowed slightly to Honerius. He then left the room. His mind worked furiously over the problem as the doorman put his coat on for him



and he walked out into the chill San Francisco night. As the doors closed behind him, he knew they would not open easily for him again if he did not succeed with his mission.

He walked quickly down the street to find a cab to take him to Chinatown.

• • •

The taxicab pulled up across the street from the Chinatown Gate. Don Benedict paid the driver and got out. As the cab pulled away he stood staring at the gate. It was so new and gaudy; a silly ornament for silly tourists. The people beyond the gate did not need such a thing to remind them of their homeland and heritage.

Don Benedict crossed the street and stood looking up at the gate. The Dowager enjoyed this edifice. She was delighted when it was first proposed and had made sure that it was completed. The Dowager liked gay and happy things. She had also asked that Benedict enter by this gate whenever he came to see her. To do otherwise was rude. So, Benedict honored her little tradition and always came through the Chinatown Gate.

He walked under it and passed through into another world. He walked up Grant Avenue, through the crowd of late-night shoppers. Asians, both American and Chinese, mixed with tourists from all over. The smell of Chinese cooking wafted out of the many restaurants. Benedict stopped when he reached California Street. He stared across the lane at Saint Mary's church.

It was called Old Saint Mary's now by mortals, but it was still new to Benedict. He remembered it as it had been the day it was dedicated. He remembered the first Mass there and how proud he had felt: another church by which the heathen frontiersmen and native savages could be brought to God. But there were very few natives left by then. He and the other missionaries had seen to that.

Don Benedict moved on. He crossed the cable car tracks and traveled deeper into this pocket of American Asia. He turned left on Sacramento and walked up the hill, past Waverley with its temples and Hang Ah Al alley with its playground.

A dog ran from the alley over to him and sniffed at his feet. Benedict stopped and looked down at the dog. It was a mangy, hairy mutt, probably one of the many strays that wandered the alleys of Chinatown. Benedict was surprised, for it had been a long time since a dog had been so bold with him. They mainly stayed well away, or barked at him from afar. He put his hand out to pet the dog, but it jumped back and ran away, down the alley it had come from. Benedict shook his head; he wondered if he should get a dog himself. He would have to give it some blood to keep it from running away like this dog, but it would perhaps add life to his home. He recalled that dogs were symbols of loyalty to the Chinese.

He continued up the street and turned right onto Stockton and crossed over to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the Chinese Six Companies. He stopped and looked at the lion guardians, carved in stone. They warded the building from evil, yet they had never prevented him from entering. He stepped past the ornamented gateway, beneath the dragons, birds and fishes which frolicked there.

He knocked on the red doors and waited for a reply. The doors soon opened and a Chinese man looked out at him.

“Yes?”

“I have come to see the Dowager,” Don Benedict said.

The man’s eyes narrowed but he nodded slightly. He opened the door wider and Benedict stepped in. The main hall was large and impressive. Three long tables with chairs were in the center of the room. Flags, both American and Chinese, hung on the walls. A very formal and serious place. Here, disputes between rival tongs were once arbitrated, all under the watchful yet invisible auspices of the Dowager.

The man motioned for Benedict to follow him. Benedict knew the way. He had been here many times before. He knew the man he now followed; he had been coming here before this man was even born. Yet it was the same response every time. The Dowager was strict on the importance of appearance. It made up for the lack of her own.

The man led Benedict to the wall, where he placed his hand and exerted a delicate amount of pressure with only his middle and final fingers and lower palm. A door swung open and Benedict walked through to the stairs leading down. The door closed behind him, but the paper lanterns lit the passage well enough to see. He came to the bottom and walked up to the doors, identical to the red doors above. Two golden dog statues were to either side, similar in duty to the lions above, but they also had never halted his passage.

He stopped before the door to compose himself. He centered his body and began a quick breathing exercise. He then performed the Thaumaturgy he had learned from his Eastern studies. Channeling his *chi*, he controlled the flow of his blood, sending it to his skin, flushing the skin with a rosy red. His hair grew brighter and his eyes sparkled. He was no longer a pale man who spent too much time in the dark, but a ruddy, tanned son of the *conquistadores*. Don Benedict appeared as he had in life.

He straightened his suit and knocked on the doors. They were immediately opened by a servant. A small palace lay beyond, a relic of a bygone age in a far-off land. Benedict stepped into the Dowager’s home.

“Ah, you’re here! Oh, Father Benedict, I had so hoped you would visit me.”

The Dowager sat on a dais, surrounded by pillows and Chinese servants. She wore the most beautiful silk dress in the world and fanned herself with a golden fan that was once the Emperor’s. All about her was jade. But all these things could never bring back her beauty. The Dowager was hideously ugly, as repulsive as any of her Clan: Nosferatu.

Benedict bowed to her. “Empress, I am glad to see you well. The sun hides at night, ashamed before your radiant beauty.”

“Oh!” The Dowager smiled and sighed, fanning herself. “Oh, Father, only you can say such things to me. And I believe them when you say it, for you can see the beauty of a soul. You see inside of me. You are so good, Father Benedict.”

Benedict sat down on a pillow across from her. "Please, Empress. I am no longer Father. Call me Don or Benedict."

"Ah, Father. It is a most wonderful night, is it not?" She said as she continued to fan herself.

"Yes, it is." Benedict replied. She had always ignored his request and continued to call him by his old title. There were a few moments of silence, as both of them waited for a polite amount of time before business could be discussed. Even then, Benedict knew they could not speak too plainly; it was not the way.

Finally, the Dowager said. "It is so uncomfortable lately. I get almost no sleep at all. All these pillows, they are for the servants to sleep on. I so want to sleep as I once did, in a coffin of jade. I even had one sent from China, all the way from Hong Kong. But, alas, it has not arrived."

Benedict waited a few moments before responding. "I have heard of a shipment from China, just in yesterday, at the Embarcadero. But an incident arose concerning it. Many men are confused about the events."

"The Embarcadero? Perhaps this is the same incident I have heard of. The servants say so many things all day long, I cannot help but listen sometimes. You know how it is." The Dowager was silent for a moment, as she continued to fan herself. "I do hope my wonderful jade bed is all right."

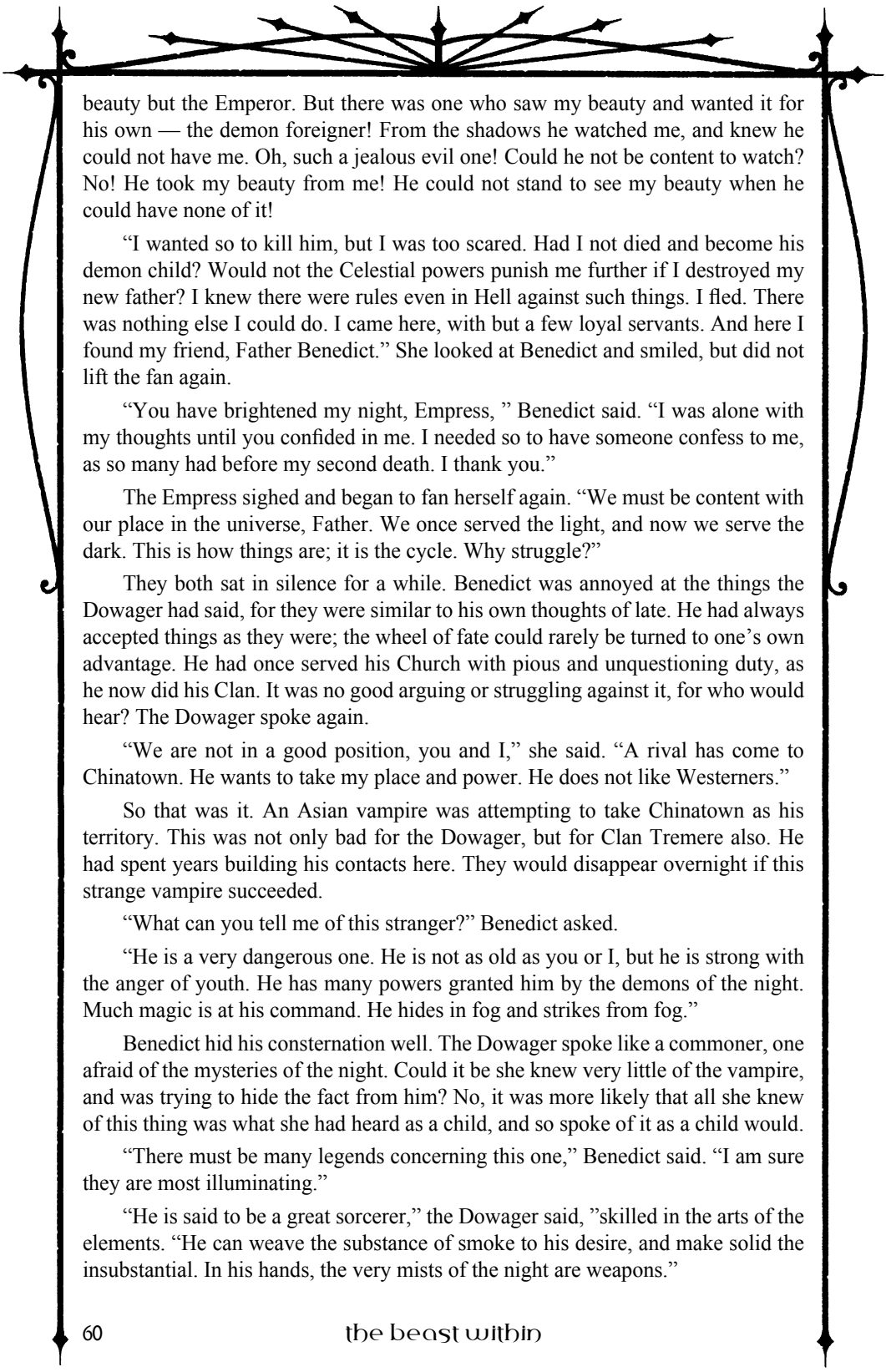
"I am sure it is fine, Empress. Those who have intervened in this incident are responsible gentlemen. I am sure I can put in a good word with them. But they will ask me so many questions. I wonder where I am to find the answers."

The Dowager looked worried, as if she was unsure how to say something. They sat in silence for a while until Benedict intervened. "Sometimes it is wise to speak one's mind, lest further confusion is the result."

The Dowager looked at him and stopped fanning herself. "Oh, Father. There is danger all about. The times are not as they once were. The laws of heaven are unheeded by men, and the evil trample upon the righteous." She sat back and stared at the ceiling. Benedict frowned. She had been about to say what was on her mind, but now she was lost in memory.

"Do you remember when we first met, Father? We were both so young then. Our deaths had been but a mere decade behind us. We are almost the same age, you and I. You were at Saint Mary's, in the park, staring at your church. How long had it been since you entered? I watched you for a long while, and I knew you had a strong soul, the soul of a righteous man. That is why I finally approached you. I was so lonely, for few would speak to me here in this strange land. Yet you did. You spoke so wonderfully too. I knew then that there was hope for us, you and I, unlike those around us, who were engulfed into the night. We did not need the sun, for we knew it was in our hearts.

"It was you who made me forget my vengeance, Father. It was your good soul. So much evil had been done to me. I was so pretty! I was the most beautiful girl in China. All knew that I was to be the Empress, for none deserved to touch my



beauty but the Emperor. But there was one who saw my beauty and wanted it for his own — the demon foreigner! From the shadows he watched me, and knew he could not have me. Oh, such a jealous evil one! Could he not be content to watch? No! He took my beauty from me! He could not stand to see my beauty when he could have none of it!

“I wanted so to kill him, but I was too scared. Had I not died and become his demon child? Would not the Celestial powers punish me further if I destroyed my new father? I knew there were rules even in Hell against such things. I fled. There was nothing else I could do. I came here, with but a few loyal servants. And here I found my friend, Father Benedict.” She looked at Benedict and smiled, but did not lift the fan again.

“You have brightened my night, Empress,” Benedict said. “I was alone with my thoughts until you confided in me. I needed so to have someone confess to me, as so many had before my second death. I thank you.”

The Empress sighed and began to fan herself again. “We must be content with our place in the universe, Father. We once served the light, and now we serve the dark. This is how things are; it is the cycle. Why struggle?”

They both sat in silence for a while. Benedict was annoyed at the things the Dowager had said, for they were similar to his own thoughts of late. He had always accepted things as they were; the wheel of fate could rarely be turned to one’s own advantage. He had once served his Church with pious and unquestioning duty, as he now did his Clan. It was no good arguing or struggling against it, for who would hear? The Dowager spoke again.

“We are not in a good position, you and I,” she said. “A rival has come to Chinatown. He wants to take my place and power. He does not like Westerners.”

So that was it. An Asian vampire was attempting to take Chinatown as his territory. This was not only bad for the Dowager, but for Clan Tremere also. He had spent years building his contacts here. They would disappear overnight if this strange vampire succeeded.

“What can you tell me of this stranger?” Benedict asked.

“He is a very dangerous one. He is not as old as you or I, but he is strong with the anger of youth. He has many powers granted him by the demons of the night. Much magic is at his command. He hides in fog and strikes from fog.”

Benedict hid his consternation well. The Dowager spoke like a commoner, one afraid of the mysteries of the night. Could it be she knew very little of the vampire, and was trying to hide the fact from him? No, it was more likely that all she knew of this thing was what she had heard as a child, and so spoke of it as a child would.

“There must be many legends concerning this one,” Benedict said. “I am sure they are most illuminating.”

“He is said to be a great sorcerer,” the Dowager said, “skilled in the arts of the elements. “He can weave the substance of smoke to his desire, and make solid the insubstantial. In his hands, the very mists of the night are weapons.”

Benedict was not sure what to make of this. If this vampire had power over smoke and fog, then San Francisco would be a powerful place for him, with all the mists coming in from the bay. "Can this legendary one himself take the form of smoke?"

"I have never heard so in the legends. He commands these things, but is not of them. He also knows well the art of calligraphy and talismans." The Dowager reached behind her for a wooden box, carved with beautiful birds. She placed it before Benedict and opened it. Inside, laying on a satin lining, were three strips of colored paper, each with a different symbol written in colored ink upon them.

Benedict recognized them: Taoist talismans, each holding a powerful magic spell, designed to release the spell as the paper was ignited. He looked carefully at them. The Dowager had taught him something of their manufacture, and he had made a few of his own in the past. He recognized one as a warding from evil, and another as a fire symbol. But the third was unknown to him.

"These will protect you from the evil one," the Dowager said. "The one there will defend the owner from spells, causing them to perish. The one here will cause an enemy to ignite into flame, thus destroying him. And the one here is special, for it represents the element of wood. It will provide a weapon whereby mastery over his body can be obtained." Benedict understood; it was an interesting spell. The Dowager continued, "Take them, Father. For you will need them against this demon."

Benedict frowned. "I thank you, Empress. But what of his martial prowess?"

"Formidable," the Dowager replied. "But your own kung fu should protect you. Are you not a master of Pa Kwa, Eight Trigram Boxing?"


"I have had many years to develop my skills," Benedict said. "Are there any servants you can lend me in my task?"

The Dowager began to fan herself. "Oh, but I need all of them here. I have too few left. If this demon were to see them, he might blame me for letting them stray. I would not like a visit from him, even if his intentions were good."

Benedict understood. The Dowager did not wish to be involved in this undertaking, in case Benedict lost. She would then still be able to ally with the vampire if necessary.

"I must go forth then," Benedict said. "But I do not know where to look for my adversary."

"These gossiping servants of mine! What tales they tell. I have heard that there is a small store, one which sells imports from China, in which many interesting things can be found. It is called the Hsi Lu Trading Company. If one were to go to this store, he would find a set of stairs in the back, which leads below the street, to the underground world. I have heard that many go there after arriving here from abroad. But the storeowners are very rude, and they do not allow any of our Western hosts in. I am sure that a wise gentleman would have little trouble convincing them, however."



Benedict knew of the place. He had seen it before, during his wanderings in Chinatown. It was down one of the many alleys that hid behind the main streets. He smiled. He bowed to the Dowager, took the wooden box, and stood up. "I thank you for your gracious hospitality, Empress."

"Please visit me again, Father. I look so forward to hearing of your adventures." The Dowager fanned herself as she said this. Benedict knew this was her defense for showing emotion. He saw worry on her face, something she rarely displayed.

He knew she had a difficult position, an exiled Empress-to-be of a Western vampire Clan trying to maintain a hold over an invisible population of Asian Kindred. He knew there were some Asian Clans in Chinatown, some who had never been heard of by the Camarilla. But even with his relationship to the Dowager, she was very careful to keep them secret from him. This new one must be of a Clan even she could not control.

He knew he could wrest such information from her, and she would still forgive him. She was unaware of the Blood Bond he had subjected her to long ago, when she was new to the city and the West. It was this Bond that fueled her deep affection for him. But he had never pressed the Bond, had never used his hold over her overtly. He was afraid that the Bond was all that kept her love for him.

Benedict turned and walked out of the room, back into the dim passageway. As he climbed the stairs, he thought about his next actions. He had been underneath Chinatown before, but he had been escorted by the Dowager's servants. He had sensed that much was hidden from him down there, a world where many supernatural refugees from China hid from western eyes. He would have to pierce the veil between them. This foreign vampire had made the first move by killing Harris. Now Benedict had to find him and bring him under Clan Prestation. He doubted this would happen. From the way the Dowager spoke, he knew he would have to fight this vampire. To the final death.

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The small, tight alley stretched for half a block before it dead-ended in a brick wall. To the right of this wall was a small shop, with a tarp hanging above and colored banners with Chinese characters. The narrow door was open, and light spread out into the alleyway, along with the thick incense smoke which burned within.

Benedict walked quietly down the alley to the shop and stopped at the window, looking in. Behind a counter sat an old man with a long pipe. He blended in with the exotic commodities scattered around him and all about the room: fu dog statues, authentic woks, bamboo chairs, banners and wall-hangings, many small statues, and other Chinese knickknacks. Benedict stepped into the room from the alleyway and the old man frowned.

"We closed. Go away," the old man said.

"I am simply looking for the stairs," said Benedict.

"No stairs! You go!" the old man yelled. Benedict met his eyes, and the old man could not look away.

“Show me the way,” Benedict said.

“Yes ... yes, this way,” the old man said, as he stood up and moved to the back of the store. Don Benedict followed. The old man parted a curtain and pointed to a trap door with a large ring. He could not tear his gaze from Benedict.

“Open the door,” Benedict commanded, and the old man bent down and tugged at the ring with both hands. The door pulled open with a creak, kicking dust into the air. The cloud settled slowly around the room. Benedict looked into the hole and saw a set of stairs leading down. There was no light. “Bring me a lantern,” he told the old man, who then walked into the front room and soon returned with a lit candle.

“This all I have,” the old man said, holding out the burning candle, set in an ornate bronze holder. Benedict took it from him.

“Go back to watching the store. I never came through here,” he said.

“Yes. You no come. I not know you.” The old man walked back into the front room and sat down behind the counter. He picked up his pipe and began to smoke again, as if nothing had disturbed him.

Benedict walked down the stairs, holding the candle before him. The stairs went down for some ways before he came to a landing where another set of stairs led down. He kept going, deeper into the earth. He was sure that the distance was illusory, though. At the most he was below the sewer level. He doubted the underworld extended any deeper than that.

He came to the end of the stairs and before him was a large tunnel with a “T” intersection. It was an old sewage tunnel, dry and crumbling. He stepped forward and looked to the left and right. The tunnel extended into darkness either way. He listened, but the silence was complete. Far off, he faintly heard rushing water, somewhere down the left fork.

Benedict thought about the situation. The vampire he sought was using the tunnels to hide in. He would want to maximize the security in case other vampires like Benedict came after him. In this case, would he choose to hide near the rushing water, to hide his own voice, or away from it, so that he could hear the sounds of others approaching? Benedict considered the character of this vampire: he had to be audacious to do what he had done so far, yet he could not be too powerful or he would not hide in the tunnels. What would be his weapons of defense? He used fog to his best advantage, according to the Dowager.

Benedict knew which way the vampire waited. He would be to the left, where he could use the spray from the rushing sewage water to substitute for fog. Benedict went left.

After 10 minutes of walking Benedict saw a faint light ahead, coming from a side tunnel. The sound of the rushing water was louder, but its source was still farther ahead. He extinguished his candle and crept forward. He heard voices coming from the tunnel and stopped to listen. They were too far away to make out, but he recognized the Mandarin Chinese dialect. He quietly moved closer until he was

next to the side tunnel. He smelled incense and could now clearly hear the conversation. It was two men, arguing with each other.

“... leaving it there was idiotic! Who knows what method they have of tracking us? I tell you, you are arrogant and risk everything!”

“Shut up! I know what I am doing! I covered my tracks with spells. Do you not see? This way, they will think that the ugly bitch is to blame, that she is hiding something! They will turn against each other and we will reap the benefit. I will rule Chinatown!”

Benedict looked around the corner and saw the two men. The tunnel led to a large chamber, festooned with tables, chairs, and a bed. Silk wall hangings covered the grimy sewer walls. The two men stood in the center of the room facing each other. One of them was a Chinese man, dressed like a businessman. The other was a large, athletic-looking Chinese, dressed in gray. A fog of incense lay heavy over all.

“Fool! She knows them too well!” said the businessman. “They will see that you are to blame. She will lead them to us.”

“Ha! Let them come! I am not afraid of them,” said the large man. “These Western vampires have not seen the might of my magic! I will teach them!”

“Then you may begin your lesson with me,” Don Benedict said, stepping from the tunnel and into the room.

Both men gasped and stared at Benedict in shock. The large man recovered quickly and smiled. He stepped forward. “So! It is one of the crawlers in darkness, come to pay respect to the new ruler of Chinatown!” The businessman moved to the back of the room, trying to hide.

“I am here to have many questions answered,” Benedict said. “You are an unwanted guest into these domains, and you must explain yourself.”

“Ho! Do not speak to me like that! I have killed men for speaking to me like that. I do not have to answer to you!”

“You do not belong here. These are not your territories. There are age-old rules for these things. Ignorance of them is no excuse.”

“I need no knowledge of laws! These are my laws!” and he held out his fists and snapped into a kung fu fighting stance. Benedict recognized the form as Chang Chuan, Long Fist. Benedict took a defensive Pa Kwa stance. The man nodded. “So, you are not entirely Western, yes?” he asked Benedict.

“I have many skills.” Benedict replied. “Will you give me your name?”

“I am Feng Sha, the Wind Killer, of Clan Yin Shan! You would do good to fear me,” the man said.

Benedict only smiled. “The Dark Mountain Clan? I have never heard of it. I am Don Benedict, of Clan Tremere.”

“Ha! Clan Tremere! A joke! I have heard of your Clan. Did not your ancient master have to steal his powers from another? You are but a dog to them, a dog fetching sticks, with no will of your own!”

“Untrue. Do not confuse structure with weakness. Our Clan’s very powers rely on strength of will. You would do good to remember this.”

“Will? How can will come from a mere pawn? Are you not what they call, ‘a brick in the Pyramid?’”

Benedict’s eyes narrowed; this one knew some Clan secrets.

“Yes, I have heard of your Clan,” Feng Sha continued. “Men of greed snatching knowledge from dusty ruins. Are you like this? I think you seem different — civilized; you know many things Chinese. Why do you not join me, and we shall rule this city together, a union of East and West?”

“I am the agent of my Clan in this matter,” Benedict replied. “It has been declared so by the powers that guide heaven and hell. My fate is the Clan’s fate.”

Feng Sha began his move before Benedict had even finished speaking, but Benedict deftly sidestepped the leaping kick. Feng Sha landed and ran at Benedict with a furious series of punches. Benedict blocked all of them and then stepped to the side and punched Feng Sha, slipping under his arms and landing the blow hard into his ribs. Feng Sha was knocked back with the force of the blow, expelling air with a grunt as he fell.

“Do you submit?” Benedict asked.

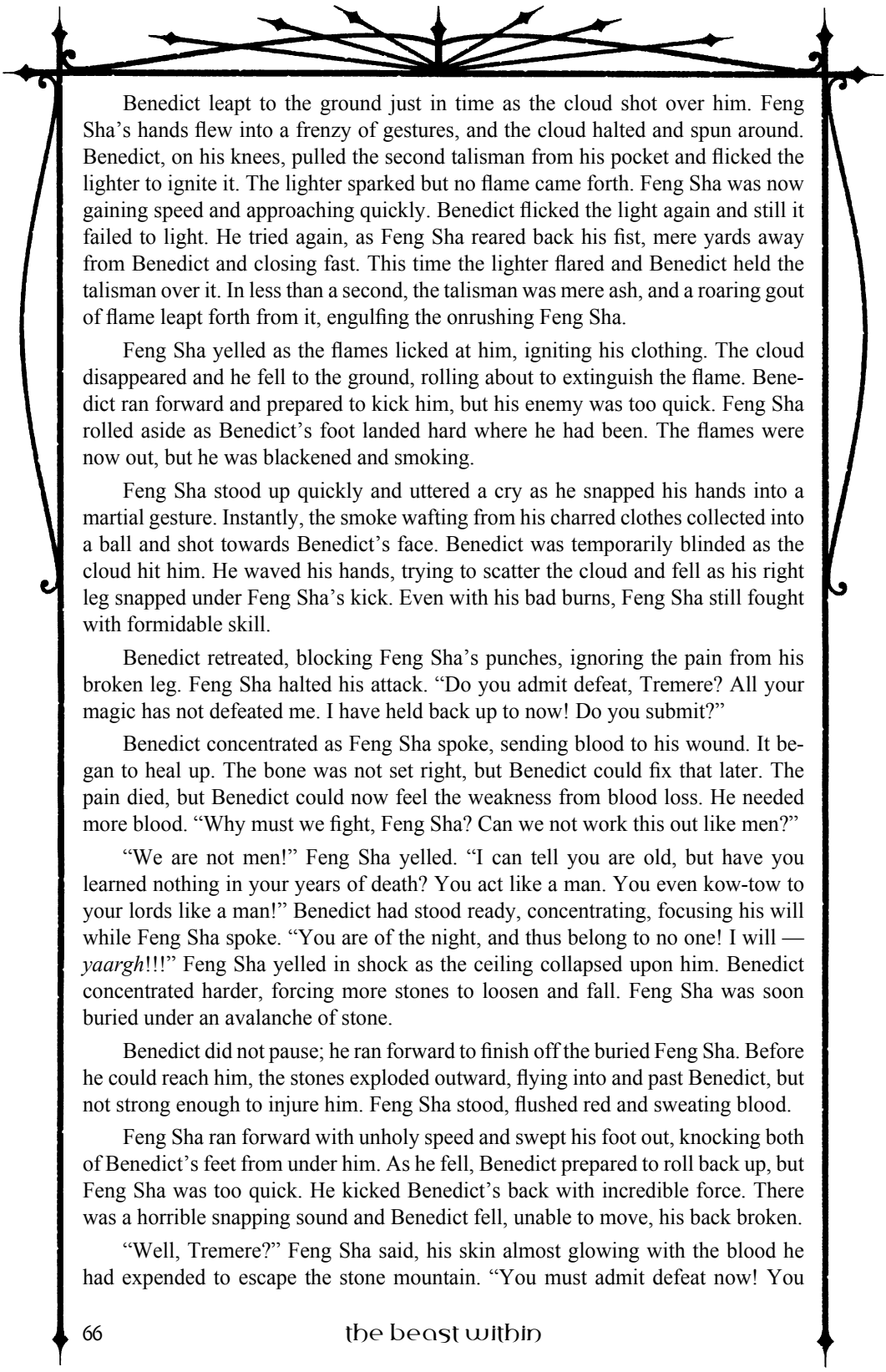
Feng Sha gave him an evil look and said, “Never!” He then began to twirl his arms in a circular pattern. The incense fog in the room began to swirl and move towards him, as if he were the center of a swirling vortex. He yelled out and the fog suddenly formed the shape of a sword in his hand, solidifying out of wispy air. “Ah ha!” he yelled and ran at Benedict, swinging his sword in massive, circular strokes.

Benedict began furiously dodging, moving about the room, retreating after Feng Sha’s advance. He moved past a chair and flung it at Feng Sha. The smoky sword splintered it in half with one blow. Feng Sha kept coming. Benedict was unnaturally fast, moving with a speed most mortals could not perceive, but Feng Sha had kept up with him, and even seemed to move faster.

Benedict leapt over Feng Sha, landed on a table, and hopped over it just as the sword came down upon it, splitting it asunder. Benedict reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out one of the Dowager’s talismans. He barely dodged another blow as he fumbled into his pants pocket for his cigarette lighter. He ran behind another chair, kicking it at Feng Sha, who almost tripped on it before he kicked it out of the way. This gave Benedict enough time to light the paper.

The paper burnt to cinders in an instant and a great gust of wind leapt from the ashes towards Feng Sha’s sword, blowing it into mere mist and out of the room. Feng Sha looked at his empty hand and yelled in anger. Don Benedict ran into the tunnel, seeking enough time to light another talisman.

Feng Sha began to whip his hands about in a swirling pattern, and again the incense coalesced, increasing in mass, growing into a carpet of fog. Feng Sha leapt onto it and it rocketed from the room into the tunnel. Feng Sha yelled in triumph as his flying cloud shot towards Benedict, standing a ways down the tunnel.



Benedict leapt to the ground just in time as the cloud shot over him. Feng Sha's hands flew into a frenzy of gestures, and the cloud halted and spun around. Benedict, on his knees, pulled the second talisman from his pocket and flicked the lighter to ignite it. The lighter sparked but no flame came forth. Feng Sha was now gaining speed and approaching quickly. Benedict flicked the light again and still it failed to light. He tried again, as Feng Sha reared back his fist, mere yards away from Benedict and closing fast. This time the lighter flared and Benedict held the talisman over it. In less than a second, the talisman was mere ash, and a roaring gout of flame leapt forth from it, engulfing the onrushing Feng Sha.

Feng Sha yelled as the flames licked at him, igniting his clothing. The cloud disappeared and he fell to the ground, rolling about to extinguish the flame. Benedict ran forward and prepared to kick him, but his enemy was too quick. Feng Sha rolled aside as Benedict's foot landed hard where he had been. The flames were now out, but he was blackened and smoking.

Feng Sha stood up quickly and uttered a cry as he snapped his hands into a martial gesture. Instantly, the smoke wafting from his charred clothes collected into a ball and shot towards Benedict's face. Benedict was temporarily blinded as the cloud hit him. He waved his hands, trying to scatter the cloud and fell as his right leg snapped under Feng Sha's kick. Even with his bad burns, Feng Sha still fought with formidable skill.

Benedict retreated, blocking Feng Sha's punches, ignoring the pain from his broken leg. Feng Sha halted his attack. "Do you admit defeat, Tremere? All your magic has not defeated me. I have held back up to now! Do you submit?"

Benedict concentrated as Feng Sha spoke, sending blood to his wound. It began to heal up. The bone was not set right, but Benedict could fix that later. The pain died, but Benedict could now feel the weakness from blood loss. He needed more blood. "Why must we fight, Feng Sha? Can we not work this out like men?"

"We are not men!" Feng Sha yelled. "I can tell you are old, but have you learned nothing in your years of death? You act like a man. You even kow-tow to your lords like a man!" Benedict had stood ready, concentrating, focusing his will while Feng Sha spoke. "You are of the night, and thus belong to no one! I will — *yaargh!!!*" Feng Sha yelled in shock as the ceiling collapsed upon him. Benedict concentrated harder, forcing more stones to loosen and fall. Feng Sha was soon buried under an avalanche of stone.

Benedict did not pause; he ran forward to finish off the buried Feng Sha. Before he could reach him, the stones exploded outward, flying into and past Benedict, but not strong enough to injure him. Feng Sha stood, flushed red and sweating blood.

Feng Sha ran forward with unholy speed and swept his foot out, knocking both of Benedict's feet from under him. As he fell, Benedict prepared to roll back up, but Feng Sha was too quick. He kicked Benedict's back with incredible force. There was a horrible snapping sound and Benedict fell, unable to move, his back broken.

"Well, Tremere?" Feng Sha said, his skin almost glowing with the blood he had expended to escape the stone mountain. "You must admit defeat now! You

have not broken your chains, and I stand victorious! I do not want to kill you — I want you to tell your masters that I am unbeatable!”

Benedict internally sent blood to his back, and it began to heal. The bones were set wrong, but this was a minor problem compared with paralysis. He could move again now, but he felt the Hunger awakened in him. He would have to end this soon.

Benedict slipped the last talisman from his pocket. Feng Sha saw what he was doing and moved to kick the lighter from his hands. Benedict moved so the blow landed on his back instead. More bones broke, but Benedict could still move. The talisman caught fire and Benedict threw it at Feng Sha. There was a creaking sound, as of wood breaking, and Feng Sha yelled out. He fell back, staring at Benedict in surprise and anger. A wooden shaft poked out of his chest, right out of his heart. Feng Sha fell over, unmoving.

Feng Sha’s eyes stared at Benedict, seething with anger. Benedict stood up. He would now take this vampire back to the Chantry where his secrets would be snatched from him. He walked over to Feng Sha and stood over him.

He looked into Feng Sha’s bloodshot eyes and was suddenly aware of the blood pulsing there, throbbing in the veins, a river of red life. He saw the trickle of blood around Feng Sha’s chest, where the wooden shaft had appeared. He saw the red stain all over Feng Sha’s skin, where blood had oozed forth from his exertion. He closed his eyes, trying to gain control. He could not succumb now; the Clan needed this vampire’s secrets too much. Benedict opened his eyes again and looked into Feng Sha’s eyes, which were now staring at him in horror, fully aware of what Benedict was fighting against. With incredible effort of will, Feng Sha opened his mouth to say something. All that came out was a trickle of blood.

Benedict lost the battle. He fell onto Feng Sha and tore his throat out, gulping up the torrent of blood that gushed forth. He drank and drank, aware of nothing but the ecstasy of a hunger finally satiated. Then, he was engulfed in a tingling wave of current, traveling from his mouth to everywhere in his body at once. It was an ecstasy of power unparalleled. Nothing mattered anymore: not knowledge, not Clan, not self.

When it was over and Benedict opened his eyes, Feng Sha was dead, a pale corpse, quickly decaying as time finally caught up with him.

Benedict sat by the corpse for a while and then stood up. He searched the chamber, but there was nothing of interest there. The businessman was gone, but Benedict could find him later. There were enough things in the room to act as an occult channel to him.

Benedict lit his candle again and walked back to the stairs.

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It was a cool evening as Benedict sat on a bench in St. Mary’s Square. He thought about the events of the last week. He had caught up with the Chinese businessman, Feng Sha’s aide, the next evening. The man had been packing, preparing to leave town. He had shrieked in fear as Benedict came in through the door, after

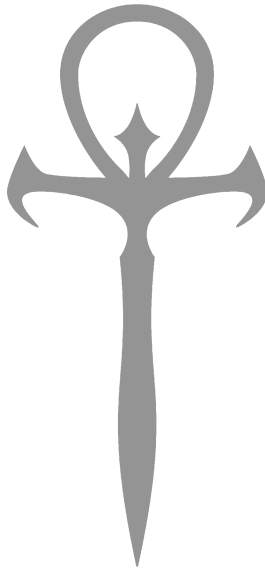
breaking the lock. All Benedict could force out of him was an odd statement, before he collapsed, dead by a strange Thaumaturgical spell. The man had said, "I am but a servant! More will come ..."

The Dowager had been quite satisfied with the outcome of the affair, although she ignored Benedict's question about the businessman's last utterance. Honerius was angry that Feng Sha had been killed before his secrets could be had, and was concerned about the businessman's statement. He spoke of the need for better intelligence on the affair and mentioned sending Benedict to Hong Kong, but as yet, Benedict had heard no more on the issue.

Benedict thought about his frenzy and its results. He had the blood of Feng Sha in him now. It was powerful, yes, but he did not care. That was not as important to him as what had happened when he lost control. Something had snapped. A cycle had been broken.

He looked down the street at the church. He had not been through its doors since his death, over a century ago. He thought about the light spreading out of the doors from inside, the light of a thousand candles. He thought about the oracle, the Ming I. He had feared that he was the evil influence it spoke of. But there had never been cause for worry; he was indeed the dark man, he knew that now. What had been broken were the bonds of the human condition, the chains that had held him to his place, a slave to what was expected of him. He was free.

After a while, Benedict stood up and walked over to the open doors of the church. He took his candle out of his pocket and walked through the doors to light it.





Descent

by Sam Chupp

“Really, Anastasia, I didn’t think you’d show, especially after that earthquake.” Selena smiled. It was a shark’s smile, sure and predatory. She was dressed to kill, as well: a velvet dress, green, with a beautiful stone circle Sumerian pendant depicting Inanna, Queen of Heaven. Anastasia smiled back the same way, her eyes hard. It had been a long time since she had been forced to play dominance games with another vampire.

“Oh, Selena, you know, I so dearly love Luigi’s. That’s why I’m here, really. Ah, isn’t that Inanna! Wasn’t she the one who lost her life in the Underworld?” Anastasia said, smiling.

“She found great power with the Queen of the Damned, actually. And returned to rule.” Selena’s eyes glittered.

“Who’s your blonde friend?” Anastasia smiled. She brushed her thick, auburn hair back from her face and her dark eyes glittered. The maitre d’ hadn’t even noticed her leather jacket and jeans: perhaps he’d be expecting her.

Selena prodded the teenaged, blonde surfer boy with a single, gloved hand. The boy was obviously uncomfortable in his white tuxedo, and he stumbled forward. Selena smiled wickedly back at Ana through the veil of her midnight hair. She smoothed the silk sheath dress she was wearing as she watched Anastasia’s reaction. “Go on, boy. Tell Mistress Ana your name.” Selena’s leer, her red lips and tongue, disgusted Ana.

The surfer smiled, dully, slowly. “I’m... my name’s Dinner, ma’am.” His voice was thick and sleepy.

Anastasia flinched, almost imperceptibly. But Selena caught it. “What is it, Ana? Do you not like your wine white? I imported him from Marin County. Would you prefer a less fruity, more robust vintage?” Selena had a habit of referring to blood as wine.

Anastasia smiled slowly. “Although your hospitality is without question, Selena, I’m not thirsty at the moment. Thank you for the offer, however.”

“Not thirsty? How strange. I myself am never one to turn down fresh young things like this one. But I understand: you prefer a more feminine blush these days. What’s her name? Susie?” Selena motioned for the surfer to step back to her.

“Sofie. Her name’s Sofie. I thought you wanted to talk about old times?”

Selena brushed her hair aside, her green eyes narrowing. She smiled impishly, her whole demeanor changing in a second. “Oh? A sore spot for you? Don’t tell me you’ve gone and fallen in love with her?”

Anastasia returned Selena’s look with stony silence. A waiter took this opportunity to change the plates on the table: the soup went away, replaced by the salad.

Selena was first to break the silence. “Well, so. I see that’s not a topic you’re interested in discussing. Is there something beside the weather that we can discuss?” Selena’s voice was icy.

“I would imagine you’d be full of gossip from the east. How is Jeremiah, Tabitha? I’ve not heard from them in some time.” Anastasia said, picking at her salad. She was amazed at how old habits returned to her. She used to be a master at maintaining the Masquerade, especially in public and especially in restaurants. She noticed then Selena made no such pretense — perhaps Luigi’s was Kindred-owned.

“Jeremiah is doing boring Toreador things, and Tabitha is doing boring Tremere things. They’re both boring. And you would know that if you weren’t hiding in your ivory tower here in San Francisco.” She motioned to the surfer, who kneeled next to her and presented his wrist.

“Oh look, Ana. Poor boy’s got slash scars. Probably has a rough life. Poor thing. Well, you’re about to feel better, honey.” Then, there, in the balcony of Luigi’s, Selena sunk her fangs into the surfer’s wrist and began to suck deep draughts of blood. He smiled in dull pleasure, closing his eyes and savoring the feeling.

“Don’t you think you should leave him some to get home on?” Anastasia said, trying to keep her composure. Even though she was not hungry, and had not needed to feed as much lately, the smell of the rich surfer vitae was tempting.

“Oh really, Ana. You’re so very droll. The last bits are the sweetest, you know.” Selena said, smiling, licking her lips. The totally drained surfer was lifted onto a cart and taken out. A waiter stepped forward with a napkin, and Ana looked up at him in surprise.

Selena smiled, dabbing some vitae from her chin. “I wanted us to be completely comfortable this evening, Anastasia. So I took the liberty of arranging things. Don’t worry about your precious Masquerade tonight. None will be the wiser for our celebration.” Selena’s skin had grown pink, her hair shinier, her whole body more shapely.

“Oh? And what are we celebrating?” Anastasia felt a wave of nausea well up inside her, and forced herself to maintain a mask of propriety.

“Our friendship, of course. And independence. You are independent of the Camarilla, the Circle of Seven’s iron grip. And so am I,” Selena said, smiling victoriously.

“What? How did you swing that? Your Sire get you a research grant?” Anastasia narrowed her eyes.

“Hardly. I’ve decided to go freelance. Totally. Tremere for hire. And I tell you, Ana, I’ve met the most interesting people in Mexico.”

“Mexico? Why would you want to go there? The place is crawling with the Sabbat,” Anastasia said.

“Exactly,” Selena said, smiling, her eyes gleaming.

Anastasia put down her fork. She looked at Selena, looked at the inhuman coldness in her eyes, for the first time seeing it. Then she looked away. “Oh, Ana. Ana. You are so naive. You and your hermitage, your cloister. You’re right to turn away from the Camarilla — what have they ever offered you that was of value? They ask you to deny what is truly you. The Beast Within.”

Anastasia looked up at her, eyes afire. “I... I may not be involved with the Camarilla. But I am still loyal to my Sire.”

“Your Sire? And when was the last time you spoke with Etrius?” Selena said, smiling.

Anastasia’s eyes narrowed to slits. “I speak with him at the Esbats, as you well know. Or have you forgotten the lore that the Tremere taught you?”

Selena licked her lips and brushed her raven hair aside again. “Ana, that’s just it. I’ve learned so much more among the Sabbat. They have powers, and paths, and rituals that are much more potent than any of those taught to us in the Camarilla.”

“Yes, I imagine so. It’s quite easy to gain power when you sell your soul for it. So tell me, Selena: who is your infernal master?” Anastasia said, finally finding her anger. She felt it building within her, welling up.

“Those old wives’ tales about the Sabbat and the Infernal are just that. And I never took you for an old wife, really Anastasia. How dramatic. The way you talk, you’d expect me to burst into flame at any moment.”

Anastasia rose and smiled as sweetly as she could manage. “Don’t give me any ideas, Selena. Now, if you excuse me, I’ve suddenly lost my appetite for this conversation.” She whirled and stalked down the stairs.

From the balcony, Anastasia could hear her laughing. “You’ll be back, my sweet. You’ll be back,” Selena called.

...

Ana took a cab across town, and made her way to the market, where she purchased a handmade wicker picnic basket from a street vendor. She began to fill the basket with wonderful things, things that she knew Sofie loved.

Ana loved tasting the sweet flavor of the warm Valpolicella wine in her blood, loved the sweet tang that garlic and basil and oregano brought to her lovers’ vitae. She threw herself into shopping, trying to forget the disturbing things Selena had said.

Ana decided she would take Sofie and drive up to the beach house, where they’d spend the rest of the night. It would be nice to get away, away from Selena, away from San Francisco, away from other vampires.

She smiled thinking of the light Sofie's eyes would have when she saw the cav-
iari, the *foie de gras*, and the anchovies, all wrapped in green foil. She even smiled
at the vendors who wished to haggle with her, and who were surprised that, be it
Italian, Greek, or even Chinese, she answered each in their native tongue. Soon her
basket was filled with jewel-like parcels, wrapped neatly in their individual pack-
ages, giving off a redolent scent of luxury.

All this preparation was for the midnight picnic on the beach that had become
their tradition at the house. Ana shook out her hair and smiled absently as she
thought of the daring race they would play with the sun as it burned over the cliffs
and pierced to the ocean: about how sweet those last kisses were, before retiring for
the day. Sofie would be able to sleep next to her while the jealous sun burned in the
sky. It would be heaven.

Ana began to feel filled up with the combination of anticipation and longing
that she felt. It consumed her. Sofie was the moon and sun in her life. Sofie was
what made each step worthwhile. Sophia, bringer of wisdom, Sophia, bringer of
peace. That gentle spirit, a magical woman who did not even know the simple mag-
ic that she carried in her fingers, the grace and beauty that she held in her eyes. This
was why Ana loved her, why Ana had forsaken her own kind for a simple life with
her, away from the intrigues of the Kindred.

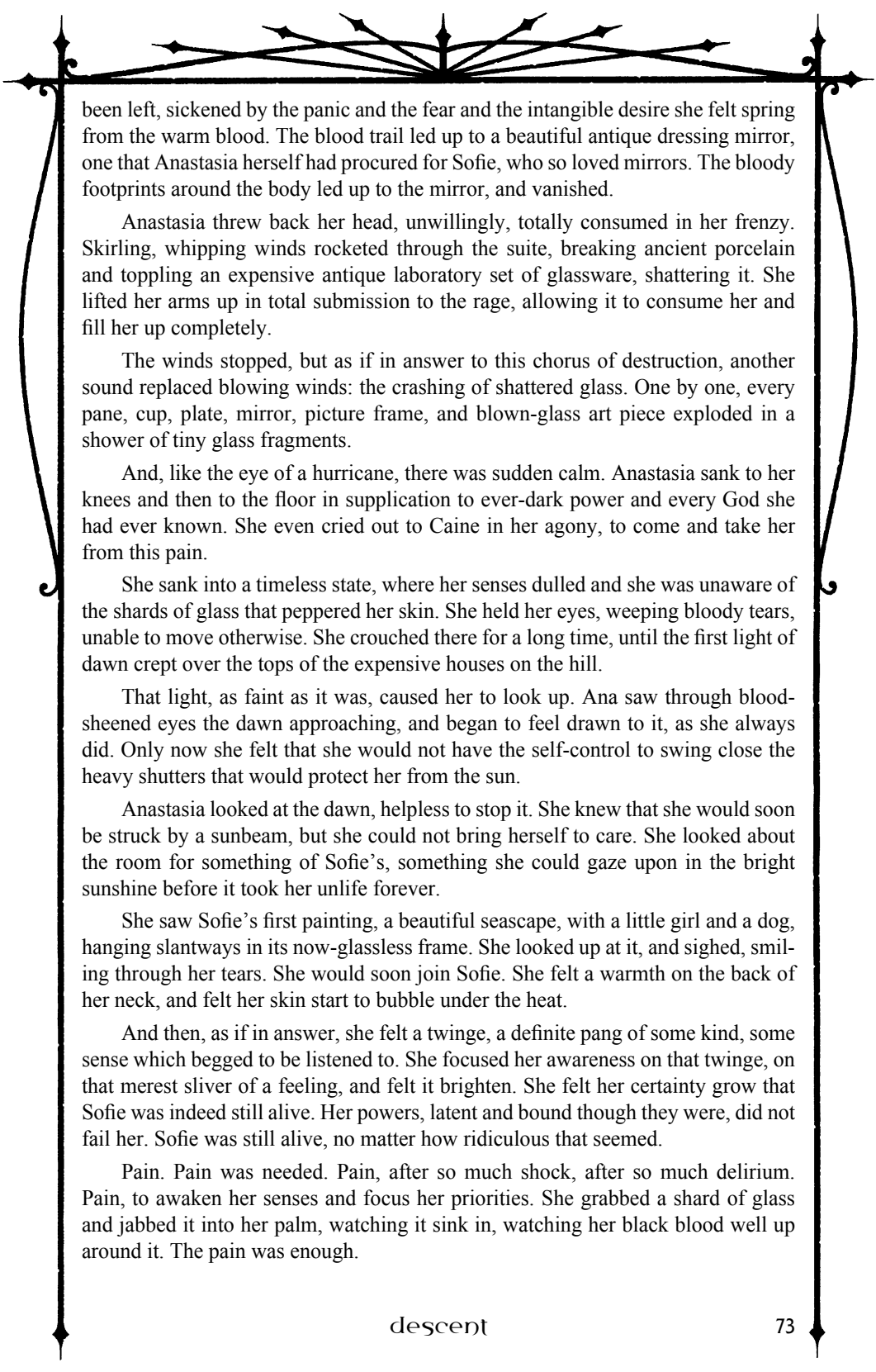
Anastasia had met Sofie by pure chance, had stumbled into her life as the result
of an accident, and had stayed with her because of something totally coinciden-
tal and unexplainable. Sofie painted Ana's dreams, painted the landscapes of her
daytime slumbers. She did so with a clarity and accuracy that was unnerving and
disturbing to Ana, who held herself quite an authority on the occult and magick.
Sofie fell in love with Ana's dreams, and with the vision of Ana, and finally with the
reality of Ana. When it came time to reveal her nature, Anastasia had steeled herself
for the possibility that she would have to blot out her existence by commanding
Sofie to forget her forever.

She needn't have worried. Sofie had smiled her sweetest smile and said, "Then,
my love, let us seize the night, as we can never be together during the day."

Ana could almost feel the love that she shared with Sofie as a palpable thing: it
surrounded her, kept her warm, kept her calm. Just now, relaxing, she realized how
much Selena had goaded her, how close she had been to losing control. She walked
the rest of the way up Russian Hill, and through a secret garden to get to the well-
nigh hidden brownstone they rented.

The door to the attic apartment in the brownstone was properly locked, so
Anastasia was spared that initial shock of dread and panic when one finds one's
door ajar, hanging open there like a murderer on a noose. No, she was lulled into a
sense of security as she opened the door and made her way through the silent attic,
intent on the meal she would soon be creating. It was not until the pungent smell of
her lover's blood wafted up to her nostrils that she was hit with the wave of terror.

Ana screamed. She ran down the spiral staircase that joined the lightproof attic
with Sofie's studio. She ran through the studio, following the blood-trail that had



been left, sickened by the panic and the fear and the intangible desire she felt spring from the warm blood. The blood trail led up to a beautiful antique dressing mirror, one that Anastasia herself had procured for Sofie, who so loved mirrors. The bloody footprints around the body led up to the mirror, and vanished.

Anastasia threw back her head, unwillingly, totally consumed in her frenzy. Skirling, whipping winds rocketed through the suite, breaking ancient porcelain and toppling an expensive antique laboratory set of glassware, shattering it. She lifted her arms up in total submission to the rage, allowing it to consume her and fill her up completely.

The winds stopped, but as if in answer to this chorus of destruction, another sound replaced blowing winds: the crashing of shattered glass. One by one, every pane, cup, plate, mirror, picture frame, and blown-glass art piece exploded in a shower of tiny glass fragments.

And, like the eye of a hurricane, there was sudden calm. Anastasia sank to her knees and then to the floor in supplication to ever-dark power and every God she had ever known. She even cried out to Caine in her agony, to come and take her from this pain.

She sank into a timeless state, where her senses dulled and she was unaware of the shards of glass that peppered her skin. She held her eyes, weeping bloody tears, unable to move otherwise. She crouched there for a long time, until the first light of dawn crept over the tops of the expensive houses on the hill.

That light, as faint as it was, caused her to look up. Ana saw through blood-sheened eyes the dawn approaching, and began to feel drawn to it, as she always did. Only now she felt that she would not have the self-control to swing close the heavy shutters that would protect her from the sun.

Anastasia looked at the dawn, helpless to stop it. She knew that she would soon be struck by a sunbeam, but she could not bring herself to care. She looked about the room for something of Sofie's, something she could gaze upon in the bright sunshine before it took her unlife forever.

She saw Sofie's first painting, a beautiful seascape, with a little girl and a dog, hanging slantways in its now-glassless frame. She looked up at it, and sighed, smiling through her tears. She would soon join Sofie. She felt a warmth on the back of her neck, and felt her skin start to bubble under the heat.

And then, as if in answer, she felt a twinge, a definite pang of some kind, some sense which begged to be listened to. She focused her awareness on that twinge, on that merest sliver of a feeling, and felt it brighten. She felt her certainty grow that Sofie was indeed still alive. Her powers, latent and bound though they were, did not fail her. Sofie was still alive, no matter how ridiculous that seemed.

Pain. Pain was needed. Pain, after so much shock, after so much delirium. Pain, to awaken her senses and focus her priorities. She grabbed a shard of glass and jabbed it into her palm, watching it sink in, watching her black blood well up around it. The pain was enough.

She got to her feet and slammed closed first one, then the other heavy shutter, collapsing against it. Anastasia slumped down until she was resting on the floor, her back against the warm shutter.

Then, from exhaustion and wounds, Anastasia fell into unconsciousness.

She dreamed. She dreamed of a happier time, a night almost four years ago. She saw herself and Sofie, on the beach. The moon was bright. Sofie was naked, as she always was on beach, and wet from the water. “No, Ana, no. I want you to promise me. I want you to put away your super powers. I don’t want you to use them anymore.”

Anastasia shook her head, trying to focus on Sofie. “Why my love? Why? They are a part of me.”

Sofie put her fingertip to Ana’s lips. “No. No, Ana. They are a part of your old life. Your old ways. And now you’re with me. Remember what you told me about that Goal-condra thing?”

“Golconda. Yes. I remember.” Anastasia was smiling at Sofie. When she wanted to be charming, she was charming. It didn’t hurt that she was teasing Ana the entire time, turning slightly in the firelight.

“Well, that proves it. No more ESP. No more spoon bending or door opening. Nothin’. Okay? You got it?” Sofie was smiling, but her voice was firm.

Anastasia looked very serious. “You’re serious, aren’t you? You really want me to throw everything away?”

“Not everything, Anastasia. You’ll still have me. What do you want? Maybe that’s what you have to ask yourself.”

Anastasia watched the surf come in, watched it wash out. “I want... I want to be with you...”

“So promise me. Promise me, and I won’t bitch about it any more.” Sofie dug in the sand with her toes.

“But... what if I need my powers to protect you?” Ana said, looking far out to sea.

“I’m not saying you should throw them away... just don’t use them. Unless you have to. And I mean, there better be a damn good reason. Now, will you pinky swear?”

“Pinky swear? What’s that?”

Sofie laughed. It sounded like the surf in her dream. “You know, a solemn promise. How would you put it? An oath. You gotta swear.”

Anastasia smiled at Sofie. She shook out her hair and drew her close. “No, Sofie. I have a better idea. A much better idea.”

Then she was suddenly in the beach house, bent over a leaf of parchment. The parchment contained the carefully worded terms of her promise, and she signed it in her own blood. Sofie looked solemn at Ana, and realized that it was one of those issues that she would not bend on. Ana held her hand while she made the pinprick.

Sofie signed her part of the contract in her own blood. She remembered celebrating that pact as one might celebrate a marriage; it was a honeymoon of sorts. The dream turned to the silvery nights they spent by the sea.

The telephone rang. It rang again, incessantly. Ana's eyes were nearly sealed shut from the bloody tears she'd cried, but she managed to open them and find the telephone. The digital clock on the VCR told her it was evening again.

It was Selena's voice. "I imagine by now you've discovered my little plot."

Frenzy boiled up inside her, and she choked it back down. "Where is she, you bitch!"

"Please, please Anastasia. Such language. Let's be civilized shall we? You can certainly sense that she is still alive, no? Or are your powers weak from disuse?"

Anastasia struggled to hold on to her rage. Although she couldn't sense Sofie with her Pact-bound powers, she felt strongly that she would know if Sofie was dead — the sense she had felt earlier had not diminished.

"What do you want with me? What do you want to secure Sofie's release?"

"Ah. 'Secure.' 'Release.' You're talking like a general, Ana. Why not come down from that high horse and talk to me? Remember me, your Selena, your Moon? I have not changed. Perhaps it is you who has changed. Tell me, are you happy under the yoke of your Sire? Are you pleased that he can control what you do? Are you happy in the Camarilla?"

Anastasia nearly dropped the phone. Looking around, she noticed where she was for the first time. She had managed to crawl, bloody from the piercing glass in her skin, to Sofie's futon, which was ruined now with her black blood. She was weak, hungry, and the Beast within her was rattling its cage.

"Selena. I'll do anything. Just don't harm her. I swear, if you hurt her, I'll make sure you burn in the sun."

"Anything, Anastasia? My, my. The Ana I once knew would've never been so desperate-sounding. She would've steeled herself, and even sacrificed a petty mortal if it suited her purpose. Where is the Ana who faced the Primogen of New York?" She laughed. "Oh, and Ana — I don't have to remind you that you're in no position to make threats."

"Don't toy with me, Selena. Name your price."

"My price? My price? Why, that implies that it is something that can be paid, as a debt is paid. As a Boon is paid. No, no, Anastasia, what I want is something much more than a price. I want your oath. I want your loyalty. I want your soul. I want your blood. I want you, Ana, sweet Ana. And you can have your pretty girlfriend as a pet, if you wish. But you'll serve me. Me, and the sacred Order of the Black Hand, the Sabbat."

Hearing this began to free the Beast, the collar around its neck loosening, weakening. Anastasia's fangs slid into her mouth, and she felt their sharpness next to her tongue.

“And if I refuse?” she whispered, trying to sound cowed when she wanted to loosen her hate on the Sabbat bitch.

“Your Sofie will be made glad to join us, and be our cute plaything for a time until we stake her for the sun. You remember what I do with playthings, don’t you Ana? Or perhaps you have been neglecting that side of you, as well?” Selena’s voice was like frozen diamonds.

Anastasia shuddered. The Beast began to howl against its collar, the leash slipping out of her hands. She watched her fingernails change into talons. “Yes. I remember.”

“Very well then. I hope you won’t be offended, but I have taken the liberty of preparing an initiation rite for you. Tomorrow evening, when the moon is new, we will perform it. We will welcome either you, or a newly Embraced Sofie, into our brood. If you wish to join us, you’ll be there. The church on Beacon Street. But I’m sure you already know that, you being such the clever girl. And so well behaved!”

Her voice was rasping, irritating, provoking. She knew what she was doing, and Anastasia was powerless to prevent the Frenzy she was provoking.

“I will be there, Selena,” Anastasia said. Her hand shook as she put the phone down on the cradle. She moved to the vase on the fireplace, picked it up, looked at it, considering. Her palsy got worse, her taloned nails scraped against the fine porcelain, and then the vase slipped from her hands. It shattered on the hearth.

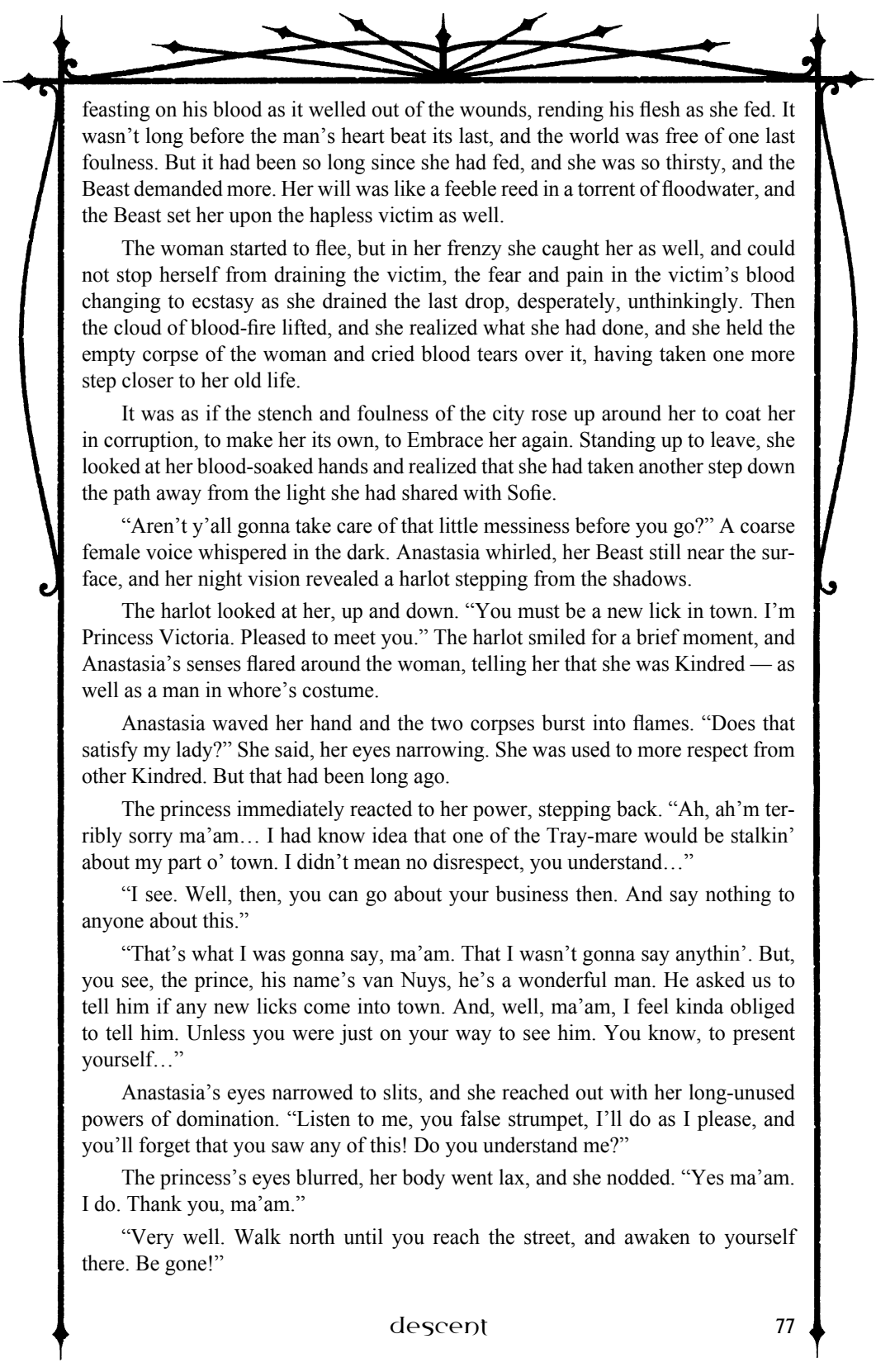
Looking down, her eyes clouded with red, she saw the parchment with her blood pact written on it. Her monstrous claws caressed the paper, and she felt a twinge of pain as she saw Sofie’s signature in blood there on the page. Her powers, her old life, her old self was waiting, contained in the words of the pact, waiting to be released. And it could only be released one way: through fire, pure cleansing fire. That would make the pact null and void. She thought a moment of Sofie — how she would be alone, terrified, weak, helpless to resist the powers of the vampires who held her. Her head felt numb, dull, cloudy. She couldn’t think straight. She knew that if she took this step she would be breaking a solemn oath, one that she had made in all serious dedication. But Sofie was in danger, a heartbeat away from living life as one of the Damned.

Her claws parted the stiff parchment of the pact with ease. It shredded into long narrow strips with one pass. They fluttered to the floor. Ana felt her power returning, slowly, being freed as it was bit by bit. Without a word, she summoned fire from her blood magic, fire from her own hand to destroy the pact that she had signed.

It burst into flame, another tie gone, another step taken.

Then the Beast struggled again, and this time caught Anastasia unaware. It slipped loose its chain and ran free, blood hunger driving it onward, on to the Hunt.

Time blurred. Ana ran through the streets, her powers cloaking her, her blood thirst driving her every step. Turning down an alley, she fell upon another kind of hunter and his prey. She fell upon the unlucky rapist, tearing the man apart and



feasting on his blood as it welled out of the wounds, rending his flesh as she fed. It wasn't long before the man's heart beat its last, and the world was free of one last foulness. But it had been so long since she had fed, and she was so thirsty, and the Beast demanded more. Her will was like a feeble reed in a torrent of floodwater, and the Beast set her upon the hapless victim as well.

The woman started to flee, but in her frenzy she caught her as well, and could not stop herself from draining the victim, the fear and pain in the victim's blood changing to ecstasy as she drained the last drop, desperately, unthinkingly. Then the cloud of blood-fire lifted, and she realized what she had done, and she held the empty corpse of the woman and cried blood tears over it, having taken one more step closer to her old life.

It was as if the stench and foulness of the city rose up around her to coat her in corruption, to make her its own, to Embrace her again. Standing up to leave, she looked at her blood-soaked hands and realized that she had taken another step down the path away from the light she had shared with Sofie.

“Aren't y'all gonna take care of that little messiness before you go?” A coarse female voice whispered in the dark. Anastasia whirled, her Beast still near the surface, and her night vision revealed a harlot stepping from the shadows.

The harlot looked at her, up and down. “You must be a new lick in town. I'm Princess Victoria. Pleased to meet you.” The harlot smiled for a brief moment, and Anastasia's senses flared around the woman, telling her that she was Kindred — as well as a man in whore's costume.

Anastasia waved her hand and the two corpses burst into flames. “Does that satisfy my lady?” She said, her eyes narrowing. She was used to more respect from other Kindred. But that had been long ago.

The princess immediately reacted to her power, stepping back. “Ah, ah'm terribly sorry ma'am... I had know idea that one of the Tray-mare would be stalkin' about my part o' town. I didn't mean no disrespect, you understand...”

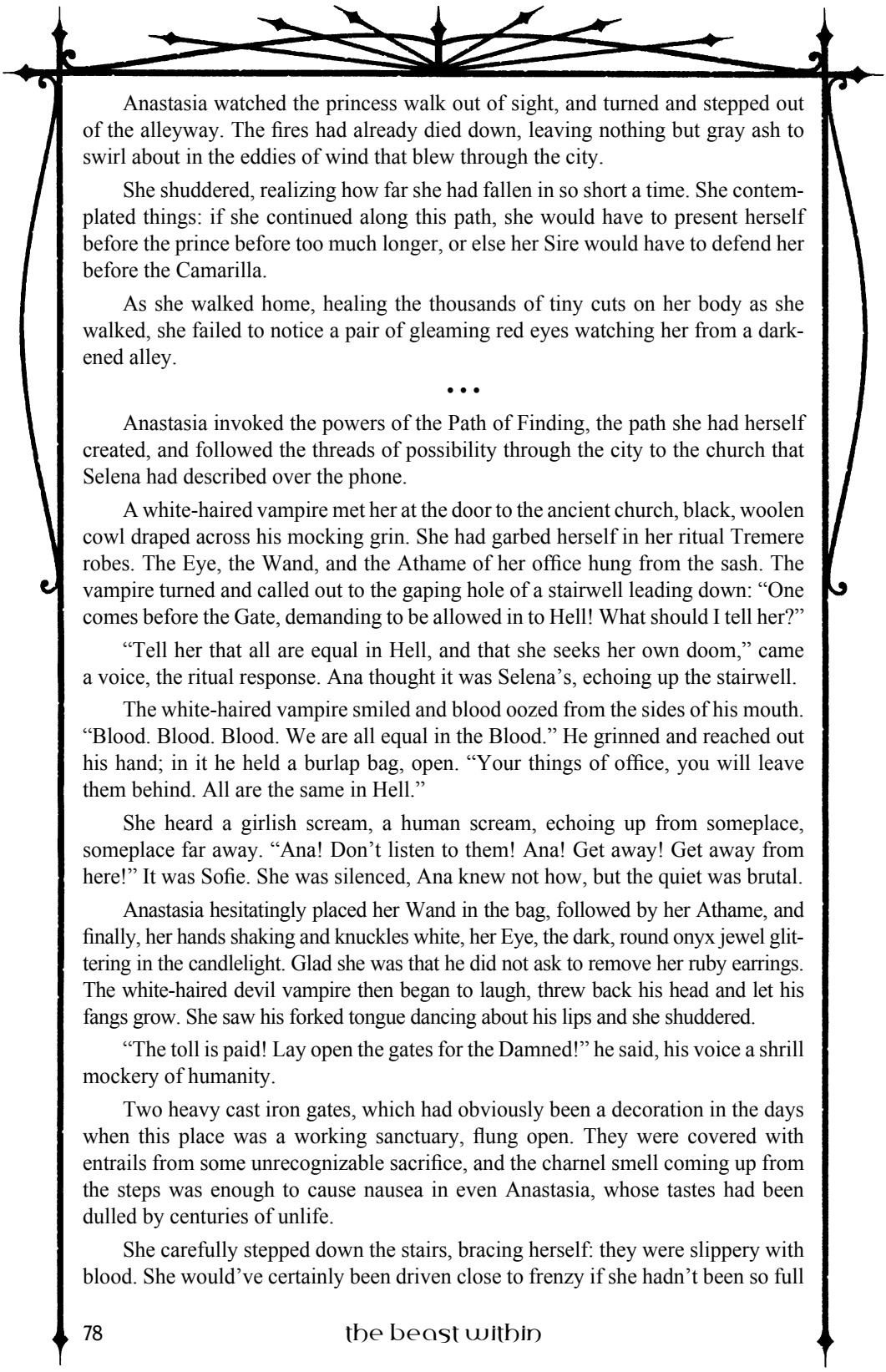
“I see. Well, then, you can go about your business then. And say nothing to anyone about this.”

“That's what I was gonna say, ma'am. That I wasn't gonna say anythin'. But, you see, the prince, his name's van Nuys, he's a wonderful man. He asked us to tell him if any new licks come into town. And, well, ma'am, I feel kinda obliged to tell him. Unless you were just on your way to see him. You know, to present yourself...”

Anastasia's eyes narrowed to slits, and she reached out with her long-unused powers of domination. “Listen to me, you false strumpet, I'll do as I please, and you'll forget that you saw any of this! Do you understand me?”

The princess's eyes blurred, her body went lax, and she nodded. “Yes ma'am. I do. Thank you, ma'am.”

“Very well. Walk north until you reach the street, and awaken to yourself there. Be gone!”



Anastasia watched the princess walk out of sight, and turned and stepped out of the alleyway. The fires had already died down, leaving nothing but gray ash to swirl about in the eddies of wind that blew through the city.

She shuddered, realizing how far she had fallen in so short a time. She contemplated things: if she continued along this path, she would have to present herself before the prince before too much longer, or else her Sire would have to defend her before the Camarilla.

As she walked home, healing the thousands of tiny cuts on her body as she walked, she failed to notice a pair of gleaming red eyes watching her from a darkened alley.

...

Anastasia invoked the powers of the Path of Finding, the path she had herself created, and followed the threads of possibility through the city to the church that Selena had described over the phone.

A white-haired vampire met her at the door to the ancient church, black, woolen cowl draped across his mocking grin. She had garbed herself in her ritual Tremere robes. The Eye, the Wand, and the Athame of her office hung from the sash. The vampire turned and called out to the gaping hole of a stairwell leading down: "One comes before the Gate, demanding to be allowed in to Hell! What should I tell her?"

"Tell her that all are equal in Hell, and that she seeks her own doom," came a voice, the ritual response. Ana thought it was Selena's, echoing up the stairwell.

The white-haired vampire smiled and blood oozed from the sides of his mouth. "Blood. Blood. Blood. We are all equal in the Blood." He grinned and reached out his hand; in it he held a burlap bag, open. "Your things of office, you will leave them behind. All are the same in Hell."

She heard a girlish scream, a human scream, echoing up from someplace, someplace far away. "Ana! Don't listen to them! Ana! Get away! Get away from here!" It was Sofie. She was silenced, Ana knew not how, but the quiet was brutal.

Anastasia hesitatingly placed her Wand in the bag, followed by her Athame, and finally, her hands shaking and knuckles white, her Eye, the dark, round onyx jewel glittering in the candlelight. Glad she was that he did not ask to remove her ruby earrings. The white-haired devil vampire then began to laugh, threw back his head and let his fangs grow. She saw his forked tongue dancing about his lips and she shuddered.

"The toll is paid! Lay open the gates for the Damned!" he said, his voice a shrill mockery of humanity.

Two heavy cast iron gates, which had obviously been a decoration in the days when this place was a working sanctuary, flung open. They were covered with entrails from some unrecognizable sacrifice, and the charnel smell coming up from the steps was enough to cause nausea in even Anastasia, whose tastes had been dulled by centuries of unlife.

She carefully stepped down the stairs, bracing herself: they were slippery with blood. She would've certainly been driven close to frenzy if she hadn't been so full

with blood, she realized. Everything seemed to appeal to the Beast within her, and she knew it would soon wake from its uneasy slumber.

She suddenly felt a revolting caress, felt sinuous fingers touching her body from all around, and she stood stock-still, knowing that anything that happened here would be a test of sorts. She felt softness on her arm and around her neck and smelled a mixture of woman scent, fresh blood, and earth. She felt a kiss on her shoulders, on her cheek, and on her forehead, and she endured them. She saw the blood-and-earth-streaked face of the one who blocked her way further: a Sabbat woman with streaked red hair, and a wicked smile.

The woman turned and called down the steps as the man had, before. “Hey-yah! Hey! There’s one here at the stairs of Hell, coming down the stairs! She wants to pass! What shall I tell her?”

“Tell her that she is doomed, and follows her own folly! Tell her that all truths are bared in Hell, and in Hell, all are naked, so that fires may burn them.” Selena’s voice again, Ana thought for sure.

The Sabbat bitch smiled a greedy smile as she put her claws up to Anastasia’s fine Tremere robes, and ripped it off, exposing her naked body underneath. The woman leered at her. She threw the fine velvet aside and growled at Anastasia. “Go forth with you, Damned soul! Get ye hence!”

She felt a strong hand push her down the stairs, and nearly fell the intervening distance, but caught herself as she came in sight of the floor. The room was bathed in red; the heat was thick and heavy here. Black smoke choked the ceiling, blackened the place, from the many small fires that had been lit here. A hole rose up in the center of the place, and that was the only way smoke could get out.

Selena stood, naked, the headdress of Hell on her head. Two large oiled and tattooed men stood to either side of her, and she had a black, glass dagger in her hand.

“So, there comes one to the fires of Hell, to see what she can see! Why do you come, little girl?” Selena said, mockingly, laughing.

“I come to join the Black Hand,” Anastasia said, hoping that the reply was sufficient, not knowing the proper response.

“You? You? Foul creature, do you think you’re worthy for the strength of the mighty Black Hand? Do you think the Strength of Caine would take you into their order? How arrogant and stupid a child you are. Take her! Punish her for her insolence!”

The two guards grabbed Ana from either side, and she did not resist them. They bound her feet together, and clasped iron around her wrists. She felt totally powerless, and it was only the comforting presence of the twin ruby earrings that kept her from losing control.

She recoiled in horror, however, when the wooden stake struck her heart, and then she was mostly paralyzed — her heart was not fully penetrated, so she could still move a little. Then she felt twin spikes, twin hooks pierce her back in throbbing pain, and felt her entire weight placed on them. She was hanging on twin meat hooks, her feet dangling in the air. Her feet left the ground. She felt her supply of

blood leaking down the side of the wounds, felt the terrible cold of the steel that passed through her whole body. She was totally immobile.

Ana felt the Hunger begin to well up in her as the blood flowed out of her faster and faster. Staked though she was, she began to struggle in her grisly bond, and for the first time a sound issued from her mouth, a low growl, animalistic, and full of hunger.

“Yes!! Yes, Anastasia! Now you see! Now you know! Let it come, Anastasia. Do not fight it. You will be reborn! You will be reborn as one of the rightful daughters of Caine! Let it come! Let your hate reforge you!” Selena whispered in her ear, and she retched blood in response. Selena petted her as if she were a sick child.

Anastasia knew that they were trying to make her one of their own, breaking down her humanity and forcing the Beast in her to come out. She shook with impotent rage.

Then she saw Sofie. The white smock she’d been wearing when they took her was torn and bloody, but she was still breathing, still alive. The two brutes brought her in and chained her to the wall, her hands over her head, facing it. Selena then took a scalpel and began to cut the smock from her, and Anastasia had to watch in horror.

Sofie’s back was a network of lines that were bleeding once the smock was cut away, and the fresh smell of the blood wafted over to Anastasia and filled her with self-loathing, desire, and disgust.

“Do you desire her, still, Anastasia? Well, I’m afraid that there’s another who does as well. The right of feeding has already been claimed.” Selena waved to the white-haired devil, who laughed maniacally and leaped forward. He grabbed Sofie’s arm and sunk his fangs into her, feeding on her rich vitae.

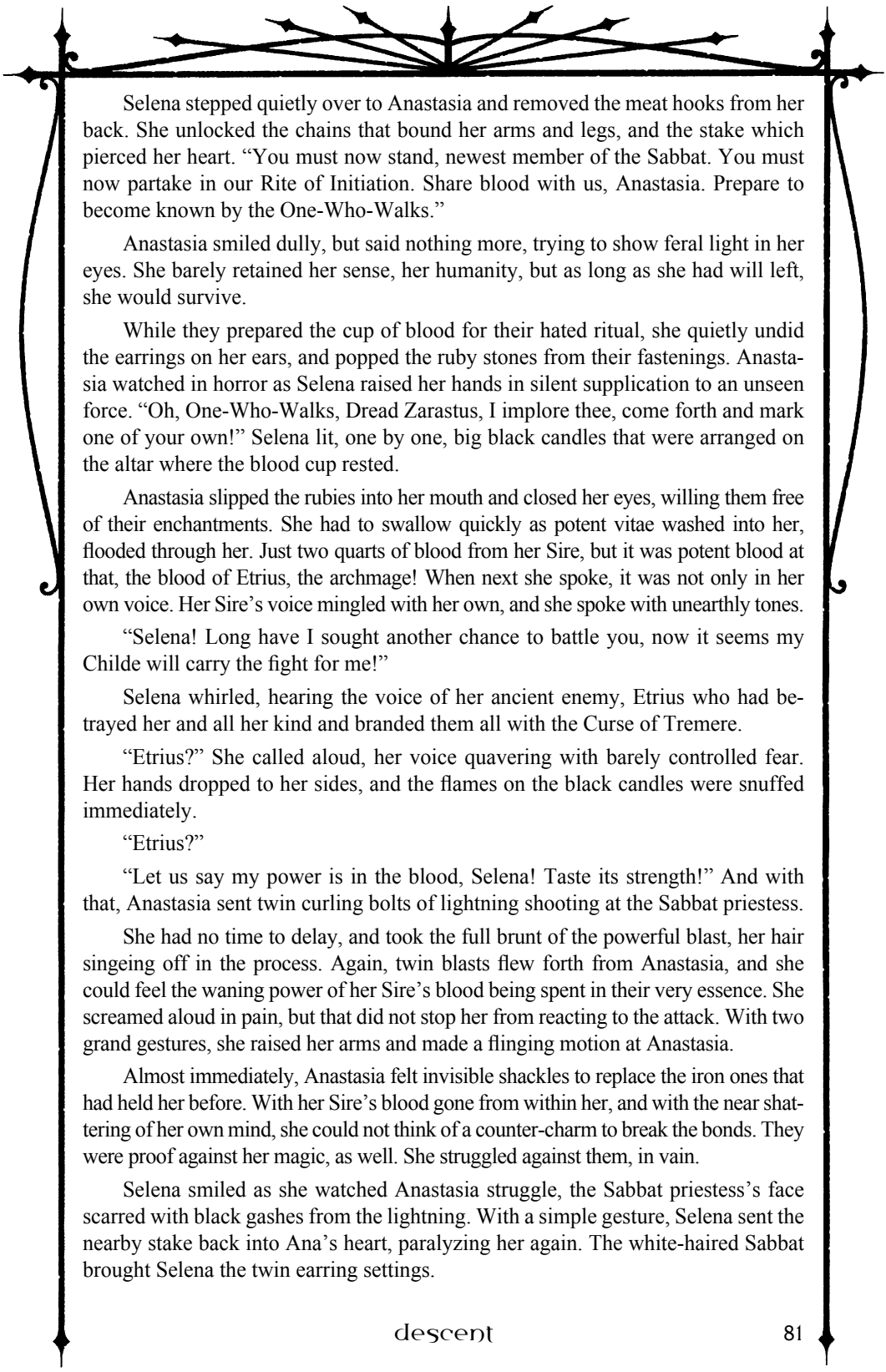
Anastasia howled. She struggled on her hooks, so much so that Selena was afraid she’d be ripped in two by the meat hooks. Frenzy was past her as she watched what that white devil did to Sofie while he fed, and she felt every ounce of her humanity straining as she was forced to endure the torture along with her love.

When it was over, they opened the manacles and Sofie slid down the wall, the blood from her wounds causing a sickly wet slap on the flagstones.

Anastasia was an angry Beast then, and it was only Selena’s powers of domination that kept her in control. Fixing a look in Ana’s eyes, Selena told her “Silence!” With that, Anastasia calmed, but the fire behind her eyes was still there.

Selena stepped before Anastasia, who mustered all the control she had. In her hand was a bloody piece of cotton, one of the shredded strips of Sofie’s frock. “Do you find this delicious? Did you like what we did?” She asked Anastasia, holding the strip under her nose.

Anastasia swallowed back the black bile rising in her throat and nodded, trying to let the feral fire in her eyes reflect madness, trying to convince Selena that her attempts at destroying her humanity had been successful. Selena smiled as Ana licked at the blood on the cloth.



Selena stepped quietly over to Anastasia and removed the meat hooks from her back. She unlocked the chains that bound her arms and legs, and the stake which pierced her heart. "You must now stand, newest member of the Sabbat. You must now partake in our Rite of Initiation. Share blood with us, Anastasia. Prepare to become known by the One-Who-Walks."

Anastasia smiled dully, but said nothing more, trying to show feral light in her eyes. She barely retained her sense, her humanity, but as long as she had will left, she would survive.

While they prepared the cup of blood for their hated ritual, she quietly undid the earrings on her ears, and popped the ruby stones from their fastenings. Anastasia watched in horror as Selena raised her hands in silent supplication to an unseen force. "Oh, One-Who-Walks, Dread Zarastus, I implore thee, come forth and mark one of your own!" Selena lit, one by one, big black candles that were arranged on the altar where the blood cup rested.

Anastasia slipped the rubies into her mouth and closed her eyes, willing them free of their enchantments. She had to swallow quickly as potent vitae washed into her, flooded through her. Just two quarts of blood from her Sire, but it was potent blood at that, the blood of Etrius, the archmage! When next she spoke, it was not only in her own voice. Her Sire's voice mingled with her own, and she spoke with unearthly tones.

"Selena! Long have I sought another chance to battle you, now it seems my Childe will carry the fight for me!"

Selena whirled, hearing the voice of her ancient enemy, Etrius who had betrayed her and all her kind and branded them all with the Curse of Tremere.

"Etrius?" She called aloud, her voice quavering with barely controlled fear. Her hands dropped to her sides, and the flames on the black candles were snuffed immediately.

"Etrius?"

"Let us say my power is in the blood, Selena! Taste its strength!" And with that, Anastasia sent twin curling bolts of lightning shooting at the Sabbat priestess.

She had no time to delay, and took the full brunt of the powerful blast, her hair singeing off in the process. Again, twin blasts flew forth from Anastasia, and she could feel the waning power of her Sire's blood being spent in their very essence. She screamed aloud in pain, but that did not stop her from reacting to the attack. With two grand gestures, she raised her arms and made a flinging motion at Anastasia.

Almost immediately, Anastasia felt invisible shackles to replace the iron ones that had held her before. With her Sire's blood gone from within her, and with the near shattering of her own mind, she could not think of a counter-charm to break the bonds. They were proof against her magic, as well. She struggled against them, in vain.

Selena smiled as she watched Anastasia struggle, the Sabbat priestess's face scarred with black gashes from the lightning. With a simple gesture, Selena sent the nearby stake back into Ana's heart, paralyzing her again. The white-haired Sabbat brought Selena the twin earring settings.

Selena smiled. "I see. 'Principle Focus of Vitae Infusion,' isn't it called... your Master's vitae? Tsk, tsk. Your sincerity was ever at suspicion, of course, but I had begun to believe that you were ready to embrace the Beast within you. I can see that I was foolish to think one of Etrius' whelps would ever see the true source of Kindred magic. I have risked much in initiating you to this, our sacred order, Anastasia! You have cost me much, and caused a sacred ritual to be ruined. And now you will pay the price for your lack of vision!"

With a gesture, Selena made the invisible chains pull her down to the floor, where she was forced into a kneeling position near the center of the room.

"Sofie doesn't seem to be feeling well. Poor dear. I'm afraid she's going to bleed to death. You're going to be forced to watch her slowly die, unable to do a thing to help her." Anastasia struggled again, but to no avail.

"I imagine that we will see your attitude change during the night, and I think that tomorrow night you may be ready to join our ranks. That is, if you are still alive. You see, the sun comes in to this place. There's a tiny hole in the ceiling, and a little beam of light filters down here on sunny days. Of course, tomorrow could be dreary. I do hope so for your benefit."

Behind her, Selena's warlocks were gathering together the items they had used in the ritual.

"Oh, and, Anastasia, in case you were wondering: this room is warded against all Disciplines and magicks, except mine. It was only the potency of your Sire's blood that broke the ward, and then only briefly. You'll not find an easy escape from this place!"

Selena left after donning her robes, sweeping her cloak behind her, her pack of Sabbat warlocks following. She heard Selena say, "No! Leave those here. They can only be used by her Sire to follow us." There was the soft clink of a bag dropped to the ground, and the group departed. Upstairs, she heard the scrape of iron against stone as the gates were slammed shut.

...

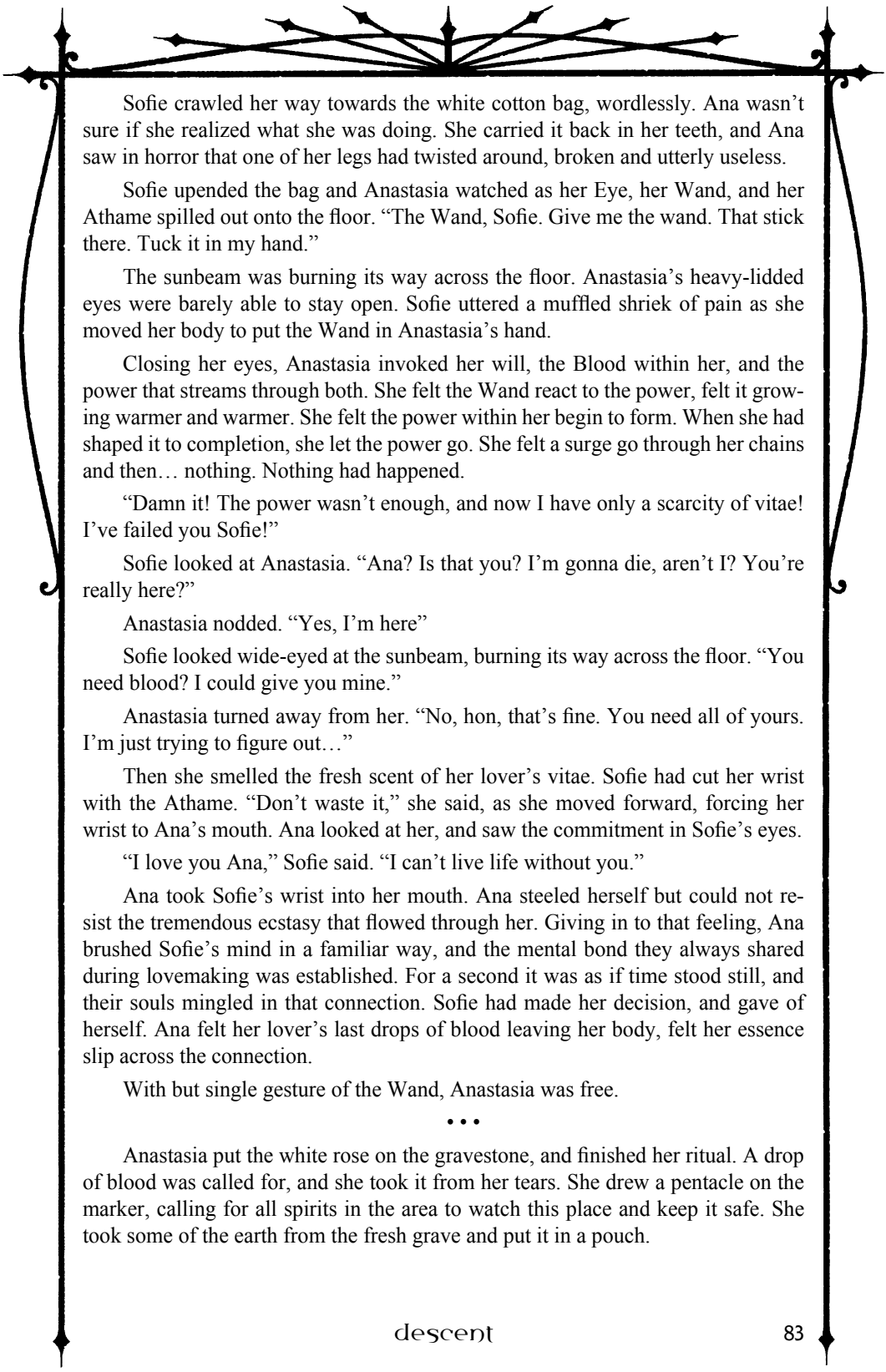
Anastasia passed into a numbness, locked as she was by the magical chains. Her mind raced, going back through all her magical training, trying to find something, anything that would save her. There was a gray time, and Sofie moaned and passed in and out of consciousness.

Soon, the light of the sun began to show down from the hole in the ceiling. Sofie stirred. Anastasia turned her head slightly towards her, having discovered that the magical chains allowed her a little freedom of movement.

"Sofie! Sofie! Are you awake?" Anastasia called. A wave of sleepiness washed over her as the sun was rising in the sky.

"Sofie!" Sofie's eyes were half-open, and she looked up at Anastasia. "Ana?"

"Sofie! You have to get me that bag. Get me the bag, sugar. I can save us both."



Sofie crawled her way towards the white cotton bag, wordlessly. Ana wasn't sure if she realized what she was doing. She carried it back in her teeth, and Ana saw in horror that one of her legs had twisted around, broken and utterly useless.

Sofie upended the bag and Anastasia watched as her Eye, her Wand, and her Athame spilled out onto the floor. "The Wand, Sofie. Give me the wand. That stick there. Tuck it in my hand."

The sunbeam was burning its way across the floor. Anastasia's heavy-lidded eyes were barely able to stay open. Sofie uttered a muffled shriek of pain as she moved her body to put the Wand in Anastasia's hand.

Closing her eyes, Anastasia invoked her will, the Blood within her, and the power that streams through both. She felt the Wand react to the power, felt it growing warmer and warmer. She felt the power within her begin to form. When she had shaped it to completion, she let the power go. She felt a surge go through her chains and then... nothing. Nothing had happened.

"Damn it! The power wasn't enough, and now I have only a scarcity of vitae! I've failed you Sofie!"

Sofie looked at Anastasia. "Ana? Is that you? I'm gonna die, aren't I? You're really here?"

Anastasia nodded. "Yes, I'm here"

Sofie looked wide-eyed at the sunbeam, burning its way across the floor. "You need blood? I could give you mine."

Anastasia turned away from her. "No, hon, that's fine. You need all of yours. I'm just trying to figure out..."

Then she smelled the fresh scent of her lover's vitae. Sofie had cut her wrist with the Athame. "Don't waste it," she said, as she moved forward, forcing her wrist to Ana's mouth. Ana looked at her, and saw the commitment in Sofie's eyes.

"I love you Ana," Sofie said. "I can't live life without you."

Ana took Sofie's wrist into her mouth. Ana steeled herself but could not resist the tremendous ecstasy that flowed through her. Giving in to that feeling, Ana brushed Sofie's mind in a familiar way, and the mental bond they always shared during lovemaking was established. For a second it was as if time stood still, and their souls mingled in that connection. Sofie had made her decision, and gave of herself. Ana felt her lover's last drops of blood leaving her body, felt her essence slip across the connection.

With but single gesture of the Wand, Anastasia was free.

...

Anastasia put the white rose on the gravestone, and finished her ritual. A drop of blood was called for, and she took it from her tears. She drew a pentacle on the marker, calling for all spirits in the area to watch this place and keep it safe. She took some of the earth from the fresh grave and put it in a pouch.

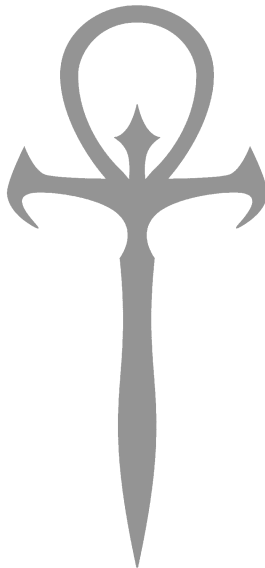
She had called Etrius to arrange for the burial, he was happy to hear from her and even managed to show sadness at her having lost Sofie. He was more than willing to help her with the financial arrangements: provided that she present herself to the prince of San Francisco immediately.

She walked back down the hill, closed the cemetery gate behind her, and stepped to the waiting limousine. Her driver was a ghoul of the Tremere elder, who had already telephoned her at her brownstone to pay his respects. As the limo passed through town, up Russian Hill, on the way to Sebastian's Club, she caught a glimpse of her former home, her Ivory Tower, the brownstone she and Sofie shared. She realized that it would never do as a Haven in this city, that she would have to move uptown, perhaps closer to the Chantry.

Whether Selena had known she had escaped or not, the Sabbat bitch had not come seeking her. Perhaps she wasn't as powerful as she had thought. Anastasia was still deeply concerned about the name Zarastus, One-Who-Walks... could that be her Sire? Or perhaps a darker creature, for the Sabbat were said to truck with forces from Hell?

She would meet the prince garbed in her robes of office, having reclaimed and mended them from the vestibule of the church. Checking them before she changed in the limo, she found something, something which told her that Selena wasn't finished with her.

It was a pendant, a stone circle. On one side was Sumerian art, the visage of the Goddess Inanna, Queen of Heaven, and on the other, the Crescent Moon, Selena's sigil.





EXpendable

by Lois Tilton

Kyle woke to the certain, gut-deep knowledge that something was wrong.

He rolled into a crouch, the lethargy of sleep replaced by sudden dread. All senses alert, scanning the fetid darkness. “Fang,” he whispered out loud, but there was no answer from the silence.

“Fang!” This time his call was a cry of desperation, and the dull echoes rang back at him, mocking: Now you’re alone... alone... alone.


He had learned, in all these years since his escape from the vampire, what it really meant to be alone, to hide in the dark, to run from the sight of a human face, speaking to no one — no one except a mongrel dog. If it hadn’t been for Fang, he was afraid he might even have forgotten how to speak, so far away from the world he had hidden himself. The dog had kept him human all this time. At least... he could let himself believe he had some faint vestige of humanity left to him. For he knew what he had become, and the knowledge was the root of all his despair.

More than just a companion, Fang was his guard, standing watch during the daytime hours when he was helpless and vulnerable. But now it was sunset, Kyle was awake, and there was no sign of the familiar presence. Fear churned deep in his belly. What had happened to the dog? A car, some lunatic with a gun? Or some other, more sinister element? The earthquake last night had really bothered Fang. Maybe it had disturbed his senses somehow.

“Fang!”

This time, as the echoes of his cry faded down the length of the empty tunnel, he thought he heard a response, a faint howl, almost like a wolf’s.

The sound finally brought him to his feet, running quickly down to the abandoned access shaft. San Francisco was like a molehill, riddled with tunnels. Someone had begun, then abandoned this project maybe as much as a hundred years ago. Kyle didn’t know or care why. But now he hesitated, as he always did, emerging into the world aboveground. Tonight, without Fang at his side, the last fading streaks of sunlit cloud beyond the city’s hills seemed colored with menace.



The recent recession had accelerated the decline of this part of the waterfront into decay. But despite the air of desolation, Kyle didn't dare call Fang aloud, not out here in the open. Instead, he searched with all his senses cast as wide as possible, for a sound of him, for the faint, inexplicable touch of the animal's mind. And felt it, from somewhere in the direction of the docks.

After a few minutes, he caught sight of the familiar form coming toward him, but his relief was cold, because Fang was limping. Recognizing him, the dog whined, a sound of pain and distress, and Kyle suddenly caught the unmistakable scent of blood.

Something raked in his gut, a burning, acidic Hunger. In his mind, the vampire's voice laughed mockingly: Feed it, boy! Feed the Beast! Let it howl!

He clenched his teeth against it, so hard that his fangs bit down on his lower lip. He felt the sharp heat of his own blood burning his tongue. Somehow, the taste of it helped him regain control. As Fang came limping up to him, Kyle fell to his knees, put his arms around the rough, matted gray coat, sticky and clotted with gore. The dog had been hurt. One ear was ripped half-off, and there were bite wounds on his face, neck, shoulders.

The animal whimpered again and pushed eagerly against him, licking at his face. Kyle knew what he wanted and allowed him to lick the blood from his lower lip, where it had run down to his chin. He closed his eyes and held him tightly, feeling the animal warmth of the living creature, the heart that beat so strongly. He was worried sometimes that he might have passed on the terrible curse of his blood to the dog, but Fang was unquestionably still alive.

"What the hell did you run into out there, boy?"

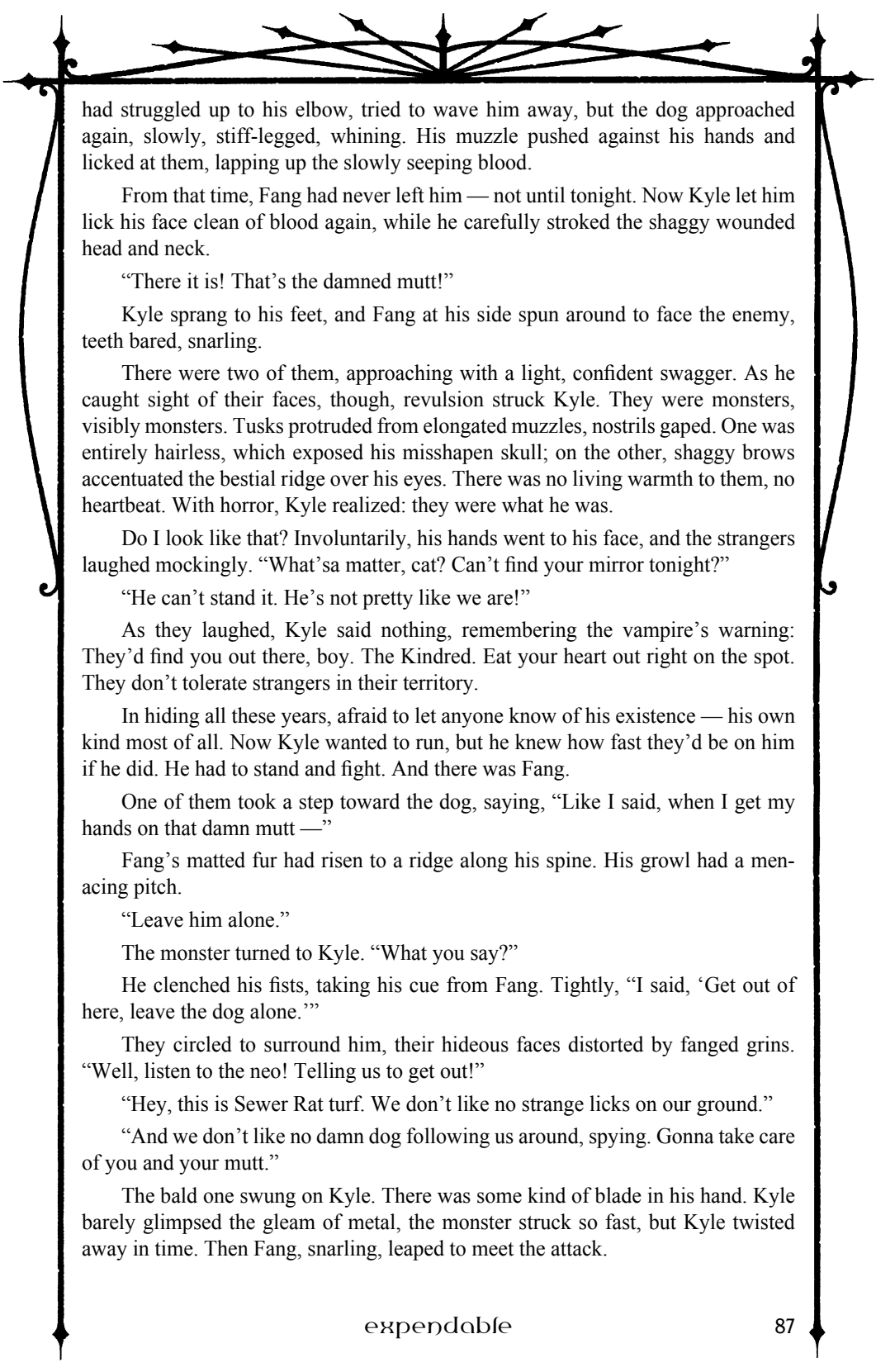
Fang had no collar to protect his throat, but for his own reasons Kyle would never put a collar on any animal, especially not Fang, who had come to him freely.

It had been near the foot of the bridge, in a night shrouded by fog. He was constantly drawn back to the bridge, where it had all begun, meaning to put an end to the curse of his unnatural existence. A million times before, chained in the vampire's cellar, he had told himself that it had all been a mistake, that he had never meant to jump, not really.

But that night, when it was too late and he was finally free from the vampire who had transformed him into another, then, he did jump, only to find himself being dragged down by the water to the bottom of the bay. Not needing to breathe, of course he couldn't drown. He couldn't die. He couldn't even die.

He had crawled out at last, weak with exhaustion after fighting the current and the weight of the water. Some rusting wreckage offshore had sliced his hands and arms. He was lying there at the foot of the bridge with the blood dripping slowly onto the ground, when a shadow had fallen over his face. At first he thought it might be a wolf, with the lolling red tongue and sharp white teeth, but the head was too massive, the gray coat shaggy and tangled.

The dog licked at his face. He felt the breath, the hot, soft tongue wiping away his tears. Then the animal yelped sharply, shook his head from side to side. Kyle



had struggled up to his elbow, tried to wave him away, but the dog approached again, slowly, stiff-legged, whining. His muzzle pushed against his hands and licked at them, lapping up the slowly seeping blood.

From that time, Fang had never left him — not until tonight. Now Kyle let him lick his face clean of blood again, while he carefully stroked the shaggy wounded head and neck.

“There it is! That’s the damned mutt!”

Kyle sprang to his feet, and Fang at his side spun around to face the enemy, teeth bared, snarling.

There were two of them, approaching with a light, confident swagger. As he caught sight of their faces, though, revulsion struck Kyle. They were monsters, visibly monsters. Tusks protruded from elongated muzzles, nostrils gaped. One was entirely hairless, which exposed his misshapen skull; on the other, shaggy brows accentuated the bestial ridge over his eyes. There was no living warmth to them, no heartbeat. With horror, Kyle realized: they were what he was.

Do I look like that? Involuntarily, his hands went to his face, and the strangers laughed mockingly. “What’s a matter, cat? Can’t find your mirror tonight?”

“He can’t stand it. He’s not pretty like we are!”

As they laughed, Kyle said nothing, remembering the vampire’s warning: They’d find you out there, boy. The Kindred. Eat your heart out right on the spot. They don’t tolerate strangers in their territory.

In hiding all these years, afraid to let anyone know of his existence — his own kind most of all. Now Kyle wanted to run, but he knew how fast they’d be on him if he did. He had to stand and fight. And there was Fang.

One of them took a step toward the dog, saying, “Like I said, when I get my hands on that damn mutt —”

Fang’s matted fur had risen to a ridge along his spine. His growl had a menacing pitch.

“Leave him alone.”

The monster turned to Kyle. “What you say?”

He clenched his fists, taking his cue from Fang. Tightly, “I said, ‘Get out of here, leave the dog alone.’”

They circled to surround him, their hideous faces distorted by fanged grins. “Well, listen to the neo! Telling us to get out!”

“Hey, this is Sewer Rat turf. We don’t like no strange licks on our ground.”

“And we don’t like no damn dog following us around, spying. Gonna take care of you and your mutt.”

The bald one swung on Kyle. There was some kind of blade in his hand. Kyle barely glimpsed the gleam of metal, the monster struck so fast, but Kyle twisted away in time. Then Fang, snarling, leaped to meet the attack.

As the dog's teeth closed around the monster's arm, Kyle was staggered by a blow from behind. He turned, weaponless, and saw the shaggy-browed one swinging a motorcycle chain. On the end was a spiked metal ball, and the tearing pain in his back knew it was what had hit him.

"C'mon," whispered the monster, still grinning hideously. "C'mon, alley cat, let's play!" The chain swung in a circle. Around. Around.

And because he was desperate, because he knew he was cornered and trapped, Kyle did the only thing he could. He grabbed for the chain, hoping to pull it to him or jerk it out of the monster's hand.

But instead he took the blow across his wrist, cracking the bone. The chain swung back again, and down, and the spikes raked him from his shoulder across his chest. He stumbled back. The chain hit his left elbow. At the sound of his cry, his enemy laughed, swung his weapon again, this time at the side of Kyle's head. He only barely managed to dodge away from the vicious spikes.

He could hear Fang yelping in pain, but he couldn't do anything to save his dog, he was almost helpless himself now.

"Hey, hold it!"

Someone's voice. Someone... a woman's voice.

He turned toward it, but this time he couldn't dodge the chain fast enough. The force of the blow knocked him to the ground.

"I said, 'Hold it!'"

Kyle was on the ground, curled up to try to protect himself, waiting for the chain to hit him again. But the ground, suddenly, shifted under him, the earth itself trying to shake him off.

Through a painful haze, he realized: it was a quake!

For an eternal moment, it was all there was, the uneasy earth shuddering. It was impossible to think, to react. Then it was over, and in the sudden, awed silence, he heard the woman's voice again, exactly as if nothing had happened.

"Don't you two jerks listen? I told you to hold it. This isn't the right dog!"

"Huh?"

She was getting up from her knees, brushing off the rags she was wearing. "This isn't the same dog, clot-brain!"

"Oh. Yeah, well, what about him?"

"You two just get out of here. I'll take care of him."

"He was on our turf."

"Yeah, and the damn dog almost ripped my arm off!"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"All right! OK!"

The two picked themselves up and retreated, looking back with sullen resentment. Kyle stared at his rescuer. What he saw looking down on him was a bag lady, authentic

from the shapeless hat down to the men's basketball shoes. But in another moment something seemed to shift in his blurred vision, and he could see beyond the wrinkled face to another, even more grotesque, sister to the monsters who'd attacked him.

Then he heard a whimper, and he looked up to see Fang lying a few feet away, panting shallowly.

Gritting his teeth against the pain of movement, he crawled to his dog. If Fang had been hurt before, it was nothing to this. The injured animal whined again, and licked his face where the spikes had torn it.

"That your dog, huh?"

He glared defiance at the bag lady/monster. "Yeah, he's mine."

"So, well, sorry about the mess here. The boys made a mistake. They were looking for someone else, some lupe who's been shadowing us for a couple days now. In fact, I think your dog here had a run-in with it. That's how the mix-up happened."

Grief and anger made him reckless. "Hell of a lot good it does, being sorry."

"Hey, dog's not gonna die or anything, you know. Not if he's yours."

Kyle stared dubiously at Fang, then touched the place on the side of his face where the dog had licked. Fang did seem better now. The dog's wounds had stopped bleeding.

He looked away quickly, not to see the blood, not to want it. The Hunger pang knew better. It had been too long since he'd fed. But no matter how strong the bloodlust, he would not use Fang that way.

"And just whose whelp are you?"

He didn't mean to answer her, but she took hold of his hair and dragged his face up to meet hers — her true face, shown to him now it all its hideous nakedness, the illusion gone. "What is it with these new generations? They don't seem to hear a thing I say! Who are you, neo? Who gave you the Kiss?"

He understood her then and shook his head. "He... never told me his name."

She snorted in amused contempt. "He never released you, either, did he? What'd you do? Run away? You did, didn't you? I oughta turn you in, y'know."

Turn him in? To whom, or what? Kyle didn't know what she was talking about, exactly, but the vampire had warned him: "As far as the Kindred are concerned, boy, you're not supposed to exist. They'd kill you on sight."

Now he said nothing, not knowing what might be dangerous to say.

She only shrugged. "Not that the Rats give a damn." She was staring at him now, even closer. "Tell me, what is that? Around your neck?"

He realized then for the first time that his shirt must have been torn in the fight, and he tried to conceal the shameful metal collar around his neck, but she pulled his hand away, stronger than he was. "Well, well! This is interesting! You may be worth my trouble, after all! Do you know what these symbols are on this thing?"

He didn't answer.

"Your Sire put this on you, did he?"

He tried to pull away, but again she made him look at her, and he felt his will crumple. "Yes! He put it on me! He kept me chained to a wall. For years. Every couple of days, he'd come and..."

Kyle couldn't make himself say it.

"He fed from you?" She was clearly fascinated.

He turned his face away. Against his will, he was reliving those years chained in that black cellar, like an animal, the collar around his neck. The constant, terrible, devouring Hunger in his gut, relieved only when the vampire would come into the room and throw him some beast — a dog or cat or laboratory rabbit. The self-disgust he would always feel as he ripped at their flesh with his fangs, sucking out the blood. And the vampire watching, laughing: "That's right! Feed, boy! You need to build up your blood!"

Sometimes, instead, it was plastic bags of blood, cold and black and tasting faintly of decay. From some hospital dumpster, maybe. Spoiled blood, diseased blood. Always, driven half-mad by the Hunger, he would drain the bags, down to the very last foul drop.

"I said, 'How'd you get away?'"

"Huh?" Kyle hadn't been listening.

"With that thing around your neck — how did you get away?"

"It was the quake. The big one."

"Hey, you're not that old!"

"No, I mean the one a few years ago." He shook his head, couldn't remember the years. "The quake hit, and the wall collapsed where he had me chained. I pulled the staple out."

"And your Sire? What about him? Don't tell me he didn't come looking for you."

"I don't know. He wasn't there when it happened. He wasn't ever there during the day."

Which was a lie. She looked hard at him a moment, as if she knew it was a lie, and he struggled to pull his eyes away from hers.

Then he was released. "So, what are we going to do with you now?"

"Just get the hell out of here, all right? Leave me alone!"

"Oh, no!" she laughed. "We can't do that. The boys may have made a mistake about your dog, but they're right, this is too close to our territory. I'm surprised you got away with staying here this long. Besides, what would you do? How many years do you think you can spend down in the sewers without going crazy? What do you exist on, you and that mutt — the garbage and rats out of the dumpsters?"

The humiliation, the truth of it, rankled. "I survive," he snarled.

“You don’t know anything, do you? About the Kindred. What we are. The Traditions.”

“I know all I want to know.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re one of us, whether you like it or not. But what you don’t know can get you killed. That’s right: killed. In case you think it can’t happen to you.”

He glared at her.

“Look, with no Sire, no Clan, you’ve got no standing, don’t you see? No one responsible for you. We don’t all of us think the same way about the Rules, but nobody wants trouble coming down on all our heads. And that’s just what you are — trouble.”

She stared down at him, then seemed to make up her mind. “All right. You wait here. I’ll be back. I know where I can take you, for now. Oh, in case anyone asks, I’m Vika.”

With a flutter of rags, she disappeared into the night.

Kyle waited, only because it was too much effort to do otherwise. From time to time, he let Fang lick his face or one of the other places the spikes had torn him, though the bleeding had mostly stopped. He hurt all over. The cracked bone in his wrist grated every time he tried to move. There was no way he could pick up Fang and carry the dog back to the tunnel, and no way Fang could walk with his injuries. So he sat there with him, and he waited, and he felt the Hunger growing in his belly, gnawing on him, raking him with its claws.

All the things she’d said just served to confirm the warnings the vampire had given him years ago. That others of his kind would destroy him on sight if they ever found out he existed. A stake through his heart —

The way he’d driven a stake into the vampire. When the wall collapsed, setting him free and pinning his tormentor at the same time. A long, sharp spike of wood, right through the heart.

Only, he didn’t think it would be a good idea to let Vika or any of the rest of them know about that.

• • •

After maybe an hour, a black panel truck came bouncing over the ground and pulled up next to them. Vika opened the door, not a bag lady anymore but something like an over-the-hill hooker on her night off, wearing a scarlet cheongsam style dress, very tight, with the slit all the way up to the top of her hipbone. There was a face to match, but Kyle could see the illusion wavering if he stared hard. He looked away, avoiding the sight of yellowed tusks and gaping nostrils.

“OK, climb in.”

“I’m not leaving the dog,” he said stubbornly.

“Not leaving the dog.” She got out of the van, opened the back door, then came and looked down at Fang. “Come on, boy, into the back.” Fang whined.

“Tell him to get into the van,” she told Kyle.

Kyle stood up painfully and went to the back of the truck. “Into the van, boy.” To his surprise, Fang got to his feet and limped toward him. Vika grabbed hold of the dog and lifted him up until he could climb inside. “See, I told you he’d be fine. A day or so, and he’ll be good as new. All right, now you.”

Kyle shrugged off her help and got into the passenger side by himself.

It was unsettling to be riding in a vehicle after so long. He found himself clutching at the door with his cracked wrist while Vika drove heavy-footed through the nighttime streets. As they came careening down Powell, all he could think of was whether her brakes had been serviced lately. Where does a vampire monster go to get her brakes relined, anyway?

Something rolled out from under the seat, and he picked it up, saw it was an airline bottle of vodka. Unwillingly, he thought of Bloody Marys. He was half-tempted to turn around and see if there was a body or something in the back of the van with Fang, but it was partitioned off. The fact did nothing to ease his nerves.

As if she could sense his thoughts, she slowed down at a corner, causing a half-dozen streetwalkers to look up and display their wares. “Care to stop for dinner, first?” she grinned at him.

He shook his head, fighting down the Hunger inside him, the part of him that wanted blood, pumping hot and rich as he fed.

“No!”

She sneered. “Too bad. But I didn’t think you were the type.”

Soon they were coming into the Marina District, and Kyle started to get even more uneasy, wondering just where they were going. But when Vika turned into a drive leading up to the gate in a high wall, his misgivings turned to actual panic.

“Hey, wait! We can’t go in here! I mean...”

She grinned again. “Yeah. Look at you.”

He hadn’t seen himself, hadn’t really looked at himself in years of hiding away in the dark. But now he did, and the shame almost made him sink down to the floor of the van. His clothes had been stripped off winos passed out in the alleys. They were torn, stained with layers of filth and grime. His hands — he stared at them — were dark with ground-in dirt. His nails were black. He realized that he smelled repulsive.

“No! I can’t go into a place like this!”

But Vika ignored his protests, drove past a guard house, through the gate past the large brass plaque that said:

THE ALEXANDRIAN CLUB
FOUNDED 1917
PRIVATE
MEMBERS ONLY

“Don’t worry! There’s no dress code.” She pulled up in front of the clubhouse. “Come on, let’s go.”

He was going to refuse, but she tossed her keys to the uniformed valet coming up to the van, and he had no choice. To his surprise, she went around to the back and helped the dog down. Seeing Fang, Kyle was even more ashamed. The dog was a mess, even more so than ever, with his fur all matted and clotted with blood.

“Look,” she said, seeing that he was going to refuse to go into the place, “This is neutral ground, all right? No matter what your Clan, if you’re Kindred, you’re OK here. Just remember: you’re under my protection.” She looked down at the dog. “And he belongs to you.”

Kyle noticed that she had totally dropped the illusion now, was headed toward the door naked-faced, all her grotesque features exposed for whoever to see, and he finally figured, hell, if she could go in there looking like that, maybe he could, too.

But one look at the inside of the club, opulent with all the wood paneling, the rugs, and he stopped cold. Vika ignored him. She went over to a man leaning against the desk at the side of the room.

“Hey, Tex, you on the front desk tonight?”

“Well, Vika, honey! You know how hard it is to get good help around here.” He grinned, even while he was glancing back over her shoulder at Kyle, who wanted to evaporate into nothing. “We don’t see you around the club much these days, do we?”

She shrugged. “When I’ve got business. I got business now. But, listen, maybe you could get someone to take care of my protégé, here, OK?”

He raised a slightly dubious eyebrow. “Your get?”

She laughed. “Not likely! Not with that face! Let’s just say he’s under my protection for tonight, OK? Oh, and the dog’s his. Maybe you could, like, get them cleaned up some? They had a little misunderstanding with the boys.”

“It’s on your tab, Vika.”

“Ain’t it always! Thanks, Tex.”

She disappeared, and the man named Tex watched her leave the foyer. He turned in Kyle’s direction. “So. It’s been a tough night, huh?”

Tex’s voice had a soft twang, and he was wearing a fancy cowboy shirt with slash pockets. But he was a vampire. He had no human warmth, no heartbeat. The utter incongruity was about all that kept Kyle from fleeing back out the door. That, and Fang.

Tex leaned down to carefully rub the animal’s wounded head.

“Looks like your dog here could use himself a big old raw steak. And maybe you’re a little bit hungry, yourself?”

Kyle nodded, all the response he could manage. As Tex led him into the opulence of the lounge, a young living woman in a low-cut evening gown crossed the room. Kyle stopped, drew back, even as the Hunger lusted to dig its fangs in her

bare throat, drink up her spurting blood. He repressed the urge desperately, imagining the horrible, obscene rites that must go on in a place like this — no matter how classy it looked like on the outside.

Tex turned and gave him a searching stare. “Around here, Kindred keep their hands off what doesn’t belong to them.”

“No, I didn’t... I wouldn’t...”

Tex nodded. “Just so you know. It’s not my business. Vika says she’s responsible for you; she stands for your sins. Just — remember.”

Kyle nodded again, completely lost and intimidated in this place.

“Good.” Tex gave him another look, then said, “Come on.” He led him through a dining room where a couple sat at a table drinking coffee, and through into a gleaming kitchen. The cook working at one counter gave him a familiar nod as he crossed to a refrigerator, pulled it open and took out a familiar-looking plastic bag filled with dark red fluid. “I think maybe you’d rather have this. Am I right?”

“Please,” Kyle said hoarsely, and watched with hungry intensity as the vampire in the cowboy shirt decanted the bag into a large glass and put it into a microwave.

“We keep quite a bit of this on hand,” Tex said conversationally. “I admit, I don’t care for the stuff myself, and most of our guests bring their own retainers, but we get some like you, too. Trick is...” he popped open the microwave, “to warm it up just enough to take the chill off. Here.”

Kyle reeled at the warm scent of the blood. With shaking hands, he took the glass from Tex and inhaled a deep swallow. The Hunger protested momentarily that the blood wasn’t pumping hot from some dying victim’s arteries, but it soon subsided. This blood was fresh and clean, and the warmth made it seem almost alive.

“Thanks,” he finally gasped, setting down the empty glass.

“No problem, that’s what we’re here for. Now maybe you might like to clean up a little?”

“Please.”

Tex showed him to the well-appointed men’s room with a shower stall in the back, and Kyle gratefully stripped off his filthy clothes and started to scrub the grime out of his skin, one layer at a time. For the first time in years, he felt almost human again, and there in the shower he paused for a moment, wondering if he could ever go back to his unlife of hiding underground, and what other existence there could be for the kind of thing he was. This place, this club, was so far outside the possibilities he’d ever been able to imagine. Could it possibly be that he belonged here? Tex’s look of warning made him doubt it. Not all alone, at any rate.

When he finally came out of the shower, there was a folded pile of clothes left discreetly on a counter. His old ones, thankfully, had disappeared. There were cord slacks and an olive-brown turtleneck sweater that fit him almost perfectly. He pulled the turtleneck up to hide the metal collar around his neck, grateful for whoever had chosen it, and without thinking he looked up at the mirror to see if the collar was visible.

And he saw his face.

For a moment, the shock left him unable to think. Then he wiped the steam away from the mirror and just stared. It was his face, unchanged from the last moment he'd seen it, almost 10 years ago. He touched it — the eyelids, the nose, the mouth. Then the half-healed marks of the beating he'd taken just a couple hours ago, still sore to the touch. But it was still him. He could see himself, and he hadn't visibly changed at all.

His finger probed his mouth, felt the fangs there, retracted. Almost not at all. Vampire, he said to the image in the mirror. Admit it, finally. What you are.

Or, as they seemed to call it around this place, Kindred. But, he recalled, he was kin with no ties, no rights, not even the right to exist.

He left the room, wandered back out into the lounge, no longer feeling like they were going to throw him out with the trash. Another couple was in the dining room now, one human and one not. A waiter came up to him. "Sir? May I help you?"

"I wanted... have you seen a dog? A big, gray dog? He was hurt."

"Your retainer? Yes, Sir. He'll be brought to you when the vet is finished with him."

The vet?

"Will there be anything else?"

He hesitated. The Hunger was subdued in him, but still alive. "If I could..." How do you ask for a glass of blood, slightly warmed to take the chill off?

But the waiter seemed to know before he could ask. "Another drink, Sir?"

Gratefully, he replied, "Yes, please."

"Perhaps you'd like it in the bar."

The bar was all polished brass and dark red velvet, the color of blood. In the back of the room, the girl in the evening gown was leaning over a billiards table. The waiter brought his drink to a table, and Kyle sat down, sipped the tepid blood, and tried to understand how a place like this could exist. How it could seem so normal.

After a while, the waiter came in leading Fang, and Kyle knelt down to see the dog, who panted and wagged his tail furiously. He'd been washed, clipped, and a couple of the worst wounds sewn up.

"Is that your dog?"

The girl was looking at them. "Yes, he's mine."

"Poor thing. What happened to him?"

"He got into a fight. With some other dog, I think." The scent of her living warmth was starting to effect him. He turned away and took a large sip from his glass.

Then he saw Vika coming into the bar with a man dressed in a black suit, another vampire. At a single gesture from the vampire, the girl put her cue down on the billiards table and left.

“Around his neck?” he asked, and pulled down Kyle’s turtleneck without asking permission. Something in his manner made Kyle simply hold still for it.

For a moment the vampire examined the metal collar, tracing the symbols on it with a fingertip. “Yes, I see. Yes, you’re quite right, of course. It is certainly Hervi’s. This is very much of interest to the Chantry. We are in your debt.”

“I can deal with that,” Vika retorted smugly.

Then the vampire grasped the collar in both hands, subvocalized a phrase, and twisted. The ring separated into two parts.

Kyle gasped, clutched his neck. “How did you —” But the look the vampire gave him made the question die in his throat.

“The Chantry would of course be even more interested in finding Hervi himself.”

Vika nodded briskly. “If I find out anything, I’ll let you know.” She glanced at Kyle. “How can you drink that puke? Never mind, let’s go.”

But the vampire placed a cold hand on Kyle’s shoulder. “One might say that this was a matter for the Chantry, too.”

“One might, if the Chantry acknowledged him. Are you gonna sponsor him, Sion? No, I didn’t think so. Then again, one might say this whole mess oughta go to for judgment to the prince. Or maybe even a Conclave. You wanna call a Conclave?”

“We don’t lay our affairs open to outsiders.”

“From what I’ve heard,” Vika said carefully, and Kyle noticed she kept her eyes turned away from Sion’s, “maybe you don’t lay all your affairs in front of the Chantry. Maybe I should go to Honerius with this matter, instead?”

The vampire scowled. “We’ll be in contact. This issue isn’t settled.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Vika said, bodily half-lifting Kyle out of his chair.

“What’s this all about?” he whispered furiously when they were outside, heading to her van. “Who was that guy?”

“Business,” she said shortly, opening up the back to let Fang in. “My business.”

“Well, what about me? You let him just take that thing!”

She snorted. “You wanted to keep it around your neck? Anyway, Sion’s Tremere. Your Clan. Or at least, they’d be your Clan if you had one, which you don’t, ‘cause you’re not bound to them and they don’t like that kind of thing one bit.”

She gunned the van into life and headed down the driveway at an unsafe speed. “I was almost sure when I saw that thing around your neck — those symbols. Information’s my business, in case you couldn’t tell. So, your Sire’s name is Hervi. He was deep into Thaumaturgy — Blood Magic — a while back, but he carried things too far. Way too far. Tremere’s been looking for him for a long time now. There was talk of a Blood Hunt, even. No one knew he was here in the Domain. Makes things real interesting, y’know.”

“I don’t know a damn thing that’s going on around here!”

She laughed a sound that was starting to get on his nerves. “I know you don’t. That’s why you’re not going anywhere right now, isn’t it?”

She pulled the van over abruptly. Kyle looked around, anxious. He wasn’t quite sure where they were.

“I could tell you some things about yourself, things you really ought to know if you’re gonna survive. Like, for example, why some people are gonna want to get their hands on you, real bad. Only, in the information business, things have to go both ways. You know what I mean?”

Kyle looked away uncomfortably. “I don’t know anything about this Hervi, whoever he is. Only what he did to me.”

“Or where he is now?”

Kyle felt the dead, cold weight of his lie. He kept his eyes turned away from hers, not daring to meet them and be trapped. “I told you, I don’t know! There was the earthquake, the wall collapsed, and I got away!”

“And Hervi never found you again?”

“That’s right!”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not right. With that thing around your neck, he wouldn’t have had any trouble at all.”

Involuntarily, his hand went to his throat, where the weight of the metal collar had choked him for so long. “I don’t know why, then. Maybe he’s dead?” Getting dangerously too close to the truth.

She shook her head again. “Hervi? Dead? Not bloody likely. Not that one!”

But the image came into his mind: the vampire lying there on the cellar floor, half-buried under the collapsed stonewall. How he had picked up the sharp piece of splintered wood, raised it over his head, brought it down with all the force he could, to drive it through the vampire’s heart.

He decided to dare it. “Why not? Why couldn’t he be dead? Maybe he... got caught outside in the sun somehow, when the quake hit.”

She looked thoughtful. “Maybe. Accidents can happen to anyone, I guess. But Hervi was a lot more than he was supposed to be. If he is dead, well, I know of more than one lick who was real hungry for his blood.”

Kyle was still remembering those years chained naked in the cellar, the vampire bending over him, fangs digging into his arms, his thighs, the dark blood smearing the vampire’s face afterward, and the sensuous way he’d lick it from his lips. Hervi. Giving him a name didn’t change anything. “I hated him so much. I never knew... vampires would... do that kind of thing. To each other.”

Vika shrugged, put the van into gear again. “Like I said, there’s a lot you don’t know. That’s just one reason the Elders want to get their hands on your Sire Hervi.”

“A lot you won’t tell me.”

“That’s right. Not for free.”

She was pulling into a parking space now, somewhere just off Broadway. “Now what?” he asked.

“Now what is I’m hungry, that’s what. You can drink swill out of a plastic bag if you want, but I’ll take the real stuff, thanks.” She twisted around under the seat, exposing more than a little of her legs and rear end, and came up with a pair of spike heeled shoes. “Damn things,” she muttered viciously, getting out of the van. The red-lipped illusion of a cheap hooker was clamped on tightly over the ugliness of her real face. “Oh, and get that dog out of the back.”

He did, and sat up front with Fang’s head in his lap, wondering at the animal’s remarkable recovery. It had to be the blood, he thought — his blood. But what was the dog now?

His own injuries were healing just as quickly. In a pensive mood, he made a small cut on the outside of his good wrist and held it out to Fang, who licked the welling blood eagerly. It certainly didn’t seem to be doing the dog any harm.

He had too much time to think, waiting. If anyone had told him, back almost 10 years ago when he walked onto that bridge, that this was what it was going to be like...

I wasn’t going to do it, he protested again. I wasn’t going to jump. Not really.

But now what? He’d freed himself from the vampire’s cellar, but then shut himself up again in the tunnels, another version of the same prison. Now here he was in this van —

Then he heard a familiar laugh, answering a man’s voice. “Oh, yeah, Baby, we’re gonna have a great party, right here in back of my van! You’ll see! Got a bed back here, and booze, and everything!”

The back door opened, the van’s shocks sagged and protested. “See! Now ain’t this better than some seedy, flea-bitten cheap hotel!”

In the front, Kyle was forced to listen as Vika entangled her victim with sex and alcohol. Soon he could almost taste the sharp, tantalizing scent of human blood, warm and alive. His fangs ached to extend themselves, the Hunger in his belly twisted. Fang lifted his head and whimpered softly.

Kyle held the dog tight. He wanted it. Wanted it so much. Shortly later there was a tap on the partition behind the front seats. “Hey, you wanna come back here to give me a hand?” His own, one-time experience had led him to expect a corpse with a torn-open throat. Instead, Vika handed him out a man who looked like he was passed out, but unmistakably still alive, and without even a visible wound on him. “You didn’t —”

“Kill him? What, you think we all kill every time we feed? Just dump him over there, next to the curb. He’ll wake up in the morning and think he had a damn good time, that’s all. Unless he gets rolled, of course, but that’s not my business.”

There was a smear of blood on the man’s cuff. Kyle stared at it avidly, aching with need, despite the blood he’d consumed in the club. It was never enough, not really. Not like the real thing.

Vika laughed unpleasantly. "So! You want some?"

He dropped her victim. "No!"

She stood looking at him. "Tell me. You ever done it? I mean, really done it?"

"Once," he admitted, full of shame. "I killed her. And... I liked it too much."

"Sure you did. And now you let it claw you up on the inside, trying to deny what you are. Oh, I've met your kind before. They don't last long, let me tell you."

She got back into the van, waited for him. "OK, you did it once. And you couldn't stop till it was too late? Right?" She didn't wait for him to acknowledge it. "Then what?"

"I ran."

"Ran away and left the body, right? Now that's why the Kindred can't afford to have someone like you running around loose, leaving a big mess behind. No self-control, no common sense!"

He said nothing to defend himself, only looked up sullenly when he saw they were pulling into a parking garage. "Now what?"

She rolled her eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, it's getting late? Or do I need to tell you what happens when the sun comes up, too?"

In an instant of panic, he twisted around to look out at the fading night, as if the sunlight were going to burn through the back of the van at that moment. In fact, with everything that had happened, the impending sunrise had been the last thing on his mind. "So what do we do?"

"Well, I can't take you back with me. The boys wouldn't like it. You're not our kind. And I still want to hang on to you for a little while. So, like I told the john, it's real comfortable in the back. Nice and snug. And dark.

"But you better go let the dog out for a while before you bring him inside."

•••

Vika seemed to have the dog on her mind a lot. "Take the dog out," was just about the first thing she said when they woke up at sunset the next day.

"Why don't you get that dog something to eat?"

"Doesn't that dog need some exercise?"

Kyle wasn't exactly stupid. He figured she was talking on the van's cellular phone whenever he was gone with Fang, that she didn't want him to hear whatever she was saying. It was business.

And it didn't seem to be going very well, either. Vika was visibly nervous as she drove through San Francisco's hilly streets, looking back behind her in the side mirror. Business. Buying and selling. And he was the commodity. He was — or what he knew about the vampire named Hervi.

Dangerous business. "So what's in it for me?" he wanted to ask. "After you're paid off and they've got what they want, what happens to me?"

Kyle's lie was a strangling lump in his throat. None of them believed him. Or wanted to believe him. Or maybe they had some way to sense he knew more than he was saying.

I killed him. I drove a stake through his heart and killed him.

Vika parked the van again. Kyle looked out. They were in the old military cemetery on the grounds of the Presidio.

She turned to him. "Stay here. I've gotta meet with some people."

He stared through the film of dead moths that smeared the windshield. He could see her approaching the Two Bits monument. She'd changed into dark jeans and a leather vest laced at the front, dug out of the piles of garments that littered the back of the van. Toward her, a figure was coming from out of a grove of trees, a man wearing black, a vampire. Kyle eased the door open, glad the interior lights didn't work, and slipped out.

Both of them in black, Vika and the one named Sion, standing by the grave. Arguing, bargaining, haggling over the terms of their deal.

Kyle took a few steps closer, hoping to catch their words. He had to know what was going on.

Fragments floated toward him from the dark:

"So, you're sure about that?"

"... the Chantry... our affair..."

"... life is forfeit already... Diablerie..."

"... a matter for the..."

"... worth my while..."

What the hell? Just as Kyle was about to step closer, further out of the van's shadow, Sion suddenly raised his eyes in his direction, and Kyle felt a sharp shock run through his nerves. The vampire turned back to Vika, but at that moment there was a movement from a grove on the other side of the monument, and a small group emerged, swaggering, openly displaying their weapons. Kyle recognized the Sewer Rats from his previous encounter and wasn't quite sure whether to be relieved or not, but prudence quickly sent him back to his seat in the van while the two vampire factions confronted each other.

It appeared to be a standoff. Finally, while her allies covered her retreat, Vika got back into the van. Kicking the engine to life, "Thought I told you to stay put!"

"I've got a right to know what's going on!"

She glanced behind her in the side mirror, keeping her speed down to avoid the unwanted notice of the police. "You wanna know what's going on? All right, it seems like your Sire Hervi isn't dead, after all!"

"But —" Kyle tried to swallow his dread, but it clung to his throat. "How do you know?"

"They have ways of finding out that kind of thing."

“The... Tremere, you mean.”

“Right. Or, at least, that’s what Sion says.”

“And they think I know where he is?”

“They think they can find him, maybe. Through you. I don’t ask how. Not my business.”

He shook his head, denying everything, wishing, now, that he could acknowledge his lie. “So, then why didn’t you sell me to them? I mean, that’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

“It’s complicated,” she muttered. “I don’t know if I trust Sion. I think he’s operating on his own, outside the Chantry. That’s not good.” She looked at him directly. “You know what Hervi was doing, right?”

“Um, Blood Magic, didn’t you say?”

“Yeah. He was into that. Maybe more. Maybe worse than even what you know. They say — that Hervi’s a lot older than he’s supposed to be. There are people who’d be willing to pay a whole lot to get their hands on him. They aren’t necessarily the kind of people you want to deal with, though.”

Kyle thought he knew what she meant — vampires, killing other vampires for their blood. It made his own blood feel cold, if Vika was afraid to deal with them.

“I think I maybe made a mistake, going to Sion instead —” Her voice broke off as she took another look back in the mirror. “Oh, hell!”

Suddenly Kyle was pressed back against the seat as the van shot forward. He tried to look back, but he couldn’t see what or who was chasing them. Vika drove like a possessed being, teeth clenched, manhandling the steering wheel, taking corners at reckless speed, and Kyle could feel the van go airborne as they crested the hills and landed with a clash of overstrained shock absorbers. From the back, Fang moaned in fear.

“Is it him? Sion?” Kyle demanded, but Vika didn’t answer him, only gunned the van forward through a red light. “I thought... you didn’t want the cops on your tail!”

At least there were no sirens.

Finally she pulled into an alley, cutting her lights and letting the van coast to a stop, all the while staring back into the mirror.

“You lose them?” he asked.

In answer, she slumped back against the seat. “I don’t know. I think — yeah.”

“So who was it?”

“Don’t know.” She laughed weakly, a different sound than Kyle was used to hearing from her. “Not Sion, I’m almost sure! I don’t even know it was us they were after! But sometimes you can’t afford to hang around to find out. Things are stirred up these days. A lot of things. You’re not the only one with problems, I can tell you that!”

Fang howled from the back. "I've got to see the dog."

The animal flung himself into his arms, a hundred pounds of dog almost knocking him over. "It's OK," Kyle told him. "It's OK now."

"Get back in," Vika called from the front. "You can bring him up here with you." Although she looked as if she regretted that decision when the dog squeezed into the seat between them, tail beating hard.

"What if it had been them?" Kyle asked her. "Whoever you were afraid it was?"

She laughed again. "They would have drained you dry, boy. Like a husk. And me, too, probably, just for the hell of it. Not the kind of people you want to show up at your party. I don't even know if your friend Hervi could handle them."

Cold dread choked his throat again. "And they know about me?"

"If they don't already, they will, sooner instead of later." The hard look was back in her eyes. "Look, right about now you're starting to look more like a liability than an asset. I know you know more about Hervi than you're letting on. Hervi's the one they're all after. Now, if I had information that could lead them to him, maybe people'd be willing to forget about you."

He hesitated. She wanted to sell out Hervi herself. And what did he have to lose? Not a good question to ask, not in the company he was mixed up with now.

"Suppose... I could show you where it was? The place he kept me?"

She grinned hideously. "That'd be a start! I was hoping you'd be reasonable. Where do we go?"

"Like I said, I ran away from that place, and I wasn't planning to go back. Somewhere in the park. I don't know exactly. Maybe I can recognize some landmarks if I see them again."

Vika wasn't quite happy about that, but she backed the van out of the alley and started down Presidio toward the park. Kyle didn't say much at first, except to give directions. He still wasn't sure. Finally, "What if Hervi does turn out to be dead, after all?"

"Don't know. Depends if there's any proof, I suppose. Damn, this looks like a dead end. Are you sure you know where you're going?"

"I told you I wasn't sure! Maybe that should have been a left turn, not a right." After another minute, "If he's dead, would they still want me?"

She shrugged. "You sure seemed convinced he's gotta be dead, don't you? Any particular reason?"

He said nothing. His nerves were crawling with anxiety. The dog sensed it, and kept whining restlessly. Vika kept having to shove his tail out of the way so she could drive. Finally, when they had passed the same corner the third time, she said irritably, "This is taking too long! I'm about out of gas, and all we do is keep driving around and around in circles. And this damn dog is driving me crazy! I'm gonna stop so you can get him out of my face and into the back again."

She pulled over, and Kyle and Fang jumped out. There was a scent of eucalyptus in the air, and something about the look of the hill off to the right, something familiar. It had been just about this same time of year...

Fang sniffed at a tree, doglike. "Maybe I'd better walk him a little before I put him in the back," Kyle called to Vika.

"OK," she replied from the driver's seat.

Kyle casually followed Fang into the trees, then looked back quickly to see if she was following him. Come, he called to Fang with his mind, and set off at a run.

He was taking a big risk, and he knew it. He had enemies out here in the night, maybe Vika's enemies as well as his own. There were too many things about the situation he didn't know. Most of all, how far Vika could be trusted. It could well be that this was a big mistake, that leaving her protection was the worst thing he could do. But the more he learned about the other vampires, the more he didn't think he could trust any of them. They sure didn't seem to trust each other very much.

Things were looking more familiar, now that he was outside and on foot, the way he'd been that night he made his escape. Running, desperate, half-crazed after his years of captivity, thinking only to put as much distance as he could between himself and the cellar where the vampire lay with the stake through his heart. Dead. Or was he? Was he somehow still alive, after all this time?

Now he could remember. The hill behind him when he'd turned around to see if the vampire was pursuing him through the night. Remembering now how much the night had changed for him, how clear and bright it was with his new vision, how sharply visible it all was.

Now, with his dog running next to him, he retraced his flight as closely as he could, deeper and deeper into the woods.

The ravine was almost impossible to see until you came on it, with trees growing precariously on the steep sides. The cellar was down there. It was what remained, he supposed, of some centuries-old cabin that had once occupied the site before the land had tumbled into the gorge.

It was almost impossible, even now, to recognize the place. The quake had been years ago. Rocks and earth had slipped down into the ravine, trees had toppled and new ones grown up. On the slopes, brush and undergrowth had crept up to disguise the effects of the earthquake and erosion, hiding the entrance to the cellar, concealing it from sight. It wasn't hard for Kyle to believe that no one had happened onto the place in all the time since his escape.

"Stay," he told Fang, then climbed down the eroded slope to the cellar's entrance. It was dark inside, and the faint odor it exhaled filled him with a gut-deep unreasoning terror.

I can't go in there.

The vampire was in there. The vampire was in there, and he wasn't dead, he had never been dead, all this time.

I should go back, he told himself. I should go back and tell Vika I've found the place, let her go inside, let her deal with it.

But he couldn't trust Vika. With her, it was and would always be a matter of business. He was expendable, and he knew it. Expendable and more than a slight inconvenience.

He had to face the vampire himself.

His mouth felt dry as he took the first step through the open door into the fetid interior. The earth floor still held the odor of old, spilled blood. This had been his prison, where he'd been chained in the dark like a starving animal. And on the other side of the fallen wall, the vampire's secret retreat, where he engaged in his foul experiments, where he slept in the daytime. But now the walls were collapsed, and half-buried under the fallen stones —

He was still there. The vampire was still there, the stake still protruding from his chest, hands still vainly clutching the wood where it impaled him.

For a long time, Kyle just stood in the entrance, staring. It was only when the sky started to take on a noticeably lighter shade that he realized his time was running out, that he was going to have to find shelter or else be forced to spend another night in this place, alongside —

"Well! So you got your memory back, after all!"

At the sound of that laugh, he spun around, galvanized by shock. Vika stood above him, grinning with that grotesque expression she deliberately used to unsettle people. "Was wondering when you'd finally break for it. So, this is what you were looking for?"

His fists tightened, but Kyle knew when he'd been outmanipulated. "He's in here. And he's dead, like I told you."

"Really?" He watched her climb down to the entrance. "So, this is the place," she said again. "Nice. Cheery. Let's have a look, then."

Kyle turned away. "Go right ahead. This is what you wanted. I'm getting out of here."

"No. I don't think so. Unless you think you can get past me. Now, why don't you go in first?"

Reluctantly, he stepped inside ahead of her. "There," he pointed to the staked figure beneath the collapsed wall.

And he heard her laugh. "You idiot! You... ignorant Childe! You thought he was dead? Like that? You thought you'd killed him? It was you, wasn't it, who staked him?"

"The wall fell, like I said," Kyle muttered tightly. "He was pinned down. It was my only chance to get away."

Vika went closer, climbing over stones, and looked down on the staked vampire. "So, this is Hervi. Whoever woulda thought it?"

Irritably, Kyle said, "All right, there he is. All yours." He glanced at Hervi, hardly able to believe that even the vampire could still be alive like that, after all this time. But it was true. He hadn't decayed, hadn't changed, like he was in some kind of suspended animation. Not dead. Not dead, after all. It made Kyle shudder in irrational terror to think that he might still come back to life, might sit up and bare his fangs.

Vika glanced back toward the entrance, where the sky was now discernibly lighter. "Looks like we might as well stay here today, then I can get the boys together tomorrow night."

"Oh no. No way! Not me!" Kyle backed away from her. He never wanted to spend another day in this place. And the more so now, with the vampire — with Hervi lying there. Not dead. "You've got what you want, you don't need me any more. So you can call off the hunt, all right? I just want out of here!"

"That is unfortunate, then."

At the sound of the voice, both Kyle and Vika froze.

"Sion!" Vika hissed his name like a curse.

Kyle recognized the vampire in black as he stepped inside the cellar. He felt his nails dig into his palms.

Sion grinned. "It appears that we'll all have to spend the day in here — one way or the other. Oh, and Vika, I wouldn't be expecting your brood to show up this time. I believe they've been unavoidably detained."

Sion laughed with malicious enjoyment at her expression. Then he stepped closer and took one intent, avid look at the staked figure on the floor and smiled in satisfaction. "It has been a long time, Hervi! And under such circumstances!" He glanced from the helpless vampire back to the entrance. "Yes, there is just time enough! But first, my inconvenient friends..."

"Sion, no!" Vika protested, backing away from him. "I don't want to have anything to do with all this!"

"But it's too late for that. You see, Vika, you're already involved. It's a drawback to the information business, you know — sometimes you end up knowing too much for your own good. And now, of course, you've witnessed a terrible crime. It's only too bad you couldn't get away in time to report it to the authorities.

"Look at me!"

While Kyle watched in horror, Vika turned slowly, unwillingly, to meet Sion's compelling gaze. She stood as if paralyzed in front of him while he pulled a sharpened hardwood stake from inside his coat and plunged it deep between her ribs.

For a moment, she still stood upright, blood welling from her mouth and nostrils, before she slowly crumpled to the ground. Blood scent filled the cellar.

"And now..."

Kyle made a single, desperate move to escape, but Sion stopped him with a word. Then his piercing eyes seized hold of Kyle's will.

“Kneel down.”

No! Kyle’s mind protested, but he was powerless. He knelt, unable to do anything but obey.

“Look at him. Look at your Sire, your progenitor, your maker.”

Kyle’s vision fixed on Hervi, on the vampire’s sightless, staring eyes, on the ancient, bloodstained shirt with the wooden spike projecting from it. Sion bent, ripped the shirt away, revealing where the wood had penetrated the flesh, the blackened, congealed blood that had oozed out so long ago. Hervi’s blood.

The vampire’s blood. The scent of it! Kyle felt the sharpness of his own fangs in his mouth. Hunger clawed at his gut.

“Yes!” Sion hissed avidly. “You want it, don’t you? Of course you do. I can see how much you still hate him. No one will doubt what must have happened here. How you came back, looking for vengeance...”

Sion’s hand closed around the jagged piece of wood.

“How you drained the blood of your own Sire!” Slowly, he pulled it free, letting a few drops of the thick, sluggish, black liquid seep slowly from the dark pit of the wound.

And deep within the dullness of the vampire’s eyes, a gleam seemed to flicker. Clawed nails flexed.

“Take it! Now!”

Kyle fell on Hervi, biting down with his fangs, tasting the vampire’s blood, reeling with the sensation of it, sucking it from the wound, wanting more, wanting it all —

“Enough!”

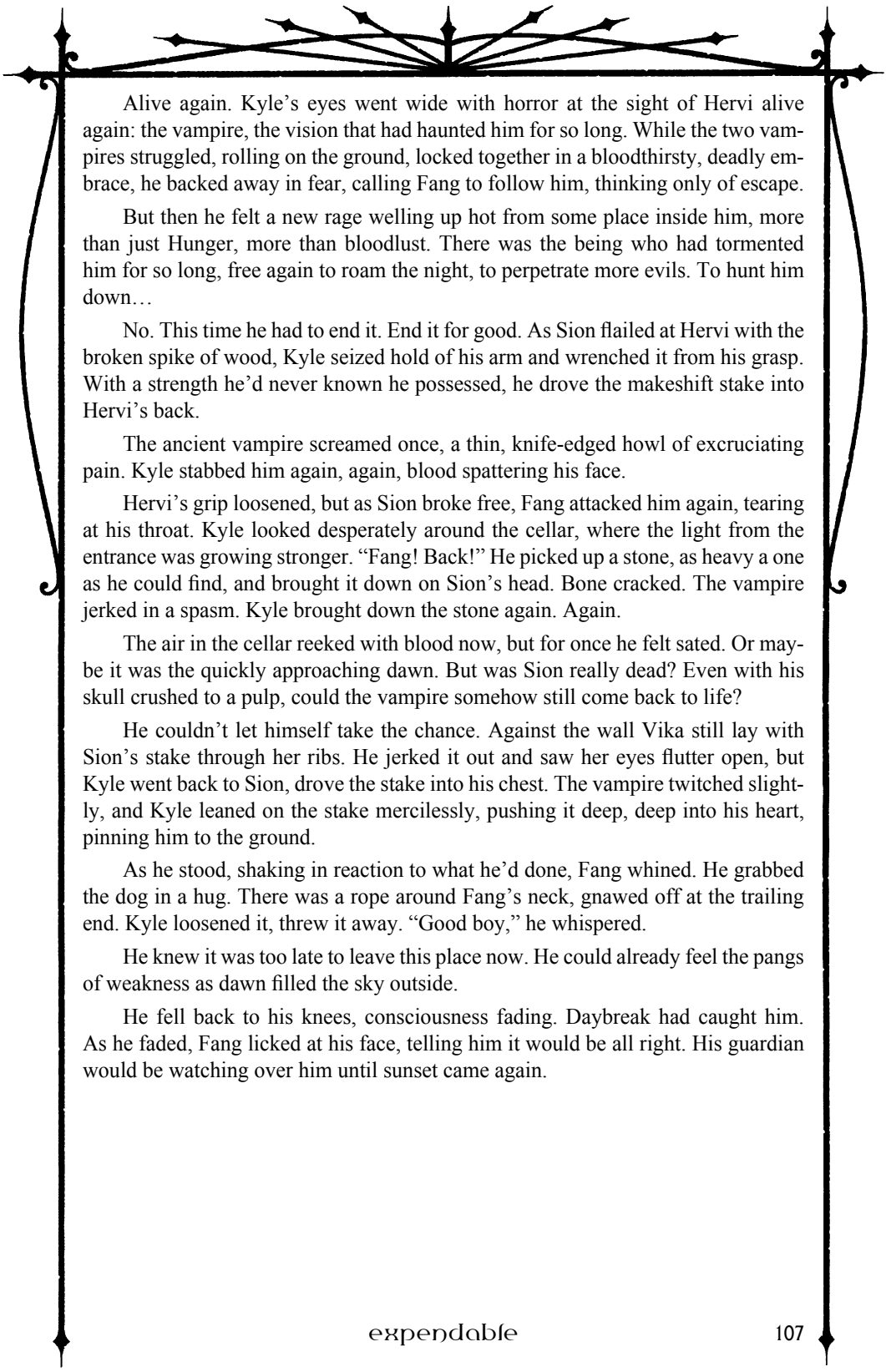
Kyle heard the order, but the bloodlust in him struggled against it.

“Stop!” And in a softer, more malicious voice, “Don’t be greedy, Childe! Don’t take it all!”

This time, reluctantly, Kyle obeyed. Hervi’s blood was rushing through him, exhilarating. So much richer than the one time he’d taken human blood, the one time he’d killed.

The avid gleam in Sion’s eyes was brighter now. “Of course, there can be only one penalty for what you’ve done.” He was still holding the bloodstained spear of wood that had impaled Hervi. But just as he was about to stab it through Kyle’s chest, a rush of gray fur came through the cellar entrance, and over a hundred pounds of furious dog struck him from the back and knocked him to the ground, snarling, biting.

Sion twisted to stab at the dog, but as he tried to defend himself, a pair of black-nailed hands reached out to seize his throat. Hervi, reviving quickly, sank his fangs into the other vampire.



Alive again. Kyle's eyes went wide with horror at the sight of Hervi alive again: the vampire, the vision that had haunted him for so long. While the two vampires struggled, rolling on the ground, locked together in a bloodthirsty, deadly embrace, he backed away in fear, calling Fang to follow him, thinking only of escape.

But then he felt a new rage welling up hot from some place inside him, more than just Hunger, more than bloodlust. There was the being who had tormented him for so long, free again to roam the night, to perpetrate more evils. To hunt him down...

No. This time he had to end it. End it for good. As Sion flailed at Hervi with the broken spike of wood, Kyle seized hold of his arm and wrenched it from his grasp. With a strength he'd never known he possessed, he drove the makeshift stake into Hervi's back.

The ancient vampire screamed once, a thin, knife-edged howl of excruciating pain. Kyle stabbed him again, again, blood spattering his face.

Hervi's grip loosened, but as Sion broke free, Fang attacked him again, tearing at his throat. Kyle looked desperately around the cellar, where the light from the entrance was growing stronger. "Fang! Back!" He picked up a stone, as heavy a one as he could find, and brought it down on Sion's head. Bone cracked. The vampire jerked in a spasm. Kyle brought down the stone again. Again.

The air in the cellar reeked with blood now, but for once he felt sated. Or maybe it was the quickly approaching dawn. But was Sion really dead? Even with his skull crushed to a pulp, could the vampire somehow still come back to life?

He couldn't let himself take the chance. Against the wall Vika still lay with Sion's stake through her ribs. He jerked it out and saw her eyes flutter open, but Kyle went back to Sion, drove the stake into his chest. The vampire twitched slightly, and Kyle leaned on the stake mercilessly, pushing it deep, deep into his heart, pinning him to the ground.

As he stood, shaking in reaction to what he'd done, Fang whined. He grabbed the dog in a hug. There was a rope around Fang's neck, gnawed off at the trailing end. Kyle loosened it, threw it away. "Good boy," he whispered.

He knew it was too late to leave this place now. He could already feel the pangs of weakness as dawn filled the sky outside.

He fell back to his knees, consciousness fading. Daybreak had caught him. As he faded, Fang licked at his face, telling him it would be all right. His guardian would be watching over him until sunset came again.



Homecoming: Affairs of the Heart

by James A. Moore

Jeremy Wix sat slumped back in the passenger's seat of the Jeep. His eyes were half-closed and his Stetson was pulled low over his head, making him appear as if he were asleep, when in truth he was very much awake. Beside him, Dawson drove on through the night, heading towards a city that had never seen him before.

"Where's the turn off, Jerry? And please, try hard to remember that I've never been here. Don't pull a Seattle on me, okay?"

Jeremy sat up a little taller, looked around the area with a blank face and casually pointed. "Next exit. And will you knock it off about Seattle already? Christ, next you'll be blaming me for the goddamn traffic."


Dawson shrugged his shoulders and grinned amiably. "Hey, you're more than welcome to walk if the company bothers you. I've got better things to do with my time than play chauffeur, y'know."

Jeremy grabbed the door of the moving car, reaching through the open window, and sank his fingers into the aluminum. His voice when he spoke again was very soft, almost a whisper, not at all like his normal gravelly tones. "By all means, let me off here. I imagine I'll make it through to San Francisco." His eyes were now wide open, staring out at the distant lights of the city.

Dawson ignored the request, and turned towards the exit lane, neglecting his turn signal. "Your problem," he mused as he accelerated into the sharp right turn, "is that you have no sense of humor. Used to be I could hassle you and just get a little hassle back, not a load of crap about making it on your own."

They drove on in silence for the next 20 minutes, the tension between them unbroken. "I'm sorry, Dawson. It's just ... It's not easy coming back here." Jeremy was silent for a few more minutes, then he shrugged his shoulders and continued. "I spent my whole life here, my mortal life, and then I was forced to leave. How the hell am I supposed to come back here and act like nothing happened?"

Dawson shook his head, a half-smile smeared across his face. In the sodium lights of the freeway, he looked downright sinister, the way the shadows pooled at



his eyes and his cheeks, he looked worlds meaner than he was in reality. "I know what you need. Drop the face."

Jeremy turned and looked at his friend as if he had lost his mind completely. "Are you crazy?" Dropping your face was one of those little terms that Dawson had come up with, a term that meant letting the mortals see just how nasty you looked without the illusions that hid your damnation. Both Jeremy and Dawson were unfortunate enough to have Faces that they needed to wear, though each had his own reason.

"Naw, we ain't in the city yet, why not?" He grinned, a wide, slightly vicious expression, and winked. "No one to see us do it, Jerr. We could just watch the faces on the other drivers. Heck, you could pull out the camera if you wanted, take shots of these schmucks."

Jeremy smiled in spite of himself, and reached for the Polaroid Instamatic that he was carrying in his over night bag. "What the hell, no one here to see it."


They pulled up next to a Ford station wagon that had seen its best days well over a decade ago. Sitting in the driver's seat was a portly Latino somewhere in his mid-fifties. The man was bobbing his balding head side to side, following the beat of a Top-40s classic song. The song was old enough that Jeremy couldn't recognize it immediately; such songs grew rarer all the time. Dawson spoke softly, whispering almost, and started the countdown. "One ... two ... three!" Dawson's hand struck the horn on their Jeep, and the man's bobbing head turned to face in their direction as the shrill honk cut through the night air. At the same time, both Dawson and Jeremy let the man see their true faces.

It was only for a second, just long enough to watch the man's eyes bug halfway out of his head and to see the color drain out of his face. Just exactly and precisely long enough for the man to realize that neither of the people he was looking at were human. And just long enough for Jeremy Wix to snap a picture of his stupid expression.

Then it was over. Then they were just two guys in a Jeep having a good laugh.

By the time Jeremy and Dawson had reached the edge of San Francisco proper, Jeremy was in better spirits. He kept looking at the photo from his Instamatic, amused by the expression on the man's face, and bitter about what had put the silly look there in the first place. Five years ago the bitterness would have been the only thing that really mattered, it would have brought a rage upon his soul that was capable driving him to violence. A lot had changed in the last five years, and now he could focus on the humor of the situation. Dawson claimed that he had no sense of humor; Jeremy knew better, it was just that there was so little in his life worth laughing about.

Dawson cleared his throat noisily, and Jeremy looked towards him. "Look, I gotta get out of here, Jerry, I need to take care of some business over in Oakland." He stared at Jeremy Wix for a few seconds, wondering what was going on deep behind the mask that Jeremy always wore, the mask that said all was right with the world, or at least it wasn't any worse than it was yesterday. "You gonna be OK?"



Jeremy smiled back, it was a weak smile one made small by fear, but it was real at least. “Yeah. Yeah I’ll be fine. Get out of here. I’ll call you when it’s all taken care of.” Dawson looked ready to stay right beside him through the whole visit, and Jeremy knew he would if he was asked. Jeremy did not ask. “Hit the road, Dawson, I’ll let you know what happens, assuming I still can, but you don’t want any part of this, believe it.”

Dawson nodded slightly, seemed almost ready to volunteer for combat, and then nodded again. “We’ll see ya, Jeremy.” The Jeep started roughly from the side of the road and took off like a bullet. Jeremy Wix watched the spot where it had last been for several minutes before heading on his way. The city had changed in 15 years, and he supposed that was to be expected, but the changes hurt in a soft way. Still, it was the only place he would ever be able to call home. Jeremy shifted the Army surplus duffel bag on his shoulder, leaned to the side a little for balance, and started on his way. From this moment on, until he met with Jochen van Nuys and, hopefully, gained the right to live in San Francisco again, he was a wanted man.

Dawson had let him off on Fifth Street, not too far from his first destination. Only 12 blocks. Jeremy could have asked for a lift all the way to where his mother was mourning the death of her life long husband, but Jeremy had learned a long time back never to trust anyone that far, never to tell anyone where you planned to spend your time, not even your good friends. That was not the way the game was played when you were undead.

The walk was painful, dredging up more and more memories of how his life had been before the Embrace, when he was handsome, when he was still human. By the time he had arrived at Union Square, the light mist that had been threatening to become fog had carried out its threat. Rather than making him lonelier, sadder, the fog revitalized him. The fog was a part of Jeremy’s home as much as anything else in the city.

Jeremy Wix was just starting to reflect on the smells that made San Francisco — the occasional waft of seawater spray, the smell of damp litter hidden in the gutters, the faintest hint of sourdough bread from one of the numerous over-priced bread shops — when he was struck hard enough on the shoulder to actually stagger him.

Jeremy stared at the bastard that had just collided with him, a lean, well-muscled man, scarcely any older than 18 to 20. He was dressed in evening finery, ready for a night out on the town, and by the looks of him, ready to go pick up his date for the night. Jeremy almost let the man’s rudeness go, almost ignored the man entirely, then the man opened his mouth and sealed his fate. “Why don’t you look where the hell you’re going, asshole.”

Jeremy’s hands pulled into fists without his even having to think about it. “Hey, pretty boy, come here.” The man turned to look at him with what almost equated to shock on his face, as if the idea that Jeremy might actually be talking to him was simply beyond his comprehension. He started walking away, an almost laugh, almost sigh of disgust going past his model perfect lips.

Jeremy was beyond the point of caring. There was too much going on in his life, there was too much to worry about, and he simply couldn't bring himself to let the man go on his way. Besides, he was hungry. "I said come here, pretty boy, I want an apology."

The man was a good four or five inches taller than Jeremy's 5' 10". At a guess he had about 40 extra pounds on him as well, and it looked to all be muscle. Jeremy waited to see when the man would make his move. The man simply waved him away with one hand, turned, and made to leave again. Jeremy Wix made a casual assessment of his surroundings, made certain that absolutely no one was around to see what was occurring, and made special note of the alley that was off to his left. When he was positive that there would be no witnesses, he tossed the man towards the alley's opening, not much of a toss, just enough to get him moving in the right direction.

"Shit, you don't know how to listen very well, do you?" the startled man yelped, more surprised than anything else. Jeremy took another quick look around, made absolutely certain that there was no one in the vicinity to see the two of them, and then grinned amiably. He shoved the man back into the alley with a smooth push on the his expensive looking leisure suit. "Boy, I can't tell you how nice it is to see a friendly face my first night back."

The man slammed into the dirty brick wall with enough force to knock the wind out of him, and Jeremy heard the sound of loose change clattering musically off of an overturned trashcan not far away. A much warier man was gaining his feet when Jeremy reached him. Jeremy kept his voice even and friendly as he pulled the man close. "I was just thinking to myself. I was thinking: Jeremy, what you need is a little something to eat before you get home," he mused as he slapped the shocked man's face hard enough to actually hear the hinge of his jaw dislocate. He talked over the man's muffled scream, smiling into the pain widened eyes as he lifted his victim completely off of the ground and pressed him into the wall again, making certain not to let the man's head hit first. It was no fun if they were unconscious.

The man tried to talk, "Whyrnooingthhith? I'm thorry. Pleath, chust leaf me alone!" Jeremy was more adept than most at hearing words mangled by speech impediments. Hell, speech impediments were very common among his kind. "Why are you doing this? I'm sorry! Please, just leave me alone!" About every other word was even mildly coherent. Jeremy guessed at the rest of what the man said. "Why? Because I can, and because you really pissed me off. But mostly, because I'm a bad liar. See, my dietary habits forbid me the pleasure of Mom's cooking." He frowned slightly, looking at the squirming fool in his hands, ignoring his prey's attempts to break his grip. "I'd hate to lie to my mother. I'd hate to tell her that I'd just eaten, if in fact I had not."

Desperation allowed the handsome man to move, he kicked Jeremy in the balls. Jeremy acted as if nothing had happened, and his assailant started to get really nervous. Jeremy didn't know exactly what the thoughts going through his victim's mind were, but he could guess: Maybe he was thinking that there were things more import-

ant than whether or not he was going to be late for picking up his date; things like living to explain to his fiancée why he hadn't been able to meet with her and her parents for dinner. Jeremy forced the thoughts from his mind; it was far too late for feelings of guilt. Besides, the nastier parts of his mind were enjoying the show, and his personal favorite part was about to begin. It was time to make the man understand what he was up against. Jeremy surveyed the alleyway one last time. After he was reassured, he dropped the Face that hid what he had become from everyone who might see him.

Todd Kingsley, until recently from L.A., looked at the dark blue, warty skinned demon in front of him and started thrashing anew. The devil in blue jeans reached for his face and tweaked his nose hard enough to rupture the cartilage that gave his sinuses access to air. Todd whimpered, felt his eyes start to sting with the burning water of tears, and continued to kick ineffectually at the monster's crotch and stomach.

Jeremy Wix waited patiently for his opponent's eyes to clear and then, for maximum effect, smiled broadly, revealing a set of teeth that would have made a Doberman pinscher jealous. They were long and sharp, and spread all over his mouth as if vying for space in an overcrowded bus.


Jeremy lowered the rude man until they were eye-to-eye, and winked slowly. "You did me a real favor, guy. I never could lie to my mom worth a piss. Thanks." Jeremy savored the sensation of his teeth ripping into the throat of his prey, relished the taste of hot blood flowing into his mouth and past his own gums, caressing his tongue with the sultry, rusty taste.

When he was done feeding, Jeremy carefully licked the wounds, curing them with his saliva. Normally, he would have let his foolish victim live, let him have nightmares about what could only be a serious nightmare. But he was nervous, and he really couldn't afford to leave any trace of evidence that he had done anything wrong. He tried to make the breaking of his victim's neck as painless as possible. Sometimes, he really hated himself.

Only 20 minutes later, Jeremy stood at the entrance to his family's home, and politely knocked on the door. In less than a minute, Alicia White was looking at him from the across the threshold, a look of pleasant shock on her face. Jeremy, face now back where it belonged, hidden in a sheath of illusion, placed his finger against his lips and gestured for silence. The woman was almost as dear to his heart as his own mother, and he hugged the maid fiercely, aching at how much he had missed her despite how few times he had thought of her consciously.

Alicia led him to where his mother sat, reading a book about financial security and looking a hundred years older than her 58 years. From where he stood, he could see the gray roots that she had carefully dyed; he could see the marks that even the best plastic surgeon could not quite erase. Mostly he could see her pain, her grief at the loss of her husband. It tore a gaping wound in his soul to see her suffering. "Mom, I'm home." The words were even more of a croak than they normally were.

Anita Wyzchovsky looked at her son face to face for the first time in 15 years, and the tears she had held at bay for the last week poured past her carefully applied



make-up in a deluge. Mostly blinded by tears, she stumbled across the room to where her only child stood, and threw her arms around his chest, burying her face in his neck and sobbing her grief onto him. Jeremy Wyzchovsky held his mother closely, using only a small portion of his strength to support her, holding back his own blood-red tears with only the greatest of efforts. They stood that way for several minutes, until the crying jag was over.

Jeremy did his best to comfort his mother's soul, trying to relocate the parts of himself that he had deliberately lost some time back. He smiled at the right places, keeping his answers as close to the truth as he could, giving what comfort was possible for him.

"Oh God, Jeremy, let me look at you." Anita stared into her son's eyes, amazed at how healthy he looked. "You've hardly changed at all."

"I wish that were true, Mom. I've changed a lot, just not so's you'd notice it with ease." She stared at his perfect teeth, his stylishly long hair, with just the slightest touch of silver starting at the temples; she lost herself in his cool, blue eyes. For 15 years the only communication had been on the phone, maybe an occasional card or package at the holidays. He looked away from her, sorrow written across his handsome features, and sighed softly. "I was so sorry, Mom. I know me and Dad never got along the best, but I was so sorry to hear about ... about the accident."

Anita Wyzchovsky felt the water works start up again, wrapped her arms around her son one more time, and started crying. He held her, he crooned meaningless phrases and promised that everything would be all right, but somehow, the words and gestures seemed almost practiced. She took the comfort, she allowed herself to be fooled, but a small part of her refused to be fooled. Her son had changed in some fundamental way, he had been hurt as few people could be without scarring, and she had no idea what might have caused his pain. She wanted to ask him what had happened, wanted desperately to know what had made him so cold, she never said a word.

When he was ready, he would talk. They spent the next hour consoling each other, making conversation and promising to see each other again, soon. It was after he had left that she started really thinking about the hesitation in his voice, the odd catch when he first mentioned his father's death. She found herself wondering if maybe her son knew something that she did not. She started wondering what her son had really come back to town for, and if maybe, just maybe, he knew something about the death of her husband that she did not.

When he had finally managed to break free, he stumbled from the house on Nob Hill, the section of town where his family had lived for the last few generations, and threw himself into the first dark area he could find. Safely away from prying eyes, Jeremy Wix allowed himself to cry for what he had lost. He cried for his mother's grief, he cried for his lost chances to be with his father, chances that would never have mattered if they had not been taken from him by force. He cried for the pain he had let back into his soul and he cried in fear, knowing with little doubt that he would never be allowed to return to San Francisco, and damn the information that he hoped to barter with Jochen van Nuys.

When the tears had finally stopped, Jeremy Wix set his shoulders, readied himself for his upcoming confrontation, and headed towards the last location he knew of for the prince of San Francisco. “You’ll let me stay, Van Nuys. You’ll let me stay, or so help me God, you’ll live to regret the decision.”

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Joseph Cambridge sat in his “office,” one of the many row homes that made up so much of the good sections of San Francisco, and stared at the television screen in front of him without acknowledging the pleas of the latest commercials to try the exciting new products being released on the market.

Instead, he listened to the cultured tones of Jochen van Nuys explaining that Jeremy Wix was back in town. A thin smile spread across his toad like countenance, and he fingered the rusty leg brace that supported him.

“I trust that this will be taken care of, Jochen. I have kept my word to you, I have accepted your punishment — harsh though it was — and I hope that I can expect this problem to be taken care of before I have to get involved myself.” Joseph Cambridge pressed the button marked “Off” on his remote control, and let the light of the television fade, drowning his room in darkness.

“No, I understand completely, sir. No, of course I shall allow your people their chance to find him. I’ll make it even easier on you. I’ll meet you at your offices, that way you can keep your eyes on me.” He listened patiently to the prince’s response, nodding as if the prince could possibly see him in the darkened room. “Nonsense. It’s no inconvenience at all. This is as good an excuse as any to come see my sister. Yes, please do tell Donna that I’m on my way.” A long pause then, as the prince conveyed the message and gave Donna Cambridge’s response. “Yes, I’m looking forward to seeing her as well. Perhaps we could finish that game of chess we started? Your turn, if I’m not mistaken. Has it already been six months? Well then, I’d say we were over due to finish this particular game. I shall see you shortly, Jochen. Say 20 minutes? Wonderful.”

Joseph Cambridge sat for a few moments in the darkness of his plush apartment, trying to force the eager smile to stay off of his face, trying to prepare himself for the right level of indignation, knowing for certain that Jeremy Wix would be arriving at the prince’s offices only a short while after himself. “Yesss, Jochen. It is most definitely time to finish this particular game.”

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Jeremy Wix saw the two men tailing him almost as soon as they started to follow. It was a necessary adaptation to his mortal life style, he had to know when he was being followed, he had to know how many followed him at any given time. Vampires did not believe in playing the same games as the humans they fed on, their games were a great deal more subtle, and normally involved the use of loyal human retainers. Jeremy could tell by the way that they followed him, letting him gain a great deal of distance before they closed back in on him, that the fools following him were mortal, like as not a part of the prince’s veritable army of retainers, and that they were there primarily to watch him at this point. He risked capture long enough to place a phone call.

He placed the quarter in the phone's slot for change and dialed his mother's number from memory. A large and slightly mangy mongrel started sniffing at his leg, and for the moment, he ignored the beast.

His mother answered on the second ring, sleep blurring her voice slightly. "Mom? No, listen to me. I left a small package in the side of the sofa where I sat, between the cushions. I want you to read the papers that you find there. They'll explain a great deal, and when I come back tomorrow night, we can talk about what they say. Listen to me, listen carefully."

Jeremy spent several moments he could ill afford to waste listening to his mother's questions, and then cut her off abruptly. "Mom, be quiet for a minute, please. Just listen. Thanks. Now then, the pages are written on flash paper. They're gonna read like a bad piece of horror fiction, but believe me, you do not want to get caught by anyone in this town with those pages on you, or anywhere near you. Yes, I'm very serious. If someone should knock on the door, if Alicia should happen to ask you about the pages, lie through your teeth and deny any knowledge of them. If someone should ask any funny questions... what? No, not funny hah hah, funny strange. Like the stuff you expect in a spy movie. Right, like on *Mission Impossible*. If any one asks questions, yes, even Alicia, you burn those pages. All it will take is a single match. They'll go up in one hell of a flash, there'll be nothing but a little bit of ash, scatter the ash if you end up burning them. It's very important, Mom. More important than you could possibly know. And Mom? Never, ever, ever tell anyone about what those pages say. We'll talk tomorrow night. I love you too. Good night, Mom. Sweet dreams."

Jeremy reached out to pet the mutt at his heels, but it shied quickly, a small growl coming from its muzzle. "Yeah, you ain't anything special to look at either, Fido." The dog snapped once and skittered away, half expecting to be kicked. Jeremy didn't bother; he liked dogs, it was humans that always pissed him off.

He was heading for the two men following him, when someone called out his name. "Jeremy Wix!" He turned to look at the source of the voice, and suddenly felt deceptively strong and incredibly shapely arms wrap around his neck. The body that hugged him closely was one that he knew well enough to have dreamt about on more than one occasion.

Jeremy stared into dark eyes that fairly sparkled with amusement and allowed himself to grin. "Carlotta! How the hell are you?" He looked at the complete package of Mediterranean beauty in front of him, and smiled ear to ear. "Damn you're looking good." He hugged her again, honestly glad to see a friendly face.

Carlotta smiled mischievously, wiggled against him suggestively, and replied, "I'd say the same back..."

They finished the line together. "But it would be a lie." She hugged him closely, placing her lips to his ear, and gave him the warning. "I don't know why you left Seattle, but you shouldn't have come here. Those two delicious looking lumps over there are Jochen van Nuys' men."

He pulled back from her and smiled again. "Thanks for the warning, Carlotta, but I had already figured that part. I was just about to have a little talk with them when you showed up."

"Why are you back? From what you told me you're not exactly a welcome sight around here." He could stare at her little pout for months and never get tired of seeing Carlotta.

"Hey, it's where I'm from, sweetie, I had to come home." The obligatory leering wink at Carlotta, and a suggestive grind of his own, "If I'd known you were here, I'd have come back a long time ago."

He risked a look at the two goons, they were looking everywhere but at him. The wary mutt was going past them, paused long enough to salute a telephone pole, and headed towards Nob Hill. "You missed all the fun, Jeremy, We had a little quake earlier on, should have seen the looks going down at the Vampire Club."

Jeremy smiled, ruffled Carlotta's hair, knowing that she hated it, knowing that she would tolerate such nonsense from him, they were, after all, friends. She swatted his hand away affectionately. "I imagine there'll be plenty more, this is San Francisco after all." He thought about it for a second, asked her one last question. "Is that were you hang out in this town, the Vampire Club?"

"Sweetie, there is no other place for our kind to hang in San Francisco, any one tells you otherwise is lying."

Jeremy Wix held her delicate fingers in his hand for the briefest of times, smiled once more. "If I survive tonight, I'll meet you there soon." The smile faded from both of their faces, they knew full and well the implications of what he had just said, he was banned from the city, his most likely punishment for being here was death. "Give me a Kiss goodbye?"

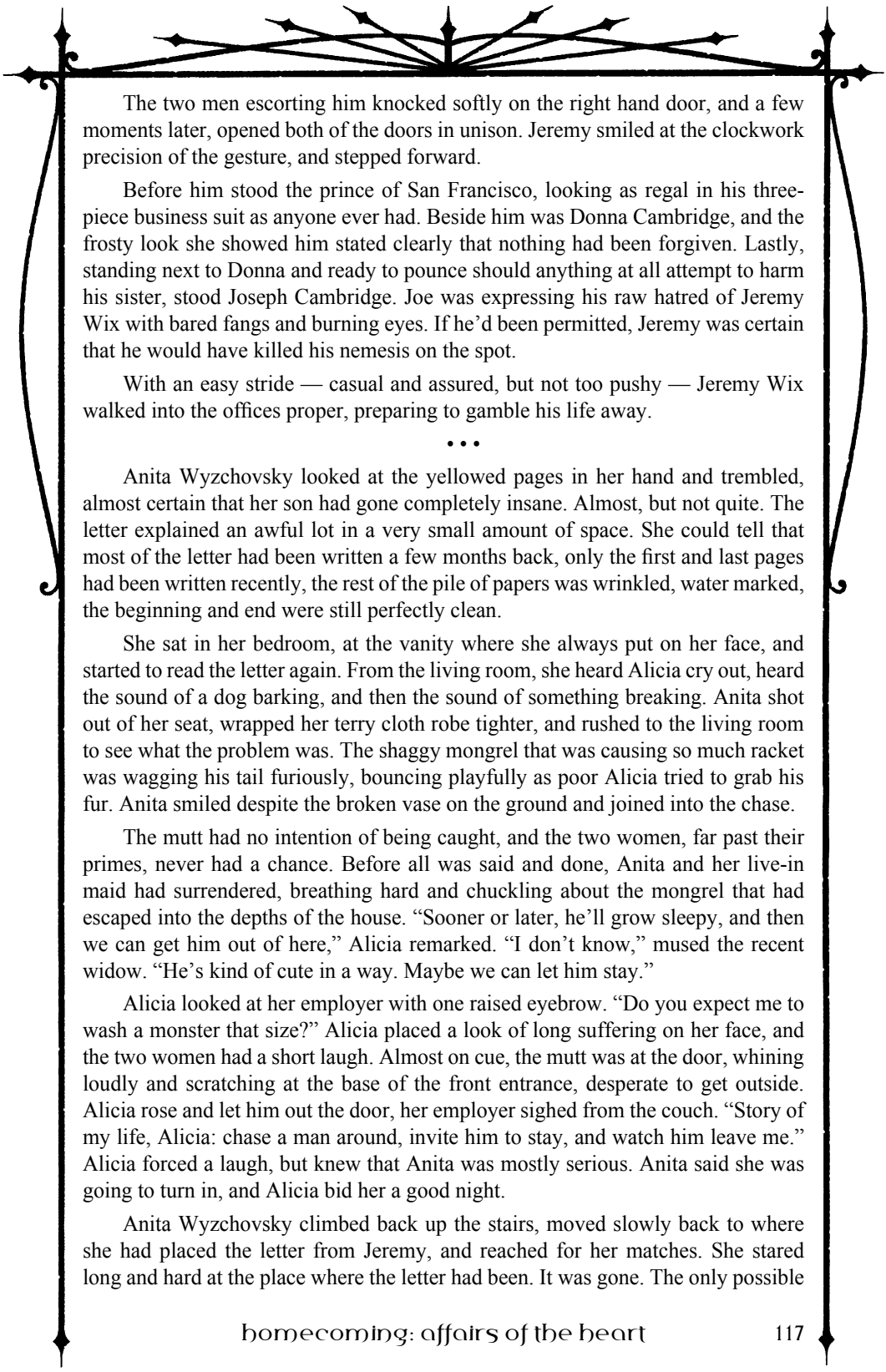
Carlotta's smile came back. "Not a chance in hell, Jeremy." She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Just a kiss for luck. See ya around." Jeremy watched her go, hoping he'd be able to keep his promise to see her soon, and doubting it.

Jeremy left the phone booth, walking back the way he had come. The two men were doing their best to look as if they were interested in reading the menu from a Chinese restaurant.

"I'm guessing that you gentlemen work for Jochen van Nuys?" The first of the gentlemen in question looked over at the second. The second of the gentlemen nodded almost imperceptibly. "Good." Jeremy smiled, held his hands above his head in a mocking gesture of surrender. "Take me to your leader, I'm ready to throw myself on his tender mercies."

Both men looked understandably wary, but also managed to look truly relieved at the same time. Jeremy Wix gave them no trouble.

Within 30 minutes, he stood before the double doors that led to the offices of Jochen van Nuys, a tight, dry lump trying to nest in his throat. He wondered almost idly if he had made a colossal mistake when he murdered his dinner earlier. Either way it was too late to change the past. That lesson at least, he had learned just over 15 years ago.



The two men escorting him knocked softly on the right hand door, and a few moments later, opened both of the doors in unison. Jeremy smiled at the clockwork precision of the gesture, and stepped forward.

Before him stood the prince of San Francisco, looking as regal in his three-piece business suit as anyone ever had. Beside him was Donna Cambridge, and the frosty look she showed him stated clearly that nothing had been forgiven. Lastly, standing next to Donna and ready to pounce should anything at all attempt to harm his sister, stood Joseph Cambridge. Joe was expressing his raw hatred of Jeremy Wix with bared fangs and burning eyes. If he'd been permitted, Jeremy was certain that he would have killed his nemesis on the spot.

With an easy stride — casual and assured, but not too pushy — Jeremy Wix walked into the offices proper, preparing to gamble his life away.

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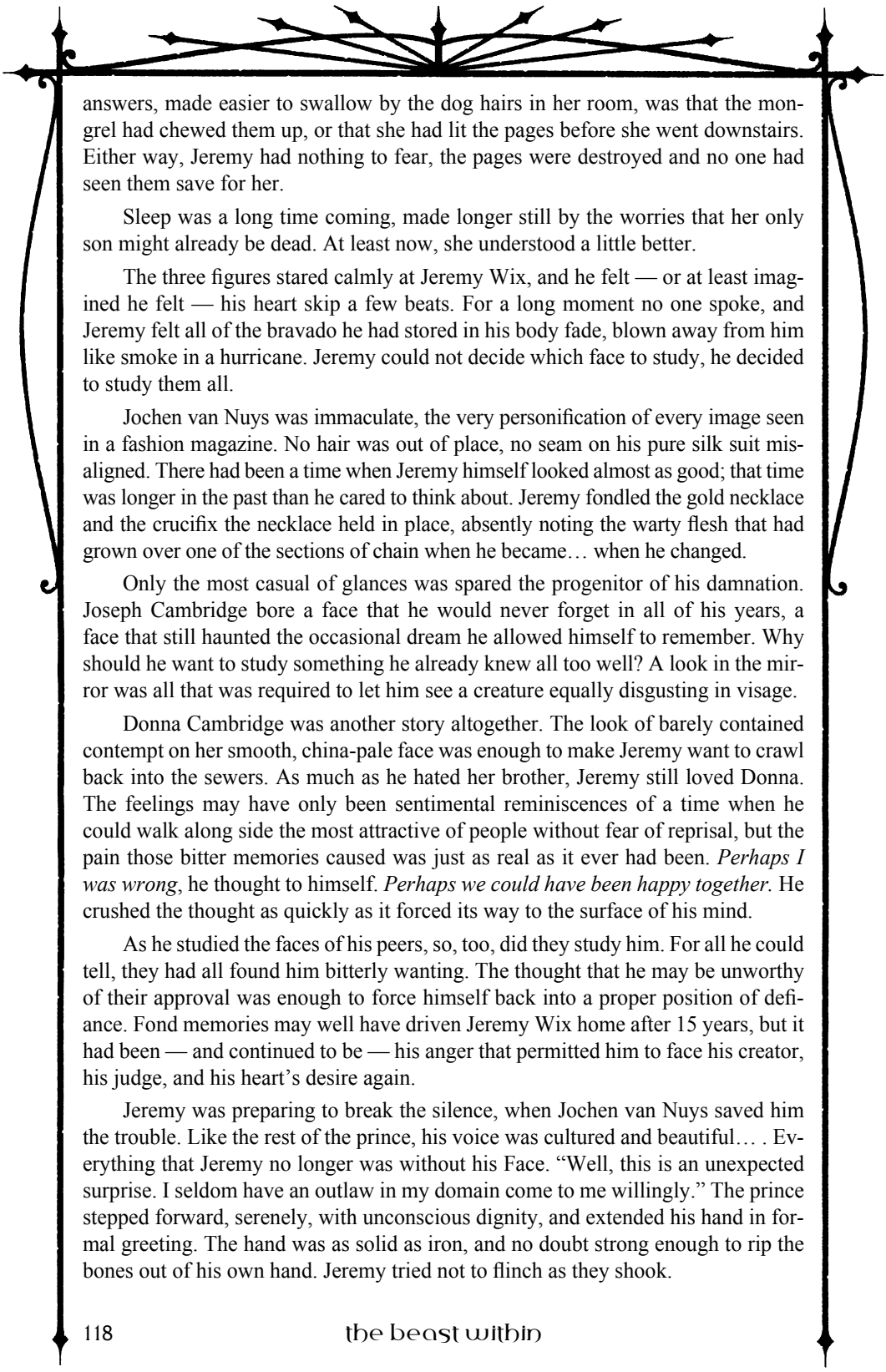
Anita Wyzchovsky looked at the yellowed pages in her hand and trembled, almost certain that her son had gone completely insane. Almost, but not quite. The letter explained an awful lot in a very small amount of space. She could tell that most of the letter had been written a few months back, only the first and last pages had been written recently, the rest of the pile of papers was wrinkled, water marked, the beginning and end were still perfectly clean.

She sat in her bedroom, at the vanity where she always put on her face, and started to read the letter again. From the living room, she heard Alicia cry out, heard the sound of a dog barking, and then the sound of something breaking. Anita shot out of her seat, wrapped her terry cloth robe tighter, and rushed to the living room to see what the problem was. The shaggy mongrel that was causing so much racket was wagging his tail furiously, bouncing playfully as poor Alicia tried to grab his fur. Anita smiled despite the broken vase on the ground and joined into the chase.

The mutt had no intention of being caught, and the two women, far past their primes, never had a chance. Before all was said and done, Anita and her live-in maid had surrendered, breathing hard and chuckling about the mongrel that had escaped into the depths of the house. "Sooner or later, he'll grow sleepy, and then we can get him out of here," Alicia remarked. "I don't know," mused the recent widow. "He's kind of cute in a way. Maybe we can let him stay."

Alicia looked at her employer with one raised eyebrow. "Do you expect me to wash a monster that size?" Alicia placed a look of long suffering on her face, and the two women had a short laugh. Almost on cue, the mutt was at the door, whining loudly and scratching at the base of the front entrance, desperate to get outside. Alicia rose and let him out the door, her employer sighed from the couch. "Story of my life, Alicia: chase a man around, invite him to stay, and watch him leave me." Alicia forced a laugh, but knew that Anita was mostly serious. Anita said she was going to turn in, and Alicia bid her a good night.

Anita Wyzchovsky climbed back up the stairs, moved slowly back to where she had placed the letter from Jeremy, and reached for her matches. She stared long and hard at the place where the letter had been. It was gone. The only possible



answers, made easier to swallow by the dog hairs in her room, was that the mongrel had chewed them up, or that she had lit the pages before she went downstairs. Either way, Jeremy had nothing to fear, the pages were destroyed and no one had seen them save for her.

Sleep was a long time coming, made longer still by the worries that her only son might already be dead. At least now, she understood a little better.

The three figures stared calmly at Jeremy Wix, and he felt — or at least imagined he felt — his heart skip a few beats. For a long moment no one spoke, and Jeremy felt all of the bravado he had stored in his body fade, blown away from him like smoke in a hurricane. Jeremy could not decide which face to study, he decided to study them all.

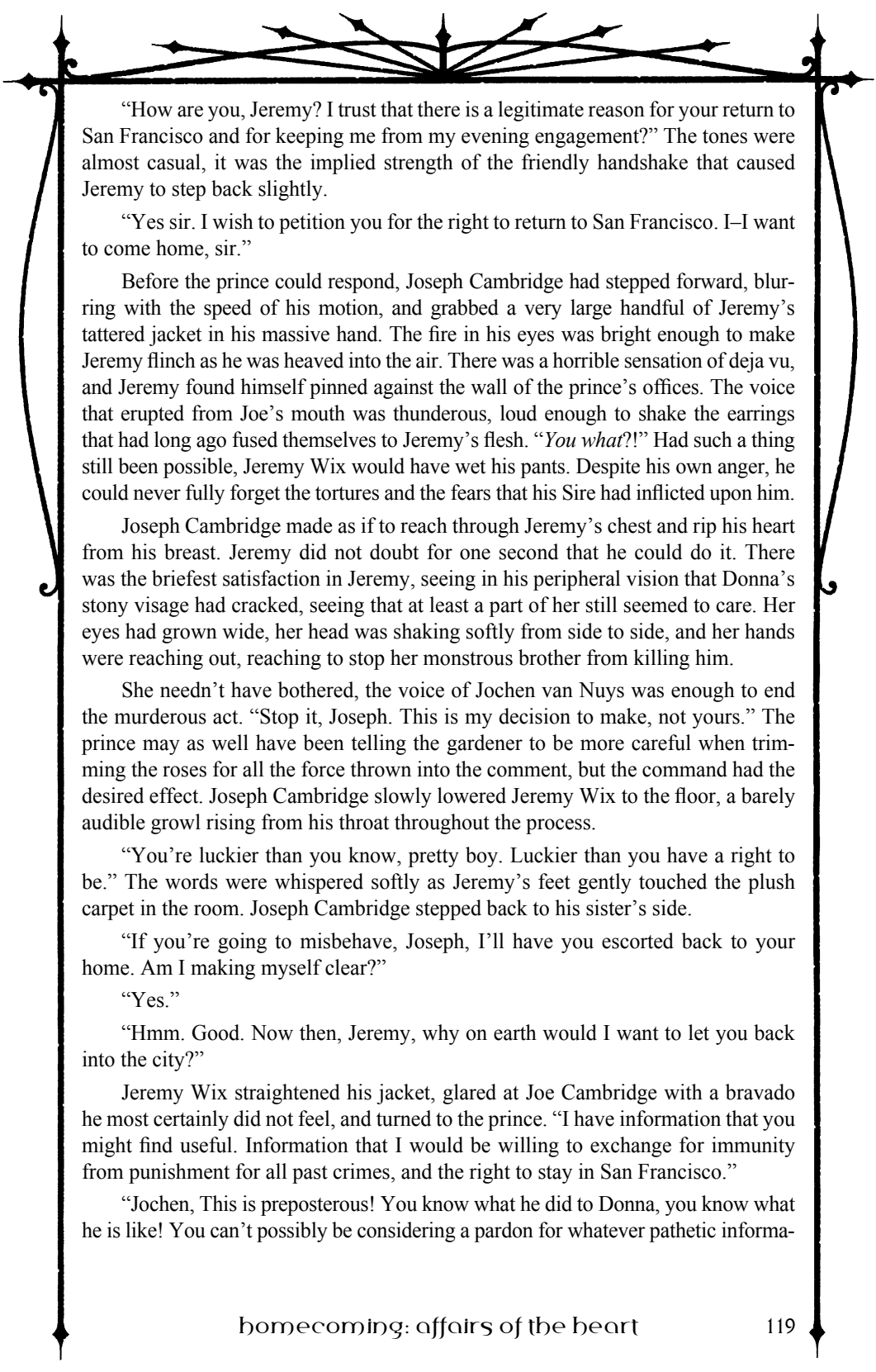
Jochen van Nuys was immaculate, the very personification of every image seen in a fashion magazine. No hair was out of place, no seam on his pure silk suit misaligned. There had been a time when Jeremy himself looked almost as good; that time was longer in the past than he cared to think about. Jeremy fondled the gold necklace and the crucifix the necklace held in place, absently noting the warty flesh that had grown over one of the sections of chain when he became... when he changed.

Only the most casual of glances was spared the progenitor of his damnation. Joseph Cambridge bore a face that he would never forget in all of his years, a face that still haunted the occasional dream he allowed himself to remember. Why should he want to study something he already knew all too well? A look in the mirror was all that was required to let him see a creature equally disgusting in visage.

Donna Cambridge was another story altogether. The look of barely contained contempt on her smooth, china-pale face was enough to make Jeremy want to crawl back into the sewers. As much as he hated her brother, Jeremy still loved Donna. The feelings may have only been sentimental reminiscences of a time when he could walk along side the most attractive of people without fear of reprisal, but the pain those bitter memories caused was just as real as it ever had been. *Perhaps I was wrong*, he thought to himself. *Perhaps we could have been happy together.* He crushed the thought as quickly as it forced its way to the surface of his mind.

As he studied the faces of his peers, so, too, did they study him. For all he could tell, they had all found him bitterly wanting. The thought that he may be unworthy of their approval was enough to force himself back into a proper position of defiance. Fond memories may well have driven Jeremy Wix home after 15 years, but it had been — and continued to be — his anger that permitted him to face his creator, his judge, and his heart's desire again.

Jeremy was preparing to break the silence, when Jochen van Nuys saved him the trouble. Like the rest of the prince, his voice was cultured and beautiful... Everything that Jeremy no longer was without his Face. "Well, this is an unexpected surprise. I seldom have an outlaw in my domain come to me willingly." The prince stepped forward, serenely, with unconscious dignity, and extended his hand in formal greeting. The hand was as solid as iron, and no doubt strong enough to rip the bones out of his own hand. Jeremy tried not to flinch as they shook.



“How are you, Jeremy? I trust that there is a legitimate reason for your return to San Francisco and for keeping me from my evening engagement?” The tones were almost casual, it was the implied strength of the friendly handshake that caused Jeremy to step back slightly.

“Yes sir. I wish to petition you for the right to return to San Francisco. I—I want to come home, sir.”

Before the prince could respond, Joseph Cambridge had stepped forward, blurring with the speed of his motion, and grabbed a very large handful of Jeremy’s tattered jacket in his massive hand. The fire in his eyes was bright enough to make Jeremy flinch as he was heaved into the air. There was a horrible sensation of *deja vu*, and Jeremy found himself pinned against the wall of the prince’s offices. The voice that erupted from Joe’s mouth was thunderous, loud enough to shake the earrings that had long ago fused themselves to Jeremy’s flesh. “*You what!?*” Had such a thing still been possible, Jeremy Wix would have wet his pants. Despite his own anger, he could never fully forget the tortures and the fears that his Sire had inflicted upon him.

Joseph Cambridge made as if to reach through Jeremy’s chest and rip his heart from his breast. Jeremy did not doubt for one second that he could do it. There was the briefest satisfaction in Jeremy, seeing in his peripheral vision that Donna’s stony visage had cracked, seeing that at least a part of her still seemed to care. Her eyes had grown wide, her head was shaking softly from side to side, and her hands were reaching out, reaching to stop her monstrous brother from killing him.

She needn’t have bothered, the voice of Jochen van Nuys was enough to end the murderous act. “Stop it, Joseph. This is my decision to make, not yours.” The prince may as well have been telling the gardener to be more careful when trimming the roses for all the force thrown into the comment, but the command had the desired effect. Joseph Cambridge slowly lowered Jeremy Wix to the floor, a barely audible growl rising from his throat throughout the process.

“You’re luckier than you know, pretty boy. Luckier than you have a right to be.” The words were whispered softly as Jeremy’s feet gently touched the plush carpet in the room. Joseph Cambridge stepped back to his sister’s side.

“If you’re going to misbehave, Joseph, I’ll have you escorted back to your home. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Good. Now then, Jeremy, why on earth would I want to let you back into the city?”

Jeremy Wix straightened his jacket, glared at Joe Cambridge with a bravado he most certainly did not feel, and turned to the prince. “I have information that you might find useful. Information that I would be willing to exchange for immunity from punishment for all past crimes, and the right to stay in San Francisco.”

“Jochen, This is preposterous! You know what he did to Donna, you know what he is like! You can’t possibly be considering a pardon for whatever pathetic informa-

tion this... this bastard may have!" It was almost a plea, those words that rumbled from deep inside Joseph Cambridge's chest. It was almost a demand as well.

Jochen van Nuys turned gracefully to look at Joseph Cambridge and lifted one eyebrow, smiled slightly. "I believe I should like to hear what the information is, before I decide, Joseph. If you don't mind, that is, I'm only the prince, and I realize that what I may or may not think means nothing to one of your own prestigious station, but it is after all, my job to hear all sides of an argument."

Joseph Cambridge bristled at the obvious sarcasm in the prince's voice, decided instead to plead his case again. "Jochen, he'll do you no good. His kind hasn't the heart to care one way or the other."

Before the prince could respond, it was Jeremy's turn. "My kind? I guess you'd know all about that wouldn't you, you made me what I am." His voice was once more barely a whisper. Joe seemed nonplused by the change, Donna and the prince both seemed more perceptive.

"You deserved worse! I should have torn your heart out and fed on it you bastard!"

Jeremy was halfway across the room, charging towards Joseph before he had given any thought at all to the matter. "It would have been better than this, you fucking freak!"

Joseph Cambridge stepped forward to meet him, ready for combat and ready to destroy what he had created. Perhaps it was anger, perhaps it was the desire to acknowledge all of the truth, to see at last all that fate had done to both of them. The two revealed their true natures, revealed for all in the room to see, just what it meant to be Nosferatu.

Joseph stood on his leg braces and towered fully a foot over Jeremy. His skin was a pale toothpaste blue as opposed to Jeremy's darker skin, but his face was just as hideous; it was covered in cysts, cross-hatched with folds of warty flesh. His teeth were bared, strong teeth in rows as numerous as those of a shark, sheathed partially in gums the color pitch. He was just as hideous as Jeremy remembered, just as horrible to see as Jeremy himself.

Joseph Cambridge backhanded Jeremy Wix hard enough to blast him into the desk of Jochen van Nuys. Jeremy and the heavy oak desk both went over with a crash.

"No, Joe, don't hit him again!" Donna's cry made her brother hesitate for the briefest of seconds, just long enough for Jeremy to regain his footing. With a cry that was mostly animal, Joseph Cambridge charged forward again. Jeremy dropped into a better stance ready to kill the demon that had stolen everything that mattered from him.

Jochen van Nuys intervened. "*Stop!*" the word was not loud, but the power that backed the word was thunderous. Both Joseph and Jeremy felt the force of his command, muscles seized and refused to obey them. They were as still as statues.

The prince stepped between the two, ignoring the hatred that fairly poured from them. His words were cold, cold enough to make them both listen. "This is my domain. There will be no combat here. For the last time, Joseph, the decision is mine to make, not yours. Furthermore, that desk is older than the two of you combined, and has a great sentimental value. If you've damaged it, I'll stake you to meet the sun. If you continue to act in this way, I shall be forced to punish you. Severely. Do I make myself clear?"

Joseph Cambridge calmed himself with a visible effort. Nodded his assent.

"Good. Jeremy, this is hardly the proper way to convince me that I should let you stay in San Francisco." There was almost no change in the prince's demeanor, no shifting of his features, just a mild look of disappointment. "Perhaps you should pick up my desk and share with me what your information is and why I should find it useful. Does that sound good to you, Jeremy?"

Jeremy looked at Joseph Cambridge. Cambridge sneered back.

He looked at Donna Cambridge, whose face had again become as stone. He looked at Jochen van Nuys. "I would rather tell you alone, sir. One on one as it were." He turned away and hefted the massive desk back into its proper position.

Jochen van Nuys stared back with a slight smile on his face. "Very well, Donna my dear, why don't you take Joseph over to the pond in back? I should like him to see my new Koi. They really are amazing specimens, Joseph. Perhaps I can have a few of them delivered to your house."

Donna led her gargantuan brother by the hand, smiling sweetly up at his glowering visage. Joe looked ready to finish the argument, but was apparently smart enough not to push his luck. Jochen van Nuys waited patiently, head cocked at an odd angle until they had been gone for some few minutes. "Now then, let's talk Jeremy."

• • •

Jeremy Wix walked slowly away from the prince, turned and faced him, even as the prince was seating himself behind the huge oak desk that covered one corner of the room. "You haven't given your word to me yet, sir."

Once again the prince looked rather surprised, as if the thought that his promise was necessary hadn't crossed his mind. "My, you are the pushy one, aren't you Jeremy? Of course, if you weren't, you wouldn't be in quite the mess you're in now, would you?"

"No sir, I wouldn't be."

"What ever possessed you to do that to Donna, in the first place Jeremy?"

"Which part sir, breaking up or sending out the photographs?"

"Well, why not cover both? The breaking up and then the photos."

Jeremy shrugged, he had expected questions, he had even predicted this one. "I didn't promote the break up, Prince Van Nuys. I was caught in bed with another woman." Jochen van Nuys asked questions with his eyes, Jeremy added the details

necessary. "She'd always knocked before, I guess the shock of seeing her brother after eight years of thinking him dead made her forget her usual manners." He shrugged again. "My own fault really, I should have locked the door."

"And the pictures?"

"Is this really necessary sir?"

Jochen van Nuys smiled thinly. "Quite necessary, Jeremy. Tell me about the pictures."

Jeremy sighed, wanting to be anyone but who he was, anywhere but where he was. "We argued a lot, I was a little vindictive, even though I shouldn't have been. I had some Polaroids of Donna in the nude, I wrote her name, phone number, and hourly rate on the back. I passed them out to some of the sleazes I met at a few bars." Jeremy looked at the prince, the prince looked back, expressionlessly. "It was juvenile and reprehensible, sir. I admit that."

"You understand the sort of trouble that you'll be causing yourself by coming back here? Joseph may not be among the Primogen, but he has substantial clout. He is second only to his Sire among the Nosferatu in San Francisco. He will most likely do everything in his power to destroy you."

"I understand that, sir."

Jochen van Nuys steepled his fingers for a moment, staring as much through Jeremy as at him. "Very well, you have my word. If the information is of importance, and is useful to me, I shall grant you immunity for past crimes and safe haven within the city of San Francisco and the surrounding areas over which I have control. Fair enough?"

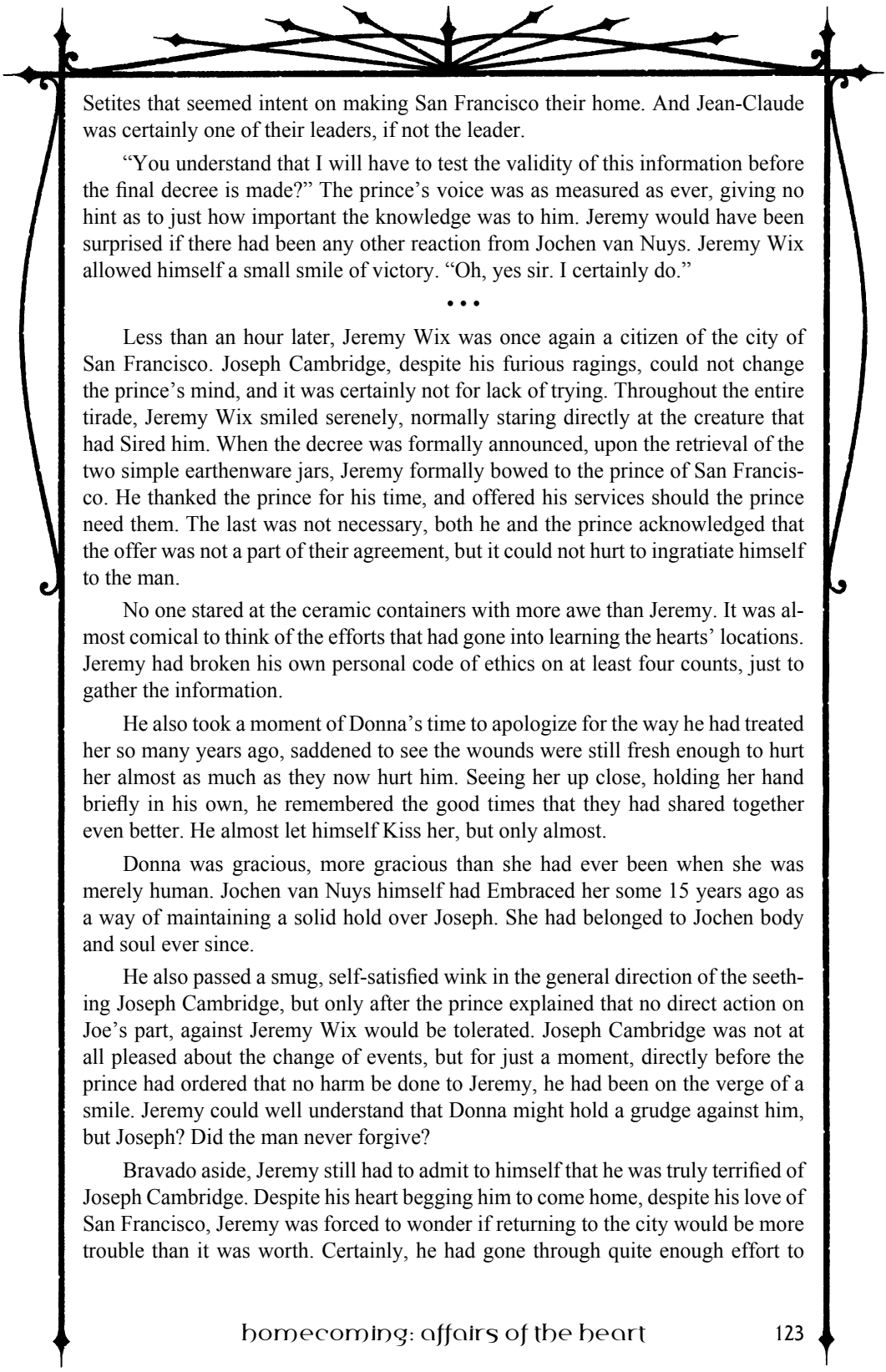
"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"I shouldn't thank me quite yet, Jeremy. I haven't agreed that the information is of great enough significance as yet."

"Point taken, sir." Jeremy fidgeted, not knowing quite how to proceed, and finally decided that the straightforward approach would be best. "I can give you the locations, within this very city, of two Setite hearts." He paused to savor the honest surprise on Jochen van Nuys' face, and the way the prince suddenly sat a trifle straighter in his chair, ready to listen. "One of the hearts belongs to Darrius Stone. Not the most powerful of Setites, granted, but certainly a fine way to keep your eyes on the rest of the Setites that want to make this area home."

Jeremy let the knowledge sink in, savored the moment while he could, and then placed his trump card on the table before him. "The other heart belongs to Jean-Claude."

Jochen van Nuys stared through Jeremy Wix for several moments, weighing the usefulness of the information proffered. Setites were the only known Kindred that could actually remove their hearts, making it much harder to truly hurt them. The catch was that if you had possession of the Setite's heart, you could kill the Setite whenever you felt like it. A solid bargaining chip, considering the number of



Setites that seemed intent on making San Francisco their home. And Jean-Claude was certainly one of their leaders, if not the leader.

“You understand that I will have to test the validity of this information before the final decree is made?” The prince’s voice was as measured as ever, giving no hint as to just how important the knowledge was to him. Jeremy would have been surprised if there had been any other reaction from Jochen van Nuys. Jeremy Wix allowed himself a small smile of victory. “Oh, yes sir. I certainly do.”

• • •

Less than an hour later, Jeremy Wix was once again a citizen of the city of San Francisco. Joseph Cambridge, despite his furious ragings, could not change the prince’s mind, and it was certainly not for lack of trying. Throughout the entire tirade, Jeremy Wix smiled serenely, normally staring directly at the creature that had Sired him. When the decree was formally announced, upon the retrieval of the two simple earthenware jars, Jeremy formally bowed to the prince of San Francisco. He thanked the prince for his time, and offered his services should the prince need them. The last was not necessary, both he and the prince acknowledged that the offer was not a part of their agreement, but it could not hurt to ingratiate himself to the man.

No one stared at the ceramic containers with more awe than Jeremy. It was almost comical to think of the efforts that had gone into learning the hearts’ locations. Jeremy had broken his own personal code of ethics on at least four counts, just to gather the information.

He also took a moment of Donna’s time to apologize for the way he had treated her so many years ago, saddened to see the wounds were still fresh enough to hurt her almost as much as they now hurt him. Seeing her up close, holding her hand briefly in his own, he remembered the good times that they had shared together even better. He almost let himself Kiss her, but only almost.

Donna was gracious, more gracious than she had ever been when she was merely human. Jochen van Nuys himself had Embraced her some 15 years ago as a way of maintaining a solid hold over Joseph. She had belonged to Jochen body and soul ever since.

He also passed a smug, self-satisfied wink in the general direction of the seething Joseph Cambridge, but only after the prince explained that no direct action on Joe’s part, against Jeremy Wix would be tolerated. Joseph Cambridge was not at all pleased about the change of events, but for just a moment, directly before the prince had ordered that no harm be done to Jeremy, he had been on the verge of a smile. Jeremy could well understand that Donna might hold a grudge against him, but Joseph? Did the man never forgive?

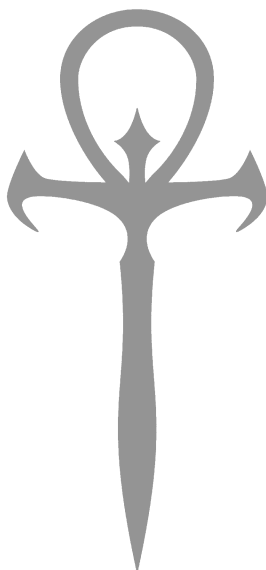
Bravado aside, Jeremy still had to admit to himself that he was truly terrified of Joseph Cambridge. Despite his heart begging him to come home, despite his love of San Francisco, Jeremy was forced to wonder if returning to the city would be more trouble than it was worth. Certainly, he had gone through quite enough effort to

gather the locations of the two hearts, but that had been almost easy in comparison to the risks he had taken in coming home. The prince's rule came back, no direct harm from Joe Cambridge. He could handle anything else that came along, he was certain of that. After a final nod to all three of his counterparts, Jeremy Wix left the prince's offices and headed into the night.

Jeremy had to see his mother. And see her he did. He told her of the Kindred, and what his life had been like for the last 15 years. He spent the majority of the night talking with her, there was so very much to talk about.

Jeremy Wyzchovsky, called Jeremy Wix or even Pretty Boy — due to the features he affected, the features he had once truly had in all their effeminate glory — by most everyone that knew him, smiled more that night than he had in the last five years. He had much to smile about, he was home again.

Tomorrow was soon enough to ponder all of the implications about coming home, for this night at least, he was once again his mother's son. Right then she had more need of a son than she did of anything else. Seeing his mother helped him remember what he had once been, and if only for one night, he needed to be reminded.





undercover

by Matthew J. Costello

Morning and Maria Rodriguez hurried through the halls of Police Center, nearly running, thinking: Christ! If I'm late for this meeting I'm dead. But the drive up from Pacifica had been a bitch. Living alone was great, as long as you could get yourself out of bed.

Out too late last night? One Dos Equis too many? Least I didn't screw him. Got to give me that.

She got to the desk outside the office of the Chief of Detectives, Homicide Division. The desk sergeant in a starched shirt with crisp collars looked up.

"I — I have an appointment with Captain —"

But the Captain's secretary already had the phone up to his mouth, had already hit a button, was speaking oh-so-quietly into the mouthpiece.

Then click, the handset was down on the base. "He's waiting for you." A smile — as if this cop knew secrets that I don't, Maria thought. "Go in"

Maria took a breath, pulled down her skirt, straightened her jacket, and walked in.

Captain Max Cameron was a well-known figure. Especially these days, especially with the papers and the news keeping a running total of the body count. Eight people dead so far, and everyone waiting for the next mutilated body to surface. No pattern, no rhyme nor reason to the killings — a schoolteacher here, a bartender there. One tabloid ran a photo of a body recovered in the bay, near the bridge. The skin looked like tissue paper that a nasty cat went berserk tearing.

Maria stood at attention while Cameron dug in his drawer for something.

"Sorry I'm late, sir. The traffic —"

Cameron looked up and smiled, a disarming smile. The man was twice Maria's age, but her antennae told her to be alert. These days she got hit on from the most unlikely sources.

"Don't worry, Rodriguez. I've got some good reports on you. You're not afraid to get down and dirty, as they say."

So I'm going to Homicide, Rodriguez thought. That's good. Could make Detective there pretty fast. Course — I could also get killed.

"You busted those people at that club — what's it called?"

"The Night Wing, sir."

"Some kind of coke deal. Weird kind of club —"

Putting it mildly, Maria remembered. Everyone was in full S&M regalia, boots, leather, garter belts — and androgyny was in full flower. She helped get the dealers, but Maria felt that there was more going on in the Night Wing than simply a few deals for blow.

"Good stuff that. That's why we thought of you for —" Cameron was back looking in the drawers. "— ah. Here we are." He pulled out a detailed street map of San Francisco. Cameron looked up, smiled again.

He wants me to come to the desk, Maria thought. And she took a step while Cameron watched. Shit, she thought, don't let him make a pass. Not this morning. I want to try and be a professional cop this morning, that's all.

"Know what these are?" he asked, pointing to red dots on the map.

Maria shook her head.

"That's where we've found the bodies. One up near the old Presidio, another by the horseshoe courts — that must have been nasty for the old farts to find in the AM And another here, behind Japan Center. One red dot for every body."

Maria cleared her throat. "You want me to work homicides? I'd like that. That —"

Cameron shook his head. "Patient. You're getting ahead of me. And, yes, I want you to come on board. But it's how I want you to come on board."

Cameron took a breath. Maria waited while Cameron teased her. Then —

"What do you know about the Gutters?"

The Gutters. Well, not a hell of lot. It was a gang, but not like one of the bands marauding in East L.A. The Gutters were organized. There were rumors that they moved drugs, that they were contract killers, even rumors that there was no such group.

"It's a gang."

Cameron nodded. "We think — let's say, we have some evidence that some of the Gutters may be playing a little game." Cameron held the map up. "The body count game."

"Evidence?"

"We have a photo of a leader in the Gutters, a man who calls himself Mac. And we'd like to find out what this Mac is up to."

Maria nodded, the light bulb still not going off.

"We've heard that he likes women."

A slow glow started to appear. Maria shifted on her heels. There was a throbbing in her head. Maria looked for a chair, but the room was so dark, shades down, so hard to see.

“So the idea is for you to go undercover. Meet some Gutters, maybe hook up with this Mac. See what games the kiddies are playing.”

Maria licked her lips. Say, “No,” a voice suggested. Say, “No, thank you,” turn around, and walk out. Life’s too damned short.

“Interested?” Cameron said. “No pressure. Your decision.”

And Maria cleared her throat and said, “Sure.”

• • •

Maria checked herself in the window of the boutique. She was wearing tight shorts and her leather boots. Black stockings and a white blouse from a retro ’60s store. Her third night out, and no luck so far.

OK, she thought, I look hot. Still no guarantee that I can meet a Gutter, let alone get into the gang. . . if there is a gang.

She was standing with a lot of other young people by Buena Vista Park. The summer night air was warm, with just a bit of dampness from the Pacific. There were glows in the darkness, the fireflies of crack bowls and joints passed.

She could have been wired. It was an option.

“Thing is,” Cameron said, “if they find a wire on you, if they see a suspicious bulge, you’re a dead woman. This way, you can get in, get out, and they won’t know squat.”

But now, standing with these kids, Maria wished she had some link to safety and sanity.

Testing, testing. Is anybody there?

But she was all on her lonesome.

She started moving through the crowd, looking for people who looked like they were the alpha males of this watering hole.

Across the street from the Dugout Bar, under a sputtering streetlamp, Maria saw some guys standing. Guys she hadn’t seen before. Could just be three guys, or maybe, if I’m lucky, it could be something else.

She looked over at them, and then one guy started across the street before he was quickly stopped by another man dressed in jeans and black leather. Then that guy took the lead, walking over to Maria, coming close. He had dark eyes and jet-black hair that caught the fading yellow light of the street lamp.

He walked over to Maria. “You look lost, babe.”

Maria nodded. “Not lost at all,” she said. Then right at him, studying the face, recognizing it as the same person in the photo, she added, “Just bored.”

Then Mac’s friends joined him. “If you’re bored, we’ve got the cure.”

Testing. One. . . two. . . three.

“Are you up to party?”

Maria looked away, then back to Mac whose smile seemed warm, radiant in the darkness. “Sure.”

Funny, the name of this place was Twin Peaks Park. Twin Peaks, like that show. Maria had liked that show — the music, the strange characters. Everyone seemed weird, an outsider. Like me.

Mac stood by her and pulled her close.

“Wait — you’re going to like this.”

Maybe now is when I should try to leave, she thought. I can’t just stand here and watch what they’re going to do. I don’t even have a gun. “A gun’s too dangerous,” Cameron said. “They might kill you if they found a gun.”

“Hmmm,” Mac said, pulling her tighter.

A couple turned a corner, heading up towards the Twin Peaks Park.

“You know what they’re going to do, babe?” Mac said, His lips were close to her ear, whispering to her. Maria thought she should pull away. But no, that wouldn’t be in character. She moved a bit, and Mac’s lips moved down her neck, sliding, making goose bumps sprout on her.

“What do you think they’re going to do?” There was a click, and then a blade flashed in the night. Mac’s lips were still on Maria’s neck. She felt him touching her, holding her.

Then Mac pulled away, and Maria felt loss, the warmth, the smell of him gone. Mac stood up and turned to the other guys with him.

I should look at them, Maria thought. Look at them, study their faces. But all she could see, all she could remember was Mac.

“Let’s go,” Mac said. And they followed the couple up the hill.

Maria saw the couple lying on the ground, twisting on the grass.

“We’ll wait a minute,” Mac said. “Give them a few more minutes.”

Maria shook her head. “I — I don’t think we should —”

“Should what, babe? You said you were bored, right? What’s the problem?”

“We’d better go —”

I can’t stand here and watch them kill these people, Maria thought. I can’t let that happen.

Maria pulled away, but Mac’s hand — cold, firm — was on her wrist.

“Can’t leave now, babe. The party’s just starting.”

Maria tried to yank away, but his hand was like a metallic claw, tight and closed, and now dragging her to the couple.

“A pretty sight, don’t you think? They don’t even hear us, see us.”

“Please,” Maria said. And then Mac yanked her close, like snapping a doll on a string, and Maria was looking into his eyes. “This is what you came for, isn’t it?” Mac pulled her closer, his lips brushing hers. “Isn’t it?”

Then back to the couple. Mac took a step closer to them. The woman on the grass said something. Maria heard her say something, aware that there were people around. Maria could feel her fear, as if she was the person on the grass.

Maria saw the knife in Mac's hands. "No," Maria said, but she had stopped struggling, as if this was a show to be watched, letting it play out.

The man on the grass now stirred, aware that he and his girl were not alone. Mac stopped. "And now, it's time for the surprise," Mac said. He turned to Maria and put the knife into her hand.

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Evening. The sun was down and the streets turned cooler.

Cameron said he'd wait for her. And Maria walked into the office, and the dark was soothing, peaceful.

"Go on," Cameron said. "You met Mac and others. And what did you learn about the Gutters?"

The shades were shut against the city lights. Maria pushed her hair off her face, looking around, smelling the air. She rubbed her lips.

"We went to the park."

"And they killed someone?" The Captain took a step towards her, smiling. "You watched them kill someone?"

Maria shook her head. "No. No one was killed."

Cameron smiled. "I don't believe you. I think you're scared."

Cameron moved past her to the door, turning the lock. The click was loud. "I think that something happened last night, that maybe you went to their lair, where they hide out. And I think that you're going to tell me what happened."

Cameron took a step.

"You see, you weren't really working for the SFPD. Not really. I had to have someone find out what the Gutters were up to. Why all the killing, why all the bloodlust when there's only one who should decide such things."

Maria stepped back.

"Oh, don't worry about calling out, Maria. The desk sergeant is gone. It's quite silent in here. No sounds can escape."

Another step backwards. Maria opened her mouth, so dry.

"Jochen van Nuys needed to know what these young ones were doing. They will be stopped, of course, but it will take time. They're so stupid, so rash, so greedy. But van Nuys will stop them."

A breath. There seemed to be so little air in here.

Cameron works for man named van Nuys. He's not like van Nuys. But he does his work.

Yes. Of course. Like Mac said.

“Now, you will tell me everything.”

Maria nodded. Yes, everything — the way it happened — in Twin Peaks Park.

The couple stood up, and now they drifted over to Mac, Maria, the others, laughing. And Maria saw that they all knew each other. She saw that now she was in the center of the circle, that they were all looking at her.

Their faces were hungry, full of desire. Only Mac’s eyes had any warmth.

“You wanted to join us, and we’d like you —”

Mac brought Maria’s hand that held the knife over to his wrist. And, with his eyes still on Maria, he began cutting.

“— we’d like you to join us.”

The thin cut bloomed, as Mac’s blood began to trickle out. He held his wrist up to her.

“Drink. Just a taste on your lips.”

The wrist was there in front of her lips, then closer. Mac’s voice whispered, soothing, hypnotically: “Drink.”

Until Maria closed her eyes and pressed her mouth over the razor-thin wound, tasting the blood, feeling. . .

Wonderful.

Cameron froze. “Then, you are one of them?” Cameron’s mouth opened wide, and he was genuinely surprised. This was something Cameron was unprepared for.

Maria backed closer to the door, feeling for the lock, turning the knob. It was deserted outside. Cameron had said so.

“Still, you will talk. They can’t exist like this, killing, feasting, creating chaos, creating terror—”

The lock clicked, and Maria backed away, as the door kicked open —

And Mac was there.

She wanted to taste him again, touch him, to live as part of his soul.

Cameron’s eyes widened. But he was too old, too slow to move, to avoid the knife that sliced him open, and then the savage bites. The human was too slow. And Maria laughed, giggled, watching Mac snap at Cameron’s neck, making him howl in agony.

Mac whispered something in Cameron’s ear, a final curse, and then Maria watched him drive the silver blade into Cameron’s chest. Into his heart.

They’d have to leave in a moment. People would come to find the ninth body. But Maria, hesitating at first, just standing there, took a step toward the body, to where Mac was bent over it, laughing, licking.

And Maria joined her lover.



The Inquiry

by Gherbod Fleming

[From the interview of Archon Theo Bell, Clan Brujah, on 14 November 1999, conducted by Justicar Mme. Guil, Clan Toreador.]

MG: *And so, in your estimation, Archon Bell, at the point at which you lured Prince Vitel to the warehouse, he remained unaware of your harmful intent toward him?*

TB: Do you think he'd have got in that car if he'd thought I was gonna blow his [expletive deleted] head off?

MG: *I'm interested in your opinion, Archon. [pause; rattling of cellophane] I'd prefer that you didn't smoke in here.*

TB: [barely audible muttering.]

MG: *Excuse me, Archon?*

TB: Yes. In my estimation, he remained unaware. Hell, we spent weeks briefing him and the others, telling them that the Sabbat could bust through any night. Which was true. And the scenario we constructed for Vitel was credible. When they did attack a week later, they came along the same routes I told him they were using that night.

MG: *But you knew he was in communication with the enemy. Shouldn't he have known that the assault was not happening that night?*

TB: From everything that Pieterzoon and Colchester had scraped together, we thought his communication with the Sabbat was sporadic. We hoped he didn't know the exact details of whatever attack was coming.

MG: *You "thought" his communications were sporadic. You "hoped" he didn't know?*

TB: Look. That whole operation in Baltimore was built on hope and speculation. If anybody had bothered to tell us that there was a plan underway to take New York, it would've helped. As it was, I say we were damn lucky that the plan Pieterzoon and I came up with dovetailed with what was already going down in New York.

MG: *I believe had your plan not coincided with our wishes, Lucinde would have guided you in a more convenient direction. As it was, your actions bore out our predictions to a significant degree, so you were left to operate independently. But we were, I believe, discussing Marcus Vitel.*

TB: Right. And you're interested in my lowly opinion. Well, it seemed most likely to me that the Sabbath high command wasn't going to keep Vitel completely informed. If your spy gets bagged and spills his guts, you're screwed.

MG: *You seem to accept this theoretical Sabbath policy of parceling information on a need-to-know basis more whole-heartedly than our own similar practice—at least as far as you are concerned. Would not our New York gambit have been threatened had a combatant such as yourself been aware of every detail and captured?*

TB: Different situation, lady.

MG: *That would be "Madame," or "Justicar," thank you.*

TB: Hmph.

MG: *Let us skip ahead, Archon. Once you were in the warehouse—you and your driver, the prince and his retainer—your first interaction there with Vitel was...*

TB: I shot him in the face.

MG: *Indeed. Before or after extracting a confession?*

TB: This wasn't no interrogation. It was a hit. We already knew what we needed to know. We were there to take him out of the picture, not ask questions.

MG: *And Mr. Pieterzoon concurred with your assessment?*

TB: Yeah.

MG: *And Lucinde?*

TB: Couldn't tell you for sure. But since you're so interested in my opinion, I assumed Pieterzoon was keeping her informed. I don't think she would've had it any other way. Look. We were trying to hold Baltimore till the last second *and* pull off a screened withdrawal to another city. If you folks are unhappy about how we did it, then just have Pascek give me my pink slip, and I'll be on my way.

MG: *I am merely attempting to ascertain the facts.*

TB: Bullshit. We were cut loose, and I bet that for every justicar who hoped we'd pull it off, there was another hoping we'd fall on our ass. And now that we did pull it off, you're gonna second guess me to death because you, or somebody, can't stand for the credit to go to Pascek or Lucinde or who-the-hell-ever.

MG: *Archon Bell, I am not unaware of this and other services you have rendered the Camarilla, but I will not be addressed in that tone. [pause] Now, in your experience, the shot you fired at Prince Vitel—that would have incapacitated many Kindred?*

TB: I gave him a burst, four shots, of dragons breath—that's white phosphorus incendiary rounds—square in the face. Many...hell, *most* Kindred that's gonna take their head clean off. At the very least he should have been incapacitated for a long [expletive deleted] time.

MG: But he was not.

TB: No. Not for long.

MG: What other force did you bring to bear against him?

TB: Besides me, we had thirteen ghouls plus Pieterzoon with sub-machine-guns, and four more of my people, Kindred, three with side arms, the other with a sword.

MG: I see. And your losses?

TB: Eleven ghouls dead, one Kindred destroyed, another completely fucked up, and the rest of us banged around pretty good.

MG: From just Vitel and his retainer?

TB: No. That's just from Vitel. Lydia blew the ghoul's [expletive deleted] head off right after I shot the prince the first time.

MG: [pause] I see. [pause] Was that the type of encounter you were expecting, Archon Bell?

TB: [derisive laughter] No. Not exactly.

MG: What exactly were you expecting?

TB: Well, any time you tackle a prince, it's gonna be tough. And Vitel, to be prince of a city like D.C., he's got a lot in his corner. The advantage we had was that he'd been run out of his city, he didn't have the power structure and built-in safeties that he was used to, and we were taking the initiative. All of that, and the firepower we had—it should've been...not easy, but not as damn hard as it was. I mean, take your ghoul on the stenograph machine there—I pop him in the face with one dragons breath round...he's toast. Like I said before, I hit Vitel in the face with four rounds. And then, over the course of the fight, with four more bursts—that's three or four rounds each, maybe twelve to fifteen shots *after* I plugged him in the face, point blank. Add to that...God, I don't know, hundreds of solid shots from everybody else. I know a few ain't nothing, but that many added up.

MG: Prince Vitel seems to have made quite an impression on you.

TB: I've been in some rough spots. It's my job. And I wasn't expecting some [expletive deleted], but he was no typical elder. He had to have been *old* to have taken that much punishment and still tossed around the heavy [expletive deleted] he was.

MG: Not a typical Ventrue.

TB: [pause] No.

MG: What "heavy [expletive deleted]" was it that he was tossing around, Archon?

TB: Well, I've said how much of a beating he took and kept going. He was fast—he got out of that car in a damn hurry when we were distracted for just a few seconds—but that's not a big surprise. For a little while after he came out from under the car, he was hiding from us, and there wasn't nothing to hide behind, and the lights was on. I know that's the kind of trick a Kindred might be able to learn, if you

know a Nosferatu who's stupid enough to teach you and give up his competitive advantage, but still... I can swallow that much. But this guy was levitating. He was throwing *fireballs*, for Christ's sake. Fireballs he just summoned out of nowhere in his hand. [expletive deleted]. I don't even like to think about it. And he was packing some serious shadow magic.

MG: Shadow magic. As a Lasombra might wield.

TB: You could say that.

MG: But would you say that, Archon Bell?

TB: I might.

MG: Prince Vitel seems to have been a very...resourceful individual.

TB: Jesus [expletive deleted] Christ.

MG: But it was the sword that finished him?

TB: Right.

MG: Tell me, Archon Bell, as powerful as it seems Prince Vitel was, far more potent than you expected even of an elder, did it not seem odd to you that he did not escape from the warehouse once the combat was underway? Do you not think he would have been capable of that?

TB: Hell, yes, he was capable of that. But he was [expletive deleted] pissed.

MG: Are you suggesting that a Kindred prince, a creature that had existed perhaps hundreds of years, met his Final Death because he was angry?

TB: Angry. Arrogant. Whatever you want to call it. You weren't there. You didn't see his eyes. I was concerned about him escaping, but that was only at first. Once I realized how powerful he was... He was *insulted* that we attacked him. He was *enjoying* ripping ghouls limb from limb and roasting Kindred. It was gonna be a close thing. I think he just miscalculated. Even prince that's old as dirt can make a bad call, especially if he's pissed. And this time it was his ass.

MG: I see. And your conviction couldn't possibly stem from the satisfaction and notoriety you derive from having destroyed Marcus Vitel?

TB: [expletive deleted] you, lady. Oh, pardon me...[expletive deleted] you, Madame Justicar.

MG: I believe this interview is at an end, Archon.

TB: You might be at an end. I got a few more [expletive deleted] things to say....

...

[From Justicar Mme. Guil, Clan Toreador, to M. _____.]

I believe you will agree that my interviews with Mr. Pieterzoon and Archon Bell, in addition to the correspondences retrieved from Marcus Vitel's possession, confirm my earlier assertion: that Vitel was not at all what he seemed. The letters, consistently addressed to "Lucius" would appear to corroborate other information I have uncovered concerning one "Lucius Sejanus". These traitorous retches can

hide from me for only so long before I unearth their black secrets.

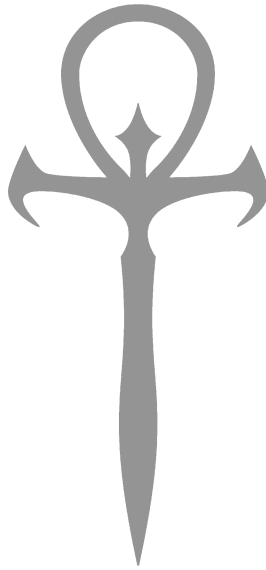
We are fortunate to be rid of “Vitel”. There is undeniable evidence that he was consorting with the Sabbat. Your stratagem of utilizing Pieterzoon and Bell as pseudo-independent (i.e., expendable) agents against Vitel proved practicable. Had their investigation of and assault versus the prince gone badly, the matter would have been to their detriment—and would have created no additional complications for yourself or the other members of the Inner Circle.

I fear, however, that one issue may not be in full resolved: We may be rid of “Prince Vitel”, yet not have seen the last of “Lucius”. Despite Archon Bell’s strident protests to the contrary, I have difficulty accepting as a certainty that a being as evidently aged and powerful as the one Bell fought was dispatched—even by so able an archon. Perhaps Bell is correct. I hope that he is, but I cannot yet *believe* it. (You have long accused me of playing the skeptic, and I freely confess: Neither have yet allowed myself to believe the reports regarding that bloated spider, Monçada!) Even should the most desirable outcome have come to pass, prudence behooves us to remain guarded. As always.

Until our next meeting.

Yours Indubitably, etc., etc.

Mme. Gui





And the Third Angel sounded

by Eric Griffin

Thursday, 6 January 2000, 11:50 PM

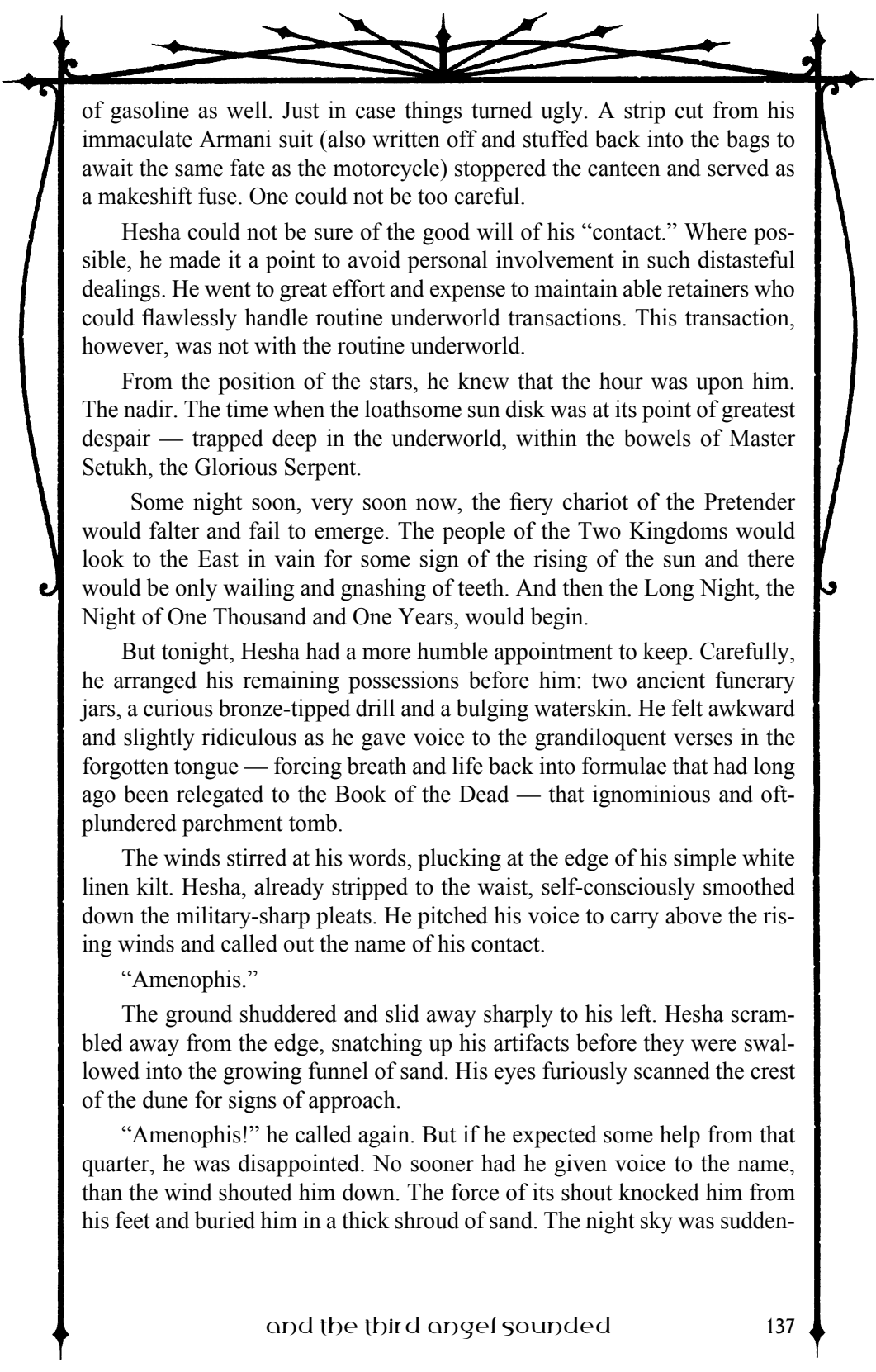
Desret, Egypt

Hesha Ruhadze stood atop the dune like a solitary watchman upon a parapet. The wind patiently clawed at the edge of the battlement, dislodging a steady hourglass-stream of sand over the lip of the precipice. Hesha smiled knowing that, if he had to, he could outwait even the wind. Given time, his howling adversary might tear down his fortifications and bury him beneath shifting cinnamon mountains of sand. But Hesha could outwait the comings and goings of mountains.

As if sensing his determination, the wind fell back to gather its forces. No sooner had the swirling sands begun to settle, than ice-sharp stars pierced through the veil above him. Hesha was suddenly aware of the scrutiny of the unblinking night sky — its eyes as innumerable as the grains of sand that already buried him to mid-calf.

The brilliant desert above was fiercely protective of the one below. Hesha was trespassing deep within the no-man's-land of the *Desret* — the Red Land. Behind a nearby embankment, which shielded from the worst ravages of the wind, his motorcycle leaned drunkenly to one side. It had served him well to this point, but Hesha doubted that it would carry him much further. The bike had become so pitted that even the chrome had taken on a uniform dun color. The pervasive grit steadily ground down the engine from the inside out. It was unlikely, however, that the bike would succumb to this slow death. At any moment the sheer weight of sand upon it threatened to topple it altogether and bury it from sight.

Hesha had already salvaged everything of value from the bike, mostly the contents of the saddlebags. But he had siphoned off a canteen-full



of gasoline as well. Just in case things turned ugly. A strip cut from his immaculate Armani suit (also written off and stuffed back into the bags to await the same fate as the motorcycle) stoppered the canteen and served as a makeshift fuse. One could not be too careful.

Hesha could not be sure of the good will of his “contact.” Where possible, he made it a point to avoid personal involvement in such distasteful dealings. He went to great effort and expense to maintain able retainers who could flawlessly handle routine underworld transactions. This transaction, however, was not with the routine underworld.

From the position of the stars, he knew that the hour was upon him. The nadir. The time when the loathsome sun disk was at its point of greatest despair — trapped deep in the underworld, within the bowels of Master Setukh, the Glorious Serpent.

Some night soon, very soon now, the fiery chariot of the Pretender would falter and fail to emerge. The people of the Two Kingdoms would look to the East in vain for some sign of the rising of the sun and there would be only wailing and gnashing of teeth. And then the Long Night, the Night of One Thousand and One Years, would begin.


But tonight, Hesha had a more humble appointment to keep. Carefully, he arranged his remaining possessions before him: two ancient funerary jars, a curious bronze-tipped drill and a bulging waterskin. He felt awkward and slightly ridiculous as he gave voice to the grandiloquent verses in the forgotten tongue — forcing breath and life back into formulae that had long ago been relegated to the Book of the Dead — that ignominious and oft-plundered parchment tomb.

The winds stirred at his words, plucking at the edge of his simple white linen kilt. Hesha, already stripped to the waist, self-consciously smoothed down the military-sharp pleats. He pitched his voice to carry above the rising winds and called out the name of his contact.

“Amenophis.”

The ground shuddered and slid away sharply to his left. Hesha scrambled away from the edge, snatching up his artifacts before they were swallowed into the growing funnel of sand. His eyes furiously scanned the crest of the dune for signs of approach.

“Amenophis!” he called again. But if he expected some help from that quarter, he was disappointed. No sooner had he given voice to the name, than the wind shouted him down. The force of its shout knocked him from his feet and buried him in a thick shroud of sand. The night sky was sudden-



ly and completely extinguished. Fighting against a mouthful of sand, Heshu managed to call for help one last time.

“Amenophis!”

At the third iteration of the name, the wind fell suddenly and inexplicably silent. Heshu struggled to one knee, sloughing off the mantle of sand and clawing layered grit from his eyes. He spat mouthfuls of mingled blood and sand.

Somewhere, as if from very far off, he heard a faint scratching. It was weak, but tenacious. With growing apprehension, he recognized the sound — the clawing of someone who had been buried alive beneath the shifting mountain of sand.


Furiously, he scanned the surface of the broken dune. His keen eyes picked out nothing more unusual than a gnarled stick poking from the sands. But that was unusual enough. Heshu hurled himself toward it and began furiously shoveling away double fistfuls of sand.

He was reluctant to yank on the twig for fear it might come away in his hand and he lose his only link to the man trapped below. Soon he had uncovered a foot-long section of branch and the outline of a larger, vaguely man-shaped hump of sand beneath it. The scratching sounds maddeningly grew neither louder, nor more frantic at his approach.

“I am here,” Heshu kept up a steady monologue that he hoped sounded reassuring, trying to hold on to the buried man with, if nothing else, the anchor of his voice. He gave no sign of realizing that he was still speaking in the ancient tongue. “It is all right. I will have you out soon. I swear it. If you can hear me, dig towards the sound of my voice.”

It was a sisyphusian effort. For every double handful of sand Heshu hurled away from the hole, his weight where he knelt at the edge of the excavation sent another six handfuls of sand back into it. The wind had picked up again and seemed intent on filling every slight depression on the exposed dune face as quickly and efficiently as possible. It also kept knocking the branch against his face and shoulder as he worked — a distraction that was quickly escalating from a slight annoyance to the brink of a dangerous full-blown fury.

Heshu broke off his efforts in frustration and defeat. Clearly another approach was called for here and quickly. He cast about for his belongings, which were already themselves hidden under a fine layer of sand. Unstopping the waterskin, Heshu poured out the entirety of its contents over the buried man.



The sand eagerly soaked up the life-giving moisture. It was not just water, it was river water. The waters of the Nile. The very lifeblood of the land. That meant something here in the deep *Desret*.

Hesha immediately found that the wet sand held its form better and was less likely to drift back into the hole. It may have been a trick of the imagination, but Hesha thought that the scrapings below had grown steadier and more focused as well. He fell to digging with a renewed energy.

He ignored the redoubled howlings of the wind. He ignored the jerking and crackings of the exposed branch as the buried man apparently sought to employ it as a digging tool from below. He ignored the rising swell of the outline in the sand.

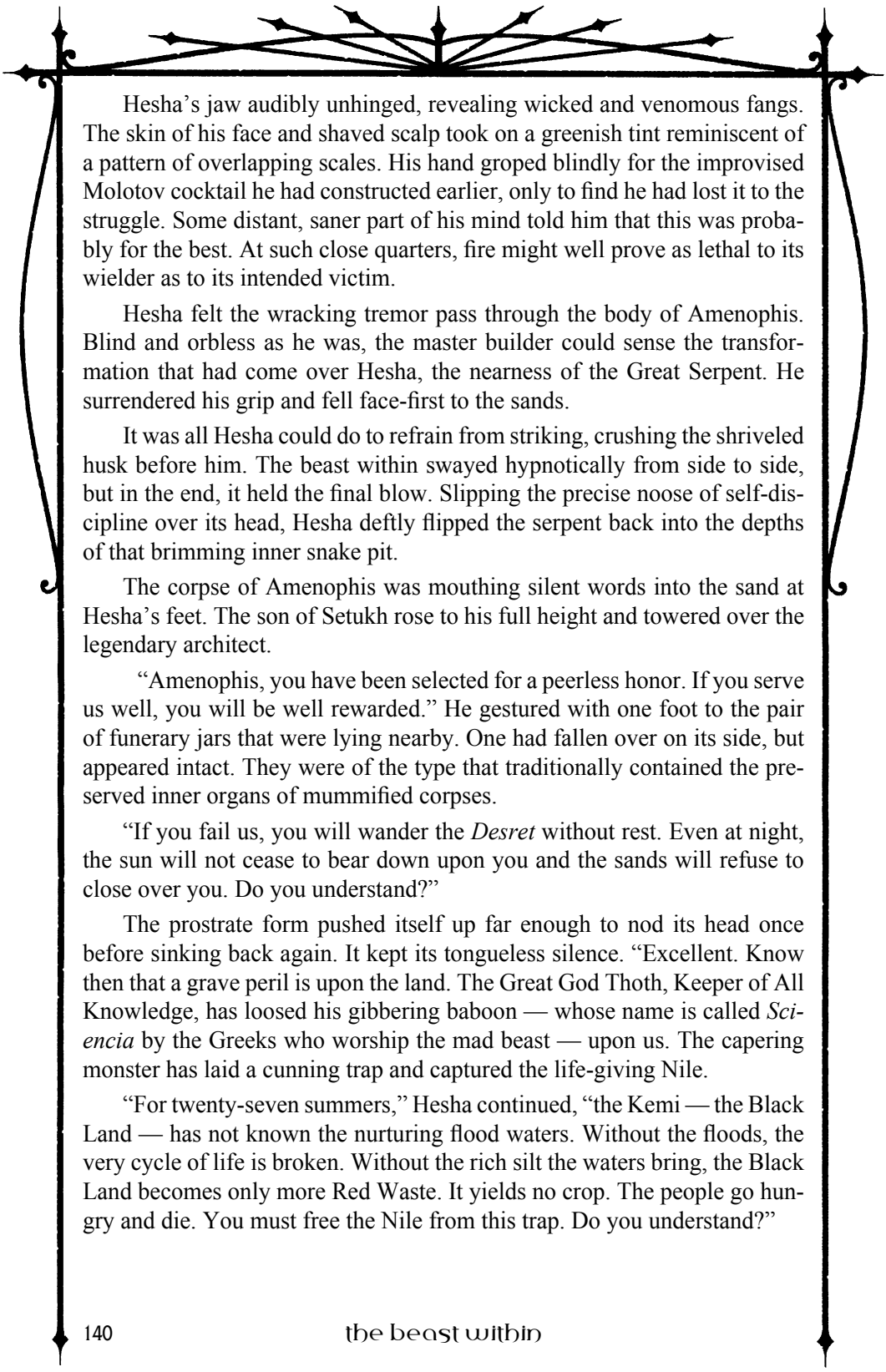
What he could not ignore was the unmistakable grip that suddenly tightened upon his shoulder.

Hesha wheeled. Faster than an asp striking, his fingers closed and locked on the offending wrist. It felt brittle, like gnarled wood in his grasp. Hesha immediately realized what he held.

The exposed twig had ravenously consumed the spilling waters of life, resuming some vague semblance of the human form it once wore. Its branching fingers flexed, knuckles cracking, elongated fingernails cutting deeply into the muscle and tendon of Hesha's shoulder. He stiffened under the sudden pull as the dried and desiccated corpse dragged itself bodily from its tomb of shifting sands.

They made an odd pair, these two refugees from the courts of death. They knelt, locked together, alone in the midst of the deep *Desret*. The one who had once been known as Amenophis, son of Hapu and Overseer of all the King's Works had not weathered the journey across the sands of time unscathed. His body was bent and stunted, as petrified and hollow as an old log. His leathery skin stretched paper-thin over all-too-visible bones. Scattered patches of coarse black hair stuck out from the skull at odd angles. The teeth tenaciously clung to their posts, but they had been worn to crooked nubs from a lifetime of ingesting the pervasive sands with each mouthful of food.

Hesha, on the other hand, might have been a beaten copper idol. Stripped to the waist, lustrous with exertion, he had the type of figure that Greeks were want to immortalize in sculpture. As he struggled against the unbreakable death grip, he was forced to relax something of the strict control he kept over that most dangerous opponent of all — the inner beast. Sensing opportunity with its darting tongue, it reared to strike.



Hesha's jaw audibly unhinged, revealing wicked and venomous fangs. The skin of his face and shaved scalp took on a greenish tint reminiscent of a pattern of overlapping scales. His hand groped blindly for the improvised Molotov cocktail he had constructed earlier, only to find he had lost it to the struggle. Some distant, saner part of his mind told him that this was probably for the best. At such close quarters, fire might well prove as lethal to its wielder as to its intended victim.

Hesha felt the wracking tremor pass through the body of Amenophis. Blind and orbless as he was, the master builder could sense the transformation that had come over Hesha, the nearness of the Great Serpent. He surrendered his grip and fell face-first to the sands.

It was all Hesha could do to refrain from striking, crushing the shriveled husk before him. The beast within swayed hypnotically from side to side, but in the end, it held the final blow. Slipping the precise noose of self-discipline over its head, Hesha deftly flipped the serpent back into the depths of that brimming inner snake pit.


The corpse of Amenophis was mouthing silent words into the sand at Hesha's feet. The son of Setukh rose to his full height and towered over the legendary architect.

"Amenophis, you have been selected for a peerless honor. If you serve us well, you will be well rewarded." He gestured with one foot to the pair of funerary jars that were lying nearby. One had fallen over on its side, but appeared intact. They were of the type that traditionally contained the preserved inner organs of mummified corpses.

"If you fail us, you will wander the *Desret* without rest. Even at night, the sun will not cease to bear down upon you and the sands will refuse to close over you. Do you understand?"

The prostrate form pushed itself up far enough to nod its head once before sinking back again. It kept its tongueless silence. "Excellent. Know then that a grave peril is upon the land. The Great God Thoth, Keeper of All Knowledge, has loosed his gibbering baboon — whose name is called *Sciencia* by the Greeks who worship the mad beast — upon us. The capering monster has laid a cunning trap and captured the life-giving Nile.

"For twenty-seven summers," Hesha continued, "the Kemi — the Black Land — has not known the nurturing flood waters. Without the floods, the very cycle of life is broken. Without the rich silt the waters bring, the Black Land becomes only more Red Waste. It yields no crop. The people go hungry and die. You must free the Nile from this trap. Do you understand?"



Amenophis, again pressed upward and nodded, but still he kept as silent as the grave. “I have brought you a gift, to aid you in your task.” Heshu drew out the wooden hand drill. Its brass tip caught the light as he tossed it disdainfully to land inches from the master builder’s head.

“You may take this tool and the jars and go now. And do not think to play me falsely. If the waters of the Nile do not flow again, the jars — like the *Kemi* itself — will surrender only red dust and spent ashes. May Set smile upon your efforts, Amenophis.”

What remained of the Royal Builder pulled itself to its feet. It gathered in the offerings and bowed low before lurching away over the edge of the dune. Heshu watched the receding figure until it was no longer visible. It never looked back.

Somewhere, far to the south, he imagined the lumbering corpse picking its way determinedly forward. Heshu could see Amenophis retracing long-forgotten paths through the ancient quarries that had once supplied the stone for the great obelisks and pyramids. He could see the architect coming at last upon the unimaginable marvel of the Aswan Dam which, since its completion had done what no god-king had ever dared presume — to put an end to the annual summer floods which were the very pulse of the Two Kingdoms. He could almost picture the millenniums-old master mason tackling the mad monkey god’s trap with nothing more than his brass-tipped wooden hand drill. It was sublime.


And Heshu knew with cold certainty that the legendary Amenophis — a man who had bridged the worlds of the living and the dying with nothing more than mere quarried stone and sacred geometry would not fail in his appointed task.

Heshu thought fleetingly of the thousands upon thousands of lives that would be lost in those first hours when the flood waters, after long years of imprisonment, at last burst free. He was perfectly prepared to accept such losses. They amounted to very little in the long run, especially when weighed objectively against the potential — against *his* potential — gains.

It was obvious that it was not concern for the “starving” inhabitants of the *Kemi* — many of whom he had just consigned to a watery grave — that drove him. Nor was it any sense of restoring the ancient ecological rhythm of the region. No, something else was at work here. Something very tangible.

That something lay deep beneath the brooding waters of Lake Nasser.

Bunched up against the solid wall of the dam, Lake Nasser still managed to cover more than 310 miles. Its silent waters closed over the entirety



of what had once been the rich and enigmatic land of Nubia — a land rich in gold, ebony, ivory, pygmy slaves, exotic animals and, of more direct interest to one Heshu Ruhadze, fabled treasures.

In his line of work, reputations had been made and broken over the raising a mere ocean liner. What was such a meager achievement in comparison to the feat of raising an entire nation from its watery grave?

With mounting anticipation, Heshu strode off purposefully to the south. When the drowned land first reemerged, he intended to be there to welcome it home.

unseen, the kindred MOVE AMONG US

Not merely mad beasts or lonely hunters, the vampires of the world of darkness who call themselves the kindred because of the blood that eternally binds them together are dangerously organized and cunning. They hide behind a plan they call the masquerade so that they do not draw the attention or ire of mortals, and the society this masquerade obscures is as rich with wonders and as rife with conflict as any ever known among men.

This collection of stories concerning the kindred of the world of darkness serves as both an introduction to their nature and an expose of the danger they pose. Collected within this second edition are favorites of the first edition, including stories by S.P. Somtow and Matthew J. Costello, as well two all-new stories from Gherbod Fleming and Eric Griffin, two authors of the bestselling vampire clan novel series.

