# ahunner, like fire greg stolze



A new guy comes in and tries to mooch me off of Rick. This new guy is huge—six-four at least, muscle-bound and flat-topped, with gross arm veins that only a steroid dealer could love.

He's awful. He has on a purplish shirt that aches to be retro but is really just retardo. Fat gold links. Weight-lifted man-boobs that are probably bigger than mine. He's Omega Travolta, some inbred result of a million years of anonymous disco hookups.

Not only that, he speaks the line out of a hundred Bmovies, mid-season TV pilots and Charles Atlas print ads. "Hey baby, why don't you dance with a real man?"

I give him one out. "I'm here with Rick," I say, pointing.

"You're here with Prick?" he asks. "Sweetie, I got all the prick you need right here." And lord help me, he grabs my hand and puts it on his crotch.

Okay Omega. You had your chance.

"You are inadequate," I tell him, and I don't bother to yell it.

I'm speaking directly to a specific part of Omega's mind, the part of every mind that craves discipline and punishment and longs to willfully obey a strong leader. I seize that part, the sniveling worm of the soul, through Omega's eyes and twist it beneath me. I can do this very, very well.

"Your penis is too small. Every woman you meet can tell. Lots of men can too." He can't ignore this. He can't doubt it. This is his new truth.

His eyes are locked on mine and although he shouldn't be able to hear me over the thumping club beat, I know that every word is getting hammered straight into his brain. "You do not have what it takes to make a woman happy. You make women laugh. Women laugh at you all the time."

More than his hand goes limp, and I can see tears starting to drip out of his eyes. Good.

"Go home and think about this," I tell him, and he turns to the door, moving like a man in a very sad dream.

This is, I think, my favorite part about being a vampire.

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ISBN 1-58846-862-3 First Edition: December 2004 Printed in Canada

White Wolf Publishing 1554 Litton Drive Stone Mountain, GA 30083 www.white-wolf.com/fiction

ahunger likefire greg stolze VARPIPE, THE REQUIEM



It is curious, if not unfitting, that the most common name for unlife among vampires is a musical reference, the Requiem. The word itself means a mass or musical composition for the dead. In some cases, a requiem is a dirge. In other cases it is a chant intended for the dead's repose. In still others, it is a gesture of respect.

No surprise, then, that the word has taken on its own meaning among the vampires who call themselves

Kindred. The word has connotations of its own, suggesting that the Kindred must have adopted it in a more enlightened or sophisticated time. Tonight, however, all but the most cloistered Kindred know that the word bears

its own specialized meaning. The Requiem is the Kindred's unlife, the grand, doomed waltz through which every one of their kind dances every night, urged on by metaphorical strains of music that represent the hidden powers that guide, manipulate and inspire them.

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Every night stands out as singularly as each separate note in a composer's opus. When we hear the composition, though, we do not examine each and every note. Rather we

experience it in sum. This is the key to avoiding the malaise of eternity. Let each night, each note, stand out in the greater body of the Requiem your life has become. —Charlotte Gaudibert, Aequitas Fatalis This book is lovingly dedicated to my child Daniel, born May 27, 2004. Son, I apologize in advance for any neglectful or shaky parenting.

Part One: Summertime

"For strangers to the truth, bewilderment is to be expected. For those who know the truth, the natural reaction is suspicion."

-Solomon Birch

6

Chapter One: Bruce

I open my eyes and I think, What the hell?

I'm wrapped in plastic. Crinkly thick stuff, smells kind of like paint.

Looking left and right, nothing hurts, so I try turning my head. It's all right. Stomach feels okay. So I must've slept right through the hangover. Haven't done that in a while.

I move and my wrapping isn't too tight—I can get it off my face without a lot of trouble. It's a drop cloth, and I get my head and shoulders free.

I'm in a basement, I think. It's dark, and it feels like I'm in a small space. Everything's dusty, and there's a little light coming in from under the door.

Man. I must have really tied one on last night. Nina's gonna be pissed.

What time is it? My watch has a light on it; I pinch the little button and it's *Saturday*! Saturday, and eight o'clock at night! Damn, I must have slept through the whole day, and I was going to fix that toilet handle in the half-bath. Shit.

I stand up and find the light cord.

The room is small, maybe ten by ten, with a bare bulb and wood shelves stacked with junk. There's a humidifier, some old tools, a dusty aquarium with magazines in it, a red Coleman cooler with maybe a folded-up tent on top of it... just crap. I bet I'm in somebody's storage room, like in the basement of an apartment building.

What the hell happened to me? How did I get here?

Okay, last thing I remember. It was Friday night. Check. Got out of work and went to Pitchers & Pool with Tony and Spence and that new guy from Lawn. Check. Had some pitchers, played some pool. Okay, all normal.

How'd I get here from there?

I guess the first thing is to figure out where here is. And get some food. Damn, I'm starving.

The door on the storage locker is busted, looks like someone kicked it in. Did I do that? It's not a big deal, a cheap padlock and hasp, Aisle Eleven, probably fifteen bucks. There's a cruddy linoleum floor with corners turning up over dirty concrete, water damage on the cement walls, I smell something musty... and fabric softener? I hear clunking from down the hall, there's more light that way. Off I go.

The well-lit part is the laundry room. Yeah, I must be in an apartment building. Someone's got her clothes in the dryer and I step out into the light. Young woman, small, real dark hair, wearing a blue tank top. She's sitting in one of those plastic and metal stacking chairs. I come in and she turns her head. She's frowning a little, but just for a second. When she sees me, she gives a little yelp.

"Hey, I..."

Her eyes are kind of wide and she's inching away. Okay, whatever. I head for the door. Outside, I see streetlights.



I get out of the apartment building and look around. It's a hot, humid night. Anyone with any sense is inside with a cold beer and the fan on, but there's a few young kids running around, a few *vatos* hanging out on porch sofas or stoops, one young couple walking down the street holding hands. I get out and in the good light I take a moment to look down at myself.

I've got dust and mess all over me. I'm filthy. My arms look like they're really encrusted with... something. My

8 a hunger like fire

jeans are the same ones I wore to work on Friday. Same Home Depot polo shirt, only there's some dried crud on it and... the hell? Where'd that hole come from?

Clearly I got a lot to answer for. I wish I could remember what happened, but I'm drawing a blank. It's been a long time since *that* happened too. I usually don't black out from just beer. In fact, I don't think I've ever blacked out from just beer. Did we start drinking hard stuff on Friday? Why?

I was at Pitchers & Pool and I played eight ball with the new guy... what was his name? I can't even remember who won. Did I start to go home? I think I did, but then it all gets fuzzy.

Fire?

Yeah, fire... I remember a... an accident? Something. And some guy, some short guy, just hideous, like something from a freak show...

I hear someone hiss.

It's not a cat hiss, like when an ump makes a bad call. It's one of those sharp breath hisses, like when you come around a corner and there's a dead dog all spread out in the street. I look up and the young lovers are looking at me, and I'm the dead dog.

They edge around me. The chick looks kind of nervous. The guy, just disgusted.

"What're you lookin' at?" I ask, but I don't really want to know, I just want them to move along.

They move along.

Screw this. I'm starving. I think I know where I am, and there's a taco joint not far.

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My name is Bruce Miner. I'm thirty-eight years old. I graduated from Morton East High School when I was nineteen, married Nina that summer, had our only daughter Brooke a couple years after. I worked at Meridian Rail for a while, until the accident, and now I work at Home Depot. 9

Brooke's in high school, talking about dropping out. I keep telling her it's not like when I was young—you can't just quit school and get a job. But she knows it all better. Louder, too.

Nina works at a doctor's office, answering the phones and typing and stuff. She makes more money, so it's *her* car, and she never lets me forget it. Not that I'm supposed to drive anyway.

It's not the best life in the world, but there you go. At least I knew what to expect. Until tonight, I guess.

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The taco place is Pepe's, I remember it. It's a dive, but I'm so hungry I don't care. It's a long walk to my place, but not too bad if I get some food in me. Three tacos and a beer and I'll be good as new.

Maybe I should give Nina a call, ask her to come and get me? Probably not. The first couple times I broke the leash, she worried about me, but I guess that routine got pretty old. Now she's just gonna be mad, and if I ask her to drive out and get me it's not going to make things any easier. I'll eat, then call her.

There are four teenagers in a corner and one guy sitting at the counter. He gives me the evil eye when I sit, just like everyone has been, and I am not in the mood. And then I smell it.

I look over at him (and he leans back when I do) and damn, something over there smells great!

The short-order cook comes up and asks if he can help me, and I point at old Evil Eye's plate. "I want that," I say.

"Burrito supremeo," he says.

"And a... what you got on draft here?"

"Budweiser and MGD."

"And a Budweiser."

"Coming up."

He's been giving me the stink-eye, just like everyone else. What the fuck? Maybe I got something on my face?

II

greg stolze

Maybe it's like that time Spence and I were drinking with that one guy... what was his name? Some really Italian name like Angelo or Giovanti... and when he passed out, Spence's girlfriend put lipstick and rouge and eyeliner on him. Yeah, when he woke up he was one puzzled and pissed off eye-tie.

I pick up one of those metal napkin holders and use it as a mirror, but it's too greasy, all I can see is smears and blurs. But Jesus Christ, what happened to my hands?

I put the napkin holder down for a closer look. Man, my hands look like they went through a meat grinder! I thought they were just real dirty, but that's not it. They don't hurt or anything, but the skin's all red and choppy and scabby... it's like when that guy at the plant got psoriasis, only it's redder, it's worse.

I put my hands to my face and I can feel the bulbs and blisters. Now I know why everyone's been looking at me weird. Christ, I must look like the Elephant Man!

I leave the restaurant before my food comes.

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The walk home is longer than I remember. I catch a bus halfway there. The Herberts aren't home on the other side of the duplex—good, I don't want to talk to them anyhow. I let myself in and the dog starts barking.

"Hey Peaches. Hey. Whooza good girl, huh? Huh? Who's my good girl?"

The dog cocks her head and starts to whine. No. C'mon, no, not my fucking *dog* too?

"Peaches. Kiss kiss doggie. Whooza good doggie? C'mere girl. Come to da-da. C'mon, please? *Please?*"

My voice breaks on that last word, weird, kind of high and whiny and I don't like it, am I that desperate? But it works, it gets through, and Peaches comes up to lick my hands and my face.

"Yeah, you're a *good girl* aren't you? Who's daddy's good girl? Good Peaches." Fuck, I'm almost crying, but I'm so grateful this dog isn't rejecting me. Everyone else might, but not Peaches, she's licking my face like she always has. Of course, she drinks from the toilet, but still.

It's still a relief.

Man's best friend. Fuckin'-A right.



First thing I do is go to the bathroom. I'm ravenous, but I gotta see the damage first.

Looking in the mirror, all I see is blur—guess I'm still kind of teary-eyed from the reunion with my dog, damn. Or maybe whatever it was did this to my face is making me blind too? Man. Is this that Ebola shit, or West Nile or what?

I lean in and squint and it's bad.

It's almost kind of cool, how gross my face looks. Like when you were a little kid, and you'd show someone your chewed up food? Or when you snuck into a slasher flick when you were fifteen or something? I can't stop looking because it's so nasty.

You can still recognize the shape of my face, and there are clear patches here and there on the cheek and neck. The forehead's pretty much okay. That's something. But those boils, that rash... they're all over my neck and one side of my face, it looks like I got burned really bad or maybe electrocuted. Man, what happened? My face is covered with sores and what the fuck happened to me?

I have to look away before I start to cry again.

Food. That'll cheer me up. I'm so hungry that even my own messed-up face can't spoil my appetite.

I open the fridge, grab some leftover Chinese food and a beer, and there's a note on the beer box.

Uh oh.

I put the fried rice on a plate and start heating it while I open the beer and look at the note. Nina's handwriting. Oh boy.

13

greg stolze

Dear Bruce

I don't know why I'm putting dead on this letter because I am so mad at you I can barely hold this pen without breaking it in hall. What kind ob man are you? Your no kind ob a man you can't provide bor your barnily and I accepted that, you can't keep down a job and I got used to that too but I hoped you could at least respect yourself. But you don't. The only thing you respect is your bucking Budweiser. I was close to throwing all your beer down the drain but you know what? I'm tired ob tiging. Your a lousy boozer and I'm tired ob even tiging to stop you So why don't you go ahead and drink yourself to death if you can even sober up enough to kind your way hom?

FUCK YOU.

-Nina

Wow.

Well, it could have been worse, I guess.

The microwave dings. Snack time.

I twist off the beer cap and get out the plate and sit down at the table, I take my first swig and almost spit it out. It's *terrible*! What the fuck? It tastes like piss, like vinegar, it gives this sting in my nose like when you smell hydrogen peroxide, it's *nasty*. Fuck!

Did Nina put something in my beer? Man, that's not like her. She's never been sneaky. Mean yes, mad yes, but never sneaky. Must just be a bad batch, but I'm disappointed. Budweiser's never let me down like that.

I get a forkful of fried rice and it's turned too. How old is this stuff? It tastes rancid, jeez, it's got that fishy taste like when meat goes bad and, and that kind of grapey taste like sour milk and the next thing I know I've puked all over myself.

Perfect.

"Peaches ol' girl, this is not my lucky day."

I go, get in the shower and find out that those patches of scab or scar or whatever the hell they are, it's all over my body. Great. My cock has a cracked, leathery looking *thing* on it, right at the base and spreading on both balls. There's some pus or something coming out. Man, if I hadn't puked before I'd puke now. I can't stop poking at it, it doesn't hurt or anything, but *man*.

I start to cry, again. The water's running down my whole mangled body, and when I look at the drain, I can see a little blood going down there too. Wonderful.

At least I've got something to throw in Nina's face when she gets home. Where the hell are they?

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I try some more food, but it's all wrong. Even bread, just plain white bread without even any butter, I bought it on Wednesday so it's got no chance to go bad... I can't even swallow it. I gag it, cough it up. Peanut butter, bananas, milk, stuff that *anyone* can eat but I just can't choke it down. And I'm *hungry*, I'm starving, but nothing's good, and I'm still looking in the cupboards when I hear Peaches bark and the back door open.

I'm still not sure how to handle this. Do I tell Nina I really was drinking, got drunk, passed out? Heck, do I *know* I passed out? I'm sick, maybe that brought me down. It's not like she didn't know I was going to Pitchers & Pool after work. It was Friday, after all. She's not going to think I was out buying her a gift or something.

I see her coming in and Brooke's right behind her, they've got a bunch of shopping bags. I stand up and turn.

"Hey."

Nina drops the bags and just stares. Brooke's less stunned, her face crinkles up and she says "Ewww!"

"Nina. It's me."

"Bruce?" She can't believe it. Doesn't want to believe it. But she takes a little half-step toward me.

"Yeah. It's me, I'm..." Sorry. "...home."

I move forward and she moves back.

"What? Yeah, I'm... something happened, but I'm still..."

"What happened?"

"...I'm still *me*, c'mon...'

"What *happened* to you, Bruce? Jesus Christ, your face!"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"How can you not know?" Brooke asks.

"Look, all I remember is..." The bar. Drinking. The guy from Lawn. (The ugly man. Fire. The stink of the ugly man's breath as his sharp pasty nose got close, closer, his breath was like rotted meat and I could see bugs on his *clothes*, jeez, a huge centipede crawling along his collar, and fire, *fire*...)

"Are you okay, dad?"

"It doesn't hurt."

"How can it not hurt?" Nina asks.

"Because it *doesn't*, shit, you think I don't know if I'm in *pain* or not?"

"Well I'm *sorry* Bruce, but you disappear for a whole night and day and when you come back you're... you're... were you in an accident?"

"I don't know." Fire. "I... maybe. I think so."

There's a little pause, and I can see on her face that she's having a bad thought, and then her eyes narrow and she says, "You weren't *driving*, were you?"

"What?"

"Bruce just... just tell me you weren't behind the wheel." "I don't fucking believe this."

"You were, weren't you?"

"I show up covered in wounds and sores and instead of, of maybe showing me some *niceness* I get the third degree?"

"Were you driving drunk again?"

"No!" Before I know it, I'm right in her face, right inches away and I don't know what I was doing last night but I can't let her win this... greg stolze

15

"No Nina, I was not fucking driving drunk, I don't drive, I haven't driven since then and *I'm never driving again*, are you happy now?"

I guess I grabbed her wrist because I can feel it in my hand, her skin is so warm, like hot...

"Huh Nina? Satisfied? That okay with you?"

Man, I'm just getting madder and madder and Nina, Christ, she looks scared, her eyes are big as pool balls (beautiful) she jerks her hand out and backs away, she stumbles over one of the bags she dropped and falls, she's (trapped) funny and I can't help it, I laugh, it feels good to look at her sprawled down there with her skirt coming up above her knees a little, breathing heavy and, man, she smells great...

Then something smashes into my back. Thump. Hard enough to make me stumble forward. I turn.

Holy shit. Brooke just slugged me in the back.

"Hey!"

"Leave her alone!"

"You don't hit me," I start, and this time she kicks me. Hard. In the shins. With her pointy-toed little boots.

I'm forward and I get her by the shoulders, she's hitting my side with her little fists and she smells great too, just like her mother, her binky little short-sleeve sweater tears under my hands and her skin feels hot too, so good, like that sex hot you feel afterwards when you're just lying there (mmm...) and then I bite her neck and yes, this is what I was hungry for.

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## Man.

It's maybe an hour later. I finally pulled over the car. Yeah, I took the car, Nina's car, the car I'm not supposed to drive for a bunch of reasons. I got bigger problems right about now.

I think I... I was a little bit out of it for a while there. When I was... when Brooke and I were...

What did I do to her? What did I do to my daughter?

It was like when I was younger and I'd go to bars with bands, and sometimes after the first pitcher I'd just trance out, not really drunk but buzzed and with the music going and I could just sit at a table and drink and listen and look without really thinking about anything at all. I think it was like that, when I was... when... then.

Nina brought me out of it.

Jesus. Nina.

Nina was screaming and she didn't bother with a simple punch like Brooke. Nina stepped in the kitchen and got a knife.

There's a hole in my coveralls, a little blood on it, right by the ribs on my side. (Coveralls? When did I put on...? Oh, after the shower, right.) When I pulled the knife out and looked at the hole, it just closed right up. Of course, I didn't do that until I was done with Nina.

I hope I didn't kill her. I hope to *Christ* I didn't. But she stabbed me and I got mad, I hit her (which, drunk or sober, I never did before) and then... well, I hit her in the face, busted her lip and I saw the... the blood...

I saw it and I wanted more. I wanted it again. She'd let go of the knife and I grabbed her, like I'd done Brooke, and it was (even better) even worse, in a way, with Nina. It reminded me of making love to her, to be perfectly honest, I mean, I was... sucking... right on a spot I would kiss all the time, your face fits right there where the neck meets the shoulder and the skin is so soft and tender, so salty... but this was no kiss. Shit, I bit her open, I was working my tongue in to make the hole bigger, I *chewed*, I didn't care if she bled to death as long as I was there to catch it, get it, drink it all.

At some point, it was enough, I guess. Usually, you drink or eat a bunch and you feel sluggish and drowsy, but not me, not... this. I felt great. Strong and tough. More alive than I had in years. Since the accident, really.

I've gone crazy, haven't I? I'm around the bend. I'm a serial killer now. Is this how it happens? One day, or night, greg stolze

17

you wake up and you're psycho? You attack your wife and daughter and then just leave them piled up by the back door? Steal the car for bonus points?

Man.

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Step one. Money. I'm going to need some. And a place to hide. I can't keep the car, I don't have a license. Yeah, I don't have a license and my wife's going to tell the cops I stole it after trying to kill her.

Unless I killed her.

Right, money. And a place to hide out. And get rid of the car.

Peaches barks.

"You're okay girl, just stay still, good dog."

Cash, hideout and dog food.

Money's easiest, for a little bit. I pull over by an ATM, try for the maximum withdrawal, but there's insufficient funds. That's me and Nina in a nutshell. I see how much there is and it's \$793.57. I withdraw \$790 because the machine has nothing smaller than a ten in it.

One down.

There's a Motel 6 up ahead and I pull into the parking lot. Maybe they won't notice the car for a while. Maybe I can get a leg up on the cops. Or I could get on the highway now, just run, get to Pittsburgh by six in the morning. They wouldn't look for me there, I don't know anyone there.

The only problem with that is, I don't know anyone there.

Crap, maybe what I should do is just check into a hospital. Something is clearly very wrong with my skin to make it break out like it did, but Nina had to go and fuck *that* up by pissing me off so bad. Thanks, honey.

No, that's not fair. This is my own fault. I snapped. Maybe this stuff that's in my skin, maybe it's in my brain too. Maybe that's what's making me crazy and violent and messed up.

Shit, what am I going to do?

There's a bar next to the Motel 6. Budweiser light in the window.

Lord knows I could use something to calm me down.

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It's midnight. I've been sitting in the bar and not drinking. Nina would be so proud, if she knew. If she's alive.

I tried, of course. Shot of Jack, usually a big comfort. No dice. I had to spit it back in the shot glass before I puked it.

Once, when I was going to those dumb AA meetings, I heard about this stuff, some drug. I can't remember what it was called, but they put it in you and it makes you allergic to alcohol. I must have gotten dosed with some of that stuff. It's the only thing that makes sense.

I hope Peaches is okay out in the car.

Man, I hope Brooke and Nina are okay at home.

I came into this dive, ordered my Jack, got the oogie look from the bartender who, I think, just barely decided I might sue him if he tossed me out for being ugly. Not that the people here care. This isn't a place where people go to drink martinis and giggle and flirt and hear music. It's a barfly bar. It's a place where drunks go to get drunk. I got a bunch of quarters and took my drink to a dark corner by the phone. I was happy to be out of sight and I'm sure the bartender was glad too.

First, I called Gino. Gino and me have been pals since grade school and, sure, we drifted apart after we got married and everything, but the chips are down and I thought he'd help me.

Good thinking, Bruce.

The good news was, Gino's become the kind of solid citizen who's home on a Saturday night. The bad news is, he's the kind of solid citizen who won't invite a drunk he hasn't talked to in five years to stay with him, his wife, and his two daughters on short notice. Yeah, it pisses me off, but I can't blame him. A man's gotta look out for his family first, I guess. I call Spence. Get the answering machine. I call Tony. Answering machine. I know Tony's got a cell, but I don't have his cell number (because why would I need it? I see him at work every day and most weekends).

Who else would help me? Nina's brother? Sure. He'd help me black my eyes so they match the rest of my face. My folks are both dead, and my brother's way the hell out in Florida, I haven't talked to him for forever.

I call him anyhow.

"Hello?"

"Hey there, Todd."

"Who is this?"

I'm a little hurt, but what should I expect? "It's me, Bruce. Your brother."

"Bruce? What the ...? What time is it?"

"It's late, I know, I'm sorry..."

"Are you okay? I mean, are you in trouble? What's wrong?"

What's right? "Well..."

"You can tell me."

Family. "I, uh... I had a thing with Nina..."

"Bruce, have you been drinking?"

Jesus, what is it with everyone? Like they never have a fucking beer. "It's not that, really," I say. Though I guess you could say it's exactly that, I just wasn't drinking what he thought. "We had a fight and I'm kind of out of the house."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm at a hotel."

There's a pause.

"What do you want me to do?" Todd asks.

"Hell, how should I know? Man, can't a guy just get some, some support?"

"Okay, I'm, look, I'm sorry, but I what I meant was... what do you want me to *do*? Do you want me to come up there?"

"Could you?" For a minute I almost think it could work. But it wouldn't. "Uh... well, as I think about it... nah. Nah,

20 a hunger like fire

greg stolze

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don't come up. It wouldn't help." Dragging Todd in is just going to slow me down and fuck us both up. I mean, what if I'm contagious?

(Jesus, what if I infected Nina and Brooke?) Another pause.

"Is this something you and Nina can work out?"

"I don't... think so."

"Huh."

"If you'd like to continue, please insert another..." I shut up the phone's mechanical voice by cramming in more quarters.

"I thought you were in a hotel," Todd says.

"I'm using the pay phone in the lobby."

"Oh." He clears his throat. "Do you... y'know... want to come down here and stay? For a while, y'know?" He doesn't sound really thrilled.

"Maybe. Yeah, that might... I'll have to think about it, okay?"

"All right. You got a number where you're staying?"

"Not yet. I'll, uh... I'm gonna check in and then I'll call you again, all right?"

"Okay. You sure you're...?"

"I'll be all right. G'bye."

Okay. Is it a plan? It's a plan. I'll go down and stay with Todd, get my act together, maybe get some goddamn *medical attention*. Florida, sure, they're crammed full of illegal immigrants so their hospital probably won't check me against Illinois' outstanding warrants. That stands to reason, right? I could set out right now, drive like a fiend and be in the Sunshine State by Monday, just drive all night and day.

(Fire.)

...and suddenly I've got the creeps. Suddenly I'm scared. Suddenly, I don't want to go to the sunshine state. What the hell?

I make a few more calls. Steve. Dave. Neither of 'em help me out, neither of 'em give me the time of day. (Well,

greg stolze

21

okay, Dave tells me it's almost one o'clock and asks if I have any manners.)

I'm so desperate I even call Lydia. She's friendly at least. From the time she says "Hello, whoozis?" I can tell she's soused.

"It's Bruce Miner," I tell her.

"You gotta wrong number."

"No, I... this is Lydia, right? Lydia Wheeler?"

"Mm hm?"

"You were my AA sponsor. You remember?"

There's a pause and then she just laughs.

"Alcoholics 'Nonymous," she snorts. "What a crock of shit. You think it stopped me drinking?"

"I guess not."

"It just slowed me down. You know, like a halftime. Now I 'preciate my liquor more than ever."

Oh boy. "That's great for you."

"You mus' be feeling 'tempted,' right? You're 'in crisis'? Otherwise you wouldn'ta called."

"Uh huh, well, yeah." I'm trying to think of a polite way to hang up, trying to think why I should bother being polite, when the bartender yells out that it's last call.

Lydia hears, she laughs. "Come over here," she says. "I've got a bottle of Beefeater. That'll take care of your crisis."

Gin's never been my drink of choice, but what the hell? It's not like I've got anywhere else to go.

"Sure," I say.



Lydia gives me directions to her place, which is way out there in Aurora, and when I get there it's 3 A.M. and I can't fucking find it. I drive around those lousy, dirty streets for an hour. I can't find her address, Peaches is snoozing in the shotgun seat and I finally just punt the whole idea. It was dumb anyway. What am I supposed to do? Hole up with drunk Lydia until this blows over? I'm not going to be back at Home Depot working the key-cutter in a month. Not unless I square things with Nina.

22 a hunger like fire

As soon as I think that, I know it's right. It's what I've got to do. I was being a chump, running away. I do that. But I should at least make sure Nina and Brooke are okay before I do anything else. I owe them that much. Shit, I owe them a lot better than that, but right now it's all I can do.

I get on the highway. I'm not tired at all, hell, I must have slept something like sixteen straight hours. I take the Harlem Avenue exit, just to stretch it out a little. I haven't driven in a long time.

The city is creepy at night. Empty, and in that yellow lamp glare everything looks washed out and dead, like after a gas attack or something. The only people out are drug dealers, drug buyers and the worst whores of all, ugly and used up cheapies who look even worse by streetlight. Even the bums are smart enough to be under cover by this time of night. It's just the dregs and me.

I start to see newspaper trucks driving around, and other delivery trucks getting an early start. I see cops. Eventually one of the cops turns on his lights and pulls me over.

Maybe it's just as well.

"License and registration, sir?"

"Look, I give up."

"Excuse me sir? If you could just give me your license and registration..."

"Ain't got one. No license I mean. And if the car isn't showing up stolen, then my wife didn't report it. I stole this car. I give up. I'm turning myself in." I keep my hands on the steering wheel, where he can see them.

He starts muttering into the radio on his shoulder. Peaches blinks and sits up.

"Is that a dog?"

"Yeah, it's my dog. Her name's Peaches," I say, though I'm sure he couldn't possibly care less.

I'm watching him in the rearview mirror and from his posture I can tell he's thinking that a dog is all he friggin' needs. 23

"Sir, I'm going to have to call animal control to take care of the dog."

"No, look, come on man, the dog didn't do anything wrong!"

"I realize that sir, but they're equipped to tend to the animal."

"Look, when my wife... I mean, it's her dog too, okay? You got to make sure she knows who has Peaches and how she can go get her, right?"

"Your dog will be fine, sir." I can't tell for sure, but I think he relaxes a little. He's still got his hand near his gun, but he's not looking quite as cautious.

"You got a dog?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. "Actually it's my ex-wife's. She didn't want it. Little yappy dog named Bobo."

This is almost nice. He's not being so cop-polite to me anymore. We could just be two guys talking, like at a barbecue or something, talking about our dogs. I lean back a little and he's alert again, hand by the gun again. I put my hands back on the wheel. We're not just two guys talking.

He gets my name and calls it in. He reads me my rights and slowly talks me out of the car. Peaches starts barking and I calm her down. He thanks me for that as he puts the cuffs on me.

"Do we really need...?"

"Standard arrest procedure, sir."

Sir again. Crap.

He opens the back seat of his cruiser and puts his hand on my head so I don't bump it against the doorframe. He's wearing rubber gloves—when did he put those on? I get in and it's cramped and tiny, just a plastic seat with no cushion.

Despite my drinking which, I'll admit, is not completely under control, I haven't been arrested more than twice. Once was when I was a teenager, which I don't really count. And after the accident. So I'm hardly used to being in the backseats of cop cars. But there I sit and there I wait.

And wait.

25

greg stolze

And wait.

The holdup is, I guess, the animal control van. He keeps getting on the radio about it and sounding more and more impatient. He asks them if he can get someone else to come out and watch the dog while he takes me in, I don't hear the reply but I guess it's negative because we just keep sitting.

He looks at his watch.

"It's nearly dawn," he says, and something about that makes me scared. Then the dogcatcher finally shows up and everything goes crazy.

While the animal control guy is trying to get Peaches out of the car (and she doesn't want to go, she's doesn't know who this guy is) the first ray of sunlight comes over a roof and (fire) falls on me in the car and it *burns*, shit, it's horrible and I can't help but yell and try to get away. (Fire)

The cop hears me freaking out and turns, he was standing near the dog pound guy and *holy shit my skin is starting to smoke!* 

(Fire!)

I'm burning alive and then I get my hands free, smash the window, I scramble out and the cop runs over, I hit him, knock him back...

"Peaches! Get 'im!"

Peaches goes for the dog catcher and the cop has out his gun, just an hour ago we were talking like guys but he shoots and I grab him by the throat, grab his arm, pick him up and throw him across the hood of his car, the sun is getting higher, getting hotter

(Fire!) and I run, run for the darkness... "Peaches!"

...run for the shadows.

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I wake up and think *Where the hell*...? Then I remember. The storm sewers.

I pinch the watch and, yep, I slept all damn day again. This is getting really old. At least this time I remember what happened... sort of. I punched out that cop and ran away down an alley and there was a sewer grating and (I ripped it out of the pavement) it must have been made with some really cheap concrete. Big surprise. Everything the city of Cicero does is crooked. I wouldn't be surprised if they were patching potholes with buckwheat flour. Anyhow, the stupid thing came right out in my hands and I jumped in the hole and ran.

Now I'm in the pitch-black damp, I hear rats and I got no idea where I am at all.

"Peaches?"

No reply. Just echoes.

It takes me about an hour of stumbling around before I find some light. It's another sewer grating, right under a lamppost I guess. I sit there a while, grateful that it's been a dry summer.

My side hurts and I look down. There's a hole.

The hole in my coveralls is dirty and damp and about as big around as my little finger. There's maybe a little blood on it, but when I was lying in the water it must have washed it, kind of.

The hole in me is the same size. I can actually stick my finger in it (ow!) and feel guts and it's not bleeding.

Sweet Jesus Christ.

It closes up as I'm looking at it.

Okay, this is *really* not real. But hey, I'm insane, right? I lost my nut, jumped my family, punched out a cop. Man, they're going to lock me up until doomsday for that one...

Unless it's all a dream, like. Or a hallucination, I guess. Sure. I mean, that hole just closing up, like when Nina stabbed me, what if those are just hallucinations? That makes sense, more sense than them just going away, and if that stuff's all in my head, why not the rest of it? Maybe I've been on some crazy DT thing, maybe right now I'm tied down in a nice warm hospital and I never hurt my wife or kid or anyone else.

A rat crawls on my foot and I jump and you know what? Crazy or sane, I don't have that much imagination.

I start looking around for a way out of the sewer.



I find a maintenance hatch that I can unlock from the inside, and someone's already cut a hole in the bottom of the fence, so I don't have to crawl over the barbed wire on top. I've still got my wallet with my \$790, but Peaches doesn't come when I call. Why would she? I probably walked a mile underground and she's had all day to run. She probably ran home.

Home.

I find a train station with a change machine, get quarters, call home.

"Hello?"

Nina sounds awful, like she's been crying, but she's alive. "Aw Nina, thank God you're okay..."

"Bruce?" She's surprised. I guess I should've expected.

"Sweetie, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I..."

"Bruce, where are you?"

Something sounds weird. Off. The Nina I'm used to would be yelling at me.

"Nina, is Brooke okay?"

"Where are you, Bruce?" She sounds tightly wound.

"First tell me if Brooke's alright."

"What do you think? No, she's not alright, she's in the hospital in a coma because of what you did to her! She may not come out of it and she may have brain damage because of you, you sick, evil fuck! Now tell me where you are so I can have the cops come and bust your worthless ass!"

I drop the receiver and run.

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I don't know how much time passes. I keep walking. I try to stay out of the light so people don't see me. I walk by the shitty bars where I can't drink anymore, and the shitty houses like the one I can't go home to, and past all the shitty people who are still better than I am.

I'm walking along by the railroad tracks, not doing much, when I hear a voice.

"Are you Bruce?"

What makes me stop is the dog's bark. I turn and she's coming at me-Peaches, she found me!

"Hey! Whooza good girl, huh? Who's my good girl?"

I kneel, and she's in my arms.

"Yeah, she's a smart animal."

I finally look up, and I shudder.

(run)

The guy with Peaches is wearing Redwing boots, jeans, and even though it's summer he's got on a leather jacket one of the old kind, like a *Hogan's Heroes* jacket. He's about my height, probably my age, shaggy gray-brown hair, sharp blue eyes and skin so white it looks a little blue too. He has a long nose and high cheekbones and thin lips.

(Run)

And I don't know why, but he scares the crap outta me. I only realize I'm getting ready to bolt when Peaches gives a little wimper when I stand back up. I glance down at her and that happy, pitiful look she's got catches me like it does every time. I can't just run off on her too, can I?

"It's okay," he says. "I ain't here to hurt you."

"You a cop?" But I know he's something worse than a cop...

"Nope. Name's Masterson." He steps closer and I notice that he's got dirty fingernails. For some reason that makes me feel a little easier.

"I guess you've been looking for me."

"I guess so. You need some help, I reckon."

"Unless you're a doctor, you..."

"You don't need a doctor."

"Maybe you didn't get a good look." I step close, so that he can see my gross face.

Unlike everyone else, he doesn't flinch.

"You ain't sick," he says. "You're just a monster."

29

greg stolze

When he grins, his mouth isn't right. His teeth are all fangs, like inch-long needles.

"C'mon," he says.

"Where are we going?" I follow anyway, but I still want to know.

"You're going to meet the other vampires."



It's fucked up. It's insane. A vampire? That's crazy. (But then, I'm crazy.) Vampires aren't real. They're like ghosts and werewolves and the thing under the bed, they're not...

Although, it does explain a hell of a lot.

We catch a cab and don't talk, and we go to an okay neighborhood in Berwyn, right nearby. Ordinary house, right up the street from a school for fuck's sake. It's a little nicer than mine, built around the same time.

Before we go in, Masterson stops me on the steps. "You're gonna want to wig out, when you go in there," he says. "Try to keep your shit together."

"What?"

"Look, you know when two nasty dogs meet? It's like lots of snarling and fighting and shit, right?"

"Yeah, but what-?"

"Well there's a part of you, that's like one of those dogs. You run into another predator, it'll want to fight or run or just wig the fuck out. Like when your dog brought me to you."

This is all too much. Way too much. "Why should I go in there, then?"

"'Cause I ain't giving you a choice, Brucey." He smiles that needle-toothed smile of his. "But don't fret. It'll get easier." Then he knocks.

As soon as the door opens, I feel a shudder of fear and rage pound through me. Masterson puts his hand on my shoulder. "Easy," he says.

I swallow down the panic and force myself to look at the guy standing in the entry to the house. He's skinny and pale, like Masterson. He's taller, looks like he's about twenty, with a blonde crew cut that's a little long on the top, spiked up with gel or something. His eyes are brown and he wrinkles his nose at me. He's wearing white leather pants and one of those jackets that buttons right up to the neck, like a dentist.

"Found our lost lamb," Masterson says.

"Your lamb stinks like shit, Ambrose," the host says, but lets us in. "The dog stays in the yard."

"Go on in back, Peaches," Masterson says, and Peaches does it. I figure Ambrose is Masterson's first name.

The house, inside, looks normal. No coffins, no skulls, nothing... monster-y. Ratty carpet, hardwood floors, a couple framed pictures of Chicago buildings in the living room.

"I am Raphael Ladue," leather-pants announces. "You may remain here as long as you do nothing to endanger me or my activities, but I expect a high standard of behavior. Do you understand?"

"Just let him shower," Ambrose mutters, lowering onto a sofa.

Raphael Ladue glares at him. "It's in here," he says.

I hear the door open while I'm washing, and when I get out I find that someone's left a pair of shorts and a Tshirt from Taste of Chicago 2000 on the floor in the bathroom. They're a pretty awkward fit, but my coveralls are a loss.

Going to the living room, I hear Ambrose and Raphael talking.

"...Just hand him over," Raphael says. "Get Lucky off our backs, maybe get him to take me seriously..."

"He says 'frog' and you jump. Yeah. That's the *best* way to earn his respect. I can make this right, don't worry."

"You *better* fix this, that's all I'm saying. I'm not about to throw away everything..."

"Yeah yeah. Look, are the nose four at two coming or not?"

"Filthfoot is on his way. I haven't heard anything from Naked or Anita."

"I'm here," says a woman, and suddenly she's there.

She's naked and fat and black, but not a proper black. I mean, a black person is usually brown, right? She's black like really dark mud, like a gray black, wet ashes... like nothing living. She stands there and just looking I can tell she's *slimy*, her skin's more like a frog than a person and her eyes... they're little pools of blood.

I lose it.

"Gawddamn! "

I turn and run. I hear Raphael yelling, "Don't *do* that, dammit!" I hear them getting up behind me and I can hear that... *thing*... laughing—a little tinkly laugh, high and pretty and *wrong* coming from a walking pile of grease.

I'm trying to get the back door unlocked when I feel a hand on my shoulder. I bat it away.

"Calm down! Look, it's okay. Really."

Suddenly, I can do it. I can calm down. I turn to look at him and I don't understand how I could have ever thought Raphael was being mean or snotty. He's my friend. He's going to make everything work out as long as I can just keep looking at his face and hearing his voice...

"You're okay," he tells me, and I believe him. I slump down against the door and start crying, mostly just from relief.

"Poor thing. Is this better?" It's that same pretty voice, only now it's coming out of an ordinary woman wearing a flannel shirt and cutoffs.

"You... you were..." I swallow, hard. "Is this real?"

"Nothing is real," she says, which doesn't help.

"We're here to help you," Raphael says, and I look up at him, grateful.

Just then the back door opens and I fall back, hitting someone's grimy old pants. I look up into the face of another monster—this time his face all *wrong*—like each eye is just a half-inch away from where it's supposed to be, and his ears are too small, and his nose is just a little tilted, and his mouth is a half-inch too wide. It's a face, all the pieces are there in more or less the right place but... they're wrong. *He's* wrong.

"This the guy?" he asks.

Peaches is way over in the farthest corner of the yard, whining.

"I've got the police video saved," Raphael says. "That's how we found out about you."

"You really should be a little more subtle," Filthfoot says. That's the guy with the mixed around face. He's dressed like a bum, and barefoot. His name fits.

"Give the poor fellow time," says Naked, who still looks normal. Completely normal. So normal, in fact, that I'd have a hard time describing her.

"So, did one of you...?" This is Ambrose, and he asks it looking at Naked and Filthfoot. I have no idea what he's asking.

"Not me," Filthfoot says. "I got enough sorrow in my life."

"No," Naked says. She leans forward and takes my chin in her hand, like... like she's got every right to do it. "He's one of ours but not one of mine."

"You think it was Anita?" Ambrose asks.

"Anita had some stuff going down." Raphael squints at me. "I don't know if she'd... you know..."

"What are all you guys talking about?"

"Vampires don't just happen," Ambrose says. "They're made by other vampires, and it's not easy. It's not something you do by accident. And it's not something anyone is supposed to do lightly."

"It's not something anyone is supposed to do *at all*," Filthfoot adds.

"So... what does that mean?"

"Well, you're a rogue, and you were pretty blatant with the attacks on your wife and daughter..." Raphael says, and that hurts. I was right the first time. He *is* an asshole.

"Hey," Naked says. "Take it easy on him."

33

greg stolze

"What? It's just the truth, isn't it? He got on TV slugging it out with a cop, and the only reason they didn't find out about him ripping up the pavement is that they're too dumb to believe what's before their eyes." He turns to me, and that good feeling I had about him earlier is totally gone. "Listen. You are a creature of darkness, damned to hunt the night forever or until your own destruction. You are a curse upon humanity, like all of us. You can never go back, and the sooner you accept your role as a predator, the less damage you'll do overall."

Ambrose rolls his eyes behind Raphael's back.

"Wait, you mean I... I have to...?"

"Drink the blood of the living?" Naked asks. "Oh yeah."

"You know that's not true," Ambrose says. "There's animals."

"It's not the same," Filthfoot says, "Though it is a good idea for a newcomer like... say, what's your name, anyhow?"

"I'm Bruce."

He laughs and repeats it, and for a second I think he says *Brews*, but when he adds, "That's a good one. Fits your look," I realize he's actually saying *Bruise*.

"No," Raphael says. "His name *is* Bruce. Like Bruce Lee or Bruce Jenner?"

"My mistake." Filthfoot turns to face me. "Lots of us change our names after the embrace. You know—keeps your mind on your business."

"Huh?"

"After you become a vampire," Ambrose clarifies. "You have to cut ties to your old life. You know that, right?"

"But what about...?" I'm about to say *Nina and Brooke*, but I know the answer. Hell, I'm the poster child for why vampires should cut ties. I sink back into the couch.

"Hey," Naked says, leaning forward. "It's not so bad. We never get old, never sicken..."

"Never have to take a whizz," Raphael adds, sneering, "And all it costs is your soul." "It does not," Filthfoot objects. "Don't listen to prettyboy there. We're part of God's plan. We do important work."

"I don't see..."

"You just haven't found your path. We are the scourge of the wicked, the punishers of man."

"Yeah, and that's pretty fun, isn't it?" Ambrose says.

I can't tell if he's joking or not.

They tell me a bunch of other stuff. Sunlight and fire can kill me. Stakes in the heart are bad news. Garlic and holy water are bullshit, and so are roses. (I'd never heard that roses were supposed to hurt vampires.) I don't have to be invited into a house. I have a reflection, but it's messed up unless I concentrate... just a bunch of stuff, I can't take it and I tell them.

"You better take it," Raphael says. "If you're going to spill the secret and mess everything up, I don't want it happening here."

"Now, it's a lot to... digest," Naked says, "But if, as you say, you have no idea who embraced you, and you know nothing about it and you were... well, made and dumped... then you're doing well."

"Yeah," Filthfoot says. "We'll take care of you, even if your sire doesn't."

"What's a sire?"

"Don't worry about it," Ambrose says. "Not yet. Here, c'mon out in back and I'll teach you a trick, something you can use right away."

We go in the backyard and everyone else stays inside. Maybe Ambrose waved 'em back, I didn't see.

"You already twigged to a little bit of beast speech," he says, rubbing Peaches' ears. "That's a good skill. Let's work on that."

"What? Whaddaya mean... beast speech? I just, I mean... Peaches is my dog, that's all."

"It's not all. Animals don't like us, they can smell us or something... we give 'em the creeps. Unless we use the

35

greg stolze

beast speech on 'em. Not everyone gets the knack, but you did it on your pooch here. You can use it on anything."

"Anything?"

"Well, not bugs or worms or, you know, germs or what have you. But anything with enough of a brain. F'rinstance... okay, see that cat over there?" He's pointing at a big stray with long gray hair. "Call it to you. Good and loud now."

"Here, kitty kitty...?"

"No no no, you have to say it like you mean it. Put some, you know, some *catness* into it. Like this. *Heeeeere kitteeeey*." His voice has a weird, piercing quality. "You gotta look it in the eye. *C'mere, poos pooos*."

The cat hops up on the fence and gives Ambrose a wary look.

"C'mere kitty. No one's gonna huuuurt you." He walks forward, holds out his hands, and it jumps into his arms.

"There." It's purring. "This will get you through a lot of lean times."

Then he sinks those monster fangs into it, right by the neck, so deep I'm surprised the head doesn't just fall off.

I stumble back, but it's over quick.

"You know what I hate 'bout eating pussy? The taste. And the hair that gets stuck in your teeth."

I just stare at him.

"That was a joke," he says.

"Uh huh."

"You do it."

"I don't want to kill a cat."

He sighs. "Neither do I, particularly. But you need blood, cat's got it. It's not the same, not nearly, but a cat or a dog or a squirrel... it's a smart way to start your night. Keeps the hunger down. Keeps you from doing anything stupid. Anything crazy. Look it in the eyes first and tell it anything it wants to hear..."

"Isn't there some other way?"

He sighs. "In theory you could just hang out by the slaughterhouses. That seems like a great idea, right? So great that lots of older, tougher, vampires already had it. Emergency rooms are too risky unless you really know what you're doing, and you don't. Small kosher butcher shops are too piss-ant for the Prince or his posse to bother with, but the rabbis get awful suspicious if the same guy comes back night after night asking for the same thing. Nah, it's this or people."

"Prince?"

"It's about as dumb as it sounds," he says, "but he and his gang of assholes will make your eternity hell if they find out what you did to that cop and your family."

My family. Nina and Brooke.

Cats will keep me from doing anything crazy.

"So I... I just talk to it?"

Chapter Two: Persephone

Bella leans forward, lips parted, eyes half closed and says, "I wish I had your tits."

"I wish I had your hair," I say, not meaning it. I'm putting makeup on her, dramatic burgundy lipstick over a layer of powder with another layer of lipstick underneath that. I've already done her eyes with a touch of rose-brown shadow and mascara. Bella's hair is a big dishwater blonde ball, supported by a glittering series of fake-jewel pins and with a few limp tendrils hanging off it. She looks scrawny and pale and like she's trying too hard. Her knobby white knees are prominent between the high hem of a short black skirt and the high tops of patent leather boots. A pair of tank tops, black and gray, both rise above a stomach that isn't buff—it's actually concave. She looks anorexic.

"You really should smudge the makeup on your hand before putting it on me," she says. Like it matters.

She's been dead for fifty-seven years and we're going clubbing.

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She lets me step out first, which is kind. I start Pushing Out when the bouncer outside looks at me.

That's how I think of it—Pushing Out. I read somewhere about pheromones, about secret chemicals that make insects respond, make them mate. That's what I do. I project a wave of Wanting Me and I can see the bouncer's expression change when it hits him.

He waives our cover.

When I go down the hall into the club, the music is already deafening—something with the obligatory penetrating bass. Perfect, I'm sure, for people who came here hoping for some penetration. There's a repetitive lyric over the top—"Do it! Do it! Do it!" Delightfully subtle, uh huh.

I love the moment I enter, with the strobe lights and the disco ball specks and the colored lasers zipping all over the place. I Push Out and everyone turns.

Inside, I feel a little bit of "this isn't me!" but it's nothing negative. It's like that first Halloween in tenth grade when Betsy Plesser convinced me to dress up as a sexy kitty cat (she was dressed as a sexy belly dancer) and we went to the stupid Halloween dance and the boys all looked. The ones our age, from our class at school, they didn't know what to do with us except make some jerky comments, but a couple older boys, like seniors, asked us to dance.

That's what I think of every time I Push Out. I think of their eyes, in the dim, wanting me.

Dancing with seniors wasn't me either. I was smart little Linda Moore, jazz choir and debate team. I followed rules. But for that night I felt like the kind of free, smart-alecky girl who could ride on motorcycles and drink beer and smoke and still, somehow, never get date raped or in a car crash or anything. The next morning when I put on my normal jeans and normal sweater and went to school, I knew that there really weren't girls like that, that being irresponsible and antisocial and *naughty* had horrible consequences, with STDs and unwanted pregnancies and being a dropout.

Only now I find out that there are girls like that, girls with no consequences. Bella's one, and tonight, I'm pretending to be one too. Maybe pretending enough that it's true.

I'm wearing gobs of black eyeliner and a water bra that pushes those boobs Bella envied right against the neckline of a black lace-and-spandex top. It's cropped around the bottom of my ribcage, showing off a henna "tattoo" that skirts my navel and disappears into the top of skintight black jeans with the top button undone. A couple armbands, a silver choker, and lace-up knee-high boots complete the ensemble.

Maybe I don't even need to pretend any more. Maybe, at this moment, with all the eyes on me, I really am this person called "Persephone."

Bella comes in then, and she Pushes Out too. And if mine is a little urge of Wanting Me, hers is a tidal wave of Needing Her.

Maxwell said there's something in everyone that wants to be overwhelmed, wants to be awestruck and dumbfounded. Something that wants to worship. He told me Bella could teach me how to touch that, that it would keep me safe and help me. He was right. He's always right. That's why I love and hate and fear and admire him.

Now, Bella's sallow skin takes on the cool deliciousness of whipped cream, and her little raccoon eyes become deep pools of liquid mystery. Her thin frame is the supermodel answer to every dieting woman's prayers, and her hair is a treasure of gold, not limp and fine but ferally matted, already heavy with sweat, like she's already been at it with some guy, some lucky guy, the luckiest guy in Chicago....

I have to look away and remember that it's a trick that works on me, too.

We hit the dance floor ("Do it! Do it! Do it!") and we strut and pose and again. It's not me, not like the old me. The old me always thought she was comfortable with her body, and always had respect for herself, and putting on a display of lurid sensuality in public would have felt... silly. Even in the kitty cat costume I felt a little silly. I told myself that this was self-esteem, that I didn't need to act like some slut from a pornographic phallocentric fairy tale to get a man's attention, that a proper man would be interested in my brains and not in some lascivious display.

Bella turns to me on the dance floor and languidly winds her arms around me, grinding her pelvis into mine but not looking in my eyes. She's looking around at the boys, giving them a little show and I help her out. We're dyking it up on the dance floor, not like *real* lesbians but like the fake-pretend girl-on-girl lipstick lesbians from the skin flicks, the poor girls who are *so hot* that they have to make do with each other until Buck Hungwell delivers a pizza and gets a threesome as his tip.

Two John Travoltas are on the hook in no time. They disco up and offer us drinks at the top of their lungs (which is necessary over "Do it!"). Bella coquettes and we slink off to a table where it's marginally quieter.

Alpha Travolta is tall, hairy, looks like he does coke. Delta Travolta, his wingman, is tall, skinny and lacks confidence. Frankly, he broadcasts the kind of self-doubt that, in a saner world, Alpha would have.

They summon beverages that we ladies don't sip, they make small talk, and pretty soon Alpha is whispering in Bella's ear. She's giggling, she nods and they go off to the dance floor together. Delta asks me my name and I tell him "Persephone."

"Stephanie?"

"Persephone!"

"Oh." He nods, nods, nods with the music. "Cool name!" Cool pickup line, asshole. He won't do.

Six months ago, I killed someone just like him.

We chat a little back and forth, he's a lineman for the phone company, and then I hit him with the torpedo.

"Yeah, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get out tonight," I yell. "My sitter cancelled and I had to get another on short notice!"

"Oh, you got a kid?"

It can't be four minutes before he's gone. I get up to survey the terrain. Bella and Alpha are on the dance floor. He's shaking his groove thang, she's making every guy jealous. Go, Alpha go. Enjoy it while you can.

I'm scanning the crowd for someone suitable, which isn't easy. Then I spot him from the back, by the bar. He's a little stocky, maybe five-foot-six, sandy brown hair... a beard? Maybe, maybe.

I mentally thank Delta for the drink as I stumble and spill it on Mr. Stocky.

"Whoopsie!" I act drunk. "Oh, I'm sorry, so sorry."

He turns. No beard, just one of those yucky soul patches. But he'll work.

"It's okay," he says, or at least I think that's what he says. There's a new song on. This time the refrain is "The system... is down! The system... is down!"

"Lemme buy you another one!" I shout at him.

"No, I've still got one," he says. He's blushing, which seals the deal for him if he can just screw his courage to the sticking point and *ask me to dance*. I'm reaching for his eyes, I'm pounding that slave spot in his brain like crazy, I can tell it's working but it seems mostly to be making him tongue-tied and shy.

I glance out on the dance floor and Bella is tearing it up, she's got two other Travoltas trying to beat down Alpha in a testosterone fight. She's glorious, like a crescent moon, her hard little apple boobs are twitching under her shirt, and even in the dim light, her nipples are visible from twenty paces.

"Look," I tell Soul Patch, "To tell you the truth, this creepy guy was hitting on me and if you'd dance with me he might get the message. Please?"

He has a sweet smile. "I'm Rick," he says. Yeah, I've chosen well.

We go out on the floor and he busts an awkward move, and I relax a bit. I flatter myself that I could do this without Bella's trick. I mean, she liked my tits, right? I'm a pretty girl, right?

It turns out I'm right, in the most awkward possible way.

A new guy comes in and tries to mooch me off of Rick. This new guy is huge—six-four at least, muscle-bound and flat-topped, with gross arm veins that only a steroid dealer could love.

Rick tries to back him off with body language, but not aggressively, which is maybe just as well. I turn my back pointedly but he just rotates around to my front again.

He's awful. He has on a purplish shirt that aches to be retro but is really just retardo. Fat gold links. Weight-lifted man-boobs that are probably bigger than mine. He's Omega Travolta, some inbred result of a million years of anonymous disco hookups. 41

Not only that, he speaks the line out of a hundred Bmovies, mid-season TV pilots and Charles Atlas print ads.

"Hey baby, why don't you dance with a real man?"

The single-parent torpedo isn't enough for this lunk, but I give him one out. "I'm here with Rick," I say, pointing.

"You're here with Prick?" he asks. "Sweetie, I got all the prick you need right here."

And lord help me, he grabs my hand and puts it on his crotch. Okay Omega. You had your chance.

"You are inadequate," I tell him, and I don't bother to yell it. I'm not pushing any more. I'm grabbing.

Maxwell himself taught me about another part of the human mind, the part that craves discipline and punishment and longs to willfully obey a strong leader. He taught me to seize that part, the sniveling worm of the soul, through the eyes and twist it beneath me. I can do this better than the Pushing Out. I can do it really well.

I seize his soul and I tell him "Your penis is too small. Every woman you meet can tell. Lots of men can too." He can't ignore this. He can't doubt it. This is his new truth.

His eyes are locked on mine and although he shouldn't be able to hear me ("The system... is down! The system... is down!") I know that every word is getting hammered straight into his brain. "You do not have what it takes to make a woman happy. You will never really be loved."

More than his hand goes limp, and I can see tears starting to drip out of his eyes. Good.

"You will never really satisfy any woman. You make women laugh. Women laugh at you all the time."

His shoulders have dropped and his face is slack with grief.

"Go home and think about this," I tell him, and he turns to the door, moving like a man in a very sad dream.

Linda would have been flustered. She would have been indignant and afraid and would have tried to defuse the situation by talking. The new me? Persephone just sent his ass packing.

42 a hunger like fire

This is, I think, my favorite part about being Kindred.

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The first time they told me it was rude to say "vampire" and that we should always call ourselves "Kindred," I thought it was kind of stupid. I mean, we suck blood and do mind control and we never get old and don't show up in mirrors. Is using a different *word* supposed to help us forget what we are?

But I've gotten used to it. I kind of like it, now. If you think about it, calling each other "vampire" is really the stupid thing. If you get used to doing that, sooner or later you'll slip up and do it when someone (normal) who doesn't know the secret is around and then, well, who knows what would happen? "Kindred" sounds almost folksy, like "kinfolk" down south. "Me and Luella and the kindred are gettin' together for a Sunday brunch."

One big happy family.

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Omega Travolta nearly pulls Rick off the line, but I smooth things over. I act embarrassed and tell him that Omega is my ex-boyfriend, can't let go, blah blah, poor little stupid me with the bad choices and would you like to go somewhere and get coffee?

Rick's a regional distribution supervisor for International Harvester. He buys me coffee I don't drink, while I give him my phone number and tell him lies about my past, stories about Persephone that make her sound sweet and vulnerable and kind. Persephone's that kind of gal. Persephone has made some mistakes but she's a good person at heart. She's trying. She's making a fresh start and just needs someone she can believe in, someone to trust who can save her....

Rick, while boring, is sweet. Doesn't even go for the grope and fondle when he drops me off by a building where I don't live. (Of course, I don't "live" anywhere, get it?— seriously, it's not my building.) I have to kiss him and, of course, I can't resist.

I pull his lower lip into my mouth and my two incisors, my fangs, they slide out like a cat's claws. They're sharp as a cat's teeth, and sink all the way through his lip and make four parallel holes. He grunts—does it hurt? Does it just sting a little? I don't know.

The blood comes out and the whole experience changes.

I know a lot of vampires—Kindred—liken feeding to sex, but it's never been that way for me.

(Maybe that says something about my sex life when I was alive, I don't know. I lost my virginity with Ed and it was just awful and afterwards he never wanted to talk to me.)

I can feel Rick against me and the flow of his blood into my mouth is slow but I don't mind, it's a delicious slowness, like taking a hot bath on a winter morning when you don't have anything to do all day long.

(After college I was with Perry for a couple years. I once told Perry that making love to him was like poetry. I didn't tell him that the poem in question was *The Waste Land*.)

I'm with Rick and it's like being with a close friend all evening, someone you haven't seen for a year, and it's even *better* than old times, because you've saved up a year's worth of stories and jokes and commentary, the two of you sit on the couch and make popcorn and tea and you giggle, you get silly and chuckle and chortle and when you're all done laughing the two of you sit, tired but so content, enjoying a mellow silence, and that's what Rick's blood is to me. It's sweet, mellow silence.

(It's not like I was frigid or anything—when I was alive—but I just never seemed to line up a time when I felt it with a person I liked and a circumstance where it really clicked. Maybe I set my standards too high, but if you're going to settle, what's the point of doing anything? I don't know. Maybe I never really grew up in that one area of my life. Maybe I waited too long, or maybe Ed was too soon. I just can't say.)

Rick's blood, his life, it moves through me. I was wrong. *This* is the best part about being what I am. I drink Rick and he's raw and strong and humble, he's everything, a cozy flow, I could lose myself in this and follow it to its source, to his end...

a hun

45

greg stolze

But I don't. I won't lose myself. My teeth draw back, they're small and normal once more and I give him little healing nuzzles, the four holes seal up like magic (is it magic?) and when I step back he looks dazed, drugged, all slack lips and constricted pupils.

For a moment we just look.

"Can I get your phone number?" he asks.

"You already have it. Remember?"

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Six months ago I never would have touched Rick. I contented myself with scumballs with too much cologne, too much body hair, and too many condoms in their pockets. I fed only from men who filled me with contempt. Filled the Linda me, that is, the old me, the brisk, no-nonsense lawyer who had no time for clubbing and who could make a calculated display of sex-attract when needed but who just didn't go out and *strut* it. I picked guys I wouldn't miss and in the middle of feeding on one, some callous part of me decided no one else would miss him either.

Of course, I panicked. I was in a strange man's apartment with his dead body and four or five people must have seen me enter. I almost picked up his phone, then I thought about fingerprints, then I wondered if vampires leave fingerprints (because at that moment I couldn't think of myself as "Kindred," oh no). I got my cell from my tiny black clutch purse and I called Maxwell.

He fixed everything. He didn't even come in person, but sent his buddy Robert, who escorted me out and assured me that everything would be "tidied." He used that exact word. Robert smelled like pepper and mustard that night, I remember. I think he'd been at supper when Maxwell sent him.

Robert told me to go to Maxwell and I did. He was at his penthouse and he held me close, listened and nodded. He showed me compassion and stroked my hair and let me cry blood tears all over his fuzzy green cashmere sweater.

"It happens to everyone, eventually," he said.

I was bawling like a baby and sounded like one, too. "I don't want it to... I don't want it to happen ever again...."

He sighed and nodded.

"How do I stop it?" I whispered.

"You must be on your guard," he said. "And you must feed with great care. The urge to glut yourself, to drink down to death, is strong. It is always within us. To counter it, you need to find those whose life you enjoy, or admire, or cherish. If you feel their death diminishes you, it is easier to protect their lives."

"But... but what if I can't keep it down, even with someone like that? What if I, I find someone I like, and feed off him, and I kill *him*?"

"That death and guilt can make you stronger, and help you resist the time after that," he said. "Or, it can drive you mad, if you're weak. If you're weak, perhaps it's better to sup with disdain and resign yourself to... inevitable indiscretions. Many of our kind take that route, too."

Bella drove to the club and her car is still where she parked it, so I take a cab home. I ignore the driver's attempts to talk to me, and I open up my log. It's a plain spiral notebook, not much bigger than my hand.

I fill in the date column, I write, "Rick-dist. sup., Inat. Harv." Then I put in his phone number. It's a little cramped, but I write small.

When I get home, I take down the wall calendar in my kitchen (it's got Monet prints), page forward three months, and put Rick's name down. I'll string him along until then and feed from him again. If he's interesting or useful or something, maybe I'll start conditioning him, start poking holes in his mind to make him think I'm out of his life, but program him to meet me every three months, gives me the blood I need to survive, then forget all about the encounter. I could do that. I ought to, it's the smart way, but... I haven't yet. Not with anyone. It seems so cold and calculated, so *Manchurian Candidate*. Maybe if Rick turns out to be a real creep I'll do

it. But really, I don't mind working hard to stay fed. If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing right. Right?

I look at what's coming up on my calendar, shower and change into sweats (although I don't sweat anymore), and check my email. There's nothing good. I pay bills and by then it's gotten to be about four in the morning. The city is silent.

I live in the basement. I got a break on the rent because the windows are so tiny. (I've got them covered anyhow. Nothing serious. If all goes well, I won't be here much longer.) I take the elevator to the top of the building and I go out on the roof and look over Chicago. Even the skyscrapers don't have many lights on now, and it's all orange streetlight glow congealed along the avenues. I watch for a few minutes.

I can see the Larkins' house from here. It makes me smile, a little.

The night, she is mine. I guess.

I go downstairs and turn on the VCR. I watch *History Detectives* and then I go into my lightless bedroom and lie down.

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The next night, I arise and start the painful process of putting on my makeup. It's no treat when you've got a blurred and smudged reflection, but tonight's a big night. I have to make an impression—no easy task, since I'm going to be hanging out with some people who look like sea-bloated drowning victims, and some people who can turn invisible at will, and some people (Bella, say) who can make you feel like they're gloriously beautiful even when they're dressed in ratty lounge pants and a faded Spuds MacKenzie T-shirt.

Without those options, I get into a full-length black skirt with burgundy brocade on the front. It laces along the sides—it's really just two cloth rectangles with eyeholes on the long sides. The laces contain spring-loaded beads so that you can tighten it and block the eyelet, without visibly tying the laces in a knot. It's a very complicated way to make it look like you left your skirt ready to fall off with the slightest movement. Underwear is out of the question, of course, except for thigh-highs to go with my black Manolos. Toss on a sheer white linen shirt thin enough to scandalize, some dangly silver earrings and a leather thong necklace with a black lacquered bird skull... I'm ready to go.

It's the first Sunday night of the month and the Kindred of Chicago are meeting.

I've been going to these "courts" ever since I made the change nine months ago. I have mixed emotions. It can be interesting to meet other Kindred, talk to them and watch them talk to each other. I've always been very social, very comfortable in groups—I'll even go so far as to say "political." The issues discussed sometimes seem rather silly, but maybe that's just because I haven't been dead for thirty years or more.

On the other hand, some of the people there are just creepy. It took me until my third time to realize why one attendee had always looked especially peculiar. I finally figured out he had no eyelashes and, when I looked closer, no eyelids at all. He explained that he'd cut them off because "They get you when your eyes are closed." I didn't ask who "they" were.

The court of Chicago meets in "Elysium," which in this case means the Shedd Aquarium. It's closed to the public this late at night, but private groups often rent it out after hours. When I was alive, I went to a real-estate law conference and they had a dinner there one evening. It was nice.

I put a long, light jacket on over my finery and take a cab. It's funny: When I was living and I could really enjoy sex, I never would have dressed in anything so preposterously slutty. Now, dead and going to a conclave of other walking corpses, it seems perfectly natural. Business casual just wouldn't cut it, here.

Loki is working the door, standing at the top of the broad stone steps and slouching against one of the tall, grooved columns. I like Loki. Slenderness and pallor sit well on him, and he belongs to that small subset of mankind that looks good in leather pants.

"Hi," I say. "Is my makeup okay?"

"Hold still," he replies. He licks the tip of his thumb and carefully reaches out to smudge the corner of one of my eyes. "There. Flawless."

"Anything going on?"

"We've got guests," he says.

"Guests?"

"Unbound." He says it like the word tastes foul.

Unbound means these guests aren't connected to any of the established groups of Kindred in the city. As I understand it, most just keep their heads down, but some of them think none of the rules apply to them. That can be trouble, and Loki's job is to be some sort of cop in this freak show. Not a job I envy.

"What do they want?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I think it has something to do with Cicero." "The city or the Roman senator?"

He smiles but doesn't answer. "They're meeting in the amphitheater by the dolphin pool."

The Shedd was gorgeous by day, with soaring ceilings over marble floors, the classic architecture centering on a huge vaulted skylight over the Caribbean Reef exhibit, all Beaux Arts, plate glass, and fish the size and colors of mopeds. Entering by night, the only illumination is a full moon above and the trembling blue radiance escaping the tanks. I walk among drowned pillars, and everything looks blue-green and submarine.

I head off to the right. It's the wrong direction for the cetaceans, but I like the jellyfish display. They're lit from underneath with changing colored lights, so they shift through a rainbow display, translucent and gently pulsing.

I'm not the only fan, it seems. The other admirer is wearing a no-foolin' zoot suit—high, baggy pants, long draped jacket, even a big pimp hat with a feather. I know him. He's called Scratch.

Not many people can pull off that look, and Scratch is hideous. His nose is unnaturally long, like a mosquito's proboscis, and his eyes are beady, glassy and black. Most Kindred can retract their fangs, but his jut out all the time. It's not just his canines, either—all his teeth are pointed and uneven. Factor in gray skin with randomly placed marks like bruises and he's a gruesome picture. As I get nearer, he turns to me, raises an eyebrow, and smiles. This close, I can see that his clothes are dirty and stained. Even his rings are tarnished and corroded. I think I see something move in his lank, greasy hair and that's it. I'm near enough.

"Persephone, isn't it?"

I nod. "You like the jellyfish?" I ask.

"They're gorgeous, the bee's knees. Don't you think?" I agree with him.

"Have you seen the giant octopus? It's another critter with a bag for a body and a dangly set of tentacles. You think it's beautiful?"

"I prefer the jellyfish," I say.

"Why is that? Everyone agrees that one tentacled creature is hideous, while these aren't. What's the difference?"

Scratch is an elder, which is like being a senior partner in a law firm. His respect could really pay off for me, so I think hard before I answer.

"Transparency," I say. "They have nothing to hide." I hope like hell he thinks that's profound.

"Really? I think it's because they so perfectly blend with their surroundings." He turns from them and looks me up and down. "Nice outfit. But would it kill ya to look a little more feminine?"

I cock my head and give him a curtsey. He laughs.

"C'mon," he says.

"Where are we going?" I ask, though I can see that he's pushing the button for the elevator to the shark reef exhibit.

"I'm going to show you something."

We sink to a lower level. The dark carpeted floors and lower ceilings that greet us form a drastic contrast with the vibrant colors and flowing shapes shining behind the glass walls. Scratch beckons me impatiently past corals and anemones and fish with gauzy spines like the finest lace. He's headed for the shark tank.

There are no great whites here. The sharks displayed are the size of greyhounds at best, but there's still a cold

51

greg stolze

and dispassionate deadliness in their eyes as they swim past. When I was a law student, I did an internship with the State's Attorney's Office, and I was present for an interview with Carter Soames, a man accused of smothering his wife with a pillow. She was seven months pregnant. As I left the room, Soames told me I had a nice ass, and it made my skin crawl.

He was convicted.

The sharks have eyes like Carter Soames.

"Any moment now," Scratch says, and I'm about to ask him what we're waiting for when the rippling top of the water plunges down, there's a rush of bubbles and a funnel of foam, clearing to reveal a naked white figure.

I think her name is Alice or Amy or something like that. I almost wave, but I realize she can't see me—all the lights are inside the tank shining out. From her perspective the wall of glass is a perfect mirror.

She's painfully scrawny and beautiful like a mortified saint in a Renaissance painting. Her hair is towhead white, it floats around her like a cloud of silk. I see bubbles from her mouth as she speaks and the sharks circle her, they rub their abrasive skin against her like eager kittens, and then there's another splash.

"Dinnertime," Scratch says, and this second intruder in the pool doesn't enter with grace. He's black and chubby. Mortal. He's naked too, and his body has the unfinished look of an adolescent—hands and feet too big, limbs awkward because the bones grew faster than the muscles. The white figure swims to him, she's not breathing out any more but he is, fat bubbles of screams as he thrashes, and then a third figure plunges in right beside him. The third figure is another vampire, sleekly muscled and cutting through the water like he was born there.

The two Kindred seize the boy and they bite either side of his neck. They're right by the glass, I can see that they're looking into each other's eyes, their faces rapt with adoration. Their victim struggles harder. "Love among the river snakes," Scratch says, but I barely hear him, I can't stop staring as they open their mouths and the drowning child's blood oozes into the water. I'm horrified, I'm frozen, yet I find my fingers are up against the cool glass like I'm a child and it's a candy store. I feel my fangs slide free....

The sharks smell the blood. Instantly, the water is churned into a froth, the whole scene goes abstract, suggestive, just white water and with red currents, I see the sharks biting the boy, muscling the Kindred aside and they're biting too, biting each other, biting themselves.

"Hold this for me, willya?" I can barely tear my eyes away as Scratch puts something in my hand, it feels like a cardboard cylinder, I glance at it and just as he says, "You might want to cover your eyes," I realize it's a flare.

I get my arm up just in time and even around it I can see that this is glaring bright. It's not just a simple roadside torch—it must have magnesium in it or something. There's a horrible stench of smoke and fierce heat, and I nearly scream, nearly fling it aside by instinct, even knowing that's the worst thing I could do. And then its loud hiss subsides. I lower my arm as it cools and I see Scratch doubled over, chortling.

"You should seen those two poor mugs," he snorts. "I mean, there they are doing their love-sex-death-swimming-with-sharks routine when suddenly—whoop! Fire! Six inches from their faces! They would've crapped their pants, if they'd had pants."

"Or crap," I add weakly. I realize he's holding a camera. He glances down at it.

"I'll show you these when they're developed," he offers. "I'd get you a second set of prints, but what's the point? They'll be blurry as hell."

Just like in mirrors, Kindred don't show up clearly on film. One more reason not to lose my old driver's license.

"Do you think they recognized me?" The words are out of my mouth before I can think about it—I'm still shook

52 a hunger like fire

up from the flames. Get a grip! Persphone wouldn't be so scared and neither should Linda!

"I doubt it. I don't think they were looking right at the fire and, even if they did, all they'd see is their own burned retinas. Besides, you had your hand over your face."

"Then I guess I'll have to hope someone else wore this skirt."

"I think I saw Rowen in it earlier." Another joke. Rowen doesn't care what people think, or doesn't seem to, and she probably outweighs me by fifty pounds.

"Calm down, relax, don't getcher panties in a bunch." He turns to me, all mold and ghastly smirk. "I gotta go reconnect the fire alarm, but you want to go take a gander at that giant octopus first?"

He holds out an elbow for me to take.

He's an elder. I know this. I should kiss up to him. He's been dead since before my parents were born. But before I can steel myself to do it, he sees my hesitation.

"Perhaps some other time," he says, withdrawing. "When you're not in fancy dress."

I can't help but feel that I've failed some test.

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Unwilling to follow Scratch further, I head for the elevator to the bottom floor. As long as I'm here, I want to look at the Beluga whales. But before I reach them, I hear a voice call my name.

"Persephone." It's a clear baritone, commanding. A good voice for a lawyer or a high school principal. A voice used to being obeyed—more, a voice that takes obedience for granted.

I turn and stand up straight for Bishop Solomon Birch.

A lot of vampires are old school in ways you wouldn't believe. We swear oaths of fealty and bow to a Prince, for example. So when we find religion, it's not touchy-feely Unitarian stuff. No, Kindred go in for something like Roman Catholicism, circa 1350. The faithful call it the Lancea Sanctum—the "Holy Spear," I think—and preach about vampires being God's curse upon a wicked world. Nice folks, if you like self-righteous sociopaths.

Bishop Birch is the local head of this happy bunch, and tonight he's certainly dressed the part. A thick red velvet robe trails the floor behind him, complete with a hood, overlaid with a black clergyman's stole. The stole is embroidered in gold with symbols of his faith—snakes devouring themselves, thorns, spears, skulls, and more.

Solomon's chalk-white head is bare, hairless, crowned only with a series of thick, blunt scars. He smiles as he sees me and opens his hands, but his eyes are arctic.

"We must speak," he says.

"Delighted to." I'm anything but.

Standing behind him are two of his Sanctified flunkies. They're dressed in plain black robes with the hoods over their faces. Black gloves cover their hands, which are supporting elaborately embroidered red pillows. The pillow on the left cushions a golden mask, the face of a bearded man showing exquisite sympathy and sorrow. The other holds a pair of gold-gilt gauntlets, detailed with animal fur and sporting three-inch claws. I can't help but notice that they've been positioned so that the finger-claws dangle over the pillow's tasseled edge, and the thumbs are crossed to leave those talon-tips resting in midair.

Those are the signs of Solomon's office: the Visage of Man and the Claws of the Beast.

He takes my arm and steers me away from the elevator, down the steps by the otter habitat. "I have made arrangements for you to go to New Orleans," he says. His porters fall in behind us, totally silent.

"W... I beg your pardon?"

"New Orleans. It is a city of strong faith. I know Kindred there. It is a fitting place for you to truly begin your new existence."

"That's... um, did Maxwell ask you to arrange this?"

"Prince Maxwell," he corrects me. "It is not polite to be over-familiar, especially in Elysium." Out of the corners

54 a hunger like fire

of my eyes I can see one black-robed figure at the top of the steps, gently dissuading other guests from descending. The other has stepped around a curve on the down staircase. Solomon and I are alone.

My skin prickles.

"With all due respect... what would I want in New Orleans?"

"It is far from your life as 'Linda.' Far from the site of your Embrace. A new start, clear of any doubt or prejudice. In an environment of strong faith."

Now I get it. Solomon wants me out of the way.

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Lineage is a big deal among Kindred. So is the Embrace, which is what they call the creation of a new vampire. What we call it.

I first met the ruler of all Chicago's vampires—Prince Maxwell, or "Max Collins" as I knew him then—at a meeting over the fate of the Meigs Field airport. He was charming, articulate, friendly.... A week later we met for drinks, and somehow we wound up in a room at the Palmer House hotel in a luxury suite. We were kissing on the sofa, and he was unlike anyone I'd ever been with. It all seemed so natural. There was not an awkward second: He didn't show a single sign of hurry, going deliciously slow with each touch, with each brush of his lips. I felt like I'd finally met a man who *wanted* me without wanting to *take* anything from me.

What a crock of shit *that* turned out to be.

He kissed my neck and every inch of my skin came alive. I felt like I must have been purring, and I swooned. There's just no other word for it. I went limp, it went dark and I was falling into splendid warmth all over, wrapped in the most lovely darkness....

And then the darkness turned cold.

I tried to wake up, tried to move, tried to fight my way back to awareness but my limbs were lead, heavy, dead. I could feel myself sinking down, feel my thoughts slowing. I knew, somehow, that if they stopped they would never start again.

I was almost gone when a hot, angry taste flooded my mouth, flooded my whole body—I could feel it with every sense, red and livid and itching and raw. Some tiny part of me almost rejected it, but I couldn't stand to not be. I needed to exist, even at the price of embracing that dark and alien burning.

I opened my eyes and I had become the only offspring of Chicago's Prince of the Damned.

"I really haven't had a lot of problems with prejudice," I tell Birch.

"A lack of problems can, itself, be a problem. A coddled existence is possible for mortals, but we must be of sterner stuff. Surely you see that?"

"I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" His smile is cool and patronizing and suddenly I don't care that this jerk is the fucking imam to vampires who think mercy is a sin, I don't care that he's a celebrated badass who just last fall captured some psycho old vampire cannibal. In this moment, he's just a bastard like all the bastards holding up the glass ceiling, all the bastards who think a woman has to be weak and call her a bitch when she isn't, all the bastards who didn't pick me for their team, didn't call on me in class, didn't take me seriously.

"I damn well can. Want proof? I can take care of myself because I'm suspicious of favors that come from nowhere and benefit the giver more than me. I can take care of myself because I know enough not to squander power, or to go meekly into danger. I know enough to recognize fear, Bishop, and I know enough to see through the grade-school machinations of a withered, senile religious nut."

His smile is avuncular but he's got eyes like Carter Soames. "I presume that the 'senile religious nut' is myself?"

57

greg stolze

"What's the Bible quote? 'It is you who say it'?"

"You do me a disservice. I'll confess to some self-interest—your presence in Chicago disrupts a precarious social balance, one I desire to preserve. But you *need* the truth of the Lancea Sanctum. You still cling to your mortal friends, your relatives..."

"Have you been *spying* on me?"

He rolls his eyes.

"You... you pervert!"

That gets a chuckle. "The perversion, my dear, is to treat as human something that is not. That is the core of the sin of bestiality. How much sicker is it to treat as alive someone who is not?"

"I don't know what jollies you get seeing a woman alone, afraid and isolated from people who *love* her—maybe it makes you feel better that no one loves *you*?"

"Spare me your puerile psychobabble."

"Why? Did it hit a nerve? You want to drive me away from my friends..."

"We do not have *friends*! We have victims and we have rivals!"

"I'd rather be your rival than your victim."

"You lack the wherewithal."

"Oh? I'm insignificant, is that it? So unimportant that you'd go to the trouble of shipping me to New Orleans? Sorry, Bishop. No sale." I lean in. "I know you and Maxwell are close. I know you've been close for decades. But don't forget which one of us has his *blood*. That's mine alone, and for all your envy, it's something you will never have."

This time his chuckle is most definitely forced. "You really have no notion of how ridiculous you sound."

"Maybe, but I'm not the one with my fangs showing."

For a moment I think I've gone too far. Hell, I know it. He looks at me and it's simultaneously like he's sucking all the heat out of the room and like he's pulsing with waves of blazing anger, I'm vacillating between hot and cold... Then his incisors retreat—I'd almost swear I heard a click—and he's utterly calm and composed once more.

"Consider New Orleans," he says. "It was a dispassionate offer. Sooner or later, you *will* break your ties with the life of Linda Moore. They can be severed clean, or they can end in tragedy. At some level you know this... Persephone."

He turns away, smirks for a moment at the frolicking otters, and then stalks off down the steps. A few moments later, his black-clad assistant follows.

I expect to need a deep breath. I expect to shake. But no. Only the living breathe. Only the living tremble.

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"...local focus is reactionary and absurd," is the first thing I hear. I've gone up to the elevators, then all the way down to the whale habitat. Only I'm not alone there, either. "The future of our species is virtual—international and clandestine. If you want to stay hidden, it's not enough to simply pay your taxes and, and not drain anyone in public. We're entering the age of surveillance, the price on egg-cams is dropping steadily, bandwidth is getting cheaper and pretty soon it's going to be like a private sector version of 1984! That's what these ancient types don't understand..."

"Surely it's not yet as dire as you think." I recognize this voice. It's Bella. I creep forward as the first voice—a man—starts in again.

"Not yet, but it's closing fast and the rate of change is only going to accelerate. Our community needs to get wired *now*, or in ten or twenty years the dangerous ones are going to be the elders like Scratch who don't understand—what?"

Suddenly, Bella rounds a corner. It's almost like she just appears, poof! One moment a blur and the next she's stock-still, composed and collected. I've never seen anyone move that fast. As she sees me her eyes melt from suspicion into welcome.

"Persephone! So lovely to see you! I'd like you to meet my new friend, Raphael."

I bite back what just might be an honest-to-goodness *hiss* of anger. With a few exceptions, coming face to face with another Kindred triggers a flash of fight-or-flight instinct, something deep in the lizard-corners of my brain where everything is eat or be eaten. That instinct is a lot closer to the surface now than it ever was before.

(Before I died.)

That effect can be useful. Among other things it allows us to recognize our kind on site. But sometimes—especially when meeting someone new—the instinct can get the better of me. It almost does with Bella's new friend.

He's wearing a boxy three-button suit, very plain. For just a moment, I see him as nervous and small, but then in an instant he seems poised and chic.

That's a good trick, Raphael, but I've seen it. If you'd used it a half-second earlier, I wouldn't have suspected a thing. But it's flattering, really, that he wants to make such a good first impression. It's cute. And it eases my lizardbrain desire to hurt him.

"Raphael... from Cicero?" I take a shot in the dark and he smiles.

"It's so gratifying that my reputation preceded me. May I ask where you heard my name?"

"Oh, Persephone hears so much," Bella responds. She's not bothering making herself impressive. "She's the sole get of our illustrious Prince."

I feel a frown coming and quash it. Thanks Bella. Thanks a lot. Now Raphael is suspicious.

"I believe I heard your name come up in certain Carthian circles," I tell him. Carthians are the one-man-one-vote crowd among the undead. They used to be in charge in Chicago and apparently made a spectacular mess of it, but some of them make some sense. Anyway, telling this to Raphael is meaningless flattery, but it gets us off the topic of my relationship to The Boss. If he's really unbound, he shouldn't be too fond of my maker, Prince Maxwell. "I'm surprised that someone of your... excellent lineage... is associating with Carthians." He's not deterred. Not fully, anyhow.

"I keep an open mind," I say, "and value my freedom of association."

"The Prince's grasp of freedom is imperfect," Bella says, and I'm a little surprised by her bluntness. "Surely freedom of religion is something even a man raised in the early nineteenth century can grasp."

Nineteenth century? Is she talking about Maxwell? Is he really that old?

"You've been finding your... current structure... a little confining?" Raphael asks. His eyes narrow. "I know Solomon Birch and the Lancea Sanctum have a very close place to, uh, Maxwell's ear."

"Prince Maxwell," Bella corrects.

"Of course. You have to call him that." Raphael puts a subtle emphasis on "you," but not quite subtle enough.

"I prefer to think that it's Lancea Sanctum influence that keeps the Circle from greater recognition in Chicago," she says.

This is Bella's thing. In addition to being Club Queen Supreme, she is an up-and-comer in another group of bloodsuckers called the Circle of the Crone. If the Lancea Sanctum is Catholicism as seen by Charles Manson, then the Circle is his version of Wicca. Joy. Bella hasn't been too heavy-handed in trying to convert me, but give her an inch and she'll tell you how the Prince and Bishop Birch are keeping her faith down.

"This is my problem with religion in general." Raphael is warmed up now, and he makes a couple condescending, teacherly gestures with his hands. "I don't care what you believe, until you start telling other people what to believe."

Bad mistake. Bella's eyes narrow and she says, "That position makes sense if nothing is true, or if all things are equally true. When you have touched the ultimate truth, however, there is an obligation to share it."

60 a hunger like fire

"But..." Raphael swallows, trying to recover from his fuckup.

"How is it that you and Solomon Birch both claim ultimate truth, and you can't agree?" I ask. This dingbat had better like me for bailing him out.

Bella relaxes as she looks at me. "The vastness of truth can look contradictory, when viewed from a miniature perspective." Jesus, this is the woman who was giggling with Alpha last night while he told her about the latest Rob Schneider movie?

"'If the doors of perception were cleansed, we would see all things as they are—infinite.'" Raphael tries some Huxley on to see if Bella likes it.

"All things are *not* infinite," she replies. "All things are terminal. If there is any lesson we should take from our condition, it is that."

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The three of us go upstairs and even though I've braced myself, I'm still overwhelmed.

Any place that's declared Elysium is a big deal—neutral ground where Kindred can't rip into one another without serious repercussions. In theory, the entire city of Chicago is bound by Prince Maxwell's Peace—the "Pax Max" to vampire wags. But that rule expressly forbids only murder, so solving a problem by breaking your enemy's arms and legs or poking his eyes out—that's just fine. In Elysium, even poking and shoving is absolutely forbidden.

Already, then, Elysium is where the Damned are on their best behavior. It's where they are *watched*, and know it. So naturally, it's where they try to impress.

Courts take that usual level of posturing and launch it into the stratosphere.

One of the most prominent boons offered by the "Mistress of Elysium" is the right (and responsibility) of decorating for court. Chicago's Kindred compete feverishly for the right to spend thousands of dollars—possibly even more—decorating the Shedd for one evening. Every month, some status-conscious vampire attempts to outdo the month previous. (Unless, I gather, the previous month's décor came from the Prince. Trying to make him look bad would be a terrible breach of etiquette.)

This month, the decorator is Tobias Rieff, and he's chosen to go with tasteful understatement. For vampires, tasteful understatement means skulls, candles and flowers.

It's not just a few, either. The amphitheater in front of the dolphin pool is huge and echoing, ranked in gradually descending stone benches. Usually, it's bare rockeasy to clean after seating hundreds of kids and parents who came to see the show. Tonight, the central aisle is covered with white petals. Each bench has a floral display at each end-white roses, white lilies, white carnations. Nestled in the center of the each display is a waxed and polished animal skull, each different. Some are tiny-bird or cat, barely visible among the blossoms. Another features a yawning alligator, its bottom teeth all tipped by candles. Candles line the horned arc of a cattle skull that would please Ansel Adams. There are dog skulls and snake skulls and many more too exotic to easily identify. As I look at them, I realize that the bigger crania, and therefore the more elaborate displays, are all down towards the front. Of course. The rising brightness, all of the warm and flickering yellow that's so forgiving on our complexions, it naturally leads the eye to the front. There, hundreds of tall white tapers rise from floral glory to form a line of radiance at the water's edge. In front of the line, at the center of it all, stands an empty chair.

The guy I take to be our second visitor from Cicero is standing by an ornate silver punchbowl at the top of the chamber, in front of the gift shop. He just seems to be taking it all in.

The bowl is full of blood—something from the slaughterhouse, pig or cow. I just don't understand how anyone could drink that. I mean, when you take from a person, from the right person it's... intimate. I don't want to get all mystical here, but you can understand how it extends

your life. (Well, not *life* I guess, but you know what I mean.) Something from an animal, though... why would you want to make *that* a part of you? I couldn't do it. It's like bestiality, but a lot of Kindred have no problem with it. (Feeding from animals, I mean, not screwing them.)

This unbound is wearing oil-stained jeans and a blinding white polo shirt that still has creases from being in its package at the store. He's got brown hair, tight lips and tired eyes that flash with a familiar predatory rage. First meeting and all.

"Ambrose," Raphael says. "This is Bella Dravnzie and..."

"Persephone Moore," I tell him, reaching out.

"Ambrose Masterson," he says, and gives my hand a perfunctory shake. He glances at me briefly, nods, then goes back to keeping his eye on everyone in the room. He's holding the lizard-brain in check, but maybe not so easily.

"So, what brings you to our court?" I ask. Ambrose looks like he's been asking himself the same question. I think he's older than Raphael. I mean, clearly he was older at the time of his Embrace, but that doesn't mean anything. Bella was nineteen when she got it, but no one would ever think she was young. Unless she wanted them to, of course. For all I know, Raphael is three hundred years old, but... he doesn't have that elder feel to him the easy moves of a predator who knows he can send you home disassembled if he feels like it. He doesn't have the wary confidence of Scratch and Solomon. Ambrose, he's got it... a little.

(And Maxwell? Sometimes he shows more of it than any of them. But other times, he seems to be a lost amateur... like so many of us.)

Ambrose looks at Raphael, who looks back, so it's Bella who fields the question. "A couple days ago, a policeman tried to arrest a wife beater and child abuser named Bruce Miner. Miner seemed to be complying, but right as the sun came up he lost his temper, snapped his handcuffs, smashed out the cruiser window and tossed the cop around like a department store mannequin. Both wife and child were admitted to MacNeal Memorial and treated for blood loss. The suspiciously blurry video of Miner's fight with the cop has made it onto TV. So all in all, we're looking at a serious Masquerade breach."

The Masquerade. The fundamental commandment of our kind, something every faction and tribe supports. There are a number of rules, all prettily phrased, but they boil down to "Survive, but don't ever get caught." There's this paranoia among Kindred, and the older ones get it worse and worse. The central article of faith is that if a few mortals find out about us, soon they'll all believe and will be eager and able to wipe vampires off the face of the earth.

Vampires aren't supposed to kill one another (at least, not in Chicago), but if you break the Masquerade, the Prince might just make an exception. Or they might put a stake in your chest, paralyze you, and bury you in the foundation of Chicago's next big building project. It doesn't *kill* you. It just makes you a headache for sewer engineers in three decades, or for archaeologists in a thousand years.

"A serious breach?" Raphael snorts. "No, New Orleans in 1996—*that* was a serious breach. A serious breach was Paris in 1882. Or how about Dubai just last year?"

Bella leans back a little and raises her nose defensively. She's getting ready to defend her position when the sound of a gong cascades through the room.

Prince Maxwell has arrived.

"All stand!"

That's not Maxwell's voice, of course. It's a guy named Garret McLean, and he's impossible to ignore. It's as if his voice shudders through us, the way his hammer shivered the gong. The younger vampires start to their feet like sentries caught slouching. The older ones, Solomon Birch in particular, rise with more gravitas, projecting a fine subtext of *I don't have to stand, but I'm choosing to stand.* 

Garret processes in, stately and serious, holding aloft a plain mahogany box about four feet long, six inches deep and six wide. He's making a gradual beeline towards the

64 a hunger like fire

65

greg stolze

empty chair at the bottom of the amphitheater. It's big, baroque and old. He's about halfway there when Maxwell enters behind him.

The Prince of Chicago is not really tall—five-nine, maybe five-foot-ten. About my height. Though if he really was born around 1800, he must have been a giant in his day. He's stocky, dressed in a conservative Phat Farm sweater, the kind Bill Clinton wears. He has high, prominent cheekbones and a calm, genial appearance. Tonight, he's grandpa getting ready to cut the turkey at Thanksgiving.

My "sire."

By the time he reaches the chair, McLean has opened the box and produced (with suitable small flourishes) a shiny metal sword. Maxwell sits on the throne and McLean hands him the weapon. Maxwell unsheathes it and lays the naked blade across his knees, and it's hard to explain his expression when he does this. It's ambiguous, oblique. You can read it as an absolute commitment to the cause that all this pomp represents. You can read it as straightfaced irony, a double bladed visage that mocks this pretentious formality by perfecting it. You can read it as a constrained tyranny, a reined-in contempt for the ceremony that says, "I don't need this ridiculous metal stick to enforce my will."

His expression alters, and for a moment I'm *certain* that he winked at me. Then I see the movements, the shifts of posture through the gallery and I realize just how many of us had the same thought.

The ones up front, the elders—Solomon, Scratch, Rowen—they aren't convinced. The middle range, like Bella, they shake it off after a moment. But the youngsters, the fledglings, those of us farthest away, up by the free drinks... most of us fall for it.

I glance at the unbound. Raphael looks puzzled. Ambrose is frowning. I can't tell if they were fooled or not.

"We are the Damned," Maxwell begins, "And yet we are not so fallen that we cannot make more of ourselves than we are. We are, by inclination, solitary hunters, but we find ourselves tonight in peaceful company. We carry in every drop of our blood a polluting cruelty... but steeped in hunger though we may be, humanity remains. Cold eyes yet seek beauty," he says, gesturing about the hall, and he's right. Despite its eeriness or maybe because of it, the austere display is thrilling. "A stilled heart still craves companionship. Thus, Elysium. Thus, our court. Thus, our covenants. All our higher impulses—all that raises us above brute predation—all the good that lingers, is displayed here tonight."

He says something like this every time, some corny opening remark, but from him, it's not trite. From him, it's a ray of hope in the red darkness. Tonight, as every night, the crowd applauds.

"My dear fellow Kindred, please—be seated. We have with us tonight two visitors," he says, gesturing to the two strangers. As I'm sure he intended, everyone else looks at them. Raphael stands up straight and I feel a trickle of regard for him, he's Pushing Out but it's weak and artificial, spread too thin over souls too jaded. He's trying to warm our gazes, but it's like lighting a match in a locker full of frozen meat.

Ambrose just acts resigned.

"May I introduce our guests for the evening?" He gives them a tight, tolerating smile. "I know you may find the formality of our gatherings somewhat stifling, but please. Humor us with your names, and a recitation of your lineage."

Raphael meets his gaze. "I'm Raphael Ladue, and my sire was Old John."

I have no idea who the hell Old John is, but apparently others do. Many pale faces crane around to look at him with new interest, and most of the interested parties are sitting up front, where the power is. Rowen doesn't turn, but everyone else in the front row does, expressions all carefully blank. A few rows back, there are Kindred who can't repress fear.

"My, my," Maxwell says. "A notorious lineage indeed. And your companion?"

"I'm Ambrose Masterson and I was Embraced by the Unholy."

That gets *everyone* looking. All but the newest of us know who the Unholy is. It's like saying your dad is the boogeyman.

"Bull*shit*," says a voice from the middle, a man in an impeccably beautiful suit with skin like alabaster.

Ambrose bares his fangs, and we can all see that his teeth are inhuman, needle-sharp and unnaturally long. Not like Scratch, though. Where Scratch's mouth is a wreck, a mistake of nature, this mouth looks carefully evolved to pierce and shred.

"Yes," the Prince says. "I remember you now. From the DNC." Ambrose narrows his eyes and nods.

(Did Maxwell say "D & C"—meaning an abortion? Or was it "DNC," the Democratic National Convention with the riots? Or is it something else entirely?)

Maxwell goes on. "Despite their... well-known heritage, our guests have opted to ignore our hospitality in the past. Nonetheless, it is my hope that you will all join me in extending them a courteous welcome tonight.

"Our guests share with us a common problem. We are both concerned with the actions of one Bruce Miner. Garret, if you'd be so good...? I'm quite helpless when it comes to programming VCRs." The line gets a laugh.

While he was talking, Garret wheeled in a big screen TV, which he now pokes at until a recorded news show comes on. The story is about a man in Cicero resisting arrest and fleeing the cops, and in the middle of it they show grainy cop-cam footage of a burly guy in filthy coveralls struggling with a policeman. The two of them lurch out of the camera's coverage for a moment, and then the officer comes flying across the hood of the car. It's dramatic, the more so for being silent.

The somber news anchor fills in what I already heard wife and daughter bled out, snapped handcuffs, et cetera. They juxtapose a still frame from the video and what's obviously a cropped snapshot from some neighbor's scrapbook. The former is basically just a gray blur, pretty much what we all see in the mirror whenever we bother to look. The latter is a depressingly average white guy with bad hair.

When the segment ends, there's a silent moment.

"Comments?" Maxwell says at last.

Scratch stands. "Ice him," he says. "He's from my clan, he shares my curse and I still say ice him."

"Out of the question," says Solomon. He remains seated. "He, like we, has been cursed for a reason. We shirk our duties and corrupt our natures if we turn violent hands upon him."

"Not all of us accept that 'duty.'" The speaker is up near me, far from the center of authority. Dressed in cargo pants and a jean jacket, the only indication of his nature is a crescent on a necklace. A mortal would think the brown matter under his fingernails was oil, not dried blood. "We prey where we will, we are the fangs of the world. Why should we not fall upon any who threaten us?"

Solomon won't even acknowledge him. He makes a tiny gesture and the robed figure holding the Bishop's mask stands and speaks.

"Men feed on animals and are despised for harming men. So too we prey on men and are despised for harming our own. No Kindred has the right to any of the sacred blood, save that which flows in his own veins. It is not ours to give. It is not ours to take."

"This 'sanctimony' gets us nowhere and only leaves us in a rut we've occupied too long," says jean jacket—he's a loudmouth, and not old enough to get this much attention. Elders must be thinking what he's saying, if they're not interrupting him. He's taking a big risk going toe to toe with the Bishop, but I'm sure he'll be flavor of the month with the Circle of the Crone for a while, just for his big brassy balls. If he actually gets his way, he could make permanent gains....

69

greg stolze

"I'm always respectful of religious debate," says Maxwell, "But the ban on killing is a law of my authority."

The Crone follower bows—to all appearances, he's sincere. "None appreciates your enlightened rule more than me," he says, "but the hand that turned the key in the lock could turn it back to loose it again. What better cause than a Masquerade violation?"

"That's a gross over-reaction," Raphael says, and he takes a breath to say more when Scratch interrupts.

"Fine, so we stake him and put him on a slow train to Baltimore. Pick your nits, I don't care as long as you agree that we need to take this rogue down fast."

"It may not be so simple." This is Norris, and he's very close to the Prince. No one talks about him directly, but I get the impression that if Maxwell has a Gestapo, Norris is its Heinrich Himmler. He gets to sit up front with the popular crowd, even though his bass voice has a creepy Peter Lorre whine to it, a grating growl. It's like hearing Barry White deliver the "You have to help mee Reeck!" line from *Casablanca*. "Loki, Ms. Lasky and I have discussed this matter, and have yet to find any trace of Mr. Miner."

"If Loki..." This is one of the neonates, a new vampire like me up in the nosebleed seats, but Bella interrupts her before she really gets going.

"Maybe the problem solved itself. Maybe he made a rookie mistake, couldn't get away from the sun, and ashed himself."

"That would seem to be an ideal outcome," Maxwell says, chuckling, "but I don't think it's prudent to rely on daylight for our dirty work. Perhaps our guests can shed some light on the matter? If you'll pardon my little pun."

Raphael stands, looks around to measure the room, runs a hand through his hair and speaks.

"As a Cicero resident, it is my considered opinion that Bruce Miner is not a substantial threat to the Masquerade. Either he'll be found or he won't. If he isn't, there's no problem. Clearly, if no one can find him, he can't prove vam—uh, Kindred exist, right? If we do find him, it means that after his initial, you know, problems, he went to ground and started playing it safe. Hunting him like an animal isn't going to do any good. If anything, it will just put his back up and scare him. Scared people make stupid mistakes, and stupid mistakes are what lead investigators to the truth."

"Well said." Solomon has turned to look at Raphael. "Nevertheless, it would be best if he could be brought into the fold and educated properly for his role."

"I just, I..." Raphael's thrown off—I guess he never expected to come down on the side of the Bishop. "Right, if we find him and *educate* him... If we teach him, then we've got, you know, another..."

"Another mouth to feed," snarls Scratch. "Another moronic amateur trolling the same clubs, the same bus stations, the same slaughterhouses and tenements. Who needs it? What's another vampire, more or less?"

Voices murmur up from the assembly, some agreeing, some taking issue. Hesitant starts like "What about...?" "Have we tried...?" "Maybe we could...?" But Solomon drowns them out.

"Your words are an abomination! It is against the law of the Prince and against the justice of the night! Those who share the Blood shall not spill it on the ground!"

"Don't take that tone with me," Scratch says. "I know what's behind your mask."

This gets Solomon on his feet, pointing his finger and shouting, "Were this not Elysium you'd pay for your insolence!"

For the second time, I see Solomon's fangs flash out, and Kindred near him instinctively flinch away—not only the youngest, either. Even the bearer of his talons seems to shrink out of Solomon's shadow.

"Calm yourselves, I beg you." Justine Lasky says this, the Mistress of Elysium. Her voice is like a bell or a sigh or wind blowing through silk curtains. Solomon doesn't change his stance, he doesn't look any safer or gentler, but somehow his menace seems to become more distant.

"It's not like there's no precedent," Scratch says.

"What's the precedent?" asks a youngster. They ignore her.

"For exceptional cases, yes." This is Raphael again. "What's so exceptional about this? All the mortals see is a man who fought a cop and won. Half of them probably fantasize the same thing. Many probably think they could do the same."

"Where is his sire?" Rowen's voice rolls over the assembly like a blanket. She isn't standing, she hasn't turned, but it's like her words hit the glass walls across the water and echoed back redoubled. "Why don't his crimes redound upon his maker?"

"Even in Cicero we know the Prince's ban on the Embrace." This is Ambrose's first contribution.

"The ban is more than the Prince's." This is Solomon, sounding the very definition of holier than thou. "It is a tradition from the very dawn of our kind."

"Perhaps," says Maxwell, in a manner that leaves an unsaid "but unhelpful" ringing in every listener's mind. He turns back to the two newcomers. "So, nobody knows who has been so... indiscreet?"

Now they're glancing at me. Like this Miner bozo, I'm an unlawful by-blow. I do *not* like being associated with some child-biting asswipe, so I need to get the air cleared fast.

"If no one can find Miner," I ask, "How much harder to find his maker? Presumably anyone who sired him is older, smarter and more experienced. If, as Ambrose here said, even the unbound aren't Embracing... well then, whoever it is broke the rules and has a strong motivation to stay hidden."

Solomon audibly chuckles at that. Bastard.

"Persephone is right," Bella says. "Finding Miner is our first priority. Once found he can be educated or otherwise dealt with. His sire is the greater criminal, but Miner is surely our best link to him."

"Or her," Solomon adds. "So. How do we do it? Watch for his next dangerous indiscretion?" "Has anyone even cleaned up his first?" Tobias asks.

"He hasn't done it again," Ambrose says. "He probably learned his lesson."

"I'm not worried about the cop." Scratch has stood up and turned to address the whole audience. "I'm worried about the wife and the daughter. 'Severe blood loss' trips a lot of alarms, and not just among us. I, for one, don't want this nitwit to lure a bunch of wackos who know just enough to be trouble."

"I think we can..."

"Severe blood loss takes place everywhere, every day, to people who've never seen a vampire and never will." Raphael is standing too, rolling his eyes and working that impatient teacher voice again. He's pushing his luck.

"All it takes is for one smart cop to realize that the two bitches lost a lot of blood, but that there's no blood at the scene where it happened." Scratch is looking straight at Raphael now. "Hell, all it takes is one cop getting a deposition that hideous hubby bit them on the neck, then he's wondering, 'How'd this guy manage to swallow four quarts of blood in just a couple minutes?' Stir in the fact that this kid looks like a freak show reject"—Scratch gives a little nod and smile to acknowledge just how well he fits that particular bill—"and you've got a recipe for monster paranoia."

"Blood fetish murders are well documented," Raphael counters. "The FBI has files on human serial killers who drank blood or ate skin or whatever, they go back to the 1960s. It's a standard profile, psychos with sanguiphilia."

"That is surely a double-edged sword," Maxwell says. "Yes, every crazed mortal who acts like one of us provides a beard for the activities of true Kindred. But by the same token, many of those obsessives developed their fixations after experiences with our kind. They may be slaves to Kindred, or former servants, or feeding vessels who came to crave the experience or envy those they fed. It seems to me that the more common this explanation for a Kindred's behavior becomes, the more attention the FBI will pay. If they search

long enough, they are far more likely to trace us through some cast-aside fetishist, or through simple luck. Or by finding an ignorant neophyte like this Bruce Miner who can, nevertheless, provide proof positive of our existence."

"Luckily, the police aren't finding him. Any more than your bloodhound Loki is," Ambrose says.

"Well, Cicero has been a notoriously difficult area to keep safe," Norris says, glaring.

"Safe for whom?" Raphael retorts.

"For all of our kind, certainly," Maxwell says. "While it's outside of Chicago proper, surely you can understand our concern with any... disorder there."

"Disorder? Maybe you should talk to your elder Scratch here about Cicero's disorder!"

"What does *that* mean?" Tobias asks.

"Are you insulting me?" Scratch demands. "Are you *stupid* enough to come here and shoot your mouth off in front of my Prince, my peers and everyone?"

"I'm sure no offense was intended...."

"Sure," Raphael says. "All I meant is, I know you've got a haven there. In Old John's burnt-out brothel. You remember the place, right?"

A silence falls. I don't understand why.

"We've all got bolt holes," Scratch says at last. "We all have feeders, we all have places we dump and we all have underpants on too. That doesn't mean it's germane to today's discussion."

"I'm sorry if I outed your presence in Cicero," Raphael says, "But I just meant..."

"Well, this is interesting," Maxwell says. "I had no idea that one of our elders was familiar with the area. A consensus is emerging, I think. Scratch, you..."

"Hey, look, I do *not* want to wind up Prince of Cicero, okay? I've got enough pain on my plate." Scratch adjusts his lapels.

"Oh, there's no need to make it a separate domain, but given the concerns stated by Mr. Ladue and Mr. Masterson, it seems apparent that the judicious course is to expand our protection to Cicero, bring the situation there under control and..."

"Wait wait!" Raphael says. "Just what do you mean, 'under control'?"

"Which word didn't you understand?" Solomon asks. He's turned on his stone bench and slung one leg over it, so he can glare at Raphael without straining his neck.

"Why don't we appoint a Regent?" Norris says. "Someone seasoned whose loyalty is, heh, reasonably firm. Someone familiar with the area..."

"I know Cicero," Bella says. "And the Kindred there would be far more likely to accept someone of my beliefs than a more... rigid philosophy. Isn't that right, Raphael?"

Before Raphael can respond, Solomon says, "The last thing Cicero needs is the lax hand of an idolater. When moral failures emerge, the solution is not to send some anarchic pagan blood-slattern!"

"The last thing Cicero needs is *any* outside influence!" Raphael says. "Hey, we came here to help *you* deal with this problem, not to ask for your help and not to invite you to set up shop!"

"You have a very high opinion of yourself, who would deign to offer us your *aid*." Solomon's starting to work himself up again. "You laze through your nights like hogs at a trough, unwilling to look farther or deeper than the end of your own tongue. Fangs of the night? Your ilk are little better than ticks, annoyances who escape only because your victims don't suffer enough to bother destroying you."

"So I suppose I should join the Sanctified and learn how to *really* murder and torture mankind? *That'll* keep the Masquerade intact!"

"We honor the First Tradition far more than you sad, cringing, domesticated vampires do! To us, it has meaning. It's a holy pledge, not merely a convenience!" He turns to Maxwell. "My Prince, put these noisome brats under the shadow of the Spear! Give them the gift of discipline!"

"I don't want your fucking discipline!" Raphael jumps to his feet and stalks to the aisle. People are backing away.

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74 a hunger like fire

He's got his fangs out and his pupils are dilated. Everyone knows the signs.

This is exactly what Solomon wants. He's playing to Raphael's bloodlust, trying to wind him up and get him to go berserk. Once that happens, Raphael's credibility is shot and Solomon, the injured party, probably has a pretext to do any crazy thing he wants. But looking at the Bishop, I can't help thinking this is a dangerous ploy. I've heard stories... Solomon has a long fuse when he needs one, but when he goes off, he *really* goes. Blood calls to blood with us, and anger calls to anger...

I'm not the only one who's spotted trouble. Ambrose blocks Raphael's path and says "Ladue, take a moment, take a breath..."

"Shut the fuck up! Christ, you never respected me but I'd expect you to help me defend us from this bald-headed, sanctimonious douche bag!"

"Hear the squall of the infant's tantrum," Solomon sneers.

"You weren't so high and mighty when you were *kissing* Old John's ass! You think I didn't know? Solomon Birch, shit, he made *jokes* about you, he called you his Solomon Bitch!"

"Oh, I am stung to the quick." Solomon's playing it cool but I have to give Raphael credit—he's playing by the rules, and if he's not completely under control, he's at least got enough willpower to stick to harsh language.

"Why don't you get all your superstitious fundamentalist buddies together, maybe burn a few used band-aids and put a *hex* on me? You think everyone's scared of you, but *you're* the cowards, looking for some dark dead daddy figure to tell you what to do, scared to be free for *even one night*! Praying to *Longinus*, of all the stupid, dumb..."

"That's enough," Solomon says.

Raphael's definitely got to him. Longinus is the Roman centurion who tabbed Christ on the Cross. He also happens to be the Lancea's own messiah figure.

Solomon takes a step forward. "I'll abide your disrespect of me, but when you blaspheme in my presence-" "Whatcha gonna do?" Raphael asks, on a roll. "You gonna sock me one right here in Elysium? You talk a good game with your centurion 'Dark Messiah,' but I think when the shit's down, you'll respect the Prince who's right in front of you above your horseshit faith—"

Then Solomon's on him.

Jesus! He's up the steps in no time, even faster than Bella. Before anyone even reacts, Solomon's smashed his fist into Ladue's face. His arms come up, he falls off his bench and the back of his head impacts the floor with the loud thud of meat and bone.

"Owwwww!"

"Solomon Birch! Be seated this instant!" Maxwell is standing, pointing the sword and his fangs are out, his eyes burn, his voice echoes with command.

Solomon turns, takes a deep (and unnecessary) breath, then saunters back to his seat.

"Excuse me," Ambrose says, "But isn't there some rule against this shit?"

Raphael sits up. His nose is flattened and blood is coursing down his face. Both eyes are starting to blacken already, but then Ladue grits his teeth and his nose straightens, blood rewinding back up into it.

"That wasn't violence," Solomon says. "If I'd decided to be *violent*, he'd be an ink spot on the floor. That was just a friendly tap, something to remind him of his place."

"Is that a taste of the discipline I can expect under Lancea Sanctum rule?" Ladue asks. "A nonviolent reign?"

"We're getting away from the point!" I say. "Look, let's get back to the immediate issue here—Bruce Miner! If you can't find him in Cicero now, what chance do you have if you send in an unwanted invader and alienate every Kindred there?" I give Solomon a good hard look—he's glowering, chastened, down. Perfect time to get in my kick. "We all lose if we let some overly ambitious demagogue turn the hunt for one rogue into a midnight Vietnam."

"Miner is only the symptom—" says one of Solomon's acolytes, but no one's paying attention.

76 a hunger like fire

77

greg stolze

"I think we can all agree that anyone who finds Miner has done us all a service... Miner, perhaps, most of all," Maxwell says. His voice is smooth and mellow, but final. "As for the larger issue of Cicero, I'll have to discuss it with my council of advisors. Does anyone have any other business?"

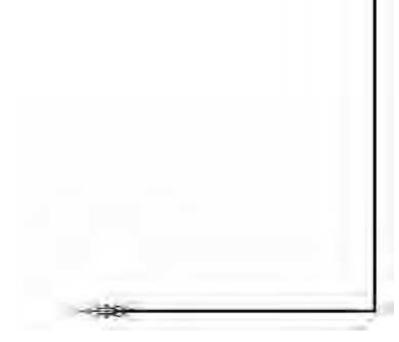
Bella stands and starts talking about the Crone, *again*, and everything's back to normal. Or whatever "normal" means for a hall of murdering beasts, lit by fire and gilded with skulls.

"Thanks for taking the heat off Cicero," Ambrose says. "I hear you've got a link to the Prince?"

"Well, your pal made a nice play. Provoking Solomon to discredit him isn't something I'd try again, but it sure worked out this time."

Ambrose snorts. "You think he did that on *purpose?*" He drifts back to the blood bowl, goblet in hand.

Oh shit.



Chapter Three: Solomon

The light hits my face and I'm lost, confused.... "Sir?"

I was in fur. It was everywhere, pressing up against me, hot and humid and with an acid stink.

"Sir? You asked..."

Now it's light. It's not right—I shouldn't be alive yet. In front of me a man stands, food, outlined against the brightness. My puzzlement turns to hunger, quick as a finger-snap.

"Sir? Sir!"

I lunge and seize, my hands bruisingly strong and fangs showing in the light. I smell fear, and close for the kill-

No.

It's David. I will not bite David. I will not feed from David. He is my aide, he does my will, we have a bond of trust and I will not violate it. Despite the rage, the hunger in me is lazy. It's there, always there, but not unbearable. The beast is either glutted or ravenous. If I do not drink myself into stupor, then I know the keen irritation of hunger. There is no middle ground.

But I am the master here. I break my hunger, make it heel. "David."

"You asked me to waken you early, sir," he says. David is a brave man. He fought in Korea. But though his voice is steady I still feel the arms in my grasp tremble.

"Early. Yes." It starts to come back to me. I look down at myself. I'm already dressed, dark slacks and a sport coat over a button-down blue shirt.

"Ian is in the car," he says.

Ian. David's son. My breakfast.

Ian Brigman looks more like his mother than like David. That's well and good. His mother, whose maiden name was Rosen, was a talented flutist and from a family of skilled musicians. Over a number of decades, there were also several Rosensweig mathematics professors in Berne, where the Rosens originated. My researchers have not yet made a connection, but I suspect it is there. Mathematical talent and musical ability are often found side-by-side. I think there is a common gene.

Ian has shown no outstanding talent for either music or math, though like his father he was a fine athlete. But I am patient. His daughter Margery may show the potential he lacks. Ian married Diane Locker, whose maternal grandfather was one of the original Oneida stirpicultures. You can keep your mass-produced Nazi Übermenschen, thanks. I'll take America's homegrown, individually crafted eugenic prizes. The Nazis stole their eugenics laws from us, you know.

The Oneida commune fell apart before it could produce more than a single generation, but they were on the right track. I have maintained their good works. I have high hopes for Margery, who has just recently turned sixteen. Old enough.

David drives the car while I refresh myself from Ian's wrist. We get on Lake Shore Drive heading south, and I'm finished with my feed by the time I need to give him more specific directions.

Ian and David wait in the car while I go downstairs to see Persephone Moore.

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I am alone on the steps. I set down my briefcase and double check the envelope inside. All is in order. Then I pull a small plastic box from my jacket, transferring it to the back pocket of my pants. Before I do, I open it and check the glove inside.

Before I died, I made prosthetic limbs. I was a craftsman—there was still demand for handmade arms and legs. I did a leather nose once, and two leather ears, but mostly legs and arms. Each was unique, scaled for its owner only, made to do what he most needed.

Hand-building an artificial limb that has anything more than rudimentary function is a taxing endeavor. One must be skilled with leather, wood and metal, knowing the unique properties and qualities of each. There were times, surprising times, when a leather hinge would more closely mimic the human form than one made of iron.

One must also study the human body, of course—learn and understand the interplay of muscle and bone, how weight and strength move cleanly, how they stall.

My best work was a pair of fingers, I think. A mill owner's son had lost them, not in his father's wood mill, but exploring the forbidden interior of the town hall clock. Funny. I was able to build him articulated fingers that would, with a turn of the wrist, open and close almost like nature's own work. They were weak, of course, but as he grew and came back for larger sets, I installed ratchets that would lock them in place if needed.

I still putter in my workshop. When the mood takes me I make furniture, or boots. I made that grand chair upon which our honored Prince sits at Elysium, and I made the box for his saber. There's no call for my true profession any longer: artificial hands and feet roll off assembly lines, all alike. But I still have a pair of those fingers, the latest, and an earlier set is in the collection at the Smithsonian. Or so I'm told. I've never traveled that far.

I think of those fingers as I look at the sturdy leather glove sewn with heavy canvas thread. The hooks are anchored firmly to nylon fishing wire that distributes pull through them all the way back to the wrist. Each hook can support 500 pounds without coming loose. I've tested them.

81

greg stolze

I put the glove carefully away. I descend. I'm ready.

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I hear murmurs behind her door. As anyone would, I press my ear to the crack and listen.

"...worried about you. All your friends are." It's a man's voice.

"I'm, honestly, there's no need. I mean, I don't know who she saw. Maybe it was someone who looked like me?" She even sounds different. Already she starts playing her games, spinning in circles, being too clever even for herself. Persephone or Linda? Soon she may build so elaborate a façade that even her personae cannot relate to each other. I've seen it happen before.

"Maybe she did, it still doesn't change things. Why didn't you go to Beaner's party? He really missed you!"

"I told you, I was sick. Remember? That flu bug?"

"You weren't sick the next day when I came by about that Larkin place."

"Do you know how creepy that sounds, Scott? How crazy?"

"Don't get defensive now, I'm not trying to attack you! I'm trying to *help* you."

There's a little pause. I have to strain to hear his lowered voice.

"Is it drugs, Linda?"

"Scott, that's... that's the most ridiculous..." She has trouble denying it. What is the theft of life itself, if not the most heady of drugs?

"Ridiculous? We never see you except late at night or, or that one time Valerie stopped by and said you were so out of it that you nearly fell asleep on your feet! You're falling away from all your old friends, you've quit going to your yoga class and your book group..."

"You were spying on me!"

"I'm not judging anyone, I just want to know what's going on!"

"Scott, I promise you, I... look, listen just... just look me right in the eye..." I knock, hard.

Persephone's expression is carefully neutral as she opens the door. As is my own, of course.

"Mr. Birch," she says. "What a surprise."

"Let me in, please." It never hurts to try manners.

"Now is not a very good time."

"I'm sorry, but I must insist."

"Well, you see, I'm with someone."

I put my shoulder into the door and push. There's a chain, it looks pretty sturdy—I'd guess brass plating over steel—but it doesn't last. There's an oaken groan as the mounting rips out of the doorframe. I only get a glimpse, but it looks like three-quarter inch wood screws, nothing stronger. Really, what's the point?

The man on the sofa stands. He's short, clean-shaven, Caucasian—I'd say of Scots descent if forced to guess. He wears "business casual" over a small paunch and looks indignant, but uncertain. A cup of tea steams on the table before him.

"Linda?" he asks. "What's going on?" He raises his chin. "Is this guy giving you trouble?"

Oh my. A hero.

"It's okay," Persephone says, looking back and forth between him and me. "Perhaps Mr. Birch and I can talk about this privately for a minute? Maybe back in the...?"

"No," I tell her. "He has to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, and he steps between her and me.

I move to light threats. "You don't want trouble with me." "That's it. I'm calling the cops."

"Scott, don't!" Persephone cries, but he's already at the phone. I make no move to stop him, and just pull out my wallet.

As he draws in breath to speak to the operator, I show him my badge.

"Detective Birch," I say. "Vice squad. How's that for rapid response?" I pluck the receiver from his fingers and say, "I'm sorry, someone hit the 911 button on the phone by mistake. No emergency here."

greg stolze

He looks from me to her. The badge is a forgery, but obviously he can't tell the difference.

"You want to tell him, Persephone, or should I?"

"Persephone?" he asks.

"Please. Just go," she says.

He looks at me and I raise an eyebrow.

Reluctantly, he leaves.

As soon as the door closes, Persephone puts her hands on her hips and glares.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"I'm concerned," I say. I don't look at her. I'm looking around the apartment. It's a bit cozy for my taste—small, tasteful, original watercolors on the walls, all ponds and flowers and sunshine. Here and there some tribal knickknack bowls or cat statuettes or baskets, Chinese or Aztec or North African, something "multicultural." Very pleasant, very feminine.

Very human.

"Concerned about what?"

"About your development."

"What do you mean, my 'development'?"

"That man who just left. Scott. A friend of yours?"

"You leave him alone!" I can see nervousness in her every gesture. She's backing away from me, shifting her weight, fidgeting her hands.

"You *think* he is your friend. You care for him? You would spare him danger?"

"You bet I would." She raises her chin and now her hands are at her hips again. Fists.

"But don't you see that you are a far greater threat to him than I? If you truly love him, you should go far away."

"Is this New Orleans again?"

"Go where you will. I'm sure you'd never trust any succor I offer you, preferring instead a trap of your own making."

"I'm sure you get your jollies off making little girls doubt themselves—I've heard all about it—but no sale here, Elder Birch." "You are trying to live in two worlds, and one of them is no longer your home. If you continue to see your friend, he will become increasingly suspicious, and he will peek and pry even more. When one of Norris' thugs kills him, will you deny your role in his demise?"

"Look, I can make the adjustment, I can keep Scott in line—all my friends. You overestimate their determination, I promise, just like you underestimate mine. Don't worry about me fooling them. I'll do just fine."

"Until the stress of lying to your friends gets the better of you. Until *you* are the one who kills."

"That's not going to happen. I'm not the one with the anger management problem."

"Indeed?" I hand her the envelope and wait. Timing is everything.

I give her the chance to see her mother's picture. Recent. She's bending to get groceries out of the car, and her skirt is riding up a little in back.

It sinks in. She's trembling.

"Negotiate with me, Linda. Tell me you'll go to New Orleans if I agree to kill her without raping her. Tell me you'll come to the Temple for a year if I let her live, a decade if I leave her mind undamaged. Use your words. Use your logic. Persuade me, you *stupid little cunt*!"

She shrieks and she charges. Her eyes are wide and her fangs are prominent. Utterly undisciplined.

I duck under one arm and put my hand on the back of her neck. While she was looking at the pictures, I put on the glove and the hooks sink in to the side of the neck, right where it joins with the trapezius muscle.

She screams, but I'm confident that her apartment is soundproof. After all, Maxwell supplied it.

"You underestimate the curse you carry," I say in her ear. Over her shouting and struggling, I have to raise my voice. "You have no mother. You have no friends. You will never be a part of their world again. You cannot. Your blood denies it."

84 a hunger like fire

She struggles inefficiently. With a twitch of arms and body, I slam her head into the broad white plane of her refrigerator. I feel neck bones shift (but not break) under my hand, blood pours from her nose all over her lilac silk blouse. (Maybe silk. Could be rayon, I'm not sure.) A second slam turns her voice off like a switch. Good.

"I will not permit you to jeopardize our existence because of your foolhardy refusal to admit what you are. You are not human. You never will be. You have no place with them. The best you can hope for from them is their ignorance. Failing that, their adoration. Failing *that*, their fear. But you are doomed if you think you can move among them as an equal. Your only place is to curse them, or test them, or destroy them. Every mortal close to you is in the shadow of peril, and you are that shadow."

A high animal whine emerges from her throat and I have reached her. I know I have found the real her—not the insolent youngster with no sense and too much protection, but the beast within, ageless and guileless and wise. "Do you feel this?" I ask. It is a rhetorical question. I know she can feel nothing else, but I want her to remember, when the blanket of thought lies once more on the blood. "This is what you really are. These are drives that can't be tamed."

I jerk her down, against the counter, her face inches from the toaster.

"Look at yourself!" I command. "You see only shadows, because your soul is now a shadow. Accept that. We cannot move in human light, among human eyes, because we are no longer human. Our souls are damaged, diluted, chewed free of flavor by the curse of the blood within. You are a monster, Persephone. All of us are."

I put my left hand on the back of her head. I turn her so she's facing away from the toaster and, with a good shove, rip the hooked glove free.

She runs, of course. Flees deeper into the apartment, slamming doors behind her. What else can she do? The

85

beast within her rules, and a stronger one has bested it. Mine has driven out hers.

I know there's only one exit from the apartment, so I'll hear her if she emerges from the bedroom. I don't expect her out soon.

I strip off the glove over the sink and turn on the water. She has one of those little hose attachments—it's handy for sluicing away the blood. There are no dirty dishes in the sink, of course. Why would there be?

When my hands are clean enough, I open the briefcase. It's got a change of clothes, a box of garbage bags, and a canister of those Lysol sanitizing disposable wipes.

The kitchen has a fair deal of blood on it—a drizzle on the fridge, spatters on the low cupboards, a small pool by the oven and a rather dramatic spray on the floor from when I pushed her loose. Nothing like a mortal would have spilled, with a heart pumping it out sundered veins, but it's still present. I should have brought a scrubbing brush.

When the kitchen is clean I strip off my soiled garments and put on fresh ones. The dirty wipes go on one bag, the dirty clothes in another. Both, with some squishing, fit in the briefcase.

I'm just about to knock on Persephone's bedroom door when she pulls it open and comes at me with a baseball bat. I take it away from her and shove her back on the bed.

"Think about what I've taught you," I tell her. I drop the bat on the floor with a clunk—it's wood, an old-fashioned Louisville Slugger. "You are not in control of your passions. You are not safe to be around. You can only bring tragedy to your friends, unless you repudiate them.

"I'll show myself out."

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Ian and David drive me home. I dismiss them and enter the chapel.

Its entrance, a rubber-lined door, is concealed behind a false panel of stone. It takes a strong man to move it, and

86 a hunger like fire

87

greg stolze

then only by a painful fingertip grip. But that is apt, is it not? Should any blessing come without effort?

A second door lies behind the first, this one decorated with the Spear and the Cross.

Inside, the chapel is red-draped, lit by fluorescent lights. Candles will not burn here, because there is no oxygen inside. Here, awash in pure nitrogen, I can pray safe from the fear of fire and humankind.

Oh Dark Messiah, purify my heart. Make me a tool for the Divine Will. Purge me of mercy, that I may cull the race without flinching. Cleanse my eyes, that I may see not in moments as a man, but in ages, as does God Above. Intercede with Him, that He may guide my malice according to His ultimate plan.

Great Longinus, Shadow of the Cross, open the hearts of the heretics that they may see their place in God's great design and thereby be Damned for meaningful acts, not for pointless self-interest. Lift the ignorance from the eyes of the Carthians, that they may turn their naïve political scheming into earnest spiritual search.

Guide Persephone Moore, that she may see the wisdom in leaving Chicago before she becomes a greater blight upon her great sire than she has already been. Failing that, let her flee in fear and ignorance, so long as she flees him.

Most of all, be in spirit with our Prince Maxwell. Guide him, shield him, enlighten him... yet, should he fail at the time of test, help me know when I must ruin him.



Emerging from my prayers, I find my thoughts still dwell on my Prince, my friend.

When he acknowledged Persephone, Maxwell pled a lapse of judgment. Swept up in the moment, he took too much, and with remorse restored her as best he could. He told us all that story—us, his Primogen, his council of advisors.

Can such puling be true?

But if it isn't, what gain could he possibly accrue by breaking his own law? What is worth the cost?

For it has cost him dearly. Not only my trust, but the trust of the other elders. A Prince who spawns? Who knows what mad, aberrant act might follow? He could unmask our entire court on a whim, or order us staked during the day by his servants, or bind us all to his will through the drinking of his potent blood.

Already the crop of folly rises up from the seeds he sowed. This rogue, "Bruce Miner"—he could be only the first of many. As the Prince goes, so goes the city, and a lax Prince models carelessness for others. Already someone has passed along the curse. The unbound flaunt their laziness before their betters, and are bolstered in their insolence by Persephone Moore, the Prince's Error embodied. Between them, they have made mock of me and cost me the esteem of my peers.

But all that is naught before the Prince.

Can the Kindred court of Chicago survive with so infirm a hand upon its tiller?

It's midnight, and the Primogen of Chicago gather under the shadow of Picasso's Horse.

It's a pleasant night, mild. We're in the heart of Chicago's Loop and there are a couple living souls about—people working very late at the stock exchange or in the Sears Tower, cabbies driving revelers to or from clubs, tourists who came here at what is very much the wrong time. From what I've seen on television, this place is awash with humankind during the day, crawling with vitality from the art museum up to the train station and beyond in every direction. But at night, especially on a Monday night, it's dead quiet. Nearly as dead as we are.

Norris, Scratch and Miriam are waiting at the bench. They greet me cordially.

"Miriam," I say. "I missed you at the meeting yesterday."

"You know I don't care for Elysium. But don't worry, I heard all about you." She is confident indeed, to taunt me about my misbehavior. Yet do I deserve any less?

"You should be less concerned about me and more concerned with the anarchy in Cicero."

"Do you think the Prince will attempt to extend his rule there?" she asks.

"Prince Maxwell has never been a 'join or die' type," Norris says. He shrugs.

"Unless you're a pretty little thing named Persephone," Scratch says, and emits a coarse guffaw.

No one else laughs.

"What? Lighten up. Jesus, what a bunch of tightasses."

"I'll laugh on my own time," Miriam says. "I just want to get tonight's business finished. Is Justine coming with Maxwell?"

"I believe so," Norris says.

"What do you suppose they're talking about?" Scratch asks.

"Probably about this Cicero issue," Norris says, looking pointedly at Scratch.

(Personally, I suspect Maxwell and Justine are talking about Bella and her exertions on behalf of her little coven.)

"Cicero business? You mean this Bruce Miner fellow?" It's Miriam again, sounding bored but I know she doesn't miss much.

"Well, it seems that Scratch here is quite the man on the Cicero scene."

"Screw you. I got a crash pad there, is that such a big fuckin' deal?" Scratch is wary tonight. Outside of Elysium, he is far less eager to try my patience. So. My blow upon Ladue accomplished that, at least.

"No, of course not. No big deal that you're digging around in the wreckage of Old John's lair. Why would anyone be concerned?"

The mention of Old John's name gets Miriam's eyebrow up. She turns a cool eye on Scratch.

"Look, Old John is dead and gone, okay?" Scratch asks.

89

"Gone, at least," I say. I'm pretty confident that Old John isn't coming back, even though no one *saw* him die. We leave only ashes, after all, and there are plenty of those in a burned-out house.

"I took a look around there a couple years back, just... you know. To make sure."

There's a little pause, uncomfortable, before Scratch continues. We all remember Old John. Even now, hearing the name pulls something in me, a small string of awe and terror that has been dormant since...

"And, you know, there was some good stuff there. Not, you know, anything physical, but... a good haven. Dayproof, hidden, secure. Maybe even a Guilford."

(Andrew Guilford was a Chicago architect in the 1920s, right about the time Scratch was brought over. He was a servant of one of the local Kindred, and through a few removes he built several houses and even a few public buildings with hidden chambers in which a Kindred might pass the day in relative safety. Most of the residences were destroyed by a group of vampirehunting Treasury agents in the 1940s. Fortunately, Maxwell and I managed to discredit them before they could brick over the useful bolt-holes in the Engine Company 88 building and the one under the greenhouse in Garfield Park.)

"So you moved in and you didn't tell anyone that you were lairing at ground zero for the Chicago unbound movement."

"Movement? Movement? I've seen more movement from dead dogs. That Ladue punk has a coterie of fellow travelers and that's about it. They're a handful of dipshits with their little herds, their little scams, their little... hell, they're *little*, okay? They ain't doin' shit."

"Except for finding Bruce Miner before my own hounds and sheriff," Maxwell says.

I think I'm the only one surprised. Miriam has a nose like a wolf, Scratch is always jumpy and Norris has access to senses I frankly don't care to imagine.

"Formalities?" asks Justine Lasky.

91

greg stolze

"Very well," Maxwell says. "As all members of this meeting of the Chicago Primogen are present, I call this meeting to order."

"All members plus one," Scratch says. That puckered up wreck he uses as a face twists into something I think is a smirk. "Don't think you can con me into your club *that* easy."

"All members, plus Priscus Scratch," Maxwell says, rolling his eyes, voice overly prim. He knows Scratch hates the title. "Old business?"

From his tone, we all intuit that he wishes to get to new business.

"Very well, new business?" He pauses to wave to a police officer. The cop's across the street by the federal court building, eyeing the group of us. "Just a moment."

The policeman comes nearer, and when he sees Maxwell's face his expression changes to one of relief. "Mr. Polermo," he says.

"Officer Grundy." Maxwell has a big grin. "How's your boy? Recovered from that hockey injury?"

"Oh yeah, a long time back."

"It's been a while since we talked, I guess. You have to take care with those... was it a knee?"

"Yeah, that's right." The cop turns to go and then remembers why he came over. "You... uh...?"

"My friends and I had a business meeting go late. Very late," Maxwell says with a laugh. "We all came down in the elevator together and it just hit us that it's a beautiful night, in the most beautiful city in the world."

Burn me again if the officer doesn't look up and around, like he's never seen Chicago before.

"Well, have a good one." He tips his hat to a man who's been dead over a hundred years. "Stay safe!"

"That's the plan!" The Prince jerks his head to the side. "Let's walk," he says to the rest of us.

We walk. South and then west, discussing Cicero and the new rogue.

"What did you mean about the Cicero Kindred finding Bruce Miner?" Norris asks. "I mean they have found Bruce Miner," Maxwell replies. "Furthermore, they found him even before they came to Elysium last night."

"Liars!" I'm not surprised, but I am still offended. "We should have known better than to trust them."

"How do you know this?" Norris says.

"The mouthy one," Maxwell says, his smile thin. "Raphael. We had a private chat and he... sued for a separate peace."

"Meaning?" Lasky asks.

"Meaning he offered me this Miner fellow in return for formal recognition." His mouth quirks. "He wants to be Regent of Cicero."

"You didn't admit him, did you?" I ask.

"I strung him along. Suggested he might make a decent Harpy." The Prince's eyes narrow, then twinkle. "His counter offer was to get his own Elysium."

"Damn him," Lasky whispers.

"Screw 'em both," Scratch says. "Why does it matter? Let him into your old boy's club, get Miner, kack the rogue and call the problem solved."

"Scratch, I'm warning you," I say. "Eliminating the fledgling, no matter how irksome he is—that's off the table."

"Mr. Ladue informs me that Mr. Miner is well in hand, studying the arts of Kindred behavior under his friend Ambrose and others in Cicero."

"You think Ladue can deliver him without a fight?" I ask.

"Is it worth it?" Justine asks. "I don't want Ladue creeping around. He's unpleasant."

"If Miner disappears and Ladue suddenly becomes a shiny new-minted Harpy," Miriam says, "his neighbors in Cicero are going to do the math and take care of that problem pretty quick."

"Which means that Miner and Ladue become the flashpoints in the Cicero powder keg," Norris says, cracking his knuckles.

"Any resistance becomes our pretext to seize Cicero," I say. "...If that is what the Prince desires."

"Cicero ain't worth it." This is Scratch, of course. "That city is mobbed up so dirty that anyone you tried to muscle would already be muscled, and anyone you tried to buy would already be bought."

"So anyone we wished to serve us would be serving two masters," the Prince says. "That is a drawback. On the other hand, a town accustomed to corruption has a certain allure..."

"The infrastructure is already in place," Norris says with a leer.

"We've always steered away from the mob," I say in turn. "O'Banion was an object lesson on the folly of letting a group of armed, violent, religious and superstitious men find out about us. Especially when they're already used to operating outside the law."

"Didn't Capone eventually clean that up for us?" Miriam asks.

"You'd have to define 'clean' very loosely," Maxwell replies, frowning.

"And 'for us,'" Scratch says.

"What would extending our influence to Cicero gain us, and what does it cost us?" Norris asks.

"It gains us a dirty, crooked town—which means it's a malleable town," Miriam answers. "But it costs us the effort of struggling with these unbound and whatever halfdeveloped power structure they've established."

"These guys ain't going to struggle," Scratch says. "They'll just bitch, then fall in line or move elsewhere."

"Which could be worse than an organized resistance." Miriam strokes her chin. "Who knows how many of these idiots there are? I mean, a *movement* with a chain of command... you can roll that up. But a bunch of random jerks moving into your turf and upsetting your feed balance..."

"Straining our influence..." "Embracing wantonly," I say. 93

There's a pause. They look at me. They look at Maxwell. He looks at me.

"Like Bruce Miner," I say.

More silence.

"All these problems," I say, "will be especially acute if they scatter throughout the metro area. I'd be happy to see these unbound gone, but I'll settle for them being confined to Cicero."

Another pause, and then Maxwell gives me a thin smile. "How is that different from gone?"

"Sycamore would be gone."

That gets a few snickers, along with suggestions that Springfield or Dixon would be even more gone.

"So," Maxwell says. "Are we agreed? The problems of civilizing Cicero outweigh the benefits, for the moment." We've reached the Chicago Board of Trade, and Maxwell leans back to drink in its façade. "We do not want their... disruptions and disorder spreading to our fair city."

"That's the ideal," said Norris. "But what of Miner?" "What of him?"

"He's already creating disruptions—draining his family and assaulting police officers. He must be stopped, and if we have to bring Cicero to heel in order to stop him..."

"We don't." This is Justine Lasky. Usually quiet, she commands attention when she speaks.

"The problem is not Bruce Miner, not his 'atrocities'," she says. "Which of us has done nothing worse? If Ladue's companions are training him, he is under control."

"That's a very fragile assertion." Norris sounds huffy.

"Their interest in discovery is no greater than our own," she insists. "All Kindred fear discovery. Miner's flight from the police shows that he fears it too. The problem, therefore, lies not with him but with the witnesses he has left the wife, the child and the police officer."

"And anyone else who saw him wandering around with blood on his face," Norris mutters.

"The problem," I say, looking squarely at Maxwell, "lies with whoever contrived our traditions by Embracing this wretch."

The Prince says nothing and the others take that as a cue to move on.

"People look away," Miriam says, picking up from Norris' comment as if I hadn't spoken. "You know this. People don't look at faces. And especially, they look away from the deformed." She turns to Scratch. "Right?"

"Right," Scratch says, his voice crisp, and I don't know if he has accepted his disfigurement or if her words sting him.

"How much of an issue is the cop?" Maxwell asks. "Norris? You've investigated?"

"I have." Norris frowns, as if he's tasting something bitter. "He's no genius," he admits. "He sees the whole episode as a case of a strong man who got the drop on him. He blames the animal control people for not getting there sooner, and his superiors are investigating whether he put the cuffs on tight enough."

"What of the kicked-out window?" Scratch asks.

"It's happened before," Justine replies.

"The curious timing that it was *just exactly* at sunrise?" "No one cares."

"The torn-out sewer grate? The fact that he was *smok-ing*?"

"No one noticed."

When I was newly Embraced, I was stunned that no one spied my distorted reflection, or when I inadvertently showed fangs (I was much less controlled in those days), or any of the many careless clues I left. Now it shocks me whenever anyone rises from self-absorption long enough to notice *anything*.

Life is often much clearer to the dead.

"What of the wife?" asks Scratch. "The daughter? They're too dangerous to let live."

"No, they're too dangerous to kill." This is the Prince himself. "The wife, what will she say? Her husband beat her, bit her neck, made her bleed? No reputable news outlet would report the lurid details. Any that would, would never assert that he drained her blood as quickly as we know he did. To make such an 'impossible' claim would endanger their already-slim credibility. This story is already cooling—another domestic disturbance. Soon the viewers and readers will have another Kobe Bryant to distract them, another Iran-Contra, another celebrity wedding. But if we kill her, the story gets hotter. We want to make this incident *boring*, and slaying one of the principals is not the way to pursue that."

He makes such sense. How can I doubt him, my Prince? And yet, Persephone...

We have walked up to Union Station, and the clock there says it's one in the morning.

"I told Mr. Ladue that I was concerned," Maxwell says, that handsome grin surfacing again. "I asked if Miner might return to the scene of his crime, perhaps try to finish the job. He assured me that Miner has no further interest in harming them."

"Ah," says Norris. "Rather the opposite, I expect?" "Yes. You remember what it was like to be new, yes?" "To have a family," Scratch whispers.

"Indeed. The daughter, I think. She's still comatose."

"Easily remedied," mutters Norris, "With a taste of the Life..."

"A taste that will place her in our power."

"Scratch? You will do the honors?"

For a moment, Scratch just looks at his Prince.

"The renegade is from your line, after all. One of the Nosferatu, I mean."

"Right," Scratch says. "Sure. Yeah. I'll do it. I'll take care of her."

"Excellent," says the Prince. "Now, as to the next matter. The Mistress of Elysium, Justine Lasky, has registered a formal complaint against Solomon Birch for a transgression of the prohibition against violence."

I give Justine a low look. She could have come to me independently with her problem, but she had to drag in

96 a hunger like fire

97

greg stolze

the Prince. Now he's voicing the words for her, poisoning the others against me. How could I think him mad, who plays us each like strings on his fiddle?

"Surely that's a matter for her to deal with personally," I say, "Not a matter for the Primogen."

"Considering that the complaint is *against* one of the Primogen, she felt it would be most proper to refer this to the highest authority." Maxwell shakes his head. "Your temper, Solomon..."

That fatuous prig. I kept my temper last night. I was never out of control: I stopped after one hit.

"If I have transgressed the *letter* of the law in some trivial fashion..."

"Elysium is a bastion of free speech." Justine must be very angry indeed if she's willing to interrupt me. Me, with my dangerous temper. "If we don't provide a forum to air opinions—even undesirable ones—they just go underground and fester. Then we wind up with a situation like Dubai or Catalina. It's not trivial, Solomon."

"No one wants another Dubai," Norris says, "But surely..."

"A higher standard of conduct applies to elders, Solomon," says Maxwell, "And your behavior was beyond the pale for anyone. What sort of example are you setting? What can we expect if the Bishop of Longinus flouts our laws?"

"Indeed," I say. "Those who interpret the laws of God must be even more responsible than those who make the laws of this world."

There. That quieted the hypocrite. What's one blow, quickly healed, when compared to a cancer like Persephone who could last for centuries?

I would look to the others, but I dare not break gaze with the Prince. Norris carefully stands an equal distance between us. Miriam, seemingly by accident, is at my right shoulder. Justine brought the complaint and stands at the right hand of the ruler. Scratch isn't a Primogen—he's backing away from us both. After a significant pause, I speak again, still staring at Maxwell. "Your words have shown me the importance of cleaving *strictly* to tradition. I humbly submit to the judgment of my peers."

"For an elder of such longstanding," says Norris, "Surely a private reprimand..."

"No, no," I say. "Judge me by the same standard to which others are held."

"Temporary ejection from Elysium is standard for a first offense," Lasky suggests.

"Ah, but it's not a first offense." I'm almost enjoying this. "I was ejected from Elysium in 1947 for this same crime. Though that time, the damage was considerably more grave."

"I suggest beating with a white-hot sword," says the Prince, and I know.

Persephone. She went whining to her maker, bearing tales, and this isn't about my blow to the ambitious Mr. Ladue. It's about my attack on Maxwell's little *pet*.

"Now that," I say, "Is a punishment I can respect."

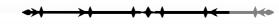
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We set the date. Next Elysium, my humiliation will be public. I don't mind. Part of me looks forward to it—I can never admit it to others, but my wrath against Ladue mortified me. If I can remain Solomon Birch while the Prince, my friend, beats and scars me with a burning brand, then I will regain the respect my position requires. If I fail, it will surely be because I do not deserve to guide my flock.

During my mortal life, I liked to gamble. I wasn't very good at it, but perhaps I never found my game.

I will not fail. I am not Persephone. Longinus has shown me what I am, and I accept it. That makes me strong. Her illusions make her weak.

I return home from the Primogen meeting, work a bit on a credenza I'm building, then fall into slumber with daybreak.



99

greg stolze

Tuesday night I wake at my accustomed time and, after prayers, have the leisure of a long, hot bath. (I have never particularly taken to showers. Besides, a bath raises my core body temperature, at least for a while. It feels nice.) I dress casually—slacks and a polo shirt.

Tuesday is family night.

I reside in the Brigman house, in what was once a coal cellar. The house is spacious, but not ostentatious. However, it is pleasantly furnished with a great deal of wellbuilt, handcrafted furniture. Every technological convenience is at hand, but concealed. The stereo speakers are hidden within the walls, and the other components lie in a refitted cabinet. The plasma-screen TV hides behind a painting when it's not in use, and even the telephones are discreetly tucked into alcoves with wooden doors. Nowhere does the functional ugliness of a modern gadget intrude upon Victorian stateliness, save in the bathrooms and kitchens I suppose. I never go there.

I come up through the basement stairs and Margery Brigman is waiting for me.

"Good evening," I say.

"Good evening, Mr. Birch." Her voice trembles. Poor thing.

"Margery? Are you all right?"

She bites her lip, nods.

"Your father and mother have explained the situation, haven't they?"

She nods again.

"Are you ready to hold up your end of the bargain?"

There's a pause and then... a violent shake of her head.

"Well, that's your choice, Margery, but I hope you've considered matters carefully." I sit beside her on the couch and she draws away.

That hurts, and I let the hurt show on my face.

"Come now. There's no need for that. Am I some monster from the late show, jumping out of the closet and yelling? I'm Mr. Birch. I was there the night you were born. I was there ready to give the Life, *my* Life, to your mother if she needed it during her emergency c-section." I sigh and look down at my hands.

"Mr. Birch, I... I just don't want to."

"Margery that simply is not acceptable. Are you a monkey in a zoo, to let your passions determine your conduct? I certainly won't force you—I respect you too much—but I hope you respect *me* enough to give me a reasoned answer for your refusal."

"I... it feels... I just know it's..."

"It's what?"

"It's wrong," she whispers.

"Wrong? Why?"

"I don't know."

"You do realize I need your Life—not all of it, just a little taste that you can easily spare—I need that to survive? I need the blood, if not from you, from someone. I have asked, politely and respectfully, for something I need and which you can give. Why do you refuse me?"

"It's mine," she whispers.

"And you don't want to share." I frown. "I expected better from someone your age. But perhaps you'll outgrow your selfishness. I hope so, and not just for my sake." I turn my head and body away, wait a little.

She says nothing.

"You're still here?" I ask. "Is there something you want? A question you'd have answered?"

She shakes her head.

"Then go! Go explain to your father why you won't help me. I have nothing else to say to you."

She flees.

Annoying. But I must respect free will. After all, it indicates a strong soul, that she would refuse me. At least she didn't devolve into grand theatrics.

Besides, there's plenty of time.



I discuss some family matters with Ian and David and Elena (who diffidently reminds me that her own supply of

greg stolze

the Life is running thin). Mostly, I put them off. I'm distracted.

Prayer helps, and after that, I make a phone call and have Ian drive me to the pier. On the way south, he updates me on current culture—"phat" spelled with a "ph" for some reason is now a synonym for "cool," Ben Affleck isn't as bankable as he once was, game shows continue their decline. I rarely use all this horseshit, but on occasion it's useful. If tonight were less busy, we'd go to a movie. Once a week, I go—it helps keep me current, helped me know what a CD was (and now, what an iPod is). The last one I really enjoyed was "Saving Private Ryan," though it did make me terribly hungry.

Bella is waiting at the slip, and I courteously help her onto my boat.

"I'm sure you know that I've told my peers I'm meeting you here."

"I expect no less."

"This is... what, a thirty footer?"

"Forty. You sail?" She nods, and I ask her help in raising the sails. We slide out into the dark swells of Lake Michigan.

"This is your second boat, yes?"

"Oh yes, the *Century* was far more impressive. A motored yacht, fit for serious business, and I built all the fittings by hand. Handled well, too."

"Caught fire, I heard?"

"Yes, in '72. But I found the perpetrators." I smile. "They were bold of heart but... merely human. Still, they lasted a long time. The *Second Century* should be ready to sail in two more years, but I'm in no hurry."

"Outfitting it by hand again?"

"If you want a thing done right..."

We're now out in the bay, rocking on three-foot swells. It's a clear night, but the view of the lakefront sheds so much light that we cannot see the stars.

"So. Let's get down to it," she says. "What do you, the great elder Judge of the Holy Blood, want with a kooky Crone cultist like me?" I take a moment to remember what 'kooky' means before I reply. "I may not share your faith, but don't assume I deride it."

"If 'anarchic pagan blood-slattern' isn't derision, what is?"

I laugh. "Elysium hysterics, intended solely as a... rhetorical flourish. The old and jaded Damned sometimes need a loud display to penetrate their ennui."

"Uh huh. And your beat-down on Ladue? You faked that too?"

"Certainly! You don't think...? No, Ladue needed to be shown that he could not hide behind Elysium, could not use the laws of the Prince to defy his betters. I'll take my lumps for it, but he'll think twice before he tries to game his betters again."

"I'd expect you to respect even an agnostic like him more than a 'pagan' like me."

"At least we agree that there *is* a religious dimension to our existence, that there *are* larger questions to ask, and at least we acknowledge the right way to find answers."

"We just don't agree on what the answers are. That's a bitter disagreement."

I wait until she's looking away from the sail and at me before I shrug. I tack around to catch the breeze and say, "My role in the court is not strictly religious. As a Primogen, I have political duties as well."

She raises an eyebrow.

"You may feel that your pleas for greater recognition and respect have fallen on deaf ears. But not everyone thinks you've gotten your fair desserts."

"The Prince has been very noncommittal, which I'm starting to realize means 'no.'"

"Our Prince has formidable skills when it comes to dodging questions."

"And you'd break with him?" She shakes her head, smiling. "You two are thick as thieves. I heard you were weaned on the same neck."

102 a hunger like fire

greg stolze

"Come to the next Elysium and you'll see just how friendly we are," I tell her. "Maxwell is my friend, but I'd fail him if I permitted my feelings to blind me to his weaknesses."

"You're talking about Persephone."

"I'm not the only one whose confidence is shaken. Profoundly shaken. I'm not the only elder with doubts."

There's a pause before she speaks.

"You think Maxwell could fall from the throne?"

I wait a bit to answer.

"I think his reign is unstable. I think the instability will get worse. And I think that it is during such times that skilled individuals can make great gains... if they maneuver wisely."

She narrows her eyes. "In the unlikely event that Maxwell left the throne..."

"Very unlikely." I smile.

"Who would you want to next see on it? Yourself, I suppose?"

I laugh out loud. "By the Centurion, no! A thousand times no. I'm no Prince. I lack the charm. I could rule only by force, and force is very limited. No, there are many better candidates. I can think of few better than Justine Lasky."

She raises an eyebrow.

"Justine is somewhat young," I admit, "but is that necessarily a disadvantage? She is current, a woman with a mindset far more modern than one finds in an anachronism like myself or my good friend Maxwell. These nights... they baffle us, in many ways. Maxwell might be happier if he no longer bore the burden of command." Have I laid it on too thick? No, she likes Justine. Bella wants to believe.

"You think she has a chance?"

"With support from the right sectors. The Circle could be potent, if they could ever agree on anything. My fellows in the Lancea Sanctum know which way the wind blows..." "Or they can be shown."

"Do you think Lasky would be as resistant to your reasonable arguments about religious tolerance? Do you think she'd put you off until tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow?"

She's nodding. I have her. "Of course, any concessions made to the Crone's children would almost certainly be extended to the Lancea Sanctum as well," she says.

"That's not unlikely. You see what I mean? Religious tolerance benefits everyone."

"Except Prince Maxwell."

"You've given him plenty of chances."

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It galls me to think of replacing Maxwell with Justine, especially after she ran sniveling to him for vengeance after I upset her little blood-and-crumpets Elysium party. But she's really the only choice. You couldn't drag Scratch onto the throne with a tractor. Norris is widely feared or despised, and I'm confident he'd turn Chicago into a police state. Miriam is too young and too isolated. Which leaves me, and I have no ambitions to be Prince. Every leader stands on the shoulders of giants, but I would rather *be* a giant.

Perhaps this can redound to my credit. In public I can display my distaste for Justine. Certainly it won't come across as feigned. But if she bids to unseat Maxwell, it only makes my support more meaningful. I can see she's uneasy with the punishment Maxwell declared. It probably looks worse to her than to me, and it's my back will take the blows.

Yes, this could work. And if it fails? If it fails, she is ruined, not I.

Next stop, MacNeal Hospital. Scratch is waiting. "You know where she is?"

"Room 216." He takes my hand, and I feel a curious sense of distance, as if all those around us have fallen back and faded. Together we pass by guards, doctors and orderlies, unseen by all.

She is pale under her covers, pasty and fleshy and with the coarse features common to the lesser genetic strains. Someone chose this specimen's father to be preserved for eternity. Sad.

"Shall I do the honors?"

"It's your duty," I say. I don't want my blood in that creature. Better she take the blood, the Life, from Scratch. She's a dewy English rose by comparison.

There's no respirator, which is good. She's comatose, but at least can breathe on her own. Scratch's wicked nails gently pry apart her lips, her jaws, and with a flick he opens his wrist above them.

"Drinky drinky," he mutters as his blood, God's holy weapon against the world, drizzles into her mouth.

The blood is the Life. We exist beyond the bounds of death because of its mystic potency. When given to a living human, Life to Life, its power is dizzying. A touch, a mere taste of its might, and a mortal can heal as we do.

Brooke Miner's eyes pop open. She looks up at Scratch and they widen in horror. Then she spies his bleeding vein, and the look softens into desire. Hunger.

She leans forward like a baby bird, eager to lick the wound. Scratch withdraws it.

"No no," he says. "Maybe later."

The potent blood of the Kindred is instantly addictive. She begins to weep in frustration and we withdraw, holding hands unseen, as doctors and nurses come running.

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In half an hour, the sun will rise. I'm in the Brigman family library with Elena. My blood has kept her frozen at age thirty since the end of the Great War. She has the prettiness of that time, like a Clabber Girl advertisement, but she is pale, the veins in her hands and wrists prominent if she does not cover them with makeup. Her gums are a pale pink, like the nose of a rat. While a perfect fit for the shelves of leather-bound texts (with no garish modern paperback to mar the eye), tonight she is visibly hungry and desperate.

Margery enters. She's in her nightshirt. She looks like a little girl, sleepy and confused and wakened by grownups. But the slim shape of her legs would draw the eye of many grown men.

"Margery," I say. "I'd like you to explain to Elena why she has to die."

"What?"

"You do understand that the exchange of the Life is a two-way street, don't you?"

"I... I don't..."

"Margery, your great-grandmother Elena is over a hundred years old. You know this. A cruel, aged death awaits her, but as long as she has the Life within her—my special blood—her demise is in check. Now, her time is running out. Her supply of that rare substance is almost gone. As is my own."

"No, you... you couldn't..."

"Couldn't what? Couldn't deny her what she needs to live? Why not?"

"Is this just because I... because I wouldn't...?"

"It's mine." I mimic her voice. "It feels wrong. I just don't want to."

"But it's, it's not the same ... "

"Not at all. You can make more. I have to rely on what I can beg, borrow or steal. And your beloved great-grandmother has to rely on me."

"Please," Elena whispers.

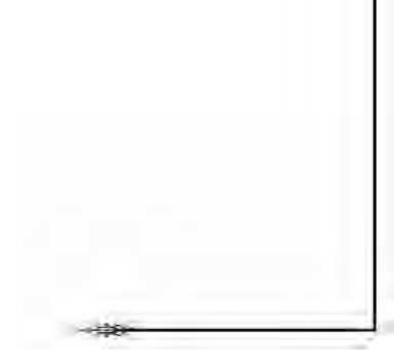
Margery looks from her to me and starts to cry. But she steps towards me and pulls down the neck of her nightgown.

greg stolze

"That's a good girl," I say.

"Soon you'll come to like it," Elena says, as I offer her an open wrist. "Soon you'll crave it more than anything." She closes her eyes in bliss. Margery's eyes are closed as well.

"Soon," Elena moans, "Soon you'll count the days until you can be tasted again."



Part Two Autumn

"The existential dilemma is particularly acute for us, who are not born but made. Too often, we know our maker's purpose-and rebel. Then we must invent ourselves, remade as monsters, and wonder at the mystery of all our breed. Why one vampire? Why a multitude?"

-Bella Dravnzie

Chapter Four: Bruise

It's about ten o'clock and I'm sitting on a tombstone with Ambrose, eating stray dogs. We must look like a couple dirt farmers from down south, shelling peas or something, only these peas wiggle and have hair.

It's the first time in a couple nights that it hasn't rained. It's cold, but cold doesn't bother me any more. It did for a while, but Raphael told me that I could get used to it. He said something about how I just had this memory that cold felt bad, so my brain still thought it felt bad even though my new dead body doesn't really care. Or something like that.

Actually, the cold still kind of bothers me.

But what's good about fall weather is that no one thinks it's weird to wear a raincoat with the hood up. Gloves, they probably figure I'm a wuss, getting an early start on dressing for winter. That's gonna be the best time, winter, when I can put a scarf over my face and bundle up to my eyes and no one will notice anything wrong with me.

I found this culvert by the railroad tracks that turns twice, so no sunlight gets in. There's a grating on the inside, and when it rains it's underwater. Man, the first time I went underwater and stayed down, I just about flipped my lid. But Ambrose was right—I don't need to breathe, so I just lay there and that was it. It's like being cold, I guess. I just *think* I can drown.

It's not like it's the crap sewer or anything. It's the storm sewer. It's just rainwater and stuff. I meet Ambrose by the graveyard gate. He's got some place in here where he sleeps, and we get some strays. There's a Burger King nearby, where we wrap the dead dogs in plastic and put 'em in the dumpster.

I'm getting better with the beast talking. I'm starting to understand them more, which is hard because they aren't wordy they just... think in pictures. And they don't think about future or past, either. Everything's right now to them.

Ambrose says we shouldn't eat rats because they carry diseases that can spread to human beings. Like, a vampire could drink rat blood and get bubonic plague, and then spread it to the next person he bites without even knowing. I told him I wasn't going to bite any people, so why worry? He says I'll do it someday, but I don't want to.

Tonight's dog looks like someone's escaped pet, really shorthaired and fat, like a tiny bulldog but with a different nose. "*C'mere boy*," I huff at it, and it rubs its face against my hand.

"Food?" It asks. Ambrose and I feed dogs a lot, so they like us.

"*C'mere*." I've got a tarp spread out on my lap. I pick up the dog, flip it over like I'm going to scratch it on the stomach, but I bite it instead.

It yaps and howls and I yell out "Aw *crap*!" Then I start spitting and Ambrose starts laughing.

"I told you," he said. "You've got bite high or you're going to nick the intestine."

I'm trying to strain the dog shit out of the dog blood, then I give up and bite again up at the neck. Poor critter's thrashing all over the place. But I get my fill, even though it tastes lousy. Even when I bite high, it tastes lousy.

Not like with Nina...

"Why don't you just drink somebody?" he asks.

"Not tonight."

"Some night you're going to, you know."

"Not tonight though."

He shakes his head, but he's smiling. That's how I'm doing it. One night at a time.

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I wish I could get drunk, still. Or not even drunk, just catch a little buzz.

Actually, I guess I could. Naked explained to me that if I drink blood from someone who's drunk, I can get drunk off them. But I'm not going to do it. Man, I just can't. Whenever I think of doing that to someone, I remember Brooke and Nina, I remember piling them up by the back door and... no. I can't do that again. Biting a dog is pretty sick, but it's not as bad as that.

I heard this story from one of the guys at work. It happened to his sister-in-law or some friend of hers or something. Anyhow, this woman was a serious smoker, like three packs a day. And she tried everything to quit, tried going cold turkey, tried stepping down, tried rewards, tried smoking brands she didn't like, the gum, the patch, the inhaler... none of it did jack.

Then one day she was taking a bath, and she saw this stuff in the water. Stuff like liquid ash. When she looked closer she saw that this gray stuff was leaking out of her nipples. It was like milk only it was cigarette tar.

After that (the story goes) she couldn't smoke anymore. Even when she wanted to or tried to, the thought of leaking that stuff out was just too disgusting.

I guess this is the same way. I finally found something so nasty that it turned me off booze.

The bad thing is, I want the blood *worse* than I want the booze. It disgusts me, but I want it. So far the disgust is stronger, mostly because I want it to be. But it doesn't make me want it any less.

When we're done with the dogs, we clean up with some of those Wet-Nap wipes. I'm getting pretty sick of the smell of those things. I know, I live in a sewer and I sometimes greg stolze

III

get dog shit in my breakfast, but... I dunno. The smell on Wet-Naps is so fake. It's not a real good smell, it's something pretending to smell good.

Man, I'm starting to think like Raphael.

"You ready for tomorrow?" Ambrose asks. We're sitting on the curb outside a Kum'n' Go. That's where he buys Wet-Naps and garbage bags and other stuff. Ambrose always has some money, but not a lot. I'm going to have to find a way to get some cash. I'm not paying a mortgage or buying dinners or anything, but... I'm keeping my stuff at Raphael's and washing clothes in his basement and *man*, that guy never lets you forget what a favor he's doing you. He's putting up Peaches, too, though I think he ought to pay *me* for having a loyal guard dog around. Raphael doesn't see it that way.

"Sure," I say.

"Not nervous?"

"Nah, I guess not."

"Uh huh." He gives me a look. "Tomorrow, do you want me to... find you someone?"

"What, find me someone to bite on?"

He shrugs. "I could."

"Why do you keep bugging me to do that?"

"Because one day you will."

"Not tonight though. Not tomorrow. I have to have a clear head, right?"

"So you are nervous."

I shrug. "I don't want to screw it up. Does that mean I'm nervous?"

"We're all nervous."

Tomorrow we're going to take care of my police problem. Ambrose looks at me long and hard. "You haven't seen your family lately, have you?"

"No."

"That's good."

Another pause.

"Haven't talked to them or anything? Your wife or your daughter?"

"No, man. Why do you keep asking me that?"

"I worry Bruise, that's all. You're smart to keep away." "I know."

"You're probably smart to keep your fangs off people, too."

"Thanks."

He opens his mouth like he's going to say something else, then shuts it again.

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"Whoosa good dog? Whoosa good li'l girl?"

"Me! Me!" Peaches barks, licking my face. I chuckle.

"That's heartwarming," Raphael says, lip curled. "She peed on the kitchen floor again."

"I thought you were going to keep her in the yard."

"Last time it rained, she pushed her way into the shed and knocked over a bunch of stuff."

"Were you really using all that crap in the shed, or was it there when you moved in?" Ambrose asks.

"That's not the *point*." Raphael looks pissy.

"Look, I'll talk to her about it." I look her in the eyes. "Pee wherever you want."

"All taken care of," Ambrose says.

"So how goes it with the Prince?" Naked asks.

As usual, all of us except Ambrose jump.

"*Dammit*," Raphael squeaks. "Don't *do* that! Christ, is it too much to ask that you knock on the door and wait to be asked in like a, like a *person*?"

"You're just encouraging her," Ambrose says.

"You're so cute when you're startled," Naked says. "Besides, I have to tone up your reflexes if you're leaving us to sit at the grown-up table. Maxie-Max and his blue-blood types play for keeps."

"Do you really think I'm *so eager* to swear fealty to their dusty old monarch with his, his sword and his throne and his nineteenth-century mindset? Get real."

"You seem awfully interested, for someone who doesn't give a damn."

"Look, the Prince of Chicago isn't going to go away just because we ignore him. We're lucky he hasn't 'subinfeudated' us yet, made us all subjects to some crony or offspring. Maxwell and his circle can make things here really, really crappy. If you don't believe me, why don't you ask Anita?"

I've never met Anita. She was a Noseforatsu, which I guess is the name of the vampires like Filthfoot, Naked and me—ugly, or shifty or just off in ways even pointytoothed Ambrose ain't. She disappeared right about the time I showed up. Some of the vampires—other Noseforatsu like Naked and Filthfoot—have kind of asked me questions like they think Anita might be my "sire," the one who made me a vampire. But I don't remember much about that night and, you know, it's not like they can show me a picture of her. I remember getting bitten by someone really ugly, but with us that doesn't narrow the field.

I don't know what she has to do with the Prince or anything though. I'm still not even clear about who the Prince is or what he's the Prince of, but everyone says I'm better off if he ignores me. Then, usually they lecture me about Brooke and Nina and that cop.

I really don't think that's fair. I mean, I didn't know what I was! No one told me. I had to figure it out, and I think I did okay. I mean, yeah, I wish I hadn't attacked my family and beaten up a police officer, but I haven't killed anybody.

And another thing. Any time I bring that up, that I haven't killed anybody, they say "yet." All of them, they just take it for granted that some day I'm going to do it. Everyone except Ambrose, and even he thinks I *could*. I wish they'd just make up their minds. On one hand, they're always warning me to stay out of sight, don't let anyone know, hide well, be smart, on and on and on. But it's also like they don't think I can keep a lid on anything, that I'm just going to snap and go apeshit on someone for no reason at all!

"...clueless anachronisms with *power*," Raphael is saying, getting in Naked's face. "You seem to conveniently forget that they've got their hands into, into *everything*. If you people ever got your heads up from your tiny little Cicero scene..."

"Oh, here we go," Naked mutters.

"...It's *true* dammit, and it goes beyond Chicago. Everywhere you go, you have to play their game. I know. I've got contacts in Paris and Cape Town and Melbourne..."

"Just how did you make all those *contacts*, Raphael? Send an email to everyone on AOL who had 'I am a vampire' in their user profile?" Naked's toe to toe with Raphael, bobbing her head back and forth. Ambrose cracks a smile, which is rare because he doesn't want people to see his real teeth.

"You can laugh, but you wouldn't have been laughing if Dr. Paul Schaafsma had got his way..."

"Oh, here we go with the Florida story again..."

"Hey, I take my safety seriously! This guy, this Schaafsma guy, he and his buddies killed *seven Kindred* in Miami and Hialeah and Fort Lauderdale..."

"Did you use the word 'Kindred'?" Ambrose asks.

"The point is, if it wasn't for having contacts and working with the power structure, no one would have been able to stop the good doctor. And then *everyone* would know about us!"

"No, I think the *point* is, you want to hang out with the cool kids like you never got to in high school!"

There's a knock at the door and I volunteer to get it. It's Filthfoot.

"You ready to go?" he asks me. I nod.

"Where are you going?" Raphael asks, sounding... I dunno, angry? But not really angry. More like he's insulted that he doesn't already know.

"We got a thing," I say.

For a moment, the three inside are silent.

"A thing, huh?" Ambrose asks. I nod.

"Be careful," he says.

"What kind of thing?" Raphael asks.

"Don't worry about it," Filthfoot tells him.

Another little silence as I go out the door.

"That's great." Raphael starts again. "Now they don't trust me. I hope you're happy, Naked, I hope you're glad that you're turning us into a nest of suspicion and fear, just like Chicago wants..."

"Just like Chicago is," she retorts, and then the door closes.

"Thank you," I say.

"They talk too much," Filthfoot replies.

Filthfoot has a van, the big old kind with one door on the side and two in the rear. It's all solid metal in back, no glass except windows in the doors. He's got them blacked out and the side door welded shut.

The van's a smart idea—I don't think he sleeps in here, but it's a good place to keep stuff, and he doesn't need to pay rent on it or anything.

The back is full of all kinds of junk—tools and books, gym bags, tied-shut garbage bags, tackle boxes and cardboard boxes and those accordion-file boxes full of papers. Some all sealed up, some open and with pens and wires and maybe a cell phone sticking out of them.

"Tomorrow," he says. "It's like a rite of passage."

"Uh huh."

"You looking forward to it?"

"I guess."

"My advice? Savor it. Saaaavor it. You can't do it twice, you know. It's like losing your cherry."

I'm not sure what he means, because these guys call you "cherry" when you haven't killed anyone yet. Once you do, you "lose your cherry," like losing your virginity. So I don't know if he means one or the other.

"Yeah," I say.

He looks over at me. We're getting on the Expressway, heading in towards the city.

"What are you going to do with eternity?" he asks. "Sorry?"

"Eternity. Endless life. Or half-life at least." He frowns, honks his horn and flicks off a driver who cut in front.

"I dunno. Do I need a plan?"

"Oh yes. Yes, you need a plan. Or at least, you need a purpose."

"Ambrose said I had to dig a well."

"You do need to dig a well, but you also need a purpose."

When Ambrose says "dig a well," he means get a reliable source of blood. Only they don't always call it blood. Sometimes they call it Vitae. That's Latin, I think.

"Look," Filthfoot says. "Nothing's stopping you from finding some safe little hole and eating a couple cats every night and never interacting with anybody. But you'll go crazy. I mean, anyone would, right?"

"I dunno."

"You'd go crazy. That's no kind of existence. You need something."

Twenty minutes ago, he was complaining that Raphael talks too much. I don't want this conversation.

"So what are we doing, anyhow?"

"We're gonna make some money," he says. "Don't worry about it. It's a cakewalk. A milk run. But you gotta think of your future, Bruise..."

"Where are we going? I mean, what's the plan here, huh?"

"We're going up north. Up into one of the big fancy McMansion suburbs, okay? There's this house, big wild money house, we're going to go in and rob it."

"Wait wait wait. I thought you told me you needed my *help*. That this was some kind of... I mean, you made it sound like a big *thing*. And it's just busting into a house and stealing stuff?"

"What, you don't need the dough?"

"I got my cats and my hole in the ground. I don't need charity and I don't need to turn into some kind of *thief*." He laughs. It's an ugly, screwed-up laugh. He laughs like his face.

"Bruise, buddy, you *are* a thief. You're a thief of *life*. You think that stealing someone's TV and jewelry is worse than stealing their vital essence?"

"I ain't bitten anyone," I say, "Not since that first night when I was all confused..."

"That'll change. You can't survive on kitties and puppies forever."

"Why not?"

"Because you *can't*." He turns his head a little, so that one of his googly eyes points my way. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

"What?"

"Look, the older you get, the more... I dunno, the more undead you become? It's like the power in you gets stronger. And more demanding. Eventually, you won't be able to survive on animals. You'll need to consume something with a soul."

"Huh? Whaddaya mean, 'soul'?"

"I mean a human being. Those elder fuckos, the guys with a hundred years on 'em? They can't use animal blood. It's no good to them."

"What?"

"Honest, man."

For a moment, I can't say anything. "Hell."

"Sorry to have to break it to you."

For a little while, we just drive. I like the silence, but I have a question that's been bugging me.

"What about vampire blood?"

"What about it?"

"If I drank some."

"Oh." He chuckles, but it's ugly. "You really don't want to go down that road. In three hundred years or so, I hear you actually *have to*, but before that, avoid at all costs."

"How come?"

"Well, because the stuff we got is addictive. *Really* addictive. Makes heroin look like that orange baby aspirin. One taste and you want more, more, more. *Plus*, it makes

118 a hunger like fire

you go all puppy-eyed and romantic about the vampire you drank from. The more you drink, the more in love you get—even if you drink from a guy! Now, you can always drain another 'Kindred' bone dry, but that's no way to make friends."

"It kills him?"

"And then some."

That does seem a little extreme, just to keep from feeling faggy about someone.

I watch out the window a little more. One of those Dodge Vipers drives by, cool.

"So someday I'll need to eat people, huh?" "Yep."

"Fuck, I don't even want to steal their TVs."

"Oh Bruise, look, these people deserve it. Really. The people we are robbing, the guy in particular we're robbing... this is like a mission. It's *meaningful*, okay? Afterwards, you'll feel great, really. You'll wish we'd done more."

"How is stealing some rich jerk's stuff going to be meaningful? Just what does that mean, huh?"

"It means possessions are fleeting."

"Yeah, okay."

There's a long pause while we drive through downtown, make our turns, head north. I think about asking him to stop, let me out. But I don't.

We don't say anything else until we pull up at the house.

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It turns out Filthfoot needs me for two things. One is the dogs, and the other is being the heavy.

The dogs are serious dogs—a pair of big black Rottweilers, absolutely identical from what I can tell, all thick muscle neck and slobbery jaws on the other side of the fence.

"Don't belong!" they bark at us, snapping and growling. "Don't belong!"

"We belong," I tell them. "We're okay. You like us. We're friends."

They whine and look around, confused, sniffling the ground near our feet.

"Trice! Hunter! Shut the hell up!" shouts someone from the house.

"See?" I wish I had some bacon or something to give them. "Master wants quiet."

"Not master," whines one of them, but they drop their heads and wander away.

"All good," I tell Filthfoot.

"For me too? Not just for you?"

"Yeah."

Then Filthfoot grabs a bar in each hand and just monkeys up, quick as walking. It's kind of weird to watch, he's like a spider. He's got to be freaky strong to do that just with his hands.

I gotta remember not to get Filthfoot mad at me.

"C'mon," he says. "Climb over."

"Can't I just bend the bars? I don't want to fall."

"We can't leave signs."

So I huff and puff and grunt my way over, and then Filthfoot says, "Head to the house. You won't see me, but I'll be right behind you."

"What, it's okay for them to see me?"

"It's only one guy and... yeah. After tomorrow, what's he going to do?"

Good point. I keep forgetting tomorrow. Or, I don't forget it exactly, I just don't think about it when I'm planning anything else. I don't know.

We get up to the back door and there's a little keypad.

"The code is 5462... heck, never mind. It's turned off already. Probably because of the dogs."

"Okay." The door's locked, but Filthfoot tells me to open it, so I pull hard and it crunches open.

"Is someone back there?" It's a man's voice, getting closer.

"Kitchen's as good a place as any." I hear Filthfoot's whisper, but he's nowhere to be seen.

"Deacon? If that's you, shit, come by the front door, those dogs could..."

The guy enters the kitchen and sees me. He stops cold.

"What do you want?" He's a young guy, maybe not even twenty, wearing this shiny purple disco shirt and blue jeans.

For a minute, there's silence. I expect Filthfoot to answer, but he doesn't, so I eventually say, "Give me some money."

Purple-shirt kind of rolls his eyes, almost like a reflex, almost like he's going to say "get a job," but I guess he adds it up that I'm in his house and he's alone and I'm not your typical bum. He makes with the nice, soothing, calmdown-the-maniac voice.

"Sure man, I can help a guy in need. I've got some cash over here in the junk drawer."

He's almost there when I hear Filthfoot. "Hit him, you fool!"

"What?"

Then I see that he's got the phone in his hand and is reaching towards the buttons, but it's Filthfoot who yanks him away.

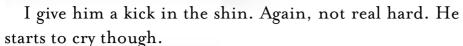
"Waaak!" The guy actually makes that sound. Like a duck. He's struggling, and I can't see Filthfoot—not like he's invisible, but just like I don't look at him. He's got the guy, the homeowner I guess (though, man, how would a guy that young afford a place this nice?) in a full nelson, or something else where his hands are up and back, and I hit the guy. I hit him right in the stomach, not too hard, but hard enough.

"Work the legs," Filthfoot says. He's not bothering to keep it quiet any more.

"He'll need his breath to tell us where stuff is, and I'm sure he doesn't want us to mess up his pretty little face."

"Who are you?" the guy asks. He's trying to look over his shoulder.

"I'm the guy you never see," Filthfoot says. "I'm the guy on the street with the sign, the guy who'll work for food, and you just walk on by with averted eyes. Give him one, Bruise!"



"Look, you guys, look, I'll give you what you want, just stop, c'mon, stop okay?"

"You make me sick, you rich young pukes," Filthfoot says. "Bruise—junk drawer. Get some rope or some tape or something. Christ, make yourself useful!" He drags the rich young puke into a chair while I come up with some packing tape—the transparent plastic kind.

"C'mon," the guy says as I start to wrap him up, ankles and elbows and hands together behind the back of the chair. "I've got money. What more do you want?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe I want to fuck your tight, puckered little ass. You ever try that, huh? You ever get together with your parasite buddies and compare trust funds and do drugs and sodomize each other?"

"Jeez man," I say. "Let's just get the stuff and get out of here."

"Don't be scared," Filthfoot says. "He can't do nothin' to us. If he calls the cops, we can just tell them about the brick of marijuana he's got stashed. You do have it stashed somewhere nearby, right Barry?"

I guess the kid is named Barry. Barry looks scared.

"How'd you know about that?"

"I know stuff. What I'd *like* to know is where you've got the payroll for your candyman."

"My what?"

"Don't play dumb with me! Just 'cause I didn't buy my way into college on my daddy's dime..."

"No man," I say. "I don't know what a candyman is either."

"You know," Filthfoot says—still completely unseeable— "His, his drug guy. His connection. His motherfuckin' candyman!"

"You mean, like a pusher?"

"Pusher, candy... look, whatever, Barry, where's the freakin' money?"

"It's cool man, it's... aw Jesus..."

"Hit him, Bruise."

"No! It's, I swear, it's up in my bedroom! I've got, like a leather satchel, I think it's under the bed or maybe hanging off the chair by the desk, there's an envelope in there with the cash!"

"Bruise, go get it. Oh, and take anything else that catches your eye."

Ten minutes later, he's heckling me about how long I took to come back, but, man, Barry (and his folks, I guess) have some *nice fucking things*. On Barry's desk there was a laptop computer, a cell phone and one of those palm-top schedule gadgets. I found the money where he said it would be—a little envelope, but it's all full of fifties. I also took a look around, checked the den and what was I guess the dad's office. I saw all kinds of expensive looking statues and paintings and... and hell, everything really. I mean, I couldn't tell if all that stuff was real silver or chrome or what. How would I know? But there was a CD player that looked like a radar dish and a bunch of really nice looking pens on the dad's desk. I pocketed those.

"This guy's mom has to have some great jewels," I say, piling the computer and other stuff by the back door.

"Is there the *money*?"

"There is." I hand it off. "What about jewelry?" I ask Barry.

"I... I dunno, look in my mom's room?"

"Your mom's room? Where's that at?"

"Top of the steps, turn left."

"So wait, she and your dad don't sleep together?" Filthfoot asks, but I don't wait for the answer.

Ransacking his mom's bedroom actually makes me feel kind of funny. I mean, I can't get a hard-on anymore, and I don't know what I'd expect to do with it if I did, but this just seems too pervy for me, going through a woman's things. But crap, I need money and these people have obviously got it and then some. I ignore the dresses and shoes, find a couple jewelry boxes and take 'em without looking, and decide to check under the mattress because that's where

I'd hide stuff. There's nothing under the mattress, but when I tip it off the bed it knocks over a vase, which is, I guess, where she keeps her spare change. There's about five hundred dollars there.

Man. The day I changed over, there was less than a thousand bucks in our bank account, and this woman has half that just lying around. Who needs \$500 for just walkingaround money? I mean, is she on drugs like her boy? Does she just go out and buy, I don't know, hundred-dollar shoes all the time?

I hit Dad's bedroom next and he's only got \$220 cash, but shit, that's good enough. Silk boxer shorts, my god. In the bedside table he's got a little bottle of almond oil (for some reason) and a locked wooden box. I take the box and a framed thing with six gold and silver coins—I figure they must be worth something if they're hanging in a rich guy's bedroom.

I get down to the kitchen again. I found a really nice steel briefcase in a closet and put stuff in that, and I don't know what Filthfoot's been saying to Barry, but Barry's *really* crying now.

"You about done?" I ask.

"Look at you, Mr. Robber-Man," Filthfoot says. "No zealot like a convert."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Okay Barry, we're just going to steal your car and run, but before I go, I'm gonna do something to you." "Oh Jesus..."

"No, Barry, my man, it's okay. Serious, it's okay. You'll like this. You'll like it a lot."

And then I can see him, and he leans in and chomps down on the boy's neck. Barry tenses up, then goes limp, and his mouth's open and he says "Oh! Oh..."

Filthfoot backs off and says, "You want some more of that?"

"Uh... Uh huh..."

"'Cause it's better than any drug you've had, huh? Well guess what? You can't have any more. Never ever. And

124 a hunger like fire

you're never even going to know what it was you just lost. That's my little gift to you, you'*rich, lazy fuck*!"

"Jeez man," I say, and Filthfoot looks up at me. Tilts his head my way, anyhow. He grins.

"You wanna give him more? You can, you know. Give him all he wants."

Ambrose explained that getting bitten makes people all happy. Raphael thinks there's some kind of drug in our spit, like a leech he said, and Filthfoot thinks it's the wrath of God making weak people love their sin and punishment. I don't know. But I know it's what Barry wants right now.

God, he smells so good.

"Please," he says. "C'mon guys."

"You want more?"

He's silent a minute, and I can see him crying a little.

"You know I do," he whispers. Filthfoot is upright behind him, grinning.

"I'll be out in the garage." Filthfoot disappears.

He wants it so bad. Like I do.

So I give in.

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I thought, just for a moment, that it might be weird with a guy, but it's not, it feels natural and perfectly right and I'm just there, I don't have to think or do anything but just draw it in, just feel good, I lose track of time and forget where I am and don't care what I'm doing...

And then Filthfoot smacks me, hard, right on the back of the neck. I start to cough and he yanks me off Barry by the hair.

"Take it easy, killer," he says.

"What?"

"Look at him."

Barry is slumped in the chair, unconscious. There's a little blood on his collar, a little more from the two holes in his neck. Filthfoot leans down and licks, and the wounds close up. It's another thing, like how I got over being shot so fast, I guess. "You don't wanna lose your cherry on this guy," Filthfoot says, and he's got his voice slow and gentle, like when you talk to a little kid. "The situation is bad. Guy found tied up, bled to death, no blood anywhere? Nah. Too obvious, y'know?"

I'm only half-listening. God, I would've killed that guy. If Filthfoot hadn't come in, I would have. Not out of being angry or bad or anything, but just... just not paying attention.

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We go and steal Barry's Jaguar, and Filthfoot drives off to take it to his contact while I load his van and drive it back to Ladue's place.

"It's not bad," Raphael says, looking over Barry's computer. "This was top of the line, last year." His tongue makes a little ticking sound. "And what does he use it for? Some ten page term papers and porn, porn, porn. Not even any games."

Naked is checking over the jewelry. "This stuff is nice, except that this piece is a fake. But it's a good fake. I'll give you guys a couple thousand for the whole batch."

"I can't negotiate without Filthfoot."

"What's in this box?" Ambrose asks.

"I don't know. It was in the dad's bedside table. You want me to open it?"

"I'll do it," Naked says. "You'd just smash the lock."

"What are you going to do?"

"Pick it. What did you think, that I'd tickle it?"

"Whoa!" Raphael says, staring at the screen. "This guy was into some weirdo stuff."

"Like what?" Naked looks up from the box and her bent paperclip.

"You really have to see it," he says.

"If it's a woman with a horse, I've seen worse," she says. "It's worse," Raphael tells her.

We gather around and he starts a little computer movie. It's a guy's dick, close up, aiming at the camera. It's a pretty big one, I guess. A hand closes around it.

"I'm not shocked," she says.

"Just wait."

The hand jerks the dick and out pop two AAA batteries. They just shoot out, plop plop. Like from a dispenser.

For a moment, we're all quiet. Then Raphael shuts the lid on the laptop.

"I've seen enough," he says.

"Oho," says Naked, as the wooden box pops open. "Freeze, muthafuckah!"

She's waving a gun, a chrome-plated revolver.

"So, have you and Filthfoot decided how you're splitting stuff?" Ambrose asks.

"Not really, I guess. I figure fifty-fifty."

"Oh really? He sets up the job, he, like, cases the joint, he plans everything and you... you what? Hold the door? Haul stuff?"

"Hey, were you there?" I'm getting a little sick of Raphael's attitude.

"I'm just wondering if you're going to keep any stuff or sell it all," Ambrose says.

"I dunno. Why, you want the gun or something?"

"Guns are mostly good for making cops shoot at you. I'd sell it, if it was me."

"I don't know," Raphael says. "A gunshot wound makes a dead body a lot less suspicious, as long as you make sure to shoot them before they die. Those forensic guys can tell, you know. Shoot them, leave them somewhere the blood would plausibly drain..."

"Like you've done this a lot?" Naked sneers at him.

"I've lost my cherry," he says. And for once, he doesn't sound like a snotty punk kid. He sounds... sad, I guess.

For once, she lets it go.

"Hey, guess what?" Filthfoot says as he enters. He's waving Barry's tiny blue cell phone. I just now realize it's the same exact blue as his car was. "I got me the phone numbers of some other rich bastards!"



We split the goods, I get a quarter of the take, and we sell the jewelry to Naked after Filthfoot haggles her for

about an hour and a half. Ambrose and Raphael leave for a couple hours each, then come back. I watch TV.

Mostly though, I'm thinking about Barry. I just about killed him.

And I'm thinking about how I can't get by on animals forever.

And, dammit, I think about what I want to do with the rest of forever.

It's raining at sunset the following night, which is okay, I guess. Shouldn't change the plan one way or the other.

I meet Ambrose at the graveyard and he's got a bunch of dogs rounded up, but I'm not hungry. He tells me I should eat, keep up my strength, and I suck down a couple just to be polite. But it's not anything real. Not like Barry.

"You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

I think about asking if it's too late for him to get me someone, but it probably is. And anyhow, I'm really full. I almost feel stuffed, all that blood from Barry last night and then two dogs.

"The important thing is, right before we do it, think strong thoughts. Tough thoughts. Like I showed you, okay?"

"I know, I got it. What's gonna go wrong?"

"Nothing," he says. "We've all got you covered."

At Raphael's, there's the new girl. Or I guess she's not really new; it's just that I've never met her. I get a flash of panic when I first see her—like I gotta get the hell out of there.

"Bruise," Raphael says, "This is Persephone Moore."

"Charmed," she says. She doesn't seem surprised that I'm wigging out and somehow that calms me down.

I feel more like a heel than anything. We shake hands. I don't take my glove off. I don't want to know if she'd jerk back or what.

Persephone is the kind of woman who, when she'd come into Home Depot, never knew exactly what she wanted,

and then acted like you were stupid when you tried to explain anything to her. The kind of college graduate who always got good grades in high school, never had ketchup drip on her pants because she never got hot dogs at lunch, always had a salad, and even that never dripped on her.

You know the kind. She's the type who's too good for you.

She's in a tan pantsuit and I don't even know how I can tell, but it looks expensive. The kind of thing Nina would look at and say, "Doesn't that look nice?" and then she'd look at the price tag and shake her head. Meanwhile, I'm in some new coveralls and Ambrose has his greasy leather jacket. The only guy who looks right next to her is Raphael, who's actually got on a suit with a skinny black tie.

"I'm really glad you're willing to help out on this," Raphael tells her. Man. I'm not too smart, but even I know what's going to happen when the chess club geek asks out the prom queen.

"Not a problem," she says.

We needed Persephone in on this because she's got one of the vampire powers that none of the rest of us have. I guess it's like instant hypnosis—she looks in your eyes and says "Sleeeep!" or something and you turn into her zombie. Shit, and I'm screwing around with talking to kitties? If I could learn that one, what else would I need?

Raphael is going over the plan again and Persephone keeps staring at me.

"We've heard this before," Ambrose says.

"Yeah, you mind if I go check Peaches?"

"You and that dog." Raphael rolls his eyes. "Fine, whatever, go see your stupid puppy. We'll just make the plan to save your skin here, if that's okay with you."

Filthfoot's man can set me up with a car—an old beater, but I can keep a car running. Raphael can get me a fake driver's license with the picture from my old one. He's not cheap, but there it is. (Actually, it's kind of funny. Now that I'm dead and a monster, I get to drive again.) If I get a storage locker to keep my junk, I can pay for a year of it and that pretty much takes care of my big robbery payoff.

It's not a lot, but crime does kind of pay.

"Hey Peaches, hey good dog, c'mere!" I don't use the beast speak on her, I just call her and she comes anyway.

Man, she's one dumb animal. Still loves me. Still thinks I'm the smartest guy around.

"Peaches, listen, I'm going to go away for a while, but I'll be back. While I'm gone, Ambrose is in charge, you got me?"

She whines a little. And then she growls. She's looking over my shoulder.

I turn and I see Persephone in the window. She's got a weird expression on her face. Not snotty or mean... more like when someone's just gotten some really bad news. I don't know. I was at work when this guy Andrew found out his son had got hit by a car. His face was a little like that. What's she seeing, that makes her look like that?

As soon as I turn, she steps back out of sight.



Dear Nina

I'm sorry what I did to you and I'm sorry what I did to Brooke. I know this doesn't help or make anything better, but I can't take it any more. I tried to quit the booge which was making me so sick and mean. If I'd been sober, I never would of gotten all burned. I remember how that happened now. I was drunk, and you'd think that would help me quit, but I can't do it. I'm too weak. I know I always said this was the chump's way out, but I guess I'm a chump. I guess this is all I've got. I'm sorry I wasn't a better husband or dad, I'm sorry I messed up that cop and took the dog and I'm sorry about Barry too. But I think it's better for you this way, and I think it's better for me. Love

-Bruce.

Man, writing a suicide note is weird.

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And then we're at the building, on the roof.

"This rain is good," Raphael says. He had all that jazz about how the cold was all in our heads, but he's huddling in a big wool coat. "It'll wash away any evidence that there was more than one person here."

Persephone is downstairs, ready to mind-zap anyone who comes by, I guess.

"You ready?" Ambrose asks.

"Sure." I step towards the ledge. "Tough thoughts, right? Tough thoughts."

"Soon, everything will be cleared up," Raphael says. He's looking around, like he expects a film crew from *Hard Copy* to show up and blow the whole scheme.

"Wait a minute," Ambrose says. "There's one more thing."

I look down. It's a long, long way. Forty feet doesn't sound so far, but it's a long way. I'm going to hit soft dirt and mud. It's a vacant lot with an old wooden fence around it, all full of beer cans and bottle caps. Just soft mud. But it's still a long way.

"What is it?" I ask. Forty feet, I could run that in no time. It's different when it's up and down, though.

"Look at me. Please." His hand is on my shoulder.

I turn and his grip tightens, and then I feel this hit, this hard blow, right in my chest. I look down and there's a plank of wood sticking out of me.

A stake through the heart. Man. I know about this—hell, it was Ambrose who told me! You get a stake through the heart and it knocks you out. Actually, it looks like he broke this off the fence down below. Very clever. Suicide guy jumps and lands on the fence. Sure.

The last thing I feel before blacking out is myself going over the edge.

Chapter Five: Persephone

Bruce Miner—or "Bruise," I suppose—looks even worse when he isn't moving. I didn't think that was possible.

We're in the hospital. Ambrose called in the jump from the closest phone booth, anonymously of course. Then Raphael picked me up, police scanner blaring, and we followed the ambulance to the hospital.

All the way, he droned on and on about how he hoped the Prince appreciated how hard he was working to keep Bruise under control. Kept trying to see if I could set him up somehow. Sure, Raphael. I can set you up. I'm bigger than herpes at court. Almost as popular, too.

It's a relief when we get to the hospital and he leaves me alone. I put on a doctor's coat and head down to the morgue. It almost feels odd, stuffy, to wear one of my old lawyer suits. I tried not to let that evil bastard Solomon scare me off my friends, but I've been drifting farther from them. I should fix that, I shouldn't let him isolate me but... the last time I made an appointment with Rick, someone had gotten there before me.

"Can I help you?" asks the attendant.

"I belong here." I grab his mind with my eyes and squeeze that idea into it.

"Right, of course."

Then it's just a matter of waiting for Bruise, waiting for a doctor to check him out and, yeah, he's sure dead all right, no pulse or vitals, sign the paper.

(The doctor is short, with sandy brown hair. Very nice.)

All we need is a positive ID, and since he had his wallet with his library card and a signed suicide note, that shouldn't be long coming.

I didn't give much thought to Bruise's survivors, I guess. I mean, I knew he had a wife and a daughter, and I guess I pictured her as poor and cringing and pale, the kind of battered wife that they put on the mailer to get you to contribute to the shelter. I figured the daughter would be a scrawny waif with wide eyes and slap marks.

In fact, the wife is just on the good side of portly, and she's a little pushy and overbearing. The daughter is chewing her gum and snapping it, and she's wearing a skintight midriff shirt with TRAMPY! spelled out in cheerful little sequins. Jeans as tight as paint with flared bottoms over towering platform shoes complete the outfit. Maybe she dressed to try and attract a doctor's eye.

"I'm sorry if I woke you out of bed, Mrs. Miner..."

"It's all right, look, can we cut to the chase?"

"If you wish. I just..."

"Okay, pull back the sheet. Please?"

The doctor sighs and does it.

There's a moment of silence, except for a little gum crackle.

Nina Miner says, "Yeah. That's Bruce."

In an instant, she's exhausted. Her mouth crumples up and her head drops, then she turns it, looking for a chair. The morgue attendant hastily brings one forward and she sinks into it.

"Daddy?"

I turn to Trampy and suddenly she looks like she's about twelve years old. Instead of a sassy teen who, like, totally can't be bothered... suddenly she's the little orphan girl I expected from the poster, a sad waif trying to be grown-up with too much makeup. She gives a big snort, and sort of chokes for a moment, then a big swallow.

"Daddy..."

"I'm very sorry," the doctor says, and tries to put the sheet back over Bruce Miner's face.

"No!" The daughter teeters forward on her platform shoes, grabs the sheet and pulls it back. "No, don't!"

"Honey..." This is the mom.

"Don't take him away!" Her face is instantly beet red and she curls her whole body in, pulling back the sheet so that we can see just how badly broken the dead man is.

(And of them, I alone know that there's still something like life in that still body, something just waiting for another chance...)

"I'm afraid we have to..."

"Fuck you!" The girl screams it. "Fuck you all!"

"Brooke that is *enough*!" Mom stands up and heads towards her daughter, very no-nonsense again. I guess a crisis brings it out in her.

"No!"

"Brooke, give me the sheet."

"Nooooo!" They're tugging at it, back and forth, and the mom is almost as red as the daughter.

It's like watching him with his dog. You're not sure if it's tragedy or farce.

The daughter slaps the mom. Mom's eyes open and her mouth sets, she grabs one wrist and one ear and then I'm there. I don't know why I didn't act sooner. It was like the slap sound switched me back on.

"That's enough." I dose the mom first, look her in the eyes and... wow. There's a pause of challenge and then she lets go, she obeys.

I don't think she would have, if some part of her hadn't wanted to.

"Calm down," I tell the daughter, and she's a lot easier, she sinks to the floor and just sobs. The attendant, in the meantime, has gotten a new sheet to put over the body. The doctor helps the girl to her feet, says he thinks the staff counselor is free now. Gently, he leads the pair away and it's just me and the attendant and cold Bruce Miner.

"Must be nice," I mutter to him, "Knowing that you were loved."

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After that, the night gets pretty boring. I wait for the cops, plant the suggestions there, wait for the orderlies, plant more suggestions, wait for the doctor without the beard, take his blood and make him forget it... I spend a lot of time there, in the morgue, and when I start to feel dawn approaching I open Bruise's little freezer-drawer and tell him, "I'll be back for you tomorrow night." He's starting to curl up, adopting the fetal position around the stake. Then I make the orderly forget what I just said and did, and I'm out of there. A cab ride home and to bed.

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The next night it's Saturday and more screwing around with Miner and the Cicero unbound. I get there early, before I even feed, hoping it's the same doctor, but no. Some guy with a black crew cut, too skinny. No thanks too easy to slip up.

It's a different attendant too, a woman with straight hair, too long for her face.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm supposed to be here."

"Right."

"Can I see the Miner paperwork?"

She looks uncomfortable. "Well, it's a sealed file. You know, a police matter."

"Right. Let me rephrase that. Get me the Miner paperwork."

"Of course."

She's really pliable. I wonder what makes her like that? Did she get beat up a lot as a kid? Or maybe she was so privileged and cosseted that she never got any toughness.

I wonder what I would have been like? How easy I would have been? Hell, for all I know, someone *did* use it on me when I was living. Maybe Maxwell did.... I don't want to think about that now. Paperwork. Check. Definite identification, definite statement of death, all good. Death certificate, all in order, stamped and signed. It is officially established that Bruce Miner is legally dead. As suggested (by me, to everyone), no autopsy is scheduled. No one has gone poking at his corpse to notice that he probably has fewer broken bones than he should. No one has decided to do anything foolish like remove the chunk of fencing that so obviously killed him. Great.

"You're not going to see what happens next," I tell her. It's an awkward proposal, but it'll warm her up for the next memory-erase.

"Sorry?"

I open Bruise's drawer, pull him out and yank out the fencepost from his chest.

"Gah!"

He reacts like a cardiac patient who's just gotten shocked to restart his heart. Bella tells me that a stake in the heart drives us into a terrible sleep full of nightmares and warped memories. Bruise clearly didn't enjoy the ride.

He starts to get up, fangs out and the hunger written all over him. I can see the hole in his chest starting to seal up, which is only going to make him hungrier. I need to calm him down and Push Out to do so.

"Shh," I say, "It's all right. Just move." He does.

"Th-Thanks," he tells me.

The attendant has backed up against the wall and is rubbing her eyes. That weak little brain of hers is struggling to believe three impossible things before breakfast.

Bruise stares at her and I know that look. I push him along and turn back to her.

"You didn't see that," I tell her, as I shut the locker door. "Go sit at your desk. In a minute, I mean, a moment, I'm going to leave. When I close the door, put your head down and fall asleep. When you wake up, you'll briefly remember an odd dream, but it will fade like all dreams do. Nobody looked at Bruce Miner's paperwork and no one looked at his body. Understand? Good. Go."

136 a hunger like fire

I close the door. Bruise is outside.

"Man," he says. "That instant hypnosis thing..."

"Here, drink this." I pull out a bag of preserved blood. Not easy to get, but I don't want any more outbursts from Miner.

He doesn't hesitate much and slurps it down. "Thanks. I mean, thanks a lot. For... well, you know. Without you, this would have been..."

"It's fine," I say. "Anything for the Masquerade."

"For the what?"

Good grief.

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"Anything for the Masquerade" is a gross exaggeration, of course. I'm trying to keep an eye on Miner because Maxwell suggested it. God, it was awful. Like when my real dad dressed me down for wanting to be popular and suggested I get a job after school.

It was especially galling because he said it after I told him about Solomon.

"What do you mean, 'maybe he's right'?" I asked and I could almost feel tears beading in my eyes. But I didn't cry. I wouldn't cry. Persephone doesn't cry. Even Linda's too old.

"I don't mean that he was right to treat you so roughly, but are your mortal friends going to do you much good in your new state?" He agreed to see me in the same damn Palmer House penthouse where he changed me. It almost made me queasy, luxurious and anonymous at the same time. It could be anywhere, but it's where I died.

"Do me much...? I don't have them to get advantages; they're my *friends*. They make me happy."

"Oh. How do they compare?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Persephone, darling, you fed before you came here. I saw you." Then I *definitely* felt creepy. "What do these 'friends' give you that compares?"

"It's... it's not the same."

"Of course it isn't. Your entire nature, now, is focused on the theft of precious blood. Nothing else a mortal offers can compare."

"Then you think I... I should leave? I should go to New Orleans?"

"No, not at all. You have a great deal to do here. But I think you should turn your mind and energies to things appropriate to what you now *are*."

"Feeding and keeping hidden."

"Those are the essentials, but the potential is far greater. You could still be walking these streets in a hundred years, or a thousand! From that perspective, don't the petty struggles of your clique of young urban professionals seem petty and unworthy?"

"Then what? I should get involved in Kindred politics? I should start scheming with Invictus and the Ordo Dracul and the rest of them?"

He gave me a look, and I couldn't tell if it was pity or a strange admiration. "You could accomplish things far beyond the realm of posturing for the Damned. But I will say that until you master those machinations, you will never surpass them."

"I'm already your offspring..."

"Which has become as much a problem as an advantage. Make yourself useful! Contribute to the *gemeinschaft*."

"Do you really expect to sell me on humanitarianism for creatures that are no longer human?"

"By no means. When you've played the game for a century or so, altruism will baffle you." He said it with a twinkle in his eye, but his next words were sincere. "Being useful is how you incur debt, and debt is the fuel that runs the machine."

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I don't know why I said "in a moment" to the orderly, as opposed to "in a minute." It's not like she's going to literally think I meant sixty seconds. I guess I choked. But it's fine. I'm sure the suggestion worked fine, especially on her little Play-Doh brain. And yeah, Bruce Miner's body

138 a hunger like fire

disappears, but the cops aren't going to care much. Maybe the widow will sue the hospital. Good on her, she could probably use the money.

When the door opens at Raphael's house, the rest of his little posse all jump out and yell "Surprise!"

No, really, they do. There are two absolutely horror show gruesome Nosferatu, there's Ambrose, and there's Raphael, along with a couple others I don't know. Some of them are, I swear, holding out wrapped presents.

Miner's *dog* is there too, yapping and jumping and licking his face.

Raphael and the male half of the freak show couple push towards the front, jovially bickering over which gift Bruise should open first. Raphael has given him a driver's license for "Reinhart Bruce," there's a MasterCard and a birth certificate and a library card too. From Mr. Wreckedface (who, I can't help but notice, is barefoot) it's a little PDA, which makes him and Bruise laugh for some reason.

"It's got everything," the guy says. "Digital camera, GPS, MP3 player..."

"Yeah, but does it have the triple-A movie?"

As soon as Bruise says this, everyone laughs.

They're pulling him inside and he turns to me and... and I swear, he actually looks *shy* as he says, "Uh, hey... you want to...?"

For a minute, I'm tempted. They seem to be actually having *fun*. But what would Loki think? Me, hanging with the unbound? Loki's one of the last friends I've got left. At least, I hope he is.

"I've got business elsewhere," I tell him.

"Yeah, of course."

I turn to my car, and I *do* have business elsewhere. But it doesn't make me feel much better.



The business of doing business cheers me up, though. As it always has.

I meet Mr. Larkin and Mrs. Larkin at the offices of Hatch, Hatch and Hurst. Their son, Billy, is with them,

poor-postured in a corner chair with his attention-his whole body, almost-curled around a GameBoy.

I like the Larkins. Nice people. I'm giving them a good price for their house, partly because I can afford it and partly because I just feel like they're good people. It's not like they're perfect, but they seem warm and tolerant towards each other. There's an easy understanding between them, with no sense of the fear or manipulation you get in so many other families. They remind me of growing up in Indiana.

I think it was Tolstoy (or Dostoevsky?) who said that all happy families are alike, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. I like that. The Larkins, then, are my stand-in for every normal family in America, or in the world. That's why giving them a sweet deal feels right.

Plus, they have no idea what they're sitting on.

Scott Hurst, my good friend, is drawing up the papers. I could do them myself, but I don't want my name on them. Instead of buying the Larkin house for Linda Moore, I'm arranging it for the Brown Civic Trust. (A trust funded and run solely by me, of course, but there it is.) Instead of a deal brokered and described by Linda Moore, lawyer with Barclay, Mearls and Shaw, it's a Hurst deal. My connection to it *can* be found, but not easily.

All this made Scott uneasy, of course. He wants to know if I'm hiding something. Wants to make sure I'm okay, wants to know about Detective Birch. I keep putting him off and putting him off, but he's smart and he's determined to save me—unless I prove that I don't need saving. There's only so much I can do, though. The book club meets over lunch.

"Everything's to your liking?" I ask the Larkins.

"I think so," Papa Larkin says. He's smiling a little, a professional smile, trying not to split into a cheerful grin. He knows he's getting a good price. Part of him is still waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it's a small part and shrinking fast. He now feels he knows me. (As I know them. She's a schoolteacher—junior high, the same school Billy attends, the school where he plays lacrosse. Dad's an

insurance salesman. In fact, he sold me some life insurance lately. The beneficiaries are my brother, my parents and the Brown Civic Trust.) He trusts me. He likes me.

His house was built by Andrew Guilford in 1924. Only no one knows because the city clerk mistyped the records, indicating that the architect and builder was "Andrew Fuilford." The error got encoded when the files were recopied into a database, and no one ever noticed it until me.

Before my fatal date with Maxwell, I was a real estate lawyer. On the night I was introduced to Kindred society, I mentioned that to a Kindred named Dubiard, who told me about Guilford. Over the next few weeks I was busy learning how to be a vampire, but the Guilford business stayed with me. Just the idea that the *whole time* I was wheeling and dealing, there were *nests built for vampires* hidden under my very nose... so I got curious and I started poking around and my old colleague Scott halfjokingly said he remembered a *Fuilford* house coming on the market. What a memory, huh?

We sign the papers and set the date, and on next Wednesday they'll be out—they'll be in their new house in the suburbs. Close to the train station and the DuPage Children's Museum. Everyone smiles, everyone jokes about wrist strain from writing our names so many times and then the Larkins file out and, I'm guessing, go get frozen yogurt treats.

I stay behind because Scott asks me to.

"Linda," he says. "About that guy..."

"It's not a big deal."

"Look, I called around and no vice squad in Chicago has a detective named Birch!"

"I've taken care of it."

"Why did he call you 'Persephone'?"

I sigh. I listen carefully.

The Larkins are gone. There are a couple other secretaries in the office, but I don't think they'll come in the conference room.

"How... how private are we, here?"

He crosses to the door and locks it. I follow two steps behind him, and when he turns around I fling myself into his arms.

He wasn't expecting it, but maybe figures I'm breaking down, bursting into tears, about to unburden myself of some horrible double life.

He's part right.

"Linda, what...?"

Then I bite him.

It's very strange, drinking a friend. Scott Hurst actually offered me a position with his firm. It was my best interview, really. I went with Barclay, Mearls and Shaw because the money was better, but I got re-acquainted with Scott after a year in practice. We met again at the dinner at the Shedd, him and his wife and me.

Scott is a decent guy, his wife's a sweetheart. They have two kids in college. He even drives a Prius. Used to climb mountains when he was younger but quit because he fell and actually broke his back, lost feeling in his legs and had to be flown out by chopper. He recovered, eventually. Quit climbing, which was probably smart.

I knew all this about him when I was alive, but until I sank my fangs into his neck, I never really *knew* him.

The blood flows and I know. I taste the wildness that drove him to climb up into the sky, and the caution that made him quit. I taste his core of decency, warm and sweet and gentle, but with a roughness to it necessary for strength, an undercurrent of outrage that he never shows but that keeps his goodness warm, keeps it moving despite defeat and resistance. I taste how he's lost the mountains and misses them every day, and how his warm comfortable life as a father and husband is slowly, slowly suffocating that loss.

I pull back and gently close the wound, knowing that someday his passion will die, and he will be more content, but less of a man. His blood seethes in me, bittersweet.

142 a hunger like fire

"Forget," I tell him.

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The next night is the first Sunday of the month and we all meet, once again, at the Aquarium.

Loki's out front, alone again, and I greet him. He just grunts.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"What do you think of the Carthians?" he asks.

Here we go.

"I don't think anyone has all the answers," I tell him.

"Okay. You like the Carthian questions better?"

"I prefer them to the Lancea Sanctum."

"What does that mean?"

"I guess it means I'd rather know whether I have representation than know whether I have a soul."

"Hmph."

"What about you?"

"Me? I'm a sworn officer of the court. My loyalty is unquestioned, right?"

"Nobody's loyalty is unquestioned. Not with your boss around."

"Norris is all right," he says.

"Sure. But would you want to be stuck in an elevator with him?"

"No Kindred I know passes that test," he says, but I've got him smiling now.

"Is it busy tonight?"

"Packed. What did you expect?"

"I expected packed."

"You won't get a good seat."

"Anywhere I can hear him holler is a good seat."

He grins wider. "You should be careful how you talk about the elders."

"I should, shouldn't I?"

He pauses, then asks, "Do you ever wonder about the Prince?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever think he might be... I don't know." He squints and looks around, as if he expects Norris' Thought Police to jump out and grab him. Even though he's one of them.

"Do I ever think Maxwell might be what?"

"Losing it?"

"Losing his throne? That's ridiculous." But I can't help feeling a stab of fear. How much worse would Solomon be without Maxwell holding him back?

He's quiet for a moment. "Losing his grip," Loki whispers. "What, because of me? Is that what this is about?"

"Forget it. Forget I said anything."

I don't answer, but I don't leave either.

"Is this some kind of loyalty test? Some kind of crazy test?"

"Yeah," he says. "Sure. You passed. Go in and see your beating."

I get down to the amphitheater and it's as crowded as I've ever seen it by night. There are at least a hundred Kindred milling around, muttering to one another and glancing to see who's looking at them. Half of them have their fangs out and it's like there's electricity buzzing in the air, lighting up everyone who enters with fear or bloodlust.

The décor this month doesn't help. Instead of flattering candles, the hall is lit with fluorescent klieg lights that would make a swimsuit model look washed out and pale. On us, the effect is universally ghastly. There are no shadows, everything is glaring and stark and instead of drawing attention to the throne, we all seem to be looking at the five great black banners hanging in front of the windows. Lit from beneath, the spotlights turn the glass into mirrors, showing us as a hazy mass, half-real. In the middle of each great streamer is a white circle with a crimson design—they alternate the spear of the Lancea Sanctum and an all-seeing eye that represents Maxwell. All in all, the effect is very Leni Riefenstahl, very *Triumph of the Will*.

The thickest clot is up near the bowl of blood—the weak and the young, slaking their thirst on something their bet-

ters dropped and eager for the chance to see someone stronger get laid low.

I head down the center aisle, ignoring the laugh that breaks out from a little clot of Armani suits and Vera Wang dresses. (They have Kindred in them, but I'm sure the clothes are ultimately more useful to society.)

Past them are two black Kindred-they seem to get darker and darker while we get paler and paler. One is a stranger to me, old when he got Embraced: the deep lines of his face make it look like the bark of an ancient oak. Yet his hair is still perfectly black, swirling around his skull like a corona. He's talking to a woman who is tall, slender and absolutely bald. She's wearing a mannish tuxedo tailored for her slim curves. I've seen her before, but rarely, and never this close. She has marks on her scalp, the imprint of a spider and its web. They can't be tattoos, because you can't tattoo white, but they aren't scars either; they're not raised. The eyes she turns on me are the skim-milk color of cataracts, but she follows me as I walk. The language they speak is alien in my ears. Bella's group is larger, an eclectic mix. About a quarter of them are in rubber-club gear (one of the men has carried it to the point that he's got on a no-mouth gimp mask), another quarter are in more mainstream "buy me a drink and fuck me" dance clothing, and maybe ten percent are women in really formal regalia-like tiaras and opera gloves. The remainder are dressed in jeans and flannel, maybe accessorized with a stocking cap—somewhere on the continuum from "shabby chic" to "got a quarter, pal?"

"Good evening," I say. I'm in one of my best dresses, black silk and lace. I should fit in, but when they turn to me I can almost *feel* them ostracizing me. I mean, they're all commingled, the grungiest talking easily to the most dazzlingly bedecked. Their eyes flick to Bella, who smiles widely.

"Persephone! So good to see you!"

"Thank you." There's a pause. "What do you think of the set dressing?" I ask, gesturing at the looming banners.

"Appropriate for the occasion," she says.

"Pretty blatant with the 'Lancea Sanctum vs. the Prince' motif, don't you think? Solomon's probably furious at whoever put it up."

Bella raises an eyebrow. "It was Solomon who won the right to decorate this month."

Everyone except Bella's group keeps talking. Her friends are silent. Like they're waiting.

Screw this.

I wish I could just shrug, turn and walk away without a word. I believe the British call it "cutting them dead." But Bella's too important. I need to get out gracefully.

"If you'll excuse me..."

"Must you go?"

"I do, I have to have a word with..." I cast my eyes around the room. Tobias has his back to me, Raphael looks as lost as I do but no way am I getting *his* stink of loser sweat on me. Loki can't bail me out, I can't be seen running to my sire...

"Norris," I finally say.

Bella blinks and her eyebrows go up. I think it's genuine. She opens her mouth, then shuts it again, then says, "Okay."

Her followers start muttering, even before I walk away. What have I gotten myself into?

I find Norris down towards the front, at the side, talking to Miriam. When they see me coming, they clam up. I don't like it that I have that effect on people.

"Persephone!" says Norris in that horrible, grating voice. "How are you this evening?"

"Well, thank you."

Suddenly, Miriam is gone and I didn't even see her leave. How'd she do that?

"Now, do I understand correctly that you were a lawyer?" "I still am a lawyer."

"Of course, of course." He chuckles. "As far as anyone knows, you're still 'alive,' yes?" He actually makes airquotes for *alive*. "I just ask because, heh, before I became an undying blood sorcerer, I was a jurist myself."

146 a hunger like fire

"Is that so?"

"Mmmyes. I like to joke that it was not such a very big adjustment. Heeh heeh."

"You know how many lawyer jokes there are?"

"Oh yes, everyone loves the jokes..."

"No, it's... I'm actually *telling* a joke." God, it's like pulling teeth. Get it together, Persephone! "Do you know how many lawyer jokes there are?"

"Oh, a riddle?" He thinks for a moment. "There are... two." In unison we say, "The rest are all true stories."

There's a little gap in which we should laugh. We don't. At that moment, the gong clangs. Maxwell is about to enter.

Norris' hand is on my arm. "Would you care to sit with me?" he asks. "I'm up at the front."

He's an elder. Can I refuse?

The command to rise is superfluous. Everyone's already standing, as if it's a rock concert. Garret enters looking unusually somber, dressed in a tuxedo with a red sash, and *medals*. He looks like an ambassador at a funeral, with a black drape on his top hat. Behind him walks the Prince, clad tonight in a timeless tuxedo, complete with tails, black gloves, studs and a black cravat. Except for his race, he'd fit in at any high society burial of the last hundred years.

Even those of us in the front are shoulder to shoulder. Norris has seated himself far to the right. I'm between him and the broad, brooding presence of elder Rowen.

"As many of you know," Garret declaims, "Tonight is a solemn occasion. Two months previous, Elysium was defiled by an act of violence. Though the shedding of blood is in our nature, Elysium has always been holy ground to all Kindred, a place where one can speak in safety. This protection extends to the lowliest of outcasts, and the punishment reaches to the most prominent of elders."

I wonder how Raphael feels about that formulation.

"In accordance with the rules of Elysium and the laws of the Prince, a punishment has been decreed. Now we carry it out, in your view, so that all of our Kindred may know the justice of this court is stern and constant."

As he speaks those words, Solomon comes forward.

He emerges from the same arch Maxwell used. (I wonder what the two of them talked about backstage?) He's stripped to the waist and the relief map of scars on his torso must be visible even up at the top, in the cheap blood section. He walks with his head held high, not like a shamefaced prisoner. Justine Lasky is two steps behind him. She's probably supposed to look like his judge, but she looks like his handmaid.

Behind her, on a little rolling platform, sits a brazier of white-hot coals. Someone I don't know—not mortal, but strangely unfazed by the flames (vampires know each other on sight now, thanks to the Predator's Taint)—is pushing it, and when it rolls to a stop he produces a small bellows and starts pumping it up. I can hear people shifting away behind me and I have to sit on my hands to keep from moving back myself. Inside me I feel every muscle tensing to run, but I won't give in to the fear. I won't be that little girl at the movie theater who cowers when the hunters come on in *Bambi*. The elders around me sit still. I will be like them.

Garret, with a bow, accepts the sword from Maxwell and shoves it down deep in the coals. They leave it there to heat up. I'm sure a blowtorch would be faster, but so much less *dramatic*. There's probably some crusty old handbook of Kindred lore that describes the proper way to beat someone with a hot sword.

Justine produces a pair of handcuffs, and Solomon says, "Those won't be necessary."

She takes a half-step back, but then Maxwell speaks.

"Put them on, Solomon."

There's a tone to his voice that doesn't fit. Everything to this point has been Grand Guignol, stagy, overblown. But the Prince sounds like a man who's just fed up with

148 a hunger like fire

this shit. He sounds like he's not playing along. Like he's not playing at all.

Solomon looks over at him and for a moment—just a moment, the first moment ever—I see him look uncertain. But he rallies.

"Fine."

Justine puts the cuffs on Solomon's wrists. He raises his hands by his face, looks at them, adjusts them so that they're tighter... and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he snaps them. I'm close enough that I can see the center link go spinning up into the air, and I hear it plop into the water behind him for some porpoise-trainer to find.

Maxwell is now on his feet. He didn't jump up, there's no anger-he just stood. He looks resigned.

"These can't stop me *now*," Solomon says, jingling his new bracelets. "What good would they do if I lose myself?"

Prince Maxwell shakes his head. "You really do have lessons to learn about proper formalities. Don't you?"

"Isn't that what this is all about?"

The two of them are usually so chummy, but not now. There's a low mutter throughout the hall, punctuated by voices pressed into urgent hisses, words spoken with unintended shrillness. I've heard a lot of muttering at Elysium, but for the first time ever there is no voice, not a single one, with a tone of irony or sarcasm. This is serious and everyone knows.

Maxwell holds out his hands for thick gloves, puts them on and draws the burning sword.

"Kneel."

Solomon does.

"One!" the Prince says.

I should be enjoying this, but I can't help but wince as the first blow lands.

Solomon's expression, however, does not change. "Two!"

The second blow is harder. It whistles through the air and Bishop Birch's body shudders with impact, but he doesn't flinch. His hands lie open on his knees, calm and still.

"Three."

Maxwell's voice is low this time, slow, and this blow is more like a caress, a slow stroke along a rib, and I realize that with the others there was little chance for the sword to really burn. This time, though, I hear flesh sizzle. I'm close enough to smell it.

Solomon's hands quake, but his face remains unchanged.

"Four!"

Another hard blow. He's hitting each time with the flat of the blade, and this time he sends it right into the side of Solomon's head. Solomon can't stay upright and he falls. A snarl creases his face... and then disappears, like wrinkles in a sheet when the bed is getting made. Calmly, steadily, he pushes himself upright for more punishment.

Maxwell makes him wait. He goes to the brazier, puts in the blade and stokes it himself.

"Five! Six! Seven!"

The strikes come in blistering succession, falling on shoulders, back and then the soles of Solomon's bare feet. Birch's nostrils are wide like a mad dog. His eyes squeeze shut and then pop open, his hands curl but don't quite clench into fists...

And Maxwell pauses.

He takes a step to the right and to the left, examining the kneeling form before him.

"Hm..." he mutters. His face is thoughtful.

Solomon is sweating. Vampires sweat blood.

"Yes... Eight."

I never dreamed Maxwell had this in him.

It's another slow and gentle touch, but this time it's with the tip, it's in Solomon's *ear*. No one deserves this. I hear the hubbub behind as Kindred stumble to their feet and flee this scene, gripped by the fear of fire and more, the fear of the Prince.

(And me? I don't know if I want to flee or if I want to run up and grab the sword from my sire's hands. I don't know if I'm nauseated or envious, the conflicting alien

150 a hunger like fire

urges so strong that I'm frozen, the little bit inside that went to law school and grew up in a nice town is suspended between monstrous fear and savage bloodlust...)

Still Solomon does not move away. His face is contorted and blood steams as it runs down his chest. The Prince follows the drip line with the tip and makes a slow, hot, excruciatingly thin cut down the side of Solomon's neck.

(How can he do it? How can he stay still for this? I *know* what the red fear is like, I know what must be screaming through his veins but he stays there, motion-less, just taking it.)

"Nine."

This time he cuts with the edge. This time the crowd is silent.

He swings it in a rapid sweep, skipping down the knobs of Solomon's spine, slicing off coins of flesh at each bone. Solomon rears upright, mouth open and fists clenched...

But he does not scream, damn him!

Instead, he opens his eyes and looks right at me. He holds my gaze, makes sure I see him seeing me. His face is utterly inscrutable and that makes it worse than any spoken threat or menacing grimace.

Then, slowly—and Maxwell is waiting, he makes no move to interfere—Solomon turns the same gaze on Justine. I see her eyes widen, and when he sees the same, he turns his face to the crowd. Is he looking at all of them? Or has he picked out Raphael?

Suddenly, Maxwell seems bored.

"Ten," he says, and swats Solomon lightly on the ass with the cooling weapon. Without even looking he tosses it to Garret. "Clean this," he says, then turns and leaves without a backwards glance.

The muttering begins at once. Solomon remains where he is for the moment.

"Would you come with me, please?" Norris once more has his hand on my arm. It's his left hand. He has a manicure, and a wedding band on the index finger. I let him draw me away, all the time thinking of Bella's advice to never go off with him alone.

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A life-sized model of a blue whale hangs in space over the aquarium cafeteria, but Norris leads me above it to the somewhat ritzier restaurant. It's closed, dark, but he opens the door with his own key. No Kindred are here, of course. What use would they have for a place where humans eat?

He takes an upended chair from a two-seat table and rights it for me, then repeats the action for himself. But he makes no move to produce light. We are looking at each other from what light spills in from the city.

"You know what I like about you, Persephone? I like that I feel no inclination to like you."

It takes me a moment to figure that one out.

"Bella told me that you don't... care to have your feelings manipulated."

"Heeh, yes. That was..." He pauses, sucking his teeth. "Bella," he says next. "You are wise to cultivate her. But I think you've gotten as close as you're going to without embracing her little coven."

"Maybe I'll convert, then."

"The Circle is not to be joined lightly. And they would know if you were less than fervent in your faith. They have ways. Besides, they would threaten your already-damaged credibility."

"What do you mean?"

He sits across from me and steeples his fingers. The nails on his right hand are all gone. They must have been pulled out while he was still breathing.

"You are the childe of the Prince. You have sworn oaths to him and to his way," he says. "Yet are a known Carthian sympathizer and are seen consorting with notorious unbound."

"Seen by whom?"

"Someone discreet, of course. Have no fear." His eyes twinkle. "Your friend Loki doesn't know. Yet."

152 a hunger like fire

Jesus.

"So what do *you* want?"

"What have I always wanted? I want information. That is my position. I am the Prince's nerve center."

"And you always need new eyes and ears."

He simpers an affirmative. "The renegades," he says. "Bruise Miner."

"Who is his sire?"

"Don't you know?"

"Obviously, if I did, I wouldn't need to ask you."

"So you *need* to ask me?"

Then everything changes. Before I have time to shout "Hey!" he grabs my wrist with both hands, contorts it painfully and pins it down on the table.

"Ahhhhh!"

"I do not enjoy banter on work matters." Up close his teeth are bleach white and his breath smells like rancid milk. "If you know, tell me now."

"No one knows!"

He lets go. I massage my wrist. I try to glare at him, but I can't, I can't get the scared look off my face. God, I'm such a weakling.

"Bruise does not know?"

"He doesn't remember anything. He was drunk."

"Hm…"

"Raphael... you know him, he's kind of their leader?" "Mr. Ladue. *Old John's* get."

Old John? Who the hell is Old John? "Raphael thinks it was someone called Anita, some Nosferatu they haven't seen since Bruise showed up."

For a moment, Norris just sits still. Computing, I guess.

"Miner doesn't know, Ladue doesn't know, but the prime suspect is this 'Anita'—another stray, I presume? who hasn't been seen since Miner emerged. Heh." He gives me a shrewd look, another bleachy smile. "One is tempted to think that Miner *is* Anita."

"What?"

"Such a sophisticated change of appearance is no easy trick," he says, "but not impossible."

"But why?"

He shrugs. "Clean slate?"

I frown. I don't want to correct him, don't want to get on his bad side, but...

"What is it, my dear?"

My dear. Like he wasn't torturing my hand just half a minute ago.

"I saw Miner's wife and daughter when they came to ID the body. They seemed pretty convinced."

"Ah?"

"Besides, if he... or she... wanted a clean slate, why would she start off by breaching the Masquerade?"

"Ah."

Another thoughtful moue. Then he laughs.

"You're right, it was a silly idea. Still. You wouldn't believe the ridiculous things that some of our Kindred have tried. For that matter, you wouldn't believe what's succeeded."

We chat for a little while longer, then return just in time to see Raphael bending down to kiss the blade of the Prince's sword. Kind of suggestive, if you ask me, but now he's in the club.

Several nights later I'm at a club, my third club of the night, and this time the blaring refrain is "Hit the red button! Hit the red button!" Daringly, this song sometimes changes it up with "C'mon, hit the red button!" or "G'wan, hit the red button!"

I scored at the last place, didn't even get the guy's digits—just got him on the hook Pushing Out during some hip-hop ode to vulgar fucking, asked him to walk me to my car, got him alone under the shadows of the train rails and bit him. I didn't bother writing down his name or getting his job or anything, even though he had a nice beard, very full but cleanly shaved at the neck so that I didn't

154 a hunger like fire

get hair in my mouth. I told him to forget the bite and go back to the club. He did it.

I'm not really hunting for more blood tonight. I'm after rarer prey: Bella.

Since it's a weeknight, it isn't too busy, but I still almost miss her. She's got her hair pulled back in a bun and is dressed in a knee-length skirt and a nondescript blouse. More importantly, her siren song isn't singing. She's just sitting.

When I come over to her, she looks pleased. Why wouldn't she?

"Persephone!"

"Bella!" I shout. "May I sit?"

"Of course, always!"

"You're looking uncharacteristically unglamorous tonight!"

"Whaat?"

("Hit the red button! G'wan, hit the red button!")

We bellow back and forth a couple times before agree-

ing to leave. Out on the street, I repeat my observation.

She smiles. "Sweet tooth."

"I'm sorry?"

"Sometimes I want a shy guy. Or gal, but straight tonight. You can't be too overpowering. I want someone who approaches the plain girl, who says hi to the wallflower."

"But how do you make them come to you?"

"That's the sport of it. I don't." She shrugs. "It's like fishing. It's calm, sedate. Not like going out with stiletto heels and speargunning some Italian Stallion through the eyeballs."

"What if no one bites the hook?"

"I'm not really hungry. If I was, I've got people to call. Don't worry about me, I've got a deep well."

"I don't doubt it."

We walk a few more steps.

"So Bella, you want to see something?"

"What?"

"Come with me."

We get in my car and talk about Raphael's induction while I drive. Sounds like I was lucky to miss his lengthy, personalized vow of fealty.

"What's this?" We're at the Larkin house.

"It's mine," I say. "I just closed on it yesterday."

"Oooh, a new haven!"

"You have no idea."

We circle around to the back. There's a garage off an alley.

"In here," I say. Inside it are five steps up to the back door.

I reach down under the last wooden stair and trip a hidden catch.

It's not like the movies where a section of wall rumbles dramatically away. Instead the steps themselves come up. They squeaked like hell the first time, and I needed some extra oomph, but yesterday I carefully oiled the old hinges. They were designed to move even after decades, like everything down here. It was designed to be a vampire's safe refuge for however long its master might sleep.

"Is this a *Guilford*?" she asks, and I can see that she's genuinely excited.

I nod.

Under the stairs, a tunnel spirals sharply down. I have to hunch over and even Bella has to duck a little. But soon we're in the cool beneath the earth, through twists and turns that sunlight can never navigate.

"Here's the vault," I say.

"Even here, outside the door... that's a pretty good place to stay."

"Yeah." I turn the dials on the steel door. It's a bank vault, and it's been heavily greased. Like the entryway, it's built to stay mobile even in the face of time.

I don't bother to hide the combination from Bella.

Inside, the steel floor has been muffled with a Persian carpet, the steel walls tastefully paneled. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, still filled with half-melted candles. (At some point, I'll have to upgrade to electric.)

A cherrywood desk occupies one corner, with an overstuffed chair and ottoman on the other. A chaise lounge occupies the wall opposite these amenities. At its head and foot there are low tables, with a number of small white statues arranged on them.

Curious, Bella picks one up. It's the figure of a woman kneeling to pray, but it's strangely lengthened, as if carved from something long and slender.

"Do you like it? They were there when I opened the chamber."

"They're ossuary art," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Carved bone, preserved against decay." She puts down the praying woman, picks up a hunchbacked man leaning on a scythe.

"I think I know who did these."

"Really?"

"He's been dead since the 1960s." She looks up. "*Re-ally* dead, I mean."

"Huh. I found a newspaper in here, and it was from 1933."

"It's a magnificent refuge," she says. Her eyes are downcast and she seems almost... shy?

"Look at this." I pull a large glass bottle from underneath the couch. "I think it's poison gas."

"Marvelous. One wonders why it was abandoned."

"No idea." I take a deep breath and square my shoul-

ders. "Bella, I'll be straight with you. I'm in bad shape." "You look fine."

"You know what I mean. No one's taking me seriously. To them, I'm just the Prince's spoiled brat."

"I'm sure no one thinks that." She's got her head turned down towards the art again.

"If it was just that, it wouldn't bother me so much, but Solomon's got it in his head that he can jerk me around any way he likes. He's messing with my feeds, he's..."

"Say no more. I can imagine what he's like when aroused, though I really don't care to." "That's what I'm *living* right now." She gives me a look.

"Okay, not 'living' but... you know what I mean! Solomon's treating me like his chew toy, and as long as he does, everyone else feels like they can piss on me too."

"Your sire..."

"I'm not going to go running to him. That might work in the short term, but I refuse to be 'daddy's little girl' for the rest of eternity."

She nods. "I have to respect that."

"It's not just me, either. I mean, Solomon's the local Lancea honcho, and I can't imagine it would hurt your cause to knock him down a peg."

"So what do we do?"

"I think we need to give him a bigger problem to worry about. Something so distracting that he won't be bothered with me. And it should be something where he doesn't know I did it."

"Do you know about Solomon's political aspirations?"

Even though my heart doesn't move any more, I would swear it skips a beat.

"No."

"He wants to be Prince," she tells me.

Just like that.

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I'm not sure how to play this—I trust Bella, but my name's dirt and I don't want to get Solomon breathing fire down her back just as she's trying to help me. Thanks to the Bishop's slander, I'm in no position to really accuse him, but if he succeeds... I don't even want to think about it.

The first thing I need to do is warn Maxwell, but I can't even get through to him. He changes phones every few months and somehow I didn't get the last number. It's not like him to forget a little detail... unless he really is losing his grip? More likely he's cutting me off as a liability. Or maybe he just *forgot*. If he's over 200 years old, some-

158 a hunger like fire

thing like a phone number could slip his mind. Maybe I'm just being paranoid.

I'm also going to need proof, which means someone's got to do some snooping. If it was a hostile takeover or City Hall graft I could probably dig it out myself, but vampire infighting isn't legislated.

I call Loki and get voicemail so, reluctantly, I dial up Raphael. The asshole is pathetically eager, promises that he'll get the word out to "his people," whoever the hell they are. He even asks if I think there's a percentage in backing him. I give him a dose of contempt to keep him cringing and tell him no, of course not.

"Where'd you hear this?" he asks.

"I have my sources."

The trump card, of course, is my new connection with Norris. I ask him to meet me at my old apartment. (I have it until the end of the month and might just keep it as a blind against Solomon and his cronies.) Unfortunately, he seems eager to meet me right away. I was hoping I could get proof, even just something circumstantial, before I went to him. But if there's any vampire in Chicago who can get proof of a thing, it's Norris.

Unfortunately, when I get there, Scott Hurst is waiting in the hall. He doesn't look good.

"Scott? Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure," he replies. He says it like he's not sure about anything, what day it is or his own name. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, of course!" I follow him through the door and, while his back is turned, I check my watch. Nuts. Norris is due any minute.

"What can I do for you, Scott?"

"I..." He sits down.

"Can I ask you a couple questions? They might sound sort of... funny."

"Sure." Christ, has Solomon gotten to him?

"The other day, when we closed on the house..." "Yeah?"

"Did I... did we stay behind after the signing?"

"Do you want something to drink? I've got..."

"Please, Linda! This is..." He breaks it off, looks away. "I got these calls. Friends, people I know who work with the police and... they were asking me about someone named Birch, and someone named Persephone."

Oh no.

"I... I think I remember making those calls, but it's... it's all cloudy. I've always had a good memory Linda and now..."

He stands up and starts pacing.

"I remember the closing, the Larkins leaving, and then, then I remember being in the car because I heard about Tom Petty coming to town on the radio and... and that was late at night. There's a *gap*, Linda, there's a hole in my memory. I don't remember you asking me to stay after but I... it's like I remember *thinking* you'd asked me and... and... did you?"

There's a knock on the door. I look through the peephole and it's Norris.

"Excuse me." I open the door halfway. "Norris, I..." "You said it was urgent?"

"It is, but I've got a kind of a... um..."

"A what?"

"I'm not alone," I whisper.

"Look," Scott says, creeping closer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... interfere or get in the way of... uh, hi." He gives a little wave, a little smile to Norris. Bleached teeth grin back.

"Good evening," Norris purrs.

"I'm Scott Hurst—Linda's real estate man," Scott says. Instantly, he sounds different. Most people in his line of work have a voice they use for people who just might buy houses someday, and I get the feeling that Scott's gone back to it on autopilot—that the part of him that's really *Scott* is hiding in a corner of his mind somewhere.

"I hope I'm not intruding."

"Can you let me have a word with Mr. Norris in private? Just for a moment?"

"Sure, no problem, I understand completely ... "

I take Norris by the sleeve and pull him through the apartment into my bedroom.

"Heeh, the boudoir on the first date, why couldn't I have had such luck while alive?"

"Look, give me a minute to get rid of him."

"Is there a problem?"

"I, uh... no, no problem."

"Look, Persephone." He reaches out to take my hand and I steel myself against flinching back. He notices and sighs.

"I'm sorry I hurt you the other night," he says, and the way he says it gives me the creeps, especially if Scott were somehow to overhear and get the wrong impression. "I'd like to make it up to you. And I'd like to show you I appreciate you helping me with my work. What's your problem with Mr. Hurst?"

"Oh I... started using... changing... his mind. You know. And it didn't work out quite right."

"Would you like me to take care of it?"

Suddenly I'm remembering Maxwell's warnings, telling me that the human mind has hidden depths, that you have to be especially careful when you twist memories or the whole thread of someone's experience can unravel...

"You can fix it?"

"Nothing simpler."

"Oh, that would be great! I just tried to make him forget some stuff last night..."

"...and now he's more suspicious than ever. Right?" "Right."

"Consider him dealt with."

There's an eagerness in his voice that makes me uneasy, and I cough a little.

"You're... you're not planning to just kill him, are you?" "Er... no?"

"Because all I want is for him to stop being suspicious."

"Of course." But now he looks disappointed.

"Why don't I handle it myself?"

"If you're sure..."

"Yeah, I really, uh, shouldn't bother you with my problems. And, you know, you're so busy. And it would be good practice for me to, you know, try and fix what I broke."

"Shall I wait here?"

I go out and try it again with Scott.

I lock gazes with him and Scott's mind is strong, but rigid. There's a disciplined structure like the framework of a skyscraper... no wonder it started to crumple when I took out a piece. So I just have to replace it with something equally strong... right?

It resists me. *He* resists me. This is no boozy Travolta: Scott doesn't want to lose his memory, so I have to force it.

"Forget that I bit your neck. You had this idea that I was using the name Persephone, but I explained to you that I'm not and proved it to your satisfaction."

"I... I..." He's sweating. Starting to shake.

"Listen to me. There is no 'Solomon Birch'—I was the victim of a practical joke and you got swept up in it. My brother did it—he played the joke on me. If anyone asks, you'll explain it. You'll be vague. These things don't matter. Stop worrying about any gaps in your memory. You will remember resetting your watch—it got set wrong somehow and that's why you were confused. There is nothing odd going on. Understand?" I give him one final twist, one final push, and his body suddenly relaxes. For a moment, I almost think he's going to collapse right there.

"There's nothing odd going on," Scott mumbles back, eyes wide and fixed on mine. "Solomon Birch and Persephone aren't important. I reset my watch. That's why I was confused."

"Good." I take him by the hand and lead him to the doorway. "Go home now and... and think of some plausible reason why you came by here. No, I forgot something at the closing, a nice pen, my Mont Blanc, and you had to stop by and drop it off."

"I stopped by to drop off your pen."

"Right." I release his mind. He blinks.

"Thanks for the pen," I tell him.

"Right. No biggie." He frowns, blinks again. "Linda, were you... were you crying? Your eyes look *really* red."

"I'm in the middle of a sad movie," I tell him.

"Right! Well, I'll just go home now."

"Thanks again."

When I close the door, I raise a hand to my cheek, just as the first tear really wells up. A blood tear. Shit. He missed it by seconds...

Seeing Scott like that... violating him... it's awful. I can't do that again. Not to him. Maybe not to anyone, maybe it's wrong... but what was the alternative? Tell him, with Norris right in the apartment? That's as much of a death sentence as getting Norris to "deal with him."

I take a deep breath (even though I don't need to breathe any more) and wipe my eyes. Take a moment. I compose myself.

Then I open the bedroom door. Norris is sitting, straight-backed and patient, on my bed.

"Solomon is planning to usurp Maxwell's throne," I tell him.

He looks at me for a moment. Then he lunges to his feet, and races across the room. I barely get out of the way before his fist slams into the wall, inches from where I stood. He goes all the way through the drywall, pulls his hand out covered with plaster, turns to me...

... and suddenly starts to laugh.

"What?"

"Oh Persephone, you made me so angry."

"What? What did I do?"

"Do? It's not what you did, dear pet, but what you *are*, what you are *being*."

I edge away. He raises his hand, white-dusted and nailless, and shakes his head.

"You're being a fool, dear. You're being a waste of time."

"I'm *not*! Dammit, Solomon is plotting against Maxwell!" "Do you have proof?"

"Since when have you needed proof?"

He laughs again. "A fair objection." He sinks back on the bed, more relaxed this time. "Oh heavens... you believe it, don't you? That's what makes it so amusing."

"Why don't you? What makes it'so implausible?"

"I've known Solomon for... mm, fifty years now. That's what makes it implausible."

"I heard it from Bella!"

"Oh, *Bella*." He laughs again and stands. "Sorry about your wall, but oh my! So angry. I really should have more patience with little things." He tilts his head. "You didn't tell anyone *else* this ridiculous theory, did you?"

"I... no. You're the first."

"Uh huh. See that you don't start. I mean, I *suppose* that you could waste your time shadowing the prominent and powerful Bishop of Chicago seeking proof for an unlikely charge that came from an absurd source... did Bella even tell you *how* she learned this? Regardless, you could do that, you could go find your law school notes on elementary evidentiary procedure, *or*, as an alternative, instead of wasting anyone's time with this, you could find Miner's sire and make yourself useful to me, the Prince, and everyone else."

He sweeps out of the bedroom and towards the exit.

## <del>>+ +++ +< +</del>

When I was ten and my brother Andrew was twelve, he laughed at me for mispronouncing "dubious," which I'd read in a Sherlock Holmes story. I got so mad that I threw a threering binder at him, hitting him right in the eye with the corner.

To his credit, Andrew treated me a little more respectfully after that. I think maybe Dad sat him down and had a talk.

Now, here I am, undying and empowered and fucking "Mistress of the Night" or whatever, but I'm *still* getting treated like a malapropism-spewing ten-year-old! Are these elders going to bully and sneer and snicker at me *forever*? Is this what being undead *really* means? Christ, it's like first year law school, only the assholes who steal the references you need out of the library never graduate!

No wonder Dubiard says we're damned.

I try to be calm and logical, try to remember that from Norris' perspective I *am* hopelessly young and naïve, but it's *still* infuriating.

Unless...

Unless Norris is in on it with Solomon?

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The final insult comes when I get back to my lair, my precious Guilford. It's an hour before dawn but I'm already exhausted. I go down the secret passage and the door to the vault has been welded shut—big thick seams, like you see on airplane wings.

That's not the worst.

There's a note stuck on the door with a refrigerator magnet. (To be specific, it's a Count Chocula magnet. Cute.) It reads:

## Persephone,

I know you won't believe me, but I really am sorry about this. It was a good bolt-hole, except for one thing: No emergency exit. I'm pretty sure that's why its previous tenant moved out.

You'll be mad at me, which I understand, but you should realize we could have just as easily sealed it up with you inside. I talked them out of it. I told them you'd come around.

Please come around, Persephone. You're bright and willful, and those are terrible flaws for creatures like us. You need to realize how weak and helpless you are. Only then can you turn to the Crone. Only then will you realize the real source of all strength.

When you truly understand, I think you will thank me. I think you might even be grateful to Solomon.

Believe it or not, much love, -Bella

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I spend the day in the hall outside the vault. She was right. Even that's a pretty good hole.

The next night, I get a call from one of the partners at my old firm. Scott Hurst has killed himself.



I got a busy night scheduled, but first and foremost I need to see my best gal Judy. I can't see her that often, and she can't see me at all, but I've got a new suit and that matters. Seeing Judy matters.

It's a swell set of clothes, hand-tailored with reams and reams of rich, thick velvet, midnight blue, drapes and swags, full seated and reet-pleated.

I'm in my hole, my Guilford maze under Old John's burnt-out whorehouse. Old John had it good, but all good things come to pass. That's why I choose to be bad, and now his king-sized bed is a democracy of roaches and centipedes. No matter how tightly I seal the doors, they find me, love up to my skin while I sleep out the day. A shower just knocks 'em back. A few decades ago I started trying bug spray, flea collars, pesticides. They were coming on the market for home use, but for me they're home useless.

Still, you gotta make an effort. It matters.

I shower off the lice and maggots, dry myself on a Turkish towel from a sealed dry-cleaning bag, put on my new glad rags and head upstairs. The car's parked in a rental garage a couple blocks from the lair, but I don't need the car. It's a nice night, cold and clear, and Judy's place is within walking distance.

No one sees me, of course. I push them back, make them far away like a fairytale from long ago. I pull the wool over their eyes and drift down the street like a bad dream, and they step out of my way even with their backs turned. They bump into each other for no reason other than they don't want to touch what they can't see and won't hear. Maybe they smell me.

I watch for collisions and pick a few pockets. Chump change. Credit cards for Sharif. Never anything good.

I get to Judy's floor and there she lies. A homely old husk if ever I've seen one, but still beautiful in my sight. I close the door and it's like breathing out, it's like the color coming on in *The Wizard of Oz*, I become immediate. I let myself show.

"Judy. Hey sweets, how you feeling?"

She rolls her head towards me, all ashy wrinkles. She was so upset when her hair started to gray. Even more so when it started falling out.

Her eyes are glassy with cataracts, so no more mirrorgazing for her. But now I don't have to hide myself, either. Some silver lining, huh?

"I brought you chockies," I say. "Your favorite, Frango mints."

Her mouth moves a little. I put the box on her bedside table, peel one and put it to her lips. She works her mouth like a little baby, pulling in the treat.

I have the fingers of a corpse, rotted, riddled, decayed. Fingernails like driftwood. Already my blue velvet is stained, darkened from underneath. Already it starts to fall apart. By dawn, it will look like I was buried in it ten years ago.

I hear the door. I don't even think about vanishing. I just disappear.

The orderly is a short guy, stocky, red-faced. Comes in, doesn't say a word, just checks the chart, checks Judy with about the same interest, sighs. Gives her a bedsore roll and I could snap his fucking neck, the way he treats her. Like he's moving a piece of furniture, like he's lifting a box of toasters. No gentleness.

And damn me blind if he doesn't try one of her Frango chocolates, and then pocket the whole box. Okay chump, that's it.

He's got a badge, so I've got his name. Cal Cromwell. Out to the front desk and there's a schedule. He's just started his shift and already he's acting impatient. Wouldn't want to see him by... four o'clock? Yeah, that's the graveyard shift. They probably don't want this meatball around when any visitors might run into him.

See you later, Cal.

I go get the car and call Doctor Deal from the payphone in the garage. His real last name is "Diehl," and he really is a doctor—a chiropractor or an orthodontist or some other crazy specialty they didn't have back when I was still getting sick. He's crooked as a spring, a Cicero realestate baron and what does *that* tell you? I had to buy Old John's burned-down pile off him, but he gave me a good deal. No one else was in the market for a hooker's graveyard.

Doctor Deal doesn't know about what I am; he just knows a little about what I do. I got a message from him yesterday, so I'm calling back. Could be some scratch in it and, after all, that's my name.

"Dealie-o," I say. "It's me. What's shakin'?"

"Hey, Scratch. We can talk, right?"

"I'm talking. You're talking."

"Yeah, but I mean... you know. You know what I mean?" "I'm on a payphone."

"And I'm on a land line. Okay. Great. So, you know those robbing gangs? The ones with their own trucks, dress up like movers, show up and completely clean out someone's house?"

"Uh huh."

"You know 'em?"

"Yeah."

"No, I mean, you know a gang like that? 'Cause I need one."

"Oh! Gotcha. Yeah, I might know some people like that. What do you need 'em for?"

"Aw, it's the IRS, Christ, they're bleeding me dry. They say I owe 'em all these back taxes and, shit, I can't pay. My money's tied up, you know? I can't get it out for them."

168 a hunger like fire



Yeah, it's tied up in Columbian marching powder, tied up with psycho Afghani opium warlords. Not the kind of business partners who let you pull out before you've satisfied them. "And why would you hand it over to the Feds anyhow?"

"Exactly! I mean, what is this? Communism? So they're going to take my house, repossess all my stuff, it's like another divorce, practically. So before that can happen..."

"You'd like my friends to steal all your stuff."

"Well, somebody's going to."

"And in return for making the job a milk run, you get, what, ten percent when they fence it?"

"Ten percent? What're you, their agent? Nah, I'm thinking it's a flat fee, they take my stuff and store it and then, when the heat dies down, I get it all back. You know. Like, I replace my losses."

"Heavily insured losses, I bet."

"It's not really betting if it's a sure thing, huh?"

"Yeah. So you take the insurance money, pay off the feds, then get your stuff back over the next couple years or so."

"That's the general idea."

"I can make that happen." We dicker for another fifteen minutes over just how much my referral fee is, and then we hang up.

The sun's barely down and I've got money in hand and bacon in the pan. Not too shabby.



The next stop is a storage locker. It used to belong to a fanger called Anita. Actually, I suppose it still does.

Anita, like me, is Nosferatu. Like me, she found a comfortable niche in the criminal underworld. Like me, she was a clever, weaselly scumbag—and mean when cornered.

A boa constrictor. What kind of sick individual gives vampire blood to a goddamn apex predator? That was how Anita got the drop on me, figuratively. It was her freakin' snake (whose name, I gather, was "Sweetie Pie") that got the drop on me literally.

Anita and I had what you might call a disagreement.

I've been around Chicago a long time. I know about Capone and O'Banion and all the various gunsel mackerel snappers between and after 'em. I know the challenges inherent in dealing with the gangland mentality. Anita, however, thought that the Mafia was a hotshot train to fat city, and she was gonna be engineer. Told me, when we were still in the talking phase, that the new mob was soft, garbage collection and stag flicks, no backbone, not like the old days. I told her it didn't take people with guns much time to grow a backbone when they find out vampires are real, but Anita had talked herself out of people seeing the downside of our condition.

It takes a lot of brains to be that stupid, I guess. And a weird kind of genius to think about juicing up a boa constrictor.

I couldn't scare the damn snake, I couldn't outfight it and it was crushing me into peanut butter. So I did the only thing I had left: I made it think I wasn't there.

You'd think it would realize it could still *feel* me, but no, it let go. I guess it's only got a brain the size of my big toe, probably not much room in there for anything other than "prey" and "not-prey." Anything you can't see is "not-prey," I presume. It let me loose, I got a butcher knife from Anita's kitchen and I chopped its evil pointy head off.

Getting to the kitchen took me about fifteen minutes, because I had to heal an awful lot of broke bones and pulped guts before I could get up and walk.

It was a clusterfuck, but I found Anita eventually. And I staked her.

Now, I gotta figure out what to do with her.

I open the storage locker door, one of those garagedoor type ones. Inside there are boxes and crates and a stacked up set of lawn furniture. There's a giant screen TV all wrapped up in plastic—that's to keep burglars from poking around in the big footlocker at the back. That's where Anita slept, and that's where I dumped her after putting the wood through her back.

## THE DANSE MACABRE BEGINS

Persephone Moore has it all—looks, brains, ambition, and an unquenchable hunger for the blood of the living. But with every night she feels herself grow a little colder, a little more monstrous. How long before her hunger consumes her whole?
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