



Slayer: The Covenhouse
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SLAYER:

IMMORTAL

by

Karen Koehler

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BlackDeathBooks

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All of his life, Brett Edelman had wanted to be immortal. He doubted it was an old wish, or a very unusual one. Didn't everyone want to live forever, in one state or another? Immortal in memory, immortal in words, immortal in deeds, good or bad. Yes, he was sure everyone, from king to peasant, from rich man to poor, wanted that. Straight or gay, black or white, dreamer or fatalist--everyone wanted that. Why would they not?

Immortal.

He thought about that word and what it mean even as he lay in Heaven, the loft area of Club Bauhaus, and coupled with Nadine. Nadine, a sweet little bitch, was his usual. Oh he would take others on occasion, but seldom with the ferocity he had for Nadine. Nadine was his. Well, not *his*, really. Nadine belonged to the Master of the Hive, Jean Paul. They all did. If he so much as breathed a word of possession Nadine's way or suggested in any way that she leave Club Bauhaus, Jean Paul would have a fit and demand he leave and never return. Really, Jean Paul, being what he was, might do worse than that.

He had seen Jean Paul do things that didn't even deserve imagining. He knew, downstairs, there was a Members Only room that catered to Jean Paul and his thralls' more eclectic tastes. No human had ever been there. It was reputed to be the most spectacular place in the world by those in the inner circle. A place where pain transcended pleasure and became something altogether different. Paradise. Hell. Brett didn't care which. At times like this, draped over the raven-haired, emerald-eyed beastly beauty Nadine as he was, the only thought he had was what it would be like to be a Member of Jean Paul's clan.

To be Immortal.

Holding that thought, Brett nearly swooned in the throes of the bloodletting. That Nadine had deigned to feed on him tonight only elevated the thrill. Nothing he had ever tried with anyone else had ever had the power of Nadine's bloody kisses. Softly he felt her delicate breath on his neck, felt the astonishing terror of being held captive to a natural predator--the pain and relief of surrender to a power greater than his own, so rare in this city where he was all but king in his own way--and the wet, exquisite demand of her mouth, her endless mouth. Endless hunger.

Endless...immortal.

He had never understood what the word swoon meant until he darkened the doorway of Club Bauhaus. He had done so about a year ago, when he and a small group of businessmen decided to see what went down in the seediest and most popular club in the Lower East Side. They had sat at round tacky-topped tables and watched the human girls dance and throw off the silk handkerchiefs that passed for clothing. The guys he was with had catcalled as they sank an endless stream of greenbacks into bras and g-strings and called themselves daring. Even now, if he

turned his head just right, he could catch a glimpse through the one-way glass wall of the loft at the naïve newcomers to the club sitting down there, their eyes glued to the redhead on the runway, thinking they were the most adventurous fools who ever lived. But he didn't want to turn his head.

Later he would suffer a tingling all-over headache from the blood loss. That and a nagging, exciting sensation of shame. What they did, after all, they did on a divan in the middle of a crimson pit of smoke and lust and there was nothing but a few feet and the haze of the cigarette and clove smoke and incense of Heaven to separating them from the next couple. But for now it was beautiful. It felt beautiful. There was something scientific about it, he'd learned. Something about the high that results from the loss of blood and the odd alchemy of the vampire's venom mingling with his human blood. But for now, he found he couldn't care less. For now it was only about the feeling. Only about being immortal.

Was this what it was like? Was this feeling what they felt every day of their unending lives, these beautiful beings? Many times he had wanted to ask such questions of Nadine. What she was and what it meant to her. But in the end he always held off, afraid of the truth. Afraid that if he knew too much about them--about the vampires of Club Bauhaus--he would spoil the fantasy. And this was his fantasy. His world away from the world of work and wife and kids and everything that pulled him down into dull, oppressive normality.

This was...immortal. And for the few short hours a week that Brett Edelman got to savor it, he called it his hidden treasure.

2

"I'll make you immortal," the guy was saying.

Irena Sullivan snubbed out her cigarette and checked the clock on the wall of the employees' lounge. Ten to nine. She had some time. She looked around. The lounge was a little makeshift room at the back of JP's club. There was a couple of folding tables, a vending machine, and a coffee pot she depended on for her life. Jean Paul didn't usually allow anyone in the back of the club, but somehow or other, this fool who thought he was a producer had gotten through.

And he was starting to piss her off.

Her face and hands felt hot and throbbing but she told herself to have control.

Control.

The guy was wearing some kind of outdated John Travolta-inspired lounge lizard suit frumped up for the new millennium. His badly dyed blonde hair was blow-dried and his shirt was open almost to his navel where a legion of chains jangled amidst what looked like black wolf hair growing wild on his chest. He smelled like a French whorehouse, as if he'd been swimming in cologne. But Irena could still smell the cheapness on him underneath it all. The pimp cheapness. She'd grown up around

these types, after all. Vampires, every last one. Looking to prey on her kind of desperation.

“Serious acting?” Irena asked, eyebrows raised as she used her teeth to pluck loose a new cigarette from the pack.

Mr. Pimp lit it for her with a monogrammed silver lighter.

“That’s all I employ, sweetness. Serious actresses.”

But Irena knew serious acting for strippers usually involved arriving on a set at three in the morning only to be tied down in various unlikely angles for hours at a time while your muscles grew sore and the set director pumped you full of heroine to keep you going through a fourteen-hour filming shift. That was what Bess said, anyway, Irena’s best friend in all the world. Bess had worked in films on the side, usually in the winter months when dancing didn’t pay as well as it should. Not that JP didn’t pay his girls well, but some of them had expensive habits and the tips they got nightly helped in a big way. And when those tips weren’t there, well...

The thought of money depressed Irena. How did that old joke go? Honey, our money problems are over. We’re out of money. She sucked back on the cigarette, kicking herself mentally because she smoked too much and drank too much and she was using up too much of their money of late. If she kept this up, she wouldn’t be able to afford school clothes for Lilly next fall. She had to be sensible. And she did try, she really did, but somehow or other, things always seemed to get away from her.

Lack of Control.

It had always been like that for her, for as long as she could remember. Even as a little girl she could never eat or drink enough, not that she had ever suffered the consequences of such indulgences. If she had, this guy would not even be considering her for the job. But the more she indulged the more she needed. She was a skeleton, and even JP had begun to eye her suspiciously, probably thinking her habits were sucking the life out of her. But no matter how much she consumed in food, wine, beer, drugs, or tobacco, none of it made any change in her. And nothing made her happy. She’d tried it all at one point or another, and sometimes all at once, but there seemed no point to it anymore; the drugs had no affect on her. The liquor was wasted. The tobacco only made her crave.

Lately, though, things had gotten worse. She didn’t sleep and nothing tasted good. Probably because of the damned cigarettes. She had to stop the fucking smoking, she knew, watching the cigarette burn fitfully between her fingers. The caffeine was driving her crazy. The lack of money was making her crazier than ever.

“Well, you think about it,” Mr. Pimp said. “Young beautiful thing like yourself shouldn’t be wasting your time on a stage working for peanuts.” He reached out to touch her hair and Irena instinctively drew back. Mr. Pimp lowered his hand and instead plucked a card out of his breast pocket, setting all that metal against his chest to jingling life. “Auditions are on Tuesday,” he said coolly, dropping the card to the table.

She looked at the name in gold gilding on the card: Chad Bellerophone, Producer.

“Phoenix?”

Irena turned to glance at the doorway behind her. Erebus was there with his arms crossed. He looked imposing, as always. Like always, like a mahogany version of Mr. Clean. The analogy had once made her giggle. Now it just annoyed her. Erebus was always watching her. Like she wasn’t just employed by JP but belonged to him, like the sick girls upstairs, the ones who did the fetish work for him. But she tried to be civilized anyway. “Yeah? What’s up?”

“Who’s this?” Erebus nodded at Bellerophone.

Irena put her hand over the card. “Just someone who wanted to talk to me.”

“I’m a fan of the Phoenix’s,” Bellerophone said, standing. “I wanted to know if she was free Tuesday.”

“She works Tuesday nights,” Erebus said in a barely audible bass growl.

“Phoenix.” Bellerophone turned to glance at her, his eyes glittering. “I like that.” And then he took her hand and kissed it.

Irena resisted an urge to wipe her hand off on her dance outfit. Mr. Bellerophone looked her up and down, as if measuring her. The outfit was one of JP’s best, a silk blue kimono carved overtop her breasts and cut into banners around her legs. Yet despite the fact that she took most of it off almost every single night, she had a sudden, chilling need to cover herself up in front of him. She pressed her knees together. And though she hated herself, her hand swept the card into her lap. She needed the money bad and she didn’t see herself making that much this winter onstage. The club was too close to the Twin Tower disaster area and getting people in was a job. Getting them to stay even harder.

No tippers meant no tips.

And then what would she and Lilly do? It wasn’t like there were a lot of jobs available...and really, she liked dancing. The music. The dance that made her feel alive when she felt like shit mostly all the time. She couldn’t see herself scrubbing floors or waiting tables. Anyway, all those types of jobs were done during the day when her astigmatism was at its worse.

Bellerophone pushed open the Exit door, letting in the lights, smoke and stink of the city. “It was nice to meet you...Phoenix. Maybe I’ll see you again.”

Irena didn’t know what to say.

A moment later Bess flew through the stage door past her, her flash dancer’s outfit glittering like Broadway all over her. Bess Girimonte always looked pantherish to Irena, dark and lithe, teeth white as light. Even her name purred. Bess slapped her on the shoulder before making a beeline for the coffee pot. “Girl...them boys are sweatin’ tonight!” She poured herself a mugful, then watched Mr. Bellerophone exit stage left. “What you doing in here talkin’ to that hustler?”

Irena looked toward the heavy pneumatic door swinging closed.

Mr. Bellerophone was gone. And so was Erebus, when she thought to check behind her, which meant she could talk freely with Bess.

“He’s got a job.”

Bess flopped down into the seat opposite Irena, yet she still somehow managed to make it look graceful. She lit up a long slender cigar and grinned, her teeth shining like pearls in her dark face. “He gonna make you a star?”

“He says.” Irena sipped her coffee, then put more cream and sugar into it and stirred it around. “What do they make you do?”

“No sex. You make him realize that early on and everything will be fine.”

“No sex. Riiight. No sex in a porn film.”

Bess grinned and said, “It’s all fakin’ it anyway. You ever hustle on the streets, you’d know.” Bess struck a dramatic pose and went into her Scarlett O’Hara routine, the same one she used in all her films, complete with a fake accent from the South where she’d never been: “Oh Lance...oh dahling...Ah do believe you give me the vapors.” Then she did a mock swoon across the table.

Irena laughed into her coffee, making it sputter up her nose.

Bess picked herself up, grinning from ear to ear. “You be a star, girl. You go and do it. You got the looks.”

“No, I don’t.”

“All that red hair? Those brown eyes? You calling me a liar?”

“Liar.”

“Shush! You go do it. Get your pretty ass outta this hole. Why not?”

Irena thought about that a moment. “Because JP pays well.”

Bess waved it away. “Fuck JP. I hate the way he looks your way anyway.”

“What way?”

“That...look. Like he’s sizing you up for Heaven. What if he asks you to work upstairs? What you gonna do? Say no?”

Irena thought about that. What, indeed? True, JP was infamous for his kindness to strays, but he also worked his girls like a pimp. You didn’t tell him no. You just said Yes or I quit. No was not an option. And if JP asked Irena to work Heaven, what could she say? She wasn’t like that. She couldn’t sell herself. She couldn’t do the things those sick girls did.

She would have to quit.

She stared hard at her bitten nails, wondering what she would say. And where she would go if she lost this job.

“Count Dracula was out there tonight,” Bess said, choosing a good time to change the subject. She sipped her coffee. “He must be looking for you.”

“He is not!” Irena said with a smirk.

“The way he looks at you? Shit.” Bess grinned.

The changed of subject let her mind wander off the more pressing problems. She had to smile. No one knew who “Count Dracula” really was. He just seemed to be someone who showed up at the club from time to time. But he didn’t act like a

regular. He was quiet and acted like somebody looking for someone. Maybe he was a cop. He had a kind of cop look about him, though he didn't resemble one in any way--tall and lank, but not at all in an unattractive way, with long black rock-musician hair and a long black leather coat. Like some character out of a moody black-and-white movie. Maybe he was with a band. Irena didn't know. No one did. The only thing for certain was that whenever she made eye contact with him while dancing he always chose to hold it in his dour, unblinking way. As if he were trying to communicate with her. Trying to tell her something.

"Damn, girl," said Bess, staring at the clock, "you gonna be late for your own funeral."

Late?

"Oh my God! When was my set?" Irena asked more to herself than to anyone in the room. She checked the wall clock again and saw she was already ten minutes into her first set. Oh Jesus God...JP was going to have a fit and might even fire her! And then she really would need Mr. Pimp's job!

Gulping down her coffee and smashing out her cigarette, Irena rushed for the door. The sight and odor of the club hit her like a wall, making her feel like she was running through molasses. The booze, the smoke, the spilt blood from upstairs...there was some nights she actually felt her head spin from it all, like she was drunk on nothing. And so she was not entirely certain if it was real or if she was just hazing out when JP grabbed her arm from out of nowhere. He was just suddenly there with her backstage, hurting her.

Irena stopped dead in her tracks.

"Ma cher," Jean Paul said, his voice almost like a purr across her skin. Like a tongue. At least, that was what it might feel like to others. For her it was like an electrical charge. She hated his voice. She hated being anywhere near him.

"I'm sorry," Irena stammered. "I lost track of time."

JP looked unconcerned. "You look unwell."

"I'm fine," Irena said. Her hand suddenly felt very hot.

JP seemed to notice too. He let her go, flicked a lock of hair out of her eyes, and put his left hand over his right where it rested atop his antique walking stick. He was dapper as always in a pristine white suit and a tie as red as a crimson tongue. As always, he reminded Irena more of a priest than a pimp. He smiled, but it was a smile full of promise. Not like a priest's at all. "We need to talk. After."

Irena nodded, too frightened suddenly to say or do anything but watch his storm-grey eyes watch her back. He looked like a man until you looked more closely at him. Then he looked like a man-eating tiger watching you from between the tall grass, waiting to strike.

"I better go," Irena said, her voice a mere whisper. She felt her heart running like a clock in her chest.

"Oui." JP's hand lifted and he touched her face with the back of his hand. Fingernails like glass whisked across her cheek. "But...after."

“After?”

“I believe it is time you understood many things.”

Irena did not know what that meant, did not know what things there were to understand, but she also had no interest suddenly in finding out. She stepped backwards, unwilling to take her eyes off of him. Then, when she was a safe distance away, she turned and rushed headlong through the heavy purple stage curtain and let the music and the dance have her and drive some of the eternal frustration out of her soul.

3

Few things were as immortal as revenge. Words came and went. People died, buildings burned. Maybe love survived some of the daily apocalypse of life, but revenge was certain to pull itself out of the rubble time and again.

Alek Knight thought about that as Dante swung at his head with his rapier. He ducked and met the fall of the sword with the Double Serpent Katana. The two blades clashed, shearing their edges in a spectacular shower of blue sparks that briefly alighted the abandoned warehouse on the docks. The place had once been an import hostel, a place where goods were housed for the bigger New York corporations. Later it had been turned into a machine shop. Even now, the husks of the burned out machines that once dominated the space lurked in corners like steel and iron carcasses, half seen reminders of dreams that had gone up in smoke and fire.

Alek fell against one of those machines as he skirted another fall of Dante's blade. The sword, a magnificent piece of Madrid steel, hacked into the machine mount behind him and held a moment. Alek used that moment to kick Dante in the stomach, sending the slayer crashing to the floor some twenty feet away. Unharmd, Dante climbed to his feet and gave Alek a sweeping bow, rapier and all, as if he were on a stage in London rather than here in this filthy bowel of a building dueling to his death.

Alek held his ground and waited, the katana resting lightly against the outside of his thigh.

Dante smiled, his eyes never leaving Alek for a moment. He was small and fragile-looking, like a young boy. Although vampires stopped aging at the age of 33, he looked closer to 23. His exact age was unknown. Even his clothing gave away no hint since the cut of them was current and in vogue with most of the Underground crowd: a chain-mail jerkin, leather pants, tall boots, a spiked submission collar, and a long leather greatcoat armored with stainless steel plates the size of teacup saucers. His hair was cut in a long ragged blonde David Bowie-inspired mane that framed eyes that were either grey or green, depending on his mood. Right now they were green like a sky before a violent storm breaks. “Bravo, old son!” Dante said. “I had

heard stories, but I never imagined the little whelp from all those years ago would become this stout warrior of today. Such a shame the Coven lost you, Slayer.”

Alek smiled a smile that was not. “You might say *I* lost *it*.”

“Nearly destroyed it, in fact,” Dante said. His voice was rich and came from deep inside his chest, like the voices some of the best actors emanated. It was a voice that his body didn’t seem capable of producing somehow.

“You flatter me,” Alek said and raised the sword so it rested against the underside of his sword arm, ready for Dante’s next attack.

He wished things had not turned out this way. He had gone hunting this Saturday night, but it was not supposed to be for slayers. No, he had wanted information on a series of unsolved crimes that had been plaguing the piers the last few nights. Working girls butchered like cattle. Brutal. Inhuman. Naturally the first thing he thought of was Jean Paul’s hive of vampires. Not Jean Paul himself--the Parisian was too smart for that--but his thralls were another matter completely. And if one of them wanted to hunt in his territory then it was important that they prepare to be hunted in return.

And then he had spotted Dante crouched over the desecrated corpse of a girl and everything fell together. Every murder. Every question. Dante...

The slayer had something in his hand--a glimmer of stainless steel--and then that thing was *in* Alek’s sword arm and a rush of fire encompassed his shoulder and arm and nearly made him lose his grip on the sword. The plates on his coat, Alek thought and tottered out of the way of Dante’s next attack. The shurikens embedded themselves in the wall behind Alek as he dodged them. Unfortunately, he was clumsy in avoiding them and crashed shoulder-first into a wall, sending the shuriken embedded in his shoulder that much further in. A spike of agony turned his vision red around the edges but Alek forced it back and turned, instinctively using a wing of his leather greatcoat to deflect two more shurikens.

Dante giggled like an insane little boy.

Alek tore the shuriken from his shoulder and threw it aside. Almost at once, another got him in the side under his open coat, nearly doubling him over with the searing, eye-watering pain. And then he did indeed double over, and ignoring the screaming agony in his ribs, rolled to the floor, swinging his sword. It grazed Dante’s ankles and tripped him up.

But there--it was enough. Dante, lost in his concentration on the target, was never aware of what Alek was doing until it was too late. He went down, twisting onto his stomach to protect his throat from Alek’s blade.

Alek grabbed the ankle of his boot.

“Bloody hell!” Dante kicked him in the face. Alek took the impact and twisted Dante’s ankle until it crackled and Dante grunted and flipped back over from the impact on his leg.

“Bloody, yes,” Alek growled and towed the slayer toward him and his blade. “Hell, yes...”

Dante reached for another plate on his coat while simultaneously trying to kick out with his good leg.

Alek applied pressure on Dante's broken foot and Dante screamed.

4

Brett Edelman paid Erebus at the back of the club, in the nook that looked more like an accountant's office than the rear side of a fetish club. Then again, what did he expect? This was a business Jean Paul ran. In fact, Erebus was an accountant--or had been, among other things. Wouldn't know it to look at the seven-foot vampire weighing in at more than three hundred feral pounds. Right now, Erebus wore a dark suit jacket over the concert T-shirt he usually wore when he was on the door. He also wore glasses. Who would have thought that, either?

Erebus gave him back change for the wad of hundred dollar bills Brett paid him with. Jean Paul ran a high-end circus, but because Brett was a regular he was privy to certain benefits and discounts. Hell, maybe one day Jean Paul would offer a Club Bauhaus credit card. Well, maybe not. After all, this was a private expense that never showed up on any records, which was why Brett always paid in cash and made a point of never taking a receipt of any kind. Nadine's kisses were his receipt. That and the tapes he always had made. Speaking of which...

"I need to pick up my camera," Brett said as he slipped his wallet back into his pants pockets, which was a feat in and of itself. He always arrived with a hard-on and left with one too. It was as if he couldn't be sated while he was here. He wouldn't feel his normal self until he was halfway home and the stink of the club was out of his clothes.

Erebus took the ballpoint pen out of his impressive canines. "Gotta talk to Sticks if you brought your own."

"Yeah, I've been bringing my own. Where's he? Still in Heaven?"

Erebus gave him a slightly baleful look. "Sure. Where else?"

Brett nodded and waited. Heaven was a place no humans were allowed to go unless you were scheduled to be there. Right now, Erebus was giving him the typical down-the-nose look, as if he was thinking of what a piece of worthless shit the human race really was. Then again, he gave that look to almost everyone. Pushing away from the terminal, he hit an intercom and said something into it, but it was in a language Brett had never learned.

A few minutes later Sticks, another vampire lackey of Jean Paul's, stepped into the accounting office holding a camcorder no larger than the palm of his hand, which was exceedingly small considering Sticks's size and seeming frailness. He had not gotten the name by accident.

With the camera safely tucked away inside his suit, Brett Edelman made his way out to the Porsche parked in the lot of the Italian restaurant across the street from

Club Bauhaus. Before he started the motor he checked himself in the rearview mirror. He didn't look especially pale and Nadine was always certain to keep the bites where his wife wouldn't notice them. Not that he was necessarily afraid of Laura finding out--Laura knew better than to question him about anything--but he didn't need his coworkers and clients seeing them. He also had to be careful around Wes these days. His nosy firstborn was just old enough to start wondering where his father went after work and if he couldn't find out and blackmail his old man for enough money for the blow he favored. Catching Wes stealing money from his safe last week had been enough. Brett didn't keep anything of consequence at home anymore. If it was important and private--like his tapes--he kept them at the office.

So his office was his first stop. He would stash this tape with the others before he even dared step foot into his house up in the Pocono Mountains where life was as normal and dull as Mom's apple pie. He started the car and took River Drive since it was the least likely to be clogged with evening traffic, unlike Madison or FDR. If he made good time he'd get to the office in just under half an hour, change clothes, dump the tape and camcorder and be up in the Poconos in less than three hours. Just in time to be greeted by the family St. Bernard and hear Wes and his sister coming to blows over something or other again. He sighed. The fights never amounted to much, but Brett didn't like the idea of his son hitting his sister. He didn't like the idea of any violence in his household unless it was much-needed discipline, such as in Laura's case, when she got suspicious and spoke out of line with him.

He passed a row of abandoned warehouses crouching in the night. The wharf had been home to the fireboxes for more than two decades. How he would like to raze that piece of real estate to the ground and put up a project, or maybe some row houses of the kind he remembered from growing up in San Francisco. He could dig that, yeah. In fact, if he closed this big deal with J. Stephan Paul, his biggest stabled author to date, he was sure to be able to afford that sweet piece of land. After that...well, he'd sell out the company to the smaller lingering publishing houses too stupid to give up in an industry that was on its deathbed and get his ass into the real estate racket, where the big money was. It killed him to imagine how the drunks and dustheads were wrecking the wharf as he dreamed about what it could do for him.

He almost didn't believe it and had to do a second take when he thought he saw a rain of sparks coming from the warehouse on the end, the big one that had once been a machine shop. It was by far the largest warehouse and would pull him down the most bank as a condo. He usually paid the most attention to it, which was why he noticed the sparks as he drove past it. What the hell were the refuse of society doing to his building? He told himself it was none of his goddamn business, but if it burned to the ground there might be a move for urban renewal, and then he could just as well kiss his dreams for Edelman Estates a fast goodbye.

He pulled over to the curb of the warehouse, squeezing the Porsche in between a Dumpster and the garbage spewn across the gutter, and killed the motor. He got out

of the car, his head swimming a bit from the bloodletting and his own anger. Fuck. Probably a bunch of asshole kids trying to burn the place down.

There was a broad, unpaved driveway that ran around the warehouse to the back where the loading docks were located. The driveway was, to be frank, undrivable due to the garbage and debris scattered across it. A single sodium light stood sentient over the lot, broken a long time ago. But there was a pair of security lights mounted over the front entrance and juiced from one of the lines that ran down that side of the street. It was the only light in the whole goddamn place, creating a limited pool of luminescence that Brett avoided like the plague. The last thing he needed were a bunch of pissed off speedfreaks spotting him here. Instead he stuck to the shadows and moved alongside the wall of the building until he found a basement window that wasn't boarded over. He knelt down and peered in through the dirty, cracked glass.

To his utmost surprise, two men were down there. One was small and blonde in a long leather coat. The other was very tall and slender with waist-length hair tied back in a long, shining blue-black braid. The big one looked like a Samurai warrior crossed with an 80's-style rock musician: black leather greatcoat, stainless steel greaves and gauntlets, a chain laced through his left ear, a heavy silver cross in his right. This couldn't be for real. Yet beyond a shadow of a doubt the most incredible thing about the two warriors was that both of them were going at it with swords.

As he watched, the big one got the blonde down on the floor and began twisting his ankle. The blonde sputtered and growled like an angry beast. Brett saw the flash of the blonde's silvery-green eyes, saw his fanged eyeteeth scissoring his bottom lip in the throes of pain, and had no doubt in his mind what he was witnessing. Not a couple of punks. Not human, anyway. This was what he'd heard of only in rumor at the club. This was what happened when two vampires clashed. Or rather, when two slayers clashed. It didn't happen often, but sometimes there was a conflict, and according to Jean Paul's thralls, it was spectacular.

Brett watched, spellbound, as the blonde twisted unnaturally, a feat no human could possibly perform, not with bones in their bodies, anyway. The action was purely serpentine. The blonde snapped at the big slayer's right arm, taking a savage bite out of it. The big slayer reflexively let go of the blonde slayer's ankle, and almost immediately, the blonde was up, his sword drawn and trained on the wounded slayer. The big dark one retaliated by sweeping to his feet and meeting the blonde slayer's blade head on.

The two swords clashed and kicked up a shock of new sparks. The sound of the two blades grating set Brett's teeth on edge. Jesus, the swords even *sounded* sharp. Brett reached under his jacket and found the camcorder. He was getting a hard-on just watching it. He palmed the camera and simultaneously hit the Record button. Jesus, the things you saw in New York. And crouched there before the window, oblivious to all else, Brett aimed the camera at the basement of the warehouse.

“Someone to see you, girlfriend.”

Irena turned away from her locker while simultaneously slipping her sweater over her head, making one smooth motion of it as she caught a glimpse of a little blonde figure dashing toward her across the room. She pulled the sweater down and dropped down to meet Lilly’s joyous assault.

“Reena...surprise!” Lilly locked her arms around Irena’s neck and gave her a squeeze.

“Hey, Tiger Lilly...what are you doing here?”

“Came to walk you home.”

Irena held the little girl at arm’s length and gave her an icy look. Lilly was four and a half, small for her age, small and bony despite how much Irena fed her, which was a lot, and Irena hated the idea of Lilly walking even the four blocks down to the club on her own. The little girl looked like the wind could blow her away. But it wasn’t the wind Irena was afraid of. This city ate kids. It ate everyone. “You know I told you never, never, *never* to leave the apartment.”

“I was bored.”

Irena played with Lilly’s hair, running her fingers through the fragile cornsilk, brushing wayward strands out of Lilly’s big periwinkle eyes. “I still don’t want you out. Bad people are out tonight. You’re making me mad.”

And she meant it. There was that maniac the police were calling the Ladykiller. Bess said she even knew one of the prostitutes the bastard had carved up, which meant the attacks were getting close to home. As much as she loved having Lilly accompany her home, she couldn’t risk her little Lilly being the Ladykiller’s next job.

Lilly nodded solemnly. “I’m sorry, Reena. Don’t be mad.”

“Just don’t do it again. Okay?”

“Kay.”

Irena stood up and took her bag out of the locker, then slammed the door.

“JP talk to you?” Bess asked from the doorway, her voice a conspiratorial rumble.

“News travels fast,” Irena said, slinging the strap of the bag over her shoulder.

Bess stopped her at the door, her hand on her shoulder. This was important. “What did he say?” she asked, keeping her voice steady so Lilly wouldn’t think it was something too important.

Irena shrugged and watched one of the dancers from the next shift skirt past them. “I believe his exact words were, ‘It is time you learned many things.’”

“He call you ‘ma cher?’”

“He always calls me that.”

“He’s setting you up, girl.”

Irena felt the heat rise in her face. "I don't give a fuck. I'm quitting this gig anyway."

Bess smiled. "Going to be a star?"

Lilly looked up wonderingly and took Irena's hand. "You're going to be in the movies?"

"Yep." She looked at Lilly, then smiled at Bess. "Of a sort."

"You go girl! Just make certain Don-Fucking-Giovanni doesn't put the moves on you, okay?"

He's not going to fucking *touch* me, Irena thought. But instead of saying that she only nodded. Raising her voice would only make Lilly nervous. "Wish me luck?"

Bess grinned and crossed the fingers of both hands. "I already have."

But Irena didn't have the luck just yet, she soon realized. Outside it had begun to snow. Snow in September, she thought. How odd. She cuddled down into her leather jacket and held Lilly close as they crossed onto Broadway where the lights were the brightest. It wasn't cold, but it felt weird. Like Halloween. She wondered why she would think such a thought, and then dismissed it as the distant prattle of her overworked body and her overtired brain. Just ahead, the rearing, neo-gothic complex they lived in slipped out from behind another, taller, office building.

"It's cold," Lilly complained.

She was wearing next to nothing, her denim jumpsuit and a blouse, that was all. Irena slipped her jacket off her shoulders and put it around Lilly. "That will teach you not to come to the club. JP doesn't like it when you're there, anyway."

"JP is scary."

I know, Irena thought.

They crossed the street and found themselves out of the lights of Broadway. It was colder and much darker here. The dark did not really frighten Irena, but she hated the idea of crossing it with Lilly. Their footsteps always sounded so lonely on the broken asphalt. And when there was leaves or snow on the ground, their footsteps still sounded lonely.

Except tonight they weren't sounding lonely at all. Behind them, maybe at a hundred feet, Irena could hear someone following them. She could feel someone. When she was alone, she sometimes chose a number of back alleys as a shortcut home, climbing a fence or even a fire escape so she was up high and the drunks and freaks left her alone, but tonight she veered away from such dark niches, cutting across a big derelict rail yard instead. The moon was full, affording them some light, however lurid. She glanced up at it and saw that despite its filmy brilliance there was blood on the moon tonight. She hurried along. A pool of light greeted them ahead, making the snow-wet street just ahead shine like spilt gold. It was only a few blocks, after all. Horns blared as cars and cabbies rolled by just beyond the rail yard fence.

But the footsteps behind them persisted.

Pulling on Lilly's arm, Irena quickened her steps until she emerged from the rail yard and onto the avenue. Maybe she ought to go back to the club, she thought, except she was halfway home already.

She wasn't afraid. Not yet.

"Phoenix."

Irena stopped at the curb and turned to look behind her, getting mad now. With the light spilling all over the two of them, no one in their right mind would think to try something.

It was the guy. The moviemaker. Chad Bellerophone.

"You fuck. Why are you following me?" she cried back, watching his form divide from the darkness.

He was smoking, looking casual. He put his silver cigarette lighter away and pulled out something else. Something small and unusual, yet she instantly recognized it. A taser.

"Oh my god...you're him," she blurted out before she had a moment to think. She felt her entire being clench up, and she wanted nothing more than to wrap herself tight around Lilly and fly away, but right now she couldn't take her eyes off of the man standing in front of her.

"Him?" said the man.

"The jerk cutting up women."

"I don't cut up women." He threw his cigarette down. He was finished playing games.

"Everyone saw us together, goddamn you!" Irena said. She could easily outrun any man, but with Lilly there was an added concern. Lilly could not keep up. And she wasn't about to abandon her, no way. So if Bellerophone tried anything she would fight and scratch at him the way she did in alleys and on the street and in the subway. She would fight him and win. She always won. "You don't think you'll get caught?"

"By whom?" He grinned, showing saber teeth. His eyes glimmered like diamonds in the dark. How had she mistaken him for Bellerophone? she wondered distantly. He looked nothing like the man. He--it--was tall and rangy, white-faced, dressed in a black leather jacket that smelled like musty copper and decay. Death. "Who will catch me? Your human police? Phoenix?"

This wasn't real. He wasn't human, she was certain of that. But what he was was unimaginable. What was he? She looked at his fanged eyeteeth, his night-shining eyes. A ghoul? Some kind of freaky cannibal? A vampire? No. Vampires were stories. Stupid myths. Movies. Vampires didn't carry tasers.

The vampire sighed. "Everyone saw me in Jean Paul's club." One dark eyebrow lifted. "Well...everyone saw Chad Bellerophone, in any event."

Irena shook her head. "What the fuck are you?"

"And after this the police will never find me. They will be looking for Bellerophone."

He seemed to be talking to himself.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Irena turned around and sought a car, any car. To her astonishment, one pulled to the curb. She couldn't imagine her luck. The window rolled down.

“Help me...?” she asked.

But only another pair of diamond eyes glittered up at her.

No!

The taser went into her back. Irena turned, scarcely able to believe the vampire had moved so quickly. The current raced through her blood like fire, numbing her lower half and making the rest of her spasm in unbelievable agony. Irena tried to scream but her voice caught as the pavement came up to smack her in the cheek. She felt her teeth break on the pavement. Voices. She was drifting. She could feel...what? She was being dragged into the car by the vampires. She was being kidnapped. She tried to move, she was conscious, damnit, but she couldn't react. She was frozen. She tried to see, but her body would not respond. The last thing she wondered before blessed oblivion overcame her was where her Lilly had gone.

6

So they were both wounded now.

Dante had a badly broken ankle. Alek had a massive, bloody wound in his arm just above his right gauntlet where Dante had sank his carnivorous eyeteeth into the flesh and shredded it. For Alek, the wounds from the shurikens had begun to mend, but the bite wound would take hours to do heal. The anticolagents in Dante's spit would make certain of that. The same was true of Dante. Almost any kind of wound with a steel weapon would have begun to heal on him by now, but a broken bone like that was not so quick to heal. The ankle was nearly snapped in half. Dante would have to feed heavily and quite soon if he had any prayer of mending it.

Dante leaned heavily against a machine mount as he fenced. His strokes were less sure, more erratic. It was difficult to fence with only one leg. Still, the same problem plagued Alek. His sword arm was stiff from Dante's venomous bite and basically useless. He had switched to his left, but he wasn't good with it. Their blades now clanked together with more power and less skill. Alek came in close and Dante reached for another shuriken. Alek retreated automatically and Dante lifted his hand off the plate.

“You are really starting to bugger me,” Dante growled.

“Yield and you walk away,” Alek answered, circling around the slayer.

“Fuck you.” Dante changed his mind and tossed the shuriken at him anyway.

This time Alek was prepared for it. Ducking under the flying shuriken, Alek rolled to the floor on his back and twisted around in mid-motion, bringing the

katana up in one great thrust. The knife-edge of the blade entered Dante through the stomach and pinned him like a bug to the wall behind him.

Dante dropped his rapier. His eyes fell on Alek. Hate. Venom. Like an immortal disease, Dante's mind and body were wracked with it. Yet he grinned.

"Well done, Slayer," he whispered around his agony. "But you had better...finish me off..."

Alek pulled the sword loose from Dante's body, dragging with it plaster dust from the wall but no blood--the sword always drank up the blood--and rolled to his feet.

Dante's eyes flashed as his hand went to grasp the hole in his gut. He knew the stories. He knew the Slayer killed in defense. Never cold blood. Never that. He knew they would again have their time, and soon. A rematch of sorts.

It was only unfortunate the stories about the Slayer were so goddamn wrong.

Dante's eyes registered surprise less than a split second before Alek butterflied his sword and with it cleaved Dante's head from his shoulders.

7

Jesus Christ.

It wasn't like in the movies. It wasn't like that at all. The defeated slayer didn't die some spectacular death, bursting into dust or fire or something. In fact, it was almost an anticlimax. The big slayer performed some deft motion with the katana that even Brett with all his concentration could not follow, and suddenly Brett found himself staring at the blonde slayer slumped against the machine mount, sans head. The blackened blood of the thing was everywhere, on the walls, on the floor, on the other slayer. It wasn't neat and perfect, a good death. Quite the opposite. Blood still pumped and drizzled out of the stump of the dead slayer's neck, sizzling when it touched the floor or some substance cooler than itself. And then, almost like an afterthought, the hands clenched and the body stiffened and the dead slayer crumpled to the floor, emptying out the remainder of his blood onto the thirsty, cracked concrete. And then the body lay still and Brett knew it was over.

The big slayer with the long black hair and coat had won. Were that him down there, Brett knew he would be retching his goddamn guts out right about now. Jesus, but he could *smell* the death of the thing even through the closed window, a cool and evil smell that sent his flesh crawling. But instead of retching, the slayer found a wall to lean against and worked on catching his breath. Sheathing his sword somewhere under his coat, the slayer started to explore the wound in his arm. It looked damp and painful and infected, even from what Brett could see of it.

Then it occurred to Brett, the way the slayer was turned, all the thing had to do was glance up and he would catch clear sight of Brett and his camera. What the hell

was he thinking? Almost frantic now as the paralysis of what he had witnessed let him go, Brett hit the stop button on the camcorder.

The slayer looked up. He had heard the switch of the button through the glass.

Jesus God.

He was staring right at the goddamn thing. Right into its eyes. It had brown eyes flecked with crimson. Nothing had eyes like that. Goddamn *nothing*. It looked right back at him, right into his eyes as if seeking something, and Brett started to shudder inside and out so badly he nearly lost his hold on the camera. No, nothing had eyes like that. Nothing at all. Dead eyes, they were. The eyes of a natural-born killer used to preying on Brett's kind. Used to preying on whatever crossed its path.

Move, goddamnit! Brett ordered himself. Fucking move it!

The thing blinked balefully up at him, and then Brett was moving. Tearing his eyes off the thing--he didn't want to, what if it followed? How could he watch it and get away at the same time?--he bolted for the Porsche at the end of the drive. It was behind him, Brett knew it was. Right there, breathing down his neck quite literally, and when it caught him it would be the sword Brett would know, that sword and those eyes. He would know them both all too intimately.

Brett was whimpering by the time he reached the Porsche. Thank God he had left the driver's side door open. He didn't think he could manage the keys. Pulling at the door so that he nearly ripped it off the car, he threw himself inside and shut it with the sound of a vault being slammed.

Silence.

Brett was trembling so badly he could barely grasp the steering wheel, yet grab it he did. He fumbled with the keys for a full half minute before he got the motor running, all the while not looking through the driver's side window, certain that a katana was going to come crashing through the glass at any moment and shiv him through like a side of beef. He could see it happening.

Brett wasted no time. Grinding the gears and stomping on the gas, Brett took off like the proverbial bat out of hell. He didn't dare glance in the rearview mirror until he was off the unpaved drive and onto River Drive again. Then he looked.

The slayer was there, standing on the rocky drive, limned in a narrow halo of illumination from the security lights. His coat burned as if with a blue flame and his hair shone crimson in the weird lighting. And there was something else, something flashing under his very long coat--the stainless steel of his sword, Brett supposed. The slayer had not gone very far from the warehouse but it was watching him with a kind of animal-like curiosity, head tilted slightly, burning white eyes narrowed.

Brett wondered two things at once: he wondered what the expression on its face meant and he wondered if he would see it again, someday, someday soon.

The horror was immortal. A sheet over her face blocked her vision and the temperature around her numbed her to the bone. Cold. She was so fucking cold. She was hardly breathing so there was nothing really to smell, but she knew, despite the utter deprivation of her senses, that she was in a morgue. She had heard its cold echoes on arriving, had felt herself slide into a drawer and heard the door close like a seal. Now, as she lay listening, she heard the hum of the refrigeration units around her while she dreamt nightmares and wished the police had not found her body. Maybe then she might have awoke in a dark alley somewhere and been able to crawl back to life, or death. Better that than to have been found by the idiot cops and the bastard coroners and now lie here in this hated purgatory of stainless steel and pray to God that someone found her before she froze to death. She prayed Lilly would not have to see her like this.

Lilly...

But before she could even complete the thought, another took its place. There might be an autopsy. She felt her entire body contract with fear. Was this what death was like? And what would it feel like, to lie naked in running water on cold steel as she was sliced from neck to groin and her body turned inside out?

Her heart thrummed with fear. Her heart! But that meant she could not truly be dead. But it hurt, her heart. Every beat was its own separate agony, sending out ripples of fresh new clenching pain throughout her body. She felt every inch of herself. Every bone and every vein and artery. She was a network of neverending throbbing pain.

She cried but it was a tearless weeping. She had no tears. She had nothing. She could not even move, her body too leaden and broken around her. Who had done this to her, who...?

The cold...the waves of pain...

She made a strangled sound in her throat, but it did not come from her mouth. Instead it seemed to hiss from her very throat, a wretched noise she associated with people who smoked through tracheotomies. Jesus. Her body...what had become of it? She didn't know, couldn't remember, but whatever it was, she was still alive, and lying in a morgue locker and dying again, this time of the pain and cold. Could she attract attention by pounding on the door?

She tried, but she could not move. Could she hang on until they took her out for the autopsy? She tried to stay alert, thinking that by doing so she could fight off hypothermia, but she must have dozed because the motion of the drawer sliding out startled her. She had not heard the door open. Light blinded her as the sheet came off.

"Would you look at that?" came a scouring male voice, musing to itself. "Fucking goddamn shame. I could do a girl like you, sweetheart."

Someone touched her face, then ran an invading hand over her breasts and then between her legs. The violation triggered something, a memory, but too dark and vague for her to hang onto for very long. A fleeting image...eyes like diamonds...a pain splitting catty-corner through her womb and another at her throat...being absorbed...being food for some beast...and then pressure built inside her and all she had was the pain and the resulting anger, the immortal rage...rage...rage...

"Do me," she said, hoarse.

Silence.

She had said that. She had. Now that she had someone's attention, she opened her eyes. A gasp sounded just above her, but she hardly noticed. Just above her was the most intriguing thing she had ever seen. She stared up at the morgue attendant, at the cords of blue under the hairless white skin that grew just under his ear. Except they were not properly blue. They were stained by a pattern of shifting crimson. All of him was, as if she had stared into the sun too long. The brilliant webwork bobbed as the man swallowed in surprise and tried to back away. Heat. She felt his heat, tasted it, saw it, and his heat seemed to animate her.

Her body acted on its own, with no mitigation whatsoever on her part. She sat up and put her arms around his shoulders, her face in his throat. The skin was tough but her teeth seared it open on the second bite. And then her mind went all glittering darkness as his enormous red heat filled her body and brought the pain to a boiling point at her throat and groin and every violated place before washing it all away in a sore red flood. Her body was pulling the threads of heat from the morgue attendant's body, stealing it. Her body was taking it in steaming mouthfuls that exploded inside of her mouth and throat and stomach like spasms, each one making her hands clench that much tighter around the attendant's neck. Finally, the bones crackled under the pressure of her fingers and she feared she was doing something irreparable to him and let him go.

He dropped to the floor, grey and lifeless like an empty bag, the gaping red maw of a wound where his throat had once been.

She trembled, but not in shock. She touched her mouth where the warmth remained. It had spilt down her throat and over her breasts. Her hair was clotted with it. But even as she watched the crimson stains grew fainter and less distinct as her skin absorbed it like the sun evaporating a spill.

Absorbing it...why? Because it had needed it?

Because it--she--was not human?

The panic returned, and with it only one prerogative--no matter that she may or may not be human any longer, no matter the crime she had just committed, she most certainly could not stay here. She had to go. Had to. There was a dead man on the floor, a man she had killed. A man she had feasted on like the beast in her memory had feasted on her. And if she were convicted of his murder she would lose Lilly. She knew she would. She would lose everything.

Lilly. Where was Lilly?

She slipped off the gurney and nearly fell to the floor. She had enough strength to stand but her head ached with a migraine and the lights made her eyes simmer and burn. Despite the strength and the warmth in her stomach, she still felt sluggish, lost and old. For a moment she looked around the refrigeration unit and wondered what to do. The body. She had to get away from the body. She had to think straight. Pulling the sheet about her for warmth, she went to the swinging door and pushed it open. The rest of the morgue was silent, but she could hear voices from the opposite end of the corridor, where the autopsy room was located. She started down the corridor, then veered off toward another door that read EMPLOYEES ONLY. Something told her there were clothes there to stave off the chill. Orderly whites. She found some in a size much too large for her but wrapped herself in them nonetheless. There were no shoes so she padded barefoot from the room and kept moving down the corridor until she saw a crash bar to the outside. The voices began to call down the hall, to call for Phil. Phil the dead morgue attendant.

Phil, whom she had killed.

As if in a daze, Irena pushed against the door and out into the world.

Time passed. And she walked within and without it. She was so cold. She found a ratty old coat in a Dumpster somewhere along the way and wrapped that around her as well. Now, looking like one of the faceless legion of the homeless, no one questioned her or even looked her way. She continued down the streets, picking them seemingly at random until she realized where she was going.

She climbed the wooden steps of the project to the fifth floor and found the apartment door by running her hands along the numbers. Her eyes would not focus. She was so tired she thought she might fall asleep where she stood. But in time she found the right door. Locked.

"Lilly," she called softly, staring at the peeling layers of paint on the door.

No one answered.

"Lilly." Louder.

Nothing.

Because Lilly is not here.

No! The thought terrified her. She has to be here!

Does she? The police and the child welfare people probably have her. You did such a wonderful job of protecting her, Irena.

She narrowed her eyes at that snide inner voice. Yet she could not refute its logic.

She went back downstairs and made her way out and down the street to the club, the filthy coat pulled up tight around her and smelling of only God knew what. Evidently it was enough to keep any more attackers away because she made it to the club without incident and wove through the door and across the floor as if in a haze, the music a muted roar in her ears, the stink of blood and sex making her feel doped beyond reason. She sat down heavily at a table.

It was early evening, almost near the shift-change, and she didn't know any of the girls. But if she stayed here long enough she was sure to be spotted by Erebus or Jean Paul. She asked herself if that was what she wanted. Maybe not, but she certainly could use Bess right now.

Could use Bess for what? So she could tell her best friend how she had murdered a man and torn his throat out? What would Bess tell her to do? Turn herself into the police, more than likely. She shivered. The panic was back and more powerful than ever. Something was wrong with her, and she could deny it no longer.

She wasn't human anymore. She was something else.

She was like Mr. Bellerophone. He had done something to her, and she thought she knew what it was. It was impossible, utterly impossible, yet she could think of no other rational explanation.

Unless she was dreaming and none of this was real.

Her stomach cramped up as if someone had laid a fist into it, proving that all of this was very real indeed. Too real. Irena doubled over and felt the sweat bead up on her face and hands. This couldn't be happening. Things like this just didn't happen in the real world. Things like this didn't exist. She forced herself back into her seat and made herself take a long, deep breath. There was one way to find out, she thought, and ran her tongue over her teeth. But whether her teeth felt sharper in her mouth or not she could not tell; they ached too badly for further inspection. Her body ached. Her being ached. And it must have showed, because one of the waitresses she didn't know came by, looking concerned.

"You want something, honey?"

She asked for water, except the taste of it when it came was like chlorine and burned her tongue. She needed something, but she doubted what she needed was on the menu. Then she thought of other places in the city that catered to weird fetishes, places like Dracula's Den up in the Harlem Heights. But that was so far. And anyway, just because a place had an odd name didn't mean anything. The whole idea was ludicrous. Except for the fact that it gave her a better idea. She hoped.

She called the waitress back over. "Looking for someone," she whispered. "Tall. Black waist-length hair. Leather longcoat. Have you seen him?"

The waitress cracked her gum. "I seen him, but not tonight."

Another cramp made Irena's eyes mist over. "You know where he lives?"

"No." The waitress paused. "I think a few working girls know, though. Velvet does. He beat the shit out of her pimp a few days ago."

"Velvet...where...?"

"Can't help you, sweetheart. I don't know the beat anymore."

The waitress, looking uncomfortable, found some new customers to wait on.

Irena rose from the table, steadied herself, and moved toward the door. It was better she had some air anyway. The cramped smoggy air of the club was choking her, making her sick. Outside, the snowy night air tasted wonderful. Velvet. She

knew where some of the girls hooked outside the club; many of them took their coffee breaks in the café across the street from Club Bauhaus.

She asked a few girls if they knew where Velvet was. A few had no idea, but a few more did. Thank God for the network, Irena thought as she forced herself to keep moving down the avenue. Velvet was working Times Square these days, one girl said. Irena found her easily enough after that--she was mahogany dark and trussed up in a red velvet cat suit. Velvet laughed when Irena asked her about the man, the one they called Count Dracula.

“No, hon. They wrong. That’s the Slayer.”

“Slayer?” For some reason the word jammed the raw edge of fear deep within her.

Velvet nodded and smiled cheekily. “He’s the patron saint of whores. Ain’t a pimp or hustler on the East Side who’ll mess with us girls, not unless they want a three way with his pig sticker.” Velvet went on to say he lived in the old Victorian house on Castle Hill. She also had a lot of other nice things to say about him but the house was the important thing. After Irena knew where it was, she thanked Velvet and headed toward Castle Hill.

The house wasn’t hard to find. There were few on the street like it: a three-story crouching stone Victorian surrounded by a tall wrought iron cemetery fence. There were carvings on the gate like serpents. Again, Irena felt a stab of fear.

What if he wasn’t what she thought--hoped--he was? Or worse yet, what is he was and he saw her as an enemy, someone invading his territory? She would be delivering herself right into his hands.

But she couldn’t let herself believe that. He might be like her, but that didn’t necessarily mean he was a killer like her. He had helped Velvet on at least one occasion, and according to the other hookers, he kept an eye on the working girls in this whole area. An evil man wouldn’t have been bothered.

Satisfied that she had convinced herself, Irena let herself through the gate and walked down the stone path to the grand porch. There was no doorbell, nothing to indicate habitation at all. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she used the doorknocker fashioned like a coiled dragon to rap four times on the door. She had to believe this would work. He--the Slayer--was the only one she knew of who might be like her. He might be able to give her answers. At least then she wouldn’t be alone with this.

She didn’t have long to wait. No lights came on in the house--she supposed he didn’t need them--but after a minute or so the doorknob turned and the door opened.

The Slayer. It was him. She knew it. The tall lanky height, the eyes like opals, the hair like black velvet. The face as beautiful and seamless as that of a white angel, a saint. Like JP he was a priest, but one done all in warm silk black, not white. Then she thought it odd that she should see him so clearly in such a dark corridor. It was the last thought she had before she collapsed into his arms from exhaustion.

“...dhampiri,” said J. Stephan Paul, and it was the only word Brett Edelman had heard in the last half an hour.

Crushing out his third cigarette of the meal, Brett looked up and said, “What was that?”

Jay shrugged in his seat. He was a ponderous man so the seat--a wooden captain’s chair that complimented the nautical setting of the Overlook Café but hemmed Jay in like a barn animal--squealed in response. John Stephan Paul--or Jay to his friends--was in his mid-fifties, overweight and out of shape like a lot of people who made their living on their asses in front of a computer. He had scant brown hair that he liked to comb sideways over his pink scalp and a pink face and chubby little pink hands. He always reminded Brett of what would happen if they decided to make a male counterpart to Miss Piggy in the Jim Henson Workshop. Jay’s suits were always pressed and he never looked unkempt, yet Brett had the nagging suspicion that at home, behind closed doors, Jay was a certified slob. Brett, of course, would never openly hint at such a suspicion.

For one thing, Jay was his biggest stabled author.

For another, Jay was the biggest fucking author in the country.

Jay smiled and made that annoying little snorting sound that passed for an embarrassed laugh in his book. Brett wanted to call him Mr. Piggy.

Mr. Piggy Bank, to be exact, which was what he was.

“You think it’s a stupid idea?” Jay asked with upraised eyebrows.

Brett waved the waiter over and pushed his coffee cup to the edge of the table. “Not at all, but try and explain it to me again, in more detail,” he said to cover his ass. Truthfully, ever since they had sat down, Brett had been off in dreamland. It wasn’t a good place to be, especially when he needed to be on his toes to cut this deal, but he couldn’t help himself. Since the incident at the warehouse last night, Brett had been unable to think about much more than the two slayers. He slept, he ate, he fucked, he cut contracts, and he thought about the two slayers dueling to the death in the bowels of a warehouse on River Drive. That had become his life now. The slayers and what they did had become an integral part of who he was. He knew they were important--he had not been shown this thing for nothing, after all, that was not how the cosmos worked--but he had yet to discover how it all fit together. He had no real fears of the surviving slayer hunting him down. Hell, the slayer couldn’t know the face of some publisher--even as big as he was--at first glance, and he had not been close enough to see Brett’s license plate, nor even the make of his car, so Brett had convinced himself there was no real danger in his newfound knowledge. Brett wasn’t afraid, not at all, not anymore. He just wished he knew how to make this knowledge work for him.

"I take that vacation I've been promising Maggie," Jay said now, and Brett made an effort to pay attention this time. "See, I have a contact in Bermuda who specializes in forging identities. While I'm there, I have him make me over. Meanwhile, you and Maggie announce to the world that J. Stephan Paul has passed on." Jay shrugged. "I make you a shitload of money on the new release--the last release--and it gives me a break from all the Baron Blood bullshit."

"Stage your own death," Brett said. It wasn't a bad idea, just full of holes. "Isn't that a little tricky?"

Paul waved it away. "Naw. My pal in Bermuda can get me a new Social Security number, tax number, everything. And I'll slide everything we make under your tax shelters. If it's one thing I've learned from twenty years of writing, it's that nothing is as hard as everyone makes it out to be. The only tricky part is, I have to stay out of site from now on while I'm working on the new series."

Brett lit up his fifth cigarette of the hour. He couldn't understand it; Baron Blood had made Jay the fortune he had today. Hell, it was the biggest erotic horror series in the fucking country. Yes, it was stupid and redundant and slathered with sex and blood, but that's what people wanted. And so far, after fifteen novels, no one looked to be losing interest. It was easy money, and Brett was getting pissed that Jay was thinking of killing off the series. It wasn't Jay's place to create art; he was a fucking author. His place was to produce units that would move on the open market. His place was to listen to his publisher before his publisher kicked his pink pig ass out of the industry. "And what's wrong with Baron Blood?"

"Christ, Brett," Jay whispered, staring down at his shiny plate. Jay even cleaned his plate like a pig. "Fifteen fucking books is enough already. I'm sick to shit of Baron Blood. I wrote it on a dare way back when. It wasn't supposed to be serious, you know."

"The audience takes it seriously, that's all that matters."

"You're telling me. The last time I went to Dragon Con there were fools there dressed like the Baron pretending to seduce everyone in sight. I mean, that kid had his dick chewed off by his idiot lover because of the fucking books. The asshole thought he *was* Baron Blood. I'm tired of the slack and the lawsuits. I ain't Socrates trying to corrupt everyone. I'm just a fucking author, for chrissakes."

As always, Jay made a big dramatic mountain out of a molehill. Yeah, some kid got mutilated by his lover because of Jay's books. Whatever. Stephan King got the same slack. Hell, so did Robert Block, way back when. It just went with the industry.

"At least this way," Jay went on, eyes downcast, "I can get serious for a change. Write something that will make a difference. Something deep. Not just sucking and fucking all the time."

Inwardly, Brett rolled his eyes. People didn't want deep. They wanted to get their rocks off. And Jay had better shape up or something would have to be done about him. Brett only wished Mr. Piggy Bank was as easy to discipline as Laura and his kids were.

Suddenly Jay brightened, the way he always did when he had an idea. "I already have notes. Maggie thinks it's really something." Jay took a deep breath, his face flushed red. "Still has vampires in it--hell, Baron Blood can even make a cameo appearance--but get this, the book--the whole fucking *series*--is gong to be about the dhampiri."

"What the hell are dhampiri?"

Jay grinned. "It's an old Balkan legend I fell across while researching the last Baron Blood book. Dhampiri are beings sired from one human woman and one vampiric father. They're immortal, sensual, yet tortured creatures. They crave blood, they crave human affection. They want to be human. And"--again that excited grin--"it's believed they made the most talented vampire hunters of all." Again, Jay shifted around his chair. "Imagine it...Baron Blood is being hunted, not by humans this time or by other vampires, but by his own goddamn *son*, a half-breed vampire hunter. I can run with the idea under a new name, a whole series about the dhampir that killed Baron Blood, his struggles to be human, his lost loves..."

"It will never work," Brett said, crushing out his cigarette and lighting a new one. "Who the hell is going to want to read about a half-breed? It won't sell. And you can't kill Baron Blood. It says so in your contract."

"Change the contract."

Brett narrowed his eyes. The bile in his throat--the sudden venomous hate he had for this fool--was enough to make the cigarette taste like shit in his mouth. "Write another Baron Blood, Jay. Don't fuck with perfection."

"I can't," Jay said petulantly. "I want to do this."

Brett sighed and crushed out the stinking coffin nail. But the thought of that term--coffin nail--made him think of vampires. Not Jay's inane kind of vampires, those fags he wrote about who ran around in outdated formal wear with cheap European accents, but the real kind. The kind he had seen killing each other a week ago. The kind that were animals in human skins. Those kinds.

And then it all came together, just like that, in one silent thunderclap, and Brett had a fully formed plan sitting in a nest in his head. The nest where all his best ideas originated. But could he do...that?

Jay looked at him hopefully, like a child begging his parent for a treat or a day off school. And Brett's hatred for the man overwhelmed him. Yeah, he could go ahead with the plan. He sure as hell could do...that.

"Okay," Brett said, continuing to crush out the coffin nail. Jay's coffin nail, he mused. "Give me a week to work out a plan on my side of things, and we'll go ahead with everything the way you planned it."

Jay brightened and turned a deeper shade of pink, if that was possible. "You won't regret it, Brett. I promise," he said. He actually rubbed his palms together like a character in one of his books.

"No," Brett responded with a smile, "I certainly won't."

When Alek opened the door to find the girl with the hair like old rusted gold standing there he thought he must be dreaming. The pounding on the door which had drawn him away from the dojo had left him wracked with the certainty that Michael had arrived and was calling a duel. Now he saw he was wrong. Wonderfully wrong.

He recognized the girl at once from the club. A dancer. Her name was...he couldn't remember her name. But he knew her. She danced with her hair down so it moved like russet leaves caught on a thick bush. Her face was white, catlike, fierce, her eyes a somber amber brown to reflect her hair. She wasn't beautiful; she was horsey, her face all derisive bones and shadow, like a young Meryl Streep. He was caught in her spell. Then the girl fell into his arms. He couldn't be certain if she was conscious, but it seemed not. He picked her up. She weighed absolutely nothing. A little thing in a ratty coat held closed by a piece of hemp, all long hair and bones and little else. He took her upstairs, took off her coat, and put her into his bed. He didn't know what else to do with her. She seemed to need looking after, at least until she gained consciousness.

And then he sat in a corner and waited.

The sun set and a hunter's moon rose.

She came around slowly, her eyes blinking open and finding him. There was something about her...that white skin, those eyes like amber glass full of shadows. Something powerful and elemental. He felt an instant attraction to her, not sexual exactly, though there was that too. It was more primal than that. It was almost an endearment. As if he knew her blood. As if he could love her. Her mouth worked, and a moment later a word emerged: "Ssslayer."

He was confused. He held himself in the shadows of the room. "Who told you that?"

"A girl. I've been...looking for you." She sat up. He had divested her of the coat before putting her to bed, but not the peculiar hospital whites she was wearing, and still she clutched his sheet to her chest as if she wore nothing at all. As if she was embarrassed. And he had seen her onstage in so much less, her body almost insectlike in its slenderness. It was a body he knew many men would not find particularly appealing, but such things did not apply to him.

Alek picked up the sword lying on the dressing table. "Really."

She nodded, looking at the sword. "Going to kill me now?"

"That depends on your motivation for finding me."

She was afraid. He smelled it on her. She had not come here to kill him, then.

"You're the Slayer," she said.

He lowered the sword, but did not put it down. Not yet. "My name is Alek. Why are you here?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were miserable. "To see you."

"So you say."

She doubled over. For a moment Alek thought she was weeping, but then he realized it was much worse than that. He put the sword down and went downstairs and retrieved the bottle of rabbit's blood he kept in the refrigerator for emergencies. Then he got a crystal goblet from the cupboard and returned to the bedroom where the girl was curled up in his bed. He uncorked the bottle and watched her entire body attune itself to the scent of the substance being poured into the crystal. When he offered her the goblet she did not hesitate but swallowed the blood down like a starving animal, then proceeded to lick out the goblet. Her tongue was grey.

He poured her another.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

The girl nodded miserably and drank down the blood. "More?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No," he said. "Any more will make you sick." He put the bottle and goblet aside and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Who are you?"

"Irena." She kept her face down, the wild unruly reams of hair hiding her expression from him.

He stroked it back. She flinched and he withdrew his hand. She looked at him, impenetrably.

As much as he didn't need this right now, the skeletal shoulders heaving with her short breaths and the constantly twitching hands pulled at him. Seduced him. "Lie back," he said gently.

She did so, though her eyes were big with fear and never left him for a moment. "Don't hurt me."

"I have no intention of hurting you, Irena."

A blood drop leaked from the corner of Irena's eye, making a rust-colored streak against her alabaster cheek. He used his thumb to wipe it away, and this time she did not flinch at all. If anything, she seemed to welcome his touch.

"Tell me about yourself."

She did. And he listened. And when she was done she looked more exhausted and older than seemed humanly possible, as if she had relived the events of the last day all over again. He thought about everything she told him. It all made sense, though he was loathed to explain it to her. At least he knew then what he was feeling. At least he knew what she was now.

"I thought maybe you could help me," she said at length.

He considered that.

"What's happened to me?" she asked.

She looked so earnest, so frightened by the changes going on in her body. He thought he could hear his own heart breaking. Stupid, but true. Wasn't he so like her at her age? But he had had instruction in the years leading up to the change. He'd

been part of the Coven then. He'd known what was about to happen to him. Amadeus had seen to that.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "This is only natural for us. You would not have killed that man had there been an alternative."

"Us." Irena's eyes brimmed. "I don't want to be vampire, Alek," she whispered.

"You're not. You're much more than that. And much less."

She looked lost. She sat up and put her arms around his neck. He was surprised but did not pull away. Her grip tightened about him and she buried her face against his shoulder. And then she did weep, all the misery pouring out of her at once in her trembling bird-boned body and heaving sobs. He held her, scarcely able to believe he still had the heart to do so. To feel this. To feel her misery pouring into him like blood into crystal. He put his face into her hair--it smelled so like the night--and waited until she had cried herself out.

Then she lay back on his pillow, swallowing tears, and simply stared up at him. The image was heartbreakingly sweet--innocence tinged with the raw, unlearned sensuality all his kind seemed to possess. Despite himself, he found himself leaning down to kiss the corner of her mouth. She tasted like blood and like hunger. The angry, racking hunger that never left, that never let go. How she must be suffering.

He smoothed her hair and then the sheet over her, folding it down for her like they did on TV. Then he gave her another goblet of the rabbit's blood. But this time she was so wearied from her crying he had to help her to drink it. But drink it all, she did. Then he used a handkerchief to wipe her mouth clean and smudge the bloody tears on her cheeks.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"Shh. No reason to be." He stroked her cheek until her body was still. Then he got ready to leave.

She grabbed his arm. "Don't leave me."

"I'm not going very far."

"Please. It's dark. I'm so afraid of the dark."

So am I, Alek thought.

And so, instead of leaving her, he lay down on the bed beside her and she cleaved to him. He was silent, feeling the night and the flush of cool autumn air on his face from the open window. Cars and cabs ran up and down the street. The noise and stink was distinctly New York--busy, bothered, angry, unattached. Irena nestled close against him and sighed like a cat.

How odd, he thought, stroking her hair. He had thought to bring someone into his home. Someone who might train his thinking away from the craving, someone to occupy him and run his tasks, but he had never dreamed they would be delivered like this into his hands. A girl. He had not wanted a girl. Females always died at his hands. Always. And there were other concerns with that, as well. He shifted slightly so she wasn't pressed quite so closely against him. Irena was enlivening feelings in him he didn't want to content with. Not now. Not ever.

So this was the House on Castle Hill. It was old and stony and simple and extravagant, with gables along the front side and turrets capped by cupolas and an imposing black iron fence that completely surrounded the house, making it seem about as hospitable and homey as a medieval castle. There was even a coach house out front. And although it had probably been converted into a maid's quarters or garage at some point, it still gave Brett the uneasy feeling that somehow or other he had sidestepped out of the century he lived in and into some older, half-forgotten one. The whole house looked like it belonged in the Welsh countryside, not smack dab in the center of one of the busiest boroughs in New York City.

An old house, he thought, for an old soul. As the Porsche ambled by the house--traffic was always so bad this early in the morning--he recalled all the things he had heard about the house. Some were probably true. Some had to be patently false.

Most of it he had heard from Nadine. She said the house was full of time. Brett had thought that meant it was just a very old house. Hell, it dated back to the fucking Pilgrims, didn't it? But now, seeing it in the flesh, so to speak, he realized how much more she had meant with those words. The house is powerful. The house is a power unto itself. Yes, it did indeed seem to keep itself. In fact, it seemed to smirk at Brett as he studied it, to study him back like an old sage full of secrets. Or an old predator. Could a house be predatory? He didn't know, but maybe...

The Slayer emerged from it, taking the steps down the stoop.

Brett hadn't expected that and panicked. He didn't know vampires could walk around during the day. He had had no idea. And now he was going much too slow. The Slayer would spot him and recognize him from the warehouse two nights ago. He was three cars away from the house with no hope in sight but to trundle along with the rest of humanity. He checked, but there were no side streets or escape routes to take. So he did the only thing left to him and put his sunglasses on, hoping it was enough. Then he wondered why he was so frightened, considering why he had come here. Except that somehow or other, he had envisioned this confrontation differently, and now he was off his game plan completely.

He moved past the house, sweating it, certain any moment the man on the stoop picking up the morning paper would look up and give him a knowing smirk, a wink, a complete reflection of the house he dwelled in. But the man, the Slayer, did not look up. He was too preoccupied by some headline on the paper. Brett took the opportunity to study the Slayer as he drove past, his foot doing a nervous tap-dance on the gas pedal. The long black hair, the long thin white hands, the pretty Asian-inspired face, the sinewy, vulpine body. Even out of the coat, Brett could not forget that man, how every element worked together to make him a perfect hunter. A perfect machine.

When he had reached the end of the street he turned off onto one of the main avenues that ran parallel to Hill Street (once Castle Hill Road, he remembered Nadine telling him) and rode it numbly down in the direction of Madison. He passed St. Patrick's Cathedral along the way and had to suppress a shudder. The big stony monolith of a church reminded him a bit too much of the House on Castle Hill, as if both structures had been cut from the same rock.

He sighed with relief when he reached Madison. It was as if he had been lucky enough to escape the den of a lion or something. Stupid. He should have just parked off the street somewhere and approached the house. He had only a short time left, after all. He had told Jay he needed a week to get his business affairs in order for Jay's great Shakespearian death, and so far he had done nothing but try to egg up his courage to visit this one stupid house. Jay would be gone on his vacation with his wife in only a few days and Brett would have spent the whole time driving past the House on Castle Hill, making up excuses why each day was the wrong day to do this. If he didn't do this right now, he never would, and his finely crafted plan would be ruined.

But he found he was reluctant. Because, for some unknown reason, he was afraid. Afraid in a nail-biting, sleepless, gorge-constantly-rising-in-your-throat kind of way he had never been before.

Don't mess with this shit.

Brett frowned, disliking the sound of cowardice echoing up from inside of him. It sounded almost like his father's voice. And his father had died a penniless bum, working for a Brooklyn slaughterhouse for four bucks an hour. It sounded like his grandfather, who had died even poorer, with a row of numbers like something from a meatpacking plant stamped up and down his arm. You back down and that's when you lose everything, he thought. Everything.

Not me. Not this bum.

Angry with himself, he pulled back into traffic and headed toward Hill Street.

12

The first thing Alek thought of when he heard the doorknocker was, Not now! Not so soon! His heart raced, seeming to echo every heavy knock of the brass fixture on that front door, so that for a moment he felt paralyzed by the sound of his own traitorous heart. He closed his eyes to an article about the Ladykiller in the Times he was reading and cocked his head. His hair brushed against his cheek and trailed along the floor from his upside down position on the athlete's bar. Taking a deep breath, he commanded the fear away. It worked, sort of. He felt his heart slow a little and the instinct to leap straight for the ceiling wasn't quite so strong, but still...

I can't live like this.

The knocking continued, making him lose his concentration completely. Dashing the paper away in a waterfall of pages, Alek reached up, grasped the stainless steel bar, and turned himself over once. Then he dropped soundlessly to the floor of the dojo despite the heavy heels of his boots. Another trick of Amadeus's he had learned a very long time ago. No matter where he was or what he wore, he had been trained to move with the obscurity of a shadow. He had changed into a black T-shirt for his daily training session, but he still had on the jeans from the evening before and now his boots zippered to mid-thigh. He knew his training. The clothes he would wear on the street were always the same ones you trained in.

A towel lay draped over the bench, and beside it, the sword. Alek reached for the sword and saw it drop off the bench and slide halfway across the floor before it stopped in mid-journey. The knocking persisted. But his thoughts were so scattered he could not even perform the simplest tricks anymore. Manually grabbing up the towel and sword, he ignored the fear and concentrated on the anger of his own cowardice as he stalked his way down the long corridor to the front door.

At the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor he paused to listen for Irena, but the poor thing was so exhausted from the night before even the insistent knocking could not wake her.

Someone was out there. He saw the shadow of the visitor reflect against the stained glass of the door. He tried to feel the presence but could conclude nothing about it, which told him nothing except that it was obviously not a vampire. Thank God. Maybe it was a Jehovah's Witness, he reasoned. That would be nice. I must be the only man in the city who would welcome one now, he thought.

Still keeping the sword at hand, he unlocked the door and opened it a few inches.

Out on the stoop stood a small man in a sandsilk suit and sunglasses. Upper West Side corporate type. Human. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but Alek could not for the life of him figure out what it was, nor why such a being would be here. Unless...was he a human ghoul of Michael's? No. He didn't have the look. The smell. If he belonged to Michael, he knew his Jacobson's organ would pick up on some of that immediately. Not a lot, but some. This man was a blank slate...and yet, he did have an odor about him. Fear, excitement.

A distrustful smell.

The man looked him up and down.

Alek opened the door further but closed his slightly parted lips, cutting off the man's taste. "Can I help you?"

"I think you can," the man answered cryptically. "If you're who I'm looking for."

Alek lowered his eyes. "And who are you looking for?"

"A man," the man answered.

Something wrong. Suddenly Alek discovered he did not like this man. Not at all. "There are clubs for that," he said and tried to close the door.

The man put his foot on the jamb, halting it. "Six-two, about a hundred and eighty pounds. Dark hair and eyes. Good reflexes. Has a leather coat and a sword," he said, looking at the sword in Alek's hand.

The jolt of remembrance made Alek let go of the door and step back into the hall. The man took the initiative to let himself in and close the door behind him. Alek stood numbly, his sword knocking against the outside of his thigh.

The man looked at it again, then up at his face. "You remember now."

"The warehouse." Alek slipped the sword under his arm, making the man's eyes skip to follow it. Fear still there, but too much arrogance to let a healthy amount of it in. The man lit a smoke. He had sensed Alek's distress and it had fueled his arrogance further. Alek couldn't believe this. He shook his head. "Get out."

The man raised his eyebrow. "Anyone tell you how photographic you are?"

The camcorder. So he had a tape. Alek had not imagined that little device his lurker had slipped under his coat just before he took off. In the beginning, he had thought there might be something there, something that could get him in trouble. But to be honest, he had not worried about it. There was little to worry about. Rome did not tape and take images of vampires or their kin. And tapes and images of vampires and their kin did not last long otherwise, either. That or the filmmakers.

The Church took care of its own that way.

Alek said, "Get rid of it."

Predictably, the man smiled, misreading Alek's reaction completely. "Nice house," he said, looking around. "Must cost you a fortune to maintain."

Alek turned around and went down the corridor to the dojo.

The man followed him. "Jesus," he said when he had taken in the full measure of the dojo, the miscellaneous and barbaric training equipment that had trained dozens of slayers, the iron fans and training staffs on the wall, the innumerable swords, the Catherine Wheel and the Cage--a stainless steel device resembling a child's jungle gym that Amadeus had used to pit slayer against slayer in near-death matches. "You know," he said when he had managed to compose himself, "I know what kind of sick shit you're into. I know what you are, Mr. Knight."

Alek chose a buck knife off the armory wall. "I'm happy for you, Mr...?"

"Edelman. Brett Edelman."

"I'm happy for you, Mr. Edelman. Now please leave."

Instead, Mr. Brett Edelman followed him out of the dojo, down the hallway leading to the butler's pantry, and out through the rear door to the garden. Alek breathed in the cool morning air, enjoying it. The garden, though not large, was his only indulgence. Encompassed by a ten-foot tall stone wall, it was impossible to see over or even climb, unless you had wings or a very good reason to be doing so. There was one iron gate to the outside, but locked from the inside to keep lurkers out. In the shady part of the garden he had set up four rabbit hutches, each containing six cages apiece. Of the twenty-four cages, eleven had occupants.

"I'm Brett Edelman of Edelman Enterprises. I own and publish Summit Books," Brett Edelman was saying.

"Congratulations on your success," Alek whispered as he tied on the leather apron he kept draped over the overhang by the cages. The overhang was little better than a retrofitted acrobat bar fitted with hooks and a stainless steel bucket at its base.

Edelman looked at it. Then he looked at Alek and the buck knife in his hands. "Maybe you've read a few? I publish the Baron Blood series."

"I don't read horror novels," Alek said, looking at him and running the blade edge of the knife softly along his cheek to check for sharpness.

"I don't publish horror, Mr. Knight. I publish supernatural erotic adventures." Edelman decided to lean against the hanging bar, and then changed his mind when he saw the rusty-brown bloodstains on it like on the pavement at his feet. He looked at his clothing to make certain nothing had rubbed off. "Stories about vampires."

"Should I be impressed?" Alek asked. Turning, he opened one of the cages and pulled a struggling brown and white rabbit out by the scruff of its neck. It wriggled a moment, its eyes as big as orange jewels in its head. Then, as exhaustion overcame the animal, it hung still, ears and nose twitching erratically.

"Maybe. Depends on how much you value your life here." Brett Edelman hesitated, then visibly winced as Alek pressed his thumb against the back of the animal's head, breaking its neck with a resounding crack that seemed to echo against the stone walls of the garden like a gunshot. The animal went limp in his hands. "Jesus."

This was of course always the hardest part--getting the blood to run before rigor mortis cut off the supply. He'd had ample practice with this so far, but sometimes he was still not fast enough. With one deft motion, Alek used the knife to slit the great vein under the animal's ear and then slammed the body down on the hooks. The blood ran red, no taint of purple. Good. He's gotten it fresh. He turned back to Edelman, the bloodied knife in his hand, and crossed his arms.

"Would be a shame if the whole world discovered your awful secret," Edelman said without much conviction as he stared at the knife.

"Get rid of the tape before it kills you, Mr. Edelman."

"It's quite safe, Mr. Knight. No one knows the truth except you and I." Brett Edelman watched the blood sputter into the bucket. The man paled as if he were the one being bled.

After the blood had leaked out of the body--it did not take long--Alek took the body off the hooks and tossed it over the wall for the stray dog that always came around begging for scraps. He took the bucket and funneled the contents into a jar on the bench, added ten milligrams of sodium citrate to keep it from clotting, and capped the jar and gave it a slight shake so the blackened substance settled correctly. Brett Edelman watched wide-eyed, the cigarette nearly falling out of his mouth.

"What exactly is it you want from me, Mr. Edelman?" Alek asked the man.

It took Brett Edelman a moment to compose himself. Then he said, tossing his cigarette down, "Baron Blood is finished. So is his author, J. Stephan Paul."

"I've read his work. The good work."

"Jay's finished," Edelman said, lighting a fresh smoke. "Right now the man is worth more to me dead than alive, if you get my drift."

Alek blinked with disbelief as the truth began to sink in. "You want me to murder your author?"

"You sound surprised."

"Excuse me...but yes, I am."

"Mr. Knight, I thought you do this all the time." He looked at the jar.

"I am not an assassin for hire, Mr. Edelman."

"But you are a slayer."

Alek narrowed his eyes. "*Was* a slayer."

Brett Edelman jabbed his smoke at Alek. "You *are* the Slayer."

Alek said nothing.

"You look surprised."

"Where did you hear that?" Alek asked.

The man smiled. "Doesn't matter. What does is whether we have a deal or not."

"Not."

"And the tape?"

"I told you: get rid of it"

"But I like watching you fight, Mr. Knight."

"You have no idea what you're fucking with," Alek whispered.

"No, Mr. Knight," Brett Edelman said evenly. "You have no idea *who you* are fucking with. Who are you, with all your blades and your Kung Fu shit? I have media connections that stretch from the Post all the way up to NBC. I have a fucking *vampire* dying on tape, Mr. Knight. One transmission over the airwaves and the Internet and the whole world knows the truth about your kind. And if I know you, and I suspect I do, you don't like media attention. I think media attention would kill your kind faster than the Coven does. What do you think?"

Alek sank the buck knife into the bench beside Edelman.

Brett Edelman backed up.

Alek untied the apron and folded it neatly. He said, "I think you're in way over your head, Mr. Edelman. I think you should stop thinking about murdering your author and go home. Now." Alek pulled the knife from the wood and drifted toward him. Edelman began to back up very slowly, more or less walking backwards until his back hit the rear door of the house and there was nowhere left for him to go.

Alek leaned forward and laid the flat of the blade against the collar of the immaculate white shirt poking out of Mr. Edelman's sandsilk jacket. The white turned pink.

"You kill me and they'll find the tape," Edelman said, hoarse.

"I'm not going to kill you, Mr. Edelman," Alek answered. "I'm just showing you the way out." He wiped the bloody knife on the white material.

With a little nervous whimper, Edelman dashed for the gate at the end of the garden path, rattled the lock until it opened, then took off walk-running down the sidewalk. Alek stood at the gate and watched him go, wondering about it all.

He could almost have smiled. It was almost a comedy. But after a moment the amusement faded as he remembered other pressing things that demanded his attention, and he closed the gate and returned to the house with the jar.

Irena was in the kitchen, standing there in his black dressing gown, looking like an odd choirgirl. "I heard voices in the garden."

He looked her over. Her hair was a wild tanglewoods and her eyes haunted and fever bright. Her skin was freckled but it was light against her white skin, the dappling of a young filly. Again he felt his heart contract at the sight of her. "It's nothing important."

She looked around the kitchen that had not been renovated in thirty years. The stove and refrigerator were spotless. Dusty pots hung from a rack above the oven. The clear glass cupboards were filled with goblets, but only a handful of dishes filled one of the shelves.

He poured the rabbit's blood from the jar into a goblet he had placed on the table. "Lesson number one. You must drink constantly in the beginning. It is the only way to maintain control." He gave her the glass. "Control is everything. Without it, you die."

She took the glass. He could feel the hunger radiating from her in waves. She started to drain it like she had last night, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Sip," he said. "Control."

A war played out on her anguished face, but in the end she did as he instructed. Her hands shaking, she sipped from the goblet and then placed it down on the table.

"Good." He sat down at the table.

So did she. Then she took the glass and gulped.

He yanked the glass away. "No."

She sat quietly, clasping her hands in her lap to keep them in place.

"Lesson number two. Food. Since your first kill, your metabolism has begun to change. You probably notice that what humans call food now nauseates you." He pushed the goblet forward but Irena didn't reach for it this time. "You must continue to eat human food. Every day. Humans believe we cannot eat. We can and we must."

Irena stared at the goblet. "I've eaten food all of my life."

He said. "What has happened to you is a natural step in your growth. You were not changed. Vampires cannot change humans any more than a human can bite and change a vampire. The two are separate species. The trauma of your attack simply invoked your true nature."

"You said I wasn't a vampire."

"You are and you are not." He watched her sip.

She wiped her mouth and said, "Why doesn't anyone know?"

"They do. But they think this is a myth. This is not. This is your survival. Lesson number three. You are immortal, but you can still die if your head is severed from your body. To prevent this, you must learn to fight."

She looked up, angry, afraid. "I can fight."

He kicked her chair out from under her.

Irena slammed into the floor on her back, knocking the goblet over and splashing blood across the tiles. She curled up on the floor, shaking.

He got up and came around the table. "Get up."

She reached for the spillage of blood instead.

"No. I said get up. Control."

She did so, but hesitantly. She watched him from under the tangle of her hair with her wounded trust.

"You don't know how to fight," he said. "Not in the real world, anyway. Our world. Follow me."

He walked down the hallway and into the dojo. He wasn't certain she would actually follow, but she did. He moved aside so she could see the training equipment, the fall mats, the training bags, and the various weapons on the walls. She took it all in with silent wonder.

"If you want to learn I'll teach you," he said. "But I won't coddle you."

Her eyes darkened. "I don't need coddling." After a moment more of silent observation, she walked to the far wall to study the weapons more closely. He watched her. She was a dhampir and she was powerful and moved like a hunter. It wouldn't take much training to get her where she needed to be. She was a survivor. She looked up. In over three hundred years Amadeus had collected every conceivable weapon in existence. Eastern. Western. Middle Eastern. Here there were broadswords, katanas, iron fans, knives of various lengths and uses, scythes, manrikisa, Chinese stars, bo staffs, nunchaku, shirasayas, maces, bows and arrows, quarterstaffs, and every conceivable spear in existence. She looked at them all as if she knew what they were. "These are all yours?"

"Yes."

"And you can use all of them?"

"Most of them."

She turned around and hugged herself like she was cold. On someone else the gesture would have made the person seem small. Not Irena. There was something about her, about them both. Humans were small, vampires were tiny, but the dhampiri were titans, like something that should never have existed at all.

"Think about it," he said.

Leaving her in the dojo, he went to the library to be apart from her and let her think. To let himself think. I can't do this, he thought. I should not. I'm not a crusader anymore. But he had already involved himself in Irena's life. What else

could he do? He had left himself no more choice than he had where Michael and Dante were concerned.

Another dilemma that needed closure.

But he did not want to think about that, either. He absently ran his hands over the lines of books until he found the one he had bought in a drugstore a long time ago. Some ghost-love story J. Stephan Paul had written early on in his career when he had not yet become a bit of marketing on Wall Street. Alek turned to the back where a portly young man was sitting on some rocks by the Jersey Shore with his hand resting on the head of an Irish setter. The dog looked content and so did the man.

“What are you thinking?” Debra asked from the mirror on the wall.

He looked up, running his hand up the spine of the book. “Just...people.”

“Which people?” She put her hands on the glass.

“The ones that have everything and want more. What kind of hunger it creates in them.”

“Are you going to warn that man?” she asked him, looking at the book in his hands.

“You would tell me it’s none of my business. That dhampiri have better things to do with their time.”

But for a change she only looked sad. So sad and wan and more like an old moving portrait than anything real.

“I’m not real, Alek,” she said as she began to fade. “I’m dead, remember?”

And he sat down on the divan and watched the empty glass and felt he could weep.

The business with Dante and Michael began with hunger and with wanting more than was permissible. In that time, 1973, there had been trouble, but not trouble as Alek and the rest of the Coven had ever know it before. Capital T Trouble, as Booker called it. Book was twenty-five at the time and had been apprenticed to Robot for seven years. Alek was two years younger and had been apprenticed to the Covenmaster Amadeus two years longer. Booker talked to him. They were brothers. The others avoided him. Booker said it was the green-eyed monster. And for years afterward Alek would watch that monster grow and become steadily more ugly. But in 1973 it was still just a curiosity.

The twins were from Europe. They were vampires who had made within the circle of the Coven an illustrious joint-career for themselves at Cambridge as hematologists working for Rome. So the fact that they had recently left their secret underground facility--something they had not done in over a hundred years--and suddenly appeared in New York City indicated to Alek that something very

important was going on. They had been summoned here. There was Capital T Trouble afoot.

He felt it further when Amadeus called him into the library of the Covenhouse the evening of the day before the twins arrived. Amadeus seated himself in the antique rocker he favored. Alek remained standing. Somehow or other, the tension in the room wouldn't allow him to rest. He went to the shelf and fingered a book at random.

"Michael and Dante have requested you, mein Sohn," Amadeus whispered.

"Should I be impressed?" The words were spoken harsher than Alek intended. But he did not like people requesting him. He was the Father's apprentice, and he was getting sick of the steady procession of slayers that came through the Covenhouse looking him up and down like a pet for sale. He knew there was a distinct possibility that he would be called out to another Covenhouse somewhere else in the country--or indeed the world--but he had no intention of going. New York was his city, and if he had to lie to the Vatican herself to retain tenure here, then he was willing to do just that. So far, though, the Father had intervened on his part when necessary and that had not happened.

And now, like the other times, the master slayer of the New York City Coven seemed to understand his misgivings. "It is not a permanent position," he said. "They need you to guide them whilst here."

Alek turned to face his master. He had never heard of more than two slayers on any one case. Despite the fact that there was some relief in the fact that it was a temporary apprenticeship, he still felt uneasy about the whole deal. "Sounds like a big problem."

Amadeus looked on him with fear and pain and love. Alek read the emotion as if he were reading one of the books in this vast library. "It is a housecleaning. The Abyssus."

Omigod, thought Alek. Please don't say Akisha is marked! He didn't know what he would do in that case. What he would say. How do you hunt the woman who was your second sensei and one of your best friends in all the world? Alek was almost too paralyzed to ask. "Who's...the target?"

"Carfax."

Alek let out a mental sigh of relief.

Now Carfax he could live without. They all could. The half-sane metallurgist had been causing a stir since the early 1950s. For a short time following World War II he had worked with Dante and Michael, then done work for a private government-run facility, experimenting with metals, recombining the molecular structure of elements in America's neverending race to create the perfect Cold War weapon. They said he had pioneered a certain kind of compressed titanium that was capable of remaining in a liquid state like mercury. But though his experiments were sometimes successful, they had also proven too unstable to continue.

When he refused to desist from his bizarre experimentations, the Coven cut him off financially. But a Medieval alchemist by trade, Carfax had not stopped there. Instead he had chosen to hide in the inner city and continue his experiments. Now, instead of pioneering new metals, he had turned to genetics. It was his unwavering belief that he could generate the perfect vampire, one that would rival even the dhampiri in power and invulnerability. He began with experiments on animals but quickly moved to humans and vampires. The Vatican did not care about the vampires he murdered in the process. They did care about the humans that had begun to disappear.

Rome was remarkably tolerant through it all, but even she had her limits. One night one of Carfax's "creations" managed to get loose. It wasn't much more than a ghoul--a human tainted by vampire blood--but constant exposure to radiation, genetic therapy and vampire blood had turned it monstrous to behold. It destroyed a line of stores on Eight Avenue and mutilated seven onlookers before it was brought down with a massive hail of bullets by New York's Finest. In the weeks of investigation that followed, the carcass of the beast and the police records both managed to disappear. The five victims who had survived the initial ordeal suffered the same fate. The media gurus never did publish anything that resembled the truth, and the one stubborn reporter who refused to nose off the case suffered an unfortunate coronary due to snakebite. Witnesses were unavailable for comment, even the officers who had witnessed the destruction and shot the beast point-blank in the face. A few months following the incident, most of them disappeared as well. The cleanup turned out to be massive and costly, both in work and time as well as human lives.

But the Church took care of its own. If the humans discovered the existence of vampires among them, their world would be disrupted, Rome accused, and the whole world thrown into chaos.

Now Amadeus, in enunciating that one little word "Carfax", was telling him that Rome had finally had enough. Carfax had revealed the Vampire's presence to the outside world. Humans had witnessed the vampire power at work and running amok through their streets. The cost had been greater than if Carfax and his hive had begun outwardly preying on the human population. Carfax had wanted too much and gone too far, and now he was marked. His whole hive was marked, in fact--or whoever stood with him when the Coven arrived to pass judgment.

Alek poured himself a drink, a brandy. He did that rather a lot when he was uneasy, and it that was probably not a good thing, but he couldn't help himself. His control was not perfect. He took the drink with him to the divan and finally sat down. "That's why they've brought in Michael and Dante."

Amadeus nodded.

Alek took a long sip of the drink. "Why do they want me?"

"You know the Abyssus. They do not. They thought it a good gambit to have you with them."

Alek took another, longer sip. "You mean they can't handle the Abyssus. So why didn't they come to me personally with this request?"

"They asked me to come to you," Amadeus replied.

"Because they know I could refuse you nothing." Alek put the glass down with a clink. "So it was never a question at all."

"You don't care for them."

"I think," he said, "that the cure is sometimes worse than the disease." He stood up and paced to the door, his coat swinging. He was halfway to the door when he stopped and peered into the gilded oval mirror on the wall. The man inside it was still a boy--a long-legged colt with long coal-black hair and haunted eyes. The leather longcoat looked all wrong on him, but he knew he would grow into it in time. It was as much a part of him as was the Double Serpent Katana. As much as the blood of the Coven was. Yet he felt an odd sort of pity for the boy grown so fast in the mirror. The warrior. "Father...I don't want to declare war on the Abyssus."

"They knew that," Amadeus answered judiciously. "That is why they would not come to you."

14

Erebus looked at him oddly when he asked to see Nadine. Jesus Christ, he's going to kill me. That was the first thought that went through Brett's mind. But Erebus did not kill him. Instead, Erebus, loyal guardian of the Underworld, snorted and leaned back against the wall of the banker's office, his massive gorilla arms crossed and his eyes at half masts. A big bald black-skinned vampire with muscles on his muscles, Erebus looked as if he could bust the seams of his T-shirt and the black suit jacket he wore overtop it by breathing alone. He was like a professional wrestler off duty or something. At least, that was the impression Brett always got from him. That was the impression he liked to give.

Especially at times like these, when a patron wanted into the club on a day he wasn't expected or welcome.

Erebus said after a moment--or rather, grunted, "I'd have to pass it by JP."

Brett felt his desperation edge up a notch. Getting it past Jean Paul was probably a good idea, but at the same time, he didn't want to involve Jean Paul at all. The back of his shirt and suit coat, already soaked through with sweat, seemed to dampen further. He wanted to tear the clinging wet clothes off his body. "Look...I only want to *talk* to her. That's it."

Erebus smiled, amused. "Are you sure it's only talk you want?"

"Yes, damnit!"

"You humans," Erebus said. And there was a palatable anger about Erebus like a crimson halo. Brett was certain in that moment that had he not been a paying patron

Erebus would have done him serious harm. He seemed to be contemplating it anyway, and that made Brett take a step back.

Erebus disappeared into the office.

Brett waited, his eyes drifting down the corridor that led to the main floor of Club Bauhaus. A live band was playing something feedback-riddled and incomprehensible. Patrons were chanting like a church. The smell of smoke, sex and blood blanketed the whole building like a rank mist, giving Brett some bad wood despite the dire circumstances of his plight. It was odd to be in the club on a night when he wasn't usually here. It was stupid, maybe, but it was easy to believe a club like this existed for you and you alone. The idea that it had its own life apart from Brett's never really occurred to him.

Erebus returned. "JP says no."

"What?"

"N-O," Erebus repeated, enunciating each letter like a parent communicating with a retarded child.

"He can't do this!" Brett shouted overtop the music. "I have to see Nadine!"

"Nadine isn't working tonight," Erebus growled. "And she doesn't want to see you."

Since when did Jean Paul's own thralls tell him when and if they would see their clients or not? His clients? Brett wondered with bewilderment what kind of establishment Jean Paul ran when the hivemaster could not even control one of his own people. It wasn't as if they had their own will. They belonged to Jean Paul. They were his property. His whores. They did as Jean Paul commanded. It wasn't even as if they were people, for chrissakes...

Brett opened his mouth to say something to that effect, but one dire look from Erebus made him change his mind. He put his shades on instead and lit a smoke. "You vampires," he said in retaliation.

"What about us?" Erebus asked with some interest.

"Bunch of motherfucking, bloodsucking cunts."

"Sue us," Erebus said and returned to the office, slamming the door behind him.

That's it, Brett thought savagely. You've fucking lost a client, Jean Paul! He'd go north to the hive in Bethlehem. True, it was smaller and stuck in the center of a redneck town, but at least he wouldn't have to put up with this bullshit. Seething, he kicked the door, making the glass rattle in the pane. Erebus looked up from his desk. Brett spat at the glass and stormed out the exit door. The heavy pneumatic door closed with a soft thomp behind him, hitting him on the ass and knocking the cigarette from his mouth and leaving him standing in the filth-encrusted alley behind the dive, despondent. He lit a new smoke and daydreamed of the different kinds of harm that he might rain down on Jean Paul and his whole lot of whores. But it was an ineffectual wish, and in the end Brett only returned to the Porsche and slipped down into the driver's seat.

Well, what next?

Brett smoked and thought. Originally he had planned on getting information about the Slayer out of Nadine--what she knew of him, if anything. What the guy wanted. What his weaknesses were. But now Brett thought better of the idea. What would Nadine be able to tell him? She was Brett's only real contact to the Underworld, but in the end she probably knew very little more about the Slayer than Brett did himself. She probably had never even met him. No, there had to be a better way. He was smart. He knew what to do underneath it all. He smoked some more and thought about everything and nothing at all.

Finally, for reasons only his subconscious could know, he started thinking about Jay and Baron Blood. There was that book, *Baron Blood, Vampire Detective*, where Blood is stuck in a frame job for a London Jack-the-Ripper-type murder spree. It was typical erotic inanity at its best, but Jay had managed to write in some real detective techniques, wonder of wonders.

Without further ado, Brett put the Porsche in gear and pulled out into traffic, taking River Drive down to the warehouse district. He reached the gravel path that led to the warehouse where all this had begun and rolled to the very edge of the first building. It looked abandoned as before. Nothing moved but shadows on the grates and behind the overflowing Dumpsters where the vermin crawled. Brett got out of the car. In the darkness he found the broken basement window more by touch than anything else. He crouched down but there was nothing to see but more darkness.

He used a brick and his suit coat to break out the window, then picked out the last teathy bits of glass before sliding on his belly through the narrow opening and dropping down onto the dank concrete five feet below. His leather pumps made a breezy echo that drifted down the empty basement and rebounded off the walls and machine mounts like the whisper of a malevolent spirit. There were no sounds or movements, save his own. Flicking his lighter, the weak splinter of light illuminated the space a foot ahead of him, no more. More machines. Waterstained concrete walls. The wires of the electrical system dragged along the floor from the open ceiling like entrails. And the floor was a filth-encrusted mess that made Brett wince to crunch it under his six hundred dollar deck shoes. Scooting low, he shone the light across the floor in particular. Yet more filth in more explicit detail.

But in time he found the part of the floor that looked more damp than usual. The place where the little blonde slayer had bought it. Here the floor was blackened and rough and stank of ammonia, as if some form of weak acid had been allowed to soak through the cement. Brett touched the floor and found it curiously warm. His hand came away with streaks of purplish rust that made his skin tingle. Weird. He continued to shine the lighter, not sure of what he thought he would find until he saw something crumpled in a corner off to the side, white against the darkness. Brett used a silk handkerchief to pick it up. Luckily, there was no acid on it. The paper had been spared, and good thing too because it was a fragile cocktail napkin and it wouldn't have survived whatever odd substance the dead slayer had poured out onto the concrete.

The napkin said MELMOTH HOTEL.

Brett tucked it away, thinking it was as good a lead as leads got.

15

She was sitting in the middle of the dojo when he went to check on her, the morning paper spread out around her like a holocaust. She was shaking, her arms over her head. Rocking. Rocking.

Alek picked up the part of the paper she had been reading. It was a follow-up to one of the Ladykiller murders. According to the story, there had been two new victims of the Ladykiller crimes a couple of nights ago, one a young woman identified as Irena Sullivan, 19, an exotic dancer who worked in a club in the Brooklyn Heights, the other a little four-year-old girl named Lilly Langford. The body of Irena Sullivan had been found missing from the morgue and a morgue attendant slaughtered almost ritualistically, making the police suspect local inner city blood cults of snatching the body and killing the man. The remaining victim, Lilly Langford, was being buried at St. Patrick's Cemetery on Friday with general services held afterward for the familyless dead girl.

Alek lowered the paper. "Was she your sister?"

For a long time Irena said nothing at all. Then, slowly, reluctantly, she unwound. Her cheeks were rusty with tears. She looked dazed and unwell, her eyes going everywhere and seemingly into a far place where he had no welcome to come. "No," she said in time. Her voice was horse as if she had been screaming for hours. "She was just a little girl. We lived in the same project. Lilly's mother...she was my age. One night she put Lilly in a Dumpster and ran away. Then Lilly was mine."

Silence pressed in around them.

"I'm sorry," he said. It was inadequate, but he had no idea what else to say.

Irena stared up at him. "Why didn't Lilly wake up like me?"

"Lilly wasn't like you."

"Immortal." Irena looked confused, then rose to her feet and began to circle the room. But now there was purpose in the way she moved. Purpose...and a dangerous grace. She was waking up. Moving past her pain and into something else. Something that made the hairs on the backs of Alek's hands stand on end. Something that singed his nostrils. Irena stopped to stare up at the weapons, her red hair streaming down her back like a curtain of blood. "What is that?" she asked, looking up.

Alek followed her gaze to a carved wooden staff with a massive flint scythe at both ends and rawhide and beads wound throughout its length. "It's called a Jatarri staff. It was used in battle in ancient Africa."

Her voice was calm. "Can you use it?"

The change of conversation made him feel better, made the suffocating presence of sorrow depart. He went to the wall armory and took it down. The weapon was

massively heavy and awkward, nothing like the slender, flyweight katanas he was used to using, but he could still use it. He moved to one of the fall mats and spun it carefully in his hands, wrist over wrist, remembering the physically demanding moves he had been taught. It was not his type of weapon, but he could still wield it.

He watched the shadow of the weapon fall across Irena's upturned face.

Irena was stone. And yet an odd calm--almost a determination--had driven the sorrow from her face and from the room. He didn't know what that meant, but it frightened him.

He gave her the staff. She took it and weighed it in her hands as if it were very valuable or fragile. He said, "It takes years, if not decades, of dedication before it can be properly used."

She gripped it solidly. Like a warrior would. Her tears were gone but her face shone with their spillage as if her flesh had been burnished with gold. "You said I'm immortal," she said. Her eyes narrowed. Fired steel. Scarlet. "I have all the time in the world."

16

The Melmoth Hotel was an ideal vampire hangout. Its architecture was a queer mixture of the gothic and the Victorian. Its façade was grimy and full of turrets, curlicues, gargoyles, gingerbreading and weird bas-reliefs that looked almost surreal in the weird Londonesque glow of the midnight streetlamps lining the street. Brett went through the revolving doors and into the somber antique lobby, ogling the people, goths and freaks, many of which might be vampires themselves for all Brett knew. They certainly were spiritual sisters to his kind of people. This was a dive for the well to do to either slum it or for the street ruffians to pretend at elegance. Brett simply could not decide which. It was also one of those trendy joints that catered to much of the bar and club scene. Ignoring the night clerk, who did not choose to look his way anyway, Brett proceeded down a rather dark hallway to an even darker club where some bass-beat techno blitz was beating against the black, neon-spattered walls. The look was tacky and overdone and infinitely false. Nothing like Club Bauhaus, which was a meat locker but had the self-respect to keep the lighting low.

He ordered a scotch and water and gave the barkeep, a young woman in a backless tux and short white-dyed hair, a fifty-dollar tip and a question.

"Seen him but he doesn't drink," she answered distractedly.

"You mean he doesn't come in here often?"

She looked at him as if he were stupid. "He came in a time or two. But he said he never drinks wine." She rolled her eyes.

He let her go service some red-haired whore at the end of the bar. Well, at least he knew for a fact that blondie had indeed been staying here. Now all that was left was to discover which room on which floor he had. Since the joint was one of those

pay in advance dives, it was possible his belongings were still here and would remain so until his bill ran out, which might be now or never. In any event, he had to move.

But how to tell where he had been staying? There were twelve floors. Twelve fucking floors! Brett was just about ready to start feeling sorry for himself again because this lead was a fine one indeed--but what the hell do you do with it?--when he thought he was going crazy and had to all but keep from falling off the stool with shock when the shadow entered the room, temporarily blocking the light from the lobby before moving off to one side.

Brett immediately recognized the sharp, foxlike features, the blonde hair--shorter now--and the same stormy grey eyes. This was impossible! There was no way in hell something could walk away from a beheading, no matter how immortal it was. It was simply impossible! Yet there he was, the blonde slayer, a cigarette in his fingers, his eyes scanning the floor of the hotel. Brett turned back as the slayer looked his way. The thing's eyes swept past him and came to rest on the whore at the end of the bar. Sitting at this angle, Brett saw the woman quite well. She smiled her professional working smile the moment the thing's eyes alighted on her.

The slayer wandered past Brett and started talking to the woman. Even from the back he saw it clearly for what it was. It was not human. It was like some insect or alien species dressed in a frock coat and slacks. He couldn't understand how the woman could not see it. The slayer bought her a drink and they whispered to each other for a while. The whore's grin broadened. The slayer put out his arm and she latched onto it immediately.

Brett followed the new couple down the corridor, trying to stay at a safe, unobserved distance. Back in the lobby they chose one of the elevators. That was when Brett realized he had no idea where they were going and quickened his step, letting them see him now, he was so desperate. The whore, not the slayer, stepped on the track of the elevator as he approached.

"Thanks," he muttered, slipping into the elevator.

The whore cuddled against the slayer as the slayer gave him an uninterested once-over and then punched the button for the tenth floor. The old Otis elevator rattled upward, making Brett feel like he was trapped in an oversized upright coffin. But luck was with him, because the whore had dug the slayer's keys out of his pocket--they were the old-fashioned kind, a real key on a ring with a marker, not a key card, thankfully--and Brett stared intently at the whore's hands until he made out the number.

1022.

The elevator let the couple off on the tenth floor. But for appearance's sake, Brett rode the elevator to the next floor, then took it back down to the lobby. Although he knew exactly what he had to do now, he leaned against the wall of the lobby by the pay phones for almost five full minutes as he arranged his thoughts. Then he pushed off the wall and staggering like a drunk toward the revolving doors.

How? he wondered. How could it still be alive? He had seen its head come off. He had seen its blood spill like a flood to the floor of the warehouse. He had touched the blood for chrissakes...

How? *How?*

How can something come back from the dead? he kept asking himself as he made his way across the sidewalk toward the Porsche. Because it was a vampire? But vampires were not dead or undead. They were very much alive. Malevolently alive. So how...

Unless...

In *Blood Brothers*, the Baron had met a complete double of himself. A creature as good-natured and gentle as the Baron was evil. Baron Blood's twin brother...

And then he knew.

Back in the car, Brett smiled and switched on the radio to a hard-hitting all-metal station and smacked the wheel in victory. Ah Brett, he thought, you are smarter than the average bear. If he ever attained a true measure of immortality--if such an impossible thing was indeed possible--Brett knew he would make one hell of an unstoppable vampire.

17

He was leaning against the gymnast bar and watching Irena assault the big Wave water bag hanging from a chain from the ceiling when the doorbell rang. Assaulting it was an understatement, he realized. She did not assault it, but literally *attacked* it like an animal, her taped hands and feet landing lightning-fast blows into it, sweating and kei-calling as she did so, making the bag sway dangerously on its chain. Her gaze was vapid; she saw nothing but the bag, her concentration so complete, he took up his coffee cup and went out into the hall without her even noticing.

Brett Edelman was on the stoop, fingering the rose bush outside the door. It was a project of his he had taken up some time ago. He had grafted red roses onto white. But the white ones had all died. "Don't touch that," Alek said, slamming his cup onto its saucer after taking a quick sip.

Edelman looked up slyly. He reminded Alek of some kind of animated character in a TV show somewhere. A shark in a suit.

"The answer is no," Alek said.

"I haven't asked the question."

"Go home." Alek slammed the door in his face and turned and went down the hall and into the library. For some reason, the room calmed his nerves when he felt jangled. The flow of books, the smell of the leather, the sight of the gilded spines lent him a feeling of enormous peace. He wandered to the window where the lights of the city were already shining like bright fallen stars and heard that troublesome little man enter the hallway and then the library behind him and shut the door. From

the sound of him--or the lack thereof--the little creep was in awe of the collection. Alek turned around and glanced down at the lighted screen of the computer where he had been busy translating the Ninth Chronicle before he became aware of Irena's workout in the other room. He scrolled up the screen so the man would not see.

Edelman took a book down off the shelf and examined it a moment before saying, "I was wrong to try and blackmail you into the job. I realize that now. Someone like yourself wouldn't let himself get caught up in such machinations..."

"Let's cut the bullshit, shall we?"

Edelman looked up, startled. "Yes...lets." He put the book back on the shelf and said, "Here's the deal. You do this job and I give you a very valuable bit of information."

"I don't do work like that," Alek stated evenly, "and you have absolutely no information I could use."

"Not even the whereabouts of a certain angry slayer who lost his brother recently?"

Alek tried not to let the surprise show on his face, but the little rat was such a conniving bastard, he recognized it anyway.

"I thought so," Edelman said. He lit a cigarette and started to wander among the shelves. "See, you and your kind are odd creatures to be sure, but not entirely impossible to figure out. You think you're so superior to us, so much more than we can ever be. But when it all comes down to it, you're no different than anyone else. If you can understand the mind of a man, then the mind of a dhampir isn't so difficult."

Alek leaned against the wall and drank his coffee.

"At first, when I saw the thing you murdered walking around, I thought it must be the same creature. Then it occurred to me that that wasn't true at all. It's the thing's *brother*."

"It isn't a 'thing'," Alek said.

Edelman shrugged. "Whatever it is, it wants you dead. I know it and you know it. Now the question remains, my friend, how much do you want to know where he is?"

"Stay away from Michael," Alek said. "I will tell you once. Next time you learn on your own."

"Michael," Edelman said with a flickering smile. "What a dull name for such an interesting character." The man flicked his ashes into a nearby urn. "And why should I stay away from Michael? Because Michael will kill me?"

"No," Alek said. "He won't kill you."

Edelman dropped his cigarette to the flowered Victorian carpet, grinding it out with the heel of his wingtip while he held Alek's eyes. "You're really beginning to shit me, you know that?" he said. "And you might not want to do that."

"Because you'll kill me?" Alek mocked him.

"I make men wish they were never born."

"I'm not a man."

“And you won’t be anything else when I finish with you!”

Alek tilted his head. “If you’re done posturing, Mr. Edelman, the door is that way.”

“I know where the goddamn door is, Mr. Knight.”

“You also know where the sword is, Mr. Edelman.”

Baring his teeth in what could only be called a human grimace, Brett Edelman headed in that direction. Alek waited until he heard the door slam shut against the jamb, rattling the stained glass in its panes. Then he waited a few moments more.

Irena appeared in the doorway, drenched in sweat, her beautiful white-boned body heaving with exertion under the tank top and sweat pants she was wearing. This time the clothing was her own. He had gone last night and gotten it for her, dragging as much of it as he could from the filthy shitbox she and Lilly had called home. “I’ve finished, Alek,” she said. “Can I practice with the Jatarri staff?”

“No.”

She waited. She knew better than to oppose his instructions. Then she said, her voice hoarse, “I want to learn to fight with it.”

“First you learn to fight *without* it. How long did you go with the bag?”

“Two hours.”

He nodded. “Did you finish high school?”

Irena looked taken aback by the question. She oriented herself, then dropped her eyes. “I...no.”

“I want you to read these books.”

She looked up and took in the hundreds of thousands of books on shelves that climbed every wall of the library. Books were stacked on tables and on revolving racks set between hardbacked benches. Books were crammed under windows and into corners. Books were even piled on the floor. She looked at them all. “Which books?”

“All of them,” he said. He looked around a moment until he saw the one he wanted, then he walked over to a shelf and took down a fat volume in worn brown leather with soft gold gilding. “Read one book a day. Start with this one.” He gave it to her.

She looked down at John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

“I’ll be away for a bit. A few hours.”

She looked up. “Where will you be?”

“Downstairs.”

She stood in his way with the book clutched to her chest.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Lilly’s funeral is today. I want to go to the cemetery.”

“You can’t go to the cemetery.”

“Why?”

“Someone might see you. You’re dead, Irena.”

“Bess will be there. I--“

“That life is over.” He moved past her into the hallway.

She turned to face him. Her eyes pleaded with him. Plead for mercy, for understanding.

But he would not be moved. Turning around, he said, “Irena died. And if you want to make the person responsible for her death pay, if you want that person held accountable, she has to remain that way.”

Her eyes darkened.

He watched as the unraveling hem of her tank top crisped and curled while the acrid aroma of burned stuff filled his nostrils. That was something else. She needed to hone her talents. But right now she just needed to heal. To heal and to learn control.

“Then don’t call me Irena,” she whispered.

“What should I call you?”

“Phoenix.”

“Very well,” he said.

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He experienced a chill when he stepped into the Great Abbey. He wanted to believe it was the vastness of the subterranean chamber and the coolness that never left it, even at the height of a broiling New England summer, but somehow he doubted it. He closed the great double doors behind him, cutting off the sight of the stairs that had led him down here to this separate world. But somehow, when he stood in the Abbey, he had the uncomfortable feeling that there was no other world. There seemed to be nothing at all but this great echoing expanse of darkness and the neverending neck-crawling feeling that he was being watched from the shadows that skirted every dark corner and every half-seen ledge.

Bats cooed above. The sound afforded Alek some comfort, not much. He heard his own rough breathing in the musty silence, but that afforded him no comfort at all. Reaching for the tinderbox near the door, Alek lit the candelabra on the table and carried it with him down the long aisle limned on both sides by columns so large they were like something from a lost Grecian temple. The Coventable was gone, destroyed a long time ago by Amadeus in a fit of temper. All that remained were the tapestries and the arms on the stone walls, the brackets of unlit torches and the stained glass.

And the altar. That was still here.

As Alek approached the altar of skulls sitting there massive and old and full of dead energies, he felt a veritable concerto of fingers playing down his spine. Each grinning grey skull-unit was like a stone, but a stone so powerful, touching it would give him a deadly electrical shock. He had been down here to the Abbey only twice since he moved into the Covenhouse, once in the beginning to see what damage

Amadeus had wrought here, and now today. But today would be different. The last time he had been here he had copiously avoided the altar, giving it a berth worthy of an active land mine. Now...well, now he planned to set that mine off.

"You're crazy, old man," he whispered. Yet he moved stealthily toward his destination. He had changed before coming down here, but it was not into his usual street gear and coat, and as he moved toward the altar he felt the edges of his floor-length habit lift and spin with his locomotion, felt the ruffled sleeves brush the tops of his hands and lift the hairs there. Why had he changed into a habit for this? Because he was a priest? Because he was crazy? He tried to answer that, but found he had no answers. It just seemed the proper thing to do, though he had not worn a habit since leaving the Coven over two years ago.

You are crazy, old man.

Crazy enough to do this. He ascended the dais and felt the shadow of the beast of bone fall over his face like a spillage of blood, of darkness. He craned his neck back, the size of the altar washing away the fear and replacing it with pure, nerve-numbing awe. Putting out his hands, he felt his psi ignite and the phantoms of the dead alight in his mind like memories on the edges of a fever dream. By moving his hands in any direction he saw faces, places, lost thoughts, regrets, salvation and damnation. The shattered remnants of a thousand lives bombarded him like punches to his mind. Some he recognized. Some he could only guess at. Many of these unfortunate souls he himself had slain. I loved animals, said one lost soul. I played violin. I was getting married in another week. I would have been the first in my family to go to college. I want my life back! Their outrage and hurt made the gorge rise in his throat and made his eyes smart with unshed tears. It was so easy to lose your way, to lose yourself in an immortal river of neverending sorrow...

But he forced himself onto a path, searching for a familiar face, familiar surroundings. He passed it up, then backtracked when he recognized his error. Right...there. Yes, there it was. He saw the Abyssus, and fleeting images of Dante and Michael. He felt the fear Carfax had known in his last moment. Fear and a peculiar kind of relief, because it was all over and there were no more fights to fight...

Putting out both hands, he laid them with gentle reverence upon the skull-face of the vampire Carfax. For a moment nothing happened. Then a humming began in his head, followed soon after by a steady rush of air that seemed to come at him from every angle. Then he was in the dark and he was falling and he was terribly, terribly afraid--

--of being wrong. It was a matter of esteem, you see, that the hivemaster always remain in the right. It would not do to be uninformed or off-balanced. It was bad if

an enemy found you thus; worse if it was one of your own. That was the thought centermost in Carfax's mind on the evening when the slayers showed up at the Abyssus on their infernal crusade.

Akisha came into the office. "They are here, my lord."

He wished he could ignore the almost taunting sound of her voice telling him about the arrival of the bloody headhunters, but he could not. Everything his Queen said to him was a mixture of worry and sadistic glee. Worry because she genuinely loved her people. Sadistic glee because she hated him as much as she loved them. Like all her cursed female-kind, she hated her dependence on him and enjoyed watching him squirm thus. "How many?" he asked as he set down his papers, all of them personal and very legal. Among them were his Last Will and Testament.

"Three. Two masters and a whelp."

Carfax looked up into her white porcelain-perfect face. "Who are they?"

She hesitated. "Dante and Michael. And Alek is with them."

"Alek? Isn't that the little whelp you fancy?"

"Alek is my friend," Akisha said neutrally. "And I would prefer it if you didn't harm him."

"Harm Alek?" Carfax asked. "Forgive me, my dear, but it is I who is under the blade, so to speak."

Akisha crossed her arms and looked aside. "If you had been more careful things would not have come down to this."

"You know," Carfax said, rising from his seat, "I often have cause to wonder whether you botched that experiment on purpose, just to be rid of me. You do have that curious history of losing mates, my Akisha, my black widow."

"You're paranoid and delusional, as usual," Akisha whispered.

Carfax hit her across the mouth. It was not a fierce blow, but it was enough to rock her back into the wall and make her slide down it to the floor in the slitted black leather gown she wore. All that grown-up clothes and makeup, and there she huddled like a broken little girl. Helpless. Hopeless. Both the pity and the revulsion rose up together in his throat. All the people to lose face to, to be weak before, but he would not show it to Akisha! He kicked her in the ribs and she doubled over on the floor, spitting blood. "I will die tonight, my dear. Have no doubts or worries over that. But then you must have cause to wonder: will your valiant and beautiful Alek come to your rescue? Will he bind you to him and take upon himself all your years of madness? Will he? I think he loves you. But, surely, he loves Amadeus more to be here in the company of those two butchers. Remember my words when I am gone, Queen Akisha. You love Alek, but what you love is spoiled. A vampire in love with a slayer...what a terrible, terrible joke."

Leaving her on the floor of his office, Carfax stepped out into the club.

The two masters were there, just as Akisha had said, their blonde heads nearly touching as they sat hunched at the bar like a couple of golden vultures, waiting for the dead to fall for them. A little ways off stood Alek, leaning against the graffiti-

sprayed wall in the shadows at the back of the club. Either he was there to serve sentence with the twins and was acting as backup, or he was there grudgingly and wanted nothing to do with this whole affair. Either way, he was as dead as the two slayers if he thought he would take the vampire Carfax without a fight.

Fixing his double-breasted suit coat and cravat, Carfax wound his way across the floor littered with half-intoxicated bodies. It was 1973 and Congress was debating the legalization of several different illegal substances, but the people here were not high on morphine, brown Mexican heroin or marijuana. Rather, the high was death...or near death. Blood loss to be exact--which, according to the patrons, was the sweetest high in the world. He didn't know from experience. He wasn't stupid enough to let someone bleed him. The paying customers, however, were another story.

Damn, but looking on it all reminded him of the poor sots lost in the opium dens of his native London. He took a deep breath and wondered if avoiding all that bloodletting was going to catch up to him someday. Maybe today.

The slayers eyed him with their usual combination of disgust, jealousy and disinterest. The disgust was for what he did here. The jealousy was because he dared do it at all. The disinterest was a put-on to keep the other emotions from bleeding through. But bleed through they did. Again he sought out the whelp at the back, but the only thing etched on Alek's pretty face was uneasiness. Perhaps it was the club. Perhaps it was because he was in the company of these two...gentleman.

"Michael...Dante," Carfax said magnanimously. "It has been a long time, hasn't it?"

Dante smiled. Michael did not. Dante was an impetuous thorn in the side. But Michael was a dagger in the throat. They were complete opposites...and yet dangerously similar. Dante was the gunman, Michael the strategist. Or so the rumors went back in the Peninsula, when the two of them drove out Napoleon's army as much with the rumors of their sadistic exploits on the surgery table as with their weapons. It was said they stole half-dead men off the battlefield, and that those men were never seen again. Or at least, not as they once were.

"Carfax," Michael whispered in greeting.

"Hello, old boy!" Dante picked his teeth with a toothpick. "How is it hanging? Still bent and shriveled?"

"Still the comedian, eh, Dante?" Carfax asked.

"Comedy and tragedy," Michael said evenly. "Which brings us to our purpose here."

"Of course."

"Seems you're to be knocked up to the ol' head block," Dante said with a bleeding joy Carfax found infuriating. Even back in their war days, when they worked together, there was no peace between the three of them.

"Dante..." Michael warned.

“Well it’s blimey true, ain’t it?” Dante laughed like a simpleton and spun around on the stool.

Michael stopped his brother’s spinning. He said to Carfax, “We’re here to serve notice.”

“I know. But why you two?”

“Excuse me?”

Carfax said, “Why did the Coven, that ruthless band of hypocrites, send you and Dante my way? Why not just send the whelp there?” He could have chosen his words better, but that no longer mattered. The truth was out and all hope demolished in it. They were here to kill him. Slay him for his God-given right to unlock the mysteries in the natural world. What did it matter if he pretended congenial now?

“I do not know why the Coven sent us in particular,” said Michael.

“That’s a bloody lie and you know it!” Carfax insisted. “You’re here for the Elixir. That’s the only reason you’ve come. You want to see if it works. If *my* Elixir works, so you can trout it back to your masters like the good little dogs you are!”

Dante stopped grinning like a fool and watched his brother’s next move.

Michael reached into his coat and pulled out the written order. He said, “We’re here to serve sentence, not to discuss Coven business with you. Had you wanted to be a part of our organization, you might have reconsidered leaving it.”

Carfax knocked the paper from Michael’s hand. “I was thrown out and you know it!” he said, his voice a low snarl. “Thrown out so I would finish the Elixir. The Coven has simply chosen this time to remove me so they can get at it.”

Michael looked away, then back again. “None of this is important. Only that the sentence is served out.”

Carfax felt his heart leap, and then calmed himself. He had one chance now and one chance only. Word and logic had failed on these two, something he once would never have believed could happen, and now he had only the loyalty of his own people to rely on. The power of the hive. “I understand,” he said.

“Are your affairs in order?” Michael asked. And there was kindness in his voice. Kindness but ice too.

“Yes...but, I am wondering...can I have a moment with the hive?”

Michael and Dante looked at each other. After a moment, Michael shrugged.

Carfax glanced at the back of the club. Alek had drawn his sword and was standing at attention--no doubt all the sudden shouting had pricked his fine dhampiri ears. Carfax had made provisions for all things but him. He had not expected the twins would come with an escort, but there was little to be done about Alek now. He could not altar his plans. Amadeus’s first acolyte was the one wild card in the room, and Carfax could only hope he was not as good as his master.

Checking over himself one last time, Carfax moved to the center of the room. The low psychedelic music stopped at once. Whatever the thralls and the human clients were engaged in stopped at once. All eyes turned on the hivemaster, because

of what he was and his power over this place. This place was a part of him, and a subtle victim of all his emotions. He silently contacted every member of the hive in one deft, almost offhand, thought. He felt their collective nod. The exchange happened quickly, and the twins did not look alerted to anything odd at all. They simply sat together at the bar, watching him.

Now Alek Knight...Carfax felt the tension there in the shadows. Turning slightly, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Alek was moving unsurely toward his two companions, an aura of worry about him. He felt it, goddamn him. So that meant Carfax must move quickly.

"It comes to my attention, my people, that I am to be removed as your leader. It seems the Coven has passed sentence upon me. And as much as I regret leaving you all, there is nary a thing any of us can do about it. And so I reckon I shall take my new rightful place." Dutifully he moved to the altar. This being an abandoned church, the altar still remained, with a stone cradle upon it, a device that was often used as entertainment. Tonight, however, the entertainment would be grim. Kneeling before the stone, Carfax motioned for the twin slayers to approach.

For a moment the two looked reluctant to pass sentence among so many. But after a moment the uncomfortable silence forced them from their seats. Michael hung back while Dante skipped ahead, that always-malicious glee on his pretty white face.

"I shall be what I must be, my people," Carfax intoned. "You hivemaster no more. I shall be--" Alek reached the front and was about to take Michael by the arm when Carfax said: "*YOUR GENERAL INSTEAD! TAKE THEM!*"

The room broke into chaos, a chaos so great even Carfax with his vast power to read and control minds lost track of the errant emotions surrounding him and crackling the air like a dangerous electrical storm.

"*TAKE THE SLAYERS!*" he bellowed. "*KILL THE SLAYERS!*"

The room surged forward as one. The vampires were loyal to him, but the humans were confused, requiring he push them with as much mental power as he could manage in that moment. And push them he did. Kill a few he did with his explosive command. Maim many others he did also. Some lost their mind or their vision, some bled from every orifice. Yet they did not let that stop them. Tumbling chairs and tables, slamming each other aside, leaping past stone and through glass, human or vampire, they jumped on the three slayers in the club like hungry fleas on a bloodied animal, like flies on a corpse. For a moment the slayers were caught in Carfax's vision--Alek grabbing Michael's arm, Dante looking off curiously and with shock--then they were gone, blanketed by the intruding, rabid-minded bodies. After that there was just the swarm, wood cracking, stone breaking, swords stabbing, blood pooling, jaws chomping with mechanized desire. Carfax smiled with grim satisfaction as the music of war roaring all about him. This was like the Peninsula. This was like Antietam. This was...glorious!

Something struck him in the shoulder, knocking him down beside the altar. It took him but a moment to twist around and recognize the face of the blonde longhaired slayer, the evil imp Dante. Somehow or other he had managed to escape the swarm, and even though his brother and the whelp slayer were still trapped under the melee, this one was stalking him like a little lion, jaws agape and foaming bloodily from the injuries he had sustained in the hive attack. And yet Dante's eyes gleamed with his usual malevolence.

"Good show, old boy...but 'tis the final curtain, wouldn't you agree?" Dante asked as he drew his sword, a long thin rapier he was considered a legendary talent with.

Carfax was no swordsman. In fact, he did not enjoy violence unless it was much needed. And he seldom committed it himself. He withdrew the only weapon he carried on himself: a modest if extremely sharp scalpel. It was an antique he had picked up on one of his travels, used by the sawbones of the ancient Roman Empire. But it was not for sentimental or historical reasons that Carfax carried it. Rather, it was because the curious little tool had been forged from iron, the only one of its kind Carfax had ever come across. He brandished it now, a tiny iron scalpel against a stainless steel rapier. And even so, he saw Dante hesitate in his step, afraid of the iron that could kill him.

It was all the opening Carfax needed. He was not a warrior, but he was quick, as all his kind was. Quick, and quite a bit older than Dante. And he had seen enough battlefields and carried off enough bodies to know how to fight when he needed to, when survival was at risk. He feigned a thrust, and Dante, the impetuous fool that he was, naturally went for it. Carfax ducked under the blow and came around behind Dante, his free hand pinioning Dante's arm to his back, Carfax's knife hand snapping up under Dante's chin. Dante stopped in mid-motion, the scalpel at his throat, and held perfect still.

The room fell silent around him. What once was all noise and violence was diffused as he commanded things to settle down. The vampires fell back, most or all dead from various sword wounds. Some lay perfect still. Some lay in pieces strewn here and about. Others gurgled off into dark corners where they had chosen to die. What remained were the two warriors, the two slayers, their swords drawn and bloodied from the impromptu massacre. Blood slathered them as much as it did their weapons--their hair, their black leather coats, their white virgin skin. On Michael it looked almost becoming because Carfax had seen it so many times. But on the other one it made him look a fright--all that whiteness and blackness tainted with red. He looked like some kind of ancient black-clad warrior sprung up from a Cornwall ditch somewhere, the Black Knight come to slay King Arthur.

Yet Alek the slayer was perfectly calm through it all. He had the perfect nature, Carfax realized, for a complete hunter. A complete murderer. Not so for Michael, who looked on Carfax and his captive brother with repressed terror and fury. And Michael never looked like this, never lost his calm and his reserve, except when

Dante did something stupid to enrage him or endanger himself. In fact, Michael looked ready to charge ahead blindly at Carfax, and just might have, except Alek put his hand on Michael's arm, halting his progress.

"Don't be stupid," Alek whispered through the blood on his mouth.

"Carfax is the bloody stupid one if he thinks he'll *ever* get away with this!" Michael said, eyeing the enemy like a frenzied animal caught in bloodlust. "Where are you going to go?" he asked Carfax. "Where are you going to hide?"

Honestly, he did not know. But he could not think about that right now. Right now, the important thing was to get out of this deathtrap. Once they were outside, out in the night where Carfax could breathe and think straight, he would think about what to do.

Alek said, "Michael is right, Carfax. Where are you going to run with a bounty on your head? And after this"--he indicated the bloody shambles of the club--"who is going to take you in? Certainly no hive in New York."

Again Carfax surveyed the room. It wasn't all that bad. They were his people. His thralls. His patrons. They had died for their leader. The humans asked their people to die for so much less, to die for vanity's sake, for pride. Yet the moment he caught a glimpse of Akisha standing in the doorway of the club, Akisha the only member of his former hive still alive, he found himself frozen by the hate in her eyes. The blame.

I did it for you, my mate, he told her through the special link they shared as blood-bonded mates.

You did it for you, she told him. And you did it for that Elixir...

Alek turned to Akisha as if he had heard their exchange. But that was ridiculous. They were not mates and he could not have heard her thoughts, unless he was utilizing some form of empathy so powerful it dwarfed even his power. And then he realized what Alek was doing. He was not listening to her. He was asking her permission to kill her mate. He was instigating an ancient law. As a slayer, he could kill any marked vampire. But as a vampire, or rather, as part of the community of vampires, he could do no such thing except with her permission.

Akisha nodded to Alek.

"No, you can't...it is forbidden except to those of our circle, Akisha!" Carfax told her.

Akisha looked at him and through him. "Alek is of our circle, my mate, and he wants to challenge you to this hive. What is your answer?"

Dante made a strangling sound in his throat. Michael practically rushed headlong at them both. Alek, however, intervened yet again, pressing both hands against Michael's chest and pushing him forcefully back, almost into the wall. Michael looked appalled but said nothing to the younger slayer.

"Akisha is right," Alek whispered. He handed Akisha his sword and coat, then turned to face Carfax, unarmed to show his intentions. "It's my right as a student of Akisha to challenge your right to the hive." Alek folded his hands in front of him in

the typical Shao-Lin stance of peace, the one Akisha had taught him all those years earlier when she had instructed him for a short time. "If you lose, you die by my hand. If you win, you die by the hand of the slayers. And if you leave without fighting, no hive in the world will ever accept you again. You will be hunted by your people until the end of your days."

Carfax snorted. "So you give me no escape at all."

"No...no escape. But if you fight me, I promise not to make you suffer in death."

"How gallant! Should I thank you?" Carfax pulled Dante up tighter and began to move sideways through the crush of bodies on the floor, toward the door. "No...I don't think so. I think I shall take my chances out in the world."

Alek dropped his hands. Carfax smelled the steel in them before he saw the throwing daggers in his sleeves flash. And then the blade was *in* Dante--Dante of all people!--and Dante was folding under Carfax's hold and there was nothing left for Carfax to do but drop him and take to the door like a bat out of hell itself--

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--except that Carfax never made it to the door. Using the second throwing dagger he carried in his opposing sleeve, Alek literally nailed Carfax to the broken plaster wall beside the door: the eight-inch blade, as slender as a tool yet as powerful as any of the weapons Amadeus had ever trained him to use, sank into Carfax's back. It did two things at once: it stopped Carfax, sealing him to the wall, and it severed his spinal column below the waist. Carfax screamed and scrabbled at the wall with his long painted fingernails, but it was a scream of rage and frustration, not pain. He could feel nothing below the waist.

The vampire's wails were the only sounds in the funeral silence of the club. The only sounds, other than the whimpers of the not-quite-yet-dead thralls and the quiet, panicked sounds of Michael going to his brother and holding him as he examined the knife that protruded from Dante's chest just above the heart.

"You...you!" Michael spat, but Alek turned away and moved swiftly to the door and to Carfax.

Carfax was helpless. A moderately sized man of moderately good looks, very European and infinitely proper. Now he simply looked like an insect smashed against a wall. Now he struggled like any animal stuck in a trap. As Alek approached him, Carfax sensed his doom and tossed back his head. "Don't let them take my Elixir! Don't let Rome have it!" he screeched through his teeth. Hair flying, body straining like a violin bow on the verge of snapping, he actually found the strength to pull himself from the wall, and, with a howl of feral anguish, turned on Alek one last time.

But Alek had gotten his sword back from Akisha before he approached the hivemaster. Carfax more or less turned right into it. Alek simply finished the process.

Akisha dropped where she stood, riveted to the floor by the sudden agony of her broken blood bond. Alek sheathed his sword and went to her and lifted her into his arms, taking her seemingly frail body back into the office so she could lie and recover upon the divan.

Her eyes fluttered open when he touched her hair.

"I need you," Alek began, "I need you to not tell anyone about tonight."

"That you...you killed Carfax.."

He nodded. She knew as well as he that by killing Carfax and by being a student of the hive Queen, he had the right--no, the duty--to claim himself as hivemaster and Akisha's new mate and master. And she knew as well as he did that as a slayer he could not perform such a duty. Not now. Not ever.

Yet she was hopeful, nonetheless. "Alek...won't you consider...?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Perhaps...one day..."

He kissed her mouth to silence her. "Tell your people Carfax was murdered by an enemy. Empirius. One of the other hivemasters. I don't care. Dante and Michael will have another story to tell, but the vampires won't believe a couple of insane slayers. "

He held her hopeful eyes a moment more. Then he went out into the battlefield again.

Don't let them take my Elixir! Don't let Rome have it!

He thought about the former hivemaster's words as he returned to Michael and Dante. He was curious enough to ask Michael what Carfax had meant, but one look from Michael shut him up at once.

"You son of a whore!" Michael snarled. "Look what you did!" With extreme precision, Michael managed to withdraw the switchblade from his brother's chest. Dante's body jumped at the last moment as the blade was freed from the sucking red cavity. Then Michael sliced his own wrist open with the blade and drizzled blood into his brother's open wound. All the while his eyes followed Alek around the room. Dante was bleeding, but not badly, and Michael's blood would certainly accelerate the healing. Alek had studied enough anatomy, vampire, dhampir and otherwise, and had practiced enough with the throwing daggers to know precisely how and where to toss them.

He had never posed a threat to Dante. Not a real one.

"He's not hurt badly. He'll recover," Alek said, annoyed and afraid of the anger pouring out of the always-placid Michael.

"You could have killed him, you stupid cunt!"

"But I didn't."

Michael glared at him, his brother's head cradled in his hands. "Leave now. I don't want to look at you again."

Alek buttoned his coat. "Fine. You clean up the mess here. I did my part." Breaking the heated eye contact with Michael, Alek picked through the bodies and headed for the door. But just as he reached the vestibule of the converted church, Michael's voice came to him again, drifting out of the steaming meat locker the club had become:

"If you ever endanger my brother's life again, I will hunt you down, whelp, and I will tear your heart beating from your chest!"

Alek ignored the threat and went out into the night.

Nothing very much did come of that night, all told. Akisha kept her promise and claimed the vampire Empirius slew her former mate. Michael and Dante either never spoke of it at all or were not believed, because the story stuck. Empirius, very much enjoying his sudden fame, settled a new hive in the Abyssus with Akisha. Rome and the Coven were satisfied if a bit surprised by the sudden decimation of Carfax's hive. And the twins went back to Europe to continue their experiments.

Alek never discovered what the "Elixir" was that Carfax didn't want Rome having. And he never saw the twins again until two nights ago. That night he got a lead on the serial murderer the papers were calling The Ladykiller--a roaming psychopath that was doing a Jolly Jack routine with a scalpel on the Lower East Side working girls. That was when he discovered the identity of the murderer as Dante. And that was when the whole mess suddenly turned personal.

21

It had been hard getting J. Stephan Paul's Manhattan address since Paul had not joined Horror Writers of America and wasn't listed in their directory. And since Alek could not very well get to him through his publisher, the whole affair caused quite a challenge. Undaunted, Alek called the one person in the city he knew would have the information he required.

Edward Ashikawa picked up on the third ring. Alek was surprised the number Edward had given him the last time they parted company was his personal cell number. "Yes, what can I do for you, dhampir?" the man said in his soft, almost hissing voice. There was no trace of an accent. As Alek paced across the library, his cell phone cradled in his neck, he sharpened his katana on a whetstone and wondered how Edward knew it was him--whether Alek was the only one who had this number, or if Edward was using some odd ability gained from the unnatural mixing of his blood with that of his vampires. Perhaps someone else might find it amusing to speak to the Dragon Lord of the New York City Yakuza, but Alek just wanted it over as soon as possible. Edward was a dangerous man and simply knew too much about everything.

"I thought...an exchange of information," Alek said.

"Ah. And here I thought you would be calling down a favor."

"And be in your debt? I don't think so, Edward."

"You play at honor, but you know nothing about it."

Nice line from *Kung Fu* or something, thought Alek. He was being cynical, but Edward always brought out the cynic in him. It had something to do with the fact that Edward was convinced Alek was an unlearned cretin and his perfect servant and would one day serve the Yakuza on his knees, not unlike Alek's recent nemesis Kage. But biting back the argument already taking form in his mouth, he said, "I have news that the Tong are moving 750 kilos on the Wharf."

"You know," said Edward, "I could pretend to know all this already and simply give you the information you require. Then you would be in my debt."

"But that wouldn't be honorable, Dragon."

"Perhaps you assume too much of me, Slayer."

Alek harrumphed.

"When are they moving?" Edward asked.

"In 72 hours, according to Jean Paul."

"Your *other* contact," Edward mused. "Seems you have one for one side of your nature and one for the other."

Alek ignored the jive and said, "I need information you probably have."

"Go ahead."

Ten minutes later, with the address written on a piece of paper in his hand and his coat slung over his shoulder--a stylish woolen one, for it was a brisk autumn day--Alek stepped into the dojo where Phoenix was practicing a combination of dance steps and war moves at the bar. She never stopped. Never quit. Not even to eat or drink.

But the moment she saw him she did stop, gliding gracefully to a dead halt. He had to admit she was incredible. Probably better than he was. Her clothing was soaked through with her sweat, her hair clinging like red vines to her white porcelain face. She looked on the brink of physical exhaustion and collapse.

"Are we going to the cemetery?" she asked, looking at his semi-formal clothing and coat.

"No. I have an errand to run. I want you to rest now."

"I want to go with you."

"No."

She scarcely seemed to move. And then suddenly she was in the air, striking at him with a sidekick, her voice a roar that made the mirrored walls at the bar shake as if with a storm.

Alek waited until she was practically upon him. Then he casually stepped aside and clotheslined her in the stomach. The impact arrested her momentum and made her crash to the floor in a sweating, trembling bundle. She recovered quickly, but the moment was lost, and instead of retaliating, she pushed herself to her knees and simply looked up at him, trembling with the mindless, clawing, seething anger going on inside of her.

“Lesson number four. Never attack in anger,” he said. “It is not an ally but a liability.”

“Fuck you,” she whispered and kicked at his legs.

He minced backward to avoid the impact, put on his day shades, and went out into the hall.

“I’m going,” she cried after him, standing in the doorway of the dojo. A threat. “I’m going and you can’t stop me! I hate you, Alek, I hate you...!”

I hate you, Alek, I hate you to hell! Debra’s words, once, spoken in childlike anger. Alek glanced aside at the mirror in the foyer but it was empty except for his own image.

Empty, he thought, like everything else in my life. When does the sorrow die?

22

An hour later he was on the penthouse balcony of one of the most exclusive skyscrapers in the city. The upper floor was dedicated to a members-only lodge called the Overlook Café, created for some of the most powerful men in the city. Bankers, Restaurateurs. And yes, authors. Alek had lived his entire life in New York City, and yet this was not the kind of exclusive club that he was familiar with. This was a club where the forbidden fruits were slightly more mundane: high-stakes gambling, high-end whores and five hundred dollar lunch platters. The maitre ‘d of the revolving glass-domed dining area received him graciously even if he was a bit annoyed by Alek’s overall presence and appearance. Alek thought it must be the black clothes and long hair, though he counted no less than three well-known heavy metal musicians sitting at tables in the dining area. No, then, it had to be because Edward had announced him.

“Mr. Paul is expecting you,” the man, who looked like some kind of Hammerstudios version of Count Dracula, said. Taking up a leather-bound menu, he led Alek around the perimeter of the dome to the back where a set of silk screens hid a small private section of the dining room from the rest of the diners. And there was J. Stephan Paul in a tailored Armani suit, sitting at a private table adorned with a white silk tablecloth and eating a steak the size of a small laptop computer.

Alek sat down in the chair across from him but did not remove his sunglasses. It was terribly impolite, he knew, and his strict European upbringing balked at the notion of sitting in a dining room behind a pair of shades, but the glass dome made the room so bright that even the little light leaking in around the rim of the glasses made him wince. Taking them off would make him effectively blind.

Alek waited to see if a busboy or a waiter would appear. None did. “Good afternoon, Mr. Paul,” he said.

“I don’t give interviews anymore, young man,” Paul said as he forked more mutilated cow into his mouth. The effect was...well, unnerving. Alek was reminded

of an animal at a trough. He tried to envision this man writing scandalous erotic romances, then stopped himself before he lost his lunch completely. The thought was almost as revolting as the overcooked animal he was feasting on. Paul looked up. "I told Ed that but he insisted I meet with you anyway."

"I'm not a reporter."

For a moment Paul simply sat there, staring at Alek with a kind of blinking, myopic interest. Alek could read nothing from the man other than an undercurrent of surprise. J. Stephan Paul had such a negative presence in the room it made Alek want to focus his thoughts elsewhere. The part of him that was Debra seemed momentarily taken aback, as if she neither liked nor trusted Paul. Alek only hoped Paul would not prove her correct. He would hate to think he sold out all those Tong punks to Edward for nothing that was worth saving.

"No," said Paul. "You're not." He put his fork down with a clink. "How do you know Ed?"

"We had some business a while back."

"Funny. I've never seen you in the club." Paul glanced around the domed dining area as if to emphasize his point.

"This isn't really my scene."

"I understand."

Alek didn't like the sound of that. Best to get things back on track. "I've come on a matter of extreme importance, Mr. Paul. I'm here to warn you about your publisher, Mr. Brett Edelman."

"Brett?" Paul took a long noisy sip of his café au lait.

"Yes, Mr. Paul. It's come to my attention that he means to do you some harm."

Paul sat back in his chair. "Does he?"

"You suspect him?"

"I've always suspected Brett."

Alek leaned forward. "Then you must believe me. I wouldn't have come here looking for you if I thought it was a joke. Brett Edelman disclosed his plans to me personally."

Paul's eyes grew wider still behind the lenses of his Coke-bottle glasses. "To you?"

Alek nodded.

"Oh...my. Oh...well, this...this is unbelievable."

"I know."

"And wonderful." Paul smiled.

Alek shook his head. "What?"

Paul shrugged. "I mean, I admit...it's an interesting disguise...but you don't really look human in that, you know."

"Excuse me?"

His eyes gleaming with a kind of peculiar mirth, Paul leaned in close and whispered his next words in a conspiratorial tone. "I know about Brett's plans. And I know what you are. But I had no idea he would act on it."

"It?"

"The tape. I saw it. Well...part of it. The secretary who works for Brett at Summit Books is on my payroll. She keeps me abreast of Brett's dealings, he's such a conniving sonofabitch. I saw the tape, and naturally, when he approved of my plans to drop out of society, I knew he was up to something. I've worked with the man for over 14 years now and you get to know someone pretty well in that time." Paul dabbed properly at his mouth with his napkin. "The point is...I know damn well he wants to off me."

Alek couldn't believe this. "Have you gone to the police?"

"Of course not! I can't accuse Brett Edelman of deadly intentions. Anyway, I wanted to see if he would act on it. If he would go to you. Obviously, he did."

"So you knew he would come to me?"

"Well...to one of you, anyway."

"One of me?"

"To a slayer. I just didn't know he had the balls to go to *the* Slayer. He impresses me. He really does."

"And how exactly do you know who I am, Mr. Paul?"

Paul shrugged, making the chair he sat in squeak. "He and I have some common interests. More precisely, those intriguing clubs you vampires run. He and I don't frequent the same club, of course, but that's besides the point..."

"I'm not a vampire," Alek said evenly.

Paul's eyes halved menacingly. "You're not, are you? You're one of the rare and deadly dhampiri. Half human, half vampire. That's like a nobility, isn't it?" Again that mischievous smile. But when no answer was forthcoming from Alek, he went on. "Tell me, Mr. Knight, does it make you feel better to call yourself that? Does it make you feel more human to say you are a dhampir?"

Alek looked away over the city strewn about at his feet like components on a circuit board. "I think that, too, is besides the point, Mr. Paul."

"Is it? I think it's a fascinating subject. A man who is not a man. A hunter hunted by a legion of immortal underworld soldiers. A creature so painfully human and yet so profoundly different from us."

Alek looked back at the man. "As usual, you overromanticize everything."

"Perhaps." Paul sipped his coffee and held Alek's gaze. "So you've read my books."

Alek ignored the question, folded his hands on the table, and got right down to the heart of things. "Is this the place where you offer to write my memoirs, Mr. Paul?"

"Yours? No. In reality, I find your story rather dull, Mr. Knight. What would I call it? *Interview With the Vampire Slayer*? All that running around the city at night,

fighting with swords and all? I'm afraid it's all been done before. No, I am more interested in employing you than I am in writing about you."

Alek let out a sigh. "Would it surprise you to know I don't need the work?"

"But the money...?"

This was pointless. Alek began to get up. "I have a lot of money, Mr. Paul. I don't need yours."

"You can never have too much money. Especially if you plan on being around a long, long time." The look on Paul's piggish face was infuriating.

Why had he ever come here? Alek wondered. What was he thinking? As Alek stood up, Paul grabbed his wrist, then let go as if he had been burned. He looked at his hand as if he half-expected to see something there.

"You're cold," Paul said.

Alek smirked. "That's what they tell me."

"Look," said Paul, favoring his hand, "I can make this worth your time. Brett, that shiteater, wants to kill me..."

"And now you want me to kill him."

"You'll be doing the world a favor, believe me--"

Alek reached out and grabbed the author by the lapels, pulling him close. Paul stiffened the moment Alek put his hand upon him but did not try to resist as Alek brought the man to within inches of his face. Paul's eyes and nostrils flared with danger. "Mr. Paul," said Alek, "forget about murdering your publisher. Forget about these games. Get yourself a new publisher. Read a book. Take up a hobby. Take care of your family and stay out of these affairs." Alek let go and the man rocked back like a pendulum, practically slamming down into his chair. The waiters looked over and whispered among themselves, but Alek ignored them.

"Go live your life," Alek whispered as he drew his coat close and turned to leave. "Death catches up to us all in time. Of *that* you can be completely sure."

23

She never realized how lonely a cemetery could be. Not scary. Just alone. Lonely. Phoenix moved past the odd assortment of graves, some of them a hundred years old, her Doc Martens squishing against the wet earth and grass. She stopped to take a flower from each grave. A lily. A rose. Most of them were dry and brittle, a victim of the early September frost. But that didn't bother her. Dead flowers for a dead soul, she thought, standing up with an armful of brown flowers.

The wind skated her hair away from her face. Cold. There would be snow again soon, so much frost so early this year. She found the moon over the hump of this next hill, half hidden by a mausoleum with angels atop it, but that too was cold. One cold face shining down on another.

She shivered. Oddly, she felt nothing. Nothing but cold, as if she were still in the stainless steel drawer of the morgue. As if she had left her body behind there somewhere.

She stomped over to Lilly's new grave, walking on the turf that had been laid just the day before, and carefully laid all the grave flowers down. Most were so dead they were whisked away by the night wind.

Phoenix stood up and found the straight razor in her pocket, the same one she tried to take her own life with, once, a long time ago, in a time before she hadn't had Lilly to look after. When she had had nothing to live for, no reason to care. The blade of the razor was cold white like the moon. She cut the cold white flesh of the palm of her hand and watched the black blood drip down onto a brown rose as a tingling sensation played throughout her hand and arm. Then the wound sewed itself up like a special effect in a movie. She cut the same hand again, and then again. Same result.

She could go on forever. She almost wanted to.

She looked down at her feet, at the blood, the immortal blood, spattered everywhere. On her shoes, on the flowers, on Lilly's grave.

For Lilly, she thought.

24

The first discovery that Brett Edelman made on inviting himself into Michael's suite in the Melmouth Hotel was that Michael had not been alone. He looked around the room after the slayer let him in. Empty wine bottles and a flotsam of room-service trays proved that not only had Michael not been alone last night, but that he hadn't allowed a maid to clean up after himself and his guest, either. And yet, by far the oddest things to be found here was the miscellaneous equipment scattered around between the more mundane things. Lab equipment, Brett guessed. But he couldn't be certain because it looked like lab equipment which might be found in some creepy old Hammer film: coiled conducting tubes, beakers half full of odd-colored substances, glass apparatuses, medical kits fitted with weird instruments that all looked particular sharp in one way or another, and--oddest of all--four large stainless steel canisters on the table between the double beds. They looked for all the world like giant modern canoptic jars.

Michael closed and locked the door behind him.

Brett turned around, a knot of fear balling up his stomach. It was the kind of scorching, acidic fear he had not known since he was a little boy on the way to the dentist's office. And that fear only edged up a notch when Michael looked at him.

Anything that might have been passingly human in the dhampir Alek Knight was absent in Michael. Those long, slitlike, unmistakably baleful eyes, the immovable mouth, the bloodless, crystalline fingernails, the skin so white and perfect it might

have been made of plastic, the whole being more like a weirdly-crafted doll or mannequin than anything alive--it was unnerving. Michael stood there in an old-fashioned black velvet frock coat and ruffled shirt and cravat, his arms casually crossed but his entire form at rigid attention in a posture that reminded Brett more of a lion considering a herd of grazing gazelle than anything humane. And for a moment, Brett was completely undecided about what to say. It had taken a combination of cajoling and outright threats before Michael agreed to see him, and now that Brett was here, facing the vampire, he was struck dumb.

Finally, Michael chose to speak. "You blokes. You stupid, suffering lot."

"What?" And Brett's voice came out much softer and squeakier than he had ever heard it in his entire adult life.

Michael smiled malignly. "You think you are superior to us because you run this old globe. You think you are so clever. So...immortal. But you could go extinct in a heartbeat. Plague. Meteor. It's happened before. And besides, despite the fact that you breed like locusts, how great are your lives in comparison to our own?" The vampire dropped his hands but made no move to jump Brett or do him harm. Not that Brett could do much about it if he did.

Brett swallowed and wiped at the sweat on the backs of his hands. He had listened to vampires and their kind talk before, many times, but never with this kind of superiority complex. He doubted even the Slayer, with his terrible reputation, felt this way about Brett's human race. "Your kind die too," he said. "I've seen it."

"Yes." Michael's eyes clouded over a moment, then snapped back to their present sparkling malice. "We all die. Yet it is the measure of how we live which determines our greatness. And Man is so very small..."

"I didn't come here to debate with you," Brett said, getting angry now.

Softly, Michael said, "Why did you come?"

For a moment Brett thought he heard something, something soft, like a gentle tinkling noise. Like someone tapping on glass. He was tempted to look behind him at the sliding glass doors hidden by heavy drapes, but he resisted the urge. He didn't want to look away from Michael, not for a moment. And anyway, there could be no one else here. If Michael had had company last night as Brett suspected--the whore, as Brett recalled--she was gone now.

Clearing his throat, Brett said, "I came to discuss the Slayer."

Michael narrowed his eyes to mere threads.

"I know him, you see," said Brett, lighting a cigarette to keep his hands steady. "I've talked to him--"

Michael charged forward. Brett realized he could do nothing, not even when Michael plucked the cigarette from his mouth and backhanded him across the cheek. Brett crumpled to the floor, his mouth on fire and full of coppery bitterness. Jesus. He never even had even a moment to react. The blow wasn't staggering, did not even spin his vision around, but it had been so fast and unexpected, Brett did not

doubt, even a moment, that these things could kill you before you even knew you were dead.

Michael ground out the cigarette in the ashtray on the table between the two beds, and then he was back in front of Brett, all of it done in such a single fluid motion it almost seemed like Brett had dreamed the last few seconds.

"Don't smoke in here," Michael said coldly. "There are dangerous chemicals you know nothing about!"

"Fuck you."

"Would you like to? But I seriously doubt you could satisfy my needs."

Brett touched his mouth, wondering if it was as red as it felt. "I suppose you had your fill of your girlfriend last night."

"My...?" And then Michael laughed and Brett looked at him, past the groomed Old World British exterior, and realized the thing was inhuman, mad, and possibly going to kill him before he left this room. "My dear chap, I am a priest! I don't have girlfriends."

"But..."

"The redheaded whore? Would you like to meet her?" Michael asked.

No! thought Brett as an unreasonable fear bubbled and boiled within him. No no no no...!

Michael put his hands together. "I assure you she is as chaste as she was...well, as she may or may not have been before I ever touched her. We vampires are an odd lot, you see. We prefer common blood." He turned to the table where the ashtray had his dead cigarette in it and where the three big stainless steel canoptic jars sat.

"Common blood?" Brett mimicked.

"Hmm...yes. We tend to depend on our blood relations to satisfy our sexual appetites."

"You mean, you and...him..."

Michael tilted his head. The look of malice had been replaced with one of almost infinite sorrow. "My brother and I have been many things to each other over the long years. We--I--am over four hundred years old, you see. And we were together since the very beginning. There has not been a day in my life until recently that I have not wakened to see Dante's sweet face on the pillow beside me. Now, though...well..."

"You're fucking sick," said Brett.

The sorrow vanished on the smooth, angelic face. "Ah yes, I forgot your human conditioning," he said as he undid the latch on the nearest jar. The jar gave a feral hydraulic hiss on opening.

Brett watched the jar, vaguely aware that he ought to get up and run for his life. But as if he were some stupid victim in a horror film, he simply sat there, his back to the foot of the bed, watching Michael flip the top of the jar back. "Conditioning...?"

"Yes, conditioning. All those human laws and instincts to keep the gene renumbering from breaking down. Humans mustn't mate with their siblings or their

mothers or fathers. It produces an unclean bloodline, according to the ancients. Actually, the overcompatibility of the genetic codes causes a breakdown in the amino acids that make up the gene helix and the poor creature suffers and dies. Not so with us. Our genes are unique in that they can be spliced with virtually any organic matter in the world and still retain their form. That's the primary property of what Dante and I used to jokingly call the 'V Factor.' Why is it a vampire or dhampir can regenerate wounds or lost parts of their bodies? Why do we cease to age at one point? Why can we not die of natural causes? These are the questions he and I and a choice few others have been searching for answers to for hundreds of years."

Michael paused to reach into the massive jar and lift out a more conventional specimen jar. It was still enormous, but not unlike what Brett had once seen in his high school science lab, the ones where they kept frogs and sometimes larger animals in formaldehyde. This one, however, was not filled with any substance Brett recognized. The fluid in this jar was jet black, like ink. And anything in the jar was obscured.

"We used to believe the secret was in the blood," Michael went on, admiring the enormous glass jar and the inky substance licking at the sides of it. "But you see--vampires have no blood of their own. At least, not the substance we accept as blood, which is why we must take it from a host or a victim. No, we had been pursuing the wrong avenue for centuries. And then your technology improved and we were able to delve much deeper into the question." He looked up and smiled. "The secret is here." He touched his temple with one long, untrimmed fingernail.

"Your head?"

"My brain, to be exactly. Our brains. The vampire brain secretes a hormone capable of complete regenerative abilities. The substance has a very large scientific name, but suffice to say we who study it simply call it Elixir. An amazing substance, it has no decay time. Nor does it dissipate in the body as hormones are supposed to do. In fact, it doesn't appear to do anything but build on itself and create colony after colony of V Factor helixes. The older the vampire, the more infused with Elixir it becomes. The more powerful. The more indestructible. Rome has been fascinated by Elixir for decades and it has been my and my brother's primary mission to disclose its true potential. If such wonders can be worked on a vampire body, what then on a human...?"

"You said Man was small."

"He is," Michael said. "And infinitely precious to us. Without Man, we the Vampire must die. Cause and effect. The balance of Nature." And reaching into the jar with both hands, Michael slowly began to lift something heavy and squirming from the black depths of the jar. "This is Elixir," Michael whispered, "And this is Man when he is exposed to it."

Brett stared at the thing in Michael's hands with an even mixture of fascination and overwhelming disgust. He knew what it was on an academic level, but seeing it, smelling it, being this close to it, made his mind want to shut down and deny its

existence. It couldn't be. It just couldn't. Something like this belonged in a bad science fiction movie, not in real life. Not here now. Not in the really real world.

The jet-black substance drained off the thing and yet defined the odd alien landscape of it, the intricately whorled grey matter, the great, bloated pestilence of it because it had obviously been feeding off the Elixir--not drinking it, surely, because a brain could not, it had no mouth, but absorbing it through the pores. It had to be. It was too large. Or perhaps it was the tail--made up of a good two and a half feet of curling and uncurling raw ivory-white vertebrae that gave it that affect. Of being huge. Alive. Alive, yes. It was definitely alive. Brett could see that easily. The way it moved and tried to resist Michael's hold on it like a frightened animal. But how? Brett's mind screamed. *How the fuck could anything like that be alive?*

He must have said that last aloud. Either that, or his thought-scream had been so loud Michael the mad scientist had heard it. He said, "I told you. Elixir."

"Keep that fucking thing away from me!" Brett screamed, scrambling to his feet. But the bed was there and the backs of his knees hit the frame and he collapsed upon it, unable to do much more than stare at the living, pulsing horror in Michael's hands.

The creature's tail curled briefly around one of Michael's wrists, then let him go. "I assure you: it's harmless. What will Cherry do to you, Mr. Edelman? Bite you?" Michael snickered.

"Cherry," Brett whimpered. And then, "You're a fucking murderer!"

"Au contraire. Cherry is still very much alive. In fact, she will live forever."

"In a jar."

One of Michael's shoulders lifted in a little shrug. "There are worse places to be." Then he put the thing back into its jar. The moment he let it go it started to move in an abbreviated swim around the confines of its new home, its bony tail clinking against the glass of the jar, making that sound Brett had heard earlier, that horrible sound. Without another word, Michael lifted the jar and placed it back into its hermetic container, sealing it shut. "At least now her life will be worth something to someone. We will study her for years to come, to see how she grows and changes." *Hiss...* and the cap was sealed. "Perhaps one day we will run our cities and computers like this. Perhaps this will be embraced as the new immortality. The new technology. Do you realize what this represents for your world, Mr. Edelman?"

"You're motherfucking insane." Yet he realized how wrong his words were the moment he uttered them. Things like this were not done by insane men. They were done by men who knew exactly what they were doing and how to do it. He sat up on the bed and looked at the door. He might still be able to make it, at least to open the door and cry out for help. Surely someone would hear him and come. A bellboy. The manager. *Someone*. He only needed to distract Michael long enough to make it out of this den of immortal horrors. "How...how long have you been at this?"

"Dante and myself? About twenty years. We have quite the menagerie in the Vaults in Rome, I assure you. We collect specimens and send them back to the

Cardinal who handles the inventory. But I must admit our research began over a hundred years ago, and that not all of it was very successful. In the Nineteenth Century we were still living in Whitechapel and finding our way. And sometimes making quite the mess. Since then we've made a few improvements on the old method. Why, one day we"--a darkness passed across his face when he realized what he had just said--"I may even conclude this experiment and move onto others. I haven't decided yet."

He put one finger to his lips and seemed to ponder something deeply. "That was why we came here to New York in the first place. We wanted to look in on an old field experiment and see how it had fared. But then Dante suggested we collect specimens before we return to Rome and I, being myself, could deny my brother nothing, as infuriatingly impetuous as he was, and agreed to it." Michael looked up. "Unfortunately, the Slayer got in our way."

Brett shook his head helplessly. "The more I learn about you and Dante the more I like that other guy."

"The Slayer." Michael's face flatlined. He looked at the jars all in a row. The first one clinked again. The other two were silent. "He should be part of the menagerie. We should see how a dhampir's brain differs from the human and vampire brains we have collected over the years. But somehow or other, I doubt that will ever happen." He undid one of the other canisters and removed an empty jar full of the black fluid, setting it on the table. "It's a very delicate operation, you see, requiring complete patience and self-control, and I very much doubt I should be able to control myself around him."

Michael looked over at Brett.

Brett swallowed but his throat was like scorched earth. "Why are you telling me all this?"

Michael tilted his head. "The scalp is peeled away from the skull, then the back of the skull perforated by a bone drill. The spinal column is left intact, of course. The brain and the great vertebrae are removed as one. The complete operation takes less than an hour if you know what you are doing."

"I told you," Brett said, "I know him...the Slayer. We talked. You touch me, he'll--"

"Do nothing," Michael answered. "He and I have never been friends, but I know him well enough to know he would not associate with one such as yourself. He has better tastes than that. You planned on selling him out to me. But you see"--Michael smiled, a dazzling smile of heartlessly perfect teeth--"he already belongs to me. Like you do."

Awash in a sudden sea of unbelievable, mind-numbing fear, Brett more or less threw himself off the bed, landed hard on the floor, hurting his shoulder, but still managing to use the momentum to spring back onto his feet. Then the room blurred all around him as he lunged for the door. One twist and he could scream for help...

The only trouble was, he had forgotten that Michael had locked the door and that it was one of those hotel locks which required a key to open it. Still he rattled the knob, oblivious to reason, hoping against hope, against the unbelievable odds themselves, that the door would magically spring open. He could see it happening. He could see himself escaping...

"Mr. Edelman."

Letting go of the knob, Brett turned around and threw his back to the door.

Michael was standing in the same place Brett had left him, at the table where those terrifying silver canoptic jars sat with their menacing presences. But now he had an almost innocuous looking scalpel in his hands. Michael said, "Did you honestly believe you were walking out of here tonight?"

Brett opened his mouth and screamed for help, his wavering, terrified voice filling the room and making the glass apparatuses rattle. He screamed until the air went out of his lungs. Then he pounded against the locked door, pounded until his arms ached and his body sagged in exhaustion and fear.

And still Michael stood there, smiling his un-smile. "This room is specifically soundproofed, Mr. Edelman. My brother and I are smarter than that, believe me. And anyway, the people in this building are Coven. This building belongs to Rome."

Brett sank down with his back to the door. Suddenly the need to sob was overwhelming. And sob he did. "Leave me alone!" he cried. "Just leave me alone! I don't want to die!"

"Mr. Edelman," Michael said with slitted eyes and a soft, coaxing voice as he approached the crying man, "There is absolutely nothing further from my mind."

25

She watched the Slayer whip the sword around, bringing it to within a hair's breadth of the neck of the stuffed dummy hanging from the dojo ceiling. The blade virtually sang with power, as if alive in his hands, alive and throbbing with a heartbeat that seemed almost human. He froze momentarily as if he was listening to it.

Phoenix, standing there, dressed in one of his oversized shirts, felt a jolt of jealousy at the simply and perfect way he had with the sword. Jealous of his grace because she was graceless. Jealous of his beauty because she was not beautiful. But most of all, jealous of the way he controlled his sorrow. It was there inside of him. She could feel it, lodged like a little lead ball in his stomach, slowly killing him. And yet he lived past it. Why couldn't she be like that? She couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. She could barely read the books he had given her. She thought her trip to the cemetery would do something, shake something free, but it only made the sorrow worse. The sadness immortal. If only I could stop *feeling*, she thought in utter despair. If only I could stop seeing Lilly's face. If only for an hour, a minute...

She clenched her fists over the scars in the palms of her hands that were no longer there. She was close to tears and she hated herself for that. But sniffing them back only brought the Slayer's utterly acute attention around to her.

He stopped, lowered his sword, and watched her for some moments. Watched her as he had watched her so often in the club while she danced. Watched her like some placid forest animal. Watched her as if he were silently trying to communicate something to her. Something important. He was the same being she had known then, tall and beautiful and utterly deadly, like some exotic animal, a black and white tiger perhaps. Or a great snake. He was sweating and unkempt from a long hot morning of kata--the sweat was in his long blue-black plaited hair, on his eyelashes like gems--but still a wonder to see.

She wished she could be like him. No...she wished she *were* him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

His voice had an odd affect on her. It was sharp and raspy and quiet, like a man who had cried too much in his life and was suffering for it. She stepped into the dojo and gave him back the book. It was Dickens. *Hard Times*. "I'm letting you down."

"You're not letting me down."

"I went to see Lilly yesterday, but it just made it worse," she said. "I want to be good. A warrior. But there's so much inside I can't Control it. I feel like it's tearing me apart. I want to hurt him so much. I want..."

He reached out and stroked her hair.

She didn't want to trust him. She didn't want to need him. But she did.

It wasn't fair! She'd been on her own since she was twelve and no one had ever done shit for her. And now this...and she didn't know what to do with it. She didn't know what to say to him. She didn't know how to show him how much this meant to her. The hard work and the sweat and the blood he gave her and the bruising he gave her too, because they were making her what she wanted--needed--to be. They were forging her. Like a sword. Like a warrior.

She didn't understand why he cared so much. She didn't understand why she did.

She leaned into him and buried her face against his shoulder so he would not have to see her tears and her loss of Control.

He held her and rocked her and said meaningless little beautiful things to her. She shook like someone wracked by a deadly fever, wracked and wanting and utterly destroyed. And then suddenly she was up in his arms and she clung to him and he was lowering her gently to the mat beneath them. She lay there, blinking up at him, mystified by his actions. But not afraid. She trusted him. She did. He knelt over her, only watching her with his great breathless silence, his eyes tracing the pathway of her tears as if he meant to take them from her.

"I haven't cried in years," he said with some regret.

"I'll cry for you," she said. It seemed all she was good at doing these days. Where was the girl who could fight anyone? The girl able to claw at attackers, to spit at the

feet of punks? Where was Irena who protected and provided for Lilly? Irena was dead. As dead as Lilly. They were buried together.

The neverending well of grief threatened to overwhelm her again. She turned aside her head so as to keep him from seeing.

He leaned down and kissed the corner of her eye and drank the tears off her face. His touch was like a brush of velvet. His mouth and his hands where they fell upon her soothed her like an elixir. A balm. Not just her bruised and aching body, but her soul as well. As if he were singing a lullaby to her in some strange old language she had never heard before yet knew instinctively. Telling her it was all right. That she was safe and valuable to him. She sighed and turned her head and blinked up at him. She felt the gift of his kiss like the brush of moth wings on her mouth, not sexual, not even sensual, but loving. Cherishing.

Phoenix smiled through her tears. "What did you do? You didn't take--?"

"Your pain? I won't do that. You need your pain. One day you'll see that."

He dropped kisses on her face, and with each one an insurmountable weight seemed to lift. The pain and anger were still there--how could she ever forget how she had let Lilly die?--but now the mindless rage that made her want to tear down the walls around her had gone, leaving in its wake only a lurid and conniving sorrow, like a hole through her heart. It still hurt. It hurt so bad. But now she realized she would one day be able to live with it. She would survive it.

She would survive her sadness like he survived his.

He sat back on his heels.

But the distance between them brought the crushing weight of misery back so quickly that Phoenix felt she would never move again. She would simply lie here for all eternity while the pain ate her alive. "Please," she said. She hated herself. She covered her face. "I can't bear this anymore."

He considered that. Something passed across his face. A decision.

He crouched over her again, pulled loose his flood of inky hair, this time covering her with his body and hair and strength. She felt a faint stirring of fear and licked her lips nervously, but his bare skin touched hers and again alighted the odd feeling of weightlessness in her. His hair fell in loops across her cheeks and throat and she turned her face to feel its soft scented weight drift across her mouth. "Lie still," he whispered wetly into her ear. She did. He kissed her again, a deeper, tongue-rasping kiss, and she tasted blood from where his sharp eyeteeth pricked her lower lip. He narrowed his eyes. They seemed darker somehow, more feral. Primitive.

Her heart tripped. Something inside told her what that meant.

"Will it hurt?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good."

He closed his eyes. "But you must be certain. I can't...undo this once it's done. I'll be a part of you forever. Even after I'm gone you will carry my blood with you even as I carry the blood of my master within me."

She touched his hair, kissed his mouth reverently. There was sex and sensuality in the kiss, but it was more than that. It was like a communion of sorts. He kissed back, slowly, as if savoring her. "My Master..." The words did not seem silly and did not embarrass her to say them.

He kissed her once more, but now the touch of his mouth was more aggressive and taking. It took all of her Control to keep from pushing him back. She'd never liked a male's touch before. Too many times in JV halls, and sometimes in foster homes, some man had stood too close to her and tried taking her against her will. She had never been with a man before. They were too frightening, demanded too much of you, like vampires trying to steal your soul so they could wound it and make it bleed. They made you feel small and helpless and afraid. She whimpered, but to her surprise, he didn't yank at her clothing or pinch or bruise her flesh like the men she had known before. The men who had wanted her and tried to hurt her. He did not hit her when she panicked and put her hands to his chest and pushed him away. He was not like them, she reminded herself. Not a man. He was one of her own. He sat back and waited. She relaxed and opened herself to him again, welcoming him, and tried to enjoy the comforting warmth his touch brought to the surface of her skin. She touched his great black mane of hair, then held his head against the side of her throat and felt the press of his kiss there. His teeth.

He hesitated and she tipped her head back, inviting him to take.

"I'll harm you there," he said and slowly began to unbutton her shirt. She should have panicked, but instead she only lay still, watching him attend to her. He took such care, touching her with such reverence. The air was cool against her bare skin, his touch cooler still. He ran the back of one finger down her throat, from the scar she had there to the valley between her breasts, then circled the nipple of her left breast, bringing a flush of color to all her white skin. He kissed her there and she felt his rough tongue dampen the tip, then his teeth close around it as he suckled her.

He tried to be gentle, but it still hurt as he said it would. The press of his teeth against her flesh brought a shiver of fright to her skin. She arched involuntarily, and only the force of his hands kept her back to the floor. The pain was like a knife in her heart, a knife to which her entire body responded. And then it was done and the sweat was on her skin from the pain and he was there, sponging blood from the wound with his tongue and she wondered if this was what it had been like on the night Bellerophone had taken her, her back to the rough stone wall of a stinking and lonely dead end space as he killed her, and wished she could remember it all more clearly. No, she thought as she felt the smallest bit of herself leak out through the tiny wounds he had made, the wounds he nursed at, it could not have been like this. Not for her. Not for Lilly. Lilly. Her Lilly...

Her body screamed with the rage. For herself. For the dead who came back and for those who did not. She felt her whole body contract with the rage. She heard it echo inside her head and out. She heard her voice, a hoarse roar that turned her throat to sand and made her vision blur and run like rain. He was there again, her

murderer, his bulk holding her down as he fed from her in the back of that reeking back alley, and she pounded helplessly against him with her fists, pounded and screamed and clawed like a cat, pouring her rage into him, making him eat that too along with her blood and her soul. Making him suffer even as she suffered...

"Phoenix."

Her vision ran clear and she saw him above her, her master, the Slayer, and stopped striking his back with her fists. His eyes were halved and bleeding over with tears. Red tears. Her pain and he was shedding it for her. She saw with wonder that a single lock of his black hair had turned white from root to tip, white like a witch's streak.

He bowed his head and wept, shivering, each tear wrung from his body like a labor, those tears falling upon her skin like rain. Her pain, her blood. And her skin absorbed it all. But now the rage was silent. She felt exhausted, inside and out, drained to the dregs of her soul. She touched the mark on her breast, his mark, smaller than the one Bellerophone had tattooed across her throat yet somehow more powerful than his had been, but there was little pain there now. It was all used up.

The Master sniffed and wiped the blood off of his face.

She touched his white lock. He was just beautiful. Her Master.

And she loved him. Loved him as she had loved Lilly. But it was a different love.

Thank you, she mouthed.

He said nothing. He carried her upstairs and put her to bed because she was quite incapable of walking on her own. She was so tired. So weak and used up. Cold. He removed his clothing and hers and lay down beside her, giving her his spare warmth, entangling her in his arms, his webwork of long hair, his words. He let her drink him as well, and showed her how to do it safely. She lapped at his skin, at the little wound she had made over his heart, cleaving to its warmth and strength.

His words sang to her. Much was in English, but oftentimes he used other languages. Languages she could not know, yet did. Their bond grew so that words were no longer needed. He told her things, about survival, about war, about history, and he spoke these things to her thoughts. He made her understand with the pictures in his mind. She fell asleep sometime in the early morning, her face pillowed on his hair and her mind full of the visions of the night and what it meant to someone like her born to her blood.

Phoenix awoke alone, which frightened her some. It must be late evening, she thought. The light leaking past the heavy drapes was a bleeding crimson.

But her Master was gone.

She pushed herself up, sliding against the black satin sheets. His side of the bed was still warm, so he must have just recently risen.

Then she heard the voices talking.

Getting out of bed, she slipped on his robe and went downstairs and followed the murmur of the voices out to the garden.

Master was there, dressed in a long black kimono, the sword at his side. He was talking to two men sitting at the top of the ten-foot-tall wall that surrounded the garden. Both men crouched atop the wall, seemingly more like animals than true men.

As Phoenix stepped into the garden, she understood why.

They were not human. She felt it.

Even the rabbits felt it, scrambling in their cages like terrified beings in a hailstorm.

The one, a vampire, was lithe and small and blonde, like a yellow fox. The other was an oddity. He was not a vampire, nor even a dhampir, but he clearly was not human, either. He was much larger and imposing yet no less graceful. This one was like a tiger. The little vampire turned his hungry attention immediately upon Phoenix. Yet it was the big one who fascinated her. He was so familiar, yet she did not recognize him at all.

"Is this your little whelp, Slayer?" the blonde asked. He had a thick British accent, like an actor in an old movie.

Master moved to block her from his view. "This doesn't concern her, Michael."

The big man grinned. "Hello, sweetness," he said.

Phoenix collapsed to her knees, almost vomiting, such was the force of his voice. That voice...

Bellerophone. But it could not be him...

Alek looked from her to the big creature-man. "Who's your friend, Michael?"

Michael indicated his associate. "This is Chimera. I'm surprised you two have not yet met. Chimera is a...field experiment of mine on this side of the pond."

"Chimera," Master said, standing over Phoenix so as to protect her. "What is he? One of those ghouls you and Carfax enjoyed creating so much?"

Chimera grinned, showing the mouthful of enormous catlike teeth he had used to take both her and Lilly's life away with. The teeth, his stink--heavy cologne to hide the sweet odor of constant decay--they were both familiar. But this wasn't the man from the street. This wasn't even the man from the club. Again he had changed. How did he change?

But Master sensed her confusion, because he said to Michael, "You taught it Glamour."

"A necessary evil, you realize," Michael said. "You don't really want to know what Chimera looks like under all that illusion. Trust me. He's a fairly successful project overall, but his regenerative abilities aren't quite as good as our own. And if I can just train him away from"--he slapped at Chimera's hand when it went to his mouth and he started to gnaw on it--"certain habits, his model will be all the rage."

Chimera grunted, his mouth full of his own blood.

Master's voice was dead. "Why did you hurt Phoenix?" he demanded to know of the creature.

Chimera shrugged. "I was hungry. I thought she was human. Her little friend was, anyway..." As he spoke he began to change, subtlety, like an odd optical illusion coming into focus. He grew smaller, blonde. Delicate. His face sweetened and his large corded hands grew tiny and white like little gloves.

Glamour, Phoenix thought. Master had taught her about Glamour. Glamour was an illusion. A dream. But looking on Lilly now, she never realized how unfair a dream could truly be. She never realized monsters lived under the dream.

The rage acted on it sown. Phoenix bolted forward as it tore loose inside of her like a hunting animal. The creature, the beast, Chimera...it had to die. She had to destroy it--

Master knocked her legs out from under her and she felt the pavement strike her on the cheek. "Control," he said.

She picked herself up and slunk backward so she was hiding behind his legs, afraid, hating Chimera, hating herself...

Control.

"I like her," said Chimera in Lilly's little-girl voice. He licked his lips. "I want her, Michael."

"So do I," Michael agreed magnanimously. He eyed Master. "She's a pretty little whelp. Can I have her? I will take her in exchange for Dante. Then we'll be even. What do you say, old son?"

"Go to hell," Master whispered.

Michael sighed and looked theatrically disappointed. "Then I guess it's back to the old plan."

"Stop shitting around. You want us to meet," Master said. "Where?"

"The old Clairborne Institute. Midnight. Do you know where it is?"

"I'll find it."

There was a long breathy pause. Then Michael said: "I told you I would hunt you down and tear your heart out. Do you believe me?"

Then they were gone, both of them, creature and creator like predatory animals over the stone wall.

Alek returned to the bedroom and changed into his street clothes. He reached for his leather greatcoat and shrugged into it, watching Phoenix watch him from the doorway. "Get dressed," he said, freeing his hair from the collar. "We have work to do."

"I'm going with you?" She sounded surprised.

He nodded "I don't suppose I could keep you from coming anyway, so it would be best if I at least know where you are." He knotted his long mane of hair into a ponytail while he watched her expression. The pain was there in her face, the war lust, but there was fear there too. Terrible, childlike fear. It was one thing to plan for revenge, to train for it, to want it with all your being. Quite another to actually carry it out. Now that Phoenix was faced with its opportunity, she looked reluctant.

She sank down on the bed. "I can't fight Chimera."

"I taught you to fight."

"I can't fight him!" She buried her face in her hands. "I'm afraid."

He went to her and knelt down. "Good," he said.

She lowered her hands. "What?"

He ran his hands over her hair. "You learned to be afraid."

"Another lesson?"

"Another lesson."

He got up and went to the small jewelry case on the table beneath the large oval mirror. In it he kept several small precious items--letters bound with ribbon, sketches, the marbles he had played with as a child, an aging deck of Tarot cards, all the things he felt were powerful in their way. Beneath it all he found a simple gold ring. He turned it in his hands and watched the crimson light of evening playing over it. He looked up and Debra was there in the glass, nodding. He returned to where Phoenix was sitting patiently at the foot of his bed and knelt down and put it on her hand. She was so thin, he wound up putting it on her thumb.

"Were you married?" she asked, looking at the ring.

"It belonged to someone special to me," he said. "She'll look after you if you wear it."

Phoenix bowed her head. "I can't do this."

"Let me do it for you."

Phoenix nodded. "Are you afraid?"

He kissed her gently. "All the time."

The Clairborne Institute. It was located on the South Side, almost on the river. Once a grande dame Victorian sanitarium, it just looked bleak and derelict now, fit only for river rats and crackheads. An old rambling house more shell than substance, like a giant carved-out cockroach. Alek knew the analogy was preposterous, but that's what it made him think of. The windows were broken or boarded up, appendages of wood sticking out at random angles, the stone of the house shiny-damp with black moss, the wood warped and weak, and anything that was worth anything had been hocked or stolen a long time ago. Even parts of the wrought iron fence had been

pulled from the ground and taken to some other filthy place in the city for only God knew what reason.

At the gate of the arcade, he stopped. It was open, hanging by one hinge, yet he could not pass. He stopped and took a deep breath, looking around. The fear of the place was like a stink. It made him want to see everywhere at once, as if at any moment he might be taken from behind. A vampire's dwelling. He checked his true feelings--the physical ones that told him if a vampire was near--but found those still. So it was Michael's protective barrier then. No different than what Michael himself had probably felt an hour ago sitting atop the stone wall of Alek's dwelling, wanting to enter...but too afraid.

Something cracked behind him and he turned sharply, his sword fully extended.

Wind. Dry leaves.

Alek let out his breath, searching the night for enemies. Nothing. Again he checked his feelings. Nothing...yet. Frustrated by the manipulation, he made himself push through the squealing gate and into the arcade where once the sick had sat at tall windows--now broken--and gazed out on the world that no longer wanted their kind. Little was left of it. The tiled floors were broken and weedy, the walls blackened with age, glass and boards and the splinters of furniture scattered throughout. Beside one long window sat a lone wicker wheelchair, unoccupied. It gave Alek a chill to see.

But not nearly as much as the building itself. Yes, this was most definitely Michael's haunt. And he had been occupying it for some time for the fear to be so strong in it. The place even stank of him--hospital oils and ammonia and old blood.

Alek walked soundlessly over the cracked tiles, keeping to the shadows where he could, though he knew it would do him little good against an enemy like Michael. No wonder he had chosen this place. It was more than a derelict building to house their confrontation; it was his stomping ground full of a smell, a cold and wicked smell, he knew would put Alek off his game plan. Michael did nothing without purpose.

Alek stopped, cocking his head to listen to the silence that seemed to close in around him like the darkness and the dank and putrid dungeon-odor of the place. Get out of here, he thought. Get out get out get out...

He closed his eyes, forcing the terror down his emotional reserve-hole.

Click.

He opened his eyes and focused on the darkness ahead where the sound had come from.

Clack.

Tile breaking underfoot?

He started to move forward, then stopped when the feeling he hated most in the world trickled down his back. Vampires. He turned, half expecting Michael to be there, behind him, pouncing, but the arcade was empty but for the checkerboard of shadows and streetlights shining in painfully thin banners through the tall windows. He shivered and reassured his hold on the sword.

Clack clack clack...

His ears pricked. Now he heard it quite clearly, but instead of footfalls, he was hearing...the squeal of wheels? He listened. Yes.

Something emerged briefly into the light, then was lost again as it rolled toward him, weaving its way across the arcade.

Alek backed up, his heart suddenly in his throat.

Something--a huddled figure in the wicker wheelchair--was moving toward him across the vast expanse of the chessboard floor, cracking tiles under the creaking wheels of its wheelchair. He saw it now. And at first he was certain it must be Michael playing some perverse game. Then he recognized the white, emaciated face of the being heading toward him, the hollow, long-dead look, and found he had no will to move.

The figure, an old man dressed in a double-breasted suit coat and cravat, stopped wheeling himself forward and looked up. His face was so skullish it looked feral even in its weariness. "You," said Carfax. "Welcome to hell, whelp."

Alek was speechless.

"Surprised to see me, are you? You bloody well should be!"

"You're...dead," Alek said.

Carfax grinned. His eyes still held their cool burn. "The dead are immortal. Haven't you learned anything at all? All those books, and you don't know even that!"

Alek stumbled back, almost knocking into a bench that had been overturned in the middle of the arcade. He caught himself against it and steadied himself as best he could. No...this was some kind of nightmare. Some kind of horrible walking nightmare.

"Slayer," said Carfax, his skull-mouth forming the word like the worst possible profanity. "Look what they did to me, look!" Reaching up, Carfax grabbed a fistful of his dusty grey-blond hair and peeled it away. But instead of merely hair or scalp coming off, the entire top of his skull was torn away, revealing an empty, brainless cavity.

Alek closed his eyes and swayed as the terror washed over him, the weight of it almost driving him to his knees. Only the bench kept him upright. No...this was not real...this *was not real*...this *WAS NOT REAL*...

The fear was like a dagger in his throat. He swallowed it as painful as it was and opened his eyes.

The wheelchair sat there, empty. No Carfax.

No. Of course not. Carfax had been dead for over thirty years.

It was Michael. It was the Chimera.

"Michael," Alek whispered, knowing the vampire would hear him. In this place even the whispers echoed. "Is this how it's going to be? You can't even face me without your little friend playing games?" He kicked the wheelchair so it slammed into the far wall and shattered.

He waited.

Nothing.

Alek turned full circle. "Are you so afraid of me? Michael?" he said, his eyes tracing the flight of the shadows in the room, the flickering lights from outside.

"Of course I am," came Michael's voice, echoing everywhere and nowhere from around the room. Alek tried to track the sound, but it was impossible to pinpoint its exact location. "I can't fight you, Slayer."

"Then you should not have challenged me," Alek answered.

Nothing.

Alek said, "You and me, Michael. Tell Chimera to crawl back into his little hole in the ground."

Alek's feeling flared.

A moment later, Michael dropped down from some unseen crevice in the ceiling, graceful, like a cat. Not even Michael's boots stirred the dust at his feet. He stood up straight. He was dressed like someone prepared to attend the theatre or an expensive party aboard a yacht. Always the nancy boy of his once fearsome duo, he wore a pressed black suit and sandsilk shirt with an opera scarf swirled casually about his neck. Dante would have been dressed just the opposite, in the lowliest, most bizarre bondage-inspired street gear he could find and still be legal in. It was hard to believe the two of them were even related. Or had been. "Hello, old son," he said, puffing on a long, thin cigarette.

Another feeling. Alek turned to face the way he had come.

Another Michael, dressed similarly, stepped out of the shadows, smoking. "Hello, old son," said the second Michael. He smiled cheekily.

Alek looked back and forth between them, unable to determine or even feel which one was the vampire and which Chimera, the ghoul. They both felt alike to him.

"What a dilemma," said the first Michael. He smiled.

Alek slid into a defensive stance. He watched them both.

"He's no idea which is which, does he?" the second Michael asked the first.

"None," agreed the first Michael. He smiled.

Alek said, "Would it surprise you to learn I don't care? You're both walking dead." He eyed them both. "As dead as Dante."

The second Michael lost his smile.

Alek nodded knowingly. "You and me."

Michael stepped backward and raised his hand in summoning. "I don't have time for this. Chimera."

Chimera threw himself at Alek.

Alek saw it out of the corner of his eyes and moved fractionally to avoid Chimera's assault. Not far enough. Chimera, his human strength redoubled by the gallons of vampire blood he had drunk over the years of his life, slammed into Alek's shoulder, driving him to the floor of the arcade on his hip in a crackle of shattering tile. Cold pain shot down his Alek's leg, fueling his fear, heating it into something

more familiar, something that tasted like war in his mouth. Chimera snarled and snapped at Alek. Alek twisted sideways to protect his throat from Chimera's biting jaws and rammed the hilt of his sword into his foe's face.

The crack resounded through the arcade.

Chimera reeled backward, roaring in his rage and pain and blood. Then, recovering remarkably fast, the blood still on his face, he launched a second assault, clawing at Alek's throat like a wild animal.

The thing was like a machine, inhuman. Alek scrambled up onto one knee, turned his sword, and felt the blade sink deep into Chimera's belly as he fell upon it, impaling himself. "Fucker," he snarled. "How does it feel to be helpless? A fish on a hook?"

Chimera convulsed on the blade, flecking Alek with blood and spit, his voice a plaintive wail down the empty halls of the Institute, echoing perhaps the thousands of screams that had reverberated here over the last century. But surely none quite like this.

Alek smirked and withdrew his sword from the sucking cavity of Chimera's body. He expected the ghoul to go down. But instead he just swayed there, the hole in his gut already mending itself. So he punched Chimera in the face.

The force of the blow hurtled Chimera into the overturned bench. Chimera's body shattered the wood into splinters. Alek climbed to his feet and approached the creature. Picking him up by the lapels, Alek threw the creature against the guard on one of the broken windows. Chimera's body rattled the iron bars like the ringing of bells and he splattered the floor in dime-sized dots of purplish blood before slumping down into a bloody heap under the window.

Alek stared at the thing where it lay, its Glamour waning. It was a ghoul. Which meant, like himself, it was a weird commingling of human and vampire blood. But unlike himself, it had once been human through and through. It had started out as human. But over the years, the unnatural infusion of vampire blood had rotted its body and its mind. Now it was little better than the monster created by Carfax all those years earlier. As the Glamour faded, he saw the thing for what it was—a living skeleton with ropes of flayed, decaying flesh clinging to its bones and a face like a corpse and the madness of its own unending bloodlust in its eyes. A pathetic creature. A victim like all the rest. Alek supposed he should feel a measure of pity for it. Instead, he sank the toe of his boot into the wound in its stomach, making the thing curl up into a ball on the floor.

"Get up," Alek growled.

Chimera groaned and uncurled, then grabbed Alek's ankle, its broken teeth closing over the flesh and bone.

Alek kned it in the groin, then swung his sword and pinned the creature against the floor with the point of the blade. "You fuck." He pulled the sword out of its lower back and whipped around and kicked Chimera in the head, snapping the

thing's head around and slamming him into the wall. Chimera's skull cracked against the tiled wall and a new fountain of blood jettied out of its mouth and nose.

Alek paced back and forth. "Get up. I'm waiting."

Chimera reached for the window, using the bars as leverage to get it to its feet. And there it stood, weaving uncertainly, one hand over the two dripping wounds in its stomach, one hand over its right eye where its skull had been split against the wall. Its one-eyed gaze roved all over Alek, feral and hateful, but seemingly imbued with the knowledge that it had lost its advantage and quite possibly its life. As Alek watched, its image seemed to splinter uncertainly, then went from its true ghoulish form to its Michael-form.

"Still trying, are you?" Alek asked, still pacing.

Chimera's image blurred.

"Why did you hurt Phoenix and Lilly?" Alek asked.

Chimera grimaced. "I was hungry." Its image reshaped itself into a close proximity of Phoenix, bloodied and torn. Its eyes narrowed tearfully. "Master..."

Alek punched it into the wall.

Chimera bounced once, twice. Its image blurred, returned to that of Michael. It spat blood and teeth onto the broken floor of the Institute.

"Try again," Alek said.

"Michael..." it whined. Weaving a moment more, Chimera dropped to the floor again, its head knocking against the wall as it slumped bonelessly at Alek's feet.

Alek slammed his foot into Chimera's solar plexus, holding it against the wall. "Michael what? Do you really think your creator is going to save you?"

Chimera blurred, became Debra. "Michael!" Chimera screamed. "Save me! Michaaaaael!"

Michael did not answer.

Alek didn't think he would. Alek kicked Chimera in the mouth so it spat out more blood and teeth and began to wheeze asthmatically.

Alek started to pace again. "You hurt them. You raped them. I felt it."

Chimera blurred, became himself. Alek had no idea what that was supposed to accomplish. He didn't love himself that much. He swung his blade around so it came to a halt just under Chimera's chin, a hair's breadth from the skin of its throat.

"You hurt *me*," Alek said.

Chimera swallowed, its throat working against the blade. With its barely-focused brown eyes clotted with blood and its clumped black hair and trembling hands it sought Alek through the haze of its pain. "No more..." it whispered as if it were grating bones through the blood on its mouth. "Please...no more..."

Alek grabbed Chimera by the throat, holding it against the wall. Chimera's eyes rounded in fear as Alek raised the sword. Using the butt end of it, Alek bashed the hard ivory against Chimera's mouth, the mouth that had bit and drunk from Phoenix. The mouth that had ended the life of an innocent little girl. Bone cracked

and broke like porcelain. Like tile. Chimera gasped through the bloody syrup of its mouth, its rabid eyes flickering. "End...this pain," he said.

"Maybe. Why did you hurt them?" Alek said, raising the sword again.

Chimera shook all over from the pain and the fear. It said, through the mush its mouth had become. "Michael needed...suspect in Ladykiller murders."

"And you--or rather, Mr. Bellerophone--was the suspect. Someone the cops could chase. Someone who doesn't exist."

Chimera nodded.

Alek bashed Chimera's head against the wall, leaving a new crimson splatter against the white-tiled wall. "*You're protecting Michael after what he did to you? Why?*"

Chimera's eyes fluttered closed. "Kill me? Please..."

"He can't help himself," came a voice from behind him. "And I needed him."

Alek turned around.

Michael put his hands together, prayerful. Looking past Alek at his ally lying unconscious against the tiles like a big broken doll, he said, "Chimera was the experiment Dante and I came here to study. Unfortunately, Dante wanted to collect specimens whilst here and I let him. My first mistake. We stayed here too long, and after the police started to close in on the Ladykiller, I knew I had to protect my brother from discovery, so I sent Chimera to Jean Paul's club to prey on one of his girls. It's a high-end club and gets rather a lot of attention. The police would be chasing down this Mr. Bellerophone for a long time whilst I managed to abscond with my brother. I didn't want to endanger Chimera that way, but it was much better than risking my brother's life."

"Still protecting Dante," Alek said.

Michael's eyes darkened. "It was supposed to be a perfect plan, as always. But then you had to interfere, didn't you?" Again Michael looked at Chimera. "Are you going to kill him?"

"No."

Michael looked surprised. "I thought you killed all your enemies."

"This enemy belongs to someone else."

"Ah. The little whelp."

Alek stalked forward.

Michael backed up. "Right then. I told you I can't fight you."

Alek swung his sword up under his arm. "You'd better learn."

"Don't you want to know why this all happened? Don't you want to know what it all means?"

Alek kicked Michael in the head.

The vampire flew backward onto the tiled floor, then skidded to a halt on his back some ten feet away. He sat up uncertainly. "I dare say, that wasn't very sporting."

"Neither is cutting up prostitutes for your ungodly experiments."

"It's for a good cause, I assure you...a noble one...!"

Alek stepped on the vampire's chest, pinning him to the floor on his back. "Really." He pointed his sword at Michael's head. "Impress me."

"It's the Elixir," said Michael. "Everything we did was for that! Everything we did was to preserve those ungrateful mortals you protect!"

Alek increased the pressure on Michael's chest. So it was this Elixir thing again. "What is the Elixir? Some kind of drug...?"

"More." Michael's eyes gleamed. "Immortality. Immortality for the human race. The ghouls are useless, unstable. But we've found a way to make the humans truly immortal. No more madness. No more flesh-eaters."

A sharp jab made Alek wince and jump away from Michael.

Michael held up a syringe. "Demerol. Getting sloppy, old son."

Demerol. Alek narrowed his eyes.

Without getting up, Michael idly turned the empty syringe in his hands. His eyes smiled. No...his entire *being* smiled. "Do you know what the amazing thing about Demerol is? It is an old lumbering dinosaur, basically inadequate to stop pain in humans. And highly toxic, I should add. Yet...do you know what it does to non-humans?"

Alek took another step back and felt the floor give away. He went down on one knee.

"It does that."

He groaned as a sudden headache hammered his skull into bits. He felt sick to his stomach. Sick to death. The sword felt so heavy in his rubberlike hands it just slipped right through his fingers and dropped to the floor.

"Relax. It's the drug taking effect." Michael's voice echoed, wavering between a howl and a whisper. "We're cold-blooded creatures, you and I. But the toxicity in Demerol raises our temperatures almost immediately. Basically, you're running a fever."

Alek shook his head to clear his hearing. The action intensified the pain a dozen fold and took the floor out from under his other foot. He half-closed his blurring eyes and tried to shove off the pain and the sickness. He was cold. He was in trouble. He needed his sword. His hand found the hilt of the katana, but he found to his utter dismay that he didn't have the strength to pick it up. His big unfeeling fingers couldn't grasp the hilt at all.

Michael strolled over and picked it up for him, making it seem very easy.

Alek reached for it, but the pain was too great and in the end he gave it up and concentrated on not shivering to death on the spot.

"You don't need this anymore," Michael said.

"Mine."

"Really? Then take it." Michael held it out for him.

Alek tried to swipe the sword but wound up falling on his face instead and cutting his cheek on the broken tile of the floor. He pushed against the floor but the crushing headache together with the cold kept him on his knees. Sweat ran in rivulets

off his nose and plinked to the floor under his chin. He watched the commingling of blood and sweat, mesmerized by the spreading pool. He touched it with his hand and it was hot to his touch.

But he was freezing to death.

"Now you belong to me," Michael said.

Then he hit Alek across the back with his own sword and darkness took him.

29

He was dreaming. And even in his dream he was surprised, because it was such a human dream, so wonderfully normal. It was daytime and he was sitting out in the garden, the sun shining down on his hair as he read a Baron Blood novel. How silly, he thought, turning the pages.

The self-appointed king of all vampires had just gorged himself on a young girl's blood and had thoroughly enjoyed himself. Blood oozed down the corners of his mouth as his face took on the mask of humanity. Then he changed into a giant vampire bat and flew off into the night to seek new disciples. How silly, Alek thought again. Yet there was something horribly unsettling about the whole thing. As if he had read this book before. He shifted uncomfortably and blinked against the bright daylight.

As his memory returned, so did the power of the sun. The once-comfortable warmth began to bake his skin and he wondered why he had ever come outside like this with no protection. Because he thought he could win? Because he thought he was human? He ran for the shadows as his skin began to blister in the harshness of the light. But he fell, pinned on his back by the sun, the relentless sun. And as he writhed in its brilliance he found a man was talking to him in a low voice, seductive and sweet and corrupted.

It's Baron Blood, he thought. And if I can just wake up it will all be over.

But the whispering voice continued to drone on and he realized he *was* awake. And the man talking wasn't part of the dream at all. The man was real. And he could not move. He was bound by ankles and wrists to a flat cold platform he could just feel through the layers of his street clothes. The room around him was dark save for one bright focal point of light high overhead. Not the sun, but a light that scorched him nonetheless.

He struggled instinctively against the bounds, his wrists twisting and turning in the metal cuffs, but he simply could not break free. He was too weak against the bonds that held him. He was helpless against them. He sought his sword but he sensed it was somewhere beyond these walls--and anyway, it was a useless trick when he had no hands to wield it with. He had been captured and the pain from the metal handcuffs was as real as the fear starting to seep into his body and mind.

"Where am I?" Alek whispered, hoarse.

The man standing over him stopped talking to himself. He moved to bend over Alek, but because of the blinding light, Alek could not see his face. All he could see was a tall, thin silhouette “You’re awake,” Michael said He sounded pleased. “Good. Good!”

“Where...?”

“You’re in the operating theatre of the institute.”

The institute. Slowly the battle came back to him. The Chimera. Michael...

“Yes. You remember.”

Michael. Michael and his games. Michael and himself alone. Michael trying to make him afraid. “You don’t frighten me,” Alek said, trying to keep his mind under control. But when he realized this was all real and not some Glamour-induced nightmare created by Chimera, the fear was there, hard within him. It was real and the fear made his voice break. “Let me go.”

But the only answer was the clink of metal. The sound of tools being laid out on the gurney beside him. Then Michael appeared, grinning, as he laid out yet another tool. Alek recognized the glints of steel there--forceps, a bone cutter, scalpels of various sizes and shapes, scissors, razors--every instrument as sharp as steel and ready to cut a body apart.

He shuddered at the sight.

Michael noticed. “Afraid of sharp instruments? You? I’m surprised.” Then he moved back and flipped a switch so that a moody circumference of small lights came on around the inside of the theatre dome, illuminating the room and reflecting off the glass panels high up in the walls where once studying doctors had watched surgeries literally unfold. And as the room became lit, Alek realized they weren’t quite as alone as he had assumed.

A second operating table sat just beside the one he was bound to. But this one had a body under a sheet, amorphous but clearly human. Alek turned his head to see it better. “So...this is where you do it,” he said.

“The experiments? Yes, this is where Dante and I did all our experiments. Would you like to see the latest? I think you should. It was very successful--though, sadly, I was forced to do it alone.”

He moved to the second operating table and unsheeted the body.

It had once been human, but so much of it had been cut and smashed apart, it was difficult to tell who it had once been, or which gender. The body, what remained of it, lay naked on its stomach on the operating table, the skull cut open and the brain and spinal column carved out, leaving only a ragged, shell-like carcass that looked more like a smashed insect than anything that had ever moved around and once been alive. Once been human. Alek felt his gorge rise despite himself. He closed his eyes. “Who was it?”

“I forget his name. That little man who was giving you such trouble of late.”

Brett Edelman.

Alek hissed through his teeth. Now that the dead body had a face and a name, he felt an overwhelming desire to tear Michael limb from limb. He looked at the ruined body, the ruined human, then at the shackles holding him to the table like the next in a long assembly line of death. Brett Edelman had been a fool and had played far out of his league, but he had not deserved this. No one did. Again Alek strained against the binds. Useless.

"Titanium alloy," Michael informed him as he chose one of the larger scalpels from the collection. "Even at full strength with your belly full of blood you could not break free. Please stop trying."

Michael lowered the scalpel and Alek felt his entire body go as rigid as a corpse as the vampire began cutting away his shirt, the leather separating like a piece of soft bread under Michael's flashing instrument. Michael said, as he worked, "While you were out, I was sorely tempted to add you to my collection, except...well, you're a special case, aren't you? I made a promise to you about your heart. About what I would do to you if you ever hurt Dante. I can't very well take that back, now, can I?" He looked up. His eyes were dead. "That wouldn't be sporting."

"You're insane," Alek said.

The horror was still there, but now the volume of it had gone from a scream to a low whisper inside of him. Fear. It was always Michael's currency. Because Michael could not fight without it any more than Chimera could fight without his many-changing disguises. "What do you want me to do, Michael?" Alek asked. His voice was soft and strong and remarkably steady despite his surging panic. "Beg you to stop? Bring Dante back? Die of fright for you?"

Michael ran his hand over the muscles of Alek's exposed chest. The muscles clenched of their own volition. Michael lowered his head and put his ear to Alek's heart, listening to it beat for some moments. Then he stood up, his eyes halved. "I miss my brother."

"Your brother was a worthless piece of shit," Alek said. "Just like you. And like me."

"Slayers..." said Michael and slammed his scalpel into Alek's left shoulder in a gout of purple blood that painted his face like a mask. The explosion of pain made Alek arched as far off the table as his binds would allow. "...all of us."

Alek fell back onto the table with a grunt of anguish, his shoulder on fire.

Michael licked the blood off his lips and reached for another scalpel.

Alek groaned, the pain so great he felt the edges of unconsciousness try to close themselves over his face. Yet through the haze of pain and fear, he saw something move in the loft above, little more than a motion in the dark. A figure. Checking his feelings, what he could feel past the volcanic pain in his shoulder, he realized it was most certainly not another vampire. An idea clicked away inside his head, a way out of this. But only if he played things right. Keeping his eyes averted from their voyeur, he said, panted, "If you want to put sharp instruments into me, Michael...fight me like a slayer, then."

Michael laughed. "You know I can't fight you or your enchanted sword."

"You don't...have to fight me...*and* the sword...just me." Alek narrowed his eyes to mere slits and waited for the pain to subside to a low scream. Then he said as he recovered, "You and me. No weapons. No cuffs and chains. Just the two of us. Man to man." He rattled the titanium chains. "Even Dante chose to fight me squarely."

"My brother was a fool."

"Dante at least had his pride."

Michael lowered the scalpel to make the first incision.

"No taste for real bloodshed, Michael? For war?" Alek asked. "You just want to carve me up like every other victim? That's not very sporting."

Michael hesitated and showed Alek his teeth in a grimace. "You are not sport, old boy," he said, his breathy meaty as he leaned in close. "You are *prey*--"

Alek head-butted the vampire with all his might.

For a moment it seemed to have no effect. Michael dropped the scalpel and cradled his forehead with a low whine in his throat. Then all at once he went down hard, clunking the back of his head against the second stainless steel operating table. What Alek's head-butt had not done, the fall had. Michael lay still on the cold tile, bleeding into the drain built into the center of the floor.

Alek let out his breath and looked up.

The figure watched him a moment, then disappeared, only to reappear a few moments later with something large and bulky. A second later the glass window of the operating theatre exploded outward in a glinting rain of glass, followed by the clattering old steel folding chair the figure had used to break the window. Phoenix leaped the ten feet to the floor of the theater in a swirl of dusty leather and long hair and legs.

She straightened up and tossed her long ponytail of hair off her shoulder. She looked just beautiful in her ragged street wear and black leather jacket with the embroidery of skulls and red roses along the collar and back. Her gear, a close approximation of his own, looked cobbled together out of his closet and hers--a sling-backed tank top and faded denim cutoffs and tall leather boots with steel toes. Even the jacket, which had once belonged to Debra, was becoming on her. "I came," she said.

An odd thing to say. He expected something far more mundane.

"Did I call you?" Alek asked, tilting his head on the table so he could watch her approach in her tall leather boots. It was a sincere question.

"You were in trouble," Phoenix said with a scowl. She rubbed at the ring on her thumb. His ring. Debra's ring. "So I came."

"Thank you."

She ran a hand over his unmarred chest, then studied his shackles. "What did he do to you, Master? Did he hurt you?"

"No. Nothing...yet." He rattled the chains.

"Where are the keys?"

Alek glanced at the floor beside him. "Michael has them. Look in his jacket."

Phoenix turned to stare at the defiled body on the next table.

"No, don't look. Control. There is nothing you can do for him."

Phoenix nodded, then turned her attention on Michael. She approached the creature on the floor with a terrible wariness, almost a fear. She knelt down, reached for Michael's pocket, then stopped to wrap her arms about herself and shiver violently. She looked up, miserable. "Is he doing something to me?"

"No," Alek said. "It's your blood responding to a pureblood. Nothing more."

"Another lesson," she answered as she started rifling through Michael's pockets.

As she worked, Alek said, "Did you see anybody else in the institute? Anyone at all?"

Phoenix shook her head of bloodred hair. "Only a lot of blood. Like someone had been dragging themselves through it."

"Chimera."

She bit her lip and her head bobbed up. "Is he here?"

"He was. But not anymore."

She nodded as she pulled loose a ring of keys from Michael's trouser pocket. She fished through the various ones until she found one that looked like it fit the lock, a new one with no notches, rather like handcuff keys. A few moments later she had all the cuffs unlocked and removed. She put the keys on the table.

But Alek didn't move to rise just yet.

She stood over him, anxious. "Master..."

He closed his eyes as he summoned what strength he had left. "Just weak."

Phoenix put her arms under his shoulders and helped him to sit up. The room spun with light and shadows and he clung to her a moment and waited until the dizziness lessened. Her smell was beautiful and wild, like the night. Her entire being was. He buried his face in her shoulder a moment like she had on the night she revealed her weakness to him. He was so happy she had come for him. Her being there seemed to soothe and invigorate him. He only wished he wasn't so needy, so hungry, so much a danger to her.

Phoenix touched the wound in his shoulder, then tilted his head back and unlaced her shirt.

"No..." he whispered.

"It's your blood too."

"Right now...I might hurt you."

"You won't." She stroked his sweat-dampened hair and invited him to take. "Let me help you."

He kissed her skin but did not break it. "My beloved one," he said. "Help me up."

She did. Her master could stand, but his weakness was terrible, making his entire body feel like a big rag doll she was trying to holding up almost entirely by her own strength. He was so lank and thin yet his weight was considerable enough to nearly throw her off balance as she helped him get his balance. She wished he were not so stubborn. Better he take a little of her blood and stand on his own than abstain out of his foolish fear of harming her and make her bear his entire weight. But one look at his hard vermilion eyes--feverish, needy eyes like red amber burning through the dark, yet eyes as unyielding at the earth itself--told her she was fighting a losing battle. He had too much Control. So gathering her strength, Phoenix walked him to the door of the theatre, then leaned him against the wall as she crouched down to study the old-fashioned latch.

"Locked," she said. And she had left the keys on the table.

She went to get them.

Her master was too weak to do little more than say her name and try and take her by the arm.

But he missed.

She spotted the flutter of motion on the floor from the corner of her eye. "What...?" But before she had time to even register it as the awakening vampire, it was on her--ravaging her like something inhuman and in pain. It did not seem that it had even moved from its spot on the floor, yet there it was, all around her, all claws and feral power, pushing her to the floor under its tremendous force, consuming her with its sheer bulk, covering her in foaming spit and blood.

Phoenix screamed going down, her voice a low snarling sound like an animal taken unaware by a bigger predator, a sound she scarcely recognized as coming out of her own mouth. Fear wracked her and stopped her thinking. Fear and hate. It was a raw, sore hate, like a wound reopened. She was pulled to the floor under the power of her own fear as much as by the power of the vampire. She gritted her teeth until the blood ran over her mouth.

Then she lashed out at it, not thinking. Reacting.

Her hand encountered its face. It bit her like a rabid dog, again and again, snarling her own blood up through its nose, holding on, trying to tear her apart. Its hands went everywhere on her, destroying. Phoenix screamed again and again in utter pain and defiance but it did nothing, nothing to stop the monster, to change their destiny. Her destiny. Her destiny was to be a bloodied and battered victim, pressed down into the hard asphalt somewhere in a lonely place while a vile, blood-seeking beast violated her again and again, its raw, stinking hands on her face, in her mouth, its body grating against her own with evil energy, stealing everything that was inherently hers, her life, her identity, her power, reducing her to the unwanted piece of garbage she always feared she was. Knew she was. And that was bad and terrible

and sad and tragic, but she could live with that. She could live with being a victim. She could live failing herself. But that body beside her--the small, ravaged blonde one who should have been protected by her and by nature and by God and whatever Powers there might be, the innocent body of the little mortal girl smashed, a white, dead, blood-spattered lily--that Phoenix could not live with. She could not live with that failure.

She could not live with the sorrow.

She could not live with it any longer.

Reaching, she put her hands up on the face of the vampire killing her and gave her sorrow to him instead.

The vampire stopped killing her and stiffened, its mouth full of her blood and flesh. It looked up at her. It wasn't human and never had been. It belonged to some dark corner of hell. And that's exactly where she wanted it to go.

And it did, in a mighty *whoosh* of air and blue flames that lit the theatre like a supernova, like midday, like hell, like the sun it could not tolerate. The fire consumed it, ate it like it had meant to eat her, bursting it like a toy, like something not real, something made all of glass and wood and air and dreams. And when the holocaust of fire passed, leaving spots of light and darkness on her eyes and her face raw and singed and her hair crackling and her clothing all but crisped on her tortured frame, there was nothing left of the vampire, the monster, but a rain of blackened bones and soot.

And as the ashes fell upon her face, the sorrow was still.

Like the darkness, like her world, it was still.

31

"Extraordinary," Jean Paul said, when the tale had been told.

They were sitting together in the garden in the middle of the night, an odd twosome, to be sure. Alek turned to the Parisian and raised one eyebrow. Almost a month had passed since the events of that night at the institute. And neither he nor Phoenix had made mention of it since. It seemed unnecessary. Life goes on. And it paid to look ahead, not back. So this was the first time he found himself recounting the events to anyone.

It had been a little after three in the morning when he found JP on his stoop. He was surprised. He had never encountered the man outside of Club Bauhaus. Yet there he was, dapper as always in his customary white suit, as immaculate as the Pope, silver-headed walking stick in hand. He might have resembled any gentleman on a tryst through New York City, except that he looked as if he belonged in a black and white photograph from the turn of the century.

Alek didn't quite know what to do with him, so he invited JP inside. But JP, being JP, decided the study was too stuffy for his liking. Alek assumed it was the

Colonial-English décor that had rubbed JP the wrong way. JP found anything English appalling and cretinous. The Parisian asked if they might retire to the garden instead. And Alek saw no reason why they could not.

It was an odd hour to be entertaining company, but at least he brought his own wine.

“Wine?” Alek asked somewhat suspiciously in the moments before JP uncorked the bottle.

“Not the house blend, I assure you,” JP said rather drolly. “Pascal Bouchard Bouquet Chardon 1897.” His eyes halved like those of a playful cat. “And what did you expect?”

“I never know what to expect from you,” Alek answered honestly.

JP toasted him, then put his wineglass down, untouched.

Alek sipped his wine, savoring the taste. “You can’t have her back.”

JP looked innocent.

Alek smirked knowingly in return. “You don’t want her back, JP. She’s not your type.”

“You realize she would have been a wonderful addition to my stables.”

“I don’t think so, JP.”

Jean Paul fell silent, and together they watched the moon fade in the night sky.

In time, perhaps a half hour before true dawn began to break, JP stood up with a sigh and took up his stick and put on his traveling hat--a white derby to go with the natty white suit--and gave Alek a gentlemanly bow. “Another night ends, so I shall bid you good day. Rest well, Slayer.”

“Rest well, Hivemaster,” Alek said, standing.

“Please,” said JP, “I know the way.”

Alek sipped his wine and watched the Parisian amble down the garden path to the gate. But as JP opened the gate, he suddenly turned back to Alek and tilted his head. “Tell me, Slayer, how can you say such a gorgeous and talented creature as the Phoenix would not enhance my demimonde?” He smiled wryly.

Alek returned the smile with one just as wry. “Because, Hivemaster, there is nothing in this world that Phoenix hates more than vampires.”

Two days later Alek read the news in the Times. On his way to a private meeting with someone from one of the bigger networks at the Skytop Café, his usual haunt for such rendezvous, bestselling author J. Stephan Paul was broadsided by a semi turning off onto Broadway at well above the speed limit.

There were no survivors and the driver of the truck was unaccounted for. It was being considered a hit and run and the police were investigating the vehicle and driver, but so far they were unable to acquire any witnesses to the crime.

Alek placed the newspaper in the fireplace and had Phoenix cinder it very slowly, her Control so powerful nothing else in the room was affected.

The Church takes care of its own.

33

Immortal Beloved was the name of the cargo ship. That much Sam Kelly knew when he signed on. But in the two weeks since he'd been aboard the rusty, run-down ship, *The Beloved*, as they called her, had not docked at any ports. And strange for a cargo ship, the hold was nearly empty. It contained only five large, unmarked wooden boxes. That was all Kelly knew until today, when *The Beloved* glided to port along the coast of Rome and the harbormaster began ringing the bell which heralded the workers down to the pier to unload the ship.

A man came with them. He wore red robes with a small red cap on the bald dome of his head. So it was Vatican cargo then.

A storm had been brewing off the coast all day, making the men nervous about a squall, and in their haste, the workers managed to snag one of the crates on the cargo crane while trying to transfer it to the tossing deck of the patrol boat. Wood splintered and sent the contents of the crate rolling everywhere across the deck of the *Immortal Beloved*. Luckily, the smaller cargo crates inside the larger one were well padded and experienced little damage in the impact. Only one small crate actually broke, releasing a large stainless steel canister that reminded Kelly of a decanter for Margarita mixes. That or some kind of space-age canoptic jar. The canister rolled down the sloping deck of *The Beloved* and came to a halt almost at his feet where Kelly was dutifully mopping the deck.

The canister clinked as the contents settled, then clinked again.

And then a third time.

The cardinal came to collect the canister himself. "This is archival material. Very fragile and important. Don't let your men damage anything further!" he shouted in Italian to the harbormaster.

The harbormaster muttered many apologies and excuses.

Kelly, still mopping, caught the eye of the cardinal as the man in his imposing robes and rings turned back to observe the rest of the cargo being unloaded from the hold. Then he looked at the canister the cardinal held. And again he heard it clink.

Like someone knocking.

The cardinal looked at him with his shrewd, knowing eyes.

And then Sam Kelly looked away. For reasons he could not explain, the sight of the canister left him dead cold.