



The Blessed

*and
the Damned*

by

**JANRAE FRANK
PHIL SMITH**

Mother Damnation Book 1

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Book I:

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PROLOGUE

Dane reached down to stroke the growling shadow hound lying beside his bed. He could feel the ruff on her neck had risen. He squinted in the dark and saw Rocket, the huge male, pacing beside the door. A shiver shot through him. It had been two years since his family fled the destruction of the Louistranan Embassy in New Cali. They missed the last plane out, so his father, a retired general had taken him and his mother on a desperate overland journey. That was all in the past: ancient history, or at least the fading climate of fear and desperation had made it seem so.

This was home. They were safe here in their old house. Yet the hounds' reactions had his fourteen-year-old's imagination and fears rising. He slid out of bed and got his carbine off the shelf, shoving mags of ammo into his pocket. It was the same one his father had taught him to use during their flight. Dane opened the door and the male hound bounded out snarling. Melody, the bitch, kept close to him. The beasts had an uncanny intelligence, although his father's old friend who had developed them insisted they were simply animals and not some new variety of sapient. The male stood fourteen hands at the shoulder and the female twelve. They had a dense wiry undercoat of black hair and a softer upper coat that shaded from steel-shaving grey to pale ash.

He paused at the landing and looked down into the small section of the living room that he could see from there. The glimmer of the television, still switched on despite the nightly

closedown, bathed the room in a pale, flickering light that showed him nothing. His father tended to fall asleep in his chair these days with the controller on his lap.

Dane crept down slowly, his fear amplifying each tiny creak to an unbearably loud groan. He cradled his gun in one arm and kept his hand tangled in Melody's ruff. He wanted to call out to his parents, but he was too frightened to speak. His father had also taught him that noise would give away his position and he was to keep silent if he thought something was wrong.

A slurping sound broke the tense silence. He heard Rocket give that peculiar, rumbling snarl of his and then bodies crashed into furniture. Now Dane ran, leaping down the stairs, forgetting every lesson his father had ever taught him about stealth. When he reached the bottom, he hit the light switch and Melody launched herself. Dane froze for an instant at the sight that greeted him. Four lesser bloods had his father pinned in the chair. One had sunk its fangs deep in his father's throat while three others sucked from his arms. Rocket worried a fifth and Melody had gone for the sixth.

Bones cracked like the report of a rifle as Rocket's teeth shattered the cervical vertebrae of his foe: the sound snapped Dane out of his terrified reverie. The big hound rounded to help his mate. Dane raised the carbine to his shoulder just as he had been taught and blew the brains out of the one on his father's throat. The other three abandoned their meal and charged him. Half-blinded from the tears in his eyes, Dane took aim as best he could and opened fire.

"Filthy slurps!"

The only way to stop a lesser blood with a carbine was with a head-shot. They bounded toward him with fangs bared, heedless of the carbine leveled at them. Dane stood his ground, his ears ringing as he emptied his gun, showering the vampires with lead, littering the walls with the liberated contents of their skulls. None of them reached him.

He turned and ran upstairs to his mother's room, slamming another mag into the carbine as he moved. Her door was ajar. He pushed the door open with the carbine and almost screamed. She lay nude in the middle of the bed, her skin gray and pale, a large male rode her while another watched. The one watching turned toward Dane.

"Hello, Dane."

Dane went hollow inside and he swallowed, "Uncle Abram..."

"Put the gun down, Dane. You can't get all of us."

"I can start with you."

Abram Jayce laughed, showing his long fangs. "I serve the Glistening One. You can't stop us, boy. We're not lesser bloods like the ones downstairs."

Dane brought the carbine up again, his finger tightening on the trigger. Something grabbed him from behind and he went down, the gun discharging as he fell. Fangs plunged into the boy's neck and shoulder. He screamed, kicking and twisting, but kept his grip on his carbine, cutting Abram Jayce's loud, mocking laughter short with a swift burst of lead slugs to the face. He failed to see the one who had been raping his mother's corpse come from the other side until it

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tore the carbine from his hands. Then there were three on him and his life was fleeing.

Two huge shapes burst into the room. The last thing he saw was Melody and Rocket tearing into the vampires.

* * * *

They let Dane out of the hospital to attend his parents' funeral. He sat in a wheelchair at the doctor's insistence. His Aunt Saliah wheeled him up and placed a handful of earth into his hands to throw into the graves. Melody and Rocket waited for him in Saliah's van. He would be going home with her after the service, and she was taking the hounds with him, even though she wasn't fond of dogs. She had been attacked by wild dogs as a child and all large dogs made her nervous. Dane had heard the story many times as an explanation for how they had to put up their dogs every time she came to visit. Still, she held her fear in check now; they had saved her nephew's life and she felt she owed them. Dane had not needed to beg for his dogs at all.

The boy felt hollow as the funeral drew to a close and Saliah wheeled him to the van. She settled him in the passenger seat and Melody immediately put her head between the seats to lick his face. Dane wrapped his arms around her head and held onto her with a desperation that brought a look of pity from his aunt's face.

Saliah reached and scratched between Melody's ears while she let the engine warm. "They are good dogs. They will not bite me."

"They only bite the bad guys..." Dane replied, trying to show her a strong face.

"And I am not a bad guy."

"No, Aunt Sally, you're not a bad guy. You aren't a guy at all," Dane struggled with a small joke and then choked on a fresh sob.

Saliah stroked his head for an instant and put the van in gear. They headed off down Highway Six for Saliah's home in Morgan Province. They drove through the hills of Virjira Province in silence for a long time. Then out of the blue, Saliah said to him in a low, troubled voice, "the gods are dead, Dane. The Gods of Light are dead."

Dane looked up at her sharply, feeling a chill rush over him. "They can't be."

"The hellgods got them all; I felt them die. All but one and she's vanished."

Dane wanted to protest, but if anyone would know it would be his Aunt Saliah. She was a witchwoman. She'd know.

"What do we do?"

"Whatever we can."

Dane stared at his hands until Melody put her head between the seats and whined at him. He slipped an arm around her again and pressed her big head to his face. "Who made the vampires?"

Saliah considered as they turned onto Highway 5 West. "Mother Damnation."

"Everyone knows that, but what is her *name*?"

Saliah caught Dane's expectant look in the rear-view mirror. She frowned, took one hand off the steering wheel, and drew

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her woolen shawl tighter. "The Glistening One. The Queen of Night." Another glance in the mirror revealed her nephew still leaning forward, still watching her. "No one 'cept her inner circle knows her true name." She went quiet, hoping against hope that her nephew would not press her further. Such hopes were in vain. A few more seconds passed awkwardly. "I have seen three names in my scrying fires: Lilith, Gylorean, Galee. Whether they're separate or the same, I don't know." She hissed through her teeth. "No more questions, Dane. It's dark and we need to find somewhere to spend the night. One I can easily ward."

CHAPTER ONE

Dear Dane,

I fear the Great Game is drawing to a close and Lareine may just have outplayed us. Our efforts to sow discord have served us well lately, but unless we do something now he'll undo everything we've accomplished over the years. He's just announced another of his parties, his biggest one yet, and with a few exceptions anyone who's anyone will be in attendance. I've briefed you about Lareine before: if anyone can get them all singing from the same score, he can.

If this little soirée goes ahead the enemy will turn all their attention on us rather than each other. If we do something to break it up we shan't be able to accomplish much else in our usual way. At the same time I don't think there'll ever be as good a chance to strike against so many of Mother Damnation's officers and nobles as this one. I have enclosed maps and a copy of my invitation. I've made my excuses, so naturally I shan't be there.

The rest is up to you, my friend.

F.

Major Dane Truman Jayce drove slowly through the village that had grown up around old Fort Necessity. It was market day and stalls sprawled across the center. He spied a small group of Nabaren chattering. They looked almost human at a distance—unless you caught sight of their small tightly curled tails. There was not much to distinguish the males from the females; Nabaren menfolk were scarcely taller than the

women, and to the human observer there was hardly any difference in musculature. Nabaren usually went nearly nude, but if they wished to attend the markets they were ordered to cover up. The majority of younger Nabaren accepted this rule under protest: the males wore loincloths and the females added a bandeau; while some of the older women adopted a sari. It barely passed for decent in the eyes of the Borderer population, but the military intervened and allowed it. They didn't need the local native tribes making trouble over being left out—not with a war on. Especially since the army had grown increasingly dependent on Nabaren scouts. That was one of Dane's ideas: he had created units of Nabaren scouts attached to every fort along the river. No one could find their way through the swamps and forests like a Nabaren; his men had taken to calling them 'marsh cats' and the scouts had taken the term as a badge of pride. Mostly the scouts were males, but in some places where he could not hire and vet enough of them, he recruited females.

One Nabaren female wore more than her fellows. She opted for cut-off shorts and a half-shirt made from cammies, with bandoleers crossing between her breasts and a machete at her shoulder. Her name was Akee and she always gave Dane trouble. She had been his guide and principal scout through the southern swamps of Morgan province in Louistrana until she caught some shrapnel. After seeing Akee hurt, he had sworn off using female guides. She was healthy and whole now, Nabaren healed faster than humans, but he couldn't get the image of her out of his mind: lying there with

one leg torn open, peppered with fragments of metal, howling like a wounded jaguar.

Dane tried to duck down a bit in the Land Rover to hide his long-limbed body, however the move came too late, and Akee started running after them.

"Major-Saee! Major Dane-Saee!"

He straightened, shifting his lanky legs to a more comfortable position than when he had tried to cram himself out of her sight. "Go home, Akee."

"Akee can guide you better, Dane-Saee. Akee can. Tirtuu is lazy. You don't want Tirtuu. You want Akee."

His men, piling into the three vehicles assigned to this mission, chuckled at his discomfort. They were heading for another reconnaissance through the swamps surrounding the fort. Tirtuu, riding behind Dane, caught the edge of the forward seat and stood up. He snarled at Akee, showing his impressive fangs. "Akee no good!" He pounded his chest with one fist. "Tirtuu better! Tirtuu strong, Tirtuu *smart*! Akee stupid female, not take good care of Major-Saee."

Akee let out a shrill scream of protest in her native language, followed by a derisive ululation. By that time she had to trot to keep up with the vehicles, and leaped onto the back. The Land Rover bumped through a pothole as Akee slithered between Tirtuu and Lieutenant Aristotle Sinclair, a barrel-chested man of average height with a swart complexion and fair hair. She tumbled forward and landed in his lap, causing her shirt to ride up and reveal sweet small breasts. Sinclair shook head ruefully at the sight. Standing orders forbade fraternizing with the natives, especially in the

clinches—although everyone knew that growing numbers of Nabaren sold themselves in the red-light districts of the small community that had sprung up around Fort Laurie, some twenty miles to the north, and probably a few worked Fort Necessity's brothels too.

Dane glanced back, caught a flash of brown nipple, and barked, "Akee, cover yourself and get out!"

"Akee get out when Tirtuu gets out!" spat Akee.

Dane signed a halt, shifted to his knees, and dragged her across the seats. "Do this again, Akee, and I'm going to turn you over my knee and spank your ass red raw." His voice had a slow, soft drawl and a wry twist. Then he opened the door and put her out.

Akee's lower lip trembled. "Major-Saee, you want Akee with you! Irrfelghau get you if stupid Tirtuu guide you!"

The vehicles rolled on, leaving Akee staring after them with tears in her eyes.

* * * *

The stretch of swamps to the west and the forests to the north were mostly a no-man's land of skirmishes and raids with each side striking back and forth across the river. Trade still came down Old Muddy, a river so wide it took a pair of binoculars to see completely across it, but it was a dangerous business. A series of major battles had been fought along its length ten years past, when despite all of Dane's efforts to slow the enemy's advance through allied regions, the forces of the hellgods finally reached the borders of Louistrana. Warfare had taken their toll on the river and the dirty, rusting

hulks of ships and gunboats broke its surface in long patches in some places and short clusters in others. Both sides seemed to have settled in to wait and watch, breaking the tense monotony with brief skirmishes and raids that achieved little. This made for hazardous boating, but no amount of raiders and flotsam could match the danger presented by the clusters of unexploded limpet mines that bobbed here and there along the river, threatening to wipe out any vessel that passed nearby.

The Louistranans were not certain what had earned them this respite, if it could be called that. Some said it was Dane, the Fox, who they also called the Old Man of the River, who had won them this. Others said that the Hellgod, Bellocar, had overextended his powers when he destroyed the Yurpan continent to replace his dwindling supplies of oil. They said he slept and might do so for centuries, leaving his wives to continue their war on the last free nation on their world. Certainly, the wives and their get, having staked out their own domains, spent too much time being jealous and suspicious of each other to cooperate and crush Louistrana. That worked in Dane's favor and he did all he could to perpetuate that. He had used his contacts throughout the continental resistance to heighten that jealousy and suspicion as far as he could.

There were still more humans and their allied races in existence, but they were mainly a broken and beaten lot under the yoke of the masters and their minions. When each nation fell, a mixture of informers, secret police, midnight raids, spot searches, and predatory monsters that walked

openly at all hours kept the populace terrified. An underground existed comprised of equal parts smugglers and resistance fighters, most of them as undesirable as those they defied, which was why Dane preferred to keep his own hand on their necks and in their pockets. What he couldn't get freely, he would force from them; few knew that he was the Fox and both sides could only guess at his motives.

The hard packed dirt of the road turned moist and muddy as they hit the lowlands along the edge of the swamps. Their recce took them to the border between Louistrana and Myssitarpin, the most recent nation to fall to Bellocar's hordes. The guards and the borderers with the aid of the Nabaren had held the line for seven hard, bloody years. They had a twofold mission: while Dane concentrated on espionage and infiltration, the rest of the platoon under the command of Lieutenant Sinclair would scout out the area surrounding the Château Lareine and destroy both the château and its inhabitants.

Killing Lareine would be a significant victory, boosting Louistrana's morale and removing several thorns from the side of the resistance.

As they rolled along Dane could not stop himself from thinking about it all. No one ever expected matters to get this bad. Certainly not so swiftly. People said the gods were dead. Bellocar's jihad erupted in the night thirty years ago with a pyroclastic flow of burning temples, crumbling cities, and terrified people. It swept across the world with technology and magic: nuclear holocausts, biological warfare, genetic mutations, and ecological disasters. The continent of Yurpa

simply died; scoured clean of life in the first ten years of fighting.

Dane had served both on the front lines and as an intelligence officer since the jihad began. He enlisted at sixteen, two years after the deaths of his parents, foregoing formal officer's training at the academy in his overwhelming desire to simply get into the field and shoot slurs. His father's old army buddies, all generals now, had eventually managed to blackmail him into the academy just after he made sergeant. He spoke Nabarese, which led to his command here. His units were going to raid along the borders while he attempted to slip into Myssitarpin once more to check on his agents there and maintain his other contacts that provided his cover when traveling in Myssitarpin.

Over the years he had turned down numerous offers of promotion to hang onto his place in the field. He was no desk-jockey; he did not want to rot in an office while generals pushed forces around like pieces on a chess game. He belonged in the field, leading his men from the front, where he believed he could do the most good; if he had to fight both sides to stay here, then he would. That Louistrana had managed to hold off the enemy for so many years was a testament to men like Dane Jayce and those under his command, and he knew it. Although the price came high. His refusal to trust anyone else with network and operations here bordered on the obsessive, but he always found grounds to justify it. His style of leadership *worked*.

The ground descended through scrubby patches and scattered trees. By mid-afternoon the humid air and heat

made them sweat, leaving their fatigues as damp as if they had been caught in a rainstorm. They smelled the swamp long before they saw it. The old growth trees with thick, twisted trunks surrounded them in thicker clusters. Orvill Putnam, Dane's driver, slowed as the road narrowed and shallow water began to appear in scattered patches that broadened around them. Tall, sharp-bladed water grass carpeted the water, giving it an illusion of firm ground.

They drove down to the cypress long shack and the boats. The swamp was a no-man's land and had been so for the past year, with raiders from both sides tearing through and across the marshlands, contesting every square inch of territory as if each handful of mud meant the difference between survival and annihilation.

A man emerged from the shack at the sound of their engines and shoved open a corrugated iron door to a barn like structure so that they could put their vehicles inside it. He chewed on a twig as he moved, nodding to Dane. "Major."

Tirtuu sprang out before the doors opened and scampered to the amphib rovers as soon as they stopped.

"Brode," Dane acknowledged the man, his voice low-key and soft. "What have you got for me?"

"Let's go inside for minute and I'll show you." The stick went round and round in Brode's mouth as he spoke. Dane had set Brode up here twenty years ago when the man had been medically discharged from the Rangers after losing half his right hand in a firefight on the West Bank of Lake Chauntalain. They knew each other well, and by unspoken agreement neither needed to salute the other. The house had

a jetty on the far side, descending from the plank veranda of the house, section secured to the dense red cypress growth. Brode Blair led Dane through his sitting room where the furniture was mostly handmade from cypress and red maple, covered with cushions, quilts and spreads that Noawhane made for him. The Nabaren woman that lived with Brode came out of their small kitchen wearing a white t-shirt proclaiming "hairy bitch and proud of it" over loose legged black pants. Mixed marriages were forbidden, but it did not stop people like Brode and Noawhane from living together in obscure places, far away from disapproving humans and Nabaren alike. She tossed her dish cloth into the sink before running to Dane and bear-hugging him.

"It's been too long!" she cried, grinning like a happy cat.

* * * *

Akee scuffed her feet in the dirt as she meandered down the hillside toward the brushy growth ahead of her. She picked up a pebble and hurled it into the bushes, her brow furrowed with frustration, and her mouth twisted into a pout. She had chased the Land Rovers until they were lost from sight and then slowed to a walk.

The purr of an engine made her look up: engines almost always meant military vehicles here. The dozens upon dozens of forts that had been built after the last outbreak of hostilities meant that troops were always close to whatever trouble might try to stretch its hand across the river. They were the shield that Major Dane Jayce had helped General

Colworth plan out ten years ago. Hence the constant patrols along the East Bank.

A motorcycle with a large sidecar slowed to a crawl beside her. Lieutenant Alan Tidwell, 'Tiddly Winks' to his friends and senior ranks, grinned at her. Everyone on the base knew Akee; she had been more than their best scout; she had been the company's mascot; as permanent a fixture as any of the officers or NCOs. "What's up, Akee?"

She growled low in her throat before answering, her face a perfect study in peeve and frustration. "Major Dane-Saee not take Akee for guide. Tirtuu no good. Akee better."

Tidwell's mouth slewed to the side thoughtfully. "Can't say as I like 'im much meself. Where y'going?"

"Brode's."

"Get in t'sidecar, then! Can't take you all the way, but close enough. You'll have to walk the rest of the way, though."

Akee sprang into the sidecar and grabbed him, planting a wet kiss on his cheek.

"Give over, lass! Don't let the wife see you do that!"

* * * *

General Jacob Colworth dimmed the lights in his office and hobbled over to his gramophone. Like him, the device was an antique and kept working out of sheer belligerence. He kept a stack of 78s nearby ever since he had risen high enough to earn an office of his own and his war wounds had got extensive enough to keep him there. After a few seconds of searching he found the disc he was after: the *Colonel Balls*

March, as played by the orchestra of his old unit, long since merged into one of the super-regiments that fought on the north-western front.

Whistling tunelessly, he made his way to his drinks cabinet, fished out a bottle of Cairn Diarmid, and poured himself a stiff measure. He had scarcely had time to taste so much as a snifter of whisky when a knock at the door interrupted him.

Colworth sighed. "Come in, Davenport."

Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Davenport, six foot even in immaculately polished boots, nicely turned ankles, starched and pressed uniform and greedy little eyes, let himself in.

"I hope I'm not interrupting, Sir?"

"You always are, Davenport," said Colworth wearily. He downed the contents of his glass, shuddered, and set it down. He waited for a few moments in silence, listening to the music. He waited until his adjutant looked ready to speak and cut in with military efficiency.

"Do you recognize this piece, Davenport?"

Davenport tilted his head. "It's *Colonel Balls*, isn't it, Sir?"

"That, Davenport, is the tune to which my unit used to march," explained General Colworth pointedly. "My battalion marched to that, and the regiment took its music from them. The 'Hammer of the Gods', they called us. Do you know where they are now?"

"Merged into the Third Infantry, Sir."

"The Third Infantry! And where were *they* a hundred years ago? Where's *their* tradition?"

Davenport had heard this many times before. The general, one of the Louistranan Army's most venerable old warhorses, was prone to reminisce about his days in the ranks. "That's war, Sir."

"War!" Colworth snorted derisively. "As if you'd know the first thing about war. The mud, the burst of shells, laying your life on the line for your comrades as they lay theirs on the line for yours..."

Davenport resorted to diplomacy. "Sir, I would remind you that I have volunteered for front line duty on three occasions and was turned down each time,"

"And I would remind *you*, Davenport, strictly off the record of course, that I know you pulled every string you could to ensure that request was denied."

Davenport's face fell. "I have the latest from the front, Sir. You asked about Lieutenant Thomas' platoon. The ones reported MIA north of Lake Gylorean?"

"I know which ones you mean, Colonel. You have the report?"

"Right here, Sir." Davenport offered Colworth a large, sealed envelope.

Colworth accepted and opened it. "Still no news, then."

"None, Sir."

Colworth frowned. "Missing, Presumed Dead, then. They're from your battalion, aren't they?"

"Yes, Sir. I've started on letters to their next-of-kin. I was thinking perhaps I could recommend them for a posthumous L.C.?"

"Yes, you were, weren't you?"

"Sir?"

"Go on, then. Posthumous Military Medal at the least. Let me know if you need anything signed."

Davenport saluted and excused himself. Pausing only to pour himself another slug of whisky, Colworth limped over to his chair and seated himself with difficulty, his knees creaking in protest. All of a sudden he felt aware of every bodily complaint he had picked up in his years of service.

* * * *

"Major, you ought to take some of us with you!" protested Sinclair, but he knew the answer already.

Dane Jayce never did anything by the book: he was a loose cannon of legendary proportions, but he always got results when no one else could. The Major's luck had held for a long time, but Sinclair had begun to wonder if the tightrope his commander was walking had worn down to a thread. Everyone's luck ran out eventually.

"It's a one-man job, Sinclair," retorted Dane. "Besides, you'll need every man you can get for our second objective. If I know leeches, and believe me, Sinclair, I *do*, it'll get ugly as soon as those charges go off."

"But, still—"

"But still nothing. Don't make me pull rank, Captain."

"Captain?"

"You heard."

"Are you expecting to come back from this one, Major?"

"The only thing I'm expecting is the unexpected. Are you turning down this promotion?"

"Well, no, obviously—"

"That's settled then. We'll get you some bars once we're done here."

Sinclair would have felt affronted by this abruptness if he and his commanding officer hadn't been through rituals like this countless times. The words hardly ever changed, although the sudden promotion had taken the wind out of his sails somewhat. "Yes, Sir. But who's going to watch your back?"

"Every last damn slurp in the province," replied Dane. "We both know that."

* * * *

Opulence reigned at the Château Lareine; velvet-upholstered divans and chaises-lounges littered the drawing rooms; fine crystalware invited guests to partake of the drink and drugs they dispensed, while portraits depicted lewd and bloodthirsty scenes for the delectation of the lord of the manor. Lord Lareine, a tall, foppish Lemyari, was among the first vampires made when Myssitarpin fell. Quick to play up his role in the whole affair, he enjoyed regaling his guests with tales of how easily his plans came to fruition.

Lareine had an especially dark reputation in Louistrana: one of Myssitarpin's finer officers who had turned to the side of the hellgods; in the short space of a year he had distributed false intelligence, covertly organized three mutinies, and even went so far as to establish a temple to Galee on his land. Before his treachery was brought to light he had rendered Myssitarpin's military divided and ineffective,

leaving the land ripe for the conquering. He was made a Lemyari as a reward for his actions, and though his powers were no greater than the majority of his kind, he more than made up for this in connections and influence. He organized; he presided over events; of all the lords and ladies in the increasingly cut-throat new order, Lareine did the most to circumvent the squabbling of Bellocar's wives and bring the Lemyari, in theory, onto the same side.

In short, he played his fellow Lemyari like violins, but he parried any accusations to that effect with self-deprecating chuckles. "I am a mere fiddler," he often said.

His celebrated parties formed the cornerstones of his diplomacy. Lareine derived considerable amusement from the irony that, despite having an ultimately parasitic existence, he made a fine host. Few Lemyari declined his invitations, knowing what delights awaited them. Wine and blood flowed freely; servants were freely available for the guests' carnal fulfillment, and no act was considered too depraved. Music flurried madly through each of his ten halls, dances often degenerated into orgies, and as the affairs careened into their third or fourth day, the games began. Servants were used in games of pass-the-parcel and completely drained by the game's climax, or buried alive for scavenger hunts.

As all this went on, Lareine conducted business on the subtlest of levels. He made introductions, guided Lemyari into games and conversations to facilitate the forging of alliances. Typically he threw four such events every year, inviting Lemyari in their dozens. Such invitations were highly sought after by most who received them. Those who refused were

either of higher status or more powerful than Lareine, and thus contemptuous of his attempts to curry favor and peddle influence; or they were insane.

Farhad Disraleigh had turned down five invitations so far and, by Lemyari standards, and in Lareine's opinion, must have been completely deranged.

* * * *

Jessymene Jayce watched her mother emerge from her bedroom wearing tight fitting pants and a wisp of a low cut blouse. The fourteen-year-old frowned. "You're wearing your slut clothes again," Jessy said, layering disapproval in her voice as thick as peanut butter on bread. "You're seeing someone again."

"That's none of your business," Edith snapped.

"Every time Daddy leaves, you're back in bed with someone else."

Edith strode swiftly down the hall and slapped Jessy hard enough to leave the imprint of her hand on the girl's fair-skinned cheek. "Liar! You don't understand anything about how life works."

Jessy's eyes misted and her lips trembled, but she pulled herself together with the Jayce stubbornness she had inherited from Dane. "I'm only two years younger than you were when you married him, Mother. I'm not a child any longer."

"Shall tell your father how I caught you necking with that Goodrow boy?"

"At least I won't end up pregnant," Jessy spit back at her.

Edith winced. The passage of the Emergency Military Family Provisional Act had taken away her contraceptives. It was the government's response to the continued high casualty rate at the western and northern fronts. Make more babies, raise more soldiers.

"What I do is none of your business!"

Jessy watched her mother leave, fled to her bedroom, and threw herself onto her bed. Tears rolled from her eyes and sobs started. She desperately wanted to tell her father what was going on, but her Aunt Kate had told her that it would only hurt him and take his mind from more important matters in the midst of a dangerous time. She frequently wished that her father had married someone like her Aunt Kate, instead of her mother.

* * * *

Dane found the spot where he had left several changes of clothes in a large waterproof chest. He changed from his fatigues into a casual suit and walked out of the last bit of the swamps into the open ground. He would have to see Leister first and pay his tolls in order to maintain his cover.

He had spent years cultivating his contacts among the vampires, especially the Lemyari, working as a merchant and smuggler. Even with the leeches' star in the ascendant, there were still certain goods that existed beyond their reach and by supplying these, Dane had made himself invaluable. Whenever one of Bellocar's wives discovered that the servants of a rival or the rival herself craved something that their holdings produced, they liked to try and deprive their

rivals of it out of pique. During these years he had learnt their politics and ingratiated himself with the vampires, playing one local leader off against another.

The Lemyari were the most dangerous of those lineages generally referred to as the 'royals.' They walked openly in daylight and they possessed secondary venomous nails beneath their primaries, a legacy of the lamia blood used to develop them. Myssitarpin belonged to the servants of Mother Damnation who had created them and very few of the demons here held positions of power, although many demons served in lesser offices and ranks. The demons were mostly storm troopers in Myssitarpin. Mother Damnation had temples scattered across the continent, many of them hidden and known only to her most reverent worshipers who performed dark rites deep within them, while her public temples were mainly for show and to receive gifts from the humans who were either propitiating her or begging for favors. She was a secretive old bitch. Only a few knew where her main temple was, the seat of her power.

Dane had seen the disturbing observances at the public temples for years, but he had never managed to get inside one of the hidden ones. If he could blow up enough of those and destroy the main temple, perhaps he could bring her down. He still had nightmares thirty years later about finding the Ylesgaires feeding on his father and discovering his uncle had gone over to the other side as a Lemyari. His uncle must have been in one of those secret temples once, Dane still believed that as strongly as ever, because of the way the man had spoken of Her. If Uncle Abram had been able to get

inside one, then sooner or later, Dane would and then he would give them a taste of what they had given his family and countless others.

A small white house stood back from the road and he strolled up the walk. A woman came out, wiping her hands on her apron. "Daniel, it's been awhile. On your way to see Leister again?"

"I got goods to move, Betty. You still taking care of my horses?"

"You know it. Little white mare foaled, so I guess you'll be taking the brown gelding?"

With gasoline rationed most humans had returned to carts and horses or bicycles. Only the vampires and their entourages had plenty of fuel, although there was talk that ruined Yurpa was now drenched in oil for the taking. That defied sense and science, but with divinity anything was possible.

Dane walked past her into the house and sat down at the coffee table in the living room. "How's life, Betty?"

She tensed slightly and then said, "Fine. Leister don't want you messed with, so we don't get messed with much."

"There's a caveat in there, Betty. What happened?"

"Marie Levoden has been sniffing around. One of her people was out here four weeks ago, a Lemyari named Trajan. He's a nasty one. Insisted, on the grounds of hospitality, that he have a taste of Nancy. We were afraid not to let him. He half-killed her. She was sick for weeks after. Still is."

"I'll have a discreet talk with Leister about it, Betty. Marie Levoden doesn't rule this province. Maybe I should have a look at Nancy. Have my horse saddled while I do that."

No, Marie didn't rule, but she wanted to. Dane rubbed his chin thinking about her and then massaged the back of his neck. He had messed her up a few times during Leister's rise to power in the province around Port Noble. Had she detected his hand in there? Or was she simply sending Trajan around to dig at Leister's secret allies and networks? He would need to find the Green-Eyed Fly and ask him to sniff around a bit.

* * * *

Scouting vampire territory, or 'batwatching' as men on the front called it, was risky business, especially in Myssitarpin. They had to leave their Land Rovers behind at Brode's waystation, as they had no hope of getting them across the river. Sinclair and thirty-odd fully-equipped men had to cross the land on foot without any vehicles available for a rapid retreat. Sending in three soldiers for a batwatching trip was damn near suicidal, but they had no choice: the fewer the scouts, the lower their chances of being detected. One fire team with Tirtuu as a guide was the absolute maximum Sinclair could spare. The rest would have to remain at the campsite. Sergeant Ramsden, possessing by far the greatest wealth of experience in this field, volunteered to lead the section.

They traveled without torches or any form of light source. This far into Slurp Country, they couldn't risk giving their enemies the faintest chance of discovering them. They

covered their hands with gloves, dulled their boots, and wore Orville helmets—woolen hats that covered the entire face save for eye and mouth-holes. They moved as quietly as they could, never raising their voices above a whisper.

They stopped some five miles from the château.

"Gather round, boys," grumbled Ramsden. They did so. "Here's how we're gonna do it. We'll tab over to the château and break up into four groups of two. I want the area surrounded and mapped: all entrances and exits, every bit of cover. Stay well out of sight. Anyone who breaks cover automatically volunteers for rear guard duty. Everyone got that?"

"Yes, Sarge," chorused his squad.

"Ringer, Wain, you take Tirtuu and check out the south side. Burke, you're with me—we're going north. Splodge, Napper—east. Watts, Jezza—you've got the west side. Solly, Ginge, keep this area secure. If you see anyone you don't recognize, stick 'em and hide the body. Everyone got *that*?"

"Yes, Sarge."

"You gonna say that every time I ask a question?"

"Yes, Sarge."

"Good boys. Let's move."

* * * *

A chill wind disturbed the fallen leaves that littered the ground and startled the scavenger from his fitful sleep. He slept lightly these days; he had to. Attack could come at any moment. The habit of weeks had made his routine second nature: before he was fully awake he had picked up and

shouldered his rifle, flipped the safety-catch off and watched the exit from his dug-out for any signs of movement. A sudden breeze disturbed the camouflage net that concealed his home from view. The scavenger took a short breath and held it. Seconds slipped by with deceptive slowness.

Satisfied for the moment, he stalked forward with all the stealth he could muster. He pushed the camouflage aside and stepped out into the cold night air.

He heard the sound of snapping twigs ahead and to his left. He turned, aimed, and rested his finger on the trigger, waiting for his unexpected companion to give its position away. He did not notice the second visitor until it was three seconds too late.

The vampire pounced from the roof of the dug-out like a jaguar, fangs down and thirsty for blood. It landed squarely on its prey, slamming him to the ground. His finger tightened involuntarily on the rifle's trigger, wasting a shot. The loud report startled birds from their slumber, frightening them into the sky in a sudden cacophony. The scavenger recovered quickly, knowing only too well what would happen if he delayed for a second. He writhed, twisted in the vampire's grasp. Despite the suddenness of the attack, he had not relinquished his grasp on his weapon. With agility that belied his scrawny build, he smashed the stock of his gun into the vampire's mouth, knocking its fangs out. A second blow to the nose stunned the predator for long enough for him to extricate himself completely. The vampire recovered itself just in time to receive a dum-dum in the head. It lurched

backward, tumbled to the loamy floor, and never moved again.

The scavenger scowled. The shot he had fired in error had almost certainly rendered his lair unsafe. He would have to move on, but first he had to dispatch the other vampire.

"Fucking slurps," he hissed. It was the first time he had heard his own voice in six days.

A second, longer rustle hinted at a panicked retreat. The scavenger bared his teeth in a humorless grin, raised his rifle, and peered down the sight. He took another short breath as he prepared himself, watching the forest for any disturbance at all. His target rewarded his vigilance with another movement. Gunfire rang out again; a single shot that put a permanent end to the lesser blood's hunger. He knew how they moved now: he had shot enough of them over the past few months to learn their habits. Smiling grimly, the scavenger made his way over to the body of his first assailant, satisfied with his work. His previous life, now an event that seemed so distant that he scarcely considered it real, had been distinguished only by the sharpshooter's wings he had earned at boot camp. Only the gun in his hands and the precise entry and exit wounds in his targets' skulls served to remind him of this past.

He examined the carcass extended before him. Its clothes were scruffy, its feet bare and it bore no weapon. The scavenger scowled. A tick. Always ticks. He had a feeling there were a couple of leeches in the area too—he hadn't bagged one of them in a long time—but he knew enough to expect a leech directing the lesser bloods. This was his fifth

attack in as many days and they had, it seemed, finally discovered his hiding-place.

The scavenger paused, the gravity of his situation holding him still. He would have to go, and go now. More to the point, he would have to move through a forest infested with slurps, with a diminishing supply of ammunition and limited stores and no direction he took would be safe. The best he could expect would be to move a few miles, dig in again, and hope some of his targets had something useful on them. Only the Lemyari—or leeches as the soldiers called them—would have anything worth taking. Furthermore, he had no chance of escape until the lesser bloods, or ticks, lacked direction and organization. The only way to do that was to kill the leech, and they did not die easily.

In short, it was business as usual. The scavenger packed his meager supplies, made sure his remaining mags were within easy reach, and headed deeper into Slurp Country.

CHAPTER TWO

Betty's daughter, Nancy, sat on the windowseat, staring out her window with a light, chain-stitch blue shawl pulled tight around her shoulders when he came in. Her eyes had that hollow, wounded animal look that still had the power to disturb Dane. He squatted next to her. The last time he had arrived, Nancy had thrown herself into his arms and kissed him. This time she just sat there.

"I want to help, Nancy. But you must tell me what he did."
Her eyes narrowed and she shook her head.

"Nancy, did he just feed? Or did he rape you?"

Nancy's eyes teared up and she went very still.

"Trajan has a reputation. A very bad one, Nancy. I'm certain your folks already suspect he did more than feed. Leister will need to know. You don't want Marie taking over do you?"

"No," Nancy replied in a small, hurt voice. Then the story came stumbling out and by the time she had finished anger simmered in Dane's veins.

"Did he force any of his blood on you?"

"No."

Dane rubbed his chin, thinking. That had been a long shot. Lemyari made very few children of their blood because they wanted fewer competitors. The Ylesgaire made dozens because they were little more than clever animals. "Show me where he bit you."

Nancy began to cry, but opened her blouse anyway. Half of her left nipple was missing. That was one of Trajan's trademarks.

"Damn him to hell," Dane snarled.

* * * *

Preparations for Lord Lareine's latest party had begun in earnest. In the past three months he had amassed a veritable army of servants. Under the beady eye of his butler Ezra, the labyrinthine corridors of the château had been swept meticulously clean and the fittings of gold, silver, and brass had been polished until they shone. Lord Lareine ordered new uniforms for all his staff save Ezra: for the duration of the party, plunging necklines were in and long sleeves and collared shirts were out. The only neck-covering each of the nibari wore was a collar to remind the guests from whose larder they fed. A crazy, jubilant atmosphere pervaded the château: by the master's orders all had to rejoice when he threw a party; but a glance into the eyes of the junior servants revealed a certain emptiness. They all expected the fangs of Lemyari to find them during this occasion, and they knew some, possibly many, would die. Only old Ezra, Lareine's first and favorite nibari, could expect any reprieve from the deadly games that were to come. Everyone else was fair game.

Despite this hopelessness, Lareine did what he could to keep his servants loyal and eager. He had a couple of casks of wine brought up from his capacious cellars and placed at the disposal of his underlings and their rations were increased. By

his leave, they ate, drank, and made merry, knowing that the next day could easily be their last. In this manner the nibari emulated their master.

By the fourth day, the château looked set for the festivities to come. The place was a vision in gold, bronze and scarlet, and positively glowed with a kind of visceral warmth. The passageways were like arteries and the halls like atria and ventricles; a vast, monstrous heart that threatened to throb with bacchanalian excess at any moment. A steady flow of narcotics for the event had begun to trickle in; entertainers retained for the coming weeks arrived: at the top of the bill was an electric string quartet whose musicians were kept in a constant state of telepathic communion and, to ensure no two performances were the same, were kept high on speedballs—a mixture of amphetamines and heroin. They alternated between near-comatose catatonia and frenzied fiddling, their sound twisted into maddened shapes by flangers, phasers, and electronic delay units.

Lareine expected only one more arrival before the guests began to turn up: a film and sound crew. The entire event would be recorded and broadcast to Louistrana to demoralize their fighters. As the days passed, Lareine grew more jovial and arrogant. It was going to be the soirée to end all soirées; news of its success might even reach the ears of the Glistening One. The time to begin drew nearer with each day, and his thoughts turned inevitably towards his wardrobe. Something formal but bohemian seemed best. In the end Lareine opted for a cream-colored poet's shirt, a black cravat and a deep crimson waistcoat embroidered with gold thread

and knee breeches to match, completing his ensemble with white silk stockings and low-heeled slip-on shoes of black velvet. He wore his long black hair in a pompadour, and spent an hour a day fussing over minor details. Everything had to be *perfect*. He expected people to talk, and he was damned if he was going to let his appearance go unnoticed.

* * * *

Wain, Eryngus and Tirtuu approached the south side of the Château Lareine from the southwest, avoiding the path by as wide a margin as possible. The château bordered on ground reclaimed from the swamps, and following the recent rains much of the ground was waterlogged, squelching beneath the scouts' boots. Eryngus, or 'Ringer' as the rest of the company knew him, grimaced at Wain, who grimaced back, but given that cold, damp and miserable were the ground state of being for sentries and scouts alike they had long since learned to put up with their predicament with a minimum of grumbling. Only Tirtuu was truly at home in this climate, and even as barefoot as he was, he splashed his way through the puddles without a trace of discomfort.

Finding a forested patch marking the border with Lord Lareine's gardens, they hunkered down, amidst the trees, the grass, the mud, and the moss. Eryngus, a born-starer with protuberant eyes, watched the grounds with his binoculars and dictated his findings to Private Wain, who squatted beside him with a notepad and his rifle cradled in his arms. Tirtuu watched the pair irritably, anxious to get away from the château as soon as possible. He paced nervously up and down

for a few seconds before Wain grabbed him roughly by the arm and hauled him down.

"Will you pack that in?" hissed Wain. "You're giving our position away!"

"Sorry, Private-Saee. There Big Fangs inside, many leech. Tirtuu not want to spend too many time out there. Sorry, Private-Saee."

"Shuddup, the pair of you," grumbled Eryngus. "One tick, three hundred yards, five o'clock, big tree."

"Got it," replied Wain, placing a cross on his notepad.

Wain and Eryngus raised their voices no higher than a whisper, and did not speak at all save to report and confirm a sighting, its distance from the observer and its direction from a reference point. Ten long minutes passed in this fashion, before Tirtuu spoke again.

"It look safe, Ringer-Saee. We get in, blow up, very good."

Private Eryngus scowled as he gazed through the binoculars. "Shut it!" he hissed. "I'm still looking."

"It look safe to Tirtuu. We go now, tell Sergeant-Saee, yes?"

"If we don't make a proper job of this, Sergeant-Saee will have us doing jankins for a month. You stay where you are." growled Wain.

"Wain, thump him if he moves." Eryngus paused. "Aye-aye. *There* we go. Tick number five: two hundred and fifty yards; three o'clock, château."

"Five tick, yes, very good. We go now?"

"What the fuck's got into you?" hissed Eryngus. "I never got this from Akee."

"Akee stupid. Tirtuu smart."

"Tirtuu get fat lip if he don't shut up pronto," added Wain, sticking out his jaw and flexing his knuckles.

Tirtuu scowled, baring his fangs, but otherwise remained silent. In the end, Eryngus counted ten lesser bloods, roaming the grounds like guard dogs. They looked wiry and half-starved, evidently kept that way just in case people like him chanced their arm. There seemed to be little pattern to their movements, but each had a territory marked and stuck to it. At the end, they had a rough but functional map of their quadrant—little more than a square for the 'shatto' as he spelled it—and circles denoting the general areas patrolled by the 'ticks', each of whom were marked with a cross to indicate each sighting.

"There. See? Now we can go."

* * * *

"So you're back again, Daniel," Leister said, regarding Dane. He opened a silver cigarette case on his desk and pushed it toward Dane who took one out and lit up. "What have you brought me this time?"

"I have a shipment coming in, same as last time."

"Good. Very good."

Dane sat down on the sofa along the nearest wall. "Marie has been sniffing around. She sent Trajan to harass my people. A young girl was brutalized." He began unbuttoning his shirt as he spoke. "Without that waystation I can't get across the border without the guards on both sides holding me up..."

"Trajan's an animal," Leister said noncommittally. "I'll put a stop to it."

Leister settled beside Dane and unbuttoned the last buttons of his shirt. The vampire was homosexual, ostentatiously so, and enjoyed running his fingers over Dane's chest, delighting in teasing the man. He knew that Dane would never bend over for him but took great pleasure in his embarrassment and discomfort. Leister's fingers traced a fang scar on Dane's shoulder. "One of my people was rough with you?"

Dane nodded. Leister never left more than a bruise. "They wanted all of me."

"They? More than one?"

"Two males."

Leister's voice dripped with sarcasm. "And yet you're here? Did you kill them? You're not supposed to do that, you know!" he added, chiding.

"My men did. They wanted your shipment."

"Daniel, I am fond of you, you know. Do try not to get caught. I'd be forced to drain you in public just to save face and no-one wants that, least of all us."

Dane's gut tightened. "I need travel papers, both to the port where the shipment is and to go north as far Tomasburg."

"Why Tomasburg?" Leister dragged an idle finger along Dane's throat, tracing the carotid artery.

"I have suppliers I need to check on. For gems. And a date with a pretty lady."

"You'll see that I get a share?"

"Don't I always?"

Leister licked Dane's neck. Dane shivered. Leister teased along the artery, giving Dane no warning. The anticipation made it worse: he dreaded it and knew he would never become accustomed to it. He reminded himself that he did this for his country a moment before Leister's fangs entered his throat. Dane gasped, stiffening for an instant at the pain before Leister swept it all away with his power. Leister was one of the most powerful and skilled of the vampires Dane dealt with. He sank against Leister as the vampire continued to suck. When he thought he could not bear anymore, Leister raised his bloody mouth from Dane and smiled.

Dane's legs felt weak and his head dizzy. Leister had taken more than usual.

"You should rest, Daniel. I'll have my secretary get the papers together for you." Leister went to his desk and hit the intercom button. "Sarah, have someone convey Mr. Jonys to the resting room and get him a whiskey. Also, draw up some travel papers for Mr. Jonys to Port Rogue and Tomasburg."

The two creatures that entered were horned with red skin and strange black eyes. Demons. Dane had not seen demons before at Leister's. His fuzzy mind wondered at what it meant as they helped him to his feet and supported him down the hall to a room with a bed and several soft sofas. He had never needed to be placed here before and it sent a chill of worry along his arms. They settled him on the bed and one of them stroked a bit of blood from his neck, then sucked its finger.

Another of the creatures brought him whiskey.

Leister kept his demons and Ylesgaire in check with an iron hand so that his province was very efficient and productive.

* * * *

Edith drove her car around to the back of the upscale home in Oxmoor, thinking about how long the drive had been with a growing irritation. Before the rationing of gasoline had become so severe, she would have been here in very little time; however the new ethanol engines were not nearly as fast and powerful as the gasoline engines in the cars she had driven twenty years ago. She fondly remembered her little red convertible that could go from zero to eighty in under a minute, and cruise at one fifty. The back seat of that elegant car was where Edith first managed to seduce Dane. She jokingly referred to it as her "fuck me" car, and she had been with more than half of Dane's graduating class at officer's school before she settled on him as the one most likely to succeed.

"Most likely to succeed, hah!" Edith let the words pop out with a lash of bitterness. "All these damnable years and nothing to show for it."

Edith pulled into a narrow parking spot concealed from the street and got out. She straightened her blouse, preparing to become her lover's perfect temptress. Rupert would take one look at this blouse and shove his hand into her cleavage. Edith shivered in delight at the thought. Rupert was a real man, an accomplished man, everything she wished Dane would try to be. But after twenty years of marriage, she had

pretty much given up on Dane ever rising above a field command.

She took her key out of her purse and let herself in through the back door. "Hello, darling."

"Edith." Rupert Davenport spoke her name as if he were cherishing it. He had a drink in his hand and took a sip before opening his arms for her to enter them. "My, I *do* like that blouse."

He held her in the crook of his arm, teased one of her breasts out the top, and began kissing and licking along her neck. "Knowing you were coming, I put a nice Virjira Chardonnay on ice."

Edith trembled with eagerness, feeling her loins moisten with desire for him.

Rupert drew back, and led her to the living room, which had a plush, thick carpet. He had sent his Nabaren servants away for day. They knew about his affairs, but the Nabaren could generally be very discreet. He favored married women. They were less likely to cry foul if they caught one in the oven, and the baking buns were always blamed on their husbands. He suspected one or two over the years might have been his, but what did matter? No one had come knocking at his door to complain. Well, except for one, but Rupert had gotten that man transferred to northern after the man threatened him and the blighter was currently listed as MIA. A shame. He should have been more civilized about such matters when he confronted Rupert.

* * * *

The scavenger's journey took him deeper into the marshland. The ground became increasingly waterlogged and boggy, and though there were fewer trees the vegetation had grown denser and denser, obscuring vision in all directions. He had been on the move for nearly eight hours when he discovered that he had company. His exit had been rapid rather than stealthy, and he had made no effort to cover his tracks. He knew it was only a matter of time before more slurps, drawn by the firefight, discovered his dugout, the bodies, and the trail he had left. They hunted in packs, and would try to pincer him if at all possible. As soon as he heard the first rustle in the undergrowth, the scavenger remembered the rest of their tactic; they'd try to panic him. Get him to waste a few more precious rounds before taking him. He'd lost half his section that way; he was surprised he'd been that predictable.

A thrill of adrenaline shook its way through his veins. Despite the urge to get it all over with, the scavenger kept his pace and his nerve. *Don't play their game*, his sergeant had told him. *They like us shit-scared and unable to fight*. Games, it was all about games. The scavenger decided to change the rules and invite the slurps out to play. He stopped, lowered his rifle, drew the .45 he had looted from the body of his lieutenant, and held it up to his head.

"You want me alive," he said. Days of silence and not enough water had left his voice raspy. "Come out or I'll blow my own head off. I'll have bled out before you get to me and there won't be much left to play with."

"We'll get you before you pull that trigger, skinny boy."

"Bend you over and ride you as we *suck you dry*."

At least two of them, then. "Reckon you got about two hours 'til first light. Better make it fast, boys."

"Maybe," retorted a mocking voice. "I bet you got a tight ass. That big male, the stripy one, he did. You should have heard him squeal and *squirm*..."

"Try any of that with me and I'll blow your ugly nuts off before you've even got it up."

The scavenger heard two splashes, and guessed that they had submerged themselves. There was no telling quite where they would come up. They were calling his bluff and had called it successfully: the scavenger was not in a suicidal mood. Still, they had moved and he had heard them; he at least had targets to look for. A haze of apprehension rose up like marsh gas as the minutes hissed by, but experience kept him from panicking. He had been in this position once before with greater numbers on his side, and it had done him no good. He remembered Corporal Tramwell, eyes wide as the ticks latched onto him and sucked all the color from his skin, and even now he felt fear, boiling away in his belly. Only hatred and the will to survive despite the odds kept him going.

"One of your buddies tried hiding," he observed at last. "I got him. Two hundred yards. Headshot." He hadn't spoken so much in weeks, and certainly didn't feel like he was in the mood for bravado, but he was surrounded, pinned down and the vampires knew where he was. He saw no harm in girding his loins a little. "I make it an hour 'til sun-up now. You boys going anywhere?" For the moment it seemed he was doomed

to soliloquize. For want of anything better to do, he stood his ground, scanning the swamp for signs of movement.

Minute followed minute, and finally the first shaft of dawn pierced the leafy canopy that covered the swamp. Tiredness nagged at his limbs and his eyelids: the scavenger usually slept around this time, but right now he could afford no such luxury. Even if the ticks had dug in to hide from the sunlight, he simply could not sleep in an area crawling with slurps; not without someone to watch his back. After another few minutes, he decided to try his luck and continue to press on.

"Feeling tired, are we?"

A massive, broad-shouldered man loomed suddenly before the scavenger, with all the arrogance of a lion. He was dressed in jodhpurs and a silk shirt with an olive-green topcoat, looking every bit the eccentric nobleman out hunting. The scavenger dropped into a defensive crouch, holding his automatic before him like a protective talisman.

"One shot, leech. That's all I need."

This elicited a peal of braying laughter from the huntsman. He threw his head back, his mouth open to reveal a set of vicious fangs. His flowing mane of well-brushed brown hair danced with mirth. "Dear me, you are a quite irredeemably stupid little creature, aren't you? Can't even compose a whole sentence."

The scavenger tightened his finger on the trigger, but the shot went wide; the vampire had closed the distance between them in an instant and knocked the scavenger's arm out of the way. The huntsman surged forward, pushed his quarry onto his back, and knelt over him, pinning him down.

"I won't say that this chase hasn't been *moderately* amusing at times," he confessed, his tone of voice still smooth and urbane; officers were officers everywhere, it seemed. "But I simply *must* draw matters to a close now. I have business to conduct with Leister later. Not that you'd understand, of course. The business of superior beings."

The scavenger struggled, tried to escape, but the Lemyari's strength greatly exceeded his own.

"Now, if I were you, and believe me it gives me a headache to think down to your level, I'd save all that strength for some last words. Anything you'd care to say before I drain you?"

The scavenger still had his pistol, but could not hope to aim it properly. Desperation led him to aim it improperly: he turned the automatic around in his fingers, resting his thumb on the trigger and his fingers on the butt. He risked breaking his fingers or shooting himself by accident, but he was out of tricks. It was either this or lie back and let the leech suck him.

"Yeah," he said after a moment, buying himself a few precious moments to line up his shot. "All officers are cunts."
He fired.

CHAPTER THREE

The handgun jerked violently and coughed a hollow-point into the huntsman's back. The recoil jolted every bone in the scavenger's hand and he felt his fingers and thumb dislocate; a wrenching agony that wracked his right arm from his fingertips to his elbow. He gasped with pain and yet through the haze of discomfort he noticed that his desperate gamble had paid off. He had distracted the leech for long enough to crawl out. The pistol fell from his now-useless hand, leaving him with the rifle that hung from a sling over his shoulders. Clambering awkwardly to his feet, the scavenger grasped the butt of his remaining gun, and, hoping that the recent collision hadn't damaged his weapon, fought to aim at the vampire. The task proved more difficult than he expected: the pain and lack of strength in his gun hand forced him to aim left-handed, wedging the stock of the rifle into his shoulder, and he could barely use his right hand to steady his arm. The barrel of the gun weaved in an unsteady figure-of-eight pattern.

The Lemyari huntsman noticed this as he stood up. Another peal of laughter echoed through the wilderness. "If you could only see yourself!" he chuckled. "You really ought to put the gun down before you do yourself another mischief: you haven't a hope in Hell of shooting straight." He focused his power, his eyes bore into the scavenger's like augers. *"Look at you! You're no better than an animal, and even if you did succeed in hitting me, I'll just shrug it off again!"* The

vampire contorted, folded his left arm up behind his back, produced a crushed cartridge, and tossed it contemptuously at the scavenger. "Here. Have this back."

The scavenger ignored the projectile, letting it bounce off his chest. His gaze remained transfixed by that of his enemy. As much as he loathed to admit it to himself, the leech had a point. He had lost the rest of his squad to creatures less powerful than this, and only by luck had he survived for so long. He was all but defenseless.

The Lemyari did not even blink. A cruel smile spread over his lips. "I knew you'd see sense. Now, give me the gun and I may see to it that you don't suffer. Much. After all, you've been rather good sport and I could be persuaded to dispatch you cleanly."

A tiny voice within the scavenger's grizzled soul screamed in defiance, but between the Lemyari's assault on his ego and his own tiredness and fatigue its struggle was in vain. His shoulders sagged, all the strength sapped from his arms. His skin turned pale, as if the vampire had already begun to drain his blood. Shivering, the scavenger held out the rifle, offering it to the Lemyari, who smiled and accepted it.

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it? Don't worry: it'll all be over soon enough. I don't think I'd try draining you anyway; I doubt there's so much as a teaspoonful left in your veins as it is. *Stand to attention!*"

The command overwhelmed the scavenger: the very idea of disobedience seemed unthinkable. He stood up as straight as a ramrod, chin tucked in, shoulders pulled back, and his arms held stiffly to his sides.

"Outstanding!" exclaimed the huntsman. "Quite the soldier boy, weren't you? Death by firing squad seems somehow appropriate." He held up the rifle like an executioner, and with a sharp eye lined the sights up directly with the scavenger's head. "One shot. Bang. No pretension; no sophistry: just death in its most basic form. There's a certain stark beauty in the bullet, you know: clinical, efficient, elegant in its simplicity. Hold your head up, soldier: you are about to become *art*."

The huntsman squeezed the trigger, only for the gun to jam. Irritated, the huntsman moved to clear the jam. His concentration broke for a split-second. The scavenger snapped back to his senses and took advantage of the moment his dumb luck had given him. All his pent-up adrenaline sought an outlet. His muscles bunched like a coiled spring: in two swift, decisive motions he lunged out, shoving the rifle out of his way, and dived for the fallen officer's pistol, picking it up in his off-hand. He emptied the magazine into the Lemyari at point-blank range as rapidly as he could. Three shots missed their mark completely.

The Lemyari reacted quickly, but not quickly enough: as he refocused his will, the fourth round caught him square in the chest, while three more drew a triangle of entry wounds in his face, ventilating his skull. The Lemyari fell backwards, twitching; his dark blood steaming on the cold ground. The scavenger, unsure if even that was enough to put a leech out of action permanently, walked over and fired another hollow-point into his would-be hunter at point-blank range. He knew most leeches could survive or at least recover from multiple

gunshot wounds: and wondered if that extended to four hollow-points to the head, half-decapitating the creature. He stamped hard on what was left of the vampire's skull just to be on the safe side, and took stock of his situation. His rifle was almost out of ammunition, and needed clearing. He had one mag left for his pistol, and his gun-hand needed medical attention lest the pain become unbearable. The scavenger resolved to see to this latter problem, but first he had to see if the leech had anything of value. Trapped out here where even the trees could have fangs, every round of ammunition was worth ten times its weight in gold. He felt a twinge of remorse at wasting so much on the slurp for that reason.

The Lemyari had nothing of any immediate value: no rations since they fed on humans; no side-arm, no ammunition; even the boots were the wrong size.

"Tight bastard," growled the scavenger, giving the corpse a spiteful kick in the ribs. Cursing under his breath, he picked up his remaining gear and looked for another hiding-place. He did not go far; tired and in pain, he managed a mere two miles before settling into an earthy hollow thick with foliage. The greens provided plenty of cover, keeping him out of easy sight. It probably did nothing to disguise his smell, and he knew that any ticks that came nearby would probably be on him in an instant: worse yet, he knew that at least two were at large. He had little choice; he needed to rest now, and to do something about his hand. If his luck continued to hold, the ticks would find out that he had killed a leech and would run elsewhere in search of easier prey. Ticks weren't bright,

but they would have to be pretty desperate to try taking on anything that could kill a leech.

The scavenger examined his right hand, which throbbed uncomfortably and was beginning to swell. He could think of nothing to do except attempt to force his finger bones back into position; that would have to do until he could find a medic to see to him. Steeling himself, the scavenger took out his combat knife and bit down hard on its hilt to muffle his cries of discomfort while, finger by finger, he tried to wrench his grimy digits back into position. The series of sharp pains brought tears to his eyes. His attempt at first aid took him about five minutes but seemed to him to last for hours, as if he had sprouted a hundred fingers, all of which needed relocating.

When he was done, the hand was still swollen and aching, but he fancied the ache was perhaps duller than it was. He tried flexing his fingers. They seemed freer than before and with considerable effort he could clench his hand into a fist, but he had no desire to test its usefulness in a fight. Settling down for a moment, the scavenger felt tiredness weighing his limbs down. He fought to keep his eyes open, knowing how dangerous it was to sleep in slurp country at night-time, but the day's exertions had taken an excessive toll. Within a moment he passed out.

An hour later, a shadow fell over the scavenger, and his dreams were haunted by visions of needles, veins, and blood.

* * * *

The chimes of midnight alerted the house to the start of the festivities. The servants paused, interrupting their tasks and conversations as the bronze bell rang twelve times. When the last echo from the clock tower fled cowering into the night, a fever gripped the nibari. They hurried through their few remaining tasks and rushed to their places. All of Lord Lareine's maids had been instructed to serve drinks: half of them carried silver trays that bore glasses filled with offerings from the château's cellars, while the other half had no drinks to offer save the blood in their veins. These first blood offerings of the night had been kept in strictly controlled conditions for the past three months: they worked at night and stayed indoors, developing an opalescent pallor, and were given regular baths and applications of skin lotion to ensure they looked as inviting to the guests as possible. Their diet was just as regimented, ensuring their blood sugar levels were kept high. These specially prepared nibari were one of the many reasons that Lareine's parties were so popular. The Lemyari called them 'Lareine's Chalices'; an incomparable treat for the truly refined vampiric palate.

The guests arrived in twos and threes: Lemyari with social aspirations had come from Port Noble and farther to sample the delights that awaited them. A pair of slender footmen waited at the front door to receive the guests and relieve them of their cloaks. From there, Lareine's old and faithful retainer Ezra announced the new arrivals to the throng that gathered in the Grand Hall.

The Grand Hall was the crowning glory of the château: a vast, oblong chamber with a high ceiling and tall fixed-glass

windows, illuminated by a dozen chandeliers. A gallery spanned the perimeter of the hall, allowing spectators to look down on the brightly polished dance floor below. The room was large enough to accommodate a hundred dancers with ease, while arches led off to chambers where other, more secluded festivities were scheduled to take place as the party progressed.

Lord Lareine welcomed each guest as they arrived, treating them as old and much-loved friends. Of course, this was all part of the act: his celebrated parties were organized purely for the purpose of political gain. Bonhomie merely helped to oil the wheels.

By the time a dozen guests had been announced the film crew had set up their cameras and microphones. One camera, located in the gallery, captured the splendor of the party for posterity in wide, panoramic sweeps. A second camera watched the door for each new arrival, while the third and final stationary camera provided tighter, more intimate shots of the dance floor.

Jes Legrand, a tall and slender Lemyari with slick black hair and a deep, polished voice, had assumed the roles of commentator and film director, mixing commentary on each arrival with small talk with the various guests. The fourth cameraman accompanied him as he mingled, recording the guest's reactions, bad jokes and attempts to upstage the commentator. It could have made for pleasantly dull viewing were it not for each Lemyari's desire to show off. None could resist sampling a servant's blood or carnal skills as soon as the camera was on them, especially when they learned the

film would later be distributed throughout Louistrana for the purposes of destroying morale. In fact, as soon as it became widely known, the guests began to play to the camera, re-enacting tableaux from popular pornographic media and supplying lines such as 'she's almost as good as your daughter' or 'this collar would look better on you!'

After roughly half an hour of this, Legrand decided to lay off the vox pops for a while and concentrate on the incoming guests. The antics of those already present to his mind seemed to cheapen the whole matter, detracting from the elegant debauchery of the games and celebrations that the host had in mind. He wanted to create a work of art: sublime, terrible but compelling; if he concentrated on shabby sex scenes and obscenities then the humans that viewed his work might simply switch off, with no damage done other than a certain amount of revulsion. What he needed to do, as he had said in an animated discussion with Lareine the previous night, was to create something that left the viewer transfixed by the images on the screen, terrified by the new race of vampire lords that now lived closer than ever, but too fascinated to look away. Of course, they would be filming all week. The real magic would occur during in the cutting room.

More party-goers poured in, and wine flowed a little more freely. The string quartet's first dose of stimulants took effect and they careered into a brisk waltz. Legrand trained the cameras on the center of the dance floor, where a nibari maid, drunk and delirious from previous feedings and several glasses of wine, was declared 'Queen of the Fountain'. Scarcely aware of her circumstances, the maid dropped her

tray and applauded rapturously while the Lemyari danced and whirled around her. Her head lolled in time with the music, her eyes closed dreamily. Lost in a world of her own, she did not notice the guests drawing keen silver knives from within their dinner jackets and clutch bags, and only realized something was amiss when the first blade caressed her throat, scoring her snowy skin. She gasped, startled by the sudden intrusion of pain into her blissful reverie, and another knife sliced past her, catching her on the breast. Her eyes widened with terror now, as the waltz's tempo increased. Vampire lords and ladies spun faster around her, and she faced knives wherever she turned. She ducked and dodged hopelessly; for every dagger she evaded, two sliced at her, marring her once-pristine complexion with more cuts. The music swelled and lurched, and even the notes seemed to gain sharp edges. The maid backed away from a vicious-sounding semi-breve, only for four crotchets to leave their marks on her bare arms. She feared that an arpeggio might tear her apart limb from limb. The Queen of the Fountain covered her face with bloody hands and ran, but the dance continued to whittle at her body, shredding her a few inches at a time.

The music stopped.

The nibari peeked up, hopeful for a reprieve, only for her master, Lord Lareine, to cut her once across the carotid artery. She fell to her knees, her head thrown back as crimson jets gushed from her neck, staining the polished dance floor.

The Lemyari burst into delighted applause, hailing the Queen of the Fountain. The ice had been broken.

* * * *

Akee arrived at Brode's place late in the afternoon the day after parting with Dane. She found Brode gone and Noawhane sitting on the porch embroidering.

"Noawhane, which way did they go?" she asked in Nabarese.

Noawhane studied Akee's face. *"Do you love him? As I love Brode?"*

Akee dropped her eyes, *"No, I—it's just Tirtuu is no good."*

"Tell the truth, Akee." Noawhane waited for the answer and then lifted Akee's chin up.

"Yes."

"You know the price, Akee."

Their kind considered mating with humans the worst form of sexual depravity short of bestiality or necrophilia. Nabarese women who did that for whatever reason were considered no better than the prostitutes that worked the forts; ineligible for marriage, disobedient and outcast from Nabaren society. Any who attempted to return to their villages were stoned to death.

"I love him."

"Dane has gone to see Leister again. Sinclair is taking most of their forces to Port Noble to blow up a government building where a meeting is being held that could result in collaring half the remaining free population of Port Noble."

Akee shivered at the thought of the arcane nibari collars that the blood-slaves of the Lemyari and other demon masters wore to force them into docility.

"I don't trust Tirtuu."

"Neither do I. You can take my old pirogue to get across the lake."

* * * *

"And that's Eryngus, Wain, and Tirtuu. All present and correct, Sarge."

They doubled back toward the campsite Sinclair had established closer to the border. As before, they moved without light save for the occasional flash from a single torch, by which Burke, one of the newer members of the platoon, read from the map, struggling to keep track of the squad's location. As the new boy or 'sprog', tradition demanded that Burke be lumbered with more work than the other squaddies. Carrying heavier packs, being picked on for dirty jobs—such treatment or 'beasting' was intended to sort the men from the boys. Thus far, Burke had acquitted himself well, showing a level of aptitude that belied his youth, although he had yet to endear himself to the rest of his unit. They had a pejorative word for people like him: 'keen'. Any soldier knew well enough not to volunteer for anything; any soldier except 'Wonder Boy' Burke, that is. He volunteered for everything and made no secret of his ambitions. He meant to reach corporal in record time and in all ways emulate the career of his commanding officer. While the Fox had the admiration and

respect of his men, Burke's views were little short of hero-worship, and that embarrassed the others.

The squad made their way back to the rest of their platoon without a hitch, which mildly annoyed everyone. While of course they knew that any mishap in Myssitarpin could mean death, most troops prayed for Wonder Boy to be shown up in some minor way.

"Your report, Sergeant?"

Ramsden tore off a textbook salute—longest way up, shortest way down—his chest swelling as it was wont to do on the successful completion of a mission. "Sah! Area reconnoitered, Sah, twenty lesser bloods accounted for and noted down on this map what I have right here, Sah!"

"All right, that'll do, Sergeant," replied Sinclair, accepting the map. He aimed a slightly conspiratorial glance at the enlisted men. They had all seen this show many times before and knew that if unchecked, Ramsden would quite happily sergeant it up all night. "At ease."

"Yessir. Could get a bit hairy, Sir. Can't shoot 'em without bringing the leeches out. If we're going in at night we'll have to stick 'em."

"Could get messy, Sergeant," observed Sinclair.

"Numbers'll be evenly matched, and you know how difficult ticks can be to put down. You think the men can do it?"

"I've had 'em practicing so much they think they was *born* knifin' slurps, Sir. When my lads stick 'em, they stay stuck."

"Probably best if we hit them just before first light, though: at least that way we've only got the leeches to worry about.

Get 'em while the ticks are going to ground and before they change guard. All right boys, fall out and get dinner on."

"You heard the captain! Fall out and sort the scoff out! I want three volunteers—*Burke, put your hand down*—three volunteers! Am I talking to myself here? Right! Proctor, Damon, Rickett: you're ration assassins tonight! Hop to it!"

* * * *

Noawhane returned to her porch after seeing Akee off in the old boat. There was a woman standing on the path that she had never seen before. The power radiating from the newcomer set Noawhane's skin to tingling and her fur stood on end.

"What do you want?"

"To offer you something, Noawhane."

Noawhane regarded the stranger suspiciously, her eyes narrowing. "What?"

"Your fondest dream. The one denied you because you and Brode are not the same species."

"It is not possible..."

"It can be. You can have Brode's child. I can help you."

Noawhane shivered. Everything among her people centered around family. The young grew up to care for the old. To grow old without children was a terrible thing for a Nabaren, but she had been willing to give up all hope of it for the sake of the love she bore Brode. "Assuming you can do this, what would you wish in return?"

"Worship me. Pray to me. Make offerings and sacrifices in my name."

"Are you of the Light?"

"Yes."

Noawhane felt the woman's power suffuse her, drawing her like a moth to a candle. The woman whispered in her ear. "Your choice. Yes or no."

"Yes, I want Brode's child. I will worship, pray, make offerings and sacrifices."

The woman drew a syringe from her pocket filled with a blue substance. "I am the Tinkerer."

Frightened, Noawhane tried to draw back and flee, only to discover she could not twitch a muscle. The woman had snared her with the power. The Tinkerer was a deadly trickster, a grey-god capable of anything. The syringe had to contain Moon's Mourning. The Tinkerer and her priests had developed the first version of the dangerous gene altering chemical cocktail. The god or demon, Noawhane could not say which, shoved it into her arm and pushed the plunger.

Pain seared through Noawhane as the god's power released her. She fell to the ground screaming. Her body burned as if her veins and arteries had become rivers of flame that consumed her from the inside. The Tinkerer left her there, vanishing.

Brode, responding to her screams, found her unconscious in the dirt, curled into a tight ball. Tremors shook her body and a froth gathered around her mouth. Her pupils, always catlike, were dilated. He lifted her up and put her in his truck, got the engine started and peeled out, heading for Fort Necessity where the nearest help could be found at the army clinic.

"Oh, gods, Noawhane, don't die on me!"

* * * *

The most significant change in the nature of warfare was not, as some might surmise, the increasing numbers of undead, and the growing use of magic on the battlefield: at the end of the day an explosion was an explosion. Rather, the major difference was the time at which raids were launched. Human forces expected the slurps to attack during the night, but when it came to going on the offensive, night raids were a thing of the past. Since most of their enemies could see in the dark, they gained no advantage from striking under cover of darkness. However, when fighting in broad daylight, many of the hellgods' forces found themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Lesser bloods did not come out, let alone fight during direct sunlight. This forced the Lemyari to consider using other forces during these hours. While this made firefights unpredictable, the humans at least had the advantage of being able to see their targets without relying on light sources or night vision equipment.

Camping was always risky this close to the border. Sinclair posted twice the usual number of sentries that night, noting that anyone on stag would remain behind during the actual offensive and guard the area. As eager as his men were to strike at the vampires, he had no shortage of volunteers for sentry duty.

Dinner was a subdued affair that night; the soldiers had no delusions about death or glory; they knew they were undertaking a deadly mission, and it seemed likely that some

or all of them would die. The privates and corporals made out their last wills and testaments on whatever writing surfaces were handy: notepads, pieces of tough, glossy standard-issue toilet paper, cigarette packets; whatever they could find. Though most of their back pay and goods and chattels would go to their widows, orphans and families, the matter of the items on their person—their remaining tobacco ration, chocolate bars, harmonicas, and so forth—remained unsettled, and so the soldiers set about bequeathing them to each other.

* * * *

The soldiers plunged ten miles into Myssitarpin. During that time none of the platoon spoke: each soldier had retreated into his shell, preparing himself in deathly silence for the carnage to come. Like every other mission they had undertaken, they had passed the point of no return. Final letters home had been written. Even their grizzled sergeant Bill Ramsden, who had served for thirty years, man and boy, seemed subdued instead of bellowing orders in his usual rambunctious way. All it took to get the men standing in three ranks of ten was a simple 'Fall in, lads'.

The men stood with ears pricked like wolves, while the newly promoted Captain Sinclair detailed their mission.

"All right, boys. You might have gathered that we have a bit more ahead of us than the usual routine. The leeches are having a party at the Château Lareine and we're going to gatecrash. I won't pretend that this isn't going to be

dangerous or difficult, because we all know it's gonna be both. But if anyone can do it, we can.

"This is Operation Firework. We'll divide into the usual three sections: Lance-Corporal Davis, you and your men will take up positions and make sure the Rovers are safe. After one hour you will bring them over and pick the rest of us up. Corporal Howard, you have the most difficult job. We know there won't be any lesser bloods patrolling the grounds in broad daylight, but there's bound to be something else. Lareine might have human guards, he might have something else. Whatever it is, your section will take it out and join Sergeant Ramsden and myself in placing explosive charges around the château's perimeter. Tirtuu, you find us the quickest route in and out. Once the charges are placed we'll retreat and fire incendiary grenades through their windows. I want that place *leveled*. Lance-Corporal Sloman, your section will wait half a mile outside the town, ready to reinforce us as we retreat. I don't need to remind you how dangerous leeches are, and if I catch anyone trying to engage one directly, I will have that man's remains put on a charge. Privates Eryngus and Jenkins, I'm talking to *you*. Wipe those smirks off your face or I'll put you in Davis' section.

"All right, fall out, everyone. Sloman, sort us out with our bombs."

As efficiently as a machine, the platoon divided itself into the teams specified and set about their allotted tasks. They remained silent as they did so. Even their guide Tirtuu, usually all bluster and arrogance or fawning obsequiousness, had gone quiet.

The squaddies could not afford to give the game away with undue noise, and thus had to rely on their bayonets and silent killing techniques. Even now, with ten years of experience under their belts, Sergeant Ramsden had them practicing weekly on sacks of straw, dispatching their targets as methodically as slaughtermen. This bayonet drill stood them in good stead; even though lesser bloods were notoriously resilient, each man had on occasion been able to dispatch ticks with a single strike: a blow through the back and into the heart or lung, or a stab through the eye socket and into the brain. However, with daylight threatening to put in an appearance and the guards at this time being an unknown quantity, the squad had to adopt different tactics. The squad remained under cover, watching for any signs of movement; any clue as to the nature of the next obstacle.

They did not have to wait long. Five grey-skinned men in one-size-fits-none black coveralls lumbered into view. They were massive, muscular and thick-skinned; pachyderms in human form, with fists the size of hams, prognathous jaws, broad noses and beady eyes. Mercifully, these soldiers carried no guns; their hands were simply too large and clumsy to handle firearms. These soldiers, known to the Louistranan army as 'ugs', were a recent development: bred for aggression, obedience, strength, and resilience; a kind of all-purpose shock troop derived from human and rhinoceros genetic stock.

Corporal Howard, thirty-six years old and bucking for promotion to sergeant, grimaced. "This ain't gonna be easy, lads. Anyone here knifed an ug before?" The other members

of the squad shook their heads. Howard nudged Burke. "Get the Sarge and the Cap. We've gotta rethink this."

Burke darted back and returned seconds later with Sergeant Ramsden and Captain Sinclair. From their hiding place, they observed the ugs on their rounds. Sinclair gnawed thoughtfully on his knuckle as he watched, his eyes narrowed in calculation.

"You're right, Howard," he murmured. "Can't just bayonet them. Change of plan: they'll have to be shot, but we'll have to draw them away from the château first, towards the north side, so we can get our bombs laid. I need two volunteers to do that while the rest of us get the bombs put down as quickly as possible."

Burke and Ramsden raised their hands, accepting the task. A few eyes rolled; an action as reflexive as Wonder Boy Burke raising his hand whenever he heard the word 'volunteer'. The omniscient Sergeant Ramsden noticed them at once and glared fiercely. Without a further word, Burke and Ramsden were off. Staying under cover, they pursued the ugs at a discreet distance, waiting for the moment to strike.

"Make your shots count, Burke. Head or heart. Nothing else'll work," whispered Ramsden.

"Yes, Sarge. Er, Sarge?"

"Yes, Burke?"

"Won't the gunfire draw all the slurps out and onto our tail?"

"We'll have to be quick then, won't we? Don't ask stupid questions, lad. How's everyone else?"

Burke glanced behind to see the rest of the squad split up and head towards the designated blasting areas. "They're on their way now, Sarge."

"All right, son. Let's get ourselves seen."

Sinclair's section darted across the gardens to the château proper, crouching and sprinting to stay out of sight of anyone watching from the windows. The ripples of music, laughter, and frenzied, bestial congress concealed the rattle of their equipment as they neared their goal. Sinclair caught a glimpse of Ramsden and Private Burke breaking cover, quickly followed by the ugs giving chase. He signaled to his men. As silent as ghosts, the troops ran lengths of wire between each charge, connecting the whole affair to a radio-controlled detonator. As the last charge went in place, Sinclair nodded and the section fell back several yards.

"Are they away yet, Burke?"

Burke dashed, keeping pace with his sergeant, his limbs aching, heart pounding and lungs bursting from the effort. He could scarcely believe his pursuers were capable of such turns of speed had he not seen them run with his own eyes. "Yes, Sarge," he panted.

"What are we waiting for then?" Hardly breaking a sweat, Ramsden raised his rifle and took down two ugs. Still fighting for breath, Burke took aim and fired, taking another through the chest. The two soldiers mopped up their pursuers in short order. Burke, still somewhat dazed and winded, felt a heavy hand pat him roughly on the shoulder.

"Good drills, soldier. Now fuckin' wake up or I'll have you on jankins for a week!"

They regrouped seconds later with the rest of the squad, who were fitting grenade launchers to the ends of their rifles. Though they didn't hear the order, they caught on quickly enough, readying themselves in similar fashion and fanning out to cover the breadth of the château. Sinclair stood by with his thumb on the detonator. He nodded once again to Ramsden.

"FIRE!"

Within the Château Lareine, the party was in full swing, well into its third day. By most accounts, it was a roaring success. The morsels Lord Lareine had prepared to satisfy his many guests' various appetites were the stuff of widespread acclaim and he had spent a blissful twelve hours drifting from conversation to conversation, introducing Lemyari to each other and arranging them like flowers. He could see the loyalty of nations shifting in his favor; the spreading of his influence an almost tangible thing. For the most part he had laid off the drugs and had drunk only sparingly; the sense of growing power was a narcotic far more potent and addictive than any mere chemically induced high.

Meanwhile, the death toll rose steadily; two dozen servants had bled out since the Lemyari had crowned their Queen of the Fountain. Many had ventured the opinion that the string quartet had not lasted past the first day, but the many cocktails of drugs of which all four of them had partaken kept them playing without cease. They all looked sallow and drawn now: red rings around their eyes, pupils permanently dilated; by the time their speedballs wore off it was doubtful whether any of them would survive. None of

them were aware of their surroundings any more. The narcotics and their telepathic union screened out everything except music. They had been playing the same tango for nearly an hour.

Ten grenades smashed their way through the windows and exploded, setting the curtains and woodwork alight. All dancing ceased there and then as the conflagration spread across the dance hall, engulfing some of the dancing couples. Chandeliers crashed to the ground and windows burst apart, showering the hall with glass and crystal. Terror and panic reigned. All the while the tango escalated into maddened flurries. The quartet failed to notice, let alone take heed of the chaos erupting around them. Their music was silenced only when part of the gallery fell on their heads, crushing them in an instant.

Sinclair gave them no chance to collect their thoughts. He depressed the trigger and all at once the explosives went off. The noise was overwhelming: a symphony of shattering glass and brick; an apocalyptic crescendo that drowned out the band's last note. The walls were blown apart, ruptured by the high explosive charges. The rest of the gallery collapsed, and the ceiling soon followed, snuffing out dozens of Lemyari in an instant. The incident would quickly become infamous throughout Port Noble as the Château Lareine Massacre.

Despite the scale of the devastation, Captain Sinclair saw shapes moving in the flame and smoke through his binoculars. Some of the guests were still in one piece and murderously angry.

Mother Damnation [The Blessed and the Damned I]
by Janrae Frank, Phil Smith

"We have survivors! Some of the leeches are still alive! Withdraw! Tirtuu, find us a way out of here!" Sinclair heard no response. "Tirtuu, where the Hell are you?" Still nothing. "The Hell with you, then. Withdraw! Withdraw!"

The soldiers beat a fighting retreat, covering their exit with hails of gunfire that failed to check the advance of the Lemyari.

CHAPTER FOUR

Farhad had saved Dane's life many times over and equally as often warned him of trouble. He supplied him with cocaine, amphereon, and raw fire poppy, which came in through the vampire's network; all of which lay on the broad table to Dane's right in neat packages.

A portion of the amphereon and fire poppy would make it back to his own lines where medical supplies were dwindling. The rest he would sell at high prices to the other Lemyari, who, because of their odd body chemistry could still get enjoyably high. Farhad refused to sell to his blood-thirsty brethren, but only to the Borealysyn, the resistance, and others like himself.

Farhad handed Dane the glass. "I know you've already fed Leister, so I'm not going to ask for a sip. Your blood has always tasted different from the others. I'm not certain why."

Dane shrugged. "Far as I know it's one hundred percent human."

Farhad laughed, suddenly sober. "You take too many chances, Dane, my friend."

"I do what I have to. Nothing more; nothing less." Dane drank from his glass and looked at Farhad over the top of it.

"How's your wife?"

"Barely speaking to me."

"That's too bad. You know, I've never understood women. I'm over a hundred and fifty years old, and they're still a

mystery." Farhad paused, cocking his head to one side. "But I've never been able to resist a good mystery."

Dane smiled briefly, cleared his throat, and returned to business. "Need to get to Tomasburg to pick up something that will seriously interest you, and then to White Rock for a shipment of gems."

"When you get the gems, if there is something green ... like an emerald? Would you reserve it for me?"

"Supposed to be several green items."

"Excellent! I'll take them all. I have houses in both White Rock and Tomasburg, you know."

Dane chuckled. "Yeah, I know. I've been there, remember?"

Farhad refilled his glass and extended the bottle toward Dane. "More?"

"I'm good."

"My latest fancy loves green. What's the other?"

"Moon's Mourning."

Farhad stopped short, walked back to his liquor cabinet, and put the bottle away, composing his thoughts.

The Lemyari turned around, his face cold. "That's pretty dangerous, Dane. Half the continent would kill to possess it and the other half would kill to destroy it."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know."

"You're taking too many chances!"

Dane remained deadpan. "Are you interested or not?"

Farhad stifled a shudder. "I'll take the lot, just to get it off the market. We don't need more monsters."

"You're rattled, Farhad. Is that just on principle or do you know something?" Dane knew that Moon's Mourning, a mutagen refined in the temples of Ishla the Tinkerer and smuggled out by someone highly talented and of dubious morals, had been used to create many of the monsters that had overrun his world. If the monsters wanted to mutate themselves and each other out of existence that was fine with Dane. He did not care how they perished, so long as they did. Farhad and his kind were the sole exceptions.

"I know something. You know Zälek?"

"Heard of him. Might have to send some business his way, just to keep my hand in."

"Think again."

"He won't deal with me?"

"He'll deal with anyone."

"Could be useful."

"You won't like his prices."

"How's that make him worse than any of the other bastards?"

"Leister, Marie, and the others are just bad. Zälek's unpredictable. No-one's got a handle on his motives yet."

"But he's looking for Moon's Mourning?"

"Leave it out, Dane. I'm *not* in the mood. Just you take it from me: Zälek is bad news."

Dane caught Farhad's weary expression. The vampire looked unfashionably serious, and it struck Dane as a good idea not to push him any further. "All right, I'll take your word for it."

* * * *

Lareine continued his advance towards the retreating company, heedless of the bullets that nicked his hide and shredded his evening wear. His black hair fell out of its pompadour and hung messily about his face, which contorted into an expression of incandescent rage. The Lemyari's fury burned as fiercely as the flames that had consumed his home.

"Keep firing, you little shit-wipes!" roared Sergeant Ramsden.

Two more Lemyari rose up from the rubble, scorched and battered. They were as disheveled as their host, and though their anger could not possibly match his, neither could their composure. They launched themselves at their attackers, claws flashing in the firelight, heedless of the fusillade that flew towards them. The first, a wild-haired and waif-thin Lemyari female, tore her way through Watts and Stich, ripping both their throats open in an instant. Private Burke let out a scream that mixed terror and anger in equal proportions as he saw the blood-soaked vampiress leap towards him. Only Sergeant Ramsden's order to fire snapped him out of it: he emptied his magazine into her, sending entry wounds dancing up her belly, over her chest and throat, and finally into her head. She fell, cut almost in half by the salvo.

Screams of rage competed with bursts of gunfire to drown out the noise of the crackling flames. The second Lemyari, nowhere near as successful a murderer as his female companion, had the misfortune to choose Bill Ramsden as his first victim. He plugged the vampire neatly in the head a split-second after ordering his platoon to fight back. "Cheeky

bastard!" He fired another shot into the recumbent Lemyari's temple before aiming at Lareine and continuing to fire.

"Ruined! Quite possibly the most important event of the season; easily the most important *soirée* I would ever give, and *you ruined it for me!*" howled Lord Lareine, his fingers splayed like the talons of an eagle. His secondary nails slid out, dripping with venom. He bounded forward, weaving to avoid the increasingly heavy fire directed at him, focusing his willpower on his attackers' perceptions, misdirecting their aim. A stray round creased his cheekbone, but he did not pay it a moment's notice "It will take me *years* to think of suitable punishments for you all."

"It's not working! Cease firing!" barked Captain Sinclair.

Despite Sinclair's order, bursts of rifle fire still ripped through the air. Only the bellowing of Sergeant Ramsden silenced it. "The Captain damn well gave an order! *Hold your fire!*"

The Lemyari, still shaking with rage, continued to stalk towards Captain Sinclair. Despite his anger, a sadistic grin crept across his face. "An officer, are we? But hardly a gentleman. Whatever shall I do with you?" He gazed deep into Sinclair's eyes, focusing his influence. "For a start, I think you should order your men to surrender to me..." He hardly seemed to notice the corpulent form of Private Lodge moving into his way.

"You keep away from the captain, you big-toothed cunt!" Splodge aimed his rifle directly at Lareine's head. The barrel weaved to and fro uncertainly, Lareine sighed, rolled his eyes theatrically, and brought his hand around in a graceful arc

that took off half of Splodge's face. If the wound didn't kill him, the venom certainly did. Private Lodge hit the ground, sending a spray of gunfire into the air like a water-jet from a whale's blowhole.

The Lemyari returned his attention to Captain Sinclair. "I do apologize," he purred. "The lower orders *will* insist on making a nuisance of themselves, will they not? Now; where were we? Ah, yes. Surrender. Now." His eyes burned like malignant stars; his gaze seared all those who caught it.

Sinclair felt the vampire tighten its grip on his will; any attempts to protest were silenced at once. Unbidden, the order to surrender crept into his mouth. In later months he would come to reflect on how close he came to giving it. He drew on every last reserve of willpower to fight that urge; to steel himself, look to his sergeant, and shout: "*AIM FOR THE HEAD!*"

"What? No!" Prior to several dozen hollow-point rounds, the last thing to pass through Lord Lareine's mind was a sudden rush of disbelief. How could blood-cattle shake off his influence? His headless body crumpled to the ground.

At the section regroup with Lance-Corporal Sloman and his men, Captain Sinclair noticed Ramsden eyeing him.

"Is there a problem, Sergeant?" he asked as the platoon made their way toward the rendezvous point.

"No, Sir. Just ... just wondering if you were all right, Sir."

"Never better, Sergeant. Why?"

"Well, it's just that, well, when we ceased firing, well..."

"You think I froze up?"

"Not as such, Sir, no, it's just that, well, you had me worried for a bit there, and—"

"Leech trick, Sergeant. It happens. He was interfering with the boys' aim; I had to get him to focus on me."

"Yes, Sir."

Sinclair cursed silently as he noticed a scintilla of doubt still haunting his sergeant's expression. One moment's hesitation had cost him a critical iota of Ramsden's trust. He knew he could count on Ramsden to obey orders, but he suspected the sergeant almost saw some rookie second-lieutenant, fresh out of the academy, rather than the experienced field officer he'd known for a decade.

The squads kept their guard up as they headed back to the campsite as fast as caution would allow. Each man cast a nervous glance back toward the ruined château, anxious to see if any other survivors had followed them. None of them were prepared to celebrate victory just yet; they were all still in slurp country and would not consider their mission accomplished until they were all safely back in Fort Necessity, preferably while blind, steaming drunk. Smoke rose from the château, illuminated by the flames that consumed the woodwork.

A tense silence descended upon the soldiers. Only Private Rich 'Gobber' Jenkins dared speak as he gazed out into the bright sky. While the sunlight might keep the Ylesgaires off their tail, it offered little hope; the Lemyari were quite capable of walking abroad by day.

"Here, Sarge?"

"Yes, Gobber, what is it?"

"Where'd Tirtuu get to?"

"No idea, Gobber."

"It's just that we always knew where Akee was."

"That'll do, Gobber."

"You see, Sarge, I was talking to Ringer and he said when he was batwatching Tirtuu kept trying to—"

"All right, Jenkins, that'll *do*."

"Yes, Sarge."

* * * *

Sergeant Ramsden and his men might not have had the highest opinion of Tirtuu, but one thing remained unchanged: his knowledge of the area bordered on the encyclopedic. He retreated as soon as the bombs went off, relying on the noise to cover his exit. A minute sooner or later would have given his motives away, so he had to pick his moment carefully. Congratulating himself on his own cleverness, Tirtuu slipped away from the grounds of the Château Lareine and made his way toward the swamps. The boggy ground gave Tirtuu no trouble, and the series of innocuous marks that generations of Nabaren had left on the tree trunks were to the trained eye as reliable as any path. He recognized this mark in particular: his cousin Kahloo had left it there and told him so.

Had the Nabaren been in the habit of keeping records for long-distance travel, Tirtuu would easily have broken them that day. His extended family lived mostly in the marshlands and forests, and as recently as two generations ago they scarcely came into the villages. For that reason Tirtuu was quite at home here, even with the danger of vampires,

although if Akee were present, she would offer her opinion that the leeches would leave him alone because his blood left a bad taste in their mouths.

* * * *

Zälek prided himself on his efficiency and timekeeping, and he did not like to be kept waiting. Ordinarily he would not lower himself to dealing with matters like this personally, but the nature of his task was such that he could only trust himself to carry it out. He stood in a clearing among the bogs and briars, eyeing his surroundings. His face set into a perpetual sneer, he sniffed and cast his glance about disdainfully.

"Nature in all her grimy glory."

He dwelt in a no-man's-land of fashion; favoring old-fashioned three-piece suits and double-breasted jackets that were never quite in style. His knee-length coat was cut halfway between laboratory overalls and episcopal vestments. No other person in their right mind would be seen dead in them. Despite that, he wore them well, affecting a kind of arrogance and self-assured superiority that easily deflected any disparaging remark about his sartorial preferences.

Zälek adjusted his tie and took out his fob watch. He looked at it, frowned, pocketed it, and drummed his fingers absently on his thigh.

"Come on, you dismally pointless little insect." His voice, cultured, educated, and mocking, echoed through the wilderness but went unanswered. Smoothing over his ruffled black hair with his hand, Zälek examined the cargo he had

brought with him. A simple metal strongbox sat nearby, surrounded by half a dozen ammo boxes. A small bounty in a very large war, to be sure, but Zälek had chosen it carefully. The path of history, as he would tell his friends if he had any, could be deflected by a single bullet in the right place.

"You know," he announced to no-one in particular, "if I can travel hundreds of miles with the requisite goods in less time than it takes to swallow, you could at least make an effort to turn up at the appointed hour to collect them!"

Somebody heard him: footsteps splashed through the boggy ground, rushing to answer the call. "Tirtuu come, my Lord! Tirtuu come!"

Zälek grasped his lapels, straightening his coat. He arched his eyebrows and regarded the new arrival imperiously. "*What* did you call me?"

Tirtuu hesitated, noticing the caustic anger in his master's eye. "...my Lord?"

Zälek's lips tightened. "Your Lord?" He fell silent; his nostrils flared. "Kneel."

Shivering, Tirtuu obeyed, falling to his knees. He looked up at the regal figure standing before him, and was surprised to receive a leisurely kick to the side of the head. Tirtuu tumbled to the ground, landing face-down in a puddle. Zälek stood over the prostrate Nabaren and kicked him until he rolled over onto his back.

"I am not your lord," he spat. "Who do you think you are, calling me your lord?"

Tirtuu scrambled to his feet. "Tirtuu sorry. Tirtuu sorry." He grasped Zälek's hand, planting a series of kisses on his master's knuckles. "Tirtuu only wanted to worship..."

Zälek withdrew his hand, an expression of mild disgust twisting his features. "*You* presume to worship *me*?"

"But, but you..."

Zälek smiled with all the sincerity of a politician. "Regardless of what I am, you thought you could curry favor with me. *Don't* shake your head, Tirtuu; I know *exactly* what you're about. You're trying to get in on the inside track, hmm? You thought if you got in my good books I might smile on you; bestow upon you the odd little boon, yes? Maybe grant you a little extra when all this is done?"

"Please. Tirtuu good servant. Tirtuu smart."

"I'll tell you exactly what you are, Tirtuu. You're an imbecile! A greedy coward who barely has the wit to do as he's told. In short, you're an opportunistic little shit, which is precisely why I retain your services. But you think for a moment I'd want someone like you as a vassal, paying homage to me? What sort of priest would you make? What's your soul worth to me?"

Tirtuu groveled before Zälek. "Please, Zälek-Saeel!"

"Stand away from me at once," scowled Zälek. "You're soiling my coat." He sniffed again, brushing at his pristine garment. "Now, get up, man! We have work to do. You wanted guns, yes? Toys for your nasty little friends?" He grinned and nodded encouragingly, but his eyes were as bereft of mirth as a corpse. "Here! Take them. They're yours."

"Thank you, Zälek-Saeel?"

"Why are you thanking me? We're on the same side, aren't we? What use could I have for your gratitude? I gave you a job to do: these are your tools. Use them." Zälek turned his back. After a few seconds he realized he still had company. "Yes?"

"Zälek-Saee?"

Zälek sighed, wondering if Ishla ever had to put up with the likes of Tirtuu. "Yes, Tirtuu, what is it this time?"

"Zälek-Saee, what happen if Tirtuu no kill Fox?"

"That is Tirtuu's problem; Zälek-Saee is quite safe, thank you very much."

* * * *

Dane rode from Farhad's home to Betty and Zeb's place to drop off his horse and walk back to the rendezvous with Sinclair. He worried about his men, who would come back and who wouldn't. Sinclair and he had spent years perfecting ways to maximize the enemy losses and minimize their own. It was a tightrope of an art.

The road meandered through a stretch of forest thick with magnolias and honey locusts along the side. The mid afternoon sun threw shadows amid the patterns of yellow light in a jagged spray of color. When Dane came out on the other side into the open road, he could tell by the position of the sun that he was running later than he would have liked. Dane coaxed Dusty into a canter to make up the time, and managed to arrive at the house close to his goal.

Betty came out of the house, wiping her hands on her apron and Zeb came around the corner. "You'll stay for coffee?" she asked him.

"Can't, Betty," Dane said, dismounting and dragging his briefcase from the saddle before throwing his reins to Zeb, who then took Dusty away to the barns. "But you don't have to worry about Trajan. Leister's promised to put a stop to that.

"Well, that's something." Betty leaned in and kissed Dane on the cheek.

Dane walked off with a wave and Betty watched him go.

Once he reached the spot where he had left the waterproof chest with his uniform, Dane changed back into fatigues, switched his .45 mag from his waistband to his holster, and started walking.

The palmetto and bald cypress stands seemed oddly silent. Dane heard no birds. He wondered where Tirtuu was. The scout was supposed to meet him around here. Dane knew that he was running late, and had lingered too long at Farhad's, but he did not believe that could be responsible for Tirtuu's absence. And where were the others?

* * * *

Tirtuu continued his journey deeper into the wilderness, into territories nominally under Galee's control, but because they were so far out of the way and produced so little, their inhabitants were left largely to their own devices. A tribe of Nabaren malcontents had settled there. Shunned by their more civilized brethren, and eschewing all peaceful contact

with humans, they were content to lurk in the swamps and forests, living by foraging and banditry. Only now did Tirtuu feel nervous: though his woodcraft was competent, he had started to appreciate village life and its various luxuries and privileges. Those sentiments alone set him apart from the Nabaren that had set up camp in these parts.

Tirtuu advanced cautiously now, keeping his eyes peeled and his ears pricked for any sign that he might have company. He did not have to wait long; he heard the tell-tale *clunk, click* of a carbine being loaded, somewhere up in the trees. Tirtuu stopped in his tracks, raised his hands, and spoke in Nabarese.

"Don't shoot!"

"This is our land. Drop everything and go away," came a harsh reply.

"You don't want to rob me! I'm family!"

"We don't have family, city boy."

Tirtuu tried to look innocent; an attempt that was doomed to failure from the moment of conception. *"What about Tirtuu? Surely you don't forget Tirtuu!"*

"Tirtuu's a city boy. Tirtuu went soft; Tirtuu loves monkeys!" jeered the voice in the trees.

"Tirtuu is here to help you, stupid! A load of monkeys are trying to fight the big fangs. They'll come back this way and I bet you they're tired. Good pickings. Very good."

"Thank you, city boy," replied the voice with heavy sarcasm. *"Maybe you don't love monkeys so much. Now go away before I shoot."*

"Don't be stupid all your life! You won't find them without Tirtuu. Who's chief now?"

"What's it to you?"

"Who is he?"

"Kahloo. So what?"

"Kahloo and Tirtuu are cousins. You tell him Cousin Tirtuu's here. You tell him Tirtuu has plans and brings gifts."

* * * *

A somber atmosphere haunted the platoon as they made their way back towards Brode's waystation. No doubt once news broke back at home the top brass would see the mission as a success, but Sinclair's platoon had not escaped unscathed. The deaths of privates Watts and Sitch had been gruesome enough, and their presence was certainly missed: Jeremy 'Jezza' Sitch was a star turn in the concert party before he joined up with the Fox; and his ventriloquist act had defused the platoon's dark moods on many occasions. Now the throat that had given voice to Little Jezza, his foul-mouthed dummy, had been ripped open like a prophylactic wrapper, his act canceled in the most final manner conceivable. Lyndon Watts, a classically trained tenor who gave up the professional circuit in the name of national service, had been silenced as well; his vocal cords snapped like over-tightened guitar strings.

As for 'Splodge' Lodge: having his face torn off had finally silenced his unceasing litany of complaints. Without the three of them, the platoon was positively silent. Sinclair realized there was no consoling his fellows, so he didn't even try. For

the moment all they could hope to do was to keep a grip on themselves and stay focused at least until they made it back across the border. Then, without the slurps breathing down their necks, they might be able to give their fallen comrades the send-off they deserved.

* * * *

The Nabaren encampment consisted of a motley array of dugouts and tents arranged in a defensive ring. Sentries waited in the boughs of tall trees while a small campfire crackled in the settlement's heart.

Though most humans insisted that all Nabaren looked alike, Kahloo's appearance defied such casual prejudice. A truly massive individual, Kahloo stood head and shoulders above his fellows, and his prodigious belly and huge muscles made it quite clear who got the lion's share of the tribe's pickings. Two bandoleers crossed over his torso, and his hair and beard grew long, wild, and matted. Sitting at the entrance to his tent, Kahloo chewed on the breast of a crudely roasted wild fowl and scratched idly at his stomach.

"Kahloo-Sae! Kahloo-Sae!"

Kahloo belched, wiped his lips on the back of his hairy hand, but did not look up. *"What do you want? Kahloo-Sae's eating."*

"Cousin Tirtuu's here, says he has plans."

Kahloo sneered and tossed a drumstick into the fire. *"Cousin Tirtuu's always got plans. Tell him to get lost."*

"He brings guns. Big box of guns and bullets."

That caught Kahloo's attention. He looked up from his meal. *"What?"*

"Gifts, he says."

Kahloo mulled this over, wondering what his cousin was about. He tore a scrap of meat from the carcass and looked at it for a few second before devouring it, sucking the grease from his fingers. *"Bring him here."*

A minute later Tirtuu arrived, held at gunpoint by a sentry. Two other Nabaren, members of Kahloo's retinue, carried the strongboxes into the camp and set them at their chief's feet. Exuding obsequious politeness, Tirtuu bowed before his cousin.

"Cousin Kahloo. It has been too long."

Kahloo belched. *"Not long enough, Tirtuu. Why do you come back? Thought you loved monkeys. Took their money. What's up? We not good enough for you? Is that it? Go back to city and shave your back while you're about it!"*

His mob of sycophants roared with laughter. They knew when to laugh if they knew what was good for them.

"Don't be like that, Cousin Kahloo," fumed Tirtuu. *"I come here in friendship."*

"Offering me a ride on Tirtuu's mother again?" Kahloo's hangers-on offered another peal of derisive laughter.

Tirtuu bridled. *"Don't talk to Tirtuu like that when he knows things."*

"Hah! Like what?"

"Like who the Fox is, where the Fox is, and how to kill him. I even have the guns for the job, and bullets too."

"Where did you get them? You were never that good at thieving!"

"They're a gift. Tirtuu has the ear of Zälek." Tirtuu's chest swelled, but the tremble of his knees belied his bravado.

"Liar!"

"There's the proof!" protested Tirtuu, gesturing at his cargo. *"Look them over."*

Kahloo scowled, plucking at a rogue hair on his chin. *"Wahru, check the guns out,"* he grunted. *"You might be telling the truth, Tirtuu, but I don't trust you. You're soft. You're a city boy. You want me to trust you, you have to take the initiation."*

"You don't trust me? We're cousins! The same blood!"

"Blood, nothing. You think you have balls, coming here and trying to get us to do your work for you. You don't change, Tirtuu. You want to prove you're one of us, you take the initiation."

Before Tirtuu could decline or assent to his cousin's demand, a gang of Nabaren rushed at him. They shoved him over onto his back, grabbed his arms and legs, and forced him into a spread-eagled position. He felt his legs yanked roughly apart as his kinfolk bore him aloft. Struggling and squealing in futile defiance, Tirtuu was swung around and a rough-barked tree loomed before him. He knew what to expect: he had been performed this rite on any number of young Nabaren bucks in his time. *"Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no..."*

Kahloo tossed the remains of his meal aside, his jowls and belly shaking with mirth. *"What's wrong, Tirtuu? Rather be in the city with the monkeys?"* He raised a brawny arm, and the

four Nabaren that held Tirtuu still moved to line their burden up with their target. Kahloo gave a harsh ululation. The mob took a couple of steps backwards before charging at full tilt, bearing Tirtuu crotch-first towards the tree. The trunk smacked hard into his testicles, pounding him like a drop-hammer. An instant later, his captors released his limbs, letting him fall roughly to the ground in an agonized, splay-legged heap.

Tirtuu gasped, his eyes filling with tears. He bit his lower lip hard to keep from crying out loud. He knew that the faintest yelp would be taken as a cue to repeat the torture. Only by keeping any outward sign of discomfort to a minimum could he hope to gain a modicum of trust from his kinsmen. He staggered to his feet, cupping his bruised genitalia, holding his whimpers in rigid check.

The mocking laughter of his hosts continued unabated, the humiliation stinging him just as much as the acute pain in his crotch. Tirtuu looked expectantly at his cousin, who at last stood up and walked over to him, chuckling. The huge Nabaren flung his arm around Tirtuu's shoulders.

"Tirtuu is one of us now! He's proved he's got balls! Round everyone up! We have raids to plan!"

Tirtuu breathed a sigh of relief. His agony subsided into a dull ache as his cousin led him to the fire.

Kahloo grinned from ear to ear, baring his fangs. *"You're one of us again, Cousin Tirtuu. Welcome back!"* He tightened his grip on his cousin's shoulders, and suddenly brought his forearm around Tirtuu's neck in a vicious stranglehold. *"But if*

I find out you're up to your old tricks, Cousin Tirtuu, I'll cut your throat and bugger you senseless while you die."

Wahru slapped a half-full bottle of cheap whiskey into Tirtuu's shaking hand. Tirtuu drank deep, letting the rough liquor burn his throat and shivered. Even after five years, absolutely nothing had changed between him and his cousin.

The atmosphere became festive as the Nabaren crowded around, helping themselves to the gifts Tirtuu had brought them. The next few days promised to be very entertaining indeed.

* * * *

Sinclair knew that as soon as the surviving big fangs in Myssitarpin learned of what had happened at the Château Lareine the slurps would not stop until they had found the men responsible. When he and the Major planned this raid they knew such a search would quickly find their vehicles' tracks, and that route would then be heavily patrolled, making any return journey suicidal.

The platoon headed deeper into the wilderness, where the land grew boggy and treacherous but stopped short of becoming swampland. Here the grass was tall and wild, and remained untouched by hands human or inhuman. The army had gathered little intelligence on this area, and all they had had come solely from the Nabarese scouts, but it was enough to put every man on their guard. Besides the ever present threat of wild Ylesgaires and slurp patrols, Akee had warned Sinclair and Dane on several occasions that there were also gangs of Nabaren at large; unruly mobs that shunned human

society to such an extent that they even occasional trade with them abhorrent. They made their living by hunting and foraging and, when the opportunity presented itself, banditry.

Each step brought Sinclair and his men closer to this territory, but to their credit no-one in the unit, not even Burke, felt even slightly nervous. They had faced worse within the past day and most of them had survived. As dangerous as Nabaren could get, one did not have to be a tactical genius to know that slurps were far worse.

"If you see 'em comin', lads, just shoot 'em in the nadgers," suggested Sergeant Ramsden. "Most of 'em ain't got guns, and none of 'em have proper guns. Just show 'em who's hardest and they'll be as scared as fuck."

The sun climbed higher and plunged back towards the horizon. Even battle-hardened men like these were led to wonder whether the sun set a little faster in Slurp Country. As superstitious as such a notion might be, they could easily imagine the sun being keen to find any excuse it could to refrain from looking down on a place like this. The foliage grew denser and more tangled as trees sprung up here and there, eventually engulfing the platoon in forest, its dark canopy obscuring the moon and stars. As their journey progressed, they were grateful to see that there were no signs of pursuit. They had, it seemed, evaded detection by the vampires. Though relieved by this, Captain Sinclair was quick to quash any feelings of over-confidence.

"We ain't out of the woods yet, boys. Just exchanged one bunch of hostiles for another."

They headed a good three miles into the forest before finding a suitably secluded spot where, their resolve beginning to wear thin, they set up headquarters. Lance-Corporals Davis and Sloman and Corporal Howard each took two men from their sections and performed a clearing patrol. Davis and Howard both reported back with their men, but they were surprised to find that Sloman remained absent. The camp fell as silent as a morgue as, horrified, the platoon realized that without a Nabaren scout to guide them they had marched right into the bandits' territory. Fearing the worst, every soldier not otherwise occupied moved to reinforce the patrol base's defensive positions. Though it seemed most likely that any attack might come from between two o'clock and six o'clock of patrol base center—the sector patrolled by Lance-Corporal Sloman's team—strictly speaking there was no telling from which direction the first blow might fall.

* * * *

Kahloo lowered the corpse of Lance-Corporal Sloman to the ground. As well-equipped as the Louistranans were, he and his boys knew the forest well and could, if the situation demanded, move as quietly as cats. He helped himself to the NCO's rifle and ammunition, while Wahru and Andhalu, his lieutenants, looted the bodies of Sloman's squad-mates. Killing them had been easy; they simply had to remain unseen; pick their moment carefully; and then clamp one hand over the mouth and cut the throat with a swift pass of the knife. The job was done in a matter of seconds and none of the other soldiers were any the wiser.

Kahloo grinned, but did not say anything. His chest swelled with self-satisfaction. If these three were the best the soldiers could offer, killing the rest would be perfectly easy. The Nabaren bandits, fifteen of them in all, breathed deeply, smelling for the rest of the platoon. Sadly the soldiers had decided against making any smells that might carry too far from the patrol base; smoking was forbidden and they had to live on cold rations. All the same, the bandits' keen sense of smell gave them a good idea of their prey's approximate direction. Kahloo gave a hand signal, ordering his fellows to spread out and take to the trees. Barefooted, their claws made short work of this task and with exaggerated cautiousness they moved to surround the campsite. Kahloo had, with the aid of Tirtuu, devised a simple strategy. The bandits would stay high up when approaching the base, to stay out of the field of fire presented by the Louistranan machine-guns. They still faced problems from the many riflemen present, but now they had guns of their own the odds were not so heavily stacked in their enemies' favor.

A single gunshot rang out, startling the birds from their nests. From his vantage point, Kahloo saw Andhalu fall twenty feet to the forest floor, nailed clean through the chest.

* * * *

"PRIVATE ERYNGUS, WAIT FOR A TARGET, YOU TRIGGER-HAPPY FUCKWIT!" roared Sergeant Ramsden, acting on reflex.

"Sorry, Sarge. Saw one up in the trees. He had a gun on him, Sarge."

Ramsden knew better than to doubt Ringer's eyesight, and the sound of a body falling heavily to earth, crashing through the tree branches bore out the marksman's claim.

"Think they're all up in the trees, Sir," observed Eryngus. "Trying to keep out of the way of our machine guns."

"Aw, bollocks," griped Gobber Jenkins. "For once I get to use the GPMG and they're out of the line of fire!"

"Shut up, Gobber," retorted Sinclair. "Get your light support weapon, see if you can smoke 'em out."

At that moment the bandits elected to return fire. A volley of small-arms fire from all directions sent the soldiers diving for cover. Sinclair's men recovered quickly. Gobber Jenkins, ever the enthusiast for rapid-fire weaponry, sent a spray of bullets up into the trees in a broad arc, the rattle of his weapon drowning out any commands either Sinclair or Kahloo wanted to give.

The Nabaren were left with few options for avoiding gunfire. They clung to their trees, weaving this way and that, hoping against hope that they didn't get cut apart by Jenkins' salvo. Luckily for them Jenkins was not even pretending to be accurate, and so any casualties they sustained were minimal; a stray shot might crease their shoulder or thigh, or bring foliage down upon them, but the most damage the soldier did was to their pride.

The rest of the soldiers soon followed suit. With all this noise, there was little hope of giving or hearing orders, so they had to rely on doing as their fellows did. Riflemen looked for targets, while bursts of light support weapon fire tore into

the trees, intending to force the bandits to break cover or better yet, to climb down into the paths of the machine guns.

While the Nabarese bandits had superior agility and night vision, they were outnumbered and outgunned. By the time Kahloo had got his underlings ready to retaliate, another three had been picked off, shot to pieces by sustained fire from the Louistranan troops. He soon realized that he had lost the element of surprise and there was little his gang could do from up in the trees.

"RETREAT! RETREAT!"

The bandits scattered, some fleeing from tree to tree, others taking their chances on the ground. It was a massacre. No longer concerned about drawing unwelcome attention, the platoon dug out torches, making targets easier to find. As soon as they caught sight of Nabaren on the ground, teams of soldiers moved to man the bipod-mounted general purpose machine guns, drilling the fleeing bandits from behind. Out of the fifteen that attacked the patrol base, only Kahloo and Wahru escaped. They ditched whatever equipment they deemed too heavy to carry, and fled deeper into the forest, vowing vengeance against the soldiers and their cousin Tirtuu.

Sinclair scowled as the last shot faded into the woods, leaving an oppressive silence; the sort of deadly quiet that only came from the site of a recent and vicious firefight. He held out no hope of capturing the survivors; they knew the area far better than he could, and more to the point were able to kill three of his men and get the drop on his unit.

"Sergeant Ramsden?"

"Sir?"

"I want this area cleared. Three clearing patrols as before, but six men in each squad this time. I want Sloman, Granville and Carter found, and any other bodies brought back here. Let's find out just how well-equipped these bastards were."

"Very good, Sah! RIGHT! You heard the Captain! Six men from each section, three-hundred meter clearing patrol! Come on, quickly, move it, move it!"

The soldiers moved like lightning, their nerves still fizzing and sparking from the battle. Keeping their eyes peeled for any signs of the bandits returning, they searched the area around the patrol base. They found a total of sixteen corpses: thirteen Nabaren and three human. Though they were still behind enemy lines, Sinclair figured that now was as good a time as any to see to the fallen. Taking up his shovel, he moved to help the men with the digging of four pits: three graves for their soldiers and a larger burial pit for the late bandits. Not a single voice was raised as Lance-Corporal Sloman and Privates Carter and Granville were stripped of their weapons and packs and their bodies were laid to rest in the damp earth. They covered the graves over and stood in silent vigil as Sinclair said a few words in their memory.

"If this were an official memorial, chances are there'd be some colonel saying some kind of bull about how each was some kind of superman, but ... well, I'm not in the habit of making stuff like that up. So I'll stick to the truth. They weren't perfect soldiers. No-one here is, least of all me. Splodge was the biggest whiner on the West Frontier. Carter was always scratching his ass. Granville told the filthiest jokes

I ever heard, and Jezza Sitch told the oldest. Some of the songs Private Watts used to sing were so damn dirty they'd never get past the censors.

"Frankly, I wouldn't have exchanged any of 'em for the world, and the unit just ain't the same without 'em. They'll be missed. We'll all miss 'em. At some point during the official service there'd probably be something about the brave lads giving their lives and their sacrifice not being in vain. Let's not fool ourselves. They were killed in battle. They might have wanted to go out that way, but I'd much sooner have seen 'em survive. But that's war: sometimes we just don't make it. It's up to the rest of us to ensure they're avenged, and that we make it back to remember 'em, 'cause there's far too many that won't. So long, guys. You deserved better."

Sinclair threw on the last handful of soil and the rest of the evening passed in silence. Any rest they got from that evening was ruined; no-one slept much. Tired, bitter and wanting to meet up with the Major and get home as soon as possible, the platoon moved out at first light.

* * * *

The brush deepened into tall water grass and trees hung with moss as Dane walked deeper into the swamp. The path eroded steadily to a tiny bar of mud that sucked at his shoes. Dragonflies swarmed like a glittering carpet across the open patches as he passed from cover to cover. Ferns grew thickly to his right in the shadows, while water lilies blanketed the more open water to his left. The briefcase he carried contained Amphereon and fire poppy, highly refined, and

intended for the hospital at Fort Necessity where drugs were always running in scarce supply to treat the wounded.

Tirtuu emerged from the trees and trotted toward him.

"Tirtuu, where the hell have you been?"

"Making sure all safe, Major-Saee."

"You'd better."

"All safe, Major-Saee." Tirtuu grinned. "Tirtuu check very good."

Dane walked on, paying no attention to Tirtuu who scampered beside him.

Tirtuu's eyes glinted. "Tirtuu run ahead, tell them you come."

"You do that, Tirtuu."

Dane ran through the past few days and found his dealings with Leister, Farhad, and the others around Port Noble satisfactory. Leister intended to warn Marie Levoden's people off from Dane's properties and he hoped that meant there would be no more incidents like what had happened to Nancy. Although he had not said as much to Betty, with slurs there were no guarantees.

"Ambush!" A Nabarese voice screamed from the trees.

Dane threw himself into the water beside the road, trying to get as low as possible. In the split second that he moved, Dane felt his chest explode with pain, his body jerked with the impact, and he knew he had been hit. The water covered him for several heartbeats and he went deep into the saw grass before coming up in a desperate quest for air.

"Fucking shit," Dane cursed low, wondering how Tirtuu could have missed an ambush. That was Akee who had called out. *What the hell is she doing here?*

Two more shots hit him in the side and leg. He went down again. The enemy was spraying the water in an attempt to get him.

Dane dragged himself up against the roots of a cypress tree, shoving at the muck with his heels, and trying to get wedged into the twisted shelter. Fire seared through his left thigh as he forced that leg to work with the other. Drowning was not on his list of preferred ways to die. He struggled to breathe as every breath sent a lance of fire through him. The fact that he had not started coughing up blood yet meant the round had probably not gone into his lung, but it was too close for comfort. He ground the heel of his palm into the wound, which seemed to relieve some of the pressure in his chest. A water snake slithered across him and continued on. Dane had no idea how much time passed before the sound of gunfire died away. He heard voices all around him. His blood spread through the water, eddying with the currents, it would draw creatures that ate the wounded. Dane reached for the .45 magnum in his holster. He could hear them getting closer now, splashing through the water and walking on the muddy bit of land bridging that slice of swamp. Consciousness was fraying and he doubted he could hold onto it much longer. If the enemy caught him alive, his last shot was for himself.

* * * *

Akee found the rendezvous spot for Dane's returning unit. They had left three men well concealed beneath the trees, their blind was almost perfect. But her keen Nabaren eyes made out the edges. Sinclair was returning from the west, moving stealthily through the undergrowth and along the waters. She moved closer to the road, keeping to cover. Something wasn't right, but she couldn't yet put her fingers on it. Tirtuu had emerged to greet Major Dane who came from his usual direction. They walked together talking for a moment and then Tirtuu scampered into the trees.

The wind shifted and that was when the scent hit Akee's flaring nostrils and she screamed, "Ambush!"

She saw Dane's chest blossom with red as he pitched forward into the water, his body jerking. Snarling, Akee sprang into the tree and climbed like a jungle cat in search of her prey. The sniper looked up and tried to bring his gun to bear on her, but he had let precious seconds slip through his fingers. Akee raked his gun-arm with the claws on her left hand and drew her machete with her right, bringing the blade down in a deadly arc that stopped halfway through his neck. The sniper fell into the mud, blood gushing from his severed artery: his neck snapped like a rotten branch. He had not come alone, however—his fellows were all through the trees, laying down suppressing fire.

Akee spat like an enraged cat, cursing Tirtuu for his stupidity, and leapt into the next tree in search of another target. Gunshots sliced their way through the foliage, missing her by inches, but they failed to deter her.

* * * *

Dane did not hear Akee arrive beside him, and only realized that she had when her soft hands, with their claws sheathed, touched his face and she shouted, "Here! Over here!"

He opened his eyes and Akee swam into focus. He saw her crouch over him, her brow furrowed with concern and a light in her eyes that Dane was not certain what to call. Dane managed a rasping chuckle. "Nice to ... see you."

A fit of coughing shook Dane's body. He spat blood into the water, sagging back against the roots of the tree, and sliding further into the muck. His gun fell from his fingers but Akee caught it, laying it aside on the mudbank.

Sinclair splashed into the water, and caught Dane under the arms as he began to slip under the surface. He started wrestling Dane through the rotting vegetation toward the mudbank. Akee grabbed Dane's shirt, but was not strong enough to make a difference. "I've found him!" Sinclair bellowed. "MEDIC! Where's the damn medic? The major's hit!"

Corporal Howard, a former orderly at Dwight Greene Military Hospital, was the closest thing the platoon had to a medic at the time. He helped Sinclair move Dane onto the path. Sinclair tore Dane's shirt open and cursed at the white froth spiked with pink emerging from the chest wound with every breath he took. The choppy sound of the major's breathing slid around his teeth, which were clenched against the pain.

Akee grasped Dane's hand, patting it in a frantic fashion. "You be all right, Dane-Saee. You be all right."

Howard had seen any number of people shot, and knew from experience that he had to act fast. He quickly sealed the wound to keep the blood from collapsing the lung and then shoved a syringe of morphine into his commanding officer's arm.

"That's all I can do, Sir," he reported. Both men hid their worry behind expressions of stolid concern. "If the Major can keep it together until Lieutenant Trence gets to see him, well..."

Sinclair nodded grimly. "Yeah. Good work, Howard. Let's just hope it's enough, huh?"

Dane's eyes closed and he felt nothing more for a long time.

* * * *

Akee went looking for Tirtuu when Howard shoed her away from Dane. Anger burned in Akee like a blow-torch; a searing blue flame of hatred. She intended to find Tirtuu and beat him senseless, put his eyes out, or simply take that illegal gun of which he was so fond and plug him in the crotch.

She found him covered in blood near a tree. He groaned when she touched him and stirred. "Stupid Tirtuu!" Akee growled.

She sniffed and the blood did not smell like Nabaren, so it must have been an enemy that he killed, but nonetheless she had no sympathy for him. He was an idiot.

"How could Tirtuu let them be ambushed?"

He scowled at her, climbing to his feet and rubbing his head. "Tirtuu was surprised. Go away."

She slapped his face with her claws sheathed. "Stupid! Stupid!"

Tirtuu grabbed her hand and stopped her. "Tirtuu smarter than your father!"

Akee had lost her father years ago; he had taken a shot in the back while checking his trap lines. No demon could have matched her fury in that instant. She lashed out with her foot, kicking him in the belly. Tirtuu staggered back, winded, unable to defend himself as Akee leapt at him. Though small, Akee moved fast. She caught him under the chin with the heel of her hand, pushing his head back. Her claws raked his face. She would have torn out his throat, had her comrades not rushed to intervene. Private Eryngus held Akee back while Wain held Tirtuu in a vicious choke-hold. He had been looking for an excuse to give Tirtuu a hiding for quite some time now.

"Gimme a reason, Tirtuu. Just gimme a reason."

"Pack that in!" Private Eryngus yelled at them. "We got enough to worry about!"

Akee gave Eryngus a peeved look and ignored Tirtuu. Then she noticed a streak of black on her arm. Tiny speckles, not noticeable to most humans, but to a Nabaren such clues shone like a lighted candle in the dark. She sniffed her arm where Tirtuu had touched her and then her hand that he had grabbed. Both had that acrid scent that human got on their hands after firing their guns. Nabaren scouts weren't issued guns and the Nabarese people were banned from owning

them, although many secretly kept an old hunting rifle or two hidden away, and the army had failed to stamp out the Nabarese black market in firearms.

* * * *

Central Command's rule regarding the calling in of choppers to evacuate wounded was that they did not risk them on the immediate borders where the enemy might target them. They had too few of them left. Strategic airpower was a thing of the past; a cherished and increasingly distant memory. So Dane's units had to withdraw as far as Brode's before they could call in an evac.

Sinclair jumped out of the Rover shouting for Brode and when he got no response, went up to the house. The door stood ajar and, now that he was on the far side, he could see that Brode's truck was gone. "I don't like this. Noawhane is always here."

Akee's nostrils flared, sniffing strongly. She walked into the kitchen and saw that the food in the pot on the stove had soured.

"Sinclair-Saee," she said in a growl that reached up from her diaphragm. "Something happened here."

Sinclair came in and frowned as she pointed out the pots, then he turned and strode quickly out the door. "Sergeant Ramsden, secure the perimeter and watch out for trouble." Then he went back and opened the big roll-top desk in which Brode kept his shortwave and began calling in an evac for their wounded. While they waited for the choppers, he went around examining the scene with a sharp eye. Something

bright caught his attention near the flowers lining the path and he went to see what it was: Noawhane's silver embroidery hoop, with a square of bright cloth in it, lay among the green, half obscured by hyacinths. He picked it up. Noawhane would not have dropped and left it here. Embroidery was one of her passions and she took good care of her belongings. This was the closest thing to a sign of a struggle he had found. Brode was a big, powerful man and knew the dangers of the swamp. If something had happened here, there would be signs of it.

Perhaps something had caused him to leave for the fort in a rush, but he doubted that Noawhane would simply leave food on the stove and table. Only the untouched food and the missing truck. Had one of them been injured?

"Akee, come see what I found."

She came and her eyes widened at the embroidery hoop.

"Give it a sniff and tell me if you find anything on it. I found it over there." Sinclair indicated the spot.

Akee held the hoop to her nose, nostrils flaring. "Sinclair-Saee, there is a strange scent here. Human. Not human."

"Vampire?" Sinclair felt a moment's worry clench his stomach.

Akee sniffed again, her attention drawn to a tiny spot near the rim. "Not vampire. Akee not smelled before. Blood." She extended the hoop back to Sinclair, pointing at the tiny spot. "Noawhane's."

Sinclair straightened and barked out, "Stay alert! Something happened here."

The captain walked over to where they had moved the wounded from the Rovers onto the strip of land and found them some shade.

"How's the major holding up?"

"Not good," Howard responded. "I'm doing all I can."

The sound of choppers rose up above all other noises. In that moment, no choir of angels could have matched the beauty of that sound. Sinclair lifted his binoculars to sight them and confirm that they were theirs. "Evac's here! I'm going to check around Fort Necessity for Brode. Sergeant, keep this place under guard. I don't find Brode, I'm going to come back and beat the bushes for what's left of him."

"You think something's happened to him, Sir?"

"I know it has. I just don't know what." Sinclair pulled a cigar out of his pocket case and lit it. "This whole thing stinks. Know damned well hitting us and then this is too much coincidence."

Akee watched from a corner of Brode's tin shed as Dane was loaded into the chopper for the flight to Dwight Greene Military Hospital at Fort Laurie. Tirtuu took this flight too. The army took good care of their native scouts, as Akee had good reason to know after that grenade had gone off too close to her. Nabaren healed better and faster than humans, which had been one of the things that most intrigued the humans when they discovered this continent three hundred years earlier and called it the New World.

Sinclair took her back to the fort with him. He wanted to get her settled down and go looking for Brode. He had left

Sergeant Ramsden and Private Burke behind to guard the house; the entire situation bothered him.

"Not here," Akee complained. "Keep going, not stop till Fort Laurie."

"Akee, we're tired, it's late. I'll get us to Fort Laurie in the morning."

"Akee got no place to stay."

"You can stay at my mother's with me. She has a house in town."

* * * *

"Hold him down!"

Two pairs of hands moved to pin the scavenger down as Ishla the Tinkerer leaned in, found a vein, and inserted her hypodermic. A measure of violet fluid flushed into the scavenger's veins, spreading through his bloodstream. He awoke instantly with every cell of his body engulfed in hellfire. He leaped up with a scream, throwing off the soldiers that held him down. They flew back, startled.

"Wiry little bastard, isn't he?"

Ishla sighed and returned her hypodermic to her case. "That is why I chose him. Now will you hold him still? I don't want to lose another candidate, nor do I want to look for volunteers in the ranks."

The Tinkerer's aides rushed to obey her and chased after the retreating scavenger. He raced pell-mell through the undergrowth, barely able to think while searing venom seethed into his tissues. He panted, drawing each breath with a ragged, pained gasp, but exhaustion and agony took their

twin tolls, forcing him to give up after a mere five minutes. The scavenger collapsed face-first onto the ground, his olive drab uniform ragged and his face and hands covered with scratches. The soldiers, tall, muscular, and dressed in black fatigues, easily caught up to him, their exertions having served only to warm them up. They hauled the scavenger to his feet, and half-carried, half-dragged him back to their waiting goddess.

"Are you sure you want this one, Tinkerer?" asked one.
"He's all skin and bones."

"Lemyari'd have him for breakfast," agreed his team-mate.

"Assuming he lives that long."

"Lowen, Ansel, I do hope you're not questioning my judgment on this," replied Ishla, raising her eyebrows. "I picked this one very carefully: I've had reports of a lone human picking off lesser bloods in this area. Hitting and running. Living off the wild. And I'm sure the remains a few miles west haven't completely escaped your notice."

Ansel examined the scavenger. "Louistranan. Well, if you want him to fight you've got someone from the right area. They're about as belligerent as they come. His name-tape's half gone, though; I can't make out his name. Co ... Cor...? Corporal, maybe? Corps?" He shrugged a broad shoulder.

"Does it matter?"

"Just curious, Tinkerer."

"Well, Ansel, this should satisfy your curiosity. He's still alive; that's the first time we've seen that happen with a Variant Three candidate. Seems to react badly with bodily toxins—and, out here, well; he can't smoke, drink, take drugs

or catch venereal diseases. As strange as it may seem, this one's *clean*."

"Which he couldn't have got within fifteen miles of an army base! Clever!"

"I know."

A noise that was half-growl, half-groan, rose up from the scavenger. "*Nnnnnnnnn!*" His eyes opened, bloodshot and irises reddened, while his veins stood out like whipcords. He struggled against his captors, trying to break their hold. Ansel and Lowen staggered, tightening their grip as much as they could. Despite their greater size, Ishla's soldiers had to contend with a man enraged, desperate enough to try anything and whose body was beginning to change before their eyes.

"He's up again!" cried Lowen over the scavenger's snarls.

"He always will be," observed Ishla coolly. "Constant alertness."

The scavenger stomped hard on Ansel's foot and bent double, trying to throw the troops restraining him. It almost worked. "Let me go or I'll rip your fucking balls off!"

Ansel was left gasping from the impact of the scavenger's heel against his instep. "Tinkerer, I don't want to question your judgment here, but it might *possibly* be a good idea to sedate him. Before he breaks my other ankle?"

Ishla summoned a tranquilizer dart-gun into her hands and took careful aim. "Well, hold him still, then!" she remarked peevishly. "Not that I think this'll work on him now, mind you..."

The soldiers locked their arms around the scavenger's, and pinned his feet down with their own. Despite their best efforts, the scavenger still squirmed and fought, but not enough to ruin the Tinkerer's aim. She squeezed the trigger, firing a dart straight into the scavenger's shoulder. He went limp instantly.

"Thank Goddess for that," remarked Lowen. "How long will he be out for?"

Ishla shrugged. "How should I know? I'm a Goddess; not a prophet. It could wear off any second, I guess. Variant Three is rewriting him from the genes up. Proteins, amino acids, it's all at work right now. Muscles lengthening, organs reconfiguring. Probably best for him that he's out cold now; it's probably excruciatingly painful. How's his pulse?"

Ansel checked, pressing his fingertips to the scavenger's carotid artery. "It's a miracle his heart hasn't burst, frankly."

His goddess chuckled faintly. "Yes. Yes it is, rather."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"What am *I* going to do with him, I think you mean."

"Yes. Sorry."

"Well, once he's evolved, I intend to leave him here. Perhaps we'll kit him out again, give him some more ammunition and stores. That might be interesting. But—do you get the impression he's here on purpose? Something's driving him; he's hunting."

Lowen shrugged. "I couldn't say, Tinkerer. No wild talents. I was bred for reflexes."

"Of course you were. Well, take it from me: he is. He's right in the middle of Myssitarpin, alone and low on supplies, and he plans to hunt *them*."

Ansel snorted. "Well, he's mad, then!"

"Quite possibly. And look how far he got before we intervened. I think it best to let this mission of his run its course. It'll be an ideal test for his abilities when they develop." Ishla banished her dart-gun, summoning a second, smaller device to her hand. It resembled a pistol tipped with a set of metal talons, splayed outwards. "Now, *this* is the clever part: this neural implant will transmit all his sensory data back to my temple. We shall see what he sees; hear what he hears—"

Lowen couldn't resist cutting in. "Let's just hope the canine genes don't make him lick his own bollocks!"

"Lowen!" exclaimed Ishla, a trifle exasperated, although she knew she had failed to disguise her chuckle completely. "Turn him around: let's tag him, equip him, and get out of here. We have a lot to do today." The Tinkerer fired her device into the back of the scavenger's neck, banished it, and summoned a pack and spare clips for his rifle. The group set the scavenger and his equipment back where they found him, and crept away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sinclair's mother's house sat on a leafy street filled with large, ancient willow trees that draped their trailing branches to the earth as if they were weeping for the land and all who lived upon it. The house itself was an old-fashioned two-story brick with dormer windows at the top. Akee liked it in an instant as Sinclair turned up the graveled driveway.

Akee shook her head as Sinclair turned the engine off and climbed out. "Too nice for Akee. I sleep in the car."

Sinclair shook his head and growled, "Come on, Akee. My mother's not going to bite you."

Akee missed the joke and just sat in her seat. Sinclair went around, opened her door, and hauled her out. "Don't tell my mom about what happened, unless she brings it up." He doubted the letter had reached her yet, but if it hadn't then he could put it off a bit longer. Sinclair knew how Lillian felt about Dane. "Just make nice. I need to snag a couple of hours sleep before driving to Fort Laurie. Don't want to put us in a ditch somewhere cause my eyes wouldn't stay open."

He drew her to the door by the hand, firm and yet gentle. The usually gruff captain led her inside.

"Mom, we got company!" he shouted, standing in the living room.

The living room overflowed with brocade upholstered furniture that had lace doilies pinned to the arms. Akee's eyes roved over everything, from the polished coffee tables in dark stained oak to the side tables with more doilies on them.

Someone evidently loved lace as much as Noawhane loved embroidery.

His mother appeared out of a side room and smiled at them. She was a plump, elderly woman of late middle years with graying hair, a fondness for woolen cardigans and a tendency not to walk so much as bustle. "Who've you brought this time, Aristotle?"

He hugged her and then stepped back with a gesture at Akee. "Mom, this is Akee. Akee, my mother Lillian Sinclair."

"Akee, I've heard so much about you." Lillian extended her hand to the little Nabaren.

Akee glanced at Lillian's hand uncertainly, and then took it. They shook. "Masae."

"I told you she wouldn't bite you." Aristotle grinned.

Lillian's eyes widened and she glared at her son. "Bite? Don't even joke about biting! You'll scare the poor thing half to death."

Akee looked from one to the other, feeling more uncertain than ever.

Lillian took Akee's hand and led her upstairs. "Don't listen to that big buffoon of a son of mine. He's entirely too coarse. Just like his father, God rest him. You'll want to freshen up." She pointed out the door to the bathroom. "And you'll have the guest bedroom." Lillian led her into a spacious room with green spreads on a double bed. "Now get yourself all fixed up while I get us some food going."

By the time that Akee finally fell into bed, she had decided that Lillian was the strangest human she had ever known—but the nicest.

* * * *

Lillian had got up well ahead of her son and had snacks, sandwiches, and sodas packed in a small cooler when they stumbled out of bed.

"Mom, we're not going to stay for breakfast. We need to get to Fort Laurie ASAP..." Sinclair saw the cooler sitting on the kitchen table. "Aww, mom. You didn't have to do this."

Lillian patted Sinclair's cheek affectionately. "I knew you'd run off. Your stomachs are going to be growling before you get there."

Sinclair allowed himself a cup of strong coffee, and then loaded the cooler into the front seat under Akee's feet. They tore out of Gasden, the little neighborhood near Fort Necessity, and roared down the highway toward Fort Laurie. As soon as they were in the clear, Sinclair extended his hand to Akee with an emphatic shake. "Drink and then sandwich."

Akee supplied him.

"And you get yourself something too, Akee. Mom probably packed enough for the platoon."

When they reached Fort Laurie, they drove another twenty minutes to Dwight Green Military Hospital. There, Sinclair and Akee found Lieutenant Trence Haslett sitting in the waiting area. Known to his friends in Major Jayce's company, and thus the entire company, as Lieutenant Trence, he had served as their medical officer for two years. Though barely out of his twenties, the past eight hours in theater had aged him dramatically, leaving his chin covered with stubble, his short blonde hair in a sweat-dampened scruffy mess and his eyes

red-rimmed. He sat slumped in a chair, his right side half-draped over the metal arm.

"How's the Major?"

Akee peered around Sinclair as he faced the medic.

Trence stirred sluggishly, rubbed his face, and then pressed the inner corners of his eyes. "He came out of theater an hour ago; we nearly lost him twice. My guess is they'll try to force a desk job on him after this. They won't let him go back to the front now. You know what they're like."

"They do that, then this whole damn operation is FUBAR." Sinclair looked grim. "Hell, the entire war would have ended more than ten years ago if the Fox hadn't turned it around."

"I know. I've seen that for myself. I believe it."

"You weren't there then."

Trence groaned, massaging his temples. "Give it a rest, Sinclair. I'm altogether too tired to argue this, especially when I agree with you."

Sinclair recognized a man at least as stubborn as himself. "You need a drink."

"You're damn right I do. However, I think the first one would knock me down."

"Why don't we go find out?"

Trence coughed up an exhausted, slightly bitter chuckle and the three of them filed out.

* * * *

Tirtuu was at his wits' end. His fight with Akee had rattled him badly, and the lengthy grilling Captain Sinclair had given him while they waited for evac to arrive had left his nerves

jangling. He had concealed his motives as best he could and stuck to his well-rehearsed cover story: he had arranged to meet Major-Saee at a previously arranged time and place, and knew nothing about any snipers. When questioned about any other details, Tirtuu played dumb, simply replying "Tirtuu no know nothing." He had hoped to pin the blame on Akee, but knew he could not expect any such accusation to stick.

Captain Sinclair had let him go, but Tirtuu doubted he believed his story. In his mind's eye, he could see the captain with a three-day growth of stubble, interrogating him at length, making him go over the story again and again until Tirtuu slipped up. He thought of that hard, rugged face and dangerously steely eyes boring into him; a gruff, gravelly voice growling at him. "Let's go over this *one more time...*"

Desperate times called for desperate measures. He had few relatives he could depend on. Even his brother Qutu would sell him if a sufficiently high reward were put on his head. Any of his cronies would do the same. If he tried to run, the army would chase him like terriers. He needed more powerful help, and he could only think of one person who could possibly provide such help.

Zälek had not given Tirtuu any means of contacting him. The only option open to Tirtuu was prayer and the fervent hope that his sponsor would hear him. Tirtuu dared not go back to his big house at Dog Rock where he kept his wives, and instead he fled to a secret hunting hut in a cold sweat, the Nabaren wondered how he might make his prayer heard. He thought quickly, remembering his childhood. Shrines. Sacrifices. Plenty of kneeling and groveling. Clearing away

soiled plates and pots, Tirtuu lit a pair of candles to convert his table into a makeshift altar. He regarded the affair critically and deemed it not impressive enough, and added another ten candles, just to make sure. He added a crude effigy made from bundles of twigs, and rifled his cupboard for offerings. He found a loaf of bread and a few strips of beef jerky. Even Tirtuu, as mean-spirited as he was, admitted to himself that no god would be impressed by this. Thinking harder, and with no small amount of regret, Tirtuu fished out a fifth of Old Uncle Mort from under his bed. He had stolen it months earlier from Captain Sinclair and was saving it for a special occasion. With a heavy heart he placed it on his altar.

Tirtuu remembered Zälek's manner; the casual disdain and self-assured sense of superiority he had about him at all times. Would these offerings satisfy him? Would any offering be enough? Tirtuu had played the role of the sycophant enough times to know that if one really intended to curry favor, one should go for broke. But what else could he give?

Outside, Tirtuu heard the lowing of his cattle.

* * * *

The officers' club at Fort Laurie was a pre-fabricated dump dedicated to the obliteration of sobriety in all its horrible forms. Soft drinks were never available and never requested; its clientele, mainly doctors and nurses and a smattering of various other officers who dropped in to check on their men, had seen plenty of sights that frankly looked better through a haze of whiskeyitis, and all agreed that there was no better place in which one could get well and truly *numb*.

Inside, a haze of smoke lurked unhealthily around the ceiling. The fans that were designed to extract or disperse this miasma had long since abandoned this pursuit as futile and instead staggered lazily around and achieved nothing. The floor was dirty; the nature of its stains perhaps best left unexamined, and nobody relished the way they made one's feet stick to the floor. Rats and cockroaches had long since abandoned the dive, considering it too unsanitary for their discerning tastes.

The barman, an off-duty sergeant who by day directed corporals, raised his eyebrows as Trence, Sinclair and Akee seated themselves, but remained quiet.

"Three whiskeys," grunted Sinclair. "Make 'em doubles."

"Rough day?"

"Could say that."

The barman pushed three glasses towards his new customers and accepted a fiver from Sinclair as payment. They stared into the amber depths for a few seconds, before drinking. Sinclair and Trence downed theirs with all the well-practiced skill of a pair of professional reprobates. Akee, wanting to keep up with her friends, tried to follow suit but was left gasping and spluttering as the liquor burned her throat.

Trence looked up somewhat blearily, pushing another note across the bar. "Same again." The barman recognized his cue and replenished their supply of intoxicants.

The barman caught sight of Trence's Medical Corps insignia. "Have I seen you here before, Sir?" he asked, replenishing the glasses.

"Maybe. Does it matter?"

The barman shrugged and pushed the doubles back.

A minute of silence passed before Sinclair finally spoke again. "You think he'll make it?"

"Major-Saee can't die!" protested Akee. Sinclair patted her arm awkwardly.

Trence felt too sober to respond immediately. He drained his glass yet again. "I don't know," he said eventually.

"Maybe. Reckon if anyone can after taking a shot like that, he can."

Sinclair chuckled bitterly. "Heh. If the Reaper tried to take him the Major would ram that scythe right up his ass."

Akee giggled for a moment, then stopped, suddenly losing her sense of humor. "You think Major-Saee die, maybe?"

"Too early to tell. Too early to tell. I Read him during Pre-Op. Touch and go. But..."

"But he'll fight it every step of the way, Akee," chimed in Sinclair. "You know what the Major's like."

"Yeah," added Trence, eyeing the barman.

"You boys gonna do anything with this one or is she still lookin' for business?" A fourth man muscled his way up to the bar. His bars marked him out as a captain and he had the kind of smell that only comes after half a dozen neat gins. Alcohol emanated from his every pore.

The temperature dropped by a few degrees. Sinclair's eyes narrowed. "You what?"

"You boys plannin' on takin' her out or is she still available? Only I'm hornier'n a three-balled tomcat and I ain't had no swamp pussy since Fort Necessity."

"Akee no whore!" protested Akee, scowling.

"Hey, honey, did I say the 'H' word? What's it you like to be called? Business girls?"

Sinclair eyed the other captain and saw the name 'Pearson' on his chest. "She's with us, Pearson. Get lost."

"Hey, no need for that, fella. Didn't know she was taken."

Sinclair's knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on his glass. "She's not a business girl. She's my platoon scout. Clear?"

"Sure, man, whatever you say. But if you're looking for some extra cash, babe—"

"The mouth. Shut it."

Pearson turned his gaze to Sinclair, his own eyes narrowing. "You got a problem with me, Sinclair? Got a stick up your ass about regulations?"

"Look, captain, nobody wants this—" began Trence.

"Was I talking to you, lieutenant?" growled Pearson. "Fuck off before I put you on a charge for insubordination."

Sinclair growled. "Last warning, Pearson. Lay off my friends or I'll have *you* on charges for dereliction of duty. You want this to go the distance? I've just had a week in slurp country, I've lost six men who were better soldiers than you'd ever be in a million years, and I am in *no mood for your crap*."

The atmosphere could have been cut with a bayonet. Captain Pearson's hand twitched, six big gins telling him he could take Sinclair out with no trouble. Then he caught the look in Sinclair's eye and that sobered him up quicker than a

liquid ton of espresso. He scowled and shambled out of the officers' club. "Godsdamn army."

Silence descended on the bar. Sinclair sighed. "What the Hell are you all staring at?" He looked back to the barman. "Set us up again, will ya?"

"Yes, *Sir*."

* * * *

Ordinarily, Tirtuu would not think of allowing livestock into his home: it was already squalid enough. To make matters worse, the cow seemed less pleased about the prospect than its owner. She did not appreciate being half-led, half-dragged into the hut. The doorway was a few inches too narrow, and once she was inside everything seemed too confined. Pawing at the floor uneasily, the cow turned her head this way and that, trying to back out of the door. Tirtuu strained at the rope, hauling her in.

"Stop struggling!"

Tirtuu grew increasingly manic, tugging harder at the rope, further maddening the beast he intended to sacrifice. The unfortunate creature bellowed, complaining at the top of her lungs, but eventually the belligerent Nabaren got her into the building. Angered and frightened, the animal lifted her tail, dropping three kilos of fresh, steaming manure onto Tirtuu's floor. Tirtuu shrieked, looking around in impotent rage for something with which he could beat the animal. Finding nothing handy, he contented himself with hauling the cow as roughly as he could towards his altar.

"Move, damn you! Move!"

He yanked hard on the rope, but the cow stood her ground, protesting even louder.

"Shut up! Shut up now!"

The cow neither understood nor obeyed. More bellowing followed, as did another cowpat.

"Fine! You die here! See if Tirtuu cares!" Tirtuu looked around for his machete. After a few fruitless seconds he remembered that it still hung from his belt. Seeing the Nabaren bare his steel, the cow panicked and ran at full tilt towards the nearest door, sticking herself fast in the door-frame. Tirtuu chased after her, snarling and frustrated. He stopped abruptly, realizing that he could not reach her throat. The beast surged forward, trying to tear her way out of the hut. Tirtuu saw the wall's timbers beginning to crack. Clambering onto the animal's back, Tirtuu leaned out of the doorway and tried to reach around her neck, finding a place to cut.

"O Great and Almighty Zälek, please accept Tirtuu's humble sacrifice!" declared Tirtuu, his voice quivering with rage and thoughts of his own predicament.

It took Tirtuu several tries to cut the cow's throat, each attempt eliciting a terrified noise from the sacrificial animal. The cow finally expired in a puddle of blood and gurgles. Tirtuu fell, panting, onto the carcass. He looked up to see Zälek standing before him, chuckling and shaking his head.

* * * *

The scavenger awoke, shivering and sweating. Waves of nausea sluiced through his stomach, threatening to gush forth

by the shortest route available. His heart pounded, his vision swam, and his insides trembled and slithered as though they had developed a life of their own. He tried to stand, but the ground slipped away from beneath his feet, leaving him lying on his belly in the mud. He heaved as sickness overtook him, but he had eaten little since his ordeal began and he could bring even less back up. He remained there for a few minutes, propped on his hands and knees, retching; doing whatever he could to exorcise the demons that had taken up residence in his stomach.

Eventually he regained his balance. Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, recollections of the past day flashed before him: his gun exploding in the face of a vampire. That same leech hitting the ground with half its face missing. Collapsing of exhaustion. Needles. Lava in his veins. Ball lightning speeding along his nerves. He climbed shakily to his feet. The woodland dipped and swayed before him; a profusion of verdant shades that came close to matching his hue. For a brief moment he treasured his pain and sickness: they reminded him that somehow, against all odds, he was still alive. The swelling in his right hand had gone down considerably. Turning his hand this way and that he could see the bones resetting. His fingers seemed longer now, more sharply tapered at the tips, with longer and harder nails to match. His complexion shifted as the color returned to his cheeks. His skin, now the color of old ivory, grew hard and tough like the hide of an animal.

The scavenger wondered if he was dreaming or feverish, but he felt himself return to his senses, and he knew with

cold, hard certainty that however strange his experiences seemed, he was not hallucinating. This was reality and he had to learn to cope with it lest the slurps catch him with his guard down. He saw a backpack and assault rifle lying a few feet away, and crouched to investigate them. He found the rifle loaded, with spare ammunition clips in the pack's pouches. The rest of the pack contained rations, a collapsible shovel, and even a bedroll. He could scarcely remember being this well equipped, and had even greater trouble believing his luck. Someone had left a loaded weapon in the area knowing full well that he would find it. Putting two and two together, he concluded that the trio that grabbed him and injected him must have done so. His suspicions rose sharply; he was being used and he did not like that one bit. The scavenger considered leaving the equipment behind out of spite, but a rumble in his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten, and his earlier fight with the leech had left him with just his pistol and a few hollow-points. An opportunity like this would not occur again.

The scavenger swore as he reached for his new kit.

Far away, Ishla the Tinkerer observed the scavenger's progress on a wall-mounted plasma screen. So far the interface she had designed to link with his neural implants provided just sound and vision. She had considered creating a suit to replicate his tactile sensations, perhaps every last one of his senses, but decided against it. Sound, vision, and possibly smell would be perfectly adequate for her purposes. Anything more would be simply voyeuristic.

"Well, he's quick, I'll give him that."

One of her assistants, a waifish lab-coated technician named Algin, looked up from her monitor. "Tinkerer?"

"Our latest star pupil. He survived Variant Three. Up and about in next to no time, and he's decided to accept the present I left for him." She smiled briefly. "Always nice to be appreciated, even if he's suspicious. He'd find menace in his own shadow, that one."

"Tinkerer, I hope I'm not speaking out of turn here..."

"I know an unspoken 'but' when I don't hear one, Algie. I think I didn't hear one just then."

Algin didn't disappoint her goddess. "But are you certain this is a good idea?"

"To be brutally honest ... I'm really not sure," confessed Ishla. "Variant Three is difficult to predict, and this subject's quite damaged already. There's no telling how this might play out."

"And you put a gun in his hands?"

"He's nowhere near us, and he has other fish to fry. Or bats, I should say."

"I thought I recognized the uniform. You don't think he'll just desert and come after us, then?"

"He kills vampires. What else can he do now? Oh—he's off! Back the way he came, and looking at the ground too. Tracking. He doesn't waste time, does he?"

The scavenger would have been the first to admit his woodcraft was rough and ready; though he could build shelters, and knew well enough to stay alert, tracking was never his forte. Despite this, it suddenly seemed so much more obvious to him now. The theory he remembered

seemed suddenly substantiated; the least bit of trampled grass spoke volumes about the creature that trod on it; its size, the length of its feet and stride. Every trace of movement had a story to tell and finally the scavenger felt able to make sense of it all. He had found two sets of tracks already; upright, human-sized, and barefoot. Ticks. He remembered that he had left two behind; waited them out until sunrise, just before their boss, the leech, tried to get him. He wondered if they might be the same ones.

"Back for more, skinny boy?"

That clinched it. "Guess so," replied the scavenger tersely.

"Think that gun'll save you?"

"See what I did to your boss?"

"You got lucky. Maybe we'll get lucky too!" Two vampires, lesser bloods, emerged from the bogs, drenched with water and duckweed. They smelled like decaying algae; the sort of stench one could only find at the bottom of a peat marsh among the rot and the muck.

The scavenger whirled around and fired a short burst at the first target to present itself. The vampire leaped aside, dodging with superhuman ease. It—the scavenger could not tell if it was male or female thanks to the filth and vegetation that covered it—had a lean, hungry appearance, like a half-starved wolf. It grinned madly, its fangs gleaming like needles. Catching a certain crafty look in its eye, the scavenger turned ninety degrees and began to withdraw backwards.

His suspicions were soon borne out. There were two of them, attempting to surround him. He fired again, but to no

avail. The ticks had blood-rushed: a combination of extreme hunger and abnormally high levels of adrenaline had made them disturbingly quick. The pack that took out most of his platoon were in this state of frenzy. He remembered them dancing and whirling out of the way of gunfire, howling and ululating, causing the soldiers to waste clip after clip of ammunition in a mania of panic-firing.

The scavenger reached for his bayonet. As insane as the idea seemed, he would have to resolve the matter at close quarters. As the adrenaline hit, something other than the usual fight-or-flight instinct overtook him. Rather than the knot of fear that tightened in his stomach in this kind of fight, the scavenger felt a surge of bravado. The vampires seemed smaller, slower, and weaker than before. Strength surged into his limbs. The belligerence that had kept him alive all these weeks amplified a thousand fold and he knew he could take them.

"Is it me, Tinkerer, or is the screen a bit, well, blurred?"

"That's the neural implant, Algie. His perceptions are distorted. He's sped up, so those Ylesgaire look slowed down. Rather interesting, really," remarked Ishla. "I wonder if he realizes the full extent of what I've done to him."

The image of the lesser blood on the screen lurched forward suddenly. A hand leaped into view from the left-hand side of the screen, grabbing hold of the vampire's head, driving its thumb straight into its eye socket. Held immobile, its face contorted in agony, the vampire could do little when steel flashed across the bottom of the screen, digging into the Ylesgaire's neck and ripping it wide open. Dark crimson blood

splashed across the screen, obscuring the action for a moment.

Algin shuddered. "He ... he doesn't waste time, does he?"

"Apparently not," commented the Tinkerer, observing the gruesome display with all the detachment of a scientist.

The camera angle lurched round to take in the other vampire. Its ravaged, feral face twitched from rabid blood-lust to abject terror. The lesser blood retreated slowly, trying to pick the right moment to flee.

"Easy, skinny boy. Wasn't really going to eat you. Just playing. Just playing..."

"The leeches. Where are they?"

"Just playing. Stop playing now?"

"Where are they?" demanded the scavenger. "*Where are the big fangs?*"

"You're big fang. You're big fang now." The vampire turned and started to run, but barely cleared ten feet before a bayonet sank into the back of its knee. The Ylesgaire pitched forward and landed sprawled in the dirt. It lifted its face from the mud, howling in pain, and tried to crawl to freedom. Such efforts were in vain: the scavenger, advancing angrily towards it, wrenched at the vampire's head until he heard vertebrae snapping under the strain.

The scavenger cursed. If he wished to kill any more leeches, he would have to find them himself.

* * * *

All signs of mirth faded from Zälek's face, replaced by the expression of mild disgust that he often wore in Tirtuu's presence.

"Now, Tirtuu, why have you gone to all this trouble to contact me? What's so important?"

"I called you, Lord?"

"No; no-one summons me. You offered a sacrifice and prayed especially loudly, and I deigned to take notice. Quite a considerable level of devotion, in fact. I could almost be impressed."

"Thank you, Lord!"

"Almost—but not quite. As I'm sure I've said before, you are the most dismally appalling little creep that it's been my misfortune to encounter. But I ask again: why? And don't call me Lord. I won't have you trying my patience by worshipping me."

"Major Jayce no die, Lor—Zälek-Saee."

Zälek sighed and rolled his eyes. "Well, yes. I had learned as much. How is this my problem?"

"Captain thinks Tirtuu did it."

"Then Captain-Saee is smarter than Tirtuu thought, yes?" replied Zälek, mockingly.

"But he come after Tirtuu soon! What can Tirtuu do?"

Zälek folded his arms. "That's Tirtuu's problem, surely?"

"But Tirtuu pray! Tirtuu make sacrifices to Mighty Zälek!"

"Yes," explained Zälek, his patience tested to its limits.

"But I didn't really *want* them, did I?"

Tirtuu's face fell. Tears of crushing defeat welled up in his eyes.

Zälek sighed again. "Oh, *do* shut up, you sniveling little wretch. Let's have a look at what you've offered me, shall we? I've come all this way; I may as well have a laugh, yes?" He faded from sight and reappeared in the hut, his nose wrinkling as he noticed the cowpattie a mere step away from his foot. "Well, if nothing else, this proves a few of my suspicions right," he observed, stepping carefully away from the offending pile. He cast his eyes over the possessions Tirtuu had gathered.

"I see you decided to keep that gun. Was that wise, I wonder?"

"Guns are power, Zälek-Saee," ventured Tirtuu as he shambled back into the hut.

Zälek sneered. "You know nothing of power, Tirtuu. As much as you think otherwise, you are not a powerful Nabaren."

"How can I be a powerful Nabaren, Zälek-Saee?"

Zälek ignored the suppliant's question and turned to look at the improvised altar that Tirtuu had erected in his honor. "All this for me? My, my. You spoil me, Tirtuu, you really do." He lifted the loaf of bread and sniffed it. "Hardly even stale!" he remarked, dropping it back onto the table. His eyes came to rest on the bottle of whiskey. "Well, the sentiment seems genuine. It must have hurt to part with this, Tirtuu." The corner of his mouth twitched into a smile and he dropped the bottle into the pocket of his overcoat.

"I'm in a mood to be generous. Consider your sacrifice accepted. Now, what do you want?"

* * * *

The scavenger lost track of time as his hunt continued. The progress of the war ceased to matter to him; he did not care if it was summer or winter, night or day. All that mattered was that he found and killed slurps. He searched tirelessly, sleeping less and less as his hunt progressed. Eventually the days and nights blurred into one; a perpetual twilight whose time was marked solely by the finding of tracks and the pursuit of his quarry. Ylesgaire or Lemyari; carnivorous or hematophagic, they were all the same to him. He murdered his way through the swamps, following trails in a haphazard way, relying on his newly-acquired instincts.

As the kills came further and further apart and his supply of ammunition ran lower and lower, a semblance of rational thought returned to the scavenger's mind. He had chased vampires in one direction and another, and had got himself lost in the meantime. Unless he regained a sense of direction and purpose, his desire to kill and gain revenge would ultimately go unsatisfied. As uncomfortable as he found the effort, he would have to stop to think; to consider his next move carefully.

He remembered from long ago that this area was deep in slurp country, and yet he had encountered barely a fraction of the amount of vampires he expected. Even when he grew bolder in his raids and ventured onto their estates he found them largely deserted; merely a skeleton crew of servants keeping the place presentable. On each occasion he slaughtered everyone present out of frustration, but he ended up regretting such a reckless move. The more he thought

about it, the more he realized that had he let them live, he might have found out why there were fewer leeches at large these days.

Eventually the scavenger abandoned the wilderness, forsaking stealth in favor of open travel. He needed to be elsewhere, and if the leeches were determined to be evasive absolutely anywhere would do. Before the changes to his body began to take effect he would have cursed his stupidity. To use the roads in slurp country was to invite death or worse. Now he welcomed the risk. His hatred and desire to kill far outweighed any fear he might once have had.

Miles slipped by on the open road and the scavenger hardly seemed to notice them. His rations gradually ran out and as circumstances forced him to hunt for food, ammunition soon began to run short. All the while, Ishla's efforts continued to take effect. His arms and legs lengthened. His fingernails hardened into claws and before long he was able to dispatch his prey with his bare hands. He passed this time in a state of constant wakefulness; he rarely slept and when he did, he did not dream. Tiredness had long since ceased to bother him; the scavenger merely felt a constant numb weariness that passed only when he fought or ate.

Escape from this state came only when the sound of distant engines shook him from his reverie. Complete lucidity returned to him in a flash, as if he had been saving his intelligence for when he needed it. After a moment or two of careful listening, he decided that he had heard heavy vehicles; an increasingly rare sound now that gasoline stocks

everywhere had started to dwindle. The scavenger felt the faintest of rumbles through the rough and poorly maintained road. Discarding his worn and rotten boots, he paused, reading this vibration through the soles of his feet. The fact that he could feel anything of the sort surprised him, but his instincts had grown sharp of late. The reading of the signs his senses had decided to post, no matter how subtle, had become second nature to him.

The ground shook, however faintly. He heard engines, probably from heavy transporters. He came quickly to the conclusion that someone was moving dozens, perhaps hundreds of vehicles. A large-scale operation was in progress. For the first time in weeks, the scavenger spoke.

"About fucking time!"

With renewed vigor he began to sprint down the road, in hungry pursuit of the source of the noise.

* * * *

Zälek chuckled. "Dear me, Tirtuu, you *are* scared, are you not? You think only I can extricate you from this mess. Well! Perhaps I have been a little hasty in judging your plight." He grinned like a crocodile. "Perhaps I should reconsider your case, yes?" Steepling his fingers, Zälek affected deep thought. He already knew exactly what he would do, but acts like this helped to impress the less intelligent. "Your botched assassination seems to have backfired somewhat, and caught the attention of the Louistranan army! Quite the pickle..." Another mocking chuckle rippled through the air. "Now, it's moments like this that being as well-informed as I am can

pay high dividends. Would you say that this Captain Sinclair is averse to a little ... bribery?"

Tirtuu shook his head. "Captain-Saee does what big Army-Saee says. No bribing Captain-Saee."

"Now, you see, Tirtuu, that's the difference between you and me. You dismiss ideas out of hand, while I prefer to keep my options open. Everyone has his price; even Captain-Saee Sinclair. Now, what do you think the Lemyari are going to do, following that raid that robbed poor Lord Lareine of his château and his life in that order?"

"They fight back?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you had a brain. And that means..."

"Lots of slurp?"

"Quite. So the good captain will be rather grateful if someone, such as myself, were to supply him with the arms he needs. I might even be able to put in a word for you while I'm there!"

"But Sinclair hate Tirtuu! Tirtuu need to get away!"

"There's nowhere for you to go, Tirtuu. You can't run or hide. You know what the army is like. We have to persuade Captain Sinclair to overlook your little indiscretion. After all, Major Jayce is out of the way now. Sinclair is in charge, yes? Much better for Captain Sinclair, yes?"

Zälek didn't believe a word of it, but his words struck a chord within Tirtuu's avaricious soul. After all, who didn't want to see their superiors fail or fall? That resulted in an elevation of one's status. A nervous grin spread across Tirtuu's face.

Mother Damnation [The Blessed and the Damned I]
by Janrae Frank, Phil Smith

"What must Tirtuu do?"

Zälek beamed. "Tirtuu must do as he's told."

CHAPTER SIX

When Sinclair, Trence, and Akee had come staggering drunk to the big house on Riverside, Kate had squawked a bit before taking them in for the night. Sinclair grinned, remembering the look on Kate's face. She never refused him, but she always read him the riot act first.

Kate, a formidable forty-year-old redhead with the chiseled features that in her youth could have landed her the heroine's role in any motion picture of her choice, lived in a huge house in a suburb adjacent to Fort Laurie with only a Nabaren servant for company, having inherited the home and a modest fortune from her mother's side of the family. A favor from Kate's family had helped get Sinclair into Darmuth Point for officer training. Cut from similar cloth as her cousin, Sinclair's platoon held her in high regard and had given her the nickname 'Duchess'.

"Aristotle-Saee want coffee?" Kate's white-haired servant gestured toward Sinclair with the steaming pot as she slid a tray onto the other end of the table. She knew Sinclair's habits well enough by now, and already had a cup ready for him: black, and strong enough to wake the dead or at least scare nine Hells out of a hangover. "Nipa know how Aristotle-Saee like it." Her pidgin-speak was largely affected, and her use of Sinclair's first name a deliberate tease. Her long service and place in the Sinclairs' affections had afforded her privileges like that.

"Thanks, Nipa." Sinclair winced at the mention of his name and wondered how the others were going to be when they woke up. He had had the common sense to take several cold tablets before collapsing and had awakened with few ill effects. He had always thought it amusing that something for a case of the sniffles worked so well on a case of too much juice.

The male of Kate's pair of shadow hounds trotted in and shoved his wet nose in Sinclair's face, getting a couple of swipes across the captain's mouth and eyes with his tongue before Sinclair could fend him off.

"Down, Bane!"

Bane gave a whuffling sigh and trotted out to look for his mate, Tempest. The grandson of Rocket and Melody, Bane was a formidable animal that had been given to Kate by Sally Walker when he was a puppy. Tempest came from the original breeder that developed them.

Sinclair unrolled a map on the kitchen table and weighted it down with cups and ashtrays and began to think hard about the situation. They had taken out a lot of the biggest fangs in Port Noble, but until news began to circulate, they wouldn't know which ones they had missed. He hoped that Marie Levoden had been among the casualties, but doubted he could be that lucky. She was important enough to be able to sit out Lareine's parties without any loss of face.

A long moan drew Sinclair's attention to the doorway. Akee stood there with her hand to her forehead.

"Akee don't feel good. Have headache. Tummy strange."
Sinclair chuckled. "That's a hangover, Akee."

"Akee don't like it."

Sinclair gestured at the table. "Sit. Have some coffee. It'll help."

"Akee hate coffee," she said, staggering up to the table and collapsing into a chair. She clung to the table for dear life as if the room would lurch suddenly and deposit her onto the floor.

"Drink," said Sinclair gruffly. "That's an order, scout."

Akee heaved a sigh and reached for a cup, her nostrils flaring at the bitter smell.

Nipa made a clucking noise. "Cream and sugar make it better. And maybe ... chocolate?" she added with her eyebrows raised conspiratorially. As far as Sinclair could remember, Nipa was unmarried and had no children; an elderly spinster who spent more time among the humans than the Nabaren. Despite that, her attitude, which swung between doting and mildly fretful, made her one of life's grandmothers.

Akee perked up at the mention of chocolate, which spoke to her Nabaren sweet tooth. Sinclair winced again as Nipa added three heaped tablespoons of sugar and a matching amount of powdered cocoa to Akee's coffee, followed by a large dollop of cream. His stomach churned at the thought of drinking something that sweet, and he shook his head ruefully. "When you've choked some of that down, I want your opinion."

Akee dutifully began to drink. A smile crept slowly across her lips. "When we go see Major-Saee?"

"We're waiting for Trence to stumble out of bed." Not easily deflected, Sinclair tried to return Akee to his original point.

"If the slurps retaliate, where do you think they'll strike?"

Once she had begun to recover, Akee began pointing out her thoughts on the map and explaining her reasoning.

Sinclair listened and argued at times, but Akee knew her business. He made a mental note to promote her from platoon scout to company scout as soon as he could. She was military to the core; an officer if only the top brass would commission Nabaren.

He paused. "What did you kill in those trees?"

"Humans. Three humans."

"Right. Nipa!"

The old servant returned to the kitchen. "Aristotle-Saee need something? Breakfast?"

"Not yet. I need paper. Big paper and pencils." Sinclair extended his hands to indicate an idea of size. "A couple of pages of that newsprint Kate likes to draw on."

Nipa fetched them and Sinclair drew out a rough diagram of the area where the ambush took place. "Okay, Akee, your turn. This is where the major came in. Show me where the men you killed were."

Akee took a pencil and put small crosses on the paper.

"What's going on?" Trence wobbled in looking like he had been dragged backwards through the brush.

"Have some coffee and shut up."

"Okay." Trence poured himself a cup and settled in, peering bleary-eyed at the map.

"This is my take on it." Sinclair pointed to Akee's marks and then the mark where his men had set up their blind for the Rovers. "Those fucking snipers were already in the trees when we set up. They ignored us. Tirtuu says he didn't know they were there, but I think we know well enough not to believe word *one* of whatever that little bastard says. Then there are these Nabaren bandits coming at us from the other side, flushing us toward them. Ambush, *my ass*. It was an assassination. Tirtuu planned it."

Trence straightened as a rush of adrenaline shoved the hangover from his body. "The major?"

Sinclair's lips tightened into a snarl; his eyes as hard and cold and deadly as steel. "If the major dies, forget the inquiry. I'll shoot Tirtuu myself."

* * * *

Sinclair and Akee found themselves once more in the waiting room while Trence went in search of someone who could tell them about Dane's condition.

Trence returned looking troubled. "He's still on the critical list." He heaved a long sigh. "There's been some slight improvement ... just not enough. They wouldn't let me in to Read him."

"He not die. He not die," Akee began a desperate little chant.

Sinclair reached out to pat her and, over her shoulder, he saw someone familiar. "Hey, Brode!"

"What the hell are you doing here, Sinclair?" Brode eyed them as the trio came over to him.

"The major caught one."

Brode's eyes widened. "Shit! Bad?"

"He's been in CCU since yesterday," said Trence.

"Damn. Of all the people who you'd think would never get—I'm sorry to hear that, Sinclair. He's a good man. The best."

Sinclair nodded at that. "Yeah. I've got Ramsden watching your place. Got worried when we didn't find either you or Noawhane."

Brode's mouth tightened. "I found Noawhane passed out on the path. She's okay now, but they won't let me take her home."

"Why Doctor-Saee not let Noawhane go home?" Akee asked, frowning at Brode.

Brode shrugged his big shoulders. "Dunno. They tell me they can't find anything wrong with her. But if that's the case, why the Hell aren't they letting me have her back?"

"I'll talk to 'em. We need you and Noawhane back at the station."

"I'm not leaving without Noawhane."

"I'll do what I can. Without the major's influence, I don't know—"

* * * *

Laying on her bed in a sterile white room in Dwight Greene Hospital at Fort Laurie, Noawhane had strange dreams. The dreams were filled with demons of tremendous size, and yet she did not fear them. They bowed down before her and turned their necks to her fangs. Noawhane grew thirsty

looking at them, longing to sink her fangs into their throats and suck like a vampire.

When she woke again, she asked the nurses and the doctors for water, juice, soda, coffee. No matter what she drank, nothing satisfied her thirst. Brode came to visit her each day and she begged him to take her home, but the doctors refused to allow it.

That depressed Noawhane: a daydream came to her as she stared longingly out of the window. Before long her reverie overtook her completely: she wanted—no, *needed*—blood. Noawhane rifled the drawer of the night stand, dug out a pen and notepad and jotted down a quick message: *GONE HOME*.

Picking up a steel-framed chair, Noawhane tested its weight and struck the window pane with all her might. She was surprised at how easily it burst apart. Paying no attention to the screaming klaxon, Noawhane tore a leg from the twisted and bent remains of the chair, swept a few shards of broken glass from the window frame, and leaped out like a panther. She caught herself on a tree branch some fifteen feet away, and swung effortlessly up into the boughs, hardly realizing that no normal Nabaren could accomplish such a feat. It came to her as naturally as breathing. She had no time to think about her actions as she scrambled from tree to tree into the night: she had escaped. She was free!

* * * *

"Is there any point in us doing this?"

The coven had reconvened at Kate's place for what felt like the millionth time. There was nothing inherently sacred or magical about her house or the ground on which it was built; no crossing of ley lines or ancient burial grounds whose energies enhanced the strength of their rituals. To have even suggested so would be to invite snorts of derision from the witches that gathered there. Kate's house was simply the biggest and most comfortable, and after a long and frustrating ritual they all felt like supper. Kate's servant Nipa usually had a cake ready for these events and that, if anything, made the whole thing worthwhile.

Kate looked at Joan, the oldest surviving member of the coven with a mixture of sympathy and irritation. Though she shared Joan's frustration the woman was always the first to voice her doubts.

"We know she's still out there, Joan. We'll keep trying."

Joan removed her glasses and brushed a wisp of grey hair away from her eyes. "Well, yeah, but she's not said anything to us for the past ten years. I was just wondering if it was time for us to move on, see if there's some other way we can help, that's all." She polished her spectacles in a matter-of-fact way that always slightly needled Kate. Joan had a habit of Being Reasonable.

Kate sighed. The rest of the coven—only half a dozen of them left now—rolled their eyes. This was ground well trod to them.

"You know that's not how we do things. Sally made me promise we'd keep trying, and it only takes an hour."

"But even so—"

"Even so, we still have to try. There's a war on, and I don't think any other people are trying this."

Joan rejoined the circle, taking up her usual position between Cath and Chris and opposite Kate. Victoria stood to Kate's left; Beryl to her right. Today they conducted their rite in the cellar, surrounded by racks of wine bottles. The cold and damp got to Joan's knees, making her more inclined to complain, but the cellar had a brick floor onto which conjuring circles could be chalked. They stood at each corner of a six-pointed star that was bathed in soft yellow radiance from one of the overhead lanterns; a solitary pool of light in a field of darkness. Though Kate, being of stolid Sinclair stock, had little truck with melodrama, such settings struck her as somehow appropriate and conducive to the right atmosphere. A reminder of the urgency of their situation would do the coven some good, herself included.

Joan began, a little reluctantly. "O Great Ishla the Tinkerer, last of the gods of light, hear our call in this, our darkest hour."

Chris followed. "O Ishla, our numbers dwindle and we seek your guidance."

Victoria chimed in: "O Ishla, time grows short and we grow desperate."

Kate, Beryl, Chris; the devotional prayers continued anti-clockwise around the circle, each entreaty focusing the witches' minds on the image of the elusive goddess Ishla. None of them expected to make direct contact with her: the ritual was a beacon. A signal to be heeded or ignored by its intended recipient. A candle held aloft in the dark.

"O Ishla, we cannot do this alone. Give us a sign!"

"O Ishla, they are so many and we are so few."

"O Ishla, my knees are playing up again."

"Joan!"

"Sorry, Kate, but they are. Can I get a chair?"

"Five more minutes."

Joan sighed. "Kate, I don't want to sound defeatist, but we've been going on for *three quarters of an hour*. If Ishla was going to turn up, she would have done. You didn't expect her to just pop up in the middle of the circle, did you?"

The trapdoor swung open and a shaft of light penetrated the depths of the cellar. A tall, regal figure descended the steps.

"Joan has a point, Kate. Translocation is an inexact science at the best of times."

Kate's initial reaction at hearing the stranger's voice was to wonder how she had gotten in past Bane and Tempest. Then Kate saw her and knew.

She stood six feet tall, but her willowy build, her stance, and her bearing could easily have fooled the casual observer into believing she was much taller. Dazzling luminescence radiated from her, banishing all shadows from the cellar as she arrived. The coven's senses, keenly attuned to the arcane, detected a level of power far beyond anything any of its members had encountered. This was no mere light-show: they were in the presence of a goddess. They found none of the lingering malignance that emanated from the hellgods and their minions, and at once they knew their new guest's name.

"Ishla the Tinkerer?"

She smiled and nodded. "In the flesh, so to speak. Oh, and can we please skip this 'O Ishla' business? Besides everything else it's so embarrassing. Just because I'm ancient, doesn't mean I don't move with the times. Just 'Ishla' or 'Tinkerer' will do."

The witches were taken aback by her chattiness. Eventually Kate spoke. "Erm ... right. Yes. Tinkerer, then," she decided with enforced brightness. The blood of generations of Sinclairs compelled her to adapt quickly to this sudden change of circumstances. "To be honest, I, er, didn't think you were going to turn up."

The Tinkerer gave an apologetic shrug. "I've been busy. Tinkering. Moving in mysterious ways. Avoiding death at the hands of the Hellgods. You know how it is—well, actually, you couldn't, but it's nice of you to try. Any chance of coffee?"

A nonplussed look of bewilderment dawned on the faces of the coven. Only Kate, by now running largely on autopilot, managed to keep her head. Ishla caught the other witches' expressions.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, you do appear to be, ah, glowing," observed Kate. "It's really quite painful to look at, actually."

"Oh!" Ishla looked suddenly self-conscious. "I'm sorry. You would not *believe* how many times I've had to manifest lately. My work clothes, you might say. Still, we're all illuminated enough, no need to stand on ceremony here." Her aura dimmed suddenly to a faint opalescent outline. There was no

point in letting the witches forget who was the goddess here, after all.

"Thank you. Girls, if you could show Ishla to the lounge I'll tell Nipa there'll be seven of us for supper tonight."

* * * *

"What the Hell do you mean, 'she's gone'?" Brode yelled at the doctor.

The doctor, Lieutenant Helmsly, looked Brode in the eye, keeping his nerve despite the grip the man had on his lapels. Helmsly had dealt with many soldiers before, often enraged ones, and even someone as big as Brode held little terror for him. "Your *wife*," he curled his tongue around the word with unmitigated distaste, "broke a third floor window and leaped out."

Brode dropped Helmsly on the floor, barged past all in his way and sprinted toward Noawhane's room.

Sinclair scowled at Helmsly. "If she's hurt, Helmsly, I'll have you before the tribunal so fast your feet won't touch the floor."

Sinclair went after Brode with Akee and Trence at his heels. They found him shaking and staring out of the broken window at the ground, and for a moment Sinclair feared that Brode might be staring at his wife's shattered body on the ground. He had never heard of a Nabaren surviving a leap like that one.

Akee darted to the window, stood on her tiptoes, and peered around Brode. "Noawhane not there."

Sinclair's lips tightened and he crossed the room. "Akee, could you make it to the trees from here?"

"Uh-uh," she replied, frowning in perplexity. "Jump too big."

Sinclair eyed Brode and saw an expression all too familiar. The man was in shock, and needed snapping out of it.

"Brode!" he barked.

Brode stirred sluggishly like a man rising from a nightmare. "Yes, Sir?"

"Go home. If Noawhane made that jump, then that's where she's headed. She's going to be keeping to the trees."

"And if she didn't?"

"We'll find her. Now get out of here!"

* * * *

The coven sat around the sitting room, their shoulders hunched in an attitude of awkwardness. Their guest, Ishla the Tinkerer, did her best not to take notice of this and lounged in her recliner as nonchalantly as she could. She stopped short of resting her feet on the arm-rest. As informal as she wished to be, she suspected Kate Sinclair had a tongue as sharp as a saber and would happily give her a stern talking-to, goddess or not.

It was up to Nipa to break the ice. Coffee was poured and served and cakes passed around. Sugar and caffeine bridged the diplomatic gap nicely, and Ishla's appreciation of Nipa's cooking gave her a few square inches of common ground with her hostess.

"Now, please, Tinkerer, don't take this the wrong way," began Kate.

Ishla raised a quizzical eyebrow, carefully selected to match her enigmatic smile. "But?"

"But why have you come here? I wasn't aware that you made social calls as such."

"Aha. Straight to business, Kate? I can see why you're in charge. You're right, of course. I must confess that I do have ulterior motives in coming to see you." She paused and chuckled briefly. "A goddess confessing to a mortal? There's a first!"

Kate refused to be side-tracked. "Your motives...?"

"Of course. Firstly, to apologize. I've not been as diligent in answering prayers as I might have been. I'm sorry if my apology doesn't sound too sincere; I've never really had the knack for regret, but please, take it from me: it's genuine. Second, and more importantly, I have some advice for you: help is on its way."

Relief dawned on the coven. Good news was rare coin indeed these days, and as dangerous and unreliable as it could be, no witch could function without hope, however sparse. Joan Sheldon tempered her hope with realism.

"What sort of help?"

"Reinforcements. I can't provide you with a complete roster, but eight more gods and their attendant legions will be turning up. The one problem is you'll have to wait, but you're good at that."

Kate bristled slightly. "How long?"

"Winter solstice. We shan't see a sign of them until the worldgate opens. If you and yours can hold the line until then, things might start to swing back in our favor."

"But the world will be swamped! That sort of war will destroy everything!"

"Better a war on our terms than a massacre on their terms. Our first priority is to survive, and, well, even then the world is better off burnt to a cinder rather than left at the mercy of the hellgods."

Kate frowned. "Really?" She paused. "Oh. Of course."

"Oh, yes. You all know what they do with their prisoners, I'm sure."

"Ten months, then."

"Ten months. Luckily the Fox has kept the enemy at each other's throats all this time. Of course, now his boys have blown up Lareine's house I don't see there being much more room for finesse." Ishla steepled her slender fingers. "These next ten months are not going to be pleasant."

"Oh, *wonderful*."

"Now, don't blame me for that one! That wasn't my decision. Of course, he had his hand and he either had to play his last hand or risk all his work being undone. I wouldn't have relished that choice either, frankly."

"I guess. What can we do?"

"What you've always done."

"Very helpful."

"I never said I was. But if you want my advice: do some recruiting. There are, what, six of you left to ward this whole area? If anyone made a serious attempt at hitting this area

with their spells you'd be hard put to keep it together for a week." Ishla heard a few strangled protests from the witches, whose struggle to stay polite teetered on the brink of failure. "I'm sorry, but it's true. You are desperately understaffed. Then again, we all are. Keep an eye out for any potential whatsoever, no matter how small. You're going to have to make the most of whatever you find. You'll have to make do, and I *know* you're all good at that."

"Thank you so much. And might I ask what you'll be up to while all this is going on?"

Ishla chuckled. "That brings us to my third reason for being here, in fact. Despite appearances to the contrary, I've been busy. I'm not called the Tinkerer for nothing. I've perfected some techniques that should help tilt the odds back in your favor. If the humans and Nabaren are going to survive this war, they'll need new allies: a race that'll eat demons for breakfast." She reached into her robe and produced a slim steel case. "What I have here is a serum that will affect the subject genetically and hormonally: condensing millennia of evolution into a few days."

Joan was quick to voice her distaste. "Sounds, I don't know, rather *dangerous* to me."

"No offense, Joan, but ... well, it would, wouldn't it?"

Kate frowned. "I think she has a point here, Tinkerer. I do hope you're not proposing to test this out on us?"

"Don't be silly. This serum's quite unsuitable for humans and you have your own duties anyway. I'm not sure how species change would affect your talents, to be honest."

"Well, that's something, at least."

"Strictly Nabaren only."

"*What?*" Cath, a short, mousy, chubby member of the coven and wearer of a succession of bob-cuts that didn't suit her at all, finally spoke up. Habitually quiet but quick on the uptake, she had caught the goddess' drift. Her brow furrowed. "You're planning to do this to *Nipa*?"

"Does this give you a problem?"

"You're damn right it does! She's practically one of us! I can't let you endanger her like this!"

"With the greatest respect, Catherine, I could simply freeze you all in place, inject Nipa with the serum, and be out of here before you regain the use of your limbs. But will you at least hear me out first? I have already instigated the demon-eater program. Some of my candidates have started to evolve. What they need right now is a leader. You know what Nabaren families are like: my demon-eaters will be much the same. They need a matriarch. Someone to look after them and make sure they look after each other. Someone to liaise between them and you. Dear Nipa is the only candidate for the job. If not her, then no-one."

Kate sighed and shook her head. "Doesn't Nipa have any say in the matter?"

"Well, we could always ask her, couldn't we?"

"You sound like you already know the answer."

Ishla smiled. "Yes, I do, don't I?"

* * * *

Sinclair sat alone in the waiting room because Akee had insisted upon searching the hospital grounds for signs of

Noawhane. Trence had gone along to make certain that no one bothered her.

"Well if it isn't *Captain* Sinclair," said an icy, venomous female voice.

Its owner looked as rigidly composed as she sounded: every strand of her blonde hair swept up from her neck, make-up tasteful and understated, and her sheath dress tight enough to squeeze the breath out of her.

"Hello, Mrs. Jayce."

Edith Jayce's eyes held a simmering anger beneath their frozen depths. "What happened to Edith?"

"I was wondering the same thing." Sinclair remembered the vivacious young girl that Dane had married twenty years ago. He could scarcely believe that they were one and the same. Edith had been sixteen to Dane's twenty-six, a young woman from a well-to-do family whose sole ambition had been to play Susie Homemaker to a promising military officer. Rand showed up seven months later, surprising absolutely no-one.

Then Dane's career stalled: he refused every colonel's commission offered him, clinging to his field posting like a limpet. Any job that threatened to land him behind a desk, away from the front, terrified him worse than the prospect of violent death. Lately things had gone sour and rumors had sprung up that Dane was staying in the field just to avoid Edith.

Edith's expression was hard; accusing. "This is all your fault."

"I don't see it that way."

"You talked him out of taking that promotion! You kept him in the field."

Sinclair's expression tightened. "The major's his own man. No one makes decisions for him."

"Are we interrupting something?" asked a male voice so similar to Dane's that Sinclair did a double take.

Lance Corporal Randall Jayce stopped just behind his mother with his fourteen-year-old sister Jessy in tow. His eyes lit on Sinclair's new bars and saluted. "Captain Sinclair, congratulations on the promotion."

Sinclair smiled back at him. Rand was so much like his old man that it touched a warm spot in Sinclair. "Thanks. It's good to see you again, Corporal. Just wish circumstances were different."

"I was given leave as soon as word came through about Dad. Were you there when it happened?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me about it?"

Sinclair noticed that they had attracted an audience. Three men from his platoon, Jenkins, Wain, and Eryngus, had shown up. "Later," he said, tossing a meaningful glance at Edith before returning his gaze to Rand.

Edith stormed off in high dudgeon. Rand gave a shrug. "I better go after her before she makes a scene somewhere else."

"Damage control." Sinclair grinned. Edith could not handle Rand any better than she could handle his father. He turned to the three men. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mother Damnation [The Blessed and the Damned I]
by Janrae Frank, Phil Smith

Gobber Jenkins chewed absently at a mouthful of tobacco. He looked for somewhere to spit but immediately thought better of it. Chewing in the presence of an officer was bad enough, but spitting would have got him put on a charge. "Sir?"

"You three specifically. I left you with things to do."

Ringer and Wain looked at Jenkins, since he had made the mistake of speaking first.

"Luck of the draw, Sir," said Jenkins. "We drew for it." He withered slightly under Sinclair's stare, trying desperately to fill up the oppressive silence. "With straws, Sir."

"Sit down." Sinclair indicated a group of chairs. "Major's still critical listed."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nipa shivered beneath the intense gaze of the Tinkerer. In a way she was reminded of being inspected for her virginity; her looks had a way of boring into one, studying every reaction, and comparing their findings to a long and exhaustive set of references. Her grandmother in particular looked at people like that and it sent a shiver down her spine now, just as it did all those many years ago. Had her hair not already turned white, it would have done so by now.

Kate tried to reassure Nipa, lowering her voice. "Now, Nipa, I don't want you to think you're under any pressure here. Whatever Ishla says, we are not going to let anyone force you to do anything you don't want to do. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Masaee."

"I want you to be well aware that what Ishla wants to do to you can't be undone. If she changes you, you can't be changed back. Your life will be different."

"I understand, Masaee. I want to help."

Kate sighed. "I know, Nipa. I know. But please don't say that just because you're trying to please us. You don't have to do this. No-one will think any the worse of you if you decide to say no. It's your choice."

"You want me to say no, Masaee?"

"I want you to choose whatever you think is best."

Ishla tried not to roll her eyes. "Is all of this strictly necessary? There are bigger issues at stake here."

Kate frowned. "Right now the only issue is Nipa's welfare. Her right to choose. Deny her that, you might as well join the Hellgods."

Ishla flinched, her aura darkening ever so slightly, but her smile remained even if all mirth had deserted her. "There are some gods, Kate, that might take exception to a remark like that."

"And look where it got *them*."

Ishla fell silent. Kate had made her point and had little left to say. The others dared not speak, pulling their shawls and cardigans tighter around their shoulders. A minute passed in this tense fashion: not even motes of dust dared to drift through the air for fear of breaking the silence. Nipa, still standing in the middle of the assembled witches and goddess, realized that she was perhaps the only person not on trial at that moment. She cleared her throat.

"I want to help, Masaee. I will do as Ishla says."

Later on, Ishla would reflect that she should have felt relieved by this, but she felt deprived of a victory. She had not out-argued a formidable and cunning witch. The witch had out-argued her, and even then Nipa had volunteered herself. Only a scintilla of shame had kept Ishla from simply doing as she would. In essence, this was why she found mortals both tiresome and invigorating: they made an issue out of everything. In a world of absolutes, they added shades of grey. If presented with shades of grey, they added black and white.

"Are you sure, Nipa?" Ishla put a hand to her mouth, surprised to learn that the question had come from her lips.

"I am sure."

Kate sighed. "All right, Tinkerer, we'll play this your way; but I don't want this to be, well, clinical. If you're going to change Nipa, it'll happen *here*, where we can keep an eye on her. Where we can look after her." The firm, resolute set of Kate's jaw suggested to Ishla that this point was not open to discussion, even if she were a goddess and attended by a trillion worshipers.

"Well, all right, but I should warn you: this could get difficult. Changing species never comes easily. Are you sure you'll be able take care of her?"

"She's looked after us long enough, and I've billeted Aristotle's platoon plenty times. We'll manage."

"Yes, you will, won't you?" observed Ishla. Kate gave the impression of being a woman who put up with things for a living. "Nipa, you may want to lie down for this." Catching this suggestion, Victoria and Cath vacated their sofa, making room for the elderly Nabaren.

"Will this hurt, Ishla-Masaee?"

Ishla opened the steel case and took out a hypodermic needle and a small glass ampoule filled with cerulean blue liquid. She filled the syringe, depressed the plunger to expel the air from the needle, and approached Nipa. "I'm afraid it will. A lot. Your entire body is going to change and as a result there will be considerable pain." She caught a venomous glance from the coven, and quickly moderated her tone. "However, it'll pass. You will be stronger and faster. Your back will not trouble you as much as it has. I'm told it feels like being burnt alive, but you may find it helps to imagine

yourself rising from the ashes like a phoenix. Hold out your arm, Nipa."

Nipa bared an arm and held it out with her palm upwards. Her skin seemed thin, almost translucent in the lamplight, every wrinkle magnified. It was the last time the coven would ever see their retainer so vulnerable.

The hypodermic needle slid into a vein, depositing its bounty into Nipa's bloodstream, and withdrew gracefully. Ishla replaced the syringe in its case and pocketed it in a businesslike manner. "The process will take a few days. That said, Nipa, you're past your menopause, so it may take a little longer. Various hormones need to be kick-started; the biological clock wound back a few hours. You may experience mood swings along with everything else. I hope Kate and her friends are good at dealing with pain, because I can't let you take any anesthetics in your present state."

Nipa winced as the serum's first effects began to course through her system, making every nerve-ending prickle uncomfortably. Kate frowned and shook her head. "We could try putting you in a trance, blocking the pain altogether: but that could affect you like a dose of painkillers."

Cath eyed her hostess. "Perhaps if we shared her sensations? Linked minds with her? If we do that in shifts we could probably take the edge off for as long as it takes."

"Sounds like a plan. Ishla, we—"

But Ishla had gone.

* * * *

Akee went up into the trees nearest to the window that Noawhane had leaped from. She spotted something very, very high near the top. When she reached it, Akee found a shredded white hospital gown. She bundled the gown up and shoved it through her belt, then climbed down.

Trence waited for her at the foot of the tree. "What did you find, Akee?"

"Noawhane's gown."

"Ripped up like that? Was she in a fight?"

Akee put the gown to her nose, sniffed, and then frowned. "No. Just Noawhane. But not Noawhane."

"What do you mean?"

Akee searched for the right human words to use. "Edge to it. Not there before."

Trence's expression tightened. "Undead?"

"Nabaren no turn undead. Noawhane smell odd."

Trence scratched his head, looking perplexed, and thinking for a moment. "Can you track her?"

"Noawhane keep to trees. Akee no follow."

"We'll have to tell Sinclair it's a bust."

"Sinclair-Saee be unhappy."

"Maybe. We can hope she'll head home. You think Noawhane knows what she's doing?"

"Akee hope so."

* * * *

Sinclair rose from his chair when he saw Trence and Akee return. "Did you find her?"

Akee shook her head unhappily. "Noawhane run away. Take tree route. No trail."

"I just hope she makes it home," said Sinclair. "Trence, see what you can find out about the major. If there's still no change, I'm going to hit the officer's club."

Trence nodded at his unit mates and walked off.

Akee settled into a chair.

Trence came back solemn. "No change."

Sinclair scanned the faces of his unit. Left to their own devices, all of them would sit here and mope. There were better things he could do with them, and it didn't include canceling the leave time they had managed to steal in order to sit in the hospital waiting room. "Look guys, let's hit the PX then go see the Duchess. I want each of you to look at a map I drew and answer some questions about what happened."

Jenkins blinked. "Yessir."

Trence and Akee rode with Sinclair, while the three privates followed in Eryngus' beat up truck.

Kate greeted them at the door. She eyed the half-dozen on her veranda with a raised eyebrow and chuckled. "Another army night?"

"Yeah." Sinclair gave her a wan smile, waiting for her to either let them in, or bawl him out and then let them in.

"Well, at least you're sober."

"For the moment."

Kate stepped back from the door, sweeping her arm out to welcome them over her threshold.

"I assume those bags contain liquor?"

"Yeah."

Kate planted her hands on her hips. "And?"

"Some for the major, who's not allowed it on doctor's orders. Some for the boys who can't anymore. And some 'cause we're thirsty."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "Aristotle Sinclair,"—this prompted a few sniggers from Wain, Ringer, and Gobber—"I should know well enough by now that an army always marches on its liver, but if you think I'm going to play hostess to half a dozen drunken reprobates, I've got just one thing to say to you."

A tense silence descended upon the company.

"Just you make damn well sure that there's some left for the rest of the platoon!" She started off, paused, and then turned. "Aristotle, Nipa isn't feeling well. You'll have to fend for yourselves. She needs quiet, so keep the guys away from the east end."

"She seemed fine this morning." Sinclair sobered.

"She's old, Aristotle. Some of the girls are helping me with her. So just keep the guys on the west end."

"Will do."

* * * *

Sinclair moved all his maps and the jar of pencils to the big table in the formal dining room upstairs where they had more space. The hour grew late, and a knock came at the door. Sinclair glanced to see who Kate ushered inside. Randall stood in the doorway with his beret in his hands, looking uncertain.

"I hope I'm not interrupting. Aunt Kate said to come up."

Because Dane had no surviving family, the Sinclair clan had become the closest thing to relatives that Randall and Jessy had besides their parents. Looking at Randall right then, Sinclair could almost see the eleven year old boy who had fled one of his parents' frequent quarrels and ridden a bicycle through forty miles of dangerous country from Fort Necessity to Kate's home.

* * * *

Trence grinned as he approached Sinclair and Akee in the waiting room the next day. "They moved him into a room on the ward last night. He's awake and alert, but he's only allowed brief visits."

Sinclair grabbed Akee and swung her around in an impromptu dance that brought odd looks from the staff walking past them.

"You can go up, Sinclair," Trence said. "But they'll only give you fifteen minutes with him."

Dane parted his eyes as Sinclair entered. He appeared pale and worn. Drainage tubes protruded from the side of his bandaged chest and another down near his waist, drawing out the excess blood and any air that might have been trapped inside him. "Sinclair." Dane acknowledged him in a raspy voice, his breathing rough.

"Major."

"Don't let ... them retaliate." Dane's eyes closed and he seemed to drift for a moment before speaking again. "They will."

"I know it, Dane."

"Call Colworth. If his secretary ... or his aide ... doesn't want to ... put you through." Dane fell silent and Sinclair could see that even this little bit was exhausting him. "Tell them ... the fox said ... the fence is down."

"Will do."

"Tell Colworth ... I said give you ... everything you ask for. Ball's in ... your court."

"I know." Sinclair looked away, finding it hard to see Dane like this. The major had always seemed little short of invincible. He searched for more words, knowing the nurse would be in to drag him out any moment. "Look, Dane, you get better fast—or the Duchess is going to bust my ass."

A thin, weary smile crossed Dane's face. "Tell her I'm ... working on it."

* * * *

For the first two hours Nipa scarcely seemed like she was going to be reborn in a new, stronger form. If anything she looked older, frailer, more in the throes of a deadly fever than the transformation Ishla described. She sweated, her eyes and nose streamed, and her skin had assumed a sickly pallor. Her tail, usually kept tightly curled, now hung limply, and her arms and legs, once possessed of the unrelenting strength that kept her working at all hours, now seemed wasted and weak, with skin as thin as paper.

Nipa felt like she was boiling alive, as if magma were coursing through her veins, burning her to ashes from the inside. The sensation left her short of breath; she gasped and gasped, but each draught merely brought more fire into her

lungs. Despite the worry that seared every part of her soul, Kate forced herself to be her usual practical self and take Nipa's temperature. As the gauge soared higher and higher she wished she hadn't. For want of anything better to do, the coven put Nipa to bed and tried to make her as comfortable as possible. Even if Nipa did not survive the effects of the serum, she could at least go out with the dignity she had shown in life.

Agony blazed its incendiary trails over Nipa's skin, dancing like flames on each of her nerve-endings before searing its way along each of her neural pathways. Ishla the Tinkerer had told her "you may find it helps to imagine yourself rising from the ashes like a phoenix," but any such glorious rebirth seemed incalculably distant. With each passing second the prospect of any such thing appeared increasingly remote...

Despite the pain, she did not cry out or call for assistance. Nipa's great age may have made her frail, but experience had taught her all she needed to endure the agony of her transition. Moreover, Kate Sinclair and her coven were determined to ensure that Nipa did not suffer alone. They took it in turns to link with the elderly Nabaren in psychic communion, sharing her pain.

Each of the witches, when their turn came, sat in a chair by Nipa's bed. As the servant's agony flooded through their bodies, they tried to find different reasons to hang on for longer; any sort of lie that got them through the hour would do. Cath told herself that sharing an experience like this would help bring the coven closer together. Joan, ever reasonable, ventured the opinion that far worse was sure to

come in the future, so everyone had better get used to suffering right now. Chris was simply out to prove that she could put up with anything. All these reasons and more were unable to withstand the onslaught that struck each witch in turn when they joined themselves to Nipa; in the face of the pain Nipa endured, there was no chance for self-delusion. Each witch suffered simply to relieve the suffering of their friend, and as each finished their hour, drawn, pale and shivering, none expected Nipa to improve.

The sixth hour rolled by like a truck with a broken axle. Nipa's breathing had turned shallow and raspy, and the coven shared the belief that Nipa was not long for the world. No-one dared speak the opinion out loud, but the silence that pervaded Kate's house was pregnant with, and looked set to deliver tidings of doom and sadness. Expecting the moment to be close, Kate opted to take her second shift now. She looked haggard and fretful, as if she had tried to absorb all Nipa's pain into herself, and had been left drained and shaky by the effort. The leader of the coven had trouble walking, but refused any offer of assistance, making her way to Nipa's bedside using pride as a crutch. Beryl sat in attendance, her eyes shut tight as she held onto Nipa's cold and clammy hand.

"All right, Beryl, I'll take it from here."

"Thanks." Beryl looked up from the chair, and noticed that she had been greeted by Kate rather than seeing Cath, "What, already? But you're not due on for another hour!"

"I know."

Beryl didn't relinquish Nipa's hand. "Come on, Kate. It's Cath's turn. You go and rest up while you can." She should have known better: when Kate had an idea in her mind she rarely let it go.

"Not going to happen. I'm taking another turn." Kate cast a meaningful glance at her ailing servant. "While I can."

"But—oh. Right. Okay." Beryl stood up at last, her legs creaking like an old rocking-chair.

The seat had barely cooled by a fraction of a degree when Kate took her place. Closing her eyes and taking Nipa's hand in hers, Kate tried to prepare herself once again for the link with the old Nabaren woman. The feeling was not unlike being doused with boiling water; she could not keep herself from gasping when the psychic link took hold.

Beryl stayed for a few moments until she regained the feeling in her legs. A kind of numbness had settled over her, almost as relieving as a soothing balm. Any sense of ease was short-lived and fleeting when she saw the obvious discomfort that both Nipa and Kate endured. Overcome for a moment, she made as rapid an exit as dignity and a dodgy hip would allow, and rested against the corridor wall with a hand over her face. "There has to be another way."

All the while Nipa lay in the bed. Each second took a painful eternity to tick past. Her gums itched. Anything that could ache did. Organs that were previously quite content to remain inconspicuous roared with a hundred different complaints like a mob of hyperactive and violent grandchildren and refused to calm down. But worst of all was the whispering in her ear; a constant, insidious hiss of white

noise that periodically formed itself into coherent words. In her fever, she was aware of something else bonding itself to her beyond the succession of guests and employers that came and went with the hours. In her mind's eye Nipa saw something vast, blind, and incalculably ancient. She could only perceive it dimly, and could not make out its form. All she knew for sure was that it had teeth; thousands of them, in every shape and size conceivable.

As Nipa gritted her teeth, she felt her canines lengthen and her incisors grow sharp. Her gums shrugged up a premolar to replace the one she had lost years ago. All the while, hunger whispered its beguiling half-words to her.

* * * *

"General Colworth's office."

Sinclair didn't recognize the voice on the other end of the telephone. Just another in a long string of faceless officers that served as secretaries to the senior ranks. He girded himself.

"This is Captain Sinclair. Get me the general."

"I'm afraid the general's busy, Sir."

"So am I, son. Just get him."

"I'm sorry, Sir. The general is actually busy. If I could take a message...?"

"Listen, Kid, we've got an army of slurps set to swarm over Fort Laurie." Sinclair paused, sighed, and decided he hadn't the time to waste on the general's aide. "Fine. You go in there right now and say the Fox said the fence is down. Okay? You damn well go in there right this instant and tell him those

exact words. I'll stay on the line and if you even think of hanging up on me there will be Hell to pay. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Sir." Another pause. "I don't think he'll be happy to be interrupted, Sir."

"You're damn right he won't; but do it, and he can take it up with me. You are not in trouble, Lieutenant...?"

"Wright, Sir."

"Lieutenant Wright, but if you don't do as I say right now, *you will be.*"

Lieutenant Wright set the receiver down on the desk, wondered what he did to deserve all this. He heard the heavy thudding march of *Louis' Mortarmen* from within. Long experience as Colworth's *aide-de-camp* had taught him to gauge his commanding officer's moods from whatever was playing on the gramophone. *Colonel Balls* meant the general felt nostalgic for his days on the front. *Louis' Mortarmen*, on the other hand, was played when more than one regiment displayed their counter-marching skills. He played that record when he heard news of deaths, or expected such news to come. The piece was in its first movement so the general had probably only had one whisky by then.

He knocked at General Colworth's door as loudly as tact would allow.

"Come," ordered a grizzled and gravelly voice.

Wright marched in, inadvertently matching time with the music. He saluted. "I've Captain Sinclair on the line for you, Sir."

Colworth turned to face his secretary. He raised his bushy eyebrows. "Ah," he simply replied. "Not Major Jayce, then?"

"Captain Sinclair, Sir."

"I see."

"He told me to tell you something about 'the Fox saying the fence is down', Sir."

An icy silence descended upon the darkened office; the sort of oppressive quiet that drowned out the bold, aggressive swell of music. Colworth dropped his whisky glass. It fell onto the rug, spilling its dregs, but in brazen violation of every law of drama, failed to shatter.

"Sir?"

"Hm?"

"Is this important? It, well, *sounded* important."

"Yes. Yes." Colworth seemed suddenly more animated, more alert. "I'll take the call at your desk. Never liked taking calls at my desk. Get me another whisky, will you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And one for yourself. I rather think you'll need it."

"Yes, Sir."

Colworth limped over to Lieutenant Wright's desk and picked up the idle receiver. "Colworth here, Sinclair. It's time already, is it?"

"I'm afraid so, Sir," replied Captain Sinclair.

"Are you basing this on anything in particular?"

"Instinct. Major Jayce and I both agree on it. Common sense, general."

"Then that's good enough for me. What's Dane's status?"

"Still incapacitated, Sir."

"Then as of now I'm placing you in charge of the fort and surrounding area. Anyone gives you any grief, you tell them to take it up with me. What do you need?"

Captain Sinclair's tone at once became more businesslike. "Everything. Field guns, machine guns, ammo, and at least three more companies. Problem is getting them over here in time. Ain't gonna happen, Sir."

"You leave that to me, Sinclair."

"Greatest respect, Sir, but no. With the fuel shortage and everything it's gonna take too long. All I can ask is that you get as many men over here as quickly as you can, so even if you can't save our asses you can stop 'em from getting any further in. You've already put me in charge of the situation and that's gonna have to be enough."

"I see. Anything else, Sinclair? Anything I can actually do?"

"Choppers, Sir."

"I thought you had some."

"Wrong sort, Sir, and I'm using them to evac the wounded. I'm going to need gunships."

"I'll see what I can do, Sinclair. Gods know the engineers have been making every excuse they can to keep them on the ground."

Sinclair tried not to sigh. "Thank you, Sir."

"Any news on Dane?"

"Still alive, Sir. I think he'll make it, if we can get him out of this."

Colworth breathed a sigh of relief. "That's something, at least. Good. Right, then. If anything else occurs, Sinclair, be sure to tell me."

Mother Damnation [The Blessed and the Damned I]
by Janrae Frank, Phil Smith

"Yes, Sir."

"And good luck. I've a feeling this is going to be a rough one."

CHAPTER EIGHT

By now, Fort Laurie bristled with guns and artillery. Anything that could fire a projectile had been requisitioned, and anyone with even the most basic firearms training found him or herself armed, drilled, and assigned to the defense of the hospital.

During this time, Captain Sinclair saw less of his old platoon. While he saw to the deployment of the company as a whole, a new subaltern was transferred to his unit and given command of the platoon. First Lieutenant Stuart was a northerner; a textbook example of the new wave of officers that Gretham Academy turned out. With his sandy buzz-cut and scrubby mustache, he gave the impression that the words PROPERTY OF THE LOUISTRANAN ARMY were stamped on his soul. Gruff, hard-featured, and harsh-voiced, Stuart showed no sign of the refinement or privilege that characterized officers of the old school.

"PLATOON ... 'SHUN!"

Three dozen pairs of army boots struck the ground in unison the instant Ramsden gave the order. Though Sinclair had developed a rapport with the platoon over the years, the enlisted men knew that they had no such connection with their new officer. They could expect no favors, no fiddles.

Stuart strode in to confront the troops, who all stood ramrod-straight; eager and alert. He walked back and forth in front of the platoon, eyeing each of them closely. Many of the men were in their mid-thirties, matching and in some cases

exceeding his own age. "Fuckin' brilliant. I've got a load of old-timers," he muttered under his breath. "All right, lads, at ease."

Again, thirty-six boots hit the ground in unison as the soldiers stood at ease.

"Right! For those of you that don't know, I am Lieutenant Stuart. I can see we're all old hands at the army game here, so we might as well know where we all stand. I'm no' some rupert who's so fresh out of Gretham that his balls havenae dropped. I've been at this for fifteen years, so if you've any thoughts o' pullin' a fast one, you'd better damn well make sure yer tricks are good!

"Captain Sinclair tells me you're the best platoon he's served with, but don't think that'll earn you any brownie points wi' me. I am my own man and I will make my mind up when I've seen you in action. *Is that understood?*"

"Yes, Sir!" chorused the platoon.

"As luck would have it, you'll have the chance to prove yerselves within the next day. Captain Sinclair reckons the slurps will be comin' *here*. Since you clever boys went and blew Lareine up, they've decided to throw another party at Fort Laurie and they're invitin' all their mates. You thought you were a war last time, lads, you ain't seen nothin' yet. But it's a different kind o' fightin'. This ain't one o' the Fox's raids. There's none o' that guerrilla warfare, none o' that small strike team bollocks. We have been given a position to defend. Machine guns, mortars, sandbags, and foxholes. Some of you may not have done this in a long time. That changes *now*. We have to strengthen the western perimeter.

This normally takes days; we have *hours*. Now, I want half of yez to fill up a shitload of sandbags and set up machine gun nests with overlapping fields of fire. The rest of yez will get prepare positions for the artillery as shown on the maps that Sergeant Ramsden will give you now." Lieutenant Stuart checked his watch. "I have a meeting with the other officers. When I get back I expect to see every man workin' his bollocks off. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Fall out and get your maps and digging tools! D'you think we're on fuckin' 'oliday or something?" bellowed Ramsden as Stuart strutted off.

* * * *

Noawhane kept to the forests, leaping and swinging through the branches, concealing herself in the dense green canopy. Wherever tracts of housing interrupted her arboreal path, she jumped from one roof to another, driven by newfound instinct to stay as high as she could. Eventually that course failed her as well; the trees grew sparse and acres separated each house, leaving her with no choice but to stay on the ground.

This drove her to earth. She sprinted across deserted land; where once there were farms, now only abandoned and gutted shells remained; the fields grown into a sea of wild grasses, broken here and there by overgrown and tangled hedgerows shifting vaguely in the brisk morning breeze. Noawhane stayed low, slipping through the tall grass like a wild cat, her movements hidden by the dense undergrowth.

She reached another wood and took once more to the trees, bounding from tree to tree. She was in her element; as fast as a cheetah, traveling a path untouched by most predators. She had no fear; none could catch her or outdistance her.

She ran like a thing possessed, driven by obsession. She had to be reunited with her mate, Brode. She called him her husband, although both their races forbade mixed marriages.

Something other than sentiment steered her thoughts too. She dreamed of blood: dark, rich, vital blood, drawn hot and steaming from the artery, or even straight from the heart. She slept with the hot iron scent in her nostrils, and could smell it on the wind. She hunted her food as she went, but no beast or bird was able to sate this all-consuming hunger. The one time she saw a human, alone, maddened and desperate, she knew that his veins held nothing of interest to her. The previous night she had stumbled on an Ylesgaire or 'tick' as Brode insisted on calling them. She had caught him and ripped him open only to find his blood as appetizing as stagnant water and half as satisfying. She needed something larger, more energetic; something of immense strength whose blood was thick with power. Each night the hunger whispered in her ear, tantalizing her with hints of the stuff she craved. Images from some untapped well of memory rose in her imagination, and the hunger gave her a name by which to know them: Demons.

As the ground turned marshy and damp, Noawhane knew that she was nearing her goal. She plunged fearlessly through the tidal pools of sawgrass and water lily tangles; darted through the shadows of the huge cypress trees with their

dangling gray-green shawls of moss. Climbing the bole of one of these brutes, she resumed her treetop journey.

Noawhane smelled woodsmoke by mid-afternoon of her second day away from Dwight Greene; a familiar pungent odor that at once reminded her of her home and hearth.

"Brode," she murmured eagerly.

The wind shifted and she was aware of a second smell that seemed to her as familiar as Brode himself, perhaps more so. At once, hunger put a name to that scent, hissing it in her mind's ear. Demons.

A predatory grin crept across her face as she prepared herself to feed. A gunshot snapped her out of her daydream, scaring the birds from the trees. A second shot followed, and a third. She recognized the sound of Brode's gun. Something was wrong.

Noawhane exploded with rage; her black hair standing on end as if a static charge had gathered on her body. Her muscles bunched like compression springs, Noawhane leaped from her vantage point and made for her home, as swift as a cougar.

* * * *

Though he was loath to admit it, Captain Aristotle Sinclair was nervous. His sudden, almost meteoric rise through the ranks did not worry him; he had effectively been a captain for years, even if no-one had thought to give him his bars. Suddenly having command of the entire fort, though surprising, failed to shock him either. Major Jayce often sought his counsel. What worried him was that he had made

a gamble: he expected the vampires' counter-attack to arrive at Fort Laurie rather than one of the less defended fortresses; that, so incensed by the audacity of the raid on the Château Lareine, they would try to make an example of their mortal enemies.

He had burned his way through four cigars and killed a quarter of a bottle of Old Uncle Mort just thinking about what would happen if he had misjudged this crucial detail. By the time the other officers arrived, his office reeked of liquor and acrid smoke. He had opened his window only as an afterthought, but the fan remained switched off. Once he had alerted the fort, all personnel were ordered to conserve power where possible.

Sinclair greeted a dozen officers as they arrived. Some were already under his direct command, Lieutenants Stuart and Tidwell, for example, but some matched his rank or even, in the case of Major Parry, outranked him. Yet, they all looked at him as if he were the senior officer. He spent a lot of time reading people and he saw respect: though he might not be the Fox, he was the Fox's chosen man. In an idle moment he realized that he could get used to this.

"Okay, guys, gather round." He called the officers' attention to a map of the area that he had unrolled onto his large mahogany desk. "Let's cut to the chase. Tidwell: any news on the relief column?"

"No joy, Sir," replied Lieutenant Tidwell ruefully. He adjusted his round-framed spectacles and squinted for a moment. "Fort Necessity gave me some rubbish about a fuel

shortage, so they say they can't get the lorries over here in time."

Sinclair grimaced. "Did you speak to Colonel Packard?"

"Aye. He had a few words to say about us, Sir," said Tidwell. "Nothin' I'd care to repeat, mind."

"Sounds about right," sneered Lieutenant Stuart.

Captain Sinclair raised his eyebrows. "Lieutenant?"

"Dinnae like to speak ill of a senior officer, Sir."

"Off the record, then. We've a fifty-fifty chance of survival as it is. May as well clear the air." Sinclair coughed on a stray wisp of smoke.

"Just between everyone here, then. He's an officious wee git who wouldnae take a piss wi'out a chitty."

An appreciative chuckle of agreement rippled through the office.

Sinclair waved a hand to restore quiet to the office. "Yeah, well, thanks to him we're now up Shit's Creek." The other officers sobered considerably. "We're under-equipped and undermanned. Once those machine guns run out, I'm not sure how much longer we've got. We certainly don't have the resources to defend the hospital *and* Riverside. Fact is, I'm not sure if we've got enough to defend either. If my sources are right, they're going try and overwhelm us by sheer force of numbers. We can expect thousands of ticks, boys. Thousands of 'em."

Major Parry regarded Sinclair, deadpan. "We're going to evacuate Riverside, then?"

"And the hospital. I want every non-combatant as far away from here as possible. Packard wants to drag his heels over

getting us the stores and reinforcements he needs, he can deal with the civvies and the wounded, right?"

Another murmur of agreement.

"We'll hand over most of the overseeing duties to the doctors and nurses. A lot of them have done OD duty. Thank the Gods for military hospitals. Captain Letts, I need you to oversee that."

"Sure thing. You realize that'll leave you without any transport?"

"I know. Just get everyone out."

Letts saluted and headed out at once. Sinclair turned to regard Lieutenant Stuart.

"What about my boys, Stuart?"

"My boys now, Sir," corrected Stuart as tactfully as he could.

"Yeah. Well?"

"Got 'em shorin' up the west side, Sir. Machine-gun nests with overlapping lines o' fire. Anything that gets past 'em does so in more'n one piece."

"It'll have to do. What's our ammo situation?"

"No' good. Four belts per gun. I've got three squaddies on each gun, just to keep the defense up while they reload. Best I could do, Sir."

"Fine. You've got good boys there, Stuart. Try'n keep 'em alive."

"Yes, Sir."

Sinclair looked to Major Parry. "Any news on artillery support?"

Parry shrugged his broad shoulders, and looked down at the map. "My men and some of Stuart's unit are shifting the guns now. They'll be in position when you need them. Again, though, we've got plenty of guns; just not too much in the way of munitions. I've put out a requisition for more, but..."

"Packard?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Parry with a rueful nod.

"And I can't spare anyone to get over there and wake him the Hell up." An uncomfortable silence descended upon the officers, broken only when Sinclair cleared his throat. "Well, we're just gonna have to tough this one out. Tidwell, you get in touch with Necessity again and make sure you've got RSM Talham with you. Don't bother with Packard again; we're going over, well, under his head. I might be new to this rank, but if I know anything, it's that the sergeant majors run the outfits. I want you and Mister Talham to get in touch with the RSM over there. Make sure he knows what's going on, what we need and tell 'em this is all done on the Fox's authority. We'll cut Packard out of the picture as much as possible, bypass him completely. Even if we can't get men from him, we need those stores." He noticed an apprehensive look on Tidwell's face. "Just say 'Yes, Sir' and mention my name if you have to.

"Yessir. Won't Colonel Packard be angry about this? Chain of command and that."

Sinclair sighed as he saw this look of apprehension spread across the faces of the other officers present. "Yes, Tidwell, he'll be furious. It's a flagrant violation of protocol but our asses are on the line here and Packard's given me two good

reasons to view him as no longer relevant. Don't bother worrying about his feelings. As of now Fort Laurie no longer gives a good godsdamn about Colonel Heywood Packard."

* * * *

For all the ribbing he gave Burke for being the platoon's 'sprog', and all the dark words muttered behind his back about his over-keenness, Gobber Jenkins was glad to have the kid on his team. Burke worked hard, fetching, and carrying sandbags, toiling away like a soldier with twice his experience. Before Burke signed up he had worked as a hod-carrier, and that had given him the muscles he needed for the job.

Gobber spat out a wad of chewed tobacco, and continued digging. His team-mate Napper Mackay had suggested singing a song to keep their spirits up, but neither could agree on a tune. That hardly mattered, since Sergeant Ramsden insisted on singing his favorite song. It didn't have much of a tune, the lyrics were hardly clever or inspiring, but at least they were easy to remember:

"SHUDDUP AND KEEP DIGGING!"

All the soldiers had their work cut out for them. With every drop of fuel requisitioned for the evacuation, they had to rely on their own efforts to get the defensive fighting positions ready. There was no chance of using mechanical excavators, and the Engineering Corps were stationed in Fort Necessity. The squaddies had only their digging tools at their disposal.

Gobber and Napper dug a three-man fighting-pit, with a firing platform. Mounds of earth and sandbags provided

frontal cover. As far as defensive positions went, it was nothing special. Burke, on seeing his squadmates' handiwork, looked incredulous.

"We've not all gotta fit in there, have we?"

Gobber cut himself another quid. "Y'know the old joke, Sprog. If y'know of a better 'ole:" He stuck the plug of tobacco in his mouth, letting Mackay finish the quotation.

"Go to it."

Their break was all too short; much still needed doing. As one of the platoon's machine-gunners, Gobber oversaw the assembly and installation of the position's gun. His team had been issued one of the heavy machine guns: a big fifteen-millimeter 'slurp-slicer'. It was a bipod-mounted, belt-fed monster of a weapon, almost large enough to qualify as an automatic cannon, Gobber Jenkins eyed the gun with something approaching lust.

"Beats my LSW hands down, I tell y'," he drooled. "Y'seen the size of the rounds this bastard chucks out? I've wanted t'be behind one o' these f' *yonks*."

"Wouldn't want to be in front of it," observed Napper.

"Yeh," chuckled Jenkins, positioning himself behind the weapon. "Bdddddddr. Bdddddddr!"

"GOBBER JENKINS, STOP ARSING ABOUT AND GET ON WITH YOUR WORK! I CAN SEE WHAT YOU'RE DOING!"

"Sorry, Sarge." He looked at his comrades, fondling the gun in a way that, were any of the men familiar with the term 'ballistophile', would consider it a gross understatement of Jenkins' feelings for his new weapon. "What're we gonna call her?"

* * * *

It was only with the greatest of reluctance and under protest that Kate Sinclair evacuated her house on Riverside. She had initially refused: her family, under one name or another, had held the land here for generations, and she had convinced herself that her coven would be able to do something on the psychic plane to help turn back the invasion. Captain Letts' attempts to persuade her otherwise were doomed to failure: each of his arguments dashed itself to pieces against her resolve like ships against an iceberg. In danger of losing his cool, Letts considered trying to clear Kate and her people out by force, but one look at her steely blue eyes was all he needed to know that none of his men would dare. Even someone as stolid as him knew of her reputation: she was rumored to be a witch. If he tried to oppose her will in this matter, he would lose. He might be scared away, suffer a fainting fit or, more likely, find him and his men on their way back to Fort Laurie, having suddenly given up on the idea of moving her out.

Letts resorted to the sneakiest trick of his career. If he could not talk the matriarch into evacuating with everyone else, perhaps her cousin Aristotle might.

"Letts to House One, Letts to House One: how do you read me, over?"

"House One here. What's up, Letts?"

"We have some civilians reluctant to evac, Sir."

"So? Shove 'em on the trucks. Don't bother me."

"It's a Ms.—"

"Miss," interrupted Kate, icily.

"Miss Kate Sinclair."

Captain Sinclair sighed loud enough to be heard on Letts' radio. "Why am I not surprised? Okay, Letts, I'll handle it. Pass me over."

"Hello, Aristotle," said Kate with diminishing patience.

"Just do as he says, will you, Kate? I haven't the time for this."

"I think you know the answer to that well enough, Aristotle Sinclair. And even if you don't, you know *me* well enough. We're staying put. We've business here, and even then we need to watch over Nipa."

"Nipa? What's up with Nipa?"

Kate paused, unsure of how she should break her news to her cousin. "She's ... still unwell. And it isn't some little something."

"We've got a convoy of ambulances going out. Can't you put her on one of them? The medics at Delta can take care of her."

"No, they can't. They really can't."

"Kate, don't be awkward. I'm not in the mood."

"Awkward, nothing. Nipa's ... Nipa's not well, but she'll recover and this isn't anything the Medical Corps can cope with. This ... look, this is a job for me and the girls. Do you understand?"

Captain Sinclair considered his words as carefully as his cousin chose hers. "You and the girls?"

Kate was resolute. "That's what I said."

"Right. Can she be moved, and can you do this at Camp Delta? Riverside ain't safe. Regardless of how many men I have, I can't keep the house covered."

"We can look after ourselves, Aristotle."

"While you're looking after Nipa?"

A lengthy pause, from Kate this time. "If we have to."

Long hours of poker against the likes of Trence and Dane had sharpened Captain Sinclair's perception. "There's more to it than that."

"Oh, *really*."

"Yeah. I reckon this ain't about you and the girls being able to look after yourselves any more than it's about Nipa."

"Aristotle Sinclair, are you accusing me of lying?"

"No, for what it's worth I think you've told me as much of the truth as you're prepared to do, but none of it's the real reason you're so hell-bent on staying behind. I know you, Kate, remember? This is about principle."

Kate fell quiet.

"This is about you wanting to hold the line like everyone else before you, and you're coming up with any excuse you can think of to justify doing it."

"And?"

"And it ain't gonna work this time, Kate. And here's why. This has nothing to do with the stuff you tell me not to ask you about. This is about mud, shrapnel, guns, and a *metric shitload of slurps*."

"Aristotle Sinclair!"

"Sorry. But that's how it is. And that's my duty. If you're so damn concerned on doing yours, here's how it works. I

need someone else to help manage this evac, 'cause gods help us if Captain Letts comes across someone else like you. I need someone to protect your community by getting it the Hell out of the line of fire. And more to the point I need you to look after Mom in case I don't make it. *Do we understand each other?*"

Kate scowled, finding her pride harder to swallow than ever. "All right. Fine. Have it your way. I'll get them out."

Captain Sinclair's relief was tangible. "Thanks, Kate."

"But do me a favor while I'm doing you one?"

"Always. What do you want?"

"Just ... just stay quiet about Nipa, all right?"

"What's up with her?"

"It's a surprise."

* * * *

As soon as watching posts caught sight of artillery on the other side of the river the town was placed on alert. The people of Riverside, long accustomed to war and the threat of invasion, were spurred into action, and were ready to leave almost as soon as the warning came across. Hardly anyone needed to be ordered to evacuate.

Instructions about evacuation were quite simple: there was a shortage of vehicles and fuel, so passenger space was at a premium. Each evacuee was permitted to have one suitcase for their belongings. They were permitted to take nothing else with them save their identity papers and any vital medical supplies. Each vehicle was commandeered by the army, and all available seats were reserved for the use of

evacuees. Evacuation groups and vehicle placements had already been assigned months in advance.

As the hours passed a column of cars, vans and trucks flowed steadily from Riverside to Fort Laurie like a tributary of Old Muddy. There, each evacuee was identified, logged and redirected further inland to Camp Delta, a Displaced Persons camp that had been set up for his kind of emergency. After pausing at Fort Laurie, the convoy's ranks swelled with the addition of non-combatant personnel and wounded.

The exodus from Fort Laurie took up every roadworthy vehicle Captain Letts could find. He requisitioned every ambulance, truck, and helicopter in the compound and prayed that it would be enough. The most difficult part of the job involved consulting the medical personnel and determining which patients could be moved. Those with the most critical injuries were earmarked for transport by helicopter; others had to travel by ambulance, truck, jeep, or sidecar, depending on the severity of their injuries, and even then there were simply too few vehicles to move everyone in one journey. The chopper pilots had to perform multiple trips, taking new passengers each time they touched down at the fort's helipad.

The fort was a constant blur of activity; between the evacuation and the reinforcement of defenses, there was not a single soldier that was not otherwise occupied; everyone was on a tight schedule, expecting the slurps to strike at any moment. As the hours shot by, attention spans and tempers frayed. The occasional breakdown in communications occurred. Mistakes were made. The nurse detailed to clear

Major Dane Jayce's ward and convey the patients to the next ambulance out miscalculated the number of stretchers and corpsmen needed, and as such Dane was left alone with Akee for a few crucial minutes.

Dane did not plan to lie idle. Grimacing, he propped himself up into a sitting position. Pain shot through his side and made him gasp; however much morphine the nurse had given him, it barely took the edge off of his discomfort. He tried to swing himself out of the bed, but gave up after a minute.

"Major-Saee! You no good to move! Doctor-Saee say stay in bed!" insisted Akee, trying to push him back down gently but forcefully.

"All these damn tubes stickin' out of me," wheezed Dane. "I look like a godsdamn boiler." He struggled again, but to no avail.

"Doctor-Saee say stay in bed!" insisted Akee, pushing him back down.

"Screw the ... screw the doctor! I've got work to do."

"Akee tell Mrs. Major Dane-Masaee."

Dane coughed up a contemptuous laugh. "Tell her then."

Akee frowned, paused, and dipped into the wellspring of cunning that had endeared her to the platoon in general and Dane in particular. "Akee tell Duchess-Masaee."

Inasmuch as it was possible in his condition, Dane blanched. "You wouldn't." He fell back onto his bed. "Godsdammit, you would too," he sighed. "Damn women. They think they know everything."

Akee crossed her arms and gave the major a reproachful look. She remained that way, willful and implacable until the orderlies returned for them and they were both well on their way to Camp Delta.

* * * *

Captain Sinclair had his own preparations to make. Though he was acting commanding officer of the entire Fort and surrounding area, he was a soldier at heart and, like Jayce, was damned if he was going to let his rank keep him away from the action. Once the other officers had filed out of his office, he set his machine-pistol on the desk, stashed the last of his booze away in a desk drawer, and started dismantling and cleaning the weapon. He felt a chill descend upon him; a sense of time slowing as the adrenaline hit. He was all too familiar with the feeling. In his long years of service he had lost count of the number of firefights in which he'd been involved, and experience had honed his instincts to such an extent that he knew in his bones that the next battle in the wall would fall here.

Being in the right was scant consolation, but at least it was better than being in the wrong.

He regarded the pieces arranged before him. "Four clips and one firing pin," he muttered. "Wouldn't send my grandmother out like that,"

"I quite agree."

Instinctively Sinclair reached for his holster, forgetting for a moment that his gun lay dismantled in front of him. A split

second later he reached for the hold-out pistol he kept at the back of his waist-band.

The new arrival, a dapper man in a three-piece suit, chuckled. He appeared deceptively young; the sort of youth one acquired by religiously avoiding any vices or labor that might accelerate the process of aging. "Oh, there's no need for that, Captain," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. He spoke with a refined accent: a northerner, perhaps, or maybe a refugee from Yurpa; one of the lucky people who got out before Bellocar flattened the place.

"Who the Hell are you?"

Zälek smiled. "A friend."

"Whose friend?"

Zälek leaned on the opposite end of the desk. "That is a very good question. Would it put you at your ease if I said I was *your* friend?"

"Take a wild guess." growled Sinclair.

"I thought not. Still, I'm here on business that'll work to our mutual benefit."

"And if I believe that, I'll believe anything. You still haven't told me who you are and why I shouldn't have my men throw you out."

Zälek sighed theatrically. "Really, names are such a tiresome encumbrance. Are you going to insist?" He looked back to Sinclair, and found himself staring down the barrel of a pistol. Sinclair's face was as grim and resolute as a statue. There was no doubt in either man's mind that Sinclair would pull the trigger if push came to shove. "I see you are. Well, if it means that much to you, you may call me Zälek."

"I've heard the name."

"It pays to advertise."

"Word is you're a scheming, manipulative bastard who can't be trusted."

"Like I said, it pays to advertise."

Sinclair scowled. "You see me laughing?"

Zälek chuckled. "Do you see me joking?"

"What the Hell do you want?"

"Oh, many things. But as far as you're concerned I want to help. I want to do business. I want to sell."

"What makes you think I'm buying?"

"Because right now you haven't much of a choice. No-one else can supply you, and precious few want to. Now, what do *you* want, Captain—or may I call you Aristotle?"

Sinclair's sour expression informed Zälek that he mayn't. The captain felt a handful of whiskeys in his belly encouraging him to rearrange 'his visitor's features into something less infuriatingly smug. In his younger days he might have followed their advice and cleaned his clock there and then, but he had long since learned to keep his fists under control. He paused to think. This line of business was more Dane's forte than his and he knew it. He suspected Zälek knew it as well. Alarm bells rang. "What's the catch, Zälek?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"You ain't answered mine. You first."

Zälek stifled a sigh, and thought it best to play along with Sinclair's game. He made a show of appearing ever so slightly worried by the gun that still pointed at him. "The catch, Captain?"

"The catch."

"The catch, Captain, is that there is always a catch."

"I don't like the sound of that."

Zälek shrugged. "Why break the habit of a lifetime? Well, I shan't insist on an answer from you: you've already told me what I want to know."

"Get to the point, Zälek. I haven't the time for your damn fool games right now. In case you hadn't noticed, we're gonna be up to our armpits in slurps come sun-down."

Zälek's smile widened. "The problem is right in front of you. What we have here is a machine pistol, yes? The perfect metaphor. It's a lethal *military* machine. Aim it at the enemy, and assuming the person holding it is a good shot, almost any target will go down. But you have only four clips: one hundred and twenty-eight bullets. Sorry. One hundred and twenty-eight *rounds*. I know how you military types get about your nomenclature. Still, ammunition goes very quickly indeed and once it's gone, it's gone. What's the use of the gun then? You might as well not have it at all. Your problem, Captain, is that you're under-equipped."

"Have you just come here to gloat, or are you up to something?"

Zälek snorted. "I'm always up to something. Right now, what I'm up to could see your company armed properly. I'm not going to guarantee victory over these vampires that you've got so annoyed, but you'd at least have a fighting chance."

"What makes you think we need—or want—your help?" Sinclair folded his arms, feeling his patience erode rapidly.

"Such pugnacity! But you know as well as I do that one can't win a firefight with attitude alone. Captain, I know how much ammunition you have and it is *nowhere near enough*. But if you call your quartermaster right now and ask him about your reserves, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"What are you up to?"

Zälek merely smiled and nodded in the direction of the telephone. Grimacing, Captain Sinclair lifted the receiver and dialed the stores. "Sinclair here. What's our situation with regards to ammunition? Yes, soldier, I know I asked you that three hours ago. Yes, I *know* what's on the form, Corporal. I'm asking you to go down and look again." He paused. "Corporal, don't think I'm not damn well giving you an order. Just look and tell me."

A few moments later, Zälek heard an excited chatter on the other end of the phone. He cocked his head to one side and grinned. "Anything new?"

"Look, Zälek, I don't know what your game is, but I haven't the time to play along..."

"Of course you don't! Furthermore, you don't trust me an inch, my voice and dress sense annoy you, you think I'm up to something and you've half a mind to blow my greasy head off, just to shut me up. Am I right?"

"What the Hell do you think?"

"What do I think? I think you'd appreciate a second good faith gesture." His voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone, suddenly deadly serious. "Would you like to know who attempted to kill Major Jayce?"

That struck home. Captain Sinclair composed himself before going further, speaking with all the icy calm of a poker player. "I've got my suspicions."

"And I've got your suspect: I caught him for you." Zälek waved a hand, and a wooden crate faded from non-existence into plain sight. Sinclair heard muffled complaints and banging from within.

"What the Hell is—"

Zälek had disappeared.

* * * *

Dejected and lonely, Brode had tried to keep himself busy, marking time until Noawhane's return, whenever that might be. Checking his snares, he found two dead muskrats and two dozen crawfish. Sighing, he passed two days in a bleak haze, worried sick about his wife who had still not come home. He tried to talk himself down by reminding himself that if anyone could make the trek from Fort Laurie back to the waystation safely on foot, it was his Noawhane. He hesitated to use the term 'unarmed', as Nabaren's teeth and claws meant they were never short of a sidearm, but times were getting tough and he would feel a lot less worried if she had a more substantial sidearm on her. The law against Nabaren bearing arms could go to Hell: things were different this far from civilization.

He hung his carbine from his shoulder as he started up the bank to the house, and was just passing the little jetty where he and Noawhane kept their boats tied, when he heard inhuman, croaking voices of the far side of the house.

"On'y one og dem. I know 'im. I get 'im dis time easy." remarked a deep, croaking voice.

"Ssssssilencce!" urged a higher, sibilant being. "Zis is wayssstationnn. Zere iss a reassson why zis one survivesssss."

"I no ssssee nussing," said a third voice, deeper than the second. "He dead already. We wasssste time."

Brode approached his house in a low crouch, set his bucket by one of the uprights, and unshouldered his carbine. He spotted four demons, all of reptilian aspect and, for want of a better word, native to his swamps. Three of them resembled pythons with arms and legs, seven feet tall and twenty feet long from tail to snout, while the third and largest looked like an upright gator. Brode knew this demon as a 'crocadevil': a huge and muscular figure covered with a thick hide that was practically bullet-proof. This one was an old enemy of his; last time they fought six years ago he managed to scare it off by shooting its eye out. Since then, the demons that infested his swamp had given his waystation a wide berth.

Now, it seemed, they had finally outgrown their fear of him.

Brode raised his carbine, but refrained from firing. He reckoned he could hit and kill one of the snake demons, but the rest would most likely scatter and attack him from all directions. Without his sub-machine gun, still locked away in his house, he did not have much of a chance. Even the snakes, officially called 'ophidires' but colloquially known as 'hissers', were stronger and faster than him, and their tails could easily constrict an unarmored man to death. Brode

adjusted his aim, looking at the scarred, one-eyed crocadevil. He took a deep breath and held it. He gambled on being able to scare the demons off if he could shoot the crocadevil's remaining eye out.

The opportunity for that shot did not come any time soon.

"Find ze human and ze Nabaren," rasped the hisser's leader. "We kill zem, desstroy ze sstation and hang zeir bodiessss from ze treessss."

The croc protested. "Why dun I get to eat 'em?"

The demon's leader refused to budge. "Hang zeir bodiesss from ze treesss. Make an example of zem. Zat's my ordersss." Its forked tongue darted out, tasting the air. At once its serpentine head whipped around, blood-red eyes flashing in Brode's direction. "Zere!"

Brode swore. They had his scent. Changing his tactic, he leveled his carbine at his attackers as they rushed towards him with murder on their minds. His gun roared once; twice, taking one of the hissers down in an instant, catching it in the belly and the chest. The ophidire splashed back into the swamp with its torso blown wide open. He gave a grunt of satisfaction, but quickly realized that kill was small potatoes when there was still the big gator to take out.

It charged with deceptive speed. Brode had a split-second in which to act, so he decided to attempt the eye-shot as planned. Forced to act quickly rather than precisely, Brode was surprised to squeeze in a couple of headshots on the ugly, thick-skinned fiend. Two shots barely scuffed the scales on its head, and its glittering yellow eye remained firmly intact and ensconced within its socket. Brode's carbine did

nothing to slow it down, and possessed only a fraction of the stopping power he needed.

Then they were on him. The crocadevil, hungry for revenge, swatted the carbine out of Brode's hands as easily as a cat might bat at a ball of paper. An agonizing instant later its long jaws snapped shut on his arm and shoulder, sinking crooked, dagger-like teeth into the tough muscle. Claws raked his chest, cutting short his scream of pain. Brode struggled and writhed beneath the bestial demon, kicking and thrashing in vain. His situation seemed hopeless.

A Nabaren's ululating war cry rang out. Brode recognized the voice at once.

* * * *

Edith slithered closer to man sleeping beside her, pressing her firm breasts against his back, slipping one arm across him to run her fingers through the hair on his broad chest.

"Looking for more, Edith?" his bass voice rumbled, as he stirred and captured her fingers to kiss them.

"Always, Rupert."

Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Davenport rolled over, covered her mouth with his own, and thrust his tongue between her lips. His hand descended to her breast, kneading it and flicking his thumb teasingly across her nipple while their tongues twined hungrily.

Edith moaned sensuously as his hands roamed her body.

Rupert opened her legs with his knee, pressed her backwards, and loomed above her with a leer.

A sudden thunder echoed through the house and Rupert's head lifted to listen, his cock bobbing between Edith's legs close to her clit. Tension threaded through him, shading his face in a fold of shadows.

"What's that?" Edith asked, trembling.

"They must be bombing the fort." Rupert listened to the explosions, considering, his mouth partly open. "We're out of range."

"The fort?" Edith went still, fear glazing her eyes. "Dane and Rand are down there."

"No. This house." Rupert shrugged it off, with an edge of cynicism as he thrust inside her. "If they hit the hospital, there go your husband problems."

Anger flowered in Edith's eyes. "Don't ever say that again, Rupert."

"Sorry."

"I mean it, Rupert Davenport. If you're going to be like that you can get the Hell out of my bed right now."

He paused, still inside her body. "Look, I'm sorry, all right? I'm just ... I'm just nervous, okay?"

"Shouldn't you go?"

"I'm not a field officer, Edith. What the hell can I do?" Frustrated more with her line of questioning than his own duties, he thrust hard into her.

"You've got to do something." Edith clutched at his shoulders, her nails digging into him as she started to writhe away from him, to disengage her body from his.

Rupert's face tightened, and he forced her hands open. "All right, all right! I will. I'll call HQ, and then get you and Jessy

out of the area. How's that?" He brought his knee up, pinning her beneath him.

"What about Rand and Dane?"

Rupert snapped. "I thought you didn't care about that fucking husband of yours!"

Edith paled at the anger in his face. "I care about you."

"Then be still. These next few minutes could be our last together."

Edith sucked in a series of long breaths and relaxed beneath him. Rupert finished quickly and pulled his flaccid member from her body. He snatched up his uniform and dressed hurriedly, still fuming.

"I'll use the phone in the hall; get my driver to take you to Ox Hollow in my staff car. You can stay with my mother there. It should be far enough from the fighting that you'll be safe. As for your son ... well, I can't do anything about him. I could try to rotate him out, but if he's anything like his father he'll just have himself rotated back or disobey me outright."

"Thank you." Edith slipped into her panties and bra, then walked to her closet and dragged out a pair of tight fitting jeans and a simple blouse.

Rupert stalked out in angry silence. Only when he had departed did Edith allow tears to run down her face.

CHAPTER NINE

Sinclair expected the slurps to attack as soon as conditions were dark enough for Ylesgaires to be deployed. They did not disappoint him. The attack came at nightfall with all the fury of a volcano. The place erupted as soon as the observation posts reported the presence of hostiles. Lesser bloods came in their tens of thousands, covering the land like ash. The charge was a disorderly affair; the multitude of vampires had simply been starved to the point of mania, aimed at the Fort, and unleashed. Unreasoning instinct did the rest; they followed their noses toward the heady aroma of blood, deaf to all but the hypnotic pulsing of hearts within. They came on screeching like harpies and the sight of them caused the Louistranan troops to blanch. Many had faced ticks before, but never in these numbers.

Even as fear took each soldier in its stony grip, they found it within themselves to stand and fight. Machine guns chattered, spewing lead among the lesser bloods. Soon assault rifles added their staccato patterns to the deadly rhythm. As the horde came within range, mortars began to thump like bass drums, throwing bombs into the vampires' midst. Smoke and shrapnel filled the air, choking the land.

Hundreds of bodies littered the ground, punctured and torn, ripped apart and butchered, but the gunfire hardly seemed to dent the vampires' numbers. There were simply too many of them, and they were too hungry and too crazed to even consider retreating. They reached the outer perimeter

within two minutes, pressing ahead through sheer force of numbers. There was no artistry or grace in the way they moved. They simply rushed forward and were either mown down or managed to slip through while the defenders reloaded.

* * * *

'Gobber' Jenkins and Napper crouched behind a wall of sandbags. Their gun was capable of chucking out a maximum of six hundred and fifty rounds per minute, and both soldiers were determined to keep their weapon's rate of fire as close to that figure as possible. They poured their fire into the masses of Ylesgaires, cutting a lethal swath through them. As the lesser bloods crawled closer, Gobber and Napper were joined by Private Burke, who guarded his fellows while they reloaded their machine gun. He fired in swift bursts, trying to take down as many ticks as he could, all the while urging his comrades to hurry up.

Burke had hardly dared to imagine a firefight that seemed as hopeless as this; if he shot one vampire there were another ten to take its place. He fought in semi-darkness, illuminated only by gun flashes. The air reeked of cordite, burning flesh and ruptured organs; the screeching of Ylesgaires and stuttering of rifles and machine guns drowned out all human voices.

"Bloody hurry up, will yer?" shouted Burke, trying to make himself heard above the din. "I don't know how many shots I've got left!"

"Keep your hair on!" Napper fumbled with another belt, feeding it into his hungry gun. Seconds later the slurp-slicer added its own voice to the chorus, firing in a wide arc that claimed another half-dozen lesser bloods.

Burke ducked down to change clips, peering over the sandbags to find his next targets. His nostrils flared. "What's that smell?"

"Who cares? Keep firing!"

Burke pinned a medal onto the nearest lesser blood: a 7.62mm-caliber medal, awarded posthumously to countless ticks since the war began. "I'm firing! I'm firing! But what is that—" He paused and looked down, noticing a rapidly growing puddle of coolant gathering beneath the machine gun. "You're leaking coolant! You're going to overheat!"

"Well, do something about it!" retorted Gobber, keeping the trigger depressed.

"Like what?"

"Anything!"

"What do I *do*, Napper?"

"*I don't fucking know, do I?* Cool it down! Use your canteen or something!"

Burke complied at once, hunkering down beside Napper. He lowered his rifle, reached for his belt, and quickly worked his water-bottle free. Unscrewing the cap, he emptied its contents over the machine gun's barrel. There was a loud hiss as steam rose from the barrel. All the while, Gobber continued to fire while Napper fed him ammunition. The gun cooled down for no more than a handful of seconds. Thinking

quickly, Burke helped himself to his comrade's water bottles and repeated the process.

"That's it. No good!"

"Use mine!" shouted Napper.

"Already have, Napper."

"Use Gobber's, then!"

"Done that too!"

"Aw, shit. Right. Get the medic. He'll have an ice pack or something. Get that and come back here!"

"I'm not leaving you two behind!"

"You'd better, Sprog. Got any other ideas?"

Burke paused for a second before sprinting away from the front, in search of Lieutenant Trence. A fresh volley from across the river distracted him for a moment: the slurps had started bombarding the place. His mind reeling with thoughts of explosives and shrapnel, Burke ran with greater desperation. "MEDIC! MEDIC!"

The reality was far worse than he expected. A yellow-brown cloud of noxious vapor rolled towards the perimeter, extending caustic tendrils toward everyone in its path.

"GAS!"

* * * *

A short distance away, privates Proctor and Rickett had problems of their own. They had heard the cry of alarm go up a few seconds before, and their mortar team bore the brunt of the assault. They had had a hellish time of it; under Corporal Howard's direction they had been firing mortar bombs into the advancing lesser bloods, while Doyle and Peck

kept the ticks at bay with their light support weapon. The racket had driven both of them half-deaf, and increasingly desperate fighting against the slurps had started to fray their nerves. The encroaching cloud of gas was the final straw. Howard was about to call for his fire team to withdraw, when two Ylesgaires pounced and tore Doyle and Peck apart in a couple of heartbeats. By the time they had fought them off, the gas had rolled over Corporal Howard, ruining his complexion far worse than the acne that had dogged him into his thirties ever could.

Terrified beyond their wits, Proctor and Rickett masked up in seconds flat and recovered their ailing NCO, half-carrying, half-dragging him away from the front. Though they were barely a few hundred yards away from the fort, it was uphill all the way, on treacherous, muddy ground and with a heavy burden.

Corporal Howard's groans unnerved the men far more than the blood-thirsty shrieks of the lesser bloods. They were all experienced soldiers; each had, they hoped, got used to the idea of living on borrowed time. The prospect of violent death, while terrifying in its own way, had nothing on the sight of their section leader slowly and painfully losing his grip on life. They withdrew slowly, trying to keep away from the coils of gas that spiraled lazily over the battlefield. Any attempt to reach higher ground failed, condemning them to several attempts to sneak around or fight through bands of lesser bloods that roamed through the deadly vapors, the chemicals failing even to blister their inhuman hides.

"This ain't gonna work, Rickett," moaned Proctor as the pair prepared to lift their corporal up again.

"Shut up."

"I mean it, Rickett." Proctor's face was a picture of despair. "I can't breathe. I musta breathed summa that gas. I can't breathe, Rickett!"

"I said shut up! Lift on three: one, *two*..." Rickett paused and glared at his team-mate, his eyes gleaming madly. "*What the bloody Hell's up with you?*"

"'s no good, Rickett. I've had it."

"No you haven't. Now lift!" The soldiers struggled to bear their leader aloft and tried once again to ascend, their boots slipping in the mud.

"It ain't gonna *work*, Rickett!"

"I said shut up! If we don't get the Corp to the sick bay, he's gonna die."

"We're all gonna die, Rickett!"

Rickett sighed, his emaciated face hardening still further. "You die all you want. You wanna die, Proc? You go ahead. But I'm not going to, and neither's the Corp. Now come on!"

Proctor obeyed mutely and followed his friend around the Fort's perimeter. All the while, explosions showered the area with shrapnel and filth. Rickett recoiled as a splash of mud caught him in the eyes. Scraping muck from his face, he staggered and dropped Howard.

This alarmed Proctor. "Rickett?" He dropped the corporal now and rushed over to his colleague. "Oh, shit. Rickett? What's up?"

"Can't see. Can't see a fuckin' thing!" complained Rickett, fumbling for his flask. "Gotta wash my eyes out."

"Hang on. I've got it." All thoughts of his own plight forgotten, Proctor grabbed Rickett's flask, yanked his head back, and poured the contents of the flask into his teammate's eyes, trying to rinse the mud out of them. "Any better?"

"I dunno. Still can't see."

"Oh, *shit*. What're we gonna do, Rickett? What're we gonna *do*?"

"I dunno. Stop panicking, will yer?" Proctor paused and took a deep breath. "I can hardly see, so you're gonna have to go in front. I'll take the Corp's legs. You just keep us away from the gas; see if we can hook up with some friendlies."

"I dunno if I can do this, Rickett."

"You're gonna have to, mate."

"All right." Proctor sighed, and bent down to retrieve Corporal Howard, who gasped and groaned as his comrades struggled to lift him up. The trio continued their trudge through the mud and the noise, growing more desperate with every step. Proctor grew numb with fear, all feeling in his tired and bruised limbs fading as he fought to lead the party out of the way of the gas while remaining watchful for others. They plunged through that mustard-and-cordite-scented Hell for what seemed like days without getting any closer to Fort Laurie. The concrete edifice loomed above them like a titan, mocking them with its presence. Safety of sorts waited behind its thick walls, but while they failed to reach its gates their situation looked hopeless.

Proctor and Rickett followed this course like men possessed, bearing their burden without a thought of relinquishing it. In their mutual desperation, the recumbent form of Corporal Howard was a religious icon; something on which their last few hopes could be pinned. Everything would be all right if they could get the Corp to the sick bay. If they managed to get Corporal Howard into the base, they wouldn't have to fight any more today. If Corporal Howard stayed alive, they stayed alive.

They persevered, even though survival looked more doubtful with every passing second. The jaws of the enemy closed in towards them. From one side came the gas, billowing and drifting like a plague of hungry locusts. From another came the Ylesgaires, feeding on the battlefield's fallen and harrying the survivors. These forces drove them towards the impenetrable barrier of Fort Laurie; a mere fifty feet of steep, slippery mud and jagged metal that laid between them and a moment's safety.

It was only a matter of time before hope, that one cruel and fickle force that motivated humans when all else failed, began to desert the soldiers.

"This ain't gonna work, Proctor."

* * * *

Incensed beyond anger, Noawhane burst into the open, her mind and body burning in the throes of frenzy. Everything she heard, saw and smelled served only to heighten her rage: the sight of Brode in danger; the smell of the demons; but worst of all was the constant hissing in her ears. Hunger

whispered to her wickedly. Noawhane darted among the hissers, her skin reddened and flushed. She felt a tingling sensation that ran from below her jaw to behind her ears. Something about her scent confused the serpentine demons. As soon as they tasted the air in her presence, their heads turned this way and that, as if they had suddenly lost their bearings. Within a split second, all three of them collapsed, drooling uncontrollably, their sinuous bodies curling and uncurling on the boggy ground. She ignored them, focusing her attention on the one-eyed crocadevil that had Brode in its jaws. Shrieking and yowling, she sprang at the huge demon, raking it with her claws.

The crocadevil, startled, released Brode and concentrated on its new assailant. "You Grode's gitch," it growled. Dropping to all fours and twisting its stocky body clockwise, the reptilian beast lashed at Noawhane with its thick barbed tail. Both Noawhane and Brode knew how dangerous this attack could be; during its last attack they had seen this crocadevil catch Wain across the chest with its tail, breaking most of his ribs in the process. A tail-swipe was a weapon almost as lethal as a bite, and the crocadevils all knew it. Noawhane flipped out of the way at once, landing on her hands and feet. As soon as the appendage had scythed through its deadly arc, she pounced, intent on tearing her enemy limb from limb.

Frustration lent her rage greater urgency as her claws failed to penetrate its thick hide, not gaining so much as a moment's purchase on the tough skin. She knew crocadevils were capable of shrugging off most small-arms fire, but she

had hoped her newfound strength and speed would have counted for something.

Noawhane continued her search for a weak spot; a chink in the fiend's armor. She kicked at its knees; tore at its throat, but only when her clawed thumb found its one remaining eye did she make any progress. She dug deep, bursting the gelatinous organ with a single gouge. The crocadevil roared, released Brode and turned about to retaliate. Blinded and in agony, the demon had to rely on its sense of smell, but had no luck in tracking her down. She leaped onto its shoulders and dug at its face, ripping its nostrils and tearing into its broad snout. The blind crocadevil flailed and snapped, trying to throw off its assailant but to no avail. Noawhane was unshakable, determined to cling to her prey until it died or killed her; and she had no intention of letting her meal get the better of her.

Fearless of the sharp teeth that bristled in the giant reptile's mouth, Noawhane grabbed the crocadevil's top jaw and began to lift. Struggle though the fiend might, her arm strength outmatched its jaw strength, and after a few seconds of effort she succeeded in wrenching its huge mouth open. The blind demon roared and tried once again to throw the predator from its back, but she always seemed to be just beyond its reach or hooked in too firmly. Eventually the crocadevil's top jaw gave way with a loud snap, accompanied by the sound of ripping tendons. It let out a wail of anguish, but Noawhane paid it no heed. Shoving her claw into the demon's freshly empty eye-socket, Noawhane dug deep and found the brain. The beast jerked suddenly, its limbs

thrashing spasmodically before pitching forwards and landing face-first in the muck. It never moved again.

Noawhane turned her attention to the hissers, all of which were still reeling from her pheromones. Grabbing one of the serpentine demons, she wrenched its head back and sunk her fangs into its exposed and broken neck. The blood was cold and unfamiliar in taste, but somehow it did something to sate her ravenous hunger. Her arms and legs trembled as energy coursed through her veins, amplifying her strength. For a moment the half-imagined hissing in her ears was silenced, but all too soon it resumed again. She had to have more. Casting the dried-out ophidire husk aside, she leaped at another of its fellows. The ophidires, beginning to recover from their olfactory overload, made to retreat, but another whiff of the demon-eater's scent soon laid them out once again.

She played with her food, exploring her new appetites with a kind of abstracted curiosity that horrified both herself and her mate. Before her transition she might have recoiled at the thought of feeding like this, but now a different set of instincts and appetites guided her actions. She tore one of the ophidires almost in half, feasting on the demon's black heart as if it were an apple before noisily slurping the rest of the hisser's sanguine treasures from its body. Each feeding gave her a rush of well-being and strength, but at the same time eroded at her inhibitions as if she had just embarked on a life-threatening drinking binge. She was just about to figure out how to feed from the crocadevil, considering ripping its head open like a gourmet might shuck an oyster, when she

noticed Brode staggering to his feet, pushing himself up with his one good arm. He regarded his lover with unbridled shock.

Noawhane noticed neither his physical nor his mental distress. Her passions inflamed by the thrill of the hunt and the kill, she had other base desires that needed to be sated before her inhuman frenzy would pass. Before Brode had the slightest chance to react, she was upon him, tearing at his clothes, and pushing him onto his back. Terrified by this change in his wife, his body betrayed him, aroused by the pheromones that lingered in the air. He smelled nothing but blood, gore and grime, but something about her scent bypassed his rational mind entirely and ignited his libido, burning his agony and fear to ash. Within seconds the pair were mating frenziedly, Noawhane's ecstatic yowls sending a shiver of fear down the spines of the other demons that called the swamp their home.

* * * *

Sinclair moved around the fort, keeping himself busy and maintaining radio contact with his subordinates. This provoked mild complaint from various members of his staff, but none dared oppose his will. While there was a fight to be won, Aristotle Sinclair was not one to stand idle. He had reassembled his machine-pistol, drawn additional clips from stores and personally saw to it that every last shell made it to where it was most needed, and from there to where it would do the vampiric host the most harm. A tense atmosphere that had descended over his own forces, a foretaste of the lethal one that was to follow.

Captain Sinclair had not expected the slurps to rely so heavily on gas, and cursed himself for not anticipating it when his spotters noticed the chemical shells on the other side of the river. He knew he had no defense against the gas, but until it struck any let-up in his side's bombardment provided the slurps with the opportunity to close in for the kill. The slightest relent, no matter how momentary, could prove fatal. It took every last scrap of courage he had held in reserve to order his men to continue firing until the last possible instant before giving the word that they should fall back to the fort.

It was scant consolation that even if he had expected it, there was little more he could have done. The worst part of the attack for him was the sense of powerlessness that dogged him. Regardless of the amount of times he had seen soldiers die, no matter how inevitable their death was, it never got any easier to bear. Worse, this was the first firefight in which he wasn't able to lead his men from the front in his usual way. He had to remain in contact with his officers, directing their movements. He knew dozens, maybe hundreds, might not make it back to the fort. The best he could hope to do was try to be where he was needed, just like everyone else. The problem as he saw it was that he needed to be absolutely everywhere, and no-one would let him venture beyond the wall.

For a commanding officer, he was surprised about how little authority he had over his own movements. Determined to stretch this restriction to the limit, he directed his troops from the walls with the aid of field glasses and a sniper rifle.

* * * *

Half a mile away from the battlefield, two Lemyari stood calmly observing the progress of their troops. Tall, aristocratic, and with black leather greatcoats protecting their spotless uniforms from the mud and grime of the battle, they watched the event through expensive field glasses. The pips on their shoulders denoted the rank of captain.

"You know, Fayette, I can't help but think of all this as somewhat ... inelegant." Godin, a fair-haired artillery officer, curled his upper lip in distaste, baring his fangs.

"Well, we are at war," replied Fayette. "A little brutality is inevitable, is it not?"

"I'll grant you that, but—well, we're at the dawn of a new age; a new race has arisen to claim its birthright—but look at us! How are we doing this? Guns! Bombs! Gas! We should overwhelm them with magic, crush their wills; simply—oh, I don't know..."

"Waltz in and supersede them?"

Godin lowered his binoculars. "You always did have a knack for plain speech."

"That's the military life for you. Been in the service all my life. One of Lareine's originals, you know."

"No wonder you signed up for this so quickly! But why do unto them exactly as they did unto us? We should be doing something more ... spectacular, I feel. This kind of warfare's just too..." Godin shuddered. "Human."

Fayette patted his colleague on the shoulder. "If it helps, think of it as having a last play with one's toys before putting them away and moving onto pursuits befitting one's status."

"I suppose," Godin shrugged. "It just seems a little embarrassing, though." The vampires paused awhile, listening to the metronomic report of the field guns, and the answering *whump, whump, whump* as their payloads detonated over Fort Laurie. "The last, faltering heartbeats of the human race," he mused. "They beat louder than ever."

"Your mate died three seconds ago." A third voice disturbed the Lemyari's musings. It rasped and hissed like its owner had only ever known hardship and desperation.

Godin spun around, to find a hulking figure clad in the tattered remnants of Louistranan Army Private, but despite the fatigues he wore he appeared neither human nor Nabaren. He stood nearly seven feet tall, rangy, with an elongated face, prognathous jaw, and fierce red eyes.

"What in the Ninth Hell are you?"

"Just getting started." The scavenger dropped the broken-necked body of Captain Fayette, and advanced towards Godin with murder in his eyes.

Godin scowled. "Whatever you are, you're too ugly to be allowed to live." He splayed his fingers, baring his secondary nails. Green venom glistened on his fingertips, and his irises began to glimmer. "Kneel before me and accept your punishment."

The scavenger sneered, drawing his pistol and aiming at Godin. "Is that it?"

"That gun won't hurt me. You cannot hurt me. Give up. You haven't a chance."

The automatic pistol begged to differ and offered Captain Godin two points in the scavenger's favor. Both were of the

hollow variety, and aimed at his knees. The vampire's patellae blossomed like bloody roses. Godin gasped and fell, clutching at his ruined legs. "*Get away from me!*" he protested, but his command fell on deaf ears.

Holstering his pistol, the scavenger stalked towards his quarry. He lunged towards Godin's neck with a sinewy, clawed hand. His fingertips ripped through the hollow of Captain Godin's throat and dug deep, hooking around the vampire's sternum. His other hand tore into the Lemyari's scalp and with a slow, deliberate yank the scavenger ripped his prey apart. Warm, dark blood showered the area and splashed onto the ground, steaming in the cold night air. The scavenger smelled iron and meat. Instinct overtook him as, drooling, he plunged his hand into the remains of Godin's chest and pulled out his heart.

He regarded the grisly token for a moment, distracted by the feeling of tough muscle in his hand and the overpowering smell of blood. The scavenger raised it to his mouth and sunk his teeth in before he knew what he was doing. The flesh was tough and rubbery: he found it difficult to choke down, even after his recent change in tastes and many months away from civilization. The scavenger spat, tossed aside the handful of cardiac tissue, and cocked his head, listening for any more signs of officers. He heard someone shouting instructions above the din of gunfire, turned and resumed his hunting.

* * * *

Fort Laurie did not have much in the way of prison facilities: soldiers awaiting court-martial or sentencing were

kept in small cells on the lowest level of the Fort prior to transportation to L.A.P. Rackwell. Two military policemen frog-marched Tirtuu down to the holding cells. It had taken both of them to keep the Nabaren under control. Though Tirtuu was smaller than either of them, he fought dirty and had clawed Sinclair on the face and punched an M.P. in the crotch before being truncheoned into submission. They wore their blue-banded caps with the brims pulled low, and had the physique and demeanor of prize-fighters. They had to tilt their heads back to look at the other soldiers, which they regarded as a barely organized mass of petty criminals.

In compliance with the Captain's orders, most lights were switched off to conserve power. The darkened corridor and state of emergency provided the bluecaps with all the temptation they needed to mete out some personal punishment. There were four incidents in which Tirtuu 'fell down some stairs', despite the basement being only three levels below Captain Sinclair's office.

They manhandled their prisoner down the corridor with greater roughness than regulations allowed, and propelled him into a holding cell with the aid of an army boot to the backside. Tirtuu landed in a heap on the brick floor as the steel-plated door slammed shut behind him. In the darkness he could make out a crude bed with a thin mattress and single blanket, a chair and a bucket. He heard the bluecaps march off and was left in near-silence, with only the muffled noises of gunfire to remind him that anything was going on outside his new hundred-square-foot world.

* * * *

Five Lemyari, four lieutenants and a captain, hustled towards a speedboat as the field guns spent their chemical payload, firing gas shells over the river and into the furious *melée*. They piled into the boat, not bothering with gas masks or protective suits. Like their lesser cousins they had little fear of the irritants and poisons.

"For Galee's *sake*, Nicolas, get a move on!"

Second-Lieutenant Nicolas Tallerand, commissioned so recently his bite-marks had scarcely healed, hauled his backpack into the speedboat and vaulted in. He viewed the chaos with a distasteful expression. A mere month ago he had expected his new life to consist of an endless string of parties, rites, and blood-letting. Reality had a habit of disappointing him.

"Have we much to do over there, Captain? I'd have thought the Ylesgaires would be able to handle a bunch of mortals."

Captain Delapoer cast his eyes heavenward. "The first thing any of us learn, Lieutenant," he began as he pulled the ripcord, causing the engine to thunder into life, "is that Ylesgaires cannot be counted on to achieve anything. They were merely sent across to occupy the mortals while the gas shells struck! The real offensive starts *now*."

"*You got that right*," growled the voice of a sixth individual.

Delapoer drew his pistol and fired at the new arrival. Though his venom was quite deadly, his military habits dated further back than his vampiric life. He prided himself on his aim and his instincts, and didn't miss at that range.

Unfortunately for him, the only flesh he ended up puncturing was that of the late Captain Fayette, whose body the scavenger had adopted as an inhuman shield.

"How did one of them get over here?" His subalterns unsheathed their own venomous nails.

The scavenger returned fire, plugging Lieutenants Tallerand and Rochet between their eyes. "Wrong question. What you *should* be asking is—"

The sudden charge from Lieutenants Prudon and Sicard interrupted the scavenger's rhetoric temporarily. He flung Fayette's corpse at Prudon like a rag doll and fired three shots at Sicard. One went wide; the other two found the vampire's chest, stopping him in his tracks and leaving him oozing, wheezing and gasping.

"What you *should* be asking is, why the *Hell*—"

The scavenger dived out of the way of Delapoer's fusillade, answering the attack with one of his own. His first shot marked the fiberglass hull of the speedboat, while the second creased the captain's shoulders. Delapoer hardly noticed it. Prudon threw Fayette's body aside and came at the scavenger with claws bared, leaping like a panther. He received a bone-shattering kick to the jaw for his trouble, and was left staggering.

"Why the *Hell* all the officers are put onto one boat! That's bloody *stupid*, that is."

"Quite possibly!" retorted Delapoer. "But so's talking and fighting at the same time!" Another shot came close to finding its mark. The scavenger turned aside, but failed to dodge. The round nicked the scavenger across the arm.

The scavenger looked down at the hole his enemy had put into his ragged fatigues. "Ha fucking ha." He noticed a slight scorching of his skin, and his arm felt tender and bruised. Despite the obvious pain, the projectile had failed to penetrate.

"What *are* you?" demanded Delapoer in disbelief.

The scavenger offered no answer or explanation. He merely took advantage of the captain's hesitation to empty the rest of his clip into the vampire's head. Sneering, he turned to regard the two survivors.

"Either of you still want some?"

From her laboratory, Ishla could not resist feeling a slight amount of satisfaction as she watched Prudon and Sicard's expressions of fear, pain, and anguish.

Algin winced and adjusted her glasses. "Tinkerer?"

"You're about to ask me, again, if I'm sure this is a good idea," remarked Ishla, not taking her eyes from the screen.

"Well," conceded Algin.

"And right now, your conscience is ringing all kinds of alarm bells. We've taken someone who's quite badly damaged and converted him into, well, I'm not quite sure what we've converted him into, frankly."

Algin could hazard a guess. She folded her slender arms. "A weapon of mass destruction?"

Ishla weighed the idea in her mind. "Close enough. Algin, I respect your opinion. You have a conscience, which is more than I can say for your predecessor. But right now we have to see the bigger picture. The stakes have been raised higher

than ever; if we don't make it until the solstice, we might as well forget the whole thing."

Algin sighed and sat down. "And after that, Tinkerer?"

"After that, I fear we may have to play it by ear. I'm hoping the new wave will be able to take charge of the situation, stop the hellgods, and let us get on with our work, just like before and somehow everything else will be sorted out as well."

"You sound like you don't believe that."

"Algin, when you've dealt with as many deities as I have, you'll quickly learn that they don't value forward planning particularly highly."

The scavenger took out his combat knife and began to crop the heads from his victims. Thankfully, many leeches followed fashion and wore their hair long, making their heads easy for him to carry. He set about his work in a businesslike, dispassionate way. Unlike some of his late comrades he had not cultivated the ghoulish habit of collecting trophies from his fallen enemies. These were presents. He had half a dozen of them now, and hoped their recipient would appreciate them.

Climbing into the speedboat, the scavenger cut the mooring rope, gunned the engine, and sped across the river towards the besieged Fort Laurie.

CHAPTER TEN

Desperation gave way to mania. Neither Proctor nor Rickett knew how long they had spent in futile retreat; time had slowed to a crawl and the passage of seconds had lost all meaning. Rickett's eyesight had cleared somewhat, but he was left wishing that he was still half-blind. If anything, the climate had worsened; every stench seemed closer and more powerful, and the cacophony had shifted from sounds of battle to sounds of panic, terror, and hunger. The first wall of steel had fallen before the chaotic onslaught. They could see the Ylesgaires' eyes now, feral, cruel and hungry, malevolent stars peering out of the darkness and the clouds of gas.

Each of the squaddies realized their time had come. Setting the ailing Corporal Howard down in the mud, the two soldiers took up their assault rifles.

"This it, then, Rickett?"

"Fraid so."

"It's been, well, y'know. Bloody awful."

"Yeah," nodded Rickett sagely. "Bit of a bugger, that."

The two soldiers steeled their nerves, drawing on their few remaining reserves as the lesser bloods began to close in. Nothing human remained of them. They were beasts of darkness: all gleaming fangs, burning eyes and jagged claws; hunger personified. Neither Proctor nor Rickett had ever seen ticks in daylight; the gloom shrouded their worst features.

They girded themselves, took aim, and began to fire. Their rifles sputtered, spitting leaden death into the midst of the

vampiric horde. It was a futile action; they were out of their element and exhausted. Each knew with overwhelming certainty that neither of them could survive for long. Abandoning that last scintilla of hope, the squaddies resolved to go out kicking. Every slurp killed was one less to worry about.

They might as well have tried to kill a swarm of hornets with a pea-shooter. For every shot that connected, three went astray. Before long, Proctor's clip ejected from his rifle. Rickett's followed suit. Their guns were spent. They fumbled desperately, trying to fix bayonets as the Ylesgaires stalked closer, savoring the soldiers' fear. Before long, they were surrounded. Gas to one side, vampires on two other fronts, and no way of retreating east to the fortress. A delirious groan rose up from the recumbent Corporal Howard.

Sadistic giggles rippled through the fanged host.

"Gonna rip you, boys."

"Gonna rip you *good*."

"Rip you up and suck you dry."

Proctor had heard numerous stories about what lesser bloods could do, and had seen enough atrocities dealt out by their hands to last him a lifetime. Conventional wisdom had it that ticks had enhanced senses. They could smell the blood in a human, make out individual heartbeats from hundreds of yards away. He saw some of the slurps cocking their heads to listen, almost mesmerized by what they could hear; the hypnotic rhythms of his pulse, racing enticingly fast. A last pang of terror chilled his blood; a faint whimper of fear that he could only silence by screaming out a challenge,

belligerent, hateful and defiant. Raising his rifle and bayonet like a spear, he bellowed out loud.

"Come on, then! Who wants some of this? *I'll take the fuckin' lot of you on!*"

Rickett joined in: two voices against hundreds. "You all frit or something? Come on!"

The Ylesgaires paused. Though they could smell fear, they had not received the signal that drove them into a true feeding frenzy. Lesser bloods could see heat; an alluring lattice of reds and golds which, along with the sound of heartbeats and the hot iron smell of blood, drew them to their prey. When humans screamed in terror, Ylesgaires saw magnificent golden clouds erupt from their mouths. This sight drove lesser bloods wild with bloodlust, and it was this cue for which the vampires waited now.

That hesitation proved fatal. A towering and ragged figure swept through them from behind, scattering their bodies before him like debris in the path of a hurricane. He came through them, clawing, punching, gouging, and elbowing, hardly bothering to look at his victims. They could not obstruct him, try though they might: he tore through them like a scythe through wheat.

The soldiers looked on for a few seconds, silent and aghast, before coming to their senses. They had a lifeline, but they had to act quickly. Not sure what to believe, they gave themselves up to the madness of battle and held their ground, stabbing, slashing and skewering with their bayonets. They could almost hear Sergeant Ramsden yelling at them, just like their regular drills.

"Come on, come on! What d'you think you're doin' with that fuckin' bayonet, soldier?" shouted Rickett, recalling those days that now seemed like the most distant of memories.

"Ticklin' 'im?" asked Proctor, completing the catchphrase. Mania overtook the pair of them; they laughed as they cut down the few lesser bloods that had slipped through, undeterred by the new arrival's onslaught.

* * * *

During the first wave Sinclair had managed to bag three dozen Ylesgaires, but it made little difference to the outcome. The vampires had force of numbers on their side: their thousands against his hundreds. He watched his soldiers fall back with an increasingly heavy heart. Too many of them were stranded outside, effectively being chased away from safety by the bands of marauding ticks. Again, he was able to take a few of them out, but he was forced to concede that he could do little good sniping on the vampires. He withdrew deeper into Fort Laurie with great reluctance, his mood darkened still further when reports of his old platoon came in.

Despite his greater responsibilities, he still felt his close bond with his platoon and discovering that more than half of them, men with whom he had fought, drunk and shared the dirtiest of jokes were now dead had upset him greatly. He resolved, should he survive, to make a point of personally writing the letters to their next-of-kin. He felt he owed them that much.

He ran from zone to zone, a walkie-talkie virtually attached to his ear and mouth, frantically reorganizing the fort's defenses.

* * * *

Rooted to the ground, Burke looked on in terror as the deadly fog rolled over the machine-gun nests, engulfing dozens, including Napper and Jenkins. Strangled screams of agony filled the air. For a moment Burke thought he could hear his squadmates' voices. He fumbled for his gas-mask in a blind panic, until a hand clasped him on the shoulder. It was Lieutenant Trence.

"It's no use, kid. We've got to get out of here!"

Burke nodded mutely and scrambled after the medic, fear and tiredness making him feel like he was trying to run through treacle. He tried not to breathe, and continued to fit his mask as he ran.

"They're usin' gas, Sir!"

"I can see that, Burke! Keep running!"

"The bastards are usin' *gas*!"

"I saw! Now *move*, will you?"

The pair fled the front line as fast as their legs would carry them. At times they scrambled on all fours like animals, not daring to look back to see if the gas had caught up with them, or indeed if the Ylesgaires had given chase. The same happened all along the perimeter. None had the chance to count the dead; each soldier simply retreated as if he was the last survivor. All those who could run did so. Those who could not stayed behind, a doomed and desperate rear guard.

Behind them came the lesser bloods; fangs flashing and claws bared, their skin only now beginning to blister. All the gas had done was fill their nostrils with pungent odors that scarred their nasal membranes, wiping away the heady aroma of blood. This maddened them, and they settled for whatever victims they could find: the dead; the dying; and each other if neither of these were nearby. Though the machine guns and mortars had fallen silent, the screaming drowned out all other sound; a noise that would haunt all survivors of the rout for the rest of their lives.

By the time the squaddies reached Fort Laurie's second line of defense, further volleys of machine gun fire assailed their ears; a sudden, leaden cloudburst that rained down upon the pursuing ticks, cutting them down as fast as they came. The mud-caked and battle-scared survivors scuttled through the killing field, welcomed into the complex by their comrades in arms.

Behind the perimeter was a blur of activity that a casual observer would not be able to tell from utter disarray. Soldiers milled to and fro, regrouping with what remained of their platoons. Sergeants yelled 'Move! Move! Move! Move!' under the watchful eyes of company sergeant majors who had risen to the challenge presented them, deploying soldiers with textbook efficiency; each a picture of military precision.

Within five minutes, Burke had been jostled from NCO to NCO until he met up with Sergeant Ramsden, a haggard-looking Lieutenant Stuart and handful of other men from his unit.

"...and Burke, Sir."

"Burke. Right. Is that all we've got left, then? You, Burke, any news of, er,"

Ramsden chimed in helpfully. "Napper and Gobber, Sir."

"Right. Them."

Allowed to stand still for a moment, the horror of Burke's ordeal had the chance to catch up with him.

"Ice-packs."

"Ice-packs?" queried Stuart. He cast an eye at the sergeant, tapping his temple discreetly as if to inquire whether he spoke to a half-wit.

"I need ice-packs, Sir," explained Burke. "Their M.G.'s overheating. I had to get ice-packs and then the gas came in, and..."

"All right, kid, all right," interrupted Stuart. "I get the picture. Mark them down, would you, Sergeant?" Ramsden nodded mutely and crossed two more names off of his clipboard. "Who've we got left?"

Ramsden consulted his clipboard. "Wain, Eryngus, Burke, Battye, Solly, Ginge and Davis, Sir."

"How many NCOs?"

"Just me and Lance Corporal Davis, Sir."

Lieutenant Stuart cleared his throat. "Right! You all heard the list. No point sugar-coating this, lads; we've had our arses *kicked*. Most of the platoon's been wiped out. Unless anyone else comes in within three minutes, I have to assume that we are the only survivors out of this unit. Anyone still out there will have to fend for themselves, Gods help 'em. I know you've all been through Hell here, but you know what the slurps are like. If we stop for a rest now, they'll swarm all

over us. We're going up on the wall once the gates are shut; the quartermasters will re-equip you once you're up there."

Three more arrivals shambled in. Despite the mud that caked their faces, Sergeant Ramsden recognized Privates Proctor and Rickett. None of them would have been able to identify the third. His fatigues may once have identified him as a soldier in the Louistranan army but now they hung in tatters and his name-tape had come away completely. He towered head and shoulders over the others, and he looked and smelled like he had gone without a bath, shave, or haircut in weeks. Coarse hair had sprouted along his bare forearms, his fingers were stained with gore, and he gave the impression of being more animal than man: an upright hyena. He wore an assault rifle in a sling over his right shoulder, and clutched tightly to a bunch of severed heads by their hair.

"There's another one with the medics," he growled. "Gas got him. Name of Howard. Corporal. One of yours?"

The other soldiers gawped at the scavenger and aimed their firearms at him. The scavenger rolled his eyes.

"What the Hell are you staring at?"

* * * *

Tirtuu sniveled as he examined his confines. He felt certain that Zälek was testing him in some way. Why else would his master crate him up and hand him over to Captain Sinclair? He had served Zälek as loyally as he could and the thought that his god could be at least as treacherous as himself simply did not cross his mind.

Reassuring himself that this was simply a further test of his ability, Tirtuu sat down and tried to think. He prided himself on his intelligence, after all, and he had lost count of the amount of times he had avoided a night in the cells. He could not count on Mutaruu or Qutu to spring him: he was deep inside Fort Laurie, which neither of them knew particularly well, and indeed neither had any reason to suspect he was there. Furthermore, once news of his disappearance broke, he expected them to do as he would and start arguing over possession of his goods, chattels, and wives.

Tirtuu stood up and shoved hard on the door. It was locked. He saw no keyhole on his side, so he had no hope of picking the lock. Scowling, he charged the door, trying to knock it down with his shoulder. The noise reverberated around the cell block, but the door showed no signs of budging. He heard no footsteps approach either: everyone else was preoccupied with the firefight. Tirtuu could make as much noise as he liked and no-one would come to answer him. On the one hand that meant that he could not call for a guard and overpower him once he opened the door, but on the other Tirtuu could try anything he liked and not be stopped and beaten for his trouble.

Short of ideas, he rammed into the door again and again, each time bouncing off and achieving nothing but another bruise for his shoulder. He let out a yelp of frustration and kicked the door, but this served only to stub his toes and remind him that he could not breach the door by brute force alone.

Tirtuu sat down, rubbing at his bruised toes. Taking stock of his situation, he realized he could do little at present. There were no windows, no guards nearby, no lock to pick; just a heavy door. Presumably at some point someone would come for him. That gave him the narrowest window of opportunity in which to act. He would need to be alert and ready for the moment. It would also help if he had a weapon.

Drumming his claws on the brick floor, Tirtuu looked around the dark cell for anything he could use. His gaze eventually came to rest upon his bed. He began to dismantle it in a hurried, businesslike manner and came up with a meager inventory. A mattress, a blanket, and a wooden bed frame. Frowning, Tirtuu picked the latter up and swung it against the door with all his might, alternating blows with attempts to rip the frame apart with his bare hands. Eventually he managed to break the frame, leaving him with four usable lengths of wood, any one of which he decided might make a serviceable club. He chose the longest and gave it a practice swing before setting it down, satisfied. If the force of the blow didn't fell any guard that approached him, the nails at least would do some harm.

* * * *

The ground was littered with corpses: humans that had choked to death on the gas, bodies blistered and discolored like pustules lay scattered among the tattered remains of Ylesgaires that had been torn apart by machine-gun fire. Covered with the filth of battle, only their bearing and posture gave any hint to the station they held.

"The shelling's stopped early."

Two figures roamed through the mud, stepping nimbly over the bodies of the fallen. A breeze whipped at their greatcoats, making the black leather garments flap about like the wings of giant bats. They had their collars turned up against the cold, their refined, dandyish features almost permanently set into distasteful frowns. They squinted as they passed through the chemical clouds, thinking it no more bothersome than an early morning fog, cloying and malodorous. Both wore lieutenant's pips on their cuffs and collars and matching jaded expressions on their faces. The taller and thinner of the two, Demanet, walked with an abstracted air about him, aware of his surroundings but with his mind obviously on other things. He let his feet worry about the mud and waste as he followed his companion's lead. He had long since learned to screen out Lieutenant Lesueur's nagging voice when it threatened to disrupt his thoughts.

"I *said*, the shelling's stopped early."

Lieutenant Demanet finally seemed to acknowledge the voice beside him. A state of shock had overtaken him for a few minutes, and he only came out of his shell once the Louistranan troops had fallen back.

"Yes. Twenty minutes early."

Lieutenant Lesueur, shorter and stockier than his comrade, bit his lower lip. "Are you alright?" His eyes darted this way and that in a fretful manner; forever darting between worry and irritation.

"Hardly."

"But we're winning!" There was a lot about his friend that confused him, and top of the list was Demanet's perpetual louché pensiveness; the impression the Lemyari gave of always knowing something that he did not. It never failed to perplex and needle Jean Lesueur. "We are winning, aren't we?"

"So it would appear."

"Oh, let's not have this again, Claude! It's hardly the time or the place. Give it to me straight: what's up?"

"I'm thinking. Please be quiet." Demanet looked up, eager to focus his attention anywhere other than the conversation his fellow officer had thrust upon him.

Lesueur took out his pistol and checked its load. An awkward, haunted silence descended over the battleground, broken only by the fevered shrieking of Ylesgaires. Nearly fifty of them came coursing over the mudslides and shell-holes, hungry for blood. Demanet ignored them, and would have been overrun had Lesueur not spoken up. The Lemyari officer focused his will, his voice booming with authority.

"Stop this at once!"

The horde stopped in its tracks, the lesser bloods regarding each other nervously. Each felt pangs of fear in the presence of the Lemyari, but these feelings competed with the first manifestations of ego that they had experienced in a long time. They had, without Lemyari to order them around, fed themselves and scared the humans away. After an uncertain start, the pack's leader shambled forward, bravado contorting its features. It bared its fangs at Lesueur.

"Go biteself, skinny. I'm big fang."

"*What did you say?*" Lesueur's voice was quiet; icy. Malice slid from his vocal cords like a sword from its scabbard; or, more accurately, like his venomous claws from their sheaths. "Say that again. Go on."

"I'm big fang. I'M BIG FANG N-ghhhhh!" The lesser blood fell back, blood gushing from its torn throat before it could repeat itself a third time. Lesueur inspected his blood-coated nails abstractedly for a moment and then looked up to the other Ylesgaires.

"*I am big fang now. Lemyari are always big fangs. Do I make myself clear?*" The lesser bloods cringed before their new leader, whimpering like whipped dogs. Satisfied for the moment, Lesueur looked at his comrade, his expression sour. "A fat lot of help *you* were! What the Hell's up with you?"

"Hm?" Lesueur's outburst woke Demanet up. "Sorry. Just thinking. Delapoer and the others should be here by now."

At times like this, Lesueur often wondered what planet Demanet thought he occupied. "What?"

"Delapoer. Should be here. Isn't. Hm?" Demanet raised his eyebrows, prompting his colleague to follow his train of thought.

Lesueur had no time for this. "So he got shot! It happens. We've got work to do."

"Must I explain everything?"

"Depends. Is that the only way you're going to grasp what's going on?" Lesueur rolled his eyes.

Demanet heaved a sigh, his frustration rising to match Lesueur's own. "Look. The shelling stopped early. Delapoer

hasn't turned up. The lesser bloods are forming packs and getting uppity. D'you follow?"

"Is this relevant? We have a job to do."

"And so have all the other Lemyari. But they're not. *Now* do you get it?"

The pause that followed was gravid, swollen with prospects, none of which were relished by either of the Lemyari present. "I think I see."

"*Finally!*"

"No Lemyari. No organization. But what's up with them, Claude? They can't all have got shot, surely. The bloodbags aren't that good."

"More to the point, Jean, it means the only people left to finish the Fox off are us."

Lesueur nodded, his brow furrowed as he contemplated the problem. "So we'll have to get in, and that place is going to be locked tighter than one of Marie's collars. We'll need a distraction. Round up the rest of these mongrels?"

For once, Demanet and Lesueur were of the same mind. "I think so."

"All right!" Lesueur turned to address the Ylesgaires, which had started to break up and drift away. "*Get back here!*"

The lesser bloods congregated once again, submissive and shamefaced. They regarded the pair of Lemyari with an expectant air, as eager for commands as trained hounds.

"*We are the big fangs!*" reiterated Lesueur. "You do not act without our command! You go nowhere unless we give you leave! You do not eat unless we allow it! If we say you starve, *you shall starve!*" Lemyari and Ylesgaire alike knew the words

by rote: a catechism of dominance and submission that, though barely fifty years old, had all the weight and gravitas of a millennia-old ritual. Delivered correctly, a Lemyari could make hundreds of lesser bloods abase themselves. Both Lesueur and Demanet had had ample opportunity to practice in recent months.

Demanet chimed in. "Your fangs are our fangs! You are our pack! Our hunting dogs! Do our will and you shall feed!"

* * * *

For one of the most highly decorated officers in the Louistranan army, General Jacob Colworth did not feel particularly powerful or courageous. A deep depression had overtaken him since his conversation with Captain Sinclair. Anyone who did not know him well might accuse him of harboring apprehensions of mortality, but really the opposite was true. He knew far fewer years lay ahead than behind and had spent his entire adult life in the army. Colworth and the reaper were old acquaintances.

What really had him rattled was the prospect of more soldiers being wasted; killed before their time and there being nothing in the world he could do about it. Sinclair had been quite blunt about that. Tactful, certainly; respectful, undoubtedly: but all the same this firefight was for those already at the scene; no-one else could make it, and—*come on now, Jacob, admit it*—it was a young man's game.

Ten years ago he might still have envied them; wanted the chance to give the slurps a taste of hot lead and cold steel, but now—especially now—the old adage that war was Hell

accrued more truth every day. He limped around his darkened office; a few moments of precious exercise, and some precious relief for his stiff back. The hinges in his false leg squeaked disagreeably. Drumming his fingertips on the sideboard, General Colworth realized that rotting away in his office, worrying himself into a not-quite-so-early grave would accomplish little. Retrieving his silver-headed cane, Colworth made his way out of his office,

"Any news, Wright?"

Wright, practically glued to the shortwave's headset, shook his head ruefully. "Nothing yet, Sir." He noticed the cane. "Should I lock up when I'm done here, Sir?"

Colworth sighed. "Might as well. Yes. I'm off to the Club." The capital C was quite audible. It was an organization quite distinct from the regular officer's club: senior ranks only, membership by invitation only, and possessed of a prestige that far outshone mere rank.

"Righto, Sir. And you're asleep if Colonel Davenport asks after you?"

General Colworth chuckled bitterly. "Good man."

* * * *

Lieutenant Stuart gritted his teeth and repeated himself, speaking slowly and enunciating as if he were talking to a half-wit.

"Look. I don't care what you say you've done. Yer goin' nowhere until I get yer name, rank, and serial number."

His troops, still shell-shocked and battle-scarred, kept their rifles trained on the new arrival. The scavenger remained

surly and contentious, refusing to grant the officer's request out of sheer belligerence. The nature of his ordeal and his unexpected survival had given him a sense of invulnerability: even a pistol-shot had merely bruised him. He wondered offhand how a volley of automatic rifle fire at point-blank range might affect him.

"Have you gone deaf or somethin'?"

The scavenger sneered. "Nah. Just wondered if you'd finished. Who's in charge?"

Stuart rallied. "As far as you're concerned, *I'm* in charge. You got that?"

"Who's your C.O.?"

"Never you mind. Listen, sonny Jim, if you don't start co-operatin' *pronto*, I'm gonna assume yer some kind o' slurp experiment and have ye shot."

"I just saved three of your men's lives. You ain't gonna give that order, and your men ain't gonna obey it."

"Izzat right?"

"You wanna give it a go?"

"You tryin' ta prove somethin'?"

"Maybe. I don't carry leech heads around for fun. Get your boss. I'll talk to him. I ain't talkin' to you."

"Oh, fer fuck's sake..." Stuart sighed. "I don't fuckin' need this right now." Fishing out his walkie-talkie, he radioed Captain Sinclair. "Captain Sinclair? No, we're not in position yet, Sir. Yes, Sir, I know we're needed up there. It's just we have, eh, exceptional circumstances that really need yer personal attention, Sir. Yes, Sir, I understand. I'll do that now, Sir." Stuart scowled, his expression sour. He thrust the

walkie-talkie into the scavenger's hand. "Right. He wants to talk to you. You take this and piss off, all right? If ye hadn't noticed, me an' my boys here have a job tae do."

The scavenger held up the radio. "Right. Who the Hell am I talkin' to?"

"Captain Sinclair. Who the Hell am *I* talking to?"

"Doesn't matter," growled the scavenger dismissively.

"Only a captain? Who's in charge?"

"I'm in charge."

"Heard that from the L-T. Who's your C.O.? This is for whoever's in command only."

"That's me," confirmed Sinclair impatiently. "*Don't* ask me to explain. In case you ain't noticed, I've got my hands full here."

"Yeah. Fine. Where can we talk in person?"

"Haven't the time. Say your piece and make it quick, whoever you are."

"Can't. Got a present for you."

"It's not my birthday."

"You're gonna think it is," replied the scavenger curtly. "I'll meet you at the gate. You sound like you got an itchy trigger-finger and it ain't as if we're short of targets." Tossing the radio over his shoulder, he made his way back to the gate.

"What? What do you mean?" inquired the voice on the discarded radio.

Sinclair cursed loudly and made his way down to the west gate. His soldiers were working overtime to keep the area secure. As the entrance to the camp closest to the river, the vampiric legions had concentrated their attack there. With no

shelling to deter them, they had advanced as far as they could, and crashed against the walls and gates, heedless of the machine-guns that blazed in their midst and the barbed wire and iron spikes that crowned every climbable surface. For every lesser blood tangled in the wire, cut down by the machine-guns or impaled on the spikes there were ten more ready to take its place.

The place was drowning in noise: the advancing Ylesgaires screamed in bloodthirst, machine-guns, and small-arms chattered in lethal riposte, while the defenders swore, turning the air blue with their expletives. Theirs was the sort of sustained blasphemy that kept them from panicking; as if only by offending any god that might be listening could they keep themselves from going insane with fear. All in all, it was a racket worthy of Hell itself and only by shouting at the top of one's voice could one hope to make oneself heard. The battleground reeked of cordite, blood and ruptured organs.

Sinclair looked around for the other conversant, and saw the hulking form of the scavenger. He had taken one of the stationary machine-guns off its tripod and stood at the gate like a sentinel, pouring leaden death straight into the tick horde. The other soldiers, not the sort to look a gift horse in the mouth, worked around him as best they could, while at the same time giving their new comrade in arms a wide berth. Captain Sinclair did not have to think twice about the nature of the stranger that had called him. Taking out his machine-pistol and flicking the safety-catch off, he walked to the bestial figure's side and joined him in his wholesale slaughter of the fanged attackers.

"So, what's this about?" he asked dispassionately. "Did Zälek send you?"

The scavenger did not look in Sinclair's direction. "Who?"

"You know. Zälek. Smug little bastard in an old-fashioned suit." Sinclair stood back to avoid the spray of spent cartridge cases.

The scavenger shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"Huh. What's this about, then?"

The scavenger grimaced as the machine-gun coughed up its last spitball of death. He looked around. "What's a man gotta do to get another belt around here?" he bellowed.

A private, face pale and pinched from his tribulations, rushed over with a belt of ammunition and held it out before him like a votive offering, trying to avoid eye-contact with his savage ally.

"Give me that!" scowled the scavenger, snatching it out of the soldier's grasp and feeding it into his weapon. He looked to Sinclair. "Notice anything about this lot?" he asked with a nod due west.

"There's a Hell of a lot of 'em."

"Ha. Yeah. Notice anything else?"

"I'm not in the mood for games," warned Sinclair.

"Neither are my six mates on that ammo box."

"What?"

"Look at 'em."

Sinclair shrugged and made his way to the ammunition box indicated by the scavenger. Half a dozen heads, severed, bruised, and torn stared sightlessly up at him, their mouths hanging open to reveal sharp canines.

"Slurps?"

"Leeches," grunted the scavenger, recommencing firing.

"Where'd you get 'em?"

"Bought 'em at the fucking P.X. Where do you think?"

Sinclair rolled his eyes, looking back at the scavenger's tattered outfit. Between that, his use of army slang and his knowledge of weapons, there was only one possible background he could have. "You're a soldier?"

"Maybe."

"Where'd you get the heads?"

"West bank. Lots of 'em over there. Mainly ruperts."

Sinclair could not help but bridle. "The term is 'officers'," he reminded the scavenger.

"I look like I give a shit? Anyway, you might notice the gassing's stopped."

"Out of shells?"

"Are they, fuck? They've been preparing this for ages. Thing is, no-one's giving orders right now. No-one's organizing *that lot* out there. Why's that, d'you think?"

"You might have noticed it ain't exactly been a cakewalk getting our boys back out of there."

"If the slurps'd been organized you wouldn't have got any of 'em out at all."

Sinclair nodded. "Point. What do you want, a medal or something?"

"Sod that. What do *you* want?"

Sinclair rejoined the firefight, emptying thirty-two rounds into the lesser bloods in a matter of seconds. "We need time. Those ticks won't be like that forever."

Like many hardened fighters, the scavenger quickly lapsed into banalities. "Yep."

"They'll have other leeches over soon enough," predicted Sinclair.

"Guess so."

"Before the General gets me those godsdamn gunships too."

"Well, whoopee *shit*," remarked the scavenger. "You want 'em dead?"

Sinclair did. "Can you do it?"

"Provided your boys don't hold me up," said the scavenger as he slapped the freshly-depleted machine-gun into the hands of the nearest soldier, "I'll kill as many as you like."

"One last thing. Who the Hell are you?"

The scavenger didn't answer.

* * * *

When Noawhane came to her senses, she found that Brode had collapsed in their living room on his side, his huge body lying in the middle of the floor like a discarded mattress. Able to think straight at last, she investigated and found his wounds packed with mud and grass. As recently as a week ago, Noawhane could not have budged her huge husband more than a few inches and would not even have tried, but she was beginning to grasp the extent to which she had changed. Grasping her unconscious husband under the arms, she dragged him effortlessly into the kitchen. She had enough first-aid knowledge to know that she should not risk spreading contaminants from her own body to his wounds

while trying to clean him up, so she scrubbed as much filth as possible from her own body before getting to work.

Setting out a stack of washcloths and two basins of water, Noawhane removed the remains of her husband's clothing and washed his wounds as gently and thoroughly as she could. The one-eyed crocadevil had made a mess of his arm. Several long lacerations went right down to the bone, with several muscles ripped and mangled. Unsurprisingly, he was still bleeding, though she could not tell whether he had fainted from shock or blood loss. With a faint twinge at guilt at having taken him while he was in such a bad way, Noawhane set about dressing her husband's wounds.

She started by cleaning each tear with surgical spirit, the shock of which brought Brode painfully back to consciousness with a loud gasp. Urging him to lie still, Noawhane packed each wound with sugar to draw out any infection from the crocadevil's bite, applied field dressings, and put him to bed. She put her lips to his forehead to check for fever and found heat in his brow.

Brode groaned and opened his eyes, reaching for her with his maimed right hand. "...Noawhane?"

Noawhane sighed. "Get some sleep," she insisted. "I'll go and get Tiddly Winks; he'll take you to the hospital. That crocadevil got you pretty bad."

"No. They might come back while you're gone." Displaying the stubborn streak that had endeared him to Noawhane years ago, Brode forced himself to sit up. "Help me to the shortwave."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Brode." Reluctantly, Noawhane helped Brode back into the living room and got him seated before the roll top desk.

Brode cranked the radio up with his good hand. Fuel for the generator was rationed, so the wind-up radio was a positive godsend. He tried to raise Fort Laurie. "Big Bear to House One, Big Bear to House One: do you read me, over?"

The radio hissed and crackled. Brode frowned. Sensing one of her husband's dark moods on the horizon, Noawhane crammed a pillow between the backrest and Brode's injured shoulder.

"Big Bear to House One, Big Bear to House One: do you read? Over." Brode sighed. "Come on, Tiddly Winks, wake up..."

More static hissed. Brode struggled to stay conscious and declined the painkillers and glass of water that Noawhane offered him. As the wait for an answer grew longer, Brode began to worry that perhaps his waystation was not the only area under attack; that the slurps had finally made their big push to take land east of the river. With the Fox out of action, such a thing looked more and more likely.

"Big Bear, this is House Three, we read you. What's up, Brode?"

"Sorry, House Three, I need House One. Over."

"Ain't gonna happen, Brode. Massive firefight up there. All communications down. Over."

Brode shivered uncontrollably. "Any place else been hit? Over."

Noawhane glared at Brode and jerked the microphone out of his hand. "House Three, we've just been hit over here. Brode's down. Send help. Over."

The voice on the other side suddenly turned businesslike and military. "Yes, Ma'am. We'll get a medic out to you right away and some back up. Slurp troubles, over?"

Brode snatched the mike back, but by then he was swaying in his seat, tilting slowly toward the desk. "Negative. Demons. Seems like every godsdamn Ronald Delta within fifteen clicks wants a piece of us. They're quiet now, but Noawhane's right. She's right. I'm in bad shape. Get someone over here, huh? Over and out."

"Back to bed, back to bed!" Noawhane helped Brode to his feet once again, and half-ushered, half-carried him back to the bed. He rested heavily against her. Rummaging in the emergency kit, Noawhane found a small bottle of Laudanum and poured a quantity into a glass, which she made Brode drink.

Brode did not stay awake for long.

Captain Joel Hodge, a six-foot scrawny southerner arrived from Fort Necessity with a section of troops three hours later. Freshly returned from a tour of surgical hospitals on the Northern Front, he had recent experience of treating demon bites, and that expertise almost certainly saved Brode's life. He saw the job that Noawhane had done on Brode's wounds, he whistled approvingly. "Sugar. That's kinda old-fashioned, but you saved him. Might even have saved his arm if we're lucky. Croc wounds infect fast."

"He'll be okay?"

"Should be now. Antibiotics, plenty of rest, pretty standard stuff. Crocadevil bites are pretty darn nasty, though, so he's gonna be laid up for a time. I'd like to get him up ta Dwight Greene, but, well, that ain't gonna happen no time soon. What happened ta the croc that bit him?"

Noawhane tried to ignore the exclamations of shock and disbelief that came from the soldiers outside, and didn't relish the prospect of explaining the state of the bodies to Doctor Hodge.

* * * *

The Louistranan troops held the line for three long hours. While the shelling had since let up, clouds of gas still hung around the battleground, forcing all the fire teams guarding Fort Laurie's perimeter to wear gas-masks, and, in the case of those on the lower levels, haz-mat suits as well. By now, the troops were beginning to feel the strain. Encased in rubber to protect them from the intrusive irritant gas, the ground-floor soldiers soon grew tired and short of breath. Sweat condensed on the lenses of their masks and drenched their bodies.

After three hours of this, Captain Sinclair had little choice but to rotate them with the upper-story troops lest he risk losing men to heat exhaustion. Unfortunately for his men, that meant their nightmare had to continue. Sore and aching from their exertions, Lieutenant Stuart and his men had to mask up and take their fellows' haz-mat suits. The protective rubber suits reeked, provoking a litany of expletives and

complaints when Stuart's men suited up. Sergeant Ramsden was quick to silence them.

"SHUDDUP! If you can't take a bad smell now an' again you shouldn't have signed up! Now get them fuckin' suits on before I put my dick in your paybooks an' fuck your next of kin!"

The soldiers dressed themselves in seconds flat. Taking up fully-loaded assault rifles and fresh clips, they doubled down to the ground floor to relieve the ailing squads.

"Right, lads! You know the drill," instructed Stuart as the men took up their positions. "We want these cunts wiped out. This is for Gobber Jenkins an' all those other poor bastards that didn't make it! Gedintathem—oh, *SHIT!*"

A sudden crash interrupted Stuart's battle-cry. The west gate was down.

The world exploded: vampires surged through the wrecked gate, trampling over each other to get at the humans inside. Without needing a moment's prompting, the soldiers closed ranks to stop up the breach. Bursts of gunfire filled the air as the soldiers fought desperately, mowing down any lesser blood that crossed the line. Their rifles sputtered and chattered, each syllable meaning 'death' in any language but without access to the machine-guns there was only so much they could achieve.

"Stuart to all units, Stuart to all units! The west gate is down; I repeat, the west gate is down! Request reinforcements immediately!"

"It's no good, Stuart," replied Sinclair over the radio. "Too many of 'em. Fall back and keep 'em from getting any higher."

"Understood, Sir. Back to the stairs, lads! We can't hold 'em here! Sergeant Ramsden, you take your boys and guard the north flank, everyone else follow me back south. Have yer grenades ready!"

If Stuart needed any reassurance of his men's competence, he got it there and then. They broke up into two teams: one heading north, the other south. In each direction flights of stairs up to the next level lay behind double doors. Even if they could not stop the multitude of fanged beasts pouring into the fort, they could at least defend the upper levels until the gunships arrived. They beat a fighting retreat, shooting at the vampires that followed them. As agile as Ylesgaires could be, the sheer number present meant that they had little room to dodge, and any shot fired into their midst was bound to hit something. Before long the lesser bloods flooded in through the gatehouse and into the yard, undeterred by the suppressing fire laid down by the slurp-slicers mounted in the fort's many turrets.

Lieutenant Stuart picked his moment carefully. While his men kept the ticks at bay with their rifles, he selected a fragmentation grenade and pitched it expertly into the square.

"Frag out!"

The soldiers took cover. The attackers, maddened with hunger, took no notice of the lieutenant's warning, and thus were surprised when the grenade exploded, sending out

serrated wire in a fifteen-meter radius. The explosion gave the soldiers a moment's breathing space. Resuming their positions, they kept the pressure on their enemies as high as possible, hardly allowing them to recover before a second grenade come over in a high arc, this time from the north. Sergeant Ramsden's unmistakable bellow followed it.

"Fire inna HOLE!"

* * * *

Although most casualties and medical staff had been evacuated, Lieutenant Trence remained behind, the constant noise making his ears ring. He held any urge to panic rigidly at bay, remembering his extensive training. As the most senior medical officer present he had been given the duty of looking after casualties when they came in. The worst part of this job was the lack of facilities. The breach of the west gate and the influx of slurps had rendered the yard impassable and had thus cut him off from Dwight Green Hospital. All the equipment he might need lay scant yards away, but might as well have been a thousand miles distant.

He had little choice; he had to make do. While he did not have the wherewithal to perform much surgery, he could at least give first aid and get his charges patched up, and while his supply of morphine held out he was able to make them comfortable.

His casualties were currently camped out in the corridor, and there wasn't much he could do for any of them. Of the eight he had, three had been savaged by slurps and the other five had gas injuries. They were covered with blisters, their

eyes swollen and weeping like pustules, their noses and lips flecked with blood and each coughed and spluttered helplessly. Trence could only recognize Corporal Howard from the name in his paybook. Sighing sadly, the medic leafed through it, and found, with exaggeratedly neat handwriting, the soldier's last will and testament, which informed the reader that he wished his personal effects sent home, apart from his chocolate ration, which he bequeathed to 'Splodge'. Trence shook his head. Private Lodge never made it back from the assault on the château.

* * * *

Tirtuu flinched as the rattle of gunfire grew closer and closer. Even here, entombed in his basement cell, each sound of battle made its way to his ears, rumbling through the ceiling and the walls. Tirtuu resisted the urge to dive for cover when he heard explosions follow in rapid succession. As far as he could tell they came from within the compound itself. The slurps had got in!

Two emotions fought for control of Tirtuu's mind: terror and hope. Though, like most sensible people, he feared the vampires, he had a chance—a slim chance—of escape. His innate opportunism won out. Picking up his makeshift club, Tirtuu gathered up what remained of his nerves and his wits. If a slurp came downstairs to the lower levels, it would almost certainly smell him and would be able to wrench the cell door open easily if it were mad or hungry enough.

Trembling nervously, Tirtuu waited by the door with his club raised. He did not feel particularly brave, but he only needed sufficient courage for one strike.

* * * *

"Not holdin' 'em all, Sah!" bellowed Ramsden above the clamor.

"Damage limitation exercise, Sergeant!" shouted Stuart in reply.

Ramsden cupped a hand to his left ear. "Damage what, Sah?"

"Damage! Limitation!"

"Can't hear you, Sah!"

"Just keep throwin' grenades, sergeant!"

"Very good, Sah! Fire inna HOLE!" Another fragmentation grenade sailed into the maddened Ylesgaire legions. It detonated a handful of seconds later, scattering tattered and shredded bodies like discarded rag dolls. By now the carrion had started to pile up. Sticky gore painted the walls, and all the nearby windows had been smashed, while blood, broken glass and shrapnel had turned the ground into a field of caltrops that threatened all who crossed it with immediate blood poisoning. The lesser blood's advance had across this area had started to slow now, but despite that the Ylesgaire had made substantial gains.

"They've made it to the cell block, sergeant!"

"Yes, Sah! I notice a distinct presence of ticks in the cell block, Sah!"

Stuart threw his last grenade. "Anyone in there?"

"Just that work-shy cunt Tirtuu, Sah. 'E's got it comin', Sah."

* * * *

Tirtuu heard the screaming of Ylesgaires, thirsty for blood and baying madly like hounds on the trail of their prey. All of a sudden his long shot at freedom looked a great deal longer. Girding himself as much as he could, the Nabaren convict tightened his grip on his weapon and waited. When that door opened, no matter who was on the other side, he resolved to strike with all his strength.

Minutes passed. Finally, above the rest of the din, something came scampering helter-skelter down the stairs. It propelled itself along on its hands and feet, scuttling along the floor, smashing itself into the doors as it went. As it came closer, each passing second stretched out to an infinity of dread. Tirtuu could feel each heartbeat, almost synchronized with the grenades. Fear tied a tight knot in his stomach, and he felt his legs tremble as the adrenaline hit.

The cell door flew open, yanked open by a lesser blood. Torn and bruised from having run the gauntlet of gunfire and grenades, its trials had done little to diminish its appetite. Its skin grey with filth and splashed with mud, it offered few clues as to its gender, but its wide, drooling mouth and sharp fangs put its intent quite beyond doubt.

Tirtuu swung, catching the vampire across the jaw, the nails in his makeshift club biting deep into its face. He wrenched the weapon free and brought it down again before his would-be predator had the chance to react. Its skull

fractured with a sickening crack, but this failed to put a stop to the vampire's resolution to feed. The lesser blood leaped at him, dazed, but missed completely, its eyesight and balance left completely off-kilter by the blow it took to the head. Tirtuu screamed with a mixture of terror and desperation and brought his club down a third and final time, shattering both the tick's skull and the club at the same time.

Fortunately for Tirtuu, that seemed to do the trick. His attacker lay on its belly, drooling and bleeding uncontrollably. Seizing the opportunity presented to him, Tirtuu poked a cautious head out of the door before stepping out into the corridor. He was loose!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The scavenger heard the west gate blow, and knew that in seconds flat the fort would be swarming with slurps. His hackles would have raised higher if that were physically possible. He hid in an alley by the Post Exchange as the tide of hungry vampires coursed along the fort's pathways. Many of them were wounded but they charged ahead regardless, as if whipped along by a taskmaster whose punishments were far worse than anything the humans could concoct.

Choosing his moment carefully, the scavenger leaped into the midst of his enemies, diving in like a kingfisher in search of its prey. He caught an Ylesgaire by its arm and yanked hard, trying to wrench it away from the pack, but he succeeded only in snapping the creature's arm off at the elbow. Grimacing, the scavenger threw punches and kicks at the ticks that surged around him, growing increasingly angry with his inability to capture a single vampire for his own purposes. As his fury mounted, he felt tempted to stand his ground and slaughter the slurps as they came at him, and though each blow he landed succeeded in knocking its target down or back, the part of him still capable of reasoning judged that sooner or later he might be overwhelmed.

Eager to salvage what left of his plan, the scavenger began to fight his way back out of the horde. He had almost reached the edge when he felt a pair of hands seize his left wrist and a set of fangs sink into his forearm. They felt like mere

pinpricks, barely sharp enough to pierce his skin. Startled, the scavenger lashed out at his attacker.

"GEDDOFF! GEDDOFF ME NOW, Y'FILTHY SLURP BASTARD, OR I'LL WRING YER NECK!"

The lesser blood did not need telling twice. It released the scavenger at once, but it was neither the shouting nor threat of imminent violence that persuaded it to do so. The Ylesgaire clutched at its throat, choking, a smear of the scavenger's blood still covering its foam-flecked lips. The vampire wretched, heaved and collapsed, vomiting uncontrollably before disappearing beneath its brethren's running feet. The scavenger rubbed at the puncture-marks on his wrist as he moved back, thankful that most of the slurps were too crazed to follow him and sought easier and tastier prey. Taking more care this time, he snagged an Ylesgaire by the leg and dragged him bodily away from the crowd.

The vampire's eyes rolled madly, and he had a starved, crazed look that until recently the scavenger might have worn himself.

"Where are the big fangs?" demanded the scavenger.

"Mngaaaaar," offered the lesser blood, fangs bared and drool running down his chin.

The scavenger scowled, grasped his captive by the neck and slammed him into the wall of the P.X. "Where are the big fangs?" he repeated.

"Gut you an' sk'n yooou an'..."

"Snap out of it!" The scavenger rammed the vampire into the wall again. He refrained from trying to beat some sense into his prisoner. If his strength was anything to go by, to do

so would risk breaking the slurp's jaw, forcing him to grab another captive and he did not have time to do that again. He flung the Ylesgaire down the alley and advanced angrily.

"Losin' my temper, slurp. Where. Are. The. Big. Fangs?"

The lesser blood cringed as the scavenger towered over him. "You're big fang. You're big fang."

The scavenger had heard this before. "Don't fuck me about. Where are they? Tell me or I'll break your arms and legs off."

"Lemyari?"

The scavenger rolled his eyes. "Yes. Lemyari. Where?"

"With us. In blood house now."

"Blood house?"

"Here. Blood house. Here."

The scavenger raised his head and sniffed the air. He could make out the combined stench of thousands of unwashed lesser bloods, but here and there he could make out traces of something almost pampered and perfumed. Between that and the almost tangible smell of fear on his battered captive, the scavenger felt he had good reason to believe the Ylesgaire's words. He advanced closer, snatching up his petrified prey.

"Don't kill me! I helped! I helped!"

"Yeah. You did, didn't you?" observed the scavenger, grasping the vampire by the throat. He snapped its neck with a swift, savage wrench and tossed the corpse aside. Sniffing the air again, the scavenger resumed his hunt.

* * * *

The back of the ambulance was packed: Dane shared it with three other wounded; all officers like himself. A stocky paramedic, Sergeant Bob 'Mungo' Lofthouse, watched over the passengers and three more crew occupied the front: two corpsmen and a driver. Akee insisted on squeezing herself in somehow, and despite the paramedic's protests about safety, Dane overruled him and insisted the Nabaren be allowed on board.

The journey to Camp Delta was rushed and uncomfortable. All the wounded were fixed in place, strapped securely to their stretchers, and to keep them comfortable or at least quiet the burly paramedic injected each of his charges with morphine and spent half the journey looking out the back window of the ambulance and swearing under his breath. Mungo mumbled each obscenity like a mantra, as if by reciting his way through every profanity his language had to offer he could somehow achieve a state of serenity or keep the slurps from pursuing his vehicle. No-one interrupted him: each officer knew well enough to extend certain privileges to their sergeants and in many cases a bit of bad language was the very least of their vices. More to the point, in uttering his incessant stream of fucks, shits, motherfuckers and cocksuckers, Mungo had managed to capture the essence of the feelings of all present. He repeated the words so often that they lost their meaning, and all that was left was a desperate, desolate angry noise. No other music could have accompanied their retreat and done it justice.

Rain splashed against the windscreen and rattled against the steel roof of the ambulance in a way that reminded Akee

of the chattering of machine guns. The air was chill and damp. Taking up a spare blanket, she huddled beneath it like an old woman beneath a shawl, but a few minutes later she thought better of it and draped the blanket over Dane. She tried to make conversation; anything to pass the time as the air grew darker and colder.

"Major Dane-Saee?"

"Hrm?" Dane had been trying to sleep. Strapped down and with drainage tubes sticking out of his torso, he had few options as far as pastimes went.

"You think ... you think Captain Sinclair-Saee okay?"

Silence fell over the ambulance as Dane considered his answer carefully. "Akee, the boys're going to be up to their asses in slurps by now. You know as well as anyone that no-one'll last forever, no matter how good they are."

Akee's face fell. Seeing her reaction, the major patted his scout on the knee.

"But if anyone can beat the odds, it'll be Sinclair."

* * * *

Tirtuu was scared. He spent a lot of time scared these days. Any elation he felt at escaping the cells had soon passed, washed clean away by a fresh deluge of terror when he realized just how many vampires had broken into the fort. He now had two groups of hostiles to worry about; the people that had locked him up in the first place, and those that sought to drain everyone they found. He did not expect them to know or care that he was responsible for putting the Fox in hospital.

Such was his desperation that he tried praying to Zälek to get him out of this mess, but it was like talking to a brick wall. He could expect no help from his master; he was still very much on his own. If he wished to survive, he had to rely on all the experience he had gained from spending years as a professional opportunistic coward. Experience taught him to avoid unnecessary engagement; he may have got the drop on an Ylesgaire and succeeded in braining the creature, but he could not count on being able to do so a second time. Making his way up to the ground floor, a quick glance out of a window revealed that the compound was crawling with ticks. To risk going out into that lot would mean certain death. He had to bide his time and stay out of the line of sight of the doors and windows, and yet have a good run at the exit as soon as the firefight let up. Keeping his eyes peeled for military policemen and Ylesgaires, Tirtuu searched for a broom cupboard.

* * * *

Lieutenant Stuart was beginning to feel tired, but battled on regardless: he had an example to set his men. It had been a hard fight and as far as he could see all the surviving members of his platoon were beginning to show signs of fatigue; even Sergeant Ramsden, who struck him as being born for this kind of combat.

"Don't see many more behind that lot, Sir."

"Come again, Private...?"

"Eryngus, Sir. Known as Ringer."

"You sure o' that, are you, Ringer?"

"Gold marksman's wings, Sir. Always had good eyes."

"Thank fuck fer that." Stuart weighed his last grenade in his hand. "Last one, lads!" He had lobbed some two dozen grenades now: when he ran out of his own bombs he had every soldier in his squad pass him theirs. In his younger days he had been a keen cricketer: he had played for Gretham's first eleven as a notable spin-bowler, and he exhibited similar skill with hand-grenades. He judged his moment carefully, pulled the pin and prepared to deliver what he thought would be the last throw of his life. He resolved to make it a good one.

Events conspired against Stuart's resolution. The lesser bloods pressed forward, and three managed to brave the defensive lines of fire and get within striking distance of the lieutenant. They snapped and clawed at him, leaving a few scratches that did not worry him half as much as the bomb he held. By the time his men beat the vampires back it had already cooked off for two seconds and he simply had to get rid of it.

"Grenade!"

"Oh, shit!" Eryngus' eyes went wider than normal when he noticed the Lieutenant had mis-thrown and bounced the grenade toward the other half of his platoon, who retreated deeper into their building to escape the kill zone.

Stuart had never been more grateful for his bowling action than that moment. The grenade spun, bounced off the doorway and back into the road. A split-second later the bomb exploded as planned, followed by bursts of small-arms fire directed at any vampires that might have escaped the

blast. A lull in the otherwise relentless vampiric assault finally came.

"Result. Right, lads! Regroup!"

Reconvening in the middle of the pathway, the platoon set about mopping up survivors while their officer assessed the situation, reporting back to Sinclair by radio.

"Stuart to control, Stuart to control. Have secured approach from West Gate. Proceeding to the gate to salvage arms and munitions. Request further instructions, over."

They needn't have bothered. The area was devastated; the firefight had scarred every building in a fifty-meter radius, and had damaged the road as far as the West Gate itself. Of the discarded gear, the squad found only one usable light support weapon and a few rifle clips.

"Better than nothin'. Off to the hospital block, boys! Lieutenant Haslett wants that area safe fer the wounded. This one's for Corporal Howard!"

* * * *

As soon as news broke that the path to Dwight Greene hospital was clear, Lieutenant Trence Haslett wasted no time in getting his charges ready to move. This took more effort than he would have liked. For a start, he needed power restored to the lifts, and there were no staff available for the job. Every spare hand had already been put to work on Fort Laurie's defenses, and all attempts to raise the one remaining electrician on the radio had failed. He had only been able to obtain the services of a team of corporsman by sheer, dumb luck. As Trence radioed around and drew a blank each time, it

soon became clear that Captain Sinclair as the only man not otherwise employed.

Sinclair expected danger as soon as he reached the stairs to the ground floor. While the streets were relatively clear now, there was no telling which buildings the slurps might have penetrated. Strapping his gas-mask on and drawing his machine-pistol, he made his way along the darkened corridors of the admin building keeping his eyes peeled for any signs of movement. The captain moved in short bursts, dashing from office to office, and ready to fire as soon as a target presented itself. He heard gunfire outside, reminding him that despite the time that had passed, the firefight was still in progress, both within and outside the fort.

"Just pulling a few switches, nothing to it," muttered Sinclair to himself, but a feeling in his gut told him that there was a reason why the electrician was unavailable. Stifling the sense of trepidation that nagged at him, Sinclair plunged deeper into the warren of corridors until the beam of his torch found the maintenance door. The area seemed quite free of gas, so Sinclair slipped his mask off, and at once he caught a faint whiff of excrement on the air. Grimacing, he slipped through the door and brought his gun around in a swift arc, but no targets presented themselves: simply a break room, the maintenance lift down to the basement, and beside it a ladder for use in case the elevator broke down. He slipped his gun's sling around his neck and began to make his way down. The air was as cold as a corpse's armpit; the rungs of the ladder doubly so. Sinclair froze as soon as he got halfway down, as a slobbering noise alerted him to the presence of

company. The sound was familiar to any experienced soldier; a loud sucking noise which had earned the vampires their nickname.

Realizing just how vulnerable he was on the ladder, Sinclair leaped, and landed on hard concrete in a defensive crouch. His gun was in his hand within a split-second.

The basement was flooded with dim red light: it was essential to keep this place illuminated just so technicians could find their way around even in a blackout. Sinclair was thankful for that; it gave him ample light for shooting. Hunched near the bank of levers that controlled Fort Laurie's power were two ticks, stark-naked and covered with filth. They bent over the body of Sergeant Mantell, the electrician. He had been ripped almost in half; his throat bore so many bite-marks that the Ylesgaires had nearly decapitated him and ripped wide gashes along his arms and thighs. The vampires must still have been hungry because now they were fighting over Mantell's organs and seemed quite prepared to tear each other apart for the chance to feast on the heart.

Sinclair's presence changed matters. They looked up as soon as the captain hit the ground, and regarded him with feral, hungry eyes and eager fangs. They bounded towards him on all fours. There were no threats, no teasing of the prey; they had no time to play with their food. All that mattered was the feeding.

"GODS DAMN YOU, YOU FILTHY SLURP BASTARDS!" roared Sinclair, venting his rage and the contents of his machine pistol at the ticks. He sent a spray of nine-millimeter hollow-points in their direction. They scattered at once; one

tick leaping up onto the console and the other weaving towards Sinclair. It closed with its prey in an instant, its mouth clamping onto Sinclair's gun-arm, making him gasp with pain. Not wanting to share his subordinate's fate, Sinclair reached with his left hand for his combat knife and stabbed as hard as he could into his attacker's neck. The knife sank in up to the hilt, cutting through skin and muscle and embedding itself in the Ylesgaire's thorax. The creature expired quickly, but its jaws had locked on his arm and it would take Sinclair precious seconds to extricate himself. To add to his despair, the other vampire came leaping around to attack him from the left.

Thanking his lucky stars that most lesser bloods were light and scrawny, Sinclair wheeled clumsily around, and had just enough feeling in his right hand to squeeze the trigger once again. More by luck than judgment, the remaining fanged beast caught a tight grouping of hollow-points in the chest, blowing its ribcage wide open, adding a further unwholesome note to the room's malodorous scent. Sinclair was alone once again. Panting, he tried to free his arm, but he could not prise the dead vampire's jaws apart. Cursing, the captain flicked the safety catch back on, took the gun in his left hand, and pistol-whipped the Ylesgaire about the jaw until he heard a loud snap. Each strike served to drive the fangs deeper into his arm, eliciting another wince and gasp from Sinclair, but after landing three such blows the slurp's mouth hung uselessly open and he was free.

Staggering over to the console, Sinclair tried to make sense of the banks of controls, before deciding to just pull the

big levers and hope for the best. He breathed a sigh of relief as the main generators came on-stream with a loud thrum, and lights started to flicker.

"Trence, this is Sinclair. Lights and elevators will be back up within a few minutes. I'm on my way back, over."

Trence replied instantly. "Thanks, Sinclair. I really appreciate that."

"Should hope so! Bagged a couple of slurps down here."

"Ah, crap. What about, what's-his-name, Sergeant...?"

"Mantell?"

"Yeah."

"He didn't make it. Took some fangs to the arm myself."

"Shit! Get back up here, Sinclair. Tick bites go septic fast."

"Never woulda guessed *that*. Heading back now. Out."

* * * *

Dwight Greene Hospital was a shadow of its former self; the firefight had laid waste to its lower stories, smashing all the windows and leaving its corridors scattered with rubbish. Gurneys and cleaning trolleys sat unattended, pictures laid strewn on the floor, jolted from their hooks by explosions, their frames twisted and shattered, and any windows that had not been entirely smashed were at least cracked and broken. Only the upper floors had escaped, but even then they were scarcely untouched by the ravages of war. All the signs of a hasty and recent evacuation remained, giving the place the appearance of a deserted ship.

Only two people remained, moving from ward to ward with increasing frustration. Their journey had left their black

leather greatcoats ragged, and each had lost their cap in the killing field.

Lesueur had lost his temper. Enraged, he flipped over one of the beds, overturning the nightstand and a jug of water in the process. "Damnation! Where is he? Where in the Glistening One's name is he?"

"Language," chided Demanet. The other officer did not look up from the clipboard he had found. "You shan't find him anywhere near here, no matter how many beds you look under."

Lesueur kicked at the overturned cabinet, splitting its door apart with his booted foot. "What the Hell is up with you these days?"

"Hm?"

"Are you trying to piss me off or something? Is that it?"

Demanet rolled his eyes. "Hardly. Now calm down, will you? I'm thinking."

"Oh, do forgive me. I wouldn't want to stop the genius from *thinking*, now would I?"

"Of course you wouldn't," sighed Demanet. "Now stop making a fool of yourself and listen. The Fox was here. These," he added, thrusting the clipboard into Lesueur's hands, "are his notes. Those bandits made quite a mess of him, and he had enough tubes stuck into him to keep him from going anywhere unassisted. We've searched the hospital from the ground up, and there are no other patients—and plenty of *them* were invalid too. The whole place has been evacuated. The Fox is gone."

"So? We find him!" Lesueur flicked out his secondary nails, bright and gleaming with venom.

"No, we don't."

"We have a mission, dammit! Find the Fox, and—" Lesueur described a savage, slashing motion with his claws.

"Oh, do put them away," said Demanet with another sigh. "Objectives have changed. The Fox is long gone. It'd be a complete waste of time to chase after him now."

"But—"

"We are not Ylesgaires. We don't just chase after the scent because we're too dumb to reappraise situations."

Lesueur sat down on one of the beds. "Go on, then! Enlighten me. Dazzle me with your intellect."

"Don't bother with the lowest form of wit, Jean. It never suited you. Simply put, we're in the middle of the bloodbags' largest fort. We have broken in. It's just a matter of mopping up the survivors and this region is *ours*. The Fox can't stop that. We might as well have caught him and drained him because right now he simply *doesn't matter*, Jean. We are *winning*. Let's remind this bunch of stupid apes of that fact."

A smile began to spread over Jean Lesueur's face. "Yes..." Mulling it over, he found he liked the sound of the idea more and more. "Yes! Claude, you are a *genius*! Sure, we don't have the Fox, but now we've got this area, it's only a matter of months before we get the rest! Right! Let's take charge of the situation once and for all." Lesueur focused his mind and closed his eyes, mental tendrils searching for any remaining Lemyari minds, praying to Galee that someone had managed to re-establish some sense of order on the other side.

"Any joy?"

Lesueur frowned. "Only Colonel Auguste left. He's in command now. Apparently most of the other officers, Delapoer included, are confirmed dead."

"His thoughts on our recommendation?"

"He concurs. He's mobilizing the Select now. Just a matter of time, Claude. It's in the bag. Or should that be the collar?"

Claude Demanet did not seem to appreciate the joke. Once again, he was thinking. "Dead, you say?"

"Decapitated."

"So something managed to kill several Lemyari. Do you think there's a reason why hardly any officers have acted over here?"

"You think it's over here?"

"I think it likely."

"Oh, don't tell me you're reappraising again, Claude! I don't know what to think, now!"

Demanet looked up suddenly. "We have company."

"What?"

"Ssh. Listen."

Demanet was right. Just on the threshold of hearing was the unmistakable drum-beat of a human pulse; muffled by distance and obstacles, but nevertheless audible.

"You don't think it's—"

"-no. Someone else."

"Who?"

"One way to find out."

The Lemyari sprang through the doorway. The sister's office, a mess of paperwork, lay across the corridor, while

other doors led out to bathrooms, other dormitories, and cupboards. Each door hung open, ransacked by the vampires when they first infiltrated the building.

"Come on," hissed Demanet.

"Come on out, bloodbag," added Lesueur.

"We might be merciful if you came out."

They stalked down the corridor, delighting in the chance to indulge in a spot of hunting. Each of them could imagine the human hiding in a cupboard, perhaps, or in the lavatory.

"We can find you if you're hiding, you know..."

The sound of broken glass echoed through the deserted ward. The Lemyari turned about-face.

Lesueur chuckled. "He's going to jump! No escape that way, you know. All we have to do is concentrate, tell you to come back and you'll come to us right now..."

"Come and get me!" came the reply.

The Lemyari answered it at once, darting towards the patients' lavatory. A second sound of shattering pottery rang out. Demanet gave his colleague a quizzical look, and received a shrug in response. Demanet sniffed, paused, and sniffed again. Since receiving Galee's gift of vampirism, all his senses had been enhanced. He could smell fear, and yet his prey was offering no such scent.

"Come on! What's fuckin' keepin' you?"

"Mad," remarked Demanet.

"Mad, Claude?"

"Mad. I went to one of Doctor Needles' exhibitions. *The Lunatic Variations*. He smells like that."

Lesueur shrugged. "Well, let's put him out of his misery, then!"

The officers burst into the lavatory. Water lay pooled around the floor, the windows smashed. Their would-be prey towered over them, wearing a lop-sided grin. In his right hand he held the chain and half the flush mechanism of a toilet, torn violently from the cistern, while in his left he held a long shard of glass; the remains of his tunic wrapped around one end as an improvised handle. A figure of bestial aspect, the scavenger had grown so hard, twisted, and brutish that neither Lesueur nor Demanet could recognize his species. Only his ragged clothing, upright stance, and war-drum rhythm of his pulse hinted at what remained of his humanity.

"Glad you could make it, boys. Been lookin' for you."

* * * *

Tirtuu listened to the deadly symphony that played outside with all the studiousness of a sound engineer. He fancied that there was a rhythm to the explosions and bursts of gunfire; that the shrieking of the Ylesgaires and curses of the soldiers was almost predictable. His resolution to stay well away from the line of sight meant that he had to rely on his ears when choosing the moment to make a break for it, and if nothing else he knew his hearing was sharp.

The last grenade faded away into the clamor that reverberated around the rest of the fort. He heard a last volley of shouts from Sergeant Ramsden and his new officer, and the shrieks of the ravenous Ylesgaires faded, presumably

because they had been scattered by the explosions. The area was probably as quiet as it was going to get. Tirtuu pushed open the door to the broom cupboard by the merest of fractions and peered into the corridor. The lights flickered on and off periodically, but in the short periods of illumination he saw no-one, human or otherwise. Girding himself as much as he could, he slipped out of the doorway and made his way to the exit.

The landscape had been painted red; corpses lay everywhere, burst, scorched, and torn; their blood a permanent stain on the scarred buildings. No amount of scrubbing would ever be able to remove it. The smell was overpowering. Tirtuu was no stranger to violence: he had been in any number of brawls and bushwhacks and had on many occasions even been on the giving end, but even this gave him reason to pause. He had never seen anything on this scale before.

His sensitive nostrils flared as he detected the scent of gas. Though the West Gate was the closest exit, he would not last five minutes without some kind of protection. He considered trying to make his way to one of the other gates, but decided against it. There was no telling exactly what he could expect to face, but there were almost certainly Louistranan troops who would think nothing of shooting him on general principle. Similarly, he could not lie low. Whoever survived would search the fort for signs of their enemies, and would probably include him among them. It was the West Gate or nothing.

For want of a better idea, he took a deep breath, held it, and dashed over to the West Gate, looking for bodies of soldiers. Bodies meant equipment, and equipment might include gas-masks.

Red-faced and chest aching, Tirtuu searched frantically and struck paydirt within seconds. His fingers made short work of the buckles, and not long after he had a gasmask strapped to his head. Relieved, he took a deep breath of filtered air and continued his search. Scowling, his search yielded little fruit; the soldiers had been there before him and taken every scrap of usable ammunition. Kicking at one of the carcasses, he helped himself to anything he could find, taking a uniform, a pair of boots and half a dozen bayonets. While the clothes were uncomfortable and did not fit him as well as he might have liked, he guessed they might provide some protection from the gas, and if nothing else the fatigues and the full-face gas-mask might serve as a disguise if any other soldiers saw him at a distance.

Tirtuu tried to summon up some last specter of braggadocio that haunted his psyche. He insisted to himself that it would be easy; he just had to use the wits he kept bragging about; if he stayed away from the river, used all the cover that presented itself, and kept his eyes and ears open he might be able to get back to his village without too much trouble. Tirtuu took a deep breath and tried to convince himself that it was possible. He imagined what he'd do when he got home; there was a fifth of whiskey under a loose floorboard in his bedroom; he'd certainly drink that to celebrate. His wives had better do something to soothe his

nerves or he'd make sure they wished he'd never escaped. He pictured himself slapping Qutu and Mutaruu about for not helping him earlier, and that plucked at the strings of his bravado too. Casting a last nervous glance at the embattled fortress, Tirtuu dashed out into the gas, and, one way or another, freedom.

* * * *

Sinclair met up with Trence and his corpsmen as they made their way to Dwight Greene Medical Hospital. They moved as fast as the patients' comfort would allow, hustling their stretchers through the door and onto gurneys, before bundling the wounded into the elevators. Captain Sinclair would have preferred to have his troops search the hospital building first to eliminate any slurps that might have taken refuge within its walls, but Trence was adamant that his charges needed treatment. He had run out of options, and the men were running out of time.

The elevators soared towards the top level as if they understood the urgency of the situation. Trence tried to persuade Sinclair to let him look at his wounds, but his friend shrugged away such attempts with a scowl.

"Right now, Trence, the only problem I got with my gun hand is my itchy trigger-finger."

Trence frowned, deep in thought. Something pricked at the edges of his consciousness; he fancied he felt the presence of something hungry and degenerate; no, wait: *two* presences. He nodded slowly. "Yeah."

Sinclair regarded the medic oddly. "Doing long-distance Readings now?"

"Forget it." Trence shook his head, and the sensation passed. The elevator let out a loud ping, and the doors rumbled open. "Okay. We'll take the Major's old dorm. Plenty of room for everyone there. Sinclair, I need you to get me some morphine. There should be plenty up here; you know what it looks like. It's all clearly labeled."

"Sure thing. What about you?"

"Me and Jackson and Sutton are going to get as much type 'O' as we can. These guys aren't ready for surgery yet, so everyone else—just get them in bed and comfortable—what the Hell's everyone staring at?" After a moment he saw the answer to his question. A pool of blood crept out from beneath the door to the nearest bathroom. "Oh, shit."

There was no time to hesitate. Abandoning the gurneys for a moment, the entire squad raised their assault rifles and followed Sinclair and Trence to the toilet at the double. Sinclair kicked the door in, bringing his machine-pistol around in search of a target. "*HALT OR I FIRE!*"

The scavenger sighed as he looked up from the butchered remains of Lieutenants Lesueur and Demanet. "For fuck's sake," he complained. "Is everyone plannin' to point guns at me today or is it just Ruperts?"

"What the Hell are you doing here?" demanded Sinclair.

"What the Hell does it look like?"

Sinclair sighed. "False alarm, men. Get back to work." He looked back to the scavenger. "I asked first."

The scavenger rolled his eyes and held up what was left of Lieutenant Lesueur. His arms had been sliced clean off and his legs broken at the ankles, knees and hips. Shards of broken glass projected like antennae from his eye-sockets, and long disfiguring gashes ran across his thorax and abdomen. Despite the extent of his injuries, the Lemyari's chest rose and fell; he was still alive.

"Tell the captain what you told me."

Sinclair felt a shiver of revulsion pass through him. He hated slurps as much as anyone else in his unit, but he had heard tell of soldiers whose hatred of vampires had turned them into beings at least as monstrous as the objects of their loathing.

Lesueur twitched, once-aristocratic features contorted into a permanent mask of pain and fear.

"Tell him!"

Lesueur breathed in sharply; an unwholesome noise that sounded as if he had sand in his lungs. "Too. Late."

Sinclair waited stone-faced, holding all reactions rigidly in check. "Too late for what?"

"Too. Late. For anything. Next wave. A legion. Legion of ... the ... Select." Lesueur emitted a raspy gurgle that tried to be a chilling laugh. His ruined and torn lips flexed into a smile, knowing his message had been delivered. He tried to bare fangs that were no longer there; they had been recently ripped clean out of his mouth by his captor. "This. Land. Ours. Fox can't save you now." Lesueur fell silent.

"Is that it?"

"Yep," replied the scavenger. "Don't know what him and his mate were doing up here, but they rang the dinner gong."

"I thought you said you'd killed all their officers."

"I killed all the ones I could find on the way here. Do you need this one alive?"

Sinclair scowled. The army's policy against summary executions did not extend to Lemyari. Standing orders said to terminate with extreme prejudice. "Nope."

"Bye bye." The scavenger gave Lesueur's neck a sharp twist and dropped the corpse next to the body of Demanet. "Now what?"

"Can you do something about these reinforcements?"

"Before they get here? Nah. Once you get ugs moving, they move quick. Unless you've got some secret weapon left over, you're fucked."

"We're fucked, I think you mean."

"Whatever. Top brass not helping you out?"

"I'm expecting General Colworth to get me some gunships ASAP."

"Expect away."

Sinclair felt his temper tugging at its leash. "And what the Hell do you know?"

"I know Colworth."

A moment later, Sinclair felt inclined to fall to his knees and give thanks. The chopping of distant rotors heralded the arrival of helicopter gunships. "That a fact?" asked Sinclair rhetorically. "Tell me something, whoever you are: if you're feeling so damn clever today, how do you rate our chances now?"

A third voice chimed in, needling Sinclair more than the scavenger's casual insolence and belligerence ever could. Cultured, refined and mocking; the last time Sinclair heard that voice it had offered him fresh munitions for a price he had yet to disclose. "If I might, ah, weigh in with a considered opinion?"

Sinclair wheeled round, his machine-pistol directed at Zälek's head.

"Oh, come now! We're all friends here. There's no need for hostility."

"*Bullshit*," replied the scavenger.

Zälek chuckled. "Oh, I like your new friend! Is he one of Ishla's?"

"I'm one of mine."

"And he's almost capable of assembling coherent sentences too!"

The scavenger looked from Zälek to Captain Sinclair. "He ain't a slurp. But if you want his legs broken I ain't bothered."

"Hold that thought," considered Sinclair. "What do you want this time, Zälek?"

Zälek grinned, his voice trembling with mirth. "Why, to watch what happens, of course."

"Do you know something I don't?"

Zälek arched his eyebrows. "Generally, yes. But I take it you refer to the coming slaughter?"

"Zälek, I'm not in the mood. You said you had a considered opinion."

"Whatever happened to Louistranan officers being great conversationalists?"

Mother Damnation [The Blessed and the Damned I]
by Janrae Frank, Phil Smith

"Zälek!"

"All right, all right. I'll tell you what's going to happen. Any minute now the Select are going to hit your side of the river, and they won't stop. If you're very lucky, those gunships and your remaining forces might be able to mop them up and some of you may even survive. Tell me, something, Captain: are you a betting man?"

"Every godsdamn day."

"Then let me put it like this: your Major's bluff has been called, and the Select are a straight flush. What sort of hand do you have?"

The sound of the helicopters' rotors swelled, drowning out Captain Sinclair's reply.

THE END

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