

YEAR-OF-THE-SCARAB-TRILOGY

Lay Down With Lions



FLEMING
2001

BOOK TWO
ANDREW BATES

YEAR-OF-THE-SCARAB-TRILOGY

Lay Down With Lions

THE BATTLE CONTINUES

Questioning the origins of his ancestors, the estranged vampire called Beckett has come to Chicago, arriving in the middle of a now full-blown war. Unknowingly, Beckett helps Khalid al-Rashid, a powerful Nosferatu, piece together the ancient history of the mummies — a history hidden for centuries. Now the Kindred not only face the threat of Thea Ghandour and her fellow hunters, but now must also struggle against other immortals.

AN UNKNOWN HISTORY

The Temple of Akhenaton has been destroyed, and Maxwell Carpenter reveals his true motive for uncovering the source of the mummies' power: revenge. Powered by his hatred, Carpenter will stop at nothing until he has killed the last member of the Sforza family, the mummy, Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep. The mummies must protect the heart of their power or they and their future will cease to exist.

Lay Down with Lions is the second novel in the Year of the Scarab trilogy. This three-volume epic reveals the rise of an ancient power that threatens to forever alter the World of Darkness: the immortal beings known as mummies.



WHITE WOLF
PUBLISHING



WORLD OF
DARKNESS

ISBN 1-58846-803-8 WW10021

\$6.50US

\$8.50CAN



U
P
C
A

0 99379 10021 3

YEAR-OF-THE-SCARAB-TRILOGY
BOOK TWO

Lay Down With Lions



BY ANDREW BATES



AUTHOR	ANDREW BATES
COVER ARTIST	TOM FLEMING
SERIES EDITOR	CARL BOWEN
COPY EDITOR	MELISSA THORPE
GRAPHIC ARTIST	PAULINE BENNEY
ART DIRECTOR	RICHARD THOMAS

Copyright ©2001 by White Wolf, Inc.
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical — Including photocopy, recording, internet posting, electronic bulletin board — or any other information storage and retrieval system, except for the purpose of reviews, without permission of the publisher.

White wolf is committed to reducing waste in publishing. For this reason, we do not permit our covers to be “stripped” for returns, but instead require that the whole book be returned, allowing us to resell it.

All persons, places, and organizations in the book — except those clearly in the public domain — Are fictitious, and any resemblance that may seem to exist to actual persons, places, or organizations living, dead, or defunct is purely coincidental. The mention of or reference to any companies or products in these pages is not challenge to the trademarks or copyrights concerned.

The trademark White Wolf, is a registered trademark.

ISBN: 1-58846-803-8

Printed in Canada

White Wolf Publishing

735 Park North Boulevard, Suite 128

Clarkston, GA 30021

www.white-wolf.com



YEAR-OF-THE-SCARAB-TRILOGY
BOOK TWO

Lay Down With Lions

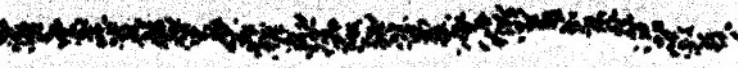
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I: ANCIENT MYSTERIES.

MODERN NIGHTS 7

PART II: TO DIE IN A FOREIGN LAND 109

PART III: THREADS OF FATE 197





THE
LIBRARY
OF THE
MUSEUM
OF
COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY
AND ANATOMY
HARVARD UNIVERSITY
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.



ANDREW BATES



The thing lay in the earth for almost three centuries, aware yet not alive, conscious yet not awake. As it had been in the ground only a fraction of its existence to date, the thing spared this passage of time little thought. It had attained such power that it need not walk the land to make its influence felt. Even had it wanted to rise, the lethargy of its torpor was hard to overcome. Though powerful, the thing would be weak when first it arose, leaving it at the mercy of its great foe. That hated creature moved about the surface world, searching for ways that it might exact a final vengeance upon its enemy.

The thing in the ground had a similar agenda, but pursued it through the subtle manipulations of lesser creatures. These agents served its ends, unwittingly for the most part, making plans of their own that protected the thing from its foe. This struggle remained a stalemate for decades. Then other conflicts grew to spill over into their ages-old battle. The thing caused itself to be exhumed and moved to a place of greater safety. While no longer buried it remained asleep, though far from at rest.

The thing sensed great change in the offing, cataclysms that could well spell the destruction of its foe or itself — or both. Many forces were at work now, though few impacted on the thing's own plans. Knowledge of them remained in the background of its somnambulant mind to be called forth if one proved useful at some later time.

In this way, the thing sensed the arrival of a new entity, a kind of presence it had not felt in three millennia. It reminded the thing of an ancient possibility, a miracle it had long forgotten existed. By its very nature, this entity held forth the possibility of redemption for the damned.

The thing extended its awareness and stirred its minions into action.



PART I:
ANCIENT MYSTERIES,
MODERN NIGHTS



ANDREW BATES

ONE

The vampire called Beckett slipped into the city unnoticed. He was a lone wolf, preferring his solitary research to being drawn into the often petty machinations in which his kind indulged. He hoped to interview a respected elder, the crone Inyanga, and leave Chicago with no one the wiser.

Beckett had been undead for centuries. He knew the United States when it was a cluster of colonies hugging the East Coast, the rude towns and ports symbols of European imperialism in all its glory. He marveled at the explosion of culture, art and science that was the Renaissance. He witnessed the revelation of mysteries that changed the very nature of mortal society — the atom, electricity, gravity, and more. Existing in a time when events of import seemed on a constantly accelerating path, Beckett had grown curious about his own origins. Not to learn how or why his shadowy sire had embraced him, had remade him into one of the undead. He'd long ago found the answers to such minor riddles. Instead, Beckett hoped to discover the origins of all vampires. He searched for the secret of Cainite birth.

Theirs was a culture that stretched back to the dawn of humanity, a long history of which even the eldest undead knew little. Vampires were masters of secrecy, after all. They hugged the shadows of human society, their survival depending on keeping their existence



hidden. Beckett excelled at piercing this veil of secrets while keeping himself wrapped in mystery. This talent made him well-suited for his chosen pursuit but not popular among vampires. His acerbic attitude and unwillingness to swear loyalty to any sect, even the clan with which he shared blood, left him separate from other undead — a gang of one. Beckett was an enigma even among his own kind.

This suited him fine. It meant working harder to uncover each scrap of fact he found, but Beckett felt it was a small price to pay. He had little patience for the petty scheming and politics common to vampiric culture. Let them squabble for control of mortal society and dominance over one another. Beckett had a greater task, and an eternity in which to pursue it.

He hoped by amassing the often vivid recollections of elder vampires that he might piece together a cohesive picture back to the one reputed to be the first of their kind — Caine. The majority of vampires believed that Caine was a real figure, a powerful thing that still existed in the modern age. Hidden, watching, waiting... though opinions varied on what Grandfather Caine was waiting so patiently for all these millennia. Beckett suspected that the son of Adam and Eve, in undead lore cursed with vampirism for killing his brother, was just that: lore. A parable. But he couldn't prove his hypothesis until he'd gathered enough evidence.

It was a drawn out, laborious task, one he'd pursued for a century already. But if there was one thing Beckett had, it was time.

...

Beckett prowled Chicago's Graceland Cemetery in the frigid February night, waiting for Inyanga. The



elder vampire had no permanent resting place and often roamed across North America for reasons known only to her. She'd adopted Graceland as the closest thing to a permanent lair. Beckett knew that if Inyanga were in Chicago, she'd come by the cemetery sooner or later. And since she was in the area the last he'd heard, Beckett camped out and waited.

It was only his second night there and he wouldn't be surprised if he had to wait even longer. Beckett had come to terms with the long stretches of boredom that walked hand in hand with immortality. The key was, simply enough, to cope with the downtime. That was easier said than done, though, especially when days became years and years dragged into centuries. Beckett split his time between re-reading James Ellroy's *American Tabloid* and taking in the sights of the cemetery's many stately tombs. He preferred being outdoors, and subzero temperatures had ceased to be a concern for him a century before anyone even imagined the concept of central heating. Strolling through Graceland, Beckett enjoyed the stillness undisturbed.

He was appreciating the design of the tomb housing famed architect Mies van der Rohe when he sensed a subtle change in the air. Even before he turned, Beckett knew Inyanga had arrived. Had been watching him for some time, he suspected. Many vampires indulged in the dramatic entrance; Beckett and Inyanga were not among them.

Inyanga stood in the dark a few yards from Beckett, visible to his preternatural senses. Inyanga's African heritage was apparent. Standing at full height, she barely reached Beckett's shoulder. She was as wiry as the night of her embrace, though her muscles had the tensile strength of steel. Beckett knew Inyanga could punch



through the marble of the nearby tomb with little effort. She looked old, too, an uncommon trait for beings who for the most part were made vampires while in their prime. Physical appearance was seldom an indicator of a vampire's age, but for Inyanga, it provided a convenient benchmark. She had the look of a wizened grandmother, her skin wrinkled and hair gray. Her skin had darkened through the years at pace with her unlife, much as fairer-skinned vampires like Beckett grew increasingly pale. Inyanga looked carved from a block of ebony, her skin so dark as to absorb the illumination cast by distant streetlights and reflected off patches of snow. She stood still as a statue, wearing the same simple style of wrap she wore ages ago. Like other old vampires, much of the small fidgets and mannerisms that mark the living had vanished long ago. Inyanga existed without the least wasted motion. Anyone lacking the enhanced senses of the undead could have mistaken her for an unusual monument amongst the rest in the cemetery. Beckett knew that, in time, he would achieve a similar state of being; he had already dispensed with many extraneous affectations that marked his days among the living. Yet still, even a creature as old as he was found Inyanga's absolute stillness unnerving.

A simple exchange of nods passed for preamble. Beckett had better things to do than inquire after Inyanga's health (an odd question between undead to begin with) or ask how the hunting was this time of year. Instead, he said in a respectful tone, "Mother Inyanga, my name is Beckett." Many of his kind appended titles of some sort to their names — "The Tracker," or "Childe of Brunhilde" — but he'd always found the convention silly in social situations. Only for purposes of genealogical research did Beckett care who sired whom.



"I hoped to ask you some questions," he continued, still speaking in a Zulu dialect. It was one of two dozen languages he commanded with equal facility, and of even more that he had at least passing familiarity with. He used it out of respect for Inyanga and as a safety measure in case some agency might be eavesdropping. Unlikely, but it never hurt to play it safe.

Inyanga looked at him without expression. Having dealt with enough elders in the past, Beckett imagined she had to remind herself to show any. Despite her stillness, Beckett caught an undercurrent of... something. Agitation? Excitement? Curiosity? He gave a mental shrug. If it had anything to do with Beckett, she would tell him or he would discover it on his own sooner or later.

"You are the one who searches our past," she replied in an older version of the same dialect. Her voice was low and resonant, conjuring images of wild places untouched by mortal hands. "You come during interesting times."

It was sometimes difficult to parse elder vampires' words, especially when they talked about something as fluid as time. She could be referring to recent events among undead society, of something specific to the area, or even of something from a century ago. Beckett hazarded a guess that it was the first option. Vampiric society, though never static, had undergone dramatic upheaval in the turning of a new millennium. There were more of them in the world than ever before, numbering in the thousands, even tens of thousands. Old enmities had exploded into fresh violence, previous alliances had ended, portents of the destruction of everything from individual vampires to every existing Cainite made the rounds, growing ever more dire with



each retelling. It had made Beckett's pursuits easier, the fear and doubt welling up in others making them more forthcoming with their hoarded secrets.

"Change is constant, Mother Inyanga," he said. "Only those without memory or vision are surprised by the present."

She nodded. "You speak of the conflict between Camarilla and Sabbat." These were the two major opposing vampire groups. "I agree that their ongoing strife is no surprise to those of us who watch the flow of history. The creatures of those sects are welcome to destroy one another until none are left. My concern is for those who suffer at their hands in the process."

Beckett knew Inyanga was as disinterested in undead politics as he was. She also had a reputation as a defender of humanity. Although she fed on the blood of mortals like any other vampire, she saw nothing to be gained by abusing them or by treating them like cattle.

"That is what I referred to, yes. But it's not what I'm here to talk about." He was prepared to continue, then noticed an increased spark of interest in Inyanga's ebon eyes. He got the impression that she hadn't referenced the undead Jyhad either. Curious, he asked, "What do you mean by 'interesting times,' Mother Inyanga?"

She looked at him a second longer, then turned away. Beckett supposed he should follow her. If Inyanga had wanted to leave she could have moved faster than even his senses could detect, giving him no trail to follow. They walked to the edge of a pond. Looking out over the icy surface, Beckett waited for the ancient thing beside him to speak.

"I have thought from time to time that we should meet," Inyanga said at length. "Your studies... interest



me. Too many of us worry about power and survival. History is a great teacher. As mortals, we learn from our parents, who learn from their parents. Culture and heritage comes from our ancestors."

She made the effort to turn her head and look up at him. "As we are now, deathless, we should benefit from even greater wisdom. And yet the undead guardians of history with the jealousy of a miser hoarding his treasure. We know next to nothing of the truth that made us."

Beckett was surprised. He'd long known Inyanga was not a typical elder vampire. She was shaped by a different philosophy than Western Cainites were. He hadn't looked her up in the past because she seemed so far from the main history of their kind. Beckett knew he shouldn't have presumed Inyanga's philosophy or knowledge based on her origins. It was pointless to regret missed opportunities in the past. Best to take advantage of the present. If Inyanga was willing, even eager, to share information, it made his job that much easier.

It didn't prove to be that simple, however. "Under other circumstances, I would spend many a night speaking with you in hopes of discovering greater truths," Inyanga continued. "We might learn much indeed by exchanging our wisdom."

"Yet there is a puzzle more immediate that demands my attention. There is a mystery in this city. One that creeps ever further into my awareness in recent times. I have used all my skills to uncover its meaning; I have looked to my ancestors for word of what the future holds."

She turned her gaze toward the Chicago skyline, hazy amid overcast skies. "The Jyhad among us has



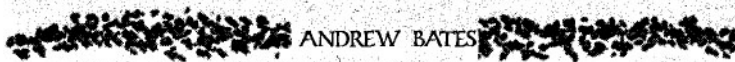
cast ripples through this world and the next. It awakened a storm in the spirit world, a storm with a fury the likes of which I have never felt. This storm continues to rage, and it has awakened forces as mysterious to us as we are to the kine. I know not their true nature, but I feel that they may forever change the nature of our existence."

Well now, that was interesting. To say that Beckett was jaded was putting it mildly, but Inyanga's words stirred his curiosity. He suspected that she'd spoken in riddles for that very reason. "I get the feeling that you want me to find out what's going on."

Was that the barest hint of a smile? "I have done what I can. I contemplate many matters in this world and the next. But I am perhaps too far from things." Her head turned a fraction, her gaze back upon him. "You stand on the fringes, close enough to see events but far enough to understand their greater significance. Your ties keep you connected to the world of mortals and undead. Yet your distance makes you free to move, to delve where others fear to go."

There was meaning well beyond the words she spoke. She may not play the game of vampire politics, but she was still a vampire. Inyanga was offering a deal: she would tell him what she knew of the history of their kind, but first Beckett would have to puzzle out this riddle for her. The game of trading favors was as old as vampires themselves. That was fine. It wasn't like he was working on a deadline. Besides, Beckett had the feeling that anything intriguing enough to capture the attention of something as ancient as Inyanga was bound to be worth the trouble.

"Tell me more about this mystery of yours, Mother Inyanga."





...

"You know of the mortals who hunt our kind."

It was not a question, but Beckett nodded in confirmation nonetheless. By this point, only the most secluded or self-deluded of vampires remained unaware of the living who carried on their quiet war against the undead.

Small groups of mortals had known of vampires and other creatures since time immemorial, but they remained few, scattered across the globe and divided in paranoia, fear and ignorance. That had changed in the past few years. Beckett heard an increasing number of stories about mortals banding together, sharing information and tips on hunting the supernatural, lending moral and financial support to one another. And most disturbing of all, these groups were springing up all over the world independent of one another. These hunters had even developed a communications network via the Internet. Beckett wasn't surprised; he himself was charmed by this latest mortal invention. He preferred hands-on research whenever possible, but sometimes it was more effective to get online than to traipse halfway across the globe to do some fact checking.

He'd long felt that a vampire who relied overmuch on his supernatural powers was soon a vampire with a stake through his tender bits. Availing himself of T1 lines whenever possible — immortal he may be, but creeping along the information superhighway through a narrow phone line frustrated him more than slogging through the early 19th century had — Beckett made surfing the Net a key element of his pursuits.

It was one of many advancements he was surprised more of his kind didn't take advantage of. A



surprising number of Cainites had trouble keeping pace with modern times — immortality does not bring with it the ability to deal with change. Many continued to meet with others face-to-face when a phone call or an e-mail would do. Beckett much preferred direct communication, but he wasn't adverse to using tools that made it easier (and safer) to pursue his studies. There was no need to keep oneself stuck in the past. Keeping up with the evolving world was the surest way to ensure his future.

Which brought him back to the hunters. His future, and those of all vampires, was in increasing peril as the hunters refined their skill and degree of communications. The fact that vampire hunters existed used to be of little consequence to most undead. After all, the undead had been around since the start of civilization. Although too few to assert complete dominance over every aspect of mortal society, vampires nonetheless exerted influence over government, law enforcement and private enterprise. Any self-appointed "defenders of the human race" could be taken care of through mundane agencies without any Cainites having to dirty their hands. And if push did come to shove, the vampires had no qualms about battling those who would destroy them.

But these "chosen," as they were rumored to call themselves, didn't play by the vampires' rules. Most tracked their quarry surreptitiously, amassing information on each vampire they hunted until they had enough to make a precise strike before fading back into the shadows. They even seemed to have unusual abilities that could combat a vampire's supernatural powers.

In many ways, the hunters used vampires' most successful techniques on them — stealth, secrecy,



patience. The hunters' effectiveness was undeniable. As undead were destroyed in ever greater numbers, the remaining vampires grew almost hysterical with fear and concern. The mortals' mission was disquieting enough, but became all the more disturbing due to the mystery they presented. Where did these mortals learn the secrets of vampires? How had they garnered the unusual talents that allowed them to stand against the might of the undead? Was their recent appearance coincidence, or was some hidden force directing them?

"In the beginning, these hunters performed a service," Inyanga said as these thoughts flashed through Beckett's mind. "This may sound unusual, coming from one such as we are. They destroyed the undead, it is true, but they found only the weak and stupid. They culled the herd, stripping away the infirm who have emerged in such numbers of late, like ants boiling from a disturbed hill. They eradicated those of our kind who proved the most threatening to humans, and likewise who would most likely reveal our existence to the living."

"You have a point, Mother Inyanga," Beckett said, mulling it over. "A lot of the younger generations don't have the good sense to keep their actions hidden behind the Masquerade. We don't have to kill the living to survive, even flourish. But they act like they're in some kind of movie."

"Impetuous childer have long taken extreme action; it is the way of youth," Inyanga agreed before returning to the subject of hunters. "Know also that those who stalk us keep their actions hidden from others of their kind. These kine see the futility of trying to reveal our existence through their photographs and



videotapes. And since the undead leave no bodies when they are destroyed, the hunters leave little evidence of their efforts. They work in secret, from our kind and theirs, hoping to protect those they love without ever revealing what they do."

"So they cut our weakest links without screaming to the world that we exist. Put that way, you might say they're doing us a service."

She revealed the faintest ghost of a smile. "You see where I lead you, young one. The hunters also discover those among us who are strong and powerful. Those of us who live in secret from the greater world, who do nothing to threaten the Masquerade, as you call it. Now even those of us who have no intent to destroy the kine, who sustain our existence, are in danger." Beckett noted Inyanga's interesting way of describing vampires' habit of feeding on humans, but said nothing. "It seems those who guide undead policy, the so-called Archons and justicars and princes, were too caught up in their own struggles to recognize the full ramifications when the 'chosen' kine first appeared. So the hunters have grown into a significant threat. It is possible that those who flock to their cause might someday eradicate us utterly."

Beckett shot Inyanga an appraising look as he adjusted his dark glasses. Most of her speech lacked emotional inflection. Though not a monotone, her voice was as much under her control as her muscles were. It was due to Beckett's significant skill in reading others — especially others of his kind — that he sensed a wistful quality to her words. He didn't think the crone was suicidal, but he got the distinct impression that Inyanga might not mind if the hunters cleared away all vampires. Something to follow up on,



though it would have to wait for another time. It appeared Inyanga was wrapping up her point.

"Most of our brethren wish to take action against these mortals, to destroy them as they would us. That may be necessary, but I believe we should find out what we can before we do. Moving rashly could prove dangerous for us."

"Know your enemy, you mean."

Inyanga made a shrug with a phantom quirk of one eyebrow.

Beckett retained the habit of sighing, and did so now. "I may be known for sticking my nose into other peoples' secrets, but I didn't think I had a reputation for placing my head in the lion's mouth." Inyanga gave him an inscrutable look, so Beckett abandoned mixed metaphors for straight talk. "Checking into these hunters is a fine idea. I think it's good sense to find out why they are so skilled at hunting us down. And I'm no neonate 10 years out of the grave; I can take care of myself.

"I must say though, Mother Inyanga, that I don't relish the notion of getting on the trail of people whose sole purpose is dedicated to leaving me spread-eagled on some rooftop at sunrise."

"Your irreverence is well-known among our kind, young one. You question even the eldest of us on the most sensitive of topics. You pursue mysteries with passion and tenacity. You expose secrets others had even forgotten existed."

"Flatterer."

Inyanga took the effort to turn her head to indicate her mixture of doubt and disappointment. "You tell me that such words are mere hyperbole, then? That you have no real interest in mystery, no desire to disclose the truth?"



Beckett smiled. He knew she was playing him, and she knew he knew. Such a transparent attempt at guile was what made it effective. She must understand him well to know he wouldn't respond to the dramatic cloak-and-dagger routine that so many vampires attempted. A creature of few pretensions but an intolerance for pretension itself, was Beckett. None of this byplay meant anything, of course. Inyanga had offered up what she wanted Beckett to do. If he wanted to learn anything from her about his own pursuits, he would have to discover something of worth to the crone. She hadn't offered up the whole story, though.

"So you'd like to find out what makes these vampire hunters tick. At a guess, I'd say destroying things like us is what drives them."

"There is more to them than that, young one. I spoke of something stirred by the recent ghost storm. I sense a convergence, some bond with or kinship to the hunters, some vital tie that we must discern if we are to know what fate holds in store for our kind."

"You think they might be working with ghosts or some other force to learn our secrets, you mean?"

She raised one wrinkled hand, as if in dismissal of Beckett's question. "I do not know. Nor, do I think, does any other undead know what they are or what they plan. I think it is more than the obvious, however."

Beckett wondered if she was being cryptic on purpose, but was surprised to see honest confusion in her eyes. "All right. I know others have been poking into the matter; shouldn't be difficult to learn what they have uncovered." He knew Inyanga could have done this herself, but she wanted to steer clear of vampiric society. Not surprising, she was known to keep her own counsel, and the conflict between Camarilla and



Sabbat was making everyone even more cautious than usual. It should be easy to get the answers she wanted. A night's work to relate what intelligence others had scrounged and he could get on with his own studies. He was used to much more difficult trades; it was nice to have an easy one for a change.

"Do not rely solely on what the undead learn," Inyanga cautioned, as if sensing his thoughts.

"I never do, Mother Inyanga. We're natural liars."

• • •

Beckett slipped from the cemetery like a whisper and loped back to the lair he'd arranged northwest of the city, pondering his meeting with Inyanga. Such encounters like that were common among his kind — rendezvous in the dead of night in some desolate place, trades of innuendo and inference to arrange the best deal possible, seldom with a true understanding of all the variables involved. He'd assumed he would have to owe Inyanga a favor or carry out some task before moving on to the topic he was interested in. It was the cost of doing business.

Investigating these "chosen" mortals would be dangerous, but Beckett wasn't concerned. Neither did it worry him that he was an anthropologist, a researcher, not a detective. A mystery was a mystery in his opinion, and Inyanga had figured out his attraction to puzzles. Not an unusual trait among his kind; vampires tended to hoard knowledge and trade in secrets. In a society of immortals, knowledge was the most valuable currency. It was more than that for Beckett. He didn't dismiss the usefulness of the secrets he learned, but that wasn't the reason for his pursuits. It was more the process itself — the thrill of discovery, of laying bare the truth.



He had enough of a reputation for this sort of thing that he'd grown used to solving mysteries for various of his kind in exchange for information. Often they were pursuits in which he already had an interest, so he wasn't put out by the prospect. (Not that he revealed this to those with whom he bartered.) The matter for Inyanga fell into that category. He'd known about these vampire hunters for some time — it was impossible not to have heard the frightened tales other undead shared. Beckett's habits were far from predictable and he already exercised natural precautions during his travels, so he didn't feel an immediate threat from hunters. It would be hard for a skilled supernatural investigator — someone rather like Beckett himself — to track him down, let alone a bunch of stumbling mortals. While he lacked any real concern for his personal safety, he couldn't ignore the threat they posed. Indeed, that made them all the more interesting a mystery.

The possibility of their involvement with some supernatural agency was intriguing. Was it a move by the Sabbat or Camarilla against their opponent? If so, it had backfired, since the hunters were taking down vampires regardless of affiliation. Spirits made for an intriguing possibility, though from what he understood it was difficult for ghosts to communicate with the living. Perhaps the "ghost storm" Inyanga mentioned might have changed things.

Beckett grinned in the cold night. Yes, he could check with other vampires and see what they'd scrounged up. It would provide a satisfactory answer to Inyanga's question. But there was plenty of mystery for him to dig into. Why should he leave the fun to someone else?

TWO

Beckett flitted through the chill night air, his chirps creating a sound painting of the terrain below. The last structures of downtown fell away as the expanse of Grant Park unfolded before him. Lake Michigan was a flat frozen sheet beyond. The Art Institute of Chicago registered as a mountain of imposing mass, details becoming more pronounced as he neared. It made for an impressive sonar picture, though sight was needed to take in the institute's full grandeur. Say what you would about mortals; they accomplish amazing feats when they put their minds to it.

He glided down, targeting the near corner of the roof. Still a few feet up and slowed to a walking pace, Beckett willed his form to change. His wings shriveled as his limbs grew, his pelt transformed to clothing, and his demonic bat face smoothed and expanded to become human in form. He trotted a couple yards as he finished his landing, his boots crunching the old snow on the roof. Adjusting the sleeves on his battered sheepskin jacket, Beckett strolled over to the rooftop door.

A young vampire stood by the door. "What's up, bat man?" the guard said, affecting a disinterested sneer to cover his surprise at Beckett's arrival.

Beckett let slide without comment the neonate's attempt at attitude. "I don't suppose this city has a new prince yet?"

The man shook his head, unsure of how he should handle the stranger before him. "Why, you lookin' for the gig?"

Beckett smiled. "Any of the primogen here tonight?"

"Couple of 'em. Down by one of the Chinese exhibits." The guard relaxed at mention of ranking vampires. Easiest to pass the buck, Beckett sensed.

Beckett didn't bother asking for directions. He'd been to the institute before. Beckett slipped through the door and made his way downstairs, sparing little thought for the ease with which he'd gained access to this favorite of the undead gathering places. The Art Institute was considered Elysium, a neutral site where all visitors were expected to avoid physical conflict. (Verbal friction and scheming was expected, if not downright encouraged.) Since Elysium was ostensibly a place of safety for all, a vampire broke the rules at great peril to his continued existence. The guard on the roof wasn't even necessary; Beckett figured he was there either to guide some pending visitor or as punishment for some minor transgression.

He passed a few people on the way, giving each a slight nod but otherwise sparing them little attention. Beckett made quite an impression on them, even if they didn't impress *him*. His preternatural hearing caught the whispered conjecture that bounced off the high white walls as he passed. A visiting vampire was rare enough; add in one of Beckett's age — though by no means among the oldest undead, Beckett was an ancient and powerful creature — and his presence in Chicago was worth comment.

Aside from faint amusement at some of the comments he overheard — no more than variations on "who's that?" — Beckett spared the other nocturnal visitors no thought. They might have been vampires



enjoying the after-hours exhibits, or ghouls, mortals who'd imbibed the blood of the undead, amusing themselves while their masters chatted with fellow undead. Whatever their reasons for being at the Art Institute, it had no bearing on his own pursuits. For that, only the primogen would be worth talking to.

He found his quarry gathered near a small display of calligraphy. Two members of the primogen council stood amid a gaggle of hangers-on. He'd met with one of the primogen, a scholarly creature named Critias, on previous visits to the Windy City. The freakish beast speaking to him as an equal Beckett suspected was the spymaster Khalid. The half-dozen others were subordinates — secretaries, sycophants or security; take your pick.

Beckett's footsteps rang on the marble, giving the group plenty of time to look him over. The conversation ground to a halt as eight pairs of eyes took his measure. Murmurs, raised eyebrows and other evidence of surprise swept the group as he neared, dying down to expectant stillness when he stopped a few paces from the primogen.

By the rules of Cainite society, as a guest in a new city Beckett was supposed to inform the community of his arrival and ask permission to visit. He'd been in the area for a few days already, but hadn't bothered to present himself. Since he'd planned on meeting with Inyanga and then leaving, it would have been nothing but a waste of his time. But he had little choice now that he'd taken on her assignment.

Like Elysium, presenting oneself was one of many rules vampires had developed through the years. Typically, a vampire came before the top Undead, the prince. The problem with Chicago was that it had no prince. The last one, Lodin, was slain during a flare-up of aggression among the supernatural some years back. It was apparently not a coup — or if it was, the potential usurper



was also slain, since no one assumed the mantle of leadership when the dust settled. That left the primogen as the closest thing to a ruling body. A council comprised of the eldest and most powerful vampires active in the city, the primogen acted as advisors to the prince and representatives of various factions. Which, in practice, meant they tried to manipulate the prince for their own ends. Each primogen was a significant power in his own right; Beckett reasoned none made the play for prince since it would restrict their influence. Not to mention make them more of a target for any future conflict. Chicago's primogen council now acted as a more democratic ruling body, deciding issues among the undead community by majority vote and in general carrying on nicely in the absence of a prince. One of the advantages of this arrangement, as far as Beckett was concerned, was that showing himself to a member of the primogen was less formal — and therefore less of a headache — than a typical meeting with a prince. Beckett seldom stood on ceremony, and took any means to avoid it.

"Hello, Critias," Beckett said as he inclined his head. "And Khalid al-Rashid, I presume?"

They returned his nod, though not as deeply. An expression flitted across the ruin that was Khalid's face too fast for Beckett to interpret. Critias said, "Beckett? This is a surprise! We haven't seen one another in, what? Twenty years?"

"Give or take." Beckett indulged himself, checking the reactions of the rest of the group while he took in the hall. They were doing their best to appear unimpressed. It wasn't every day that the renowned vampiric scholar and elder known as Beckett appeared among fellow Cainites, but they were doing their best to make it seem that way. The general expression was one of curiosity mixed with unease, though the woman on the far right



flat-out sneered. Beckett had expected to make an impression, but there was something about their reactions that puzzled him. Despite the safety Elysium offered, Beckett sensed he might not be safe here. Unsure of where the source of this discomfiture came from, Beckett focused on presenting a relaxed front while kicking up his senses a notch. "Looks like the place is holding up well."

"If you mean the Institute, yes, she endures the years with venerable grace," Critias replied. Having been a small old man tending toward plump when he became a vampire, Critias was the very picture of an ancient scholar. Which is what he'd been back in Greece, half a millennia before the time of Christ. Critias was partial to the robes of his living days, but tonight he wore a dapper tweed suit. Though small, the creature wore a mantle of wisdom that lent him a stature far beyond his five feet in height. He'd been a key player in a number of undead and mortal events through history. Beckett had interviewed Critias a number of times, the ancient vampire's insights into the time of Carthage and Constantinople helpful in fleshing out what Beckett knew of early vampiric society. Beckett thought it strange that Critias settled in Chicago; it wasn't a hotbed of advanced thought. But perhaps the present political circumstances in the Camarilla sect gave him the opportunity to indulge in the theories of democratic rule he loved to espouse.

Critias was animated for a vampire of his age. He retained many gestures and mannerisms that undead far younger than he had long ago dispensed with. Most notably, Critias loved to talk. An intellectual, philosopher and skilled debater, he enjoyed any conversational digression. A simple observation — such as an off-hand comment about a museum — could set him off for hours. Beckett wondered if he would be subject to pointless



ramblings for the rest of the night. He had no problem snubbing his peers, but walking out on a vampire of Critias' stature was not a wise move.

The other primogen spoke before Critias could begin digressing. "Beckett; I have heard of you," Khalid said, as if only now was Beckett's existence confirmed. The primogen dipped his head again. It was the only movement he made aside from eyes that flashed about, catching every little detail of those around him. It was less paranoia than acute observation. Beckett was sure nothing got past Khalid al-Rashid.

Conversely, the vampire would be impossible for anyone to forget. Though taller than Critias if he stood up straight, Khalid's spine was so warped his head was barely four feet from the floor. His limbs were the hairless extremities of a spider, and his sunken chest folded on top of a bulbous stomach. His head was elongated, like someone had grabbed his chin and the back of his skull and pulled. Stringy hair hung in oily clumps from his scalp. Rat's teeth jutted from blackened gums with no clear consensus as to which way they should point. Khalid's skin was parchment-thin and splotchy; the ivory common to the undead marred by bright red boils the color of steamed lobster. A portion of his face was a charred mess, the result of exposure to fire or the sun. Beckett could see tendons along his jaw and even a hint of bone. A large World War I-era German greatcoat hung about him, obscuring whatever clothing he wore and giving him the impression of being the failed result of some bizarre proto-Nazi experiment at creating the Übermensch. A foul haze hung about Khalid, the faint stench of burnt flesh and sulfur. Disgusting though the primogen was to look at, he was no different from others of his kind: A member of the Nosferatu clan, vampires as renowned for their secrecy as for their hideous appearance.



As a rule, vampires were not squeamish. Part of the curse — or gift, depending on how one looked at it — of vampirism was to carry within you a primal savagery, a thirst for blood and destruction. Most undead strove to keep the Beast in check; let loose, it would soon destroy the vampire. But the hideous Nosferatu had a quality that turned the stomach of even the most iron-willed Cainites. Even the Nosferatu themselves were disgusted with how they appeared, though they considered it part of their punishment of what they had become. Cainite society would have ostracized them were it not for the fact that they were the best intelligence experts ever to walk the earth.

Through the centuries, Beckett had developed a number of undead and mortal contacts around the world who aided in his pursuits. Unfortunately, his leads in Chicago — at least, those aware of the supernatural — were destroyed in the same struggle that killed the city's prince. He'd yet to take the time to establish new connections, and resigned himself to dealing with the larger Cainite network to learn what he needed. The Nosferatu in this city would have an intelligence network far surpassing anything Beckett could ever hope to develop. And controlling the flow of all this, the spider at the center of the web, was the Nosferatu primogen. Beckett had never met Khalid, but knew the vampire's reputation. Khalid was well-informed even for one of his ilk. He was also quite the recluse; it was a stroke of luck to find him there. If anyone could give Beckett a comprehensive rundown of mortal activity in the area, it was Khalid al-Rashid.

"What brings you to our city?" Khalid continued.

"Research," Beckett said. He imagined this would pique their interest. Though for different reasons, the two primogen shared an acute curiosity toward matters



of learning and investigation. Quite likely they were at the Art Institute that night to discuss some obscure scholarly pursuit.

"Indeed," Critias said. "Your work focuses on the origins of our kind, as I recall. What lies in Chicago that would bring you closer to such understanding?"

"Tonight I'm looking into something else," Beckett evaded. "I was wondering what is known about the rise of vampire hunters."

Another wave of murmurs swept the hangers-on, and a few even stepped away from Beckett. Like the mere mention of their mortal foes would bring them leaping from his brow. The primogen were too old and savvy to show much reaction, but Beckett sensed the subject was one that occupied them a lot of late.

"The kine who hunt Cainites. Intriguing. It is a topic on many tongues in recent nights," Khalid observed, his speech retaining a flavor of its Arabic origins. Glittering black eyes speared him. "What do you hope to gain from such studies?"

"I hope to avoid being staked." Beckett flashed a brief smile. "I am simply curious. From what I understand, these mortals are different from those who've hunted us in the past. I hope to find out what it is that makes them so, and what their goals are. Aside from the obvious, of course."

"Interesting."

"I think so."

A look passed between the primogen so fast Beckett wasn't even sure it happened. "Walk with us," Khalid said in a tone that made it clear the rest of the group wasn't welcome. The small gathering dispersed, the younger vampires doing their best not to look disappointed. Critias made a sweeping gesture to Beckett and began a slow walk down the hall. Khalid took a position



to Beckett's other side and skittered sideways, his large coat undulating in counterpoint to his movements.

Beckett wasn't sure why this topic called for a one-on-one (well, a two-on-one). There was an undercurrent here. Still not sure of what he was picking up, Beckett walked, silent, between the primogen, letting them make the first move. Critias spoke as they entered a new hall. "I find it curious that you stated matters as you did. After all, your presumption is not quite correct."

"Which presumption is that?"

"That these mortals hunt vampires." He waved a hand like some royal. "From what we've learned, they do not limit their efforts so."

Beckett wasn't about to ask the obvious of "what do you mean?" since it would just be an ego stroke, acknowledging Critias' great cleverness. He had little tolerance for this kind of condescending speechifying and just nodded. Critias let the silence extend for another few seconds until it became clear Beckett wasn't going to provide him with the verbal prompt he'd wanted. "By that I mean these kine hunt down any and all supernatural creatures they find. There is anecdotal evidence that lupines and wraiths and even other, more obscure, creatures suffer at their hands."

Vampires *and* werewolves and ghosts? Oh my. "That puts a new complexion on things. I'd heard it was possible some agency was somehow backing the hunters' efforts. It could still be, I suppose, though I doubt it if what you say is true. Not if mortals are working on a coordinated global scale, not if they're still receiving assistance, and not if they're taking on all comers."

The elders shared another quick glance. "We have had similar suspicions. You know much of these hunters already."

"Nothing beyond a cursory look and what scattered details I've heard around."

Khalid turned, the charred skin on his forehead cracking open and oozing pus as he raised one eyebrow. "I am surprised. I would think that one such as you would have amassed a great deal of knowledge on the subject."

Beckett thought the Nosferatu was referring to Beckett's investigative capabilities. Then he caught the gleam in the ancient one's eye and wondered again if there was another agenda at work here. "I've been busy with my own pursuits for some time," he said, testing the waters. "Off in the hinterlands, away from civilization. I only just learned of the conflict between Camarilla and Sabbat, not to mention this business with the mortals."

"Recently, you say? And so do you also remain ignorant of what your clan has done *recently*?"

There it was. "I know that Xavier seceded Clan Gangrel from the Camarilla, just as matters were heating up between the Camarilla and the Sabbat. But you should know, if you know of me as you say, I have operated independent of the clan for some time."

"Do you say you have no loyalty to your kind?" Critias asked.

"My kind? We are all offshoots of the same source. The fact that my blood is tainted in a different fashion from either of yours is of small distinction compared to the fact that we are, all of us, vampires."

"You continue to avoid stating your position," Khalid pressed. "Are you with them or are you with us?"

"I may be of the Gangrel line, just as you're Nosferatu or Critias is of the Brujah clan. But that doesn't encompass all of who I am. Xavier may speak for the clan but he doesn't speak for *me*, if you get my meaning. However, neither does that mean that I've



broken from the pack." Beckett took a couple steps back to direct his attention to both of them at once (and to give himself more of a running start should it come down to that). "It's a silly claim to make anyway. Ours is a clan of loners, after all. And even if you discount all of that, what is the matter? The worst seems to have blown over between Cam and Sabbat, so it's not as if you need more soldiers for your war."

"I note that you seem to have been conveniently absent during the entirety of that conflict," Critias said.

"Yes, and? As I said, I was pursuing other matters. It's a large world, and there is more going on in it than vampires battling one another." Beckett didn't think that jab would close the subject, and he was right.

Khalid's eyes glittered from an inner light. "You refer again to these 'other matters.' Perhaps your pursuits are not scholarly in nature?"

Beckett didn't know what the hell the ancient creature meant by that; then he made an intuitive leap. "Wait a minute. You keep hinting about what you think I should know about the hunters, then browbeat me about the clan secession. You can't suggest that the Gangrel are somehow in league with the hunters?!" Stony silence greeted his outburst. Beckett flashed his gaze between the two ancient undead. "The idea is flawed on so many levels, I don't even know where to begin."

Another pause, then Khalid's calm voice: "You still do not say where you stand, Gangrel."

Eyes blazing behind his dark glasses, Beckett clenched his fists and suppressed a growl. His bloodline was agreed to be the most animalistic of vampires. They preferred living close to nature, eschewing civilization to roam the wilds of the world. Living by instinct had its advantages, but came with its share of limitations.



Like being a bit hot-headed, reacting before thinking. Beckett was enraged at the wild accusations these two were hinting at. That they were suspicious of him because his clan had split from the greater organization of the Camarilla was bad enough. He wanted to tear into these paranoid buffoons and show them they all bled the same. He'd long thought the distinction of clans was petty and meaningless beyond an anthropological level. Then add the idea that he was working with mortals to eradicate other supernaturals? Insanity. Surely tearing those smug expressions off their faces would prove to them how flawed their assumptions were! A red haze lowered across his vision as the Beast within him stirred. With effort, Beckett restrained his impulses. He was old and powerful enough that he might get the best of one of the primogen, but that didn't make it a smart move. Regardless of the political consequences, taking on both for pointless reasons was so far beyond stupid there wasn't even a word for it.

"I stand," he finally choked out, "on my own two feet."

Beckett sensed the primogens' instinctive response to his rising fury. Tension crackled among them, the three elder vampires a twitching nerve away from flying into bloody violence.

"Welcome to Chicago, Beckett of Clan Gangrel," Khalid whispered after a moment. "But exercise caution during your visit. The city can be dangerous."

• • •

Beckett was too rattled to concentrate on changing forms, so he left the Institute by a rear exit and stalked north on Michigan Avenue. He'd walked into that like some neonate barely out of the frenzy of his rebirth. Shit. A pair of primogen had as much as said they suspected him of consorting with the enemy. They



couldn't believe the Gangrel had fallen in with kine, that the feral vampires were *conspiring* with mortals to destroy Cainites — indeed, supernatural creatures in general. No, at best they might wonder at the possibility. He noticed his hands had sprouted talons and forced himself to calm down. Must look ready to kill, stalking around like this. He jammed his fists in his jacket pockets and took a deep, cleansing breath of frigid air.

So they were suspicious. But why? It was a ridiculous claim, lacking any supporting evidence. At least in *his* mind. So how were they seeing things differently? Beckett considered the facts and suppositions in an attempt to gain some insight into where Critias and Khalid were coming from.

For centuries the Gangrel were the Camarilla's foot soldiers. They were savage combatants who could give even the dreaded werewolves a run for their money. Xaviar, leader of the Gangrel, had broken the clan from the vampiric community of the Camarilla after some crazed and powerful Cainite slaughtered a number of Gangrel. Beckett didn't know many of the details; when it happened he'd been on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea looking for a sunken ship rumored to carry artifacts from an ancient vampire city. That mad vampire had since been destroyed, but for Xaviar and most Gangrel it was a matter of too little, too late. Set aside the indignity of having a score of his best and brightest torn apart by a single opponent and Xaviar still had a valid point. Any time there was trouble, the Gangrel got dumped on the front lines to take the brunt of it. So, carrying a grudge, the Gangrel left the picture as the Sabbat made a major push to eradicate its great rival the Camarilla.

Then there was the matter of the hunters. They started coming after vampires about the same time the Gangrel split from the Camarilla. Was it before or after



or the same time, though? Beckett wasn't certain, but he was pretty sure it wasn't before. So as far as the timing was concerned, one could argue it was a funny coincidence that Clan Gangrel broke ranks as these mysterious and effective hunters came on the scene. Plus, the kine were very effective at taking out vampires. (Presumably other things that went bump in the night also, if Critias' observation was accurate.)

So could one conjecture that disgruntled Gangrel were enlisting loyal mortals as their agents, supplying them with information on the weaknesses of vampires and werewolves and ghosts (oh my)? Beckett had to admit that, upon the surface of it, one could.

He turned his thoughts to the problems with that hypothesis, the biggest of which was motive. Why would the Gangrel do such a thing? What did they have to gain? The obvious thing was power, but the clan wasn't known to crave it. In fact, along with being peerless warriors and the power to take on the forms of animals, most Gangrel shared the desire to be left alone. So it didn't make any sense. Critias and Khalid *had* to know that; hell, they'd been around for centuries longer than Beckett. They probably understood the habits of Clan Gangrel better than he did. Beckett frowned, considering further. Perhaps not. They may not have run across one of his kind for millennia. After all, in bygone ages there were far fewer vampires, just as there were fewer mortals to prey upon. Now, although the recent Camarilla-Sabbat conflict pared down the number of Cainites, you were still bound to bump into one most anywhere you went.

Beckett stopped halfway across the bridge spanning the Chicago River, surprise dropping his jaw. They couldn't be thinking that, could they? Did they suspect the Gangrel were directing mortals to eradicate



other supernatural creatures so that they could have the world to themselves? Just Gangrel and their kine herds, living happily ever after?

It was insane. Beckett didn't keep close tabs with his clanmates, but he knew full well that wasn't the case. He doubted the primogen would accept his word for it. Beckett's lips sketched a thin smile. He was supposed to puzzle out the mystery of the kine hunters for Inyanga; looked like he might want to give Critias and Khalid a copy of his final report.

So he was back where he'd started: Investigating a group who would stake him soon as speak to him. Worse, even. Instead of any aid, he would suffer everything from mild snubbing to outright hostility from the city's vampire population. Given the current circumstances, he had a suspicion that Inyanga had ulterior motives in setting him on this course. She claimed she was too far out of the loop to know what was going on. Yet she was Gangrel, as he was. Not only that, she was a member of Chicago's primogen council. Did she suspect her fellow elders' suspicions? Was Beckett being used as bait? He would be naive to think otherwise, given the circumstances.

Though generally a creature of his word, Beckett had no problem breaking it in the face of betrayal. For the moment, it seemed that discovering the forces at work behind the "chosen" mortals was still his best course of action. Trust no one and stay sharp and he would be fine.

Just like always.

...

Beckett growled in frustration. He'd surmised that since Critias and Khalid were suspicious of the Gangrel, the rest of the vampire populace in Chicago was bound to be swapping rumor and innuendo. He figured his best bet at gleaning information was to



contact fellow Gangrel. This was a challenge in itself; wanderers as they were, most of his kind didn't have permanent addresses. Plus, in the year since the troubles that split off the clan, many of his kind had moved to even more secluded areas. Since the Gangrel themselves were often on the move, Beckett pursued secondary leads, mortals and more sedentary Cainites who were sympathetic to the clan. Luckily, Beckett could track a decent number of them by phone and the Internet, saving him the tedious necessity of running around the Midwest for the next few nights.

Shortly before dawn, he discovered a Gangrel he knew by the name of Augustus had moved to Chicago some months before. The lackey with whom Beckett spoke was happy to set an appointment for the next night. Beckett looked forward to getting some solid leads from a reliable source... only to arrive a few hours after nightfall to find the place burned to the ground.

His talons dug into the stonewall he crouched atop, surveying the damage. Some cosmic force was toying with him, cutting off every lead he pursued. He considered that paranoia was a good idea at this point. He wasn't going to cut and run, though. Better to discover what happened and how it might relate to him. After all, this fire might be a freak accident. He didn't think so, but he could hope.

Considering he'd spoken to one of Augustus' people late the previous night, it was clear the fire occurred not long ago. His sensitive nose registered the lingering stench of burned wood and melted plastic, but the site was cold and dead. Beckett guessed it happened sometime in the morning, perhaps even near dawn, after his call. Coincidence seemed less likely by the moment.

Scanning from his perch, Beckett saw the place looked like it had blown up rather than burned down. The heat had melted all the old snow surrounding the



place; burned wreckage lay amid frozen mud churned up by the firemen tramping around in a futile attempt to stop the fire. Debris was strewn to the wall that ringed the property. The twisted blob of a melted telephone lay in the frozen grass below him; scorched metal lawn care implements — a twisted lawnmower blade, the mangled fan of a rake — were scattered nearby. He didn't bother trying to identify the other residue covering the lawn. His attention was on the structures.

Clouds had rolled in during the day to obscure the new moon, making the night even darker than usual. Not that it mattered to Beckett. His preternatural senses aided him in looking over the site. His ears picked up the faint creaking of brittle support timbers giving way under the stress of collapsed debris. His nose sifted the miasma of smells, from scorched grass and charred timber to melted rubber and burnt flesh. His eyes shone in the night, taking in the destruction in a degree of detail a mortal couldn't match even in brightest day.

He could have become a wolf and used his hypersensitive lupine nose to track down the actual source and composition of the accelerant, but he didn't think that level of detail was necessary. His human senses were plenty sharp enough to puzzle out what happened. Even from fifty yards away Beckett could see that this was not the result of oily rags catching alight. Maybe stored fuel or even manure or compost, but most likely a manufactured explosive charge. It started in the garage. The asphalt led from the wrought-iron front gates to circle the front of the house with an offshoot that stopped at a small crater. The initial blast had vaporized the garage and ripped through a good half of the house. Whatever remained had lit up and burned to so much charcoal.

Blackened timbers jutted out from the foundation like the bones of some great beast. He could see



portions of deeper shadow that hinted at where the floor had fallen into the basement. Through the ruins he saw the half-fallen frame of a greenhouse. He shifted position to get a better view. No, an enclosed pool. Well, once it had been enclosed; he could see the glitter of ice from the frozen surface, peppered with black chunks of burnt wood. He wouldn't be surprised if the pool was cracked from the weight of all that ice. The firemen had more important things on their minds than draining the pool. He wondered why they hadn't somehow suctioned the water to help put out the fire, then dismissed the thought with a mental shrug. Not equipped for it, or it was too much of a hassle, or some other reason irrelevant to him.

Beckett shuddered, his hackles raised at the idea of venturing down there. Even though the fire was long out and it looked like there was nothing left to burn, he was jittery. His instincts cried out to avoid fire. It was the most dangerous threat a vampire could face, and coming near flame or even the aftermath of fire was unnerving. He clamped his reason down upon his animal nature and leaped to the ground. As he approached the house, he found his initial hypothesis borne out. Someone had set off a powerful blast in the garage which had resulted in the destruction of the entire estate. He was curious about the placement; the bomb would have caused more immediate and comprehensive destruction if it'd been put in the house itself. Picking his way through the rubble, Beckett checked out ground zero. He found the twisted remains of two vehicles — a sedan and an SUV from the look of the frames — and discovered the explosion's origin.

The SUV frame looked like it had been turned inside out, while the sedan was crushed and flattened. Beckett assumed the explosives were packed into the



SUV and set off while still inside. So either the bomber had brought the explosives in himself but was forced to detonate them before he could unload them, or he'd somehow loaded them into the SUV while it was outside the estate and set them off after it returned. Either way it was quite the chancy move.

He clambered out of the hole where the garage used to be and past where a couple other cars also consumed in the fire were parked behind it. He assumed they belonged to the hired help. Circling around the house, Beckett took a closer look at the full extent of the damage. Messy, but effective. From the looks of it, the place was too far gone by the time the firemen arrived to do much more than keep it from spreading to the copse that formed a crescent around the estate.

Coming around the back, Beckett had a better look at the pool house. He wasn't sure what could be flammable in there; it looked like it was nothing more than the pool itself with a canopy around it formed by glass panels in a metal frame. A number of windows were blown out and the rest were blackened from smoke and flame, though, so it was clear it had been on fire as well. He walked over and saw something of particular interest. The rim of the pool was scorched black, as if the pool itself had been on fire. Of course, water didn't burn... but oil and gas did. On a hunch, Beckett checked inside the small stone pump room set to one side. It has survived intact, though the stones were blackened with soot like everything else. Inside was a small storage area with various burned implements including a number of half-melted plastic blobs. The stone construction had protected the interior from the fire, so he could make out enough of the shapes to see they were gas canisters. Empty gas canisters, he reasoned, since the heat would have been enough to set them afire even inside. Interesting. Why



bother dousing the pool and setting it on fire? It might have been the work of a rampant pyromaniac, but Beckett didn't think so.

He wandered back toward the house, debating whether to bother checking inside. Along the way, a patch of disturbed ground between the main house and the pool caught his eye. The lawn was burned to a crisp but he could still see a narrow patch where the topsoil was churned up. It had been baked in the fire and later frozen in the winter air, providing clear evidence for someone who knew what to look for. Beckett knelt and ran his fingers over the ground. It was hard to be certain, but he was pretty sure he knew what he was looking at. The best way to confirm it was to check underneath.

Beckett felt the blood surge to life in his veins as he focused upon the ground. He sensed an immediate connection to the frozen soil, an intimate and irresistible call. His body sank into the earth as if it were quicksand. With an effort of will, he halted his downward progress while his head and shoulders remained exposed. He passed his hands around below the disturbed patch, his movements slow and deliberate against the resistance of solid ground. After a few minutes of searching, he unearthed a few treasures. The pair of hands and length of one arm were interesting, but it was the head that caught his attention. Drawing it up took an effort, like pulling a bowling ball from tar. Beckett let it go once it cleared the ground, then drew his own arms out. The ground became solid where he braced his palms and he used the leverage to pull himself from the earth's embrace. Shaking grit from his clothes, Beckett picked up the head and looked it over.

At first one might mistake it for a rough-hewn sculpture; it had a rocky finish and chunks of earth protruded from it in places. A closer look showed it was still flesh



and bone, with an ugly hole where it had once been attached by its neck to a body. The expression, when Beckett turned the skull around to look at the front, was shocking. It contained a ferocity and fear he had never seen before. Beckett shivered in apprehension. He may be undead, but he was not without feeling. The poor bastard had suffered indescribable pain when he died.

The Final Death, Beckett thought. A vampire's ultimate end, his complete destruction. Beckett would have a similar expression should his nights as an immortal someday come to a close. Still unnerved, Beckett lowered the head and looked at the ground from which he'd taken it.

From the angle at which he'd found the remains, Beckett knew the rest of the body had been above ground, where he'd burned to a crisp. Whether from the fire or sunlight Beckett didn't know, but that didn't matter much at present. The earth in which the remaining pieces bonded had protected them even as the conflagration raged aboveground. Beckett held up the vampire's skull again and saw the preservative nature of the ground was lost now that he'd pulled them out. The skull was drying out, mummifying; the skin turning sallow and the eyes shriveling in their sockets.

"Alas, poor Augustus," he said.

...

The Gangrel named Augustus enjoyed aliases. The first time he and Beckett met, in the early 1950s, he went by Augustus Night-stalker. He gave that up in the mid-'80s after hearing about the American serial killer with the same moniker. Rumor had it that Augustus even went to California to track the kine down with the plan of showing him what a true night stalker was, to be foiled when the police caught the guy first. Beckett suspected the tale was apocryphal.



They met by accident in Germany. Beckett was interviewing Sturgang, an elder rumored to have new insight into the ancient tome of vampire lore known as the Book of Nod. Beckett had traveled to the secluded cottage on wolf's feet, as was his habit, staying on for a few nights in discussion with Sturgang. A vicious storm struck before he left; it was of little concern to Beckett, who was used to all manner of weather. Sturgang was of a different stripe; he mentioned he was expecting a delivery and suggested Beckett catch a ride back. Beckett was inclined to say no, but when Sturgang clarified that the pending visitor was a Cainite, he figured what the hell. Nothing wrong with enjoying some comfort on a cold and rainy night in the dark woods, and he might glean some interesting new insights on the vampiric condition from his traveling companion.

Beckett had assumed that the visitor would be a fellow scholar like Sturgang, with worthwhile insights to share. He saw the error of his presumption when the delivery was made. The stranger stomped in a few hours later wearing a rain slicker and leading three children. Beckett realized they were triplets, two boys and a girl, all with almond eyes and jet-black hair. He guessed their age at five years. They marched behind the man, moving to stand in the center of the cottage's small main room where they proceeded to drip all over the floor. Unlike the stranger, the children wore nothing to protect them from the weather aside from boarding school uniforms. Yet they didn't protest their sodden condition. Their shivering was an involuntary reaction to the cold and wet, but otherwise they didn't seem the slightest bit uncomfortable.

The courier shoved back the slicker's hood and greeted Sturgang, casting a suspicious look at Beckett.

"Good eve, Augustus," Sturgang said, his gaze drinking in the triplets, "allow me to introduce one of your



clan." Preoccupied as Sturgang was with the children, the two Gangrel had to make their own introductions.

"I am Augustus Night-stalker," the courier said. He was of average height and solid, his heritage a mix of Aryan and Mediterranean. Some Romans must have dallied with his ancestors, Beckett figured. "I travel where no road leads."

"I am Beckett," he replied.

Then there was the steady drum of rain on the roof, the irregular dripping from the triplets and Augustus' slicker, and Sturgang's faint cries of delight as he looked over his parcels. Augustus realized Beckett wasn't going to provide the typical Gangrel greeting and frowned in irritation. Not that Beckett much cared. He could tell he was far older than Augustus. Age gave him an excuse to behave almost any way he wanted, and irritating a young Cainite didn't even register on the social radar.

In truth, he regretted sticking around. He was disappointed that the merchandise was a fresh supply of special-delivery sustenance rather than some arcane tome.

Sturgang tore himself from his inspection. He announced that he was pleased with the selection and would Augustus do him the favor of taking Beckett back to Essen? Beckett would have begged off except that Sturgang might make a good source in the future and it wasn't worth angering him. Augustus must have considered him a good client also, for after a brief frown he declared that he would be delighted.

Beckett gathered his small satchel while the other Cainites took care of whatever payment was involved with their particular venture. Then Beckett and Augustus left old Sturgang to his toys and dashed for the new Volkswagen van parked on the side of the muddy track that served as the cottage's driveway. The undead were immune to extremes of temperature but



not to discomfort; Beckett shifted in the seat trying to adjust his rain-soaked clothes into some measure of comfort. Since his body radiated no heat, he relied on the VW's chugging heater to dry the clothes. Transforming into a wolf was never more desirable. At least then he could shake the rain from his pelt.

Neither spoke for the first thirty kilometers. Beckett found he had no interest in the creature next to him, considering the base pursuits in which he indulged. Augustus appeared unsure of what to say, and focused on wrestling the van along the uneven, waterlogged wagon track. They reached a paved road and Augustus relaxed a bit at the smoother ride, shooting glances at Beckett as he drove. Beckett figured his fellow Gangrel must be only a hundred years old, give or take a decade, considering how much he fidgeted. Clinging to human mannerisms was mainly a habit, one most vampires grew out of after a few centuries. Augustus ventured, "So, you an old friend of Sturgang's, then?"

"Not quite," Beckett said. He realized Augustus had sensed Beckett was a good deal older than he appeared and was trying to redress any social gaffes he may have made. Fine; let him stew. Then Beckett surprised himself by asking, "Why do you waste your time with this?"

Augustus' eyes narrowed. "With what?"

"This." Beckett waved a hand around the van's interior. "You traffic in mortal vessels, don't you?"

"Sure. Why do you have a problem with that?"

"You're immortal. You have eternity to do anything you want. Why spend your nights on something as petty as the peddling of human flesh?"

"Get off your high horse," Augustus replied, rolling his eyes. "Like you said, I'm immortal. That means I have plenty of time to do whatever I want."



Beckett had to admit Augustus had a point. "So what do you get out of it?"

"Quite a lot." Augustus leaned back in the seat, his slicker squeaking as he moved, and gave Beckett his spiel. "This is a niche, supplying discerning vampires with mortal victims ordered to specification. I expect you know some Cainites feed only on certain kinds of humans — pre-adolescent girls, fat Latin men, that kind of thing. I'm not sure whether it's a necessity of diet or because it gets their motor running. Bottom line is that it takes time and effort to find these specialty items. And you know few are as good at tracking things down as we are." He meant Gangrel. "I found that some Cainites are willing to offer quite a bit in money or favors to have someone else do the legwork for them."

Looked at long term, Beckett could see how Augustus might position himself as a vital component of vampiric society. He realized he'd been too quick to dismiss the young vampire. "Interesting. But most Cainites with such... singular tastes are secretive about it. How have you been able to inspire their confidence?"

"It hasn't been easy, believe me. I started about oh, seventy or eighty years ago by accident. Stumbled across a fellow who fed only on fat women. I didn't think it was noteworthy, but he almost flew into a frenzy. He calmed enough that I learned the situation. He hated traveling — it was practically a phobia — and that made it tough to find what he needed. So I offered to take care of it for him. He's a powerful son of a bitch, and I figured it was my best chance at leaving there in one piece. Turned out well enough; after a few decades he figured I wasn't going to betray him and even recommended me to some friends." Augustus flashed a smile. "I have a reputation for providing timely and confidential delivery, and I'm willing to fill even the most obscure requests."

Beckett returned a faint smile. "Sounds good, but I don't think I need your services."

"Can't blame me for trying, right?" Augustus chuckled. He wagged an index finger from the steering wheel. "I admit I was surprised Sturgang let you hang around when I made my delivery."

"He must be a new client, then. Sturgang's proclivities are well known."

Augustus nodded. "I see. Regardless, he'll get the same confidential treatment as the rest of them. Must maintain my reputation, right?"

...

Beckett hefted the skull and took another look around the ruins. Augustus had parlayed his little enterprise into a growing global concern in the half-century since the night they'd met. Beckett had parted ways with Augustus having little more personal interest in his fellow Gangrel than he'd started with. Still, he'd kept the vampire in mind for possible future use. Although Beckett had never needed Augustus' official services, he had used him on occasion as a relay for potential leads. Augustus dealt with many well-connected vampires, Cainites who might have information or artifacts useful to Beckett's own pursuits. Rather than try to track them down on his own, Beckett had let Augustus know what he was looking for; the Gangrel passed the word along to his clients and often came back with a useful lead. Augustus also had good connections in mortal society, various unsavory groups and individuals who helped him get the people he needed. Considering the contacts he had in both worlds, Augustus was well situated to have heard about the recent hunter activity.

Beckett had been surprised to learn Augustus was in the New World, let alone in Chicago, at a private estate



in a place called Elk Grove. (Beckett had yet to see either elk or groves, but that was a puzzle for another time.) The entrepreneurial Gangrel was now going by the name Augustus Klein. The assistant in Augustus' European headquarters was cryptic over the unsecured phone, but Beckett learned that the Camarilla-Sabbat conflict had hurt Augustus' network. He'd relocated to the States for a time to get things running smoothly again.

The coincidence was far too convenient for Beckett's liking, but there was nothing to be done about it. He'd felt his best move was to meet with Augustus and find out what he could; only with information could he hope to discover what it all meant in a larger context. Standing here now, holding Augustus' head, it seemed he was on the right track — though, if anything, he was farther from understanding what was going on than he'd been a few nights before. Two nights ago it was a simple matter of information gathering. Then, last night, he discovered that others suspected the Gangrel planned betrayal. And tonight, he found his next best lead, a well-connected member of undead society, was destroyed.

The question was, how did all this information connect? Was Augustus the victim of a hunter attack? That would give Beckett evidence to help disprove Critias and Khalid's claims. Or had the primogen themselves called for Augustus' destruction? If they were monitoring Augustus, they could have found out Beckett planned on visiting. But if they did somehow consider Clan Gangrel a threat, why did they destroy only Augustus? Wouldn't it have made more sense to wait until the two of them were together and take them both out? Unless the key was that Augustus knew something they didn't want revealed to Beckett. Augustus did possess a great deal of information. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility that some force



felt that getting rid of Augustus would solve some problem without requiring Beckett's destruction also. Thank heaven for small favors.

Beckett couldn't even hope to learn anything from those who worked for or associated with Augustus. Although the Gangrel had a number of undead and mortal assistants in his employ, he kept his client information to himself. Augustus' secrets died with him. Indeed, Augustus' entire network was gutted. His subordinates might recover some scraps, but most of his clients would stick to the shadows once they learned of the Gangrel's final death.

Wonderful. For every step Beckett took forward, it seemed he ended up a mile further back. He was beginning to regret ever having come to Chicago.

THREE

Intent as he was on the mystery in which he found himself, Beckett never became distracted from his surroundings. His sharp ears picked up the squeaking crunch of a boot on old snow. The sound came from nearby, within the estate perimeter. That meant it wasn't the police; he would have heard the gates open long before this. Whomever it was had come over the wall or even over the gates themselves, past the yellow tape warning of an accident investigation site. An unofficial visitor, like Beckett.

He turned toward the sound, the hands clasped behind his back still holding Augustus' head. There. A pair of them, hugging the shadows in the copse. Beckett suspected they were trying to approach from downwind, which meant they knew what he was (he already assumed they knew he was there). He pegged them for inexperienced, since if they'd thought about it they would have realized that the stench of the burned-out house would have covered their scent with the additional bonus of not having to walk through brittle, noisy snow.

"I know you're there," he called. "Might as well save us all time and come over."

The two figures stepped out after a moment, walking around the side of what was left of the pool house. Male and female; she was in charge, from the way the



guy shot glances to her as they approached. When they were a dozen feet away Beckett smelled fresh blood and the faint cold stink of death. Vampires, the both of them, and freshly fed.

"You're Beckett," the guy said. "We've heard about you." He was a callow neonate, using bluster to cover his unease at confronting an elder. The woman fired him an irritated look and he shut his mouth.

Beckett looked at the pair of them. The guy was big, well-built. Size mattered little to the undead; still, considering his belligerent opening salvo, it was a safe bet he was along as muscle. He was also probably the one who'd made the noise on their approach. The woman was slender, on the verge between willowy and anorexic. Unlike her partner, it looked like she used her brain for more than keeping her eyes from falling back into her skull. She was the older of the two, though Beckett sensed she had been undead for far less time than Beckett himself.

All things considered, Beckett had faced far more serious threats. It wouldn't do to become overconfident, though.

"You have me at a disadvantage," Beckett said to the woman, "But I'm betting you're Brujah, yes?"

Her brows flickered in surprise. "How do you figure?"

No air puffed from their mouths when they spoke. Vampires needed to breathe only to speak. Like Beckett, they had been outside long enough that their body temperatures had cooled to the point where the air in their lungs was almost as cold as the surrounding night.

"You're not ugly enough to be Nosferatu," he said. She wasn't sure what to make of that reference and Beckett didn't bother explaining. He didn't see why he should tell her his reasoning, which went something



like this: Next to the Gangrel, Clan Brujah had the best fighters the Camarilla. The recent schism gave the Brujah more opportunities for glory while also shoving them on the front lines of conflict with the Sabbat. Critias was the top Brujah in Chicago, and was very protective of his people. And unlike Khalid, he'd never gotten along with Inyanga, the Gangrel primogen. At this point, Beckett was certain the claims of Gangrel betrayal were something Critias started to strengthen the Brujah position even further and perhaps exact retribution on Inyanga for some past slight. And while Beckett assumed Critias and Khalid each put someone on his trail the previous night, the Brujah primogen had the stronger motivation for forcing a confrontation. These two were here to spook Beckett into making a mistake that would strengthen the evidence against his clan.

"That some kind of crack?" the guy said.

The woman glared at her partner. "Shut up, Graham."

"Right. So what can I do for you?" Beckett kept his attention on the woman. Dealing with Graham would only be a waste of time.

"We want to know what you know about what happened here."

Beckett took his time looking around, turning with his shoulders but making sure he kept Augustus' head from their view. "At a guess, I'd say someone burned the place down," he said eventually.

"Okay, smart guy. What do you know about the half-dozen bags who did it?" She meant juice or blood bag, a slang term vampires used for mortals. Beckett was amused at her attitude. Either she was older than he sensed or having a partner made her very confident. Graham was quivering with nervous tension but



the woman confronted Beckett with the cool, relaxed stance of an equal. Distracted by re-evaluating his opponents, Beckett was brought up short when the woman continued: "And the vamp who led them?"

"What? Where did you hear that?"

"Didn't know there was a survivor, did you?" she said. "Some of our people got out here soon as they found out what happened. They found the paramedics working on one of Klein's men. He gave the lowdown on what happened."

"When was this?"

She was pleased with his surprise, and spilled another detail. "Late this morning."

"You're telling me that a vampire led a mortal team here on a dawn raid to destroy Augustus Klein?"

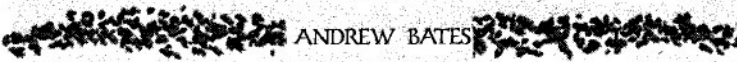
"Don't act so surprised, dog!" Graham spat.

A red haze spread across Beckett's vision. "Careful who you insult, whelp," he snarled, his composure close to gone. "I'm older than sin and twice as dangerous."

Blood sweat popped along Graham's brow as he realized he'd gone too far. He swallowed, a reflex from his living days, and took a couple steps back. To her credit, the willowy woman held her ground in the face of Beckett's bristling rage. Adopting a more somber tone, she said, "That's what we're saying. You know Critias sent us; okay. Well, he thinks you know something about it, based on your conversation last night."

"You can tell your master that I don't. You can tell him that I know as much as he does about what's going on in this city — less, even. You can tell him that I will find out, though. And no amount of threats, intimidation, or upstart fledglings are going to stop me."

"Who you calling fledgling, you mangy—" Graham snarled back, his jittery nerves overwhelming





caution. Beckett never heard the rest of it, as the second insult from that punk in as many minutes was enough to push him over the edge.

Beckett lunged forward, grabbing Graham by the throat. "You think you can insult an elder with impunity because I am not a part of your precious Camarilla?" His other hand swung around Augustus' mummified skull. Shoving the head right into the young vampire's face, Beckett growled, "See this? This is the Final Death. This is your end, should you *dare* breathe another word to me."

A panicked Graham struggled against Beckett's grip, but the Gangrel's blood was far more potent. Then Beckett felt the cold barrel of a pistol against the back of his head. "I expect you're old enough this wouldn't kill you outright," the woman said from behind him, "but it'd sure hurt like hell. Now let him go and give us some answers in a civilized manner."

Beckett struggled through the red for control. Forcing a deep breath into his atrophied lungs, he shoved Graham back and raised his hands. The pressure left his head a second later; even as he turned Beckett saw the woman was a good fifteen feet away. The Brujah were fast when they wanted to be.

"Who's that?" she said, gesturing at the skull with her pistol.

"Just a clanmate of mine," he said. He tossed Augustus' head at her and was already a wolf running for the wall when she bobbled a sloppy one-handed catch.

Graham yelled for him to stop, but Beckett was already over the wall and in a ground-eating lope that had him miles away within minutes. He wasn't even aware that he passed within inches of a wizened Nosferatu who crouched, invisible, watching the whole thing.



...

Beckett's return to the estate was less dramatic than his exit. He crept up from the north, the direction the two Brujah had approached him. He *whuffed* in frustration at the encounter. He felt certain he could have defeated the pair of them, even spotting them a free point-blank shot to the head. He wasn't as ancient as some undead, but he was old by any measure. Fighting them would have been a welcome release of his growing frustration, but it would have caused him further problems with Critias and his brood. Things were getting complicated enough without adding that to the mix.

Anyway, that wasn't why his fur bristled with irritation. He'd let some punk get him to lose control. He was letting others dictate his actions.

His stealthy return was an attempt to change that. He had to find out what was going on if he was going to cease being someone's pawn. So here he was, slipping over the old snow like a whisper. He was light enough in this form that he didn't punch through the crust, as long as he took care how he stepped. Silent and fluid as a shadow, he came to the wall. After a few dozen yards he found their footprints, crunched through the snow. Two sets going in, none coming out. Either they were still on the estate or they'd left in some other direction. He took a gamble and leapt to the top of the wall; no one in sight, so he dropped to the ground inside and slunk toward the house. His nose was next to useless downwind thanks to the stench of burnt wood, so he relied on his eyes and ears to search for his quarry. Nothing. So how long ago had they left?

He was considering sniffing around where they'd had their chat when he heard the faint roar of an



engine. Beckett's head snapped up, body quivering in anticipation, ears flicking to orient on the location. Then he was off, racing across the landscaped ground and over the stone wall again. He caught tail-lights flickering down the road. He took the time to run over to the roadside; trotting along with his nose to the icy pavement, he caught a whiff of Graham. Hadn't been close enough to get a good smell of the woman, but that was fine. He felt sure they were in the car heading away.

A low bark of satisfaction and Beckett was away again.

• • •

He caught up with the car — a late model SUV; apparently no one drove sedans any more — with little trouble. It headed south no more than a mile, and turned right as he pulled close. Not like they were trying to lose him; instead, they pulled into an extensive complex. Something built in the mode of "Modern Functional": plain and blocky, with the barest effort made at visual appeal. The gutted remains of Augustus' estate was more inviting. Beckett caught the sign: Alexian Brothers Medical Center. He coughed a wolfish laugh. A Christian hospital? But there it was, the logo even showing a shield with a cross atop it and the words of St. Paul: *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*. The love of Christ compels us.

Beckett wasn't in the mood to consider the levels of irony coming into play. Instead, he slipped around the pools of light cast by the regularly spaced streetlamps as he followed the SUV. The car turned left, then swung a right out of sight around the front of a four- or five-story slab of a building with a red brick finish. Beckett dashed across the open ground and hugged the building as he slipped around the



corner. The large structure he was against connected to a low semicircular two-story glass-and-steel expanse; the hospital's main entrance. He slipped along the building's edge and into the shadows where the two structures met. His hackles rose in superstitious reflex at the large metal cross planted perhaps a hundred feet from the main entrance. It couldn't do him any harm, he knew, but old habits were hard to break.

The SUV had stopped in a small lot not far from the cross. The two Cainites got out of the car and headed for the main entrance, their path taking them perpendicular to his hiding place. Beckett swiveled his ears to catch their conversation. It sounded like they were continuing an argument that'd been going on since he left them.

"—supposed to do, Sylvia?" Graham complained. "He knew we were there."

Silence, and the woman's head turn away from Beckett. He suspected she was directing a withering glare at her partner. "And how'd he know we were there? Mister Makes-As-Much-Noise-As-A-Fucking-Elephant? You do know what you are, right? You don't have to stomp around like that anymore."

"Give me a break. Bet you were just like me when you were a... whaddayacallit?"

"'Neonate,' and no, I wasn't. Y'know, Graham, you need to learn this stuff or you're going to fall in some major shit someday."

"This whole assignment is shit, Sylvia," Graham grumbled, gesturing toward the hospital. "Like this sorry sonofabitch. You know we're not going to find out a damn thing more than Earl did."

"We can be more persuasive than a ghoul," Sylvia said, tiring of Graham's complaining.



"Yeah, well, I bet you. We'll learn more from Klein's fucking head than fro—"

A thundering roar split Beckett's head in two. He'd boosted his hearing so much that it sounded like he was inside the engine of the jet angling toward O'Hare. The shock startled a pained whine from him. He shifted forms, his preternatural hearing in his human shape nowhere near as sensitive. He cursed, pressing his hands to his ears. The ringing faded to a dull ache; he expected it would be gone in another minute. In the meantime, the Brujah had entered the hospital. On the whole, his aching ears had given him little more than he already knew, but every piece added to the whole.

The Brujah must have an inside track if they could waltz in in the dead of night to see a patient. If it weren't already so common, Beckett would have enjoyed the irony that Cainites had staff at a Christian hospital under its thrall. He considered following them, but decided to wait. He wanted to pay a visit to whomever they were seeing, but he was better off passing the time outside. The cold didn't bother him, and he imagined his hairy, wickedly clawed hands and blazing, inhuman eyes might discomfit the staff. The price he paid for his immortal nature. Like any Gangrel, he was left marked with the sign of the Beast whenever his feral side overwhelmed him. He was luckier than most, especially considering his age. He knew others of his clan who were so warped by savagery that they were monstrous in every sense of the word.

Hunkered in the cold and darkness for twenty minutes, he saw no one leave the hospital. It was far past visiting hours, of course, but he would have thought employees might come and go. Then again, the place was big. They must have their own entrance.



Another few minutes passed, then something caught his eye. He could have sworn he saw one of the doors in the SUV open just for a second. Beckett focused on the car. After another minute or two he caught a hazy flicker of motion. If he hadn't had a clear idea of what he was watching for, he would have dismissed it as a trick of the light. Curious and more curious.

Then the Brujah came back out. Graham was crowing about how he'd been right, they hadn't gotten anything new. It was more irritating than when he complained. Beckett prided himself on his self-control, and was surprised Sylvia could refrain from caving in her partner's skull. Beckett suspected Graham would not enjoy a long existence as one of the undead.

The double slam of their doors was followed soon after by Graham's yell of surprise. Beckett lacked the heightened extremes of his wolf's hearing but Graham still had quite a set of lungs on him.

"What the fuck? The head's gone!"

•••

Beckett seldom changed forms as often as he had tonight. It took a lot out of him. Unfortunately, his best chance of tracking the Nosferatu who'd swiped Augustus' head from the SUV was by smell, which meant becoming a wolf again. He felt a gnawing hunger in his heart, the vampire equivalent of a mortal's empty stomach, as he concentrated on the change. He ignored the bloodlust as best he could. Drifting through the shadows, Beckett searched for the Nosferatu's scent. He'd never smelled the creature before, but he felt confident that he'd know it when he came across it. The Nosferatu were skilled at cloaking themselves in invisibility, baffling even other vampires' senses so that they saw — or smelled, or heard — nothing. But that was



only in the immediate area. The pungent buggers couldn't disguise the scent they left behind.

Beckett was curious as to why the creature had felt the need to take the skull. The Nosferatu concentrated on gathering information, not knickknacks. Knowing what it was and who had it was all they needed. Unless for some reason the invisible watcher hadn't wanted the Brujah to have it. Mysteries upon mysteries. Typical Cainite behavior. It reminded Beckett why he spent so little time among his kind.

He made a wide loop of the spot where the SUV was parked, ending up in the V on the opposite end of the main entrance's crescent where it connected to another large multi-story red brick structure. He'd smelled nothing. Puzzled, he settled on his haunches and watched the Brujah. The two vampires were finishing a futile search in and around the car, still trying to figure out what had happened to their prize. Their frantic conversation bounced off the walls he sat between, echoing in the still night. Seemed they were accusing him of sneaking back and swiping the head. Quite the argument to have in front of a hospital, bickering about where a head had gone missing. Good thing there was no one around to hear.

Beckett wished they would give up and leave already. The Nosferatu was getting farther away by the minute. He wanted to sniff around the SUV to catch the creature's trail before it faded away. Another minute of complaining by Graham and they got in, fired up the motor, and headed out. Beckett dashed to where they'd parked as soon as the SUV hit the main road. Some fierce sniffing around on the packed snow gave up a faint but still pungent trace of something. Beckett knew it wasn't either of the Brujah or



the skull itself. Had to be the Nos. He circled out from where he'd found the scent and picked up a faint trail toward the hospital. He could tell that it was colder than the original scent he'd found, though, and figured the spy had followed Sylvia and Graham inside, then darted out before them to steal the skull. So if that was the only trail he'd found, where could the thing have got to? Only if it had flown away would Beckett not catch the scent of something this distinctive; and Nosferatu couldn't fly. So that meant—

Beckett looked at the direction the SUV had gone. The thing was in, or on, the goddamn car. Of course; he rode out here that way, too. It would be like Khalid to sneak his spies after Critias' people, knowing full well they'd lead to Beckett. Easier than trying to track a vampire who traveled as an animal. So now what? Run like hell and try to catch the car again? His nose could parse the scents unique even to a mass-produced hunk of metal, but there wasn't much point. He'd surmised whom Graham and Sylvia were working for. And while it was clear a Nosferatu was a second shadow, Beckett knew its kind were too slippery to leave him a trail he could follow anywhere worthwhile. No, it seemed his strongest lead at the moment was in the—

"Hey! Hey, you! Get out of here!"

A heavyset man — more heavy than set, really — in a security guard uniform stood by the hospital's front doors. He held a small canister in one hand and was waving a baton in Beckett's direction with the other. Beckett snorted, realizing the guard was trying to scare off the huge black wolf standing in the middle of the parking lot. Then he caught a whiff of the man's scent, his freezing sweat mixed with fear. The hunger



surged within Beckett. Instead of tearing out the man's throat and gulping down his rich blood, Beckett flattened his ears and gave a menacing growl, then turned and vanished into the darkness.

It was pointless to go after the SUV, but there was still a worthwhile lead inside the hospital. He had to regain his strength first. Circling back the way he'd first come, Beckett saw another road went around the back of the sprawling medical center. A small frozen pond lay to the north, and he spied a well-lit parking area perhaps a quarter full of cars to the west of it, with a multi-level garage beyond. He trotted over, sticking to the darkness, and saw signs declaring Employee Parking. He couldn't see the moon through the cloud cover and he didn't wear a watch, but he'd been undead for a very long time. He could sense midnight approaching; if this place was like most hospitals, a shift change was coming up.

Beckett found a dark vantage point in the night that gave him a clear view of the parking lot and settled down to wait. After less than an hour a number of people left the back of the medical center and headed for their cars. Over the same span, a trickle of vehicles arrived and their drivers hustled in to start their shifts. Beckett waited; there were always stragglers. Another hour passed and the cold seeped into his long dead bones.

The woman shuffled over the icy pavement to an older model minivan, snuggled into her parka. She idled the van, warming its engine, then put it in gear to back out of the slot. The van rolled back a couple feet, then came a yelp and a thump. The woman slammed the breaks, skidding the minivan a few inches before the tires grabbed asphalt. She was out of the



van and headed around the back as soon as she heard the pitiful whines. Instead of the neighborhood dog she thought she'd struck, the woman saw a gigantic wolf, its pelt the color of coal. A low growl replaced the whines, and eyes blazing with the promise of death locked on her own.

Beckett was upon her before she could take a breath to scream.

...

Beckett rushed through the hospital's emergency entrance, situated on the building's west side. Waving his gloved hands, he was yelling even before the automatic doors had opened. "Help! Help! A woman— A large dog or something attacked her! She's hurt!"

It was a skeleton staff, a quiet night in the suburbs, but they sprang into action with admirable speed. "Where?" an orderly yelled while the resident barked out orders. Beckett made noises about employee parking and waved some more. A flurry of scrubs and lab coats rushed from the building along with portable medical gear. Beckett took advantage of the few seconds the lobby was empty and slipped further in the hospital.

...

After that, it was a matter of avoiding what staff was around while trying to pick up any lingering scent of his Brujah friends and follow it to wherever they were keeping Augustus' man. Avoiding personnel was easy enough late at night in a place this size. Finding the scent was the tough part. His human nose, even preternaturally sensitive, could not defeat the medical center's superior air circulation systems. Beckett ended up tracking it down the old-fashioned way: he found a room with a man guarding the door. A beefy



fellow with a buzz cut and an ill-fitting suit was holding down a chair by a corner room on the fourth floor of the central hospital block that arose behind the main entrance. The ghoul Earl, Beckett guessed; drinking from a Coke and belching. Not many Cainites to go around these days, especially for something basic as guard duty.

Beckett's long stride had him halfway down the corridor before the man even registered he was there. Beckett thought at first that Earl had an earpiece microphone, but when he turned and lumbered to his feet it was clear the guard was listening to a portable disc player. "Distractions like that could get you killed," Beckett observed.

Earl was tugging the earpieces out, his face curdled with suspicion. "What's that?"

"I said, 'Did Sylvia fill you in already?'" Six feet closer.

"Yeah, but—" Realization bloomed on his florid mug. "Shit! You're him!"

Beckett lunged the last four yards, his claws through the fingers of his glove and at the ghoul's throat by the time the man cleared the gun from its holster. "Big piece of hardware, but you think it would have stopped me?"

"S-special new rounds; call 'em Salamanders." Sweat flowed from Earl's forehead like he was standing under a faucet. His eyes bugged, shock giving way to the realization that his life was about to end. "D-dunno why; s'posed to be good for, well, uh—"

"Mythologically, a salamander could breathe fire, Earl. Why don't I take that before you hurt yourself?"

The ghoul gave up the pistol without a second thought. He gobbled air, eyes still riveted on the dark lenses of Beckett's sunglasses. "Sure, sure thing. Hey,



I'm not Earl, though. Name's Pete. You looking for him? 'Cause he's gone; not here. Uh, you're not going to kill me, are you? Please don't kill me. I don't wanna die. I'm just do—"

"You're babbling, Pete." Beckett flashed some teeth; if it was meant as a reassuring smile, it failed miserably. "Relax, my friend. I want a few minutes with the man inside. You can spare a few minutes, right?"

Pete ducked his head in a frantic nod, grimacing as he poked his heavy chin on Beckett's talons. Beckett gestured with his head for the ghoul to head for the room then stepped back, jamming the pistol in the pocket of his sheepskin jacket.

It was a private room, the hospital bed to the right and a couple low-backed padded chairs against the wall opposite the door. Windows wrapped around half the room, the shades drawn across the night. A door stood to either side of the bed; the near one was closed, while the far one was open to show a hint of bathroom tile along the lower wall.

A man dozed in the bed, a tube stuck in his arm and some others coming from his nostrils. Beckett didn't know what the equipment by his bedside was meant to do. He knew patients had panic buttons, but that was taken away with little effort — which Beckett did after shoving Pete forward and pointing at one of the chairs across the room. The trick was interviewing Augustus' guard without getting him so excited his vitals triggered an alarm at the nurse's station. He'd do what he could. No sense trying to plan around something he couldn't control.

Before waking the patient, Beckett checked out the near door, which turned out to be a closet. A parka hung inside, a pair of gloves sticking out of one pocket.



Winter boots lay on the floor, but there were no other clothes. He wondered where the rest of the man's clothes were. Perhaps they were cut off him when he was brought in. A glance showed the man was in a neck brace; it was hard to tell how he'd fared otherwise, under covers as he was. Beckett dismissed the line of thought. Not his problem. After a glance at the shredded fingers of his gloves, he took the pair from the parka and closed the door.

Beckett moved down the side of the bed to stand to one side near the foot. This put him in the patient's line of sight but not looming, and let him keep Pete in his peripheral vision. The ghoul was rubbing his throat, bulging eyes flicking between Beckett and the slumbering man. He shouldn't be a problem for the time being.

The scuffle in the hall hadn't awakened the patient. Neither had shoving into the room. He might be drugged, but hopefully not too heavily. One way to find out. Beckett shook the man's foot, noticing the chart hanging at the end of the bed as he did so. The man made a noncommittal noise deep in his throat and shifted on the crisp sheets. Beckett grabbed the chart and clacked the back of the clipboard against the bed like he was rapping a gavel for order.

"Come on... William," he said, reading the first name off the chart. "Time is of the essence." He shook the man's foot again but to no avail. "Pete, get some water from the bathroom and splash his face."

Pete stared at him, like it was some kind of trick. Beckett snarled; how turbulent were things in this town that the Brujah resorted to ghouls of this caliber? Beckett turned his gaze on the cowering ghoul. "Did I stutter?"



Pete shot to his feet like a thousand volts were pumped through his scrotum. Then, from the bathroom, came his voice: "Uh, there's no cup. What am I supposed to use?"

Beckett saw a cup next to the bed, but didn't bother mentioning it. "Use your hands, use your mouth; use the bedpan for all I care. You had better start using your brain, whatever you do."

Beckett listened to the trickle of water as he looked over the chart. William Decorah, male, late 20s, Native American. He puzzled over the term, then recalled this era's obsession with creating more "empowering" labels for its various peoples. Native American, Indian, redskin, savage — the distinctions were of no matter to him. Mortal was mortal.

Pete stepped from the bathroom, cupping a handful of water that dripped on the floor. He shuffled over and tossed the water on Decorah. It was no great deluge, but William sputtered, eyes pulling open with great effort, like they had 100-pound weights tied to them. Decorah looked around, moving only his eyes, his brain still in neutral.

"Give him another handful," Beckett said. Pete went back and stuck his hands under the still-running faucet. He came out more confidently this time and lobbed a nice splash across Decorah's face. That got his eyelids working, anyway. They fluttered, trying to clear the water away. He caught sight of Beckett standing at the foot of his bed and tried to focus. A frown of concentration pulled down his face. Good enough; Decorah would be a little out of it from sleep and the drugs, but he should be conscious enough to answer questions. Hopefully any mental sluggishness would work in Beckett's favor, making Decorah more forthcoming rather than scattered. Have to see.



Beckett waved Pete back to the chair. The ghoul was settling down; he took the time to turn the faucet off, unasked, before returning to his seat.

"Who are you?" William Decorah croaked. His voice had the timbre of sandpaper on wood.

"An acquaintance of Augustus Klein's."

A rasping chuckle. "Yeah? I don't much trust Klein's 'acquaintances' nowadays." Decorah looked down the length of his prone form and the chuckle curdled into an angry groan.

Beckett wasn't a doctor, but he had puzzled out a few words from the man's chart. Things like "spinal injury," "extensive nerve damage," and "paralysis." From what he understood of what he'd read, Decorah wasn't fully paralyzed, and he might regain feeling in his legs. Still, Beckett suspected that likelihood fell in the same category as Luxembourg becoming the next world superpower — anything was possible.

"So what happened?"

"Yeah, like you don't know." Decorah smacked his lips, trying to slurp in some of the water trickling from his face. "Damn, I'm thirsty." He reached for a plastic container by his bedside, his grip almost too weak to even lift it. He managed to position the cup where he could suck on the straw that poked out of the top. He grimaced, but paused to complain, "Apple juice is warm. Tastes all sour."

Beckett was amused at the man's attitude. Decorah knew what Beckett was, but given his present circumstance it wasn't making much of an impression. "I don't. Just got into town."

"Yeah? Why don't you have your pals fill you in and let me get some sleep, for fuck's sake?" Decorah sketched a weak nod at Pete. "Or is this one of those deals where you get me to spill again, to see if I can stick to my story?"



The guy was proving more alert than Beckett had expected. But he was talking, which was the important thing. "I'm not with them. I have more in common with Klein, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't." He grimaced around another sip of the tepid juice. "Look, it doesn't matter to me who the hell you are. You could've known Klein since grade school for all I care. Amounts to the same thing: He's dead — for good — and I'm not telling you jack."

Which implied he hadn't told the Brujah anything, either. Interesting. Made Beckett wonder why Decorah was living in relative comfort in a private hospital room, rather than enduring tortures most foul in some basement. "Pete, why the special treatment?"

The Brujah ghoul was surprised to be the target of a question. Under Beckett's piercing gaze, Pete discovered he wasn't as confident as Decorah that he could get away with pissing off a vampire. "I dunno. When we heard about what happened, he was already here. They pulled some strings to get him set up in a nicer room and gave the word that he was supposed to be kept safe."

"So has anyone even been here to see him?"

"Hell yes," Decorah replied, while Pete nodded. "You fuckers falling all over yourselves promising me the stars if I can tell what happened. Give it up, pal. This game won't work any better than the others. I mean, it's not like I can get in any worse shape, and I sure as hell ain't gonna get any better."

Beckett smiled, thinking this mortal knew very little about the undead if he thought that he couldn't suffer any more than he was already. Torture wasn't a tactic Beckett used often, though. He preferred the carrot to the stick.



"How long had Augustus been in Chicago?" He asked Pete.

The guard hesitated, but it was for show at this point, and they both knew it. "About three, four months."

"Yet he was already well-established here. Had people in place, a network set up, for a few years already?"

Pete nodded, hunching over as if he could somehow disappear if he curled into a tight enough ball.

"But you," Beckett said, turning to Decorah, "you just started working for him; say within the past two months."

Decorah nodded, then cursed. Not from the pain, but from letting slip information. The drugs weren't making him stupid, but they were making it tough on his self-control. "How'd you know that?"

"I could say because Augustus Klein and I were very close and he told me everything, so you know you can trust me. But it was a calculated guess." Beckett removed his gloves, ruined one first, while he thought aloud. "So this is curious. From what I do know about Augustus, he's cautious about bringing on new people. Prefers to work through intermediaries for years, testing his underlings' mettle. I expect most never meet him. And yet you did, and in the space of a few months."

Decorah didn't nod this time. Beckett put his gloves in the sheepskin jacket, then stuffed his "new" pair in as well. "The question arises: What would make a cautious creature like Augustus reveal his presence — indeed, his very nature — to one such as you?"

Back to Pete. "What do you know about our friend?"

"Not much. I got the call to show up here about 9 PM. Uh, Earl was watching him since they found out he'd been taken here."

“But your people never encountered him before? As far as you know.”

A shrug. “Don’t think so. Earl is our lead on days; he’s pretty well in the loop so he knows what to keep an eye on, right? But yeah, didn’t look like he knew the guy from Adam. ‘One of Klein’s men,’ was about all he said.”

Beckett considered tracking this Earl down. Maybe later, if he didn’t find what he needed here. “You’re in someone’s circle, though, aren’t you?” he asked Decorah. “From the way you’re acting, I think you know less about this city’s Cainite politics than I do. Yet you know about us, what we are, even if it’s in the most general of terms. You—”

“Jesus! He’s not one of them hunters?!”

Pete was already on his feet and lunging at the bed. His loyalty was commendable and his conclusion showed he was brighter than he looked. Still, even if Beckett hadn’t already discarded the possibility, Decorah’s clear confusion would have convinced him. He grabbed Pete and squeezed enough to get his attention, then flicked his eyes back to the chair.

“No, he’s not. He is, however, working for someone else.”

• • •

“It’s the only thing that explains Augustus’ behavior. He wouldn’t hire someone for his personal security detail even on the say-so of one of his own trusted men. You have to work up to that.” Pete nodded; Augustus Klein wasn’t the only one who worked that way. “But if you were recommended by someone Augustus trusted — as much as any of our kind trust anyone, that is — well, that’s a different tale.”

William Decorah kept his features still, but he couldn’t control the flush that spread across his face.



Beckett moved closer to the head of the bed, leaning in as if to share a confidence. "What I don't understand is why this friend would recommend someone unschooled in our nature. When you work at that level, a trusted retainer must know all he can to protect his master."

"Klein wasn't my master!" Decorah spat. "I answer to no one but Pale Wolf!" His eyes widened and he closed his mouth with an audible snap, but the damage was done. The drugs had loosened his tongue enough.

Beckett shot a look at Pete, who shrugged, just as puzzled. "Never heard of him. Some other Indian, or one of, um, you know..." he gestured at Beckett. Meaning a Gangrel, like him. Perhaps; unfortunately, the name meant nothing. His clan didn't keep membership rolls, and the name sounded like the kind of generic alias any vampire might use, particularly the Gangrel. All a part of their almost tribal habit of naming. "Ranulf Runs-Like-The-Wind" and that kind of thing.

Beckett leaned his elbows against the metal railing on the side of the bed. "All right, William. Now we're getting somewhere. I expect from your expression that your caretakers don't know about this 'Pale Wolf,' and you wanted to keep it that way." Decorah's embarrassed flush and angry glare confirmed as much. "Makes sense; they were only interested in what happened at the estate. You're lucky they're more interested in me at the moment. Otherwise they would have taken their time picking your brain about everything you know. And I don't mean that figuratively."

Standing straight, he looked around the room. "That doesn't mean they won't come back for a more thorough go-round. It's not as if you're going anywhere, right?"



Decorah stared daggers. "What's your point?" he asked, low in his throat.

"What if you weren't here to answer their questions?"

"Oh, so you threaten to kill me? That doesn't mean much, considering. Do me a favor."

Beckett shook his head. "I was thinking more that you could walk out of here."

Pete's gasp of surprise contrasted with Decorah's narrow look of distaste. "I'd rather die than become one of you." Beckett found that an interesting comment, considering the man's loyalty to this "Pale Wolf." That wasn't what he'd meant, anyway, so he let it go.

"You know how a vampire's blood works, William? It is a powerful thing, this blood. It grants us abilities the likes of which you can only imagine. It is a force unto itself, capable of far more than sustaining my kind in this semblance of life. It has the capacity for destruction... and for healing."

Pete was about having a fit in the corner, while Decorah's expression had shifted into suspicion tinged with hope. "What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm saying. By drinking the blood of a vampire, a mortal can heal even most grievous wounds, yet not become one of the undead himself."

Beckett saw that Decorah *had* heard of this, in fact, also confirming that Augustus hadn't given him his own blood. If he had, Decorah would have been his ghoul, would have been able to heal himself at least somewhat already.

A calculating look stole across Decorah's face. "And what is it you want in return?"

"I think you know that, too."

FOUR

Beckett stood at the window, drapes racked open, considering Decorah's story. There was the chance the man was lying, but Beckett didn't think so. He knew how to read people, and seldom had he met a mortal who could slip one by him. Then there were the painkillers and who knew what else Decorah struggled against to remain lucid. It wasn't as noticeable when he could fall back on attitude and ignorance, but once he tried to reconstruct his memory, the strain was more apparent.

He'd given a brief yet rational narrative. Beckett thought that any attempts at misinformation would have been obvious. Still, it would be foolish not to check his story for holes.

"So you never got a good look at the man who injured you," he commented, glancing at the reflection of the bed in the glass.

"Nothing worthwhile. Like I said: I turned around when I heard the first gunshots and there was a white guy about my height, thin, and wearing black. After that, I was too busy being thrown over the wall."

"But he ran past where you fell; nothing there?"

"I broke my back landing on top of that goddamn brick mailbox. I was focused more on that, you know?"

Beckett turned his head. "Nothing at all comes to mind? Not even the shoes he wore? Even lying on the



ground writhing in agony, you might still have seen his shoes as he ran past."

"Yeah... maybe." A pause while Decorah dredged through his muddled memories. "You know, I think he wore dress shoes. Patent leather?"

"Really? Hmm. So the black outfit could have been a suit rather than paramilitary gear." Decorah's reflection nodded. "But everyone in the group that left before the explosion wore combat gear."

"The sun was full on them as they went by, so I'm pretty sure."

"But you couldn't tell if the one they carried was alive or not?"

"It was all I could do to stay conscious from the pain, man. They ran past along the side of the road; all I could tell was they were carrying someone. Thought at first it might've been Klein, except the sun was already up."

Beckett nodded. He was certain hunters had set upon Augustus Klein. Piecing together what he'd observed at the estate with what little Decorah was able to tell him, it didn't sound like any inter-clan rivalry, nor anything any other type of supernatural would do. That was the key, of course: *supernatural*. The whole endeavor — except for the figure in black who threw a grown man over a ten foot high stone wall — sounded too mundane. Even vampires carried guns, but they were often merely backup, at least against their own kind. And a dawn raid sounded like the kind of thing mortals would do against an undead foe.

What bothered him was this black-clad man, the man in patent-leather shoes, the man who left the grounds ahead of the group... the man with superhuman strength who was up and about in the daylight.

Critias and Khalid were wrong about the Gangrel, but perhaps they were nonetheless not far off-course after all.



"This is all most helpful, William," Beckett said. "And now I suppose it's my turn."

He turned from the window and stepped over to the bed, taking in Decorah's distrustful look and Pete's nervous one. This is where the double-cross would come, of course. Decorah expected Beckett to leave or kill him, while Pete expected the latter fate for himself. He focused on William, drawing him in with his eyes. "As I said before, you shall have to drink my blood to be healed. Ingest it, then concentrate on your injuries. Think about restoring yourself. Think of nothing else but that. You'll feel a warmth, a burning spread to wherever you've been hurt. As long as it hasn't been too long and you aren't too seriously injured, it should be enough to get you on your feet again."

"I don't know how you can get more seriously injured than a broken back," Decorah rasped.

"Everything is relative." Beckett held out his left arm and turned the wrist up. Extending the talon on his index finger, he cut into the cold flesh of his wrist and pulled the sharp claw down an inch. Rich, dark blood welled up. Beckett turned his wrist and let the blood trickle into Decorah's cup, long-since emptied of juice during his rasping account. With a force of will, Beckett urged the blood through his veins. The trickle became a stream, spattering against the plastic in rhythmic spurts in time with the renewed beating of his heart.

That's when Pete made his move.

The ghoul must have burned the vampiric blood within him, for he moved with preternatural speed toward the door. Beckett had been expecting Pete to try something, either an attack or escape. It made sense; here was the apparent enemy working together — an elder Gangrel making a deal with the lackey of



another. By Pete's calculations, that must have meant he was to be disposed of after they completed their business, which was soon upon them.

That thought had crossed Beckett's mind, but he'd dismissed it some time ago. He needed Pete alive.

Decorah might have assumed Pete was lunging toward him, then the ghoul was a blur out the door and down the hall. Beckett forced another surge of blood into the container, then willed his wound to heal. The vitae trickled to a stop. Decorah looked in surprise through the open doorway, then with suspicion at the cup and at Beckett, who was donning his gloves once again.

"Your choice, William," Beckett said, and then he was gone.

• • •

Beckett had no intention of trying to catch Pete. He had to make it look good for any security cameras or hidden Nosferatu, though. He wanted Critias and Khalid and their respective broods to know what Decorah had seen. It was the best way he could disprove their theory about the Gangrel. Letting Pete go would make them predisposed to discount anything he told them, hence this *faux* chase scene.

He was weakened from having drained away some of his blood, so he had an excuse not to push himself. Still, he moved fast, his preternatural hearing picking up the click of a stairwell door and the faint staccato clanging of Pete's rapid descent. Beckett ran after, his own feet flashing down steps. He was on the third floor landing when he heard the ground floor door slam open. Rushing down, he cracked open the door, poked his head out and checked both directions (somewhat melodramatically) — nothing. He could hear retreating footsteps, sounded like they



were going for employee parking. He stood in the hall, making a show of scenting the air before heading down the hall toward the main visitor's lot, which happened to lie in the opposite direction.

Beckett was outside a minute later, looking around for Pete and throwing in a few curses for good measure. When he felt he'd put on enough of a show, he jogged north into the darkness, and back toward Augustus Klein's estate.

...

He paused by the estate's front gate, dismissing the yellow police tape that dangled across the wrought iron. There, in a lump of plowed snow by the roadside, was a small stone structure. It looked almost like a tiny brick oven, but Beckett saw it housed a mailbox. The snow was trampled around its rear, in the space between it and the wall. From the look of things, it did appear that Decorah could have landed there, his back snapping against the unyielding brick. If he'd rolled over afterward... yes, he could well have been facing the street, propped in the snow. He would have been visible to anyone going by — the only reason he survived, since the firemen or paramedics must have seen him when they pulled into the gate. But the hunters, hell-bent on fleeing the scene, must have missed him or assumed he was dead.

So if Decorah saw them run past, which way had they come from and where had they gone? Decorah claimed he passed out after that, so Beckett didn't know if they'd stood around and danced a jig. He would assume they fled the area. Beckett walked along the road that ran beside the property, looking over the snow for traces of passage. This would be easier as a wolf, but he'd made enough transformations tonight.

Fifty yards down he found it: A patch of snow churned up from the passage of multiple feet. There



were even spatters of dull red. The police would have to have been blind or in the Cainites' pocket to have overlooked something like this. He knelt and picked up a handful of snow decorated with crimson. A dab of his tongue confirmed it was blood, frozen for almost a day, but unmistakable to the rarified tastes of a vampire. He suppressed a reflexive shiver at the flavor. He could hear that he was still alone, so he didn't bother looking around before leaping over the wall. He landed on the balls of his feet and loped back over to the breezeway separating the house and the pool.

He found Augustus' arms where he'd left them. Like he, the Brujah hadn't deemed them of any immediate importance. The Nosferatu shadowing them must have been watching from a distance, otherwise he would have absconded with the arms like he did the head. Beckett picked up the right arm, holding the curled, clawed hand under his nose. He sniffed and caught the faint but unmistakable coppery scent of blood. His tongue flicked out and probed under the fingernails. It came away with bits of flesh and embedded grit. Mortal flesh, with mortal blood. The same blood he'd tasted outside the wall.

It appeared Augustus had at least hurt one of the hunters before he'd been destroyed. Had Augustus killed him? Beckett didn't think so. Otherwise the hunters were best served leaving their downed man to be consumed by the fire. So where would mortals take someone so grievously wounded he had to be carried away?

A hospital, of course.

Beckett suspected it would be too convenient that he would find his quarry at Alexian Brothers. If nothing else, he was sure the Cainites would have swept the place after hearing the news and rounded up suspects. Now was a bad time to go back and check, regardless.



There were sure to be more Brujah goons checking the place to see if he was still there and to try rounding up William Decorah — if the man had drunk the blood and used its potency to restore his spinal injury. Then Beckett realized that, if Decorah hadn't, the Brujah would have a sample of Beckett's blood. Few knew the secrets of blood magic even among Cainites. The Brujah weren't known to practice such things — neither were the Gangrel, for that matter, though Beckett had picked up some tricks through the centuries. There was always a danger, though. Should have poured the stuff into the man's mouth — or not given him any at all. Anger surged through him, directed inward. What an amateurish mistake! He'd been so focused on tying the pieces of the puzzle together that he'd left himself open. Beckett forced the Beast back down after a minute of intense internal struggle. He had to hope that Decorah was all that he'd seemed, and that he'd ingested the blood as directed. Regardless of his own wishes, it wasn't as if he could do anything about it.

Thinking of blood magic sparked further inspiration that drew him from his smoldering fury. He had learned some thaumaturgical rites; perhaps one would be of use now. It would not be easy considering how little he had to work with. If he could scrape together enough of the raw material he needed....

• • •

Two hours later, Beckett was as ready as he was going to get. The sun would rise in a couple hours and he felt exhaustion creeping around the edges of his awareness. The many uses of his vampiric disciplines in a single night was tiring. There was no question of putting off the ritual, though. Too much time would have passed. He might not be able to draw the necessary essence by the next sunset.



Laid out before him in the crumbling old mill he'd chosen as his lair were Augustus' arms, cleaned of as much earth as possible, and a small pile of blood-soaked snow in a tiny silver bowl he carried in his sheepskin jacket. He'd tracked the spattered blood trail all the way to a small copse near the estate — where tire tracks tore through the scattered patches of snow to the nearby road — scooping up every drop he could. Being cold as death, he didn't have to worry about melting any of the snow and losing the precious blood. Still, it made for a meager amount to work magic upon. He was lucky he attempted a simple working. He'd exerted himself quite a bit this evening, and such a minor thaumaturgy would come close to wiping him out.

He began the casting, a susuration spilling from his lips as he focused his will. Beckett snapped off Augustus' right index finger, then moved the arms side by side, palms up. Into them he placed the bowl, laying the finger across the top of the bloody snow. Then he drew a talon across each of his own palms and swiveled his wrists so that his hands were held in a reflection of Augustus' dead ones.

The snow burst upward in a sudden blast of steam when his blood dripped into the bowl. Beckett continued his subdued chanting, his eyes riveted to the bubbling blood. The finger was stained a rich red and threatened to spill out of the small saucer as it tumbled in the boiling fluid. He concentrated to close the wounds on his palms, but made no move to keep the bobbing finger in place. Despite threatening capsizes, it remained in the bowl. Beckett held still except for his lips, which moved ever faster as if the speed controlled the amount of heat channeled into the silver saucer. After perhaps a minute, the blood boiled away, leaving the bowl clean and the finger a dark red, almost maroon. Beckett forced a cleansing breath and lowered his arms, then picked



up Augustus' finger. He lay it in the palm of his hand and held it to eye level. Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then the digit jerked into motion, like some bizarre worm. It flexed its knuckles to shift around in Beckett's palm, stopping when it had changed its position perhaps twenty degrees.

The finger pointed toward the southeast. Toward the city of Chicago.

Beckett smiled. The hunters had become the hunted.

• • •

The next evening Beckett arose by four in the afternoon — he was usually awake before the last light of the setting sun had faded, and darkness fell early during winter in the Midwest. Though conscious, the hour and his exertions from the previous evening took their toll. He was sluggish in his adopted lair, pacing to pass the time until it was dark enough to venture forth.

Beckett followed the urgings of the finger tugging at his neck. Augustus' digit was tied into a necklace made from braided lengths of Beckett's own hair. It twitched at each change of direction, wanting always to point toward its quarry.

The west was still a burnt smear when Beckett flitted southeast, a wolf once more. The evening was a bit warm for the season, but Beckett smelled a storm a few days off. He hugged the shadows as he loped through an increasingly urban landscape. His human form was less conspicuous, of course, but for covering distance fast, nothing beat the ground-eating stride of the wolf. Still, he saw few people along the way, but didn't much worry if they saw him in return. Most would write him off as a figment of the imagination or a stray dog.

Augustus' finger gave more insistent tugs, alerting Beckett that he was drawing near. Then he stopped



dead, hackles raised and teeth bared against danger. He was filled with a tremendous sense of unease. Some threat lurked ahead, something powerful and lethal that might best even an elder like him. Pacing back and forth as if along an invisible fence, Beckett noticed the neighborhood must have sensed it also. The streets were empty, even of vehicle traffic, and his sharp ears heard the blare of too-loud televisions and radios, but no conversation. He could almost picture the mortals around him hunkered down, silent and dreading, as if hiding from some great predator.

Beckett was disturbed to realize he felt like doing the same thing. He didn't want to go where the finger pointed. He wanted to find a safe place to hide from the danger.

Then, like a switch being thrown, the feeling vanished.

Beckett shook himself. He was still uneasy, though for a different reason. He wanted to know who or what could instill such fear. Beckett wasn't a coward, but considering the threats arrayed against his kind, his clan and himself of late, prudence was called for. Whatever-it-was was gone now, though, and pacing in someone's back yard wasn't going to get him any answers.

He flashed through the long residential blocks, Augustus' finger drawing him ever closer. He felt sure he was almost on top of it when he caught the acrid tang of smoke. Slowing to a lope from his flat-out run, Beckett avoided plowing headlong into the man who burst around the corner. They both skidded to a stop, two black figures no more than a handful of yards from one another in a narrow alley used for garbage collection and garages that bisected the block. Beckett would have blown right past the man, leaving him with a story to tell his friends, but that he sensed the man was not mortal.



He stank of death — old death and the cold of the grave. He carried with him the smell of gunpowder and gasoline, of spilled blood and burning flame.

Beckett rocked his weight to his haunches, back arched and fur bristling, jagged teeth gleaming white against his pelt with brilliance equal to his crimson eyes. A low, rumbling growl flowed from his throat, like a powerful engine on idle. The amulet of Augustus' finger pulled at him, tapping at his extended lower jaw, and pointing at where the man stood.

For his part, the stranger looked bemused more than anything. He wore black, though his attire was more refined than a furry pelt. A long overcoat of midnight hung over a charcoal suit, dark hair tousled from running. Running in black patent leather shoes, Beckett saw.

"You're a big sonofabitch, aren't you? I don't envy the dogcatcher that has to take you on, my friend," the man said as he moved to one side. Beckett shifted position as well, keeping them equidistant from one another. "Don't feel like being kibble, so why don't you get away from me."

Beckett felt the force of those four words like a physical blow. He didn't notice the man's eye flare with a green light, so intent was he on running away. He'd gone halfway down the alley in the next block before he regained control of himself. The man was a dark shape swallowed in the shadows of the alley, growing smaller and less distinct by the second. Beckett knew he should go after the figure, that he would find the answers to many things from the man in the long black coat. He found he couldn't take even a single step back down the alley. The man... except he wasn't a man, but some dead thing. Not a vampire; Beckett's wolf's nose easily caught that the scent, while similar, was unmistakably different. A walking corpse. One of the rest-



less dead. It had forced something into Beckett's mind, had subjugated Beckett's will. Crimson rage flooded his sight, fury at being dominated like some weakling mortal, and by what? A pathetic parody of the undead.

Beckett howled in frustration, hungering for revenge but unable to force his body forward to exact it.



Beckett's anger subsided after he slammed himself against a Dumpster. His ears, deaf for a time to everything but his own snarls of outrage, picked up the hooting sirens of fire engines. He smelled the fire, now that he was calm enough to register it. It was a serious blaze somewhere nearby.

He shook off the encounter with the dead thing as best he could and slunk into a patch of darkness to become human again. On his way out of the alley he noticed an older woman peering from behind the drapes while she chattered on the phone. Her eyes widened when she saw him, and he thought perhaps she'd witnessed his transformation. She vanished from the window and moment later a door opened. "Mister, you'd better get out of there!" she cried, eyes darting around behind the crack. "I saw a wolf attacking that Dumpster. I'm trying to get Animal Control out here — I think it might have rabies!"

"The Dumpster?" Beckett asked with a smile.

"The *wolf*. I'm not kidding!" she snapped, slamming the door closed. "Don't come crawling to me if you get attacked!"

Beckett shook his head and followed the insistent tugs of Augustus' finger. He wasn't the least bit surprised when it led him to the fire.

He stayed a good distance away, his every instinct screaming that it still wasn't far enough. The Beast



within him clamored to run, run as far away from the fire as it could go. His nerves jangled at the mere sight of the hungry, flickering flames. His embarrassment at being defeated by the man in the long black coat fueled his resolve. Let his animal nature gibber and shake; Beckett would deny the fear the flames tried to instill.

A crowd was gathering near the burning building, a four story walk-up with a brick exterior but with plenty of wood to catch fire. The first fire engine had arrived, and firemen in yellow slickers with reflective stripes were scrambling into action. A second fire engine pulled up along with an ambulance while the first was still getting underway, with a third fire truck appearing through the alley a few minutes later. Beckett got a glimpse through the near edge of the crowd as the vehicles pushed through; looked like a couple people made it out. The paramedics made a bee line for the street where they lay while a few firemen ventured up the front steps and inside — though the latter emerged less than a minute later. The fire had spread too far for them to attempt rescue; the best they could do now was contain it. Given Chicago's history with fires — at least, with that one really big one — the firemen were well-trained in isolating the blaze so it didn't spread through the neighborhood.

The finger was still jerking at his neck, pointing at the fire. Beckett stripped the cord and shoved the amulet in his pocket. He was conspicuous enough wearing dark glasses at night; he didn't need the neighbors seeing a blood-red finger dancing on his chest.

It looked like the dead man had disposed of the very hunters it had helped the other morning at Augustus' estate. Unless it wasn't working with them; it's possible they were chasing the zombie, too. But then what was it doing at Klein's to begin with? Beckett



doubted even Augustus Klein would traffic with such a creature; few among their kind could stand such mockeries. Unless he hadn't known the thing was a corpse. Possible; if Beckett hadn't smelled it with his hypersensitive wolf's nose, he might have mistaken its scent for fellow Cainites. Even assuming that, Beckett was no closer to understanding what the black-clad man was up to. Since the hunter lead was dead-ended, Beckett dearly wanted to go after the zombie. He could track it by scent, but he felt the lingering compulsion and knew that as soon as he got close he'd balk.

Busy puzzling out his next step, he saw the ambulance tear away, sirens blaring, only to be replaced by one of a half-dozen police cars. He stepped further back into the shadows cast by the fire and considered the likelihood of finding the dead man. There was no way to be sure, but Beckett sensed that the directive to stay away wouldn't last forever. Perhaps it would be fruitful to track the scent as far as possible, get a general idea where the thing hid. Then, after Beckett had regained mastery of his will, he would pay the dead man a surprise visit.

Beckett was about to slip off into the night when he noticed a bit of red by his feet. The finger must have fallen from his pocket. It was little more than a curiosity at this point, since the quarry it had been ensorcelled to track was now dead, but he didn't like to leave vampire fingers lying around. Stooping to pick it up, Beckett saw the finger twitch. His eyes widened behind his dark glasses. The thing was still functioning; it must have tugged itself from his pocket. The hunter was still alive. But where?

His head jerked up, scanning the area where the finger pointed. It was crawling away from the fire, so the hunter was leaving the area. Even though he'd been distracted, Beckett didn't recall seeing anyone



slip away, and he would have noticed a mortal's attempts at stealth. So how—

The ambulance.

Beckett smiled. Looked like the zombie hadn't been as thorough as it might have liked.

• • •

Beckett circled the house, slipping from one piece of cover to the next, hugging the shadows, keeping his eyes on the place at all times. Though not as strong as it had been, the dead thing's compulsion still lingered; this was as close as he could make himself get. Beckett was confident it was a matter of time before he would break free of it altogether. The important thing was that he'd tracked the zombie to his bolthole.

He'd already confirmed that the ambulance had gone to Cook County Hospital, not far south of the fire. Backtracking and finding the zombie's trail was made difficult since he couldn't travel on the roads for any length of time. A large black wolf running forty miles per hour on the Interstate was bound to capture someone's attention. The trail led north for about two hours, ending in a small community on the shores of a lake. The place the creature had gone to was a fine example of the Italianate style of architecture. It was a large, two-story affair (three if you counted the spacious attic under the wide, sloping roof). The front was narrow, with a covered entrance to one side and large windows taking up the rest of the facing. The house extended toward the lake with a large enclosed sunroom on each floor overlooking the water. The structure was set back from the road with expansive lawns ranging to a precise row of firs along either side of the property. The land behind the house sloped to the lake, with a pathway meandering down to a boathouse on the frozen lakeshore. There didn't seem to be much



activity in the area; Beckett wondered if it might be a seasonal neighborhood. If the creature wanted to remain out of sight, this wasn't a bad place to do it.

Beckett burned the house and the immediate area on his memory. After one last circuit, he had a comprehensive read on the best approaches. With the zombie tagged, he considered his next move. He was some distance from Chicago, but he didn't want to call it a night; it wasn't even midnight yet. He was confident the hunter he'd been tracking was at the hospital, but he preferred to make sure. Sensing the moon's position, he felt he could make it back to the city after midnight. That should give him enough time to feed and still get some details on whoever got brought in from the fire. Visiting hours were over already, but the admissions desk would have all the information he'd need.

He made a slight detour on his return to take advantage of a motorist pulled over at a rest stop. When possible, he tried to leave alive those he fed upon. The euphoria of the vampire's bite left them with no clear recollection of what had happened, and the blood in his saliva was sufficient to close the wounds he created to feed. However, as a wolf, Beckett was far more savage in his feedings than he would have been in his human shape, and his compassion for mortals less acute. The hapless motorist died quickly, at least.

Beckett arrived at the Cook County emergency room a little after one in the morning, cheeks flushed from feeding, looking like any of the other people emerging from the cold. The ER was bustling, but not the madhouse he'd expected. It seemed the fire was the crisis of the moment, under control for a while now. A few small groups reeking of smoke scattered about the waiting area, mixed among a handful of people with minor injuries waiting their turn for treatment.



Beckett approached the admissions counter and caught the attention of a tired young clerk. "Help you?" she asked, eyeing his sunglasses.

He had an excuse ready for the glasses, but decided not to bother with it in this instance. "Yes; there was a fire in my friend's building earlier this evening."

"We only got a few injured, sir." She smacked her gum and shrugged. "I can't tell you any identities, but you give me your friend's name, I can check it against those we've received."

"Eli Warren," he said. It was a bullshit name, but that didn't matter for his purposes.

"Your friend's a man? Right; just one man brought in from that and his name's not Warren." She shrugged and made a lazy gesture around. "I heard he works here. The patient, I mean, not your friend."

Beckett frowned. Interesting if the hunter was a physician. Perhaps his medical studies had brought him across victims of vampires. Unless it was a woman the amulet was tracking. Interesting in its own right. He realized the clerk was saying something, a mask of commiseration on her face.

"—glib about it or anything. It's possible your friend was taken to another facility. Or maybe he wasn't home when the fire started, y'know?"

Beckett tried on a thin smile. "Yes, of course. The others who were brought in are all right, though?"

"I can't divulge specifics, you understand. I don't think anyone was brought in critical, though." She gave him an appraising look. "So, your accent. You from England or something?"

"Belgium," he said, for the hell of it.

Her brow furrowed. "Huh; never met a Belgish person before. That really a country?"



"It is a small one, near France." Beckett had no interest in flirting with a mortal, especially one with such poor command of basic geography. He'd learned all he could, so he thanked her and retreated. On his way to the exit, he realized one of the people waiting was looking him over with more than casual interest. A stocky Asian man in a black knit cap and overcoat flicked his eyes away as Beckett turned. He was ready to dismiss it as curiosity about a man wearing sunglasses at night. Then he noticed how the man stood. Leaning forward, knees slightly bent, weight on the balls of his feet, hands relaxed by his side. And there, the eyes panning the room but stopping for a fraction to check up on Beckett.

Beckett slowed his gait toward the exit. One of Critias or Khalid's men, somehow on his trail again? Or perhaps someone from one of the other vampire clans. A ghoul, if so; he looked too flushed and, well, alive to be a Cainite. Then Beckett remembered the man had been in the waiting area already. He couldn't have known Beckett would show, not for certain. So he wasn't here for Beckett. Coincidence and simple curiosity? By the way the man in the knit cap tracked him, Beckett was sure it was far more than that.

He stopped and bent over a water fountain, which allowed him to get a better look at the man. He made swallowing motions as the water ran through his lips, noting the man's brow darken as he did so. Interesting; surprised that Beckett would take a drink of water. Beckett straightened and wiped his mouth on the back of his glove, then turned again for the exit. Now to see if the man would follow. Get him in an out of the way place and find some answers.

A young black man came out of the rest room door in front of him. He avoided the youth, but used the opportunity to turn one last time and get a good



look at the man in the knit cap. He was advancing, but stopped when the black youth walked over to him.

Beckett exited in the general direction of the El station, considering his options. The amulet indicated that the hunter was somewhere in Cook County. He would have preferred to have tracked the kine to a more permanent site, and still didn't know his (or her, admittedly) specific identity. As far as the former was concerned, he had a fair idea of the hunter's home, but as it was a burning crater that didn't help much. For the latter, knowing his (or her) identity would help, but mattered little as long as Augustus' finger could point the way. The hunter was under scrutiny at the present; even if Beckett could get to the kine's bedside — and he wasn't thrilled with the prospect of running around yet more hospital hallways — the mortal might not even be capable of coherent conversation, depending on how severe his injuries were. Better to pick up the trail after he was released from this place. The amulet would lead Beckett wherever the target went through a full cycle of the moon; Beckett could hang back and watch as his quarry led him to each of his monster-hunting friends.

The zombie was a complication, and a frustration. Beckett was interested in knowing what role it played in current events. Though it remained off limits for the time being, he'd at least discovered where the creature dwelled. Beckett would pick up that trail when he felt certain he'd shrugged off the last of the thing's influence.

Beckett could check up on Critias and Khalid, but shrugged off that option. He felt confident that he was further along in tying together the pieces of the puzzle than they were. It would be best to disclose the whole mystery and present it to them — and Inyanga — wrapped in a nice bow. Until he could prove to the



paranoid elders that the Gangrel were not traitors, any dealings he had with their clans would be tense and difficult at best. The thought of conflict stirred his blood, but he preferred caution over combat.

The man in the knit cap was a new puzzle. He might be nothing at all, though Beckett hadn't survived as long as he had by making such assumptions. He tagged the man as a partner of the hunter he was already tracking through Augustus' finger. The mortal had a disciplined, one could even say military, bearing, and was more than casually interested in Beckett. So track him? Let himself be tracked? Either one was a dangerous proposition. Right now it seemed the man in the knit cap didn't know that Beckett had tagged him. Leave them to their own devices and stick to tracking the wounded hunter. If he was associated with Beckett's primary quarry, Beckett would find out soon enough. And if the man he amounted to nothing, so much the better.

That left the Indian, William Decorah. He wasn't a hunter, neither was he a ghoul. He knew about the supernatural, and claimed loyalty to "Pale Wolf," whoever that was. Beckett paused by the metal stairs to the elevated train platform. Yes, it might be time to find out to whom that alias belonged to.

• • •

It took perhaps an hour to lope back to Alexian Brothers Medical Center. He stopped by a frozen shrub and dropped the gloves he'd been carrying in his mouth. It was the pair he'd taken from William Decorah's pocket the night before; he had removed them from his own jacket before changing forms so that they wouldn't be transformed along with the rest of his clothing. They were his best method of picking up Decorah's scent, but didn't do him much good if he couldn't smell them.



He took a few strong whiffs; then, with the Indian's smell strong in his scent-memory, Beckett circled the hospital. Within minutes he picked up the trail and followed it west. The scent brought him west and south; at some point Decorah had picked up a ride — hitchhiking, or had he contacted someone? That detail mattered little at present; Beckett was more concerned with losing the scent. It proved a minor worry. As a wolf, his nose was forty times more sensitive than in his human shape — which was already ten times more acute than any mortal's. Decorah's scent faded, but the car had a distinct green, earthy smell that stood out in the middle of winter.

Soon enough he found himself crossing a frozen river and flashing by a golf course, then another mile to what was once a farm. The land had long since been parceled off in residential plots, though it hadn't yet become a full-fledged suburb. He felt he was getting very close to his destination. The vehicle's green smell grew even more fresh, and there was a kind of... anticipation in the air.

His trot became a low crawl before he even realized he'd slowed. There was something more than anticipation, and it wasn't coming from him. He realized a presence surrounded him, a powerful, ancient *something*, with a questing eye large as the moon. He felt the force of it like a physical pressure. He knew it was searching, looking for him — and with this realization, Beckett understood he'd felt this aura for some time, flittering in and out of his perception... ever since he'd come to Chicago.

He didn't know what it was, other than it was a power of staggering magnitude, and that once it found him, he would be lost.

Beckett did the only thing he knew to do in the face of superior might. He fled.

• • •



He ran west, stopping to slip under the earth away from the sun. His survival instinct was in overdrive, pushing him to get as far from what he'd sensed as possible. The Beast in him wanted to fight, to tear into anything that would try to control him. The Beast was cunning, but it wasn't too bright. Reason dictated caution and thinking long-term. Gratifying as it would be, Beckett understood that it was suicide trying to battle something as powerful as he'd sensed without some kind of plan.

By Idaho he had a rough blueprint worked out, and shifted his course southward.



Silver Lake was one of many neighborhoods folded into the greater sprawling mass of Los Angeles. It had long enjoyed a bohemian reputation, drawing in an eclectic mix of lifestyles and personalities, most sharing the pursuit of the performance or fine arts. Beckett walked along, noting the scattering of quirky bungalows and slab-like apartment buildings, clusters of shops peppered among them. Neither did he spend much thought on the weather, cool in the California desert night but quite balmy compared to northern Illinois in winter.

His mind was still mulling over the mystery he'd run from, handling the various pieces of the puzzle and fitting them together in new ways to see what the final picture might be. Much remained as murky as it had been when he'd fled five days ago. He had three strong leads, though, and one real obstacle remained to discovering how they all tied together.

Which was why he was walking between a set of poorly maintained hedgerows to a brightly painted cottage. He rapped on the door with his gloved hand, flexing the thin leather he wore as he waited. He'd tossed his old pair, the one hand ruined from allowing his ever-



present talons to tear through the fingertips. He didn't expect these to last — like putting a condom over a fire hose, really — but they were sufficient for the pretense.

There was no immediate response so he knocked again. It was later; sensing the movement of the new moon, Beckett imagined it was close to one in the morning. He knew she'd be up, though; she was a night owl. Must be back in her workshop.

A few seconds later the heavy wood door swung back and a woman collapsed against it as if overcome with shock. "As I live and breathe," she said, hand to her chest. "Come on in, Beckett."

He allowed himself a smile and stepped into the cozy living room, noting that she'd added a few dozen knick-knacks since he'd last been by. "How are you, Nola?"

"Not too different," she said, swinging the door shut with a solid *thunk*. "Been keeping my head down the past few years. The millennium stirred up all sorts of shit; done my best to stay out of all of it."

"I thought you might. Prudence has always been your hallmark. In fact, I thought you might move to a more secluded locale."

She shrugged with one shoulder, gesturing toward the back of the house with the other. "Let's go to the workshop. No, I figured I've been here fifty years, I'm settled. The end of the world is gonna happen I'd like to be where I'm most comfortable."

Nola Spier didn't look much over forty, but Beckett knew she was almost twice that age. This would have been unremarkable to him if she was a vampire, but she was mortal. At least, as near as he'd ever been able to determine. He'd met her sometime in the 1930s when he was searching for a drug purported to expand the user's awareness and tap into collective memory. (It



didn't.) Back then she'd been one of many orphans struggling to get by in the Depression. Her large eyes and cherubic face had brought her to the attention of one Fortis Spier, a mystic of some small ability. He'd taken her under his wing, though his designs were more prurient than humanitarian. Nola had proven herself plenty capable of holding her own against the older man's advances. Surprisingly, what could have been another dysfunctional relationship had blossomed into an equal partnership and romance. When Beckett stopped through twenty years later for some input on the local occult scene, he found Nola a handsome and confident woman who doted on the aging Fortis as much as he pampered her. It was only after her husband died that Nola revealed how powerful a mystic she was; she refrained from disclosing the full extent of her talents to spare Fortis' feelings.

Beckett was aware of the various brotherhoods of magicians scattered around the globe, but he avoided them as best he could. A superstitious and hidebound lot, they were a mass of contradictions and hypocrisy to rival vampires. He much preferred dealing with the loners, those like himself who tapped into the world around them but charted their own course.

He kept his true nature secret from most of them, though he assumed many of his contacts had a fair idea of what he was. He would have been disappointed if they didn't; he made a point to deal with those who were perceptive and discreet. He expected no less of those with whom he associated. He was sure Nola Spier knew what he was, just as he was aware she was far more powerful a wizard than she claimed. She didn't seem the least bit disturbed by him and he'd always found her good company, so they maintained a pretense that they were each no more than dabblers in the occult. The passage



of decades with no physical change on his part and little enough on hers was overlooked. In an isolated existence, it was rare to find someone with whom you could be relaxed and not be subject to the petty social conventions of disclosure or bonding.

Nola's workshop took up almost half the bungalow. It was a long, rectangular room crammed with books, jars, clothing, various devices and sundry oddments. It looked like a movie/studio/prop department after a cyclone went through. She leaned against one of the many cluttered counters, not bothering to offer a seat since there was no place to sit that wasn't already under stacks of papers and boxes, and turned a curious look at Beckett. "So, you don't look like you came by to chat."

"Not this time," he said, pausing to look over a large bisected animal skull. "Recent discovery?"

"Recent purchase. Guy I know in Texas, claims it's from a werewolf."

"Claims?"

She shrugged and pointed out a couple spots. "Something odd about the teeth and the ocular cavity. I'll figure it out sooner or later."

"You'll have to let me know how it turns out." Beckett was intrigued but, as Nola had pointed out, he didn't have time for discussions on lycanthrope physiognomy. "I need your services for something, Nola. A charm."

"Really? Not my strong suit, you know."

"You're better than you admit. And you're more willing to take direction than most anyone else I could ask right now."

"Yeah, I'm easy. So is time an issue? I know money isn't." They both smiled. Neither had much use for money; instead, they traded in favors. He was ahead



one or two, so he had little doubt she'd help him — another reason he'd chosen to come to her.

"Time is important but not vital," he said, stepping over to look over a bright green substance that bubbled in a beaker, with no apparent source of heat beneath it. "Sooner the better, but I'd prefer less than two weeks."

Nola nodded. "I'll let you know if that's do-able once you tell me what you need."

"Simple enough. Invisibility."

• • •

Beckett didn't need actual invisibility, though he wanted a similar effect. He had to cloak his psychic presence, become unnoticeable to preternatural sensing. That way he could avoid the notice of the powerful entity he'd felt when tracking William Decorah. Whatever it was — and he had a strong suspicion it was this "Pale Wolf" — it exerted some kind of influence over the city. This was pure instinct, but he'd long ago learned to trust it over his intellect. He had no intention of falling under its thrall, but the other option was to never return to Chicago... and even then he wasn't certain it couldn't reach him anywhere in the world. He might have been willing to take the risk and leave it all be, but he wanted to shove Critias and Khalid's spurious claims back down their throats. To do that, he had to find the truth behind these hunters and what connection there was between them and this force.

Nola listened as Beckett described what he needed. She didn't take any notes, but he wasn't worried. In contrast to the chaos of her home and workshop, Nola Spier's mind was a marvel of organization. She was filing his every word and already working on a method of implementation.

"This kind of thing is harder than you might expect," she said after he finished. "It's not like I can



just, well, shut off your aura. That'd make a blank spot — nobody could tell it was you, but they'd be more worked up about this psychic hole roaming around."

"I suspected as much. It would be best if I could... blend in with the background."

"Like incidental noise? Stuff we hear all the time but never pay attention to?"

"Something like that."

Nola pursed her lips in thought. "It's possible, but I've never tried it. Hard to say if I can pull it off in a week or so. What about if you don't track as you?"

"Hmm. Like I'm someone else specific, or that I have a generic psychic signature?"

"The latter. First one I don't think I could pull off. Have to get a feel for your aura and who you'd want to be, and I don't think you're hep to that."

Beckett quirked an eyebrow. "No, I wouldn't be. If that's what you're restricted to, do it."

Her head tilted to one side, eyes flicking as she considered the variables. "Okay. I'd say... give me three or four days. Get the proper materials, test everything out, the whole bit. Think you can occupy yourself through the weekend?"

"That shouldn't be a problem."

• • •

Beckett headed out to the desert to pass the time. He didn't care for big cities, and Los Angeles was one of the biggest. He considered doing some research while he was in the area, but his efforts in Chicago had left him sour on the taste of digging into mysteries. Once he had dealt with the strangeness there he would be free to move on. After a few nights of chasing hares and coyotes, he headed back for L.A., having admitted that a large part of his mood was feeling



like he'd let himself get run off. He shouldn't be ashamed of fleeing from what felt like a more powerful being, but it was galling nonetheless. At least Nola's charm would give him the opportunity to redress that.

He slipped back to her house the next Monday night, sated on animal blood and still riding high from roaming free in the wild. The electric redhead who opened the door startled him for a second, until he realized it was Nola.

She couldn't see his eyes through the dark glasses he wore, but she'd known him long enough to read the slight tilt of the eyebrows and quirk of the mouth that indicated surprise. "You like it?" she asked, fluffing the short red hair. "I got done sooner than I'd thought, so I decided to dye my hair."

"It's unnaturally vivid," he said, shaking his head in bemusement. "Quite arresting, though."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Come on back; I'll show you what else I've been up to."

The workshop was as cluttered as the other night, though Beckett's keen eyes noted that much of the clutter had been shifted around as if to create a new dynamic of disorganization. She led him to a workbench near the middle of the room. It was covered with a half-dozen festive metal cookie tins, a broken mousetrap, some dried strips of flesh impossible to identify, a clear baggie containing little white balls, a bundle of reeds and feathers, a cluster of small glass jars filled with various liquids, and a soapstone slab. The other oddments were shoved to the edges, leaving the stone in that rarest of circumstances for Nola Speir's home: a clear space.

Centered on the slab was a bracelet of braided silver, the thin strands entwined in a pattern hypnotizing in its complexity. A number of small opalescent stones were drilled through the center and strung through parts of

the braid. The bracelet was attractive in a New Age-y fashion; not the kind of thing Beckett would wear, but then he wasn't much of one for jewelry to begin with.

"I made it a bracelet when I noticed you already had a necklace," Nola explained. Beckett had almost forgotten Augustus' finger. It lay under his shirt, twitching seldom now that he was so far from Chicago. "Doesn't matter; could've made it a hatband or something, I suppose. Important thing is what it does, right?"

"Indeed." He picked up the necklace and turned it over in his hands, looking at the workmanship.

"Don't let the expensive materials fool you," she said. "It won't last more than a few months."

"I thought you said you got done early. Why not take more time to infuse it with greater longevity?"

"It's not a matter of, 'Oh, I'll take another day and slap on another six months to this puppy.'" Nola shrugged, digging into the plastic bag and popping one of the white globules into her mouth. Her chewing lending a liquid quality to her words, she continued, "Yogurt-covered peanut. Want one? No? Anyway, it's more like orders of magnitude. To give you close to what you wanted in the time I had available, another few days wouldn't have made a difference. I shot you an email on Saturday explaining things and to see if you wanted me to take more time, but when I didn't hear back I figured I should go ahead and get this together."

"No, that's fine. I wasn't aware of the limitations involved."

"All right then. Like I said, it works and pretty much does what it's supposed to." She popped more yogurt balls, leaning one hip against the table as she described her creation's capabilities. "What you have there is kind of a psychic white noise generator. Masks your aura by over-



laying it with random waves, spreading into the immediate surroundings. I figured dissipation on the fringes was the best way to hide you — kinda like a warped floor, right? At a glance, don't notice anything out of the ordinary. If you shoved that rise into a more compact area, though—" Nola made sweeping and squaring motions with her hands "—you'd see it in a heartbeat."

Beckett nodded. "Creating a demarcated border would make the disruption itself stand out even if it masked my own aura."

"What I said, yeah."

"The dissipation wouldn't be restricted to me, then, would it?"

Nola shook her head, busy swallowing. "Nope. We're both close enough to it right now it's masking each of us. I'm not sure of the radius — maybe a yard or so — before it fades altogether. But yeah, you have a friend all up close and personal, you'll both be covered.

"Although," she cautioned, rosebud lips pursed in thought. "Stronger the aura, harder it'll be to mask. You should be okay; I calibrated it to be strong enough to mask me twice over. You could have a hundred cats in your pockets and nobody'd know — psychically speaking, anyway. But someone or something — major artifact or, well, who knows? — with a potent aura is still going to come through. Harder to read, but still noticeable."

Beckett hefted the band, then slipped it over his left wrist. The metal was cool against his skin, a curious sensation since his body was already at room temperature. "This should work perfectly, Nola. I owe you."

"Yeah?" A huge grin spread across her face, fetching lines of a woman half her true age crinkling her eyes and the corners of her mouth. "And here I thought that put us even."



Beckett smiled in return. "It was only an expression."

• • •

Beckett wanted to return to Chicago right away, but the night was already half over. He put off his departure for tomorrow and used Nola's phone to book a night flight from LAX to O'Hare the next evening. In other circumstances, he would have run back under his own power, taking his time, content to deal with things whenever he arrived. Having the bracelet's protection stirred within him a sense of immediate action, a desire to get back in the thick of it. Running as a wolf would take nights, while a direct flight would eat up a few hours. He didn't care much for flying — not in man-made contrivances, anyway — but it did have its advantages.

He kept an old passport and a credit card stuffed in his pocket for occasions like this. The invention of the credit card had been a Godsend for one such as him who seldom thought about money. He'd amassed a great deal of wealth through the centuries, but his globetrotting, after-hours lifestyle made it difficult to stop in and make a withdrawal. He dealt with a small, private Swiss bank that handled all his financials, wiring him money on demand and paying off his balance any time he incurred a charge on his credit card. It was all very low maintenance and freed Beckett from the bother of thinking about bills and paperwork.

Making his plans, Beckett considered what Nola said earlier about sending him an email. That had been another much-appreciated invention, and was how he communicated with others who he didn't come to see in person. The message would sit in his in box until he had the chance to get to a computer. But, while lags of days or weeks were of little moment to an immortal, there were times when speed was important. He considered buying a small laptop, but he didn't see



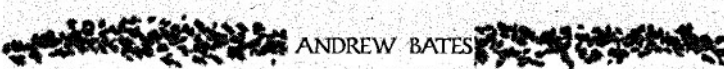
himself lugging one around. Besides, what would happen to it if he had to become a wolf or a bat? It might well transmutate into nothingness as his other accoutrements did, but then again it might be too big to be affected by the preternatural change. Perhaps one of those compact cellular phones — or even the newer satellite phones he'd heard of. That idea had appeal; his bank could handle any charges and he could use it even in the wilderness. Worth checking into. He placed a second call to Geneva; it being after 10 AM there, he was transferred from end to end to Manfred Von Reis, the man who handled his account at the Witz-Kohn bank. A five-minute conversation in French and Von Reis promised to look into satellite phone technology, including the cost and options of the top models available. A full evaluation would be emailed to Beckett's account within the week.

Beckett made his goodbyes to Nola and slipped off for a last bite before sunrise. This time tomorrow he would be back in Chicago, and that much closer to finding the answers he sought.

PART II:
TO DIE IN Δ
FOREIGN LAND



[Faint, illegible handwriting in the center of the page]



ANDREW BATES

FIVE

Thea Ghandour knew almost exactly when her life spiraled out of control. She'd been on a story, little more than a fluff piece. Stayed a little long in Chinatown picking up local color and the next thing she knew she was fighting off a bloodsucking monster from beyond the grave.

That was about 10:30 PM, Central Standard Time, May 3, the Year of Our Lord 2000 A.D. By the Gregorian calendar, anyway. She'd have to check with her mom to see when that would be in the Islamic calendar.

In the ten months since then, very little made sense in her life. Every time she thought she was on the bleeding edge of insanity, something else pushed her even farther into terra incognita. The newspaper article she was zoning out on was the latest evidence of it. Thea blinked and tried to focus on the faces looking back up at her, as if they could instill some form of sense into her. The first picture was a DMV photo of a blond woman in her mid-30s. Even taking into account the chemical process used to make drivers license photos as unflattering as possible, it was clear the woman was riding the waning edge of attractive. The next three images were police artist renderings. One was of a well built man with a bland Aryan face in a fatigue jacket and stocking cap. Next came a heavysset (okay, fat) man in the same togs but



with corpulent features. Finishing out the top row was a sketch of a dark-haired man in a suit.

Only the first picture had a name under it: Lilly Belva. She alone was not wanted for questioning in the recent attack on an obscure religious temple in downtown Chicago. Thea assumed that Lilly Belva wasn't needed for questioning because the police already had her in custody. Though, being dead, Lilly couldn't provide many answers. Not via any conventional interrogation techniques, anyway.

The middle pair of drawings represented two of Thea's partners in crime, though they were generic enough that you wouldn't know it. She knew, though. She was with Parker Moston and Dean Sankowski when they'd discovered that things were never bad enough that they couldn't get worse.

All because of the figure represented in the last drawing. This was just as sketchy as the other two, though even the rough lines placed him in a category different from the others. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark clothes, dark soul. Maxwell Carpenter, Satan incarnate, pure evil, if you believed in that kind of thing. She was willing to bet he was off someplace staring at the same article and laughing his ass off.

Thea's eyes flicked from the images to the copy for the hundredth time that morning. To the mention of "reliable sources" who claimed a "suspected hate group" had attacked the Orthodox Temple of Akhenaton in some kind of Aryan protest. Said hate group consisting of the four white members featured here. Just what they were protesting and why it involved ramming a Chevy Suburban through the front gates of a minor Middle Eastern cult temple nobody heard of before was a topic of some debate. The media had a label for the crime



and at least one scapegoat in hand for it, though, so true understanding was secondary to the sensationalism of it and the bickering over who got the entertainment rights.

Thea had to admit the story played well, a good enough substitute for a truth that was far more sensational than the public would ever believe.

"Almost out of coffee," Parker said, stepping behind her to fill a cup.

Thea shook the paper in irritation. Stepping out of the narrow kitchen and sitting on a stool on the other side of the counter, she replied, "This isn't the Holiday Inn, Parker. You want more coffee, you can make it."

There came a rumbling in the wall; one of her other house guests had turned on the shower. She'd long felt that it sounding like a rockslide every time the shower ran was a small price to pay for an otherwise great apartment. The noise covered Parker's grouching as he lumbered over to the couch, snagging the sports section on the way. Thea hunched over, elbows on the Formica, and thought about their bizarre slumber party. After the chaos of the previous day, they'd come back to her apartment. They had agreed they needed to get out of sight as soon as possible. Her place was closest, and once there they hadn't felt it was safe to leave, even after nightfall. God knew who was out there looking for them.

She had to admit she'd never expected to have three men spend the night at her place — especially such unusual men. Parker Moston, high school football star, gun store manager, rabid sports fan and Chicago history buff. He was big, tactless, and their best combat person since Romeo was dead. That was still too painful to consider, so she moved her gaze to the



black youth in the love seat. Jake Washington, tech geek, eternal optimist, and the conscience of their team. He wasn't even from around here; just passing through, stayed on to help get their rag-tag group into shape, to be more than just a half-dozen people who took out zombies on the weekends. *And look where that got us*, she thought with a wince. And in the shower was what now amounted to the last member of the group. Dean Sankowski, male nurse, overweight, jovial, blessed with the power to heal with a touch. *Not that he could do anything for Lilly and Romeo. Dead is dead.*

Each of them had unusual abilities like Dean's healing touch. Dean called them "blessings," Jake called them "edges." Thea wasn't sure where their power came from, but it was meant to help them in their struggle against the supernatural. Considering how two members of their "Van Helsing Brigade" had ended up dead the previous night, she was thinking their gifts were a bit of a white elephant.

Bitterness welled within her. Dead wasn't dead after all. Not the slightest bit, not when corpses were clawing their way out of the ground and killing their friends and loved ones. Not when fucking zombies were blowing away people they cared about, all for petty revenge.

About the sole bright spot to the current situation was that Thea's roommate, Margie Woleski, hadn't come home last night to find their apartment overtaken by a quartet of paramilitary nut jobs. She hadn't been home in a few days, in fact. Thea was a little concerned about that, but it had to take a back seat to current circumstances. Namely, that she'd just been involved in an armed attack involving a gun-toting zombie and his target — who was also some kind of supernatural creature, though just what kind was another mystery to add to the list — with two



people she knew and a half-dozen foreigners caught in the crossfire.

Jake seemed to be thinking along those lines also. Turning on the kitchen stool, she saw him looking at the sleeping bags and blankets scattered around the living room. He caught Thea's glance and gave an embarrassed shrug. "Sure made a mess of your place. Your roommate going to be okay with this?"

"Considering we've been avoiding each other for the past week, I doubt she'll even know."

"Still, best if we get out of here, maybe?"

"Not like it's safe out there just because it's daylight," Parker said from behind the sports section.

"I don't think it's that bad," Jake replied. "I mean, we still want to lay low for a while, but I don't think the police have anything on us."

Thea shook the front page at him. "You're not worried about these police sketches?"

"Maybe I'm being optimistic, but I don't think they look that much like Parker and Dean. And I'm pretty sure there was nothing in Lilly's truck that could lead back to us."

"I'm not worried about that," Parker said, tossing aside the paper he held. "Lilly always wiped the Chevy down before we did a job. She's... she was real thorough about those kinds of things." He paused, overcome by the memory of her loss. "And yeah," he forced out, "those police sketches are pretty generic, especially with us wearing stocking caps and fatigues and all. How many guys in Chicago you got built like the two of us?"

Thea nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. Considering what was in the paper and what I saw flipping channels earlier, looks like the general consensus is that no more than four people attacked the temple with



automatic weapons. Doesn't seem anyone noticed you and me and, uh, Romeo go there earlier."

"I think the Suburban overshadowed everything else," Dean agreed, emerging from the bathroom in his clothes from yesterday and scrubbing at his freshly washed hair.

"I still don't know why she rammed the damn SUV through the front gates," Parker said. "I mean, we were freaking because there was some kind of interference on your talkie once you went inside, but then, all of a sudden, *vroom!* Y'know?"

They nodded, becoming even more subdued.

"Even so, you know that what the media's portraying isn't everything the authorities know."

Jake shrugged, conceding the point. "Still. They have no reason to cover any of this up. I mean, most cops are in bed with the undead, but what possible connection is there? Everything we've learned suggests that Maxwell Carpenter's flying solo, and while there's something unusual about Nicholas Sforza I'm sure he's not the enemy. That leaves us as the lone connection, but we're the only ones who'd know that, right? It's not like we're on the Undead Ten Most Wanted List; if we were, I don't think we'd be drawing breath to talk right now."

"So as far as anyone knows, it was four racist fringe dwellers working on their own, and there's not enough to bring the cops to our doorstep." She saw general agreement, if not enthusiasm, for the assessment. "You want to get back home quick as you can and stay out of sight for a little while, though."

Murmurs of agreement, then they gathered up the used sheets and blankets while she rolled up the sleeping bags she'd dragged from the closet the night



before. As each slipped out into the cold morning air, they agreed to meet the following afternoon at their "clubhouse," an abandoned convenience store on North Sedgwick. The past few weeks had been hell, but the nightmare wasn't over yet. They needed to figure out how to deal with current circumstances... not the least of which was tracking down the cause of it all: Maxwell Carpenter.

• • •

The sheets tossed in the hamper and the blankets and sleeping bags shoved into the closet, Thea collapsed into the love seat and stared at the coffee table. Sitting in the center of a clutter of magazines, coasters and paperbacks was the newest piece of the puzzle her life had become.

It was a small clay jar, the body just larger than a softball and with a short, thick neck capped by a heavy lid. If not an archaeological relic, it was a masterful imitation of one. A series of pictograms marched around its exterior, faded with time but legible. Not that she could make sense of what the pictograms said, aside from recognizing them for what they were: Egyptian hieroglyphs. Thea was Egyptian by heritage — a mix of African and Arabic blood — but that didn't give her automatic insight into her ancient ancestors. She was American all the way — too much so, if you asked her mom. She might wear tattoos inspired by hieroglyphs, but she'd picked them more because they looked cool than because of their meaning.

Although she didn't know what the images on the earthenware said, she had a fair idea what the urn itself was. It was a Canopic jar, a container in which a person's organ was placed in the process of mummification. She wasn't sure which part the jar was meant to hold (though the pictograms probably said something on the



subject). Neither did she know if the urn held anything, since she hadn't been able to pry the lid off. Whatever was inside radiated incredible waves of power, or the jar itself did. She'd puzzled over it the previous evening, but with no real effort. With the chaos of the recent attack and the deaths of Romeo and Lilly — not to mention a half-dozen well-armed Egyptian guys — she hadn't given the container much thought after snatching it from the sarcophagus in which it was stored.

She leaned forward to take another look when she heard noise at the door. She was on her feet in a surge of adrenaline when the apartment door swung open and Margie walked in. Thea was glad to see her friend, but grew concerned at how haggard Margie looked. She was pale and tired, her lids at half-mast and her shoulders slumped as if her arms were too heavy. Her typical fresh, almost ruddy complexion was pasty and her hazel eyes were a dirty brown. She was breathing hard, as if the walk up the stairs was a mountain hike. Shuffling in, she closed the door by slumping against it.

"Geez, Margie, are you okay?"

Margie nodded, grimacing as if the motion hurt. "Got a nasty bug. Came on strong last night."

"Where have you been the last couple of days? I was starting to get worried."

She stepped over to help her friend out of her coat and get settled in. Margie turned away, almost flinching from Thea's grasp. "Stayed at the lab, wait out the storm." She shrugged out of her heavy parka and hung it on the hooks next to the front door that they seldom used, then headed for her room.

Thea was startled by her friend's behavior; even when she was sick she wasn't this anti-social. "Margie?" A muttered comment in reply, then the



bedroom door clicked shut. *What the hell?* Thea chewed on her lip for a moment, then went to Margie's door. She opened it a crack and stuck her head in. "Margie? You want me to make—"

"I said just *leave me alone!*"

There was no mistaking the anger and pain in Margie's voice. Thea closed the door and retreated to the living room. This didn't make any sense. Margie loved to be pampered when she was sick. Thea couldn't think of what would make her act this way—

Thea's eyes fell on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, tented on the kitchen counter, and her heart fell into her stomach. Did Margie know? How could she? Thea had never told her what she'd been doing the past year, that she'd been tracking down creatures of the night. Margie had suspected something was going on, had even met Jake and Romeo. As far as Margie knew, Thea was working with the guys on a story. Although Thea promised to explain her behavior, she'd never had the chance.

But what else could make her behave this way? Thea frowned. Whether it was this whole hunter business or not, it was past time to tell her best friend. She deserved the truth, and Thea had been avoiding telling her for too long. No more. Thea would make some oatmeal and tea for Margie, sit her down, get some quality bonding going, then blow away her conception of the world.

As it turned out, Margie got in a pre-emptive strike.

● ● ●

"So for a hate group, you sure have a lot of minority members," Margie said.

Thea gave a surprised yelp and dropped the teapot on the stove with a clatter. Steaming water spat



from the neck onto the spices racked on the wall. Her mind filled with thoughts of reconciliation, Thea was caught off-guard by Margie's vehemence.

"What?" was all she could think to say. Margie's demeanor was like nothing Thea had ever seen before. She still looked ill, but there was a heat in her gaze, a set look to her face, that frightened Thea. She realized that Margie had looked upset even when she'd first come home, but Thea had chalked it up to being sick.

"Cut the crap, Thea," Margie continued, one hand on the fridge for support. "I don't know what you and your 'friends' are up to, but you have one chance for a good explanation before I go to the cops."

"It's not what you think, Margie. We—"

"It isn't? Then *explain* it to me, Thea. You always were good with words. Why doesn't the *investigative reporter* explain to me why the man she *fucked* in our apartment ends up *dead* a week later?! I saw him on TV, Thea. His fucking *morgue shot* was on fucking Fox News! Explain *that* to me, Thea!" Margie was in a full-on rant, her voice cracking into a screech as she punched her words. Her wild, almost rabid look frightened Thea far more than the idea that her best friend might go to the police.

"Margie, my God," Romeo's face had been on the news? Holy shit. They didn't get cable, so she'd just seen the local coverage in the aftermath of the attack. The news had mentioned minorities attacked in the temple — Arabic- and African-Americans and one Asian; the assumption was that the Temple of Akhenaton was some kind of multicultural center. Some enterprising reporter must have paid off a morgue attendant to get some exclusive shots. Long as they weren't showing entry wounds, Fox might've



gotten away with images of all the victims. No wonder Margie was freaked. "You can't think I'm some kind of, of terrorist or something. I've never seen you freaked like this. You're about ready to collapse! Curl up on the couch; I'll get you some tea and we'll talk. Just calm down, okay?"

Margie was almost hyperventilating, her face white as the frost on the windows. Her gaze flicked around the room as she swallowed, then bobbed her head like a poorly-handled marionette. "Yeah, calm down. I'm calm, we're all calm. Let's hear it. Let's hear the big scoop." She shuffled into the living room to sit on the couch. Thea didn't think Margie even noticed that she picked up a pillow and hugged it tight, rocking back and forth.

Thea made no sudden moves as she poured tea for Margie and had the last of the coffee for herself. Margie watched her like a gazelle keeping an eye on an approaching lion, as if she expected Thea to erupt into violence at any second. Thea fumbled the honey for the tea when she remembered they'd stuck the guns from yesterday's raid in her bedroom. *Best not to mention that to Margie. Look's like she's about ready to snap already without hearing there are loaded semiautomatic weapons in the apartment.*

Worry about her best friend's behavior was making it difficult for Thea to concentrate on forming a coherent narrative. Margie was the levelheaded one in their friendship; seeing her on-edge was tough to take. Telling her what was going on wasn't bound to improve her mood any.

Margie was her best friend, had been ever since they'd met in college. They'd trusted one another with their most private thoughts for almost 10 years. This

was the first secret Thea had ever kept from her, and a hell of a one it was, too. She knew it was a matter of time until she had to spill, though. Margie was a sharp one; she had already picked up on something, even wrapped up in her graduate work as she was. It would have been hard not to notice the changes in Thea's behavior over the past few months. But it'd been subtle enough for her to let slide. Yesterday was as far from subtle as you could get.

But the truth was so bizarre; how could Margie believe her? She was already wound up out of concern for her best friend, and the facts wouldn't disprove her suspicions. Thea could imagine the train of thought: *Not only is my best friend hooked up with some fringe cult, she's been brainwashed into running around killing people she claims are "monsters"!* Next thing would be Margie on the phone to Chicago's Finest or the Illinois Psychiatric Institute. And that would be the end of Thea. She wasn't worried about the law in the abstract; the crimes she'd committed were in the defense of humanity. Her conscience was fine with that. In practice, though, the cops were beholden to the undead, whether they knew it or not. Similarly, she suspected the enemy at least monitored hospitals and psychiatric facilities for people spouting off about the forces of darkness. Thea would vanish, or be subject to an unfortunate accident or suicide while in custody.

But what choice did she have? Margie was strained to the breaking point and Thea was tired of hiding the truth. She would have to throw herself on the mercy of her best friend. Even if Margie wouldn't believe her, she would at least hear her out. She was open-minded. This would stretch the boundaries, but Thea thought that Margie would take the time to look at evidence before making any kind of judgment. It's possible Thea



could convince her of the truth. The alternative was to button up, but that would be the end of their friendship, and that Thea couldn't bear to consider.

An odd thought popped in her head. What if Margie not only believed her, but decided to join the hunt? The specter of Carl Navatt rose in Thea's memory. The powers that be had chosen Lilly Belva to saddle up, but her common law husband was left out of the loop. The couple shared everything, though, and Carl joined the hunt alongside Lilly. And met a gruesome death at the hands of zombies. Lilly had fallen also, but at least she had the unique talents most hunters shared; they'd given her a fighting chance. Carl hadn't enjoyed that advantage, slight though it was, and neither would Margie.

Hell, even if she wasn't part of the hunt, being aware of its existence put Margie in danger. Merely being around *Thea* put her in danger. Thea thought, not for the first time, that it might be best to just make a clean break, leave town and spare her best friend and her mom. She just wasn't strong enough to go it alone. The rest of the gang gave her support in the hunt, but Margie kept Thea sane.

But could she tell Margie *everything*? In this agitated state Margie was bound to take any upsetting news in the worst possible fashion. Margie deserved to know enough for her own protection, but she was better off not knowing any more than that.

Damn it; just going around in circles now. Having no more idea where to begin or how much to say than a few minutes before, Thea returned to the living room. She brought Margie her tea and sat on the edge of the love seat. Since her initial outburst, Margie had settled into a slight, nervous rocking motion. The tea seemed to relax her further, and she appeared content to wait



for Thea to begin whenever she was ready. *Thank heaven for small favors*, Thea thought. She wasn't sure she could have taken a sustained shouting match. Another look at Margie, her hands shaking every so often, the way she kept blinking; the flu must be affecting her as much as the news was. Thea debated trying to get Margie to take some cold medicine and get to bed, leave the talk for after she'd gotten some strength back.

No; despite the slight shivering, Margie's jaw was set in determination, her eyes tight with concern. Thea couldn't put it off any longer. Neither could she think of how to begin, so the two sat in silence for a time. Margie stared down at her cup, Thea glancing at her every so often then back up to look outside. A second front had followed the previous afternoon's blizzard, doing little more than dusting a thin layer of white over the recently plowed roads and looking picturesque.

The silence threatened to stretch on forever. They listened to the wind gusting past the building, the constant faint patter of wind-spun snow peppering the windows, and the distant whir of the heater pumping hot air through the apartment. Thea finally screwed up her courage, cleared her throat, and began. She explained that ghosts weren't just in stories, that vampires weren't just characters in erotic fiction disguised as titillating horror.

That evil was real.

SIX

Thea said, "You remember last May when I was attacked?"

A rustle of pillows, then Margie's voice: "Yes."

"I told you it was a mugging, maybe attempted rape, but I fought the guy off." Thea sensed Margie nodding but couldn't bring herself to look at her. "That wasn't the whole truth. I was attacked, but it wasn't anything as simple as a mugging."

Thea couldn't bring herself to jump right into it, so she bought some time by recalling the events leading up to the fateful night. "I was working on a story for an airline magazine. Nobody reads those things, but they pay well and they make for good résumé fodder. Anyway, it was about ethnic neighborhoods in American cities — how different peoples bring a bit of their homeland with them, right? I toured around the different ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago: Greek town, Little Italy, Ukrainian Village, Chinatown; that kind of thing. You know what Chicago's like; it's just a bunch of neighborhoods. Folks on the South Side who've never been to the Art Institute. People from the North Side who wouldn't dream of going south of Soldier Field." Margie gave a distracted nod; they both knew people like that. "The ethnic neighborhoods aren't too different. Just a lot more insular. Trying to shape their own private little worlds. So I figured it'd be tough to break through that defensive layer, to get a feel for what these peoples' lives were like."



"And it *was* tough. Even so, I was surprised with how open a lot of people were. I got the cold shoulder quite a bit, folks who forgot they knew English, some who were just plain rude. But I kept a smile plastered on my face and remained polite the whole time, figuring perseverance would count for something sooner or later." Thea was taking her sweet time getting to things, but it appeared her narrative was relaxing Margie. Thea's heart fluttered with the hope that by recalling the scene in vivid detail, Margie would be more inclined to take her at her word. "I'd already visited Little Italy and Greektown, giving each a couple days apiece. Then I hit Chinatown. It took a while, but I met an older lady who took a liking to me. Wen Li, her name was; ran a spice shop."

She smiled, remembering what a character the old Asian woman was. "Her English was atrocious, but not on purpose. She chattered away a mile a minute with all sorts of anecdotes on moving here and getting used to such a big, strange place. How Chinatown helped her retain her identity while enabling her to experience the New World in all its splendor — exactly what I was shooting for. Anyway, Wen Li gave me the names of some of her friends and neighbors to talk to also. Just tell them her name and I'd be fine.

"After just a couple of visits I had more than enough perspective for Chinatown. I enjoyed being welcomed into these peoples' homes, though, so I made one last stop. It was this old guy name of Shen; he was eating a late dinner with his extended family when I knocked. Once I said who sent me, they insisted I join them. None of the people I talked to were wealthy, some were downright destitute; Shen's family was middle class for the area. I didn't want to impose, but I'd learned enough to realize I'd be insulting them if I didn't accept."



That night was burned in Thea's mind with a clarity she would never forget. This was much harder than she'd thought, which was saying something. "Shen was in charge," she said, her voice starting to shake. "The rest of the family deferred to Shen in everything. It struck me as odd, but then I don't even understand the culture I come from. I wouldn't presume to judge theirs. Soon enough, Shen was apologizing about the late hour. He even insisted he pay for a cab or have one of his grandkids escort me to the El. I refused; I was a big city girl, I could take care of myself. He was pretty persistent, pointing out how dangerous the streets could be and all. I figured I knew that better than he and made my good byes. I thought it was a cultural thing for him.

"It was, but not in the way I thought."

Thea returned to the kitchen for more coffee, then recalled she'd just had the last of it. Fidgeting at the kitchen counter, she took a breath and plunged onward. "He came after me. Old Grandpa Shen, I mean. I... I was halfway to the El when I noticed him following me. I didn't know what to make of it at first. Moved fast for an old guy, you know. But then something... something changed. I saw him for what he was. He wasn't human at all, but some creature, a monster hiding behind a disguise. I can't describe how horrible he — it — really looked. And this *thing* was coming for me, and I knew I was dead.

"I don't think it expected me to attack — hell, I didn't want to attack. But somehow I knew if I tried to run, this Shen-thing would be all over me in a heartbeat. I used what self-defense training I knew, but I could tell it wasn't going to do the job. It was just too strong, too fast." Thea leaned against the kitchen counter, staring at the surface, feeling Margie's eyes upon her. It was too much to think about. She rushed to the ending.



"That's when this guy leaped out of nowhere and helped me drive it back. It was Romeo—" her throat tightened, his death still fresh in her mind. "Sam Zheng, he introduced himself afterward. You saw him on the news. We nicknamed him 'Romeo' later." A deep breath; almost done. "Anyway, between the two of us, we destroyed the thing."

"You mean you *killed* someone?" Margie blurted.

"It wasn't alive to *be* killed. It was a *vampire*, Margie. Really! A monster, something not human." Thea took a breath. "Look, I had the same kinds of questions running through my head as you do right now: Did it actually happen? What was that thing? Was it all bullshit? Was I suffering a psychotic episode?"

Margie nodded along with the questions, her doubt apparent. "And?"

"Romeo told me what I just said. I'd been attacked by a vampire. I wasn't nuts; it happened. He admitted he didn't know the full truth of just how something like that could exist, but there it was." She shrugged, knowing how crazy this was coming off. "And considering what I'd just been through, I couldn't deny that."

"Anyway, he'd started trailing it a night or two before. He was doing more of the same that night when he saw it coming after me." Thea rubbed her face. "This all sounded pretty fucked up to me, you understand. I was thinking — hoping — I'd been drugged up or something at that dinner."

"But you weren't," Margie said with all the warmth of a metal pole in subzero weather.

Thea shook her head. "Romeo said I'd been, well, called to the hunt. Except he referred to it in capital letters: The Hunt." She returned to the love seat and leaned toward Margie as if being closer to her would make it all more believable.



"Listen, Margie. Most of the legends and myths we know have their basis in truth. Monsters are *real*. Romeo said the world was out of balance, too many monsters running around. So people like us are tapped to put things back in synch." Silence; Thea muddled on, trying to build her case. "Begg the question: just who's making this decision, right? Who's saying, 'Okay, you. We're picking you to go fight these things'? I have no idea. We — Romeo and some others you haven't met — aren't the only ones who've encountered these things, though. There are hunters all over the world. Over a dozen of us around Chicago that I know of."

She broke off, thinking that number had seen a sharp decrease of late. "Anyway, every single one of them has a theory on what this is all about. The majority think we're the instruments of God — Allah, Yaweh, pick your name of choice. They think He speaks to us, His chosen, and arms us with the weapons we need. Romeo thinks it's the spirits of his ancestors. Giving guidance and that sort of thing. Lots of karmic debt involved there, I guess. Some folks think we're being subject to alien or government influence. Personally, I think that's a bunch of crap, but who am I to judge?"

Margie looked at Thea, her eyes red from tension and illness. It wasn't clear if Margie thought she was crazy or was shocked by the implications of what Thea was saying. "And what do you think it is, Thea? How do you explain all this to yourself?"

"I don't know," Thea laughed humorlessly. "You know I've never been religious; agnostic going on atheist, right? Rebelling against Mom. I guess I prefer to think that we're tapping into some kind of genetic imperative. From what I've seen in the past months, I suspect these creatures are all part of the bigger picture — kinda like cancer and droughts are all a part



of life, just not the shiny happy parts we like, right? And we're sort of humanity's white blood cells, the antibodies who stop the cancer from spreading.

"I'm not saying I'm right. It's just the hypothesis I'm most comfortable with right now. Alien conspiracies just sound too stupid to believe, and maybe I'm not comfortable thinking heaven and hell are real places."

Margie picked phantom lint from the pillow as she mulled things over. She decided not to pursue that angle any further. "Pretty coincidental that your friend was in the neighborhood right then."

"I've seen more supposed coincidences in the past ten months than you can imagine. I don't think the world is as random and chaotic as we like to think."

Silence again, as Margie returned to staring at the small urn. After a minute, her roommate moved her head; she opened her mouth, then shut it and frowned. Thea just sat, watching thoughts and questions dash across Margie's features. Margie looked down at the pillow she clutched in a death grip. Her gaze remained fixed as she smoothed at the fabric. "You believe all this... real life *Buffy* stuff... is authentic? You don't think... you're, well..."

"Nuts? Losing my damn mind? I think that all the time. It's about the only thing that makes me believe that it's all happening. If I was as zealous as Parker, then I'd be worried." Thea paused and tried another angle to bolster her point. "I understand if you think I've lost it, that I'm part of some fucked up cult or something. I guess I am, in a way. But it's like the man said, 'It's not paranoia if they *are* after you.' I know this whole thing is crazy, but that doesn't mean it's not real."

Thea sighed. "There are monsters out there, Margie." She almost mentioned the one who'd almost dragged



Margie off at the club the previous weekend, the big blond vampire built like a linebacker. "I'm sorry I never told you about all this before, but I could never think of a reasonable approach. I mean, anything I said, how easy would it be to chalk it up to insanity or brainwashing, right?"

Margie's full lips pulled down in a frown, her brow scrunched as if to puzzle out a hard physics problem. "'And what does all this 'monster' stuff have to do with that attack yesterday? With your friend ending up dead?"

"Hell, Margie. We didn't go in there planning on—"

"So you *were* there?" Margie's eyes were wide with surprise, as if up till then they hadn't been talking about anything real. "What are you *doing*, Thea? My God!"

"Listen to me: It wasn't some hate thing or a terrorist attack or anything like that. We just wanted to talk to this Sforza guy in the temple. That's all; just get some information. We got caught in the crossfire. You have to believe me! This guy came charging in and started blowing people away and we were stuck in the middle. That's... that's how Romeo died. Lilly, too. Saw her picture on the news as well, right? They were trying to stop this guy, Carpenter. Except he's not even a guy. He's an *it*; another monster. A tricky sonofabitch who's been killing off a whole bunch of innocent people and we couldn't stop him!

"It wasn't us, Margie," was all she could think of to say. "We were trying to help."

The full weight of the past few weeks—hell, the past ten months — overwhelmed Thea. She collapsed over her knees, cradling her head in her arms as sobs burst out. She'd seen too much death of late, too many atrocities; the destruction was overwhelming. And no one to tell it to, no one to understand what she'd been drawn into — not even the other hunters. They were all so certain of



what they did, the question of who they were and what they were supposed to do often forgotten in the face of the hunt. Thea couldn't help but look beyond, to wonder not only why but what was it all leading to? Was she even doing the right thing with the knowledge she'd been given? Was there a better way to deal with it all? She felt sure there was, but the weight of the struggle itself dragged her head down, kept her from seeing the other possibilities on the horizon. And now, here she was, trying to explain the unexplainable to her best friend, grieving for a man she wasn't even sure she loved and furious at the creature who had single-handedly destroyed the semblance of a new life she'd been trying to create.

Still gathering herself back together, she almost didn't hear Margie. "What?"

"If you were innocent bystanders, why don't you go to the cops, then? Why don't you explain what happened?"

"Because they'd lock us away for sure." She raised her head, wiping her eyes to see Margie still just staring ahead. Like her breakdown hadn't even made a dent. "Even if the authorities could be trusted, how would they take it if I walked in with, 'We were investigating this zombie who's killing off everyone in this woman's family because she had him killed back in 1939 — except he broke in and started shooting up the joint before we could get any answers'? I'd be in a rubber room so fast you wouldn't believe it."

"What do you mean; you can't trust the police?"

"Oh geez, Margie, they're a *part* of it. The nasties control them, the media, corporations — pick some part of society and there's a ghost or a vampire or some other fucking critter pulling the strings from the shadows. I mean, there are plenty of honest cops and dedicated reporters, but you get to the higher-ups and *somebody's* in



their pocket. Might not even know what it is they're working for, but they're in thrall all the same."

Margie looked at her as if at a stranger. "Do you realize how insane that sounds? You're talking about a global conspiracy of... of bogeymen?"

"I know, it sounds paranoid as hell. And I'm sure they don't control everything. Problem is, we know they have influence, we just don't know how much or where. So we have to be as cautious as possible. There are stories of other hunters trying to go public or to the authorities, and they've all ended up discredited, arrested, or dead. It's just too far out there for everyday people to believe, but the monsters can't take the chance that someone might listen."

She slid off the loveseat and knelt next to Margie. "I'm not crazy, Margie; everything I've told you is true. When it comes down to it, all I have to my credit is trust and faith. You're my best friend. I would never do anything to hurt you and I believe you feel the same way. If you think I've lost it and want me to get a brain scan or a psych evaluation, I will. But that wouldn't prove anything, and it might end up putting me in danger."

"Have faith in me, Margie. Trust that what I'm telling you is the truth."

Margie stared into the middle distance, her hands still caressing the pillow in her lap. Thea remained kneeling before her. She wanted to foist all kinds of rationales and arguments on her friend, give her logic and detailed accounts and hypotheses to make her believe. But it would be nothing but more words, more subjective opinion. Thea had to leave it up to Margie now. Her friend had to decide for herself if she believed.

At last, Margie looked at her friend, tears pooling in her tired hazel eyes. "I don't know, Thea. I'm not sure if I *can* believe you."

...

Margie left the room without another word. Thea felt hollow inside, fragile as glass. She long prided herself on being independent and requiring nothing but her own approval. It surprised her how much Margie's opinion meant to her. She filled a bowl in an attempt to find some relief from the roil of thoughts and emotions swirling around inside her. The bong dangled, unlit and neglected, from her hand for a good half hour. Thea's mind couldn't focus on any one thing for more than a second. She shook herself from her mental limbo and dropped her kit back in the Ziplock without bothering to clean out the marijuana first.

Thea thought she heard Margie's voice murmuring as she passed by her door on the way to her own room. She considered knocking or picking up the cordless to see who Margie was talking to. *Fuck it, Thea had decided. If she's calling the cops, fine. I'm just too exhausted to worry any more.*

Thea lay staring at the ceiling, body exhausted and brain in a tumult. It was past noon and she felt like she'd been up for a week. Her thoughts were too chaotic and jumbled to allow for a nap. So she lay there, thinking about how nuts her life had become, wondering if she'd driven away her best friend.

She also wondered why she'd held back telling Margie everything. God knew she'd said more than enough to send Margie screaming for the hills. There was something about that night in May that she just couldn't bear to repeat. Though she couldn't find the words to describe it, her recollection was as vivid as the night it happened. Her mind exhausted by her disastrous conversation with Margie, Thea was sucked down by the undertow of memory.



She remembered enjoying the brisk night air that April evening. Clear and with a slight chill, refreshing after the long winter. The streets of Chinatown had been deserted, with an eerie silence hovering over it all. That was the first sign, though she didn't realize it until afterward. The neighborhood was filled with chatter and activity during the day; although everyone moved it inside after sunset, she'd thought it odd that she didn't at least pick up the murmur of voices from the windows she passed.

The three figures seemed to form from the very shadows under a half-open awning a couple yards up the street. Young men — boys, to be accurate, none older than eighteen. Asian, of course. Thea was the only non-Asian within a mile that night. The toughs had a hard look to them, wary and dangerous. Like a blow to her gut, Thea had realized she faced the members of a tong, a Chinese gang. She walked with the confidence of pepper spray and self defense training, but that wouldn't matter to the youths. About the best Thea could hope to do was to scream to high heaven and pray someone called the cops.

Two of the kids kept looking around — for witnesses? other victims? Thea was never sure — while the third gave her a once-over without expression. None were any great prize; she wouldn't have looked at any of them twice unless she was drunk. Or facing them on a deserted street.

The leader was short and stocky; once his metabolism slowed, the muscle of youth would become the fat of middle age. The fireplug opened his mouth to speak. Thea was startled to hear a thundering voice declare, "DEATH WALKS THE STREETS TONIGHT." She would have been irritated with his fortune cookie phrasing except she was shocked at his powerful voice, especially coming from such a compact frame. That wasn't the only strange thing about it. It was like she'd heard



it through headphones, heard it right in her skull instead of through her ears. And most disturbing of all was the sense of intensity, of *gravity* to what was said. It awakened something primal within her.

Thea thought he was trying to scare her by being loud and intense. She reached into her purse, fingering the pepper spray, and said, "I'm not as easy as I look, tough guy. You try anything, you can bet I'll take at least one of you with me." It would've sounded good, too, if her voice hadn't broken halfway through.

"THE ABOMINATION NEARS," Fireplug replied, his voice even louder, more urgent. "PAIN IS ITS EXISTENCE." Thea felt things get downright surreal. *This* time the gang members lips didn't move with the words. Instead of being amused, like watching some poorly dubbed Hong Kong action flick, Thea felt goose bumps break out all over her body. The timbre of his voice was so powerful it echoed in her head after the sound was gone.

She covered her uneasiness with bluster, even taking a step forward as she threatened the trio in return. "I don't know what the hell you mean about 'abominations.' If you don't leave me be, though, *you'll* be the one in pain!"

This got her a confused look. "What the hell you talking about, lady?" Fireplug demanded. His voice was different this time, a bit high-pitched and with a midwestern twang — though at least his lips moved with the words. Bizarre.

Thea was worried she'd ingested some kind of hallucinogen while at Grandpa Shen's. Then one of Fireplug's buddies, the tall one, grabbed him by the shoulder. "Xian! I hear something!" Tall Punk said, looking past Thea.

Thinking someone else around would be a good thing, she started backing up. "What are you doing, lady?" Fireplug — Xian — barked. "I told you to stay put!"



Thea whipped out her pepper spray as he and the third one, who Thea tagged as Haircut due to his shellacked 'do, lunged toward her. "Back off!" she retorted. "Don't think I'm not afraid to beat your ass!"

The same sepulchral voice declared, "YOUR DOOM LIES BEHIND YOU." And this time Thea saw that not one of the punks even had his mouth open. Even as she felt an overwhelming urge to move, she was already dropping to the ground and rolling to one side. A shadow flashed over her and she heard one of the guys scream.

That's when everything stopped even trying to make sense.

After a year to consider what happened that night, Thea still couldn't explain the change that took place then. The closest she came was equating it to when your ears pop at a high altitude. At first, it's as if you're hearing through cotton. Then your body adjusts to the pressure and your ears pop. It's as if you can hear better than you ever could before.

That wasn't unlike what she experienced when she looked up from the pavement. One moment she saw a wiry little figure — the old Asian man, Shen. He faced away from her, one gnarled little old man's foot holding Fireplug facedown on the ground while his spindly old man's arms clutched Haircut in a bear hug. Both kids were flailing around and screaming like banshees while Tall Punk heel-and-toed it out of there.

Then, a split second later, there was a pop in Thea's mind as she adjusted to the new pressure. As she adjusted to the new *reality*.

The world took one step to the left and Shen wasn't Shen any longer. Or he was, but Thea saw him as he existed behind his protective fog. He wasn't

human, he was a thing. He — it — stood a touch over five feet tall and was hairless except for a shock of hair on forearms and shins. What exposed skin Thea could see was gray and had the consistency of Play-Do. Haircut grabbed at the Shen-thing as he struggled to get free, and his hands pulled away with disgusting globs of flesh. Adding to the repulsiveness was the monster's bulging, overdeveloped upper body. Shen's head was a bump above its shoulder blades with Popeye arms, twiglike biceps and exaggerated forearms. Its legs were pipe cleaners twisted with an extra joint or three apiece, and the feet were flat flippers.

The toes splayed out in almost a complete circle, the long needle-sharp claws of one foot digging into the asphalt. The other pushed down with hideous pressure on Xian. As Thea watched, the Shen-thing shifted its weight and its foot went through the kid's back. Fireplug lay facing her, just a few yards away. She saw his eyes bulge and he gurgled, one hand flailing at Thea. There was a series of wet crunches and black blood spurted from the kid's mouth. His eyes continued staring, but they saw nothing anymore.

Then Shen turned as if it had heard something. Although its attention shifted, it wasn't finished violating Haircut. The creature's shrunken little pygmy head was all teeth, a shark's maw of razor fangs stuck into black gums by some spastic hand. A pair of beady eyes glared red from just above its gumline, but it lacked any perceptible nose or ears. Those horrific teeth were savaging Haircut's neck and shoulder, a split tongue long as a whip curled around the kid's throat and squeezed as if to wring out the blood faster.

What Thea saw defied her understanding. It existed outside of rational explanation. It was inhuman, and it was killing this punk kid while she laid in a

filthy street and watched. It was obvious she couldn't save Haircut. The smart thing to do would be run. Hightail it away from this thing and never stop.

Thea yelled as she leapt to her feet, thrusting the pepper spray at the Shen-thing's eyes and punching the trigger.

It snarled in surprise and growled something — Thea hadn't a clue what, since the combination of its tongue choking the poor kid and speaking in a foreign language made it unintelligible. It swung a massive forearm with a hand on the end that looked like it could pulverize stone. Thea was lucky; it clipped her on the shoulder, knocking her ten feet to slam against the side of a Dumpster. Everything went gray for a second, then a tremendous yell snapped her to consciousness. A wiry Asian man leaped out of nowhere holding what looked like a bar of molten iron. He finished his cry just as he swung the bar like a sword on the Shen-thing's huge shoulder. Globbs of white-hot metal and black ichor spattered out of the wound. The stench of burning, decayed flesh choked the air. The monster tossed Haircut aside with its tongue and turned to unleash its fury upon its attacker.

Thea's side ached from slamming into the Dumpster and the sheer strangeness of the situation threatened to overwhelm her. She was tempted to let the new guy deal with things. Yet even as the thought flashed through her mind she knew with absolute confidence that he'd be nothing more than a bloody pulp if she didn't do something. Since the pepper spray didn't seem to do much good, she ran up behind the Shen-thing and did a leg sweep.

Despite favoring its shoulder, the Shen-thing was up again in an instant, trying to decide who to attack. The Asian had a crazed look in his eyes and the improvised flaming sword he held was magnesium-flare bright. There was no doubt he was the greater threat.



On impulse, Thea tore her blouse open and turned to expose her neck. "Hey!" she yelled. "Who wants some?"

The monster spared a glance, then did a double take. Bloodlust rose in the Shen-thing's weasel eyes. Then it lunged.

Thea dove away and rolled to her feet as the creature flashed by. It tried to correct its leap but Thea was too far to the side. Even so, she saw the rage and hunger on its warped features as it went past. It had already turned and was coming for her again when a ball of flame burst through its chest. The Asian was ready, as if they'd choreographed the whole thing. He shoved the bar further through the Shen-thing and twisted, his face a grimace of concentration. Fire rushed from the wound, consuming the creature's flesh. The Shen-thing shrieked and clawed at its body, tearing huge gobs of its own tissue as it tried to get at the rod. It succeeded in spreading the fire faster as flames spread across its hands to its arms and head.

The creature wrenched itself free, dragging the makeshift sword with it. Still screaming, the Shen-thing yanked out the metal and threw it to the ground where it cooled into shapeless slag. The damage was already done, though. The creature ran around like a huge, misshapen, burning chicken, screaming and gurgling and running into the sides of buildings until it collapsed to the ground. Within a minute it was a blackened, twitching skeleton.

A minute after that, kindly, wizened Grandpa Shen was just so much ash.

The image shone in her mind's eye as clearly as the night it happened. Even now, almost a year later, she recalled every detail. She felt again the sense of triumph and sorrow; feelings that she carried with her ever since. Or had until yesterday... until Maxwell Carpenter blew away Romeo Zheng and Lilly Belva.

SEVEN

Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep cursed himself for the hundredth time that hour. He assumed it was an hour, anyway; what with the duct tape over the eyes it was tough to judge the passage of time.

He wasn't as bad off as when he'd first regained consciousness, at least. That had been a nightmare, awakening to find himself bound from head to toe and barely able to breath. He discovered soon enough that his captor had wrapped him up in duct tape. From the top of his head to the soles of his feet, he was encased in the strong silvery stuff. Despite the air holes made for his mouth and nose, he'd had increasing difficulty breathing. His skin was suffocating under the damn tape. Not to mention his bladder growing ever more insistent.

Left this way, he would have died soon enough. That in itself didn't bother him; death was a minor issue, all things considered. It would've been an aggravating, not to mention embarrassing, way to go, though. It turned out that although his captor was a sadistic sonofabitch, he had a vested interest in keeping Nicholas alive. When it became clear that Nicholas' physiology was not well suited to the manner in which he'd been confined, his captor removed the majority of the tape. That wasn't so bad where he had clothes on — so his sweater and slacks were covered with bits of tacky adhesive and flecks of silver; big deal. His exposed skin hadn't fared as well. Nicholas imag-



ined his hands and face were red and raw from having the tape ripped away.

A minor inconvenience compared to the steady pain shooting through his skull. He wasn't sure how bad the head injury was, but considering the way he kept falling unconscious it must be serious. One of these times he would drop off and not wake up again. He would have liked to check his injuries, but even if his head wasn't still covered in duct tape he couldn't have looked to check. The why of that was one of the reasons he was cursing himself. Four gold bands bound him — powerful workings he'd created himself. He'd spent long hours fashioning them to do what they were doing now: freeze the captive in stasis, restricting his every move. He'd planned on using the things against the very person who now had him captive. Instead, here he was.

Nicholas was aware of the irony, but he was in no mood to appreciate it.

...

He hadn't even realized he'd drifted off again until a fresh burst of pain shot through the side of his head. Flinching, Nicholas realized he could move; at least he could move his head around. His eyes were still gummed shut so he couldn't see what circumstances had changed, but it was easy enough to tell by the sensation. His captor had removed the band encircling his neck. Aside from being able to move his head, the pain was much sharper, more immediate. Despite the frustration of the moment, he felt some sense of relief. He couldn't imagine what state he'd be in right now if he had to deal with the full level of pain this long. Interesting, though; he hadn't been aware that the bands would dull sensation as well as immobilize. Something to note for future reference.



Then there was something cold and wet at his mouth. Nicholas hadn't realized how thirsty he was until he felt the first droplets of water. His head jerked up, mouth seeking the trickling fluid. He gulped at the water even as he cried out at the agony of moving his head so fast. Then the trickle stopped, leaving him gasping and seeking with frantic lips and tongue.

"You look like a fish," a cold, harsh voice chuckled. "Head flopping around like that. Part fish, are you? Yeah, I think you are. Your grandmother was a barracuda, that's for sure."

"Fuck you," Nicholas said. Or he tried to, anyway. He started coughing as soon as he spat out the first word. After the coughing fit subsided and he could focus through the wave of pain the coughs triggered, he gave it another shot. "Fuck you, Carpenter. We both know you're going to kill me, so just get it over with."

"I am, am I? I wouldn't be so sure about that. You gave me quite the mystery to puzzle over. I want to make sure you weren't just feeding me a bunch of bullshit before I decide what to do with you."

I didn't tell him, did I? Nicholas thought. He could imagine he might've gloated at one point. He did that sort of thing now, overdosed on self-confidence as he was. He tried marshaling his shattered memories, to no avail. Memory of his capture was fractured, key details missing and cause-and-effect jumbled out of sequence. Despite his efforts to focus, his mind dredged up nothing more illuminating than fragmented snapshots of action. He knew he'd met some people, reporters? No, posing as reporters, working with his captor to get inside the temple. Thanks to Nicholas' curiosity their plan had worked to perfection. Another thing to curse himself for. They'd attacked, alarms, gunshots, his men fighting them off, trying to protect him, protect the—



"The Heart!" he blurted, regretting the outburst. *Shut the hell up, Nick!*

"What's that? Your heart? Still beating, buddy." A pause, then the voice closer, his captor leaning in close. "No, that's not what you meant. *The heart?* What heart would that be, kid? You know, in all the excitement, I forgot about something. There was some... force... in your temple. Wasn't there? Some kind of mojo, a whaddayacallit? Magic battery or something. Yeah, I remember now. You were going for it when we ran into each other, weren't you? Some kind of weapon to use against me, was it? I think I'm right; just look at the way your jaw's twitching. Love to play poker with you. So is that this 'heart' thing? What's it do? Come on, you can tell me. Old friend of the family, y'know?"

Nicholas stayed silent, trying to calm himself. He'd slipped up again, but at least he'd learned something from it. Sounded like his captor didn't have the Heart, at least. Had his men survived, retreated with the Heart to the safe house? Nicholas had to hope so.

"Nothing to say? Strong, silent type? Okay, tough guy, have it your way. Long as I have you in hand, I can wait forever and a day."



A repeat of the collar and water routine some time later. The cold water made Nicholas realize how hot it was in the room. Once feeling returned to his face with the collar's removal, he felt the sweat pouring off. Injured and dehydrated; lovely combination. Nicholas wasn't sure how much time had passed since the last dose of water, or even how long he'd been a captive. Considering his injuries felt about the same, no more than twelve hours, maybe a day at the outside. By now he knew his captor wasn't bluffing, at least about having a good idea



what Nicholas was. Carpenter wouldn't have known about the bands if Nicholas hadn't told him or tried to use them on him. Neither would he have figured out he needed to remove the band so that Nicholas could swallow. The stasis wasn't total; his primary involuntary processes functioned as normal — respiration, heart beat, and the like. But he couldn't swallow, couldn't talk, as long as that collar was in place.

And his captor wouldn't bother with the water unless he planned on keeping him alive for a while. Well, not quite true. Nicholas could well imagine the bastard performing a variation of the Chinese Water Torture before offing him. Nicholas had to think of a way out of this before that happened. It was just so hard to focus the way his head was throbbing, not to mention the frustration of total confinement. He couldn't move a single muscle; in some ways that was greater agony than the pain in his skull. *Wait; is that sensation in my hand?* Could he move it just the slightest bit, or was it wishful thinking, a phantom sensation? *Focus, try to—*

A blast of white flame flared along the side of his head, tearing a yell out of him.

"You scream like a girl, you know that? I'm getting the feeling you're not listening to me. Pay attention or I'll poke at you some more."

Nicholas heard Carpenter's words as if from a distance. They had a tinny quality, and there was a roaring in the background like they were at the ocean. "I think you blew my eardrum, asshole," he muttered. His own words resonated through the bones of his skull, setting off a vibration that tore a strangled groan from him. When the pain subsided enough that he could form coherent thought, Nicholas ventured a reply. "Listen, you sonofabitch. If you plan on keeping



me alive for however long you want to play your sadistic games, you're not doing a very good job of it."

"I don't know about that." The voice came somewhere to his right. "You seem lively enough. You hear your scream? Dying man doesn't have a healthy yell like that."

"I think I have a serious concussion. Might have swelling on the brain, internal bleeding, who the hell knows? But if it's not treated, I could die."

"Yeah? See, that's kind of funny, since I know firsthand that you've had a lot worse injuries than this and you bounced right back. What puzzles me is why you don't just pull whatever routine you used then to fix these scrapes."

Nicholas wasn't sure at first what Carpenter referred to about worse injuries, then the memories flooded back. The circumstances that had led him to this point to begin with, Carpenter's attack on him almost one year before. "That was different," he said.

"Yeah? Back on track, finally. Explain to me how it was different. Illuminate me."

Nicholas grimaced against the pain. "If you want to know, I need to be able to focus for more than a minute at a time."

"I'm not letting you out of those bands, if that's what you're suggesting."

"Then at least give me a decent amount of water and some food. I need to get my strength back." Was his speech starting to slur? Fuck.

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea."

A fragment of memory fluttered past. "Jesus Christ, Carpenter! You had just *one* of these bands holding you in and you almost didn't get free. What makes you think I can get loose with *all* of them around me?"



"Who's to say you don't have... hell, I don't know, some kind of command or something you could give them so they pop right open?"

Damn, that would have been a good idea; remember that for next time. "If I did, don't you think I would've used it by now?"

"Maybe you're waiting till you're in a better position to get free," Carpenter replied, but Nicholas caught the contemplative tone in his voice.

"Maybe, but it sure as hell isn't now. Even if I did get lose, I'd be weak as shit. What's to stop you from wiping the floor with me all over again?"

"Good point. Would be fun, too."

• • •

Nicholas would be far better off in a hospital, but getting sustenance helped. He could feel his strength returning, the pain in his head lessening. He couldn't just wish his injuries away, but he did heal far faster than a normal person. Agonizing as the whole situation was, it did have one bright spot. Since he was eating, his body had to process the waste. And, as it turned out, his captor was a neat freak.

"I should just let you lie here in your own shit," Carpenter muttered as he finished cleaning up after Nicholas.

The collar was on his throat so he couldn't make a snappy retort, but Nicholas was laughing on the inside. In fact, he could have sworn he felt his abdominal muscles flexing with laughter. He hated to doubt his capabilities — he was certain he'd fashioned these bands to restrain a powerful creature for a very long time — but this was one time he was happy to hope he'd overestimated himself.

Soon enough, he determined that his captor had somehow damaged the bands when he'd put them around



Nicholas. They'd been attached to a base, and he was almost certain they weren't any longer. So Carpenter had removed them for whatever reason and, what? Bent them around him? Do-able, since Nicholas had designed them with a bit of play. But the casket they were attached to was part of the circuit; with that gone, the bands' potency was draining away. Nicholas wasn't sure how long it would be before the bands were weak enough for him to break free, though. The way things were going, not very soon.

So his captor knew how the bands worked, but not their full properties. Nicholas could use that to his advantage. If he could just get free — what? Try to overpower a creature of Carpenter's strength while suffering serious cranial trauma? And what about those people who'd helped capture him to begin with? The woman and the two men, and a few more he hadn't seen. Wait; one of the men was dead... Carpenter had shot him himself. The memory clicked into focus.

They had appeared at the front gate posing as reporters; they knew he was alive and inside. He hadn't known who they were at the time, his curiosity directing Gamal to let them in. Then the alarms, the attack. They were a ruse, a distraction, while Carpenter and the others burst in. But now, that didn't make sense. Because when one of the men — an Asian who carried himself like a cop — had seen Carpenter, he'd started shooting. Carpenter shot back, and the man was dead. After that, Nicholas was too busy fending Carpenter off himself to draw any conclusions.

So it appeared those people weren't working with his captor — unless it was a double-cross, but Nicholas didn't think so. If they weren't in league with Carpenter, though, who the hell were they? Nicholas shoved aside that mystery; he had more important things to worry about. Like getting loose and making sure the Heart was safe.



With the temple breached, his people didn't have anywhere they could keep the Heart where it wouldn't be detected. It would be a beacon to every supernatural in the area with even the slightest ability to sense an aura. They would be forced to try taking the Heart to Egypt right away. It would be sooner than planned, but the danger of its loss mounted every hour it remained here.

Considering this, Nicholas knew he couldn't rely on his men to rescue him. Compared to the Heart, saving Nicholas was a distant second option. That bothered him little; he would be fine in the long run no matter what Carpenter did. In fact, it might be in Nicholas' best interests to egg him on to violence. The danger there was not knowing how long Nicholas would be out of commission. No, he couldn't take that chance. The Heart was too important.

...

"So what was the deal with all those camel jockeys?"

"What?" Carpenter liked to talk, it turned out. The result of being out of circulation for so long, most likely. Nicholas indulged him. It helped him remain conscious, and might even provide some chance for escape. Still, Nicholas couldn't help but notice that sometimes Carpenter came off as a narrow-minded, bigoted, sexist asshole. Okay, most of the time.

"Those guys at the temple where you were hiding. Your little firm had, what? Half a dozen security experts, all of 'em white except this mountain of a darkie. Then you're gone for a year, come back and you have a whole new crew, a whole mix of spear chucks and towelheads."

Laying it on a little thick; maybe trying to get a rise out of him? Possible. Carpenter proved he was one sneaky bastard. *Took out the whole extended family and*



would've gotten you, too, Nicholas reminded himself. *Never forget that.* So why the questions about his men? Was Carpenter worried they might be tracking him down? Or was this idle curiosity? "What can I say? I'm an equal-opportunity employer."

"Yeah, there's another interesting thing. Before a year ago, you had your little vanity project, a well-to-do but small security consultant firm. Nice angle, by the way. Far as anyone can prove, you're an upstanding businessman, but you got the perfect setup to run security for your family and all their mobbed up pals. Gives you an excuse to get in bed with most all the 'unsavory elements,' as they said in my day. Running drugs, laundering money, yeah? Tip of the iceberg, I'd bet.

"So you and your crew make some good money, condos along Lake Shore Drive, holidays in the Caribbean. Maybe a big deal some day, but right now still small potatoes. You're gone for ten months, a year, and the place keeps chugging along. Don't even need you for a figurehead anymore, you know? Then you slip back into town and throw down millions to snatch some temple downtown that nobody's ever heard of, plus God knows how much more in security upgrades. Not to mention a staff of I don't know how many, but looked like a dozen at least. Although all the paperwork is nice and legal — you buying this Temple of Akhenaton through S Securities and everything — truth is the money was funneled in from someplace else — and not from the mob, like I would've expected. Some mysterious benefactor gets you a heavy chunk to get this temple, so you run the operation completely separate from your old firm *and* set up shop inside the joint."

Fuck me, he uncovered a lot. It seemed Carpenter didn't understand the true significance of what Nicholas had been doing since his return. Nicholas divided his



attention between what Carpenter was saying and the dull echo of his voice in the room. Then there was the flat clacking of his footsteps as he paced. Nicholas figured they were in a small room; concrete or brick walls considering the acoustics. Adding in the stale air and the occasional metallic shudder of heating vents when a furnace kicked, he suspected they were in a basement. That meant they could be anywhere in the civilized world, but Nicholas felt safe in assuming they were still in the Chicago area. Carpenter didn't strike him as the globetrotting type, even before factoring in the minor complication of hauling around a body trussed up with metal strips and duct tape. *Keep him talking, see how much he knows and what's just bullshit. See how you can use it to get loose.* "You have a question in there somewhere?"

"I got a bucket full of questions," Carpenter replied. "Let's work our way up to the big one, though. Here's an easy one: What the hell is with that temple? You don't show a damn bit of interest in anything that isn't American, go God knows where for a few months, then you come back and it's like you're fuckin' King Tut."

Nicholas laughed despite the throbs it sent through his skull. "Don't suppose you'd believe me if I said I just liked the joint, would you?"

"Nope."

"Right." He seized on an allusion his captor had made. "If you'd've done a little more digging, you'd know I'm just doing the same thing I been: fronting for an interested party who preferred to keep his activities private."

"Some mobster wanted you to buy an Egyptian temple? What the hell for?"

"Think about everything you just told me and figure it out." This would bring Carpenter uncomfortably



close to the truth, but Nicholas reasoned that the answer should satisfy the bastard and distract him from looking any further. "You said it yourself; I come in with a bunch of foreigners, buy an ethnic temple, trick the place out, right? And what the hell I been doing as a business for the past five years?"

Carpenter's footsteps ceased; Nicholas imagined he was thinking, tying the elements together. "You... not a mobster, no. Not a goombah, anyway. Getting in bed with some towel-head boss? That what you're saying? What the fuck, Sforza? Your people are so deep into the American Syndicate it's like you crawled up their ass and died. You think I'm going to buy that you're shopping yourself around to the fucking Egyptian Mafia? Is there even such a thing?" A harsh, barking laugh. "Bunch of camel jockeys in pinstripe suits with Tommy guns. There's a picture, right? This is bullshit, Sforza."

Nicholas' words came fast yet calm as Carpenter's wingtips marched a staccato toward him. "I figured you were a little smarter than that, Carpenter. Who said anything about me switching teams?" He was extemporizing like crazy, trying to sell Carpenter on something, anything, to move him off the subject. "There sure as hell is a market in Egypt; best route into the Middle East, all sorts of opportunities over there. You'd be surprised. The whole economy's set up for corruption. The Syndicate's like any other business; has to keep pace with the changing world, right? Expand into new markets, all that kind of thing. Middle East is a mess, but it's just the opportunity we've been looking for. So some guys work something out with one of the local crews there, I go over to get the lay of the land, come back and set up shop here."

Carpenter stopped by Nicholas' narrow bed, silent for a second or two. Nicholas wondered what was going



through his captor's head. It was a reasonable, if not inspired, explanation. Would he buy it, or would he decide to smack Nicholas around some more? "You expect me to think you're just doing some Syndicate crap when you haven't been meeting with any bosses since you got back? No dice, tough guy. You got something else cooking with that temple, your little footsoldiers, the whole bit.

"So what is it? I look at all this Egyptian shit you're wearing and I got to wonder: You think you're a goddamn pharaoh or something?"

There was a faint jingle and Nicholas felt tugging around the back of his neck. Surprised that Carpenter hadn't removed the scarab, Nicholas didn't reply at first. His wiser self demanded caution. He tried a snort of disdain, the plosive sending a shard of pain through his temple. "Yeah, you got it," he said through a wince. "I'm Ramses, returned from the grave."

"Are you? I wouldn't be surprised." The necklace thumped back on Nicholas' chest, then more scraping footsteps as Carpenter resumed his meandering around the small chamber. "You said before you were immortal. You're not a vampire, you're not a walking corpse like me. So, what? You a mummy? That's just a corpse all wrapped up in bandages, something like me, right? But that doesn't work. You're alive. You're not just acting like it, you are. And there's the big question: How the hell are you alive, here and now, when I saw you blow your own brains out?"

Nicholas cursed himself. Trying to mislead with mundane explanations had gotten him nowhere. He should know better. New to the greater reality he faced, he was falling back on old assumptions. He was still thinking of Carpenter as his grandmother had portrayed him — a dim-witted button man for the mob, knowing nothing but guns and petty crime and brutality.



Nicholas had assumed his grandmother meant Carpenter was a thug from the modern-day Syndicate. It was after his return to Chicago that Nicholas discovered the man calling himself Maxwell Carpenter had been dead for half a century. Nicholas' new life brought with it the discovery of many secrets, including the type of creature Carpenter was. He was no longer mortal; of course he would have learned much of the ways of the supernatural. *Focus; work through the pain and see what you can salvage from the situation.* "You sure you saw what you think you saw?"

"Don't give me that. I made you pull the goddamn trigger. I saw your brains spray all over your wall."

The throbbing pain in Nicholas' head wasn't shaking loose any new ideas, so he tried one last desperation play. "You want the truth? The truth is I don't know what happened to me. That night, all of a sudden I wanted to shoot myself, right? And you did that? Made me want to put a fucking gun to my head? Hell, maybe you did something else to me then. All I know is, I didn't die. Why? I don't know; I don't remember anything for a while after that. Hell, for all either of us knows it was just a bad shot or a dud round or something, looked worse than it was. It's not like I been trying to off myself since then, right?"

Carpenter's voice whispered in his ear, the barely-suppressed rage clear in every word. "Bullshit. You're holding something back and we both know it. You don't tell me the truth, I'm going to see if you really are as immortal as you claimed."

Then the collar was back in place and Nicholas heard footsteps stomping away. A door slammed and faint footfalls receded to nothing. Nicholas struggled to gain coherent thought. His injury was screwing up his thought processes. Carpenter already brought too



much to the table, he knew enough about the supernatural that Nicholas had to be fucking clever if he was going to put one over on him.

...

Some time later, Nicholas felt the surge of pain as the collar was removed. Then fresh agony as the duct tape over his eyes was torn up. He blinked as best he could, the adhesive from the tape gumming his eyelashes. A blurry shape resolved itself a few seconds later — the face of his captor, Maxwell Carpenter.

It wasn't a pleasant countenance. Lean, with a strong nose and lines on either side of the mouth lending character. Nicholas knew it wasn't the man's real face, though, just the body he'd found to make his return to the living world. The real Carpenter stared from cold eyes blazing with hate.

"Now what?" Nicholas croaked. The faint buzzing noise he'd been hearing for the past few hours had surged to a roar when the collar was removed. Combined with the pain in his head, it was even more difficult to stay focused.

"I'm still tired from the other day and was hoping you'd give me what I wanted to know the old-fashioned way," Carpenter said. "I can feel you slipping now; I don't think you're going to be around much longer. I want to make sure I get all my questions answered before you kick, which means doing it the hard way."

Nicholas wasn't sure what to make of that, though it became all too clear when his captor spoke again. Carpenter's eye blazed with green fire when he said, "Tell me what you are."

A dagger of pain ripped through Nicholas' brain. He found himself opening his mouth to reply, heard his voice gasp, "I am the Undying. I am Amenti."



Carpenter leaned away, eyes narrowing in surprise and confusion. Nicholas struggled to get his traitorous tongue under control. That green light, the cold tone of Carpenter's voice — the bastard was shoving commands into his mind. Nicholas had wondered how he could ever have been forced to pick up a pistol and put it to his own temple, let alone pull the trigger. Carpenter could somehow force a compulsion within someone, an urge so powerful it overrode even survival instincts. And he was using it now to drag the remaining secrets from Nicholas' unwilling lips.

His captor leaned in again, capturing his gaze and barking another command. "Tell me what the hell that means," Carpenter said, one eye gray and the other brilliant green.

Agony was a lightning bolt through Nicholas' skull. Through gritted teeth he spat, "Said it yourself, asshole. Mummy. Deathless." His brain felt like it was about to explode, his vision gone from his right eye. It seemed he could see lines of strain on Carpenter's face also. *Why the hell doesn't he just have me explain everything instead of this twenty questions crap?*

"How? You were dead, like me! How did you come back? How did you become this?"

Nicholas tried some futile gesture of defiance, but the compulsion was too great. The sides of his head throbbed in crashing waves of agony even as he said, "Spell... of Life."

"At the temple? That it? Something you do at your temple?"

The green fire made him want to answer despite himself. If only he could make Carpenter think it were true! Instead, his mouth betrayed him with a "No."

"It's goddamn gotta happen somewhere," Carpenter snarled. His voice grew harsh and urgent, more as



if he was talking to himself. As if he were trying to reason out the details, to decide the best questions to ask: "It's some kind of... of procedure or ceremony; where?" His focus bored in on Nicholas. "Where do you do this 'Spell of Life'?"

Nicholas' lips curled back from his teeth as he fought the compulsion. The best he could do was be vague. "Egypt," he sputtered at last, the "E" a long, agonized groan.

Painful as this was for him, Nicholas sensed that this ability Carpenter used was not applied without some cost to him also. Even through the thickening haze of pain, Nicholas could see Carpenter looking more strained than even moments before. He wasn't sure how this would end, but if he could hold out long enough, giving up as little as possible, maybe he could leave Carpenter exhausted. Then... what? Nicholas didn't know, but it was all he had.

"'Egypt'? Big fucking country, asshole. 'Spell of Life'? Fine. Don't know fuck about spells. How does it work? Something... you were just like me, corpse walking away. Now alive. Who does it; is there a trick? Would have to be, wouldn't there? Otherwise everyone would do it." Carpenter faced Nicholas again, desperation clear. "Is it this 'heart'? Did that make you what you are?"

Nicholas groaned, trying to clench his jaw tight, but the heat from the green flame blasted through his mind. Then something rushed up from within him with such force that his body bucked on the narrow bed. A voice, deep and resonant and speaking a tongue dead for millennia, burst from his lips. The rage in the words was so great they seemed to strike Carpenter like a physical blow. He staggered back, confusion and perhaps even fear in his eyes.



Then a supernova of torture exploded in Nicholas' head. Everything began to spin, the roaring in his ears rising to a numbing crescendo. His body shook, powerful contractions starting in his abdomen and traveling up through his esophagus. Then the back of his throat was clogging with bile and the half-digested stew Carpenter had fed him. He tried to move, to roll, but the bonds remained too strong. His body flexed and jerked like a fish on the line. Then his head could move, he was turning and spewing puke everywhere while trying to draw breath at the same time. A coughing fit seized him, convulsing his body even more, and warm, thick fluid rushed through his throat and sprayed all around him. A second burst of white heat flared behind his eyes, triggering a spasm through his body so powerful he felt himself lift into the air.

Words couldn't describe the pain that tore through him. Mercifully, Nicholas was spared trying to think of any, for another blaze ripped through him, riding a wave of blackness that sucked him down with irresistible finality.

A second later, Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep was dead.

EIGHT

Thea watched Jake lean forward, his eyes roving over the Canopic jar she'd placed on the disused check-out counter. "So you think that's what Carpenter was after this whole time?"

"Possible, but I doubt it," Thea said, turning her attention to the rest of the Stop N Go. Parker was cajoling the space heaters into kicking out some warmth and Dean was fidgeting around the place like he was looking for booby traps. She and Jake were sitting in a pair of rickety chairs by the front of the disused convenience store. Hell of a secret hideout. It had been freezing and uncomfortable all winter, but Thea rushed for the place from her warm apartment earlier that afternoon. After the painful conversation with Margie, she wallowed in memories and ended up in her room the rest of the day doing nothing. She didn't hear Margie moving around either and figured her friend was trying to work through everything, along with her cold. At least the police didn't come rushing in to drag her away.

She'd felt just as uncomfortable the next day, wasting most of the morning in bed. She'd still be there if she hadn't had this place to escape to. "I think you had him pegged pretty well from your research. Carpenter's out to kill everyone in the Sforza family, and since Nicholas Sforza was laying low in the temple, he had to go in to get him." She rested her chin on tented fingers and nodded at the jar. "I don't think he even realized it was there. Doubt he'd care, either."

"Yeah, he got what he wanted," Parker snarled from where he fiddled with one of the heaters.

They all nodded. The pain of it all was still fresh in all their minds.

"I can't believe he still used us, even after we figured out what he was up to," Jake said.

"Stop with that." Thea shook her head. "I'm not saying this isn't a horrible situation, that it hasn't been agonizing for all of us. I'm not saying we didn't screw up. But we did the best we could. We tried to find out what was going on, we tried to stop bad things from happening. I still think our best option — our *only* option — was to meet with that Sforza guy.

"Carpenter just moved faster than we'd thought. I mean, think about it. He's been planning all this out for years. Hell, decades, right? I'm surprised we even got the lowdown on him in a week. I like to think we ended up surprising him, too."

"Like it ended up doing us any good," Parker said, dragging the space heater closer to the center of the room. "He killed Lilly and Romeo *and* snatched Sforza. He got everything he was going for and we didn't do a damn thing to stop him. Wouldn't even have gotten out of there if it wasn't for that snowstorm. No visibility, covered our tracks, made it tough for the cops to get in position."

This brought a bitter chuckle from Dean. "Yeah, we're lucky. Romeo and Lilly are dead, but we're okay. Lilly's branded as some kind of murdering racist, but we're doing just great."

There was no denying that bleak assessment, but Thea gave it a shot anyway. "I wish there was something we could do to change things, but you know the score. We've heard enough from other hunters that going for public exposure right now backfires. The nasties are too well-entrenched in the government and



the media. I wish we could tell the whole world what Romeo and Lilly died doing, that they're heroes. I hope someday we can. But until then, at least we'll know, right? Us and the other hunters out there. We'll spread the word, we'll make sure every hunter out there knows the truth about Samuel Zheng and Lilly Belva."

"And Carl Navatt and Wayne Farrell," Jake added in a soft tone. Thea's eyes teared up with equal parts shame and recollection. She'd forgotten about Lilly's common-law husband, Carl, and Dean's lover, Wayne. They'd both been killed by zombies, Wayne not even a hunter but in the wrong place at the wrong time. She realized she'd never caught his last name before. Even at his funeral, she'd been too wrapped up in her own concerns, in the horrors that surrounded her.

"Doesn't make it any easier, but thanks. If I could switch places... well, you know." Dean wrestled back tears of his own. "But at least I could help some of us, right?"

Thea felt a twinge in her shoulder and saw Parker rub his stomach. They'd both been wounded in the conflict, but Dean's incredible healing talent had restored them.

"I know we'd all change what happened if we could," Parker said. "But at least we can do right by them now, y'know?"

"Right," Thea said. "So how do we do that? The same blizzard that covered our escape did the same for Carpenter. Jake, yesterday you and Parker checked out the warehouse he met us at last week, right? Place is empty. So where did our favorite zombie run off to?" She looked around the old Stop N Go, sensing the defeat in all of them. "Look, guys, this is a fucked-up situation, but we have to get cracking. We can't go on like this."

"Like what?" Parker growled, showing a spark of his old combativeness. "We lost half the damn Van Helsing Brigade, the cops are looking for me and Dean,

and we don't know where to begin to try finding the fucker who stuck us in this mess."

"Exactly. Thinking like that, we're still letting Carpenter shove us around. Come on, he manipulated us, fine. Let's not let him keep doing it now. We're into something where one mistake can get you killed, you know? Always thought it was a cliché, but look at us. Down half our gang in under a month. We have to be better than we were if we're going to find Carpenter and rescue this Sforza."

"You're right, Thea," Jake commented. "But it's not going to be easy. Like you said, Maxwell Carpenter's been doing his thing for *three-quarters of a century*. He's been a ghost with one thing on his mind: revenge. I bet he spent a good fifty years thinking of contingency plans on contingency plans, all directed toward getting vengeance against the woman who betrayed him."

"His full-time job for longer than any of us have been alive," Thea said.

"Exactly. Compared to that, even with our combined experience hunting the supernatural? I'm surprised we didn't all end up dead."

"Hey, the bastard ain't perfect," Parker said, surprising all of them. He was the naysayer of their little club; not the sort to dole out positive comments. "Carpenter was so hot for this Sforza guy that he left us alive. Which means we can get some fucking payback." That was more like it. Leave it to Parker to provide a pep talk based on revenge.

Thea nodded. "I'm pretty sure he has Sforza alive someplace. We need to figure out where that is and move on him before he's ready."

"Which brings up another puzzle," Jake said. "Just what is the deal with Nicholas Sforza?"

They shared looks. That *was* a puzzle. He was the grandson of the woman Carpenter claimed betrayed



him, the woman responsible for his death in 1939. Annabelle Sforza had gone on to become a leading member of the Chicago underworld, a role that might otherwise have gone to her dead lover. Sixty years later, Carpenter's soul had possessed a new body — whose, God knew — and proceeded to kill off every member of Annabelle Sforza's family. She'd escaped that fate from dying of natural causes before Carpenter could get to her. Nicholas was the last one — the last surviving adult, anyway; Carpenter must have a thing about not killing children. A strange bit of morality, considering what a monster he was otherwise. Anyway, Nicholas had somehow survived at least one attempt on his life by the dead mobster, then vanished from sight. He'd popped up months later hiding out in the Temple of Akhenaton. They still hadn't figured out what had happened to him in the intervening year. Neither had they determined how Sforza knew the temple would put him beyond Carpenter's reach — at least, it did until the Van Helsing Brigade had gotten inside in an attempt to uncover some answers of their own. Anyway, as far as Nicholas Sforza was concerned, Thea hadn't seen enough to draw definite conclusions, but it was clear the guy was out of the ordinary.

"I'm not sure what his deal is," she said. "He's not your average security consultant, though."

"You mean what with shrugging off three point-blank shots to the chest and all?" Parker smirked.

"Like I said before, he didn't shrug them off *per se*. The bullets still hit him, but it's like they had to get through some kind of... I dunno, force field or something. Whatever it was bled off so much of the velocity that they didn't do much more than break the skin and knock the wind out of him."

"A psychic flak vest."



"Sounds more potent than anything we can do," Jake observed. "You know, it's possible he's some kind of, well, magician."

"Man, just when I think this stuff can't get any stranger," Parker said. "Don't we have enough to deal with already, fuckin' zombies and vampires and shit?"

"Jake, you did say before that the Temple of Akhenaton was supposed to be some gathering place for mystics, right?" Thea asked.

"Oh, yeah. But I didn't think it was real magic. That'd explain things, I suppose, though I'm curious how Nicholas Sforza would have learned about the place."

"Sorry, but I don't think we're going to find those answers shooting the breeze," Dean commented. "As Thea said, let's concentrate on finding him."

"There's something else to consider," Thea said. "We've learned that zombies exist out of a single overriding passion, right? Some kind of unfinished task or revenge or something. Carpenter's a textbook example of that, isn't he? His one mission in life — well, death, anyway — is to kill off this Annabelle Sforza's family. Once that's done, his spirit would go off to its, uh, final reward, right?"

"So we let him kill the last surviving adult Sforza and he'll just go *poof*? Problem solved?"

Thea gave an uncomfortable shrug. "I'm not saying we *should*. Just that it might end up being the only way to get rid of Carpenter for good. After all, he returned to life in one stolen body. If we destroy this one, what's to stop him from popping up in another one?"

This possibility shut everyone up for a little while. Jake winced and cleared his throat. "That's, uh, a disturbing thought, but let's keep it as a backup plan, right? *Way back*."

"Like I said, not necessarily a good idea. Anyway, far as Carpenter's concerned, we already have all the



research we did on him — places he used to operate when he was alive and all that. We know the walking dead are creatures of habit; we just need to narrow down his routine and we're sure to find his hiding—" she broke off, frowning. "You hear something just then?"

They all shook their heads, but everyone got up. "What was it?" Dean asked.

"Sounded like something fell over in the back room, maybe." Carpenter had scoped them out before; it seemed certain he knew about this place. So had he returned to finish off the rest of the team? He was sneaky and dangerous, but he'd never faced them when they were ready for him. She noticed the grim anticipation in the others' faces — even Jake, who was willing to think the best of even the most horrible creature. Carpenter had proven himself a monster, and they were eager to mete out justice upon him.

Parker grabbed the Spas-12 from the counter and moved over the cracked linoleum toward the storeroom door. Jake, never much of one for guns, hefted the baseball bat he'd arrived with. Dean caught Thea's eye and headed toward the front door, grabbing up his MP-5 along the way. She checked the Browning Hi-Power in her jacket pocket but kept her hands free, preferring unarmed combat to firing off rounds in a tight space. As she slipped after Dean, Thea focused her senses to attain the rarified state she labeled her sixth sense. They each had their talents — Dean's capacity to heal, Jake's ability to remain unnoticed by the supernatural. Hers allowed her to sense impending danger and, at times, to know the best thing to do in a given situation.

She cried out in surprise as she was overwhelmed by throbbing waves of energy. She realized right away what it was — the Canopic jar. She'd felt the same psychic interference when she'd first found it at the temple. It was a thing of some potency, though none of



them had a clue what it was. *Should have remembered how overpowering the thing was when focusing like this!* Clutching her aching head, Thea forced herself to emerge from the fugue state she'd just entered a second before.

Her attention on shutting off the urn's feedback, she didn't notice Dean turning to her in concern as the front door burst open behind him.

• • •

It was chaos in an instant.

Men in heavy coats and ski masks rushed in waving sub-machineguns with sound suppressors, shouting in accented English for everyone to *get down now!* Dean spun when the invaders rushed in, and the nearest one fired a burst at the big man when the profile of Dean's MP-5 swung into view. Dean flew back against her with the impact, and they both slammed against the counter.

Thea struggled to get her bearings. The attack coming just as she tried to regain her normal senses threw her off balance — and now Dean was lying on her, bleeding and gasping.

She couldn't see anything but the ceiling and Dean's bulk pinned her to the ground, made all the more painful by something digging into her shoulder blades. She could hear just fine, though. Dean's gasps and muttered half-sentences were harsh in her ears, and beyond that the continued shouting, sporadic shots and scuffles as Parker and Jake faced their attackers.

"Dean! Dean, are you okay?" she yelled in his ear. A whisper would have been fine, but she was pumped on adrenaline and fear.

His jowl wiggled against her cheek as he nodded. "Got me... abdomen. Trying to heal. Move me... help... help Jake and—" A fit of coughing seized him and Thea was sprayed with bloody spittle.



If any of us had to be shot, at least it was him, she thought as she pushed against him. Dean could mend his wounds, recover; she had to hope his gift was sufficient to deal with the injury he'd received.

Thea apologized as she shoved him to the side and struggled into a crouch. He nodded to her, teeth bared in a bloody smile. "Go!" he gasped.

She turned to see Parker and Jake holding four men at bay. Parker was yelling, his shotgun in one hand and a glowing brand of fire in the other. Jake was taking wild swings and pokes with the bat, its end smoldering from contact with Parker's firebrand (intentional or otherwise, Thea didn't know). The attackers were pointing their weapons and shifting around to try and surround them. No one shot after the initial seconds, thank God. That meant these guys were mortal, at least, since the undead were seldom worried about bullets. Based on their accents and the dark skin visible around the holes of the ski masks, she felt safe in assuming they were part of the crew from the temple. How they'd tracked them down was a mystery for another time.

She checked on Dean one last time before moving to support Parker and Jake. He was in tremendous pain, but waved her off with a shake of his head. As she turned, she saw what was digging into her back before. The small urn had fallen from the counter when they'd slammed against it. It must have rolled under her when she'd slid to the floor with Dean atop her. Thea picked it up, triggering a shout from one of the attackers trying to shove past Parker. The others took up the cry, with Parker and Jake shouting in return. Then something crashed through one of the blacked-out front windows off to Thea's right, knocking over the empty shelves they'd propped there and throwing wan afternoon light on the scene.

They were caught between two groups, all in the same nondescript coats and ski masks, all of them carrying sub-



machineguns, all of them yelling and charging forward. They wanted the jar, and they didn't appear to care how they got it. Thea and the others weren't cut down in a hail of bullets only because the two groups would have caught one another in the crossfire. Parker fired off a blast of the shotgun one-handed. The recoil jerked the thing from his grasp, but the shot caught one of the attackers in the shoulder, spinning him around to bounce off the rear wall. The place was getting crowded fast, and Thea saw they were up against to three-to-one. Parker grabbed his firebrand with both hands and swung, just as Jake was with his smoldering bat.

Jake, much smaller than Parker and without the barbarian instincts, was driven back just a foot away from Thea, doing all he could to keep the two men on him from getting by. One lunged in to take a hit from the bat on his forearms, giving the other one an opening when Jake swung down. The second man grabbed the shaft of the bat where it hadn't yet caught fire, and he and Jake engaged in a brief tug-of-war. The one Jake just hit recovered and came in low, so Jake let go of the bat and swung a wild punch. The second attacker staggered back and tripped over one of the space heaters, the burning bat flipping off into a corner. Jake's punch did little more than startle the first guy, who ducked enough that his own lunge just clipped Jake.

Thea had three coming at her through the front window; they would have been on her right away if they hadn't had to climb over the wrecked shelves. Her sixth sense was useless thanks to the urn, but then these guys didn't appear to be supernatural so she supposed it all evened out. She shoved the jar into a jacket pocket and grabbed at the cord of a space heater snaking nearby. She stomped one boot on the extension cord and yanked hard, popping the heater's cord free. Stepping to the side away from where



Jake was flailing with his opponent, Thea swung the heavy space heater in a sloppy arc. She had no real control over the thing, but it was big and hot and moved the three guys back a few feet. Thea yelled and grabbed higher up the cord with her left hand, giving her more leverage as she tried to swing the thing like a lasso.

The men weren't sure what to do; they wanted the jar, but they weren't thrilled with the idea of getting smacked in the head by a ten-pound hunk of hot metal. That was fine by Thea; she swung the space heater around again, grunting with the effort. Their hesitation proved to be a feint, though. They rushed her just after the heater swung by again. In a panic, she backpedaled while grabbing even higher on the cord as it swung around her back, shortening the arc and yanking on it hard to bring it around faster. The heater swung through and clipped one of the guys in the hip, knocking him into another one. The first went down in a tangle with the heater, but the second righted himself and came for Thea looking even more determined. The third guy was almost on top of her when she slammed her back into the convenience store counter. She grabbed the lip behind her and boosted up, taking a few wild swings with her legs as she slid her ass over the cracked Formica. She didn't connect, but they couldn't catch hold of her before she rolled off the back of the counter onto the floor.

The men leaped over the barrier after her, one doing a two-handed plant on the surface to vault down next to her, the other coming over in a sloppy scramble. Thea just had time to grab one of the dozen stakes stashed there for their vampire hunts. She rose fast, using all her momentum to jam the wood high up on the second guy's left side. He was overextended, his arm stretched out to grab the back lip of the counter. His heavy coat took the brunt of it, but he cried out and fell back as the stake pierced the flesh under his armpit.



The vaulter called out something in Arabic. Thea's mother had tried to teach her the language when she was growing up. She had done her best to forget it all, wanting to be as American as possible. Even so, she could have figured out most of what these guys were saying to one another if it weren't for all the violence and impending death ruining her concentration.

Rather than ask for a translation, Thea launched a side kick at the guy. Turned out he knew a few things, too, since he deflected her leg and pivoted around to come in closer and grab her. Thea went with the block's momentum and rolled back across the counter, tucking her legs as she came over so she wouldn't land on Dean. The man wasn't interested in letting her outmaneuver him again, though. He grabbed the back of her jacket and yanked back hard, bringing his other arm around to put her in a headlock. Thea found herself sprawled on her back on a creaking convenience store counter, her legs kicking for leverage while some Arab in a ski mask strangled her. Fighting back the panic, she switched tactics and jackknifed her legs up, rolling up and over the guy's back to land behind him. She almost lost her balance when she hit the ground a foot lower than she expected and clutched at her opponent to keep her footing. He was already trying to turn and Thea was out of cool moves at that second, so she jumped on his back and slammed his head into the counter two or three times.

She dropped him to the ground and tried to get her bearings. She was shocked to see Jake being tossed aside by his attacker, who rounded on Thea with such intense hatred in his eyes that she flinched. The man grabbed the sub-machinegun hanging on a strap across his chest and swung the weapon to bear. Thea scrambled in her pocket for the jar, hoping the sight of it would hold his fire. Even as she went for it, she knew she'd be too late. There was the sustained burp of automatic fire followed



by a much quieter popping sound. She realized she was unharmed, with a series of bullet holes stitched up the Sheetrock next to her — but the guy who'd shot was staggering back, covered in blood. It was like his own rounds had ricocheted off the wall and struck him.

A bloody hand slapped at the other edge of the counter and Dean heaved himself to his feet, his still-smoking MP-5 dangling in his other hand. He looked half dead, face pale and drawn, corpulent features a nasty gray, eyes tight with pain. Thea recognized it wasn't all from the physical wounds he'd suffered; Dean was grim with the knowledge he had just killed a living person.

Sliding over the counter, she saw Parker was trying to be as lethal as Dean had been. He was cleaving into everything in sight with his firebrand while bellowing. His three opponents were skilled, but they were having difficulty getting past the white-hot flame. Dean's gunshots seemed to flip a switch with them all, and seeing Thea and Dean standing behind Parker without opponents galvanized them into action. In unison, all three grabbed for their SMGs.

"Shit! Parker, get down!" Thea yelled, pulling at Dean while she lunged for the broken front window. Parker cried out and threw the firebrand sidearm as he flung himself in the opposite direction. The flaming sword started dissipating, but it still had plenty of heat and heft to it when it sliced into the leftmost gunman. The other two ignored their fallen comrade and blazed away with their weapons. She heard the quiet stuttering cough of suppressed weapons fire, knowing the hot slugs would tear into them at any second. *They weren't going to make it; cut down a yard from—*

Then Thea was tumbling through the air as if a mighty fist had shoved her forward through the broken window. She landed on her back in the snow, unsure if she couldn't breathe because she'd had the wind knocked out of her or



because she'd just been killed. Blinking and trying to focus, she noticed it was after dark, with a brilliant, cloudless sky and just a hint of the waxing moon. She registered more shots being fired inside and saw flickering muzzle flashes out of the corner of her eye. A gasp tore through her and she was breathing again, gulping down air as she struggled to her feet. Her side felt like Parker had jammed his firebrand into it. She staggered over to the window, not sure what she was going to do. There was a second of silence when she stepped forward, then a shape leaped at her from the darkness. She slammed to the ground again, sliding on the icy hardpack and struggling to throw off her assailant. More rounds stitched the air above them as they fell, adding to the insanity.

She got a good hold of her attacker's throat, then realized it was Jake. He gasped in relief as she snatched her hand away, croaking, "Move it! They're coming!"

Over his shoulder Thea could see darker shapes advancing in the abandoned building. She heard the telltale snap and *ca-chak!* of fresh clips being slapped into place. "Dean and Parker!" she said, already moving back inside.

Jake grabbed her by the collar and pulled, swinging her around. His eyes had the raw look of someone who's seen enough suffering to last a dozen lifetimes. "They're dead, Thea! They — just come on!"

Multiple figures spilled from the Stop N Go, yelling and pointing at them. None were her remaining friends. Only Jake was left. She stumbled after him, her side throbbing in agony. They ducked for cover behind a Jeep Grand Cherokee parked in the lot, then dashed down the street. Jake was a few feet ahead of her, chanting "come on" like a mantra as he ran. The shouts continued behind them, but no shots as yet. Still out of line of fire. With a sudden inspiration she grabbed Jake's arm and dragged him into a building alcove.



"What are you doing?" he gasped.

"They're going to mow us down if we just run down the street," she replied. She yanked free her pistol and poked it back up the street. She fired a couple random shots, then swung her aim in at the lock on the door. Another double-tap, the Glaser rounds packing enough force at point blank range to smash the lock in. She shouldered through the door with Jake right behind. "They'll be a little cautious now. I hope. Sneak up or something, and give us time to get the hell out the back."

Jake nodded and headed down the hall. Like the Stop N Go next door, the old realtor's office was abandoned. Thea didn't know if Parker's uncle owned both lots — he let them use the old convenience store, no questions asked — but she gave silent thanks to whomever it was who left the place derelict and without a metal accordion door across the front. Their running footsteps and gasping breath echoed in the confined space, with a ringing in Thea's ears from all the weapons fire. Thanks to the ringing, it was hard to tell if she was hearing sirens or if it was just wishful thinking.

They were almost to the back when the front door flew open, followed by a short burst from an SMG. Then shouting in Arabic and multiple pairs of feet dashing inside. The hallway ran straight, front to back, making them sitting ducks if their attackers wanted to just spray away with their weapons. Thea body checked Jake through a door to one side, her side a supernova of pain as they tumbled through the cheap pressboard barrier and fell to the dusty ground. Seconds later bullets stitched across the back door and halfway across the room they were in.

"Jesus Christ," Jake whispered. "I tell you, I'd rather face vampires than all these assholes with automatic weapons."

Scrambling into a crouch, Thea realized the urn wasn't in her pocket. She would have fallen right on it when she



hit the ground before. She didn't think their attackers would stop chasing them if she pointed that out, though; nothing to do but keep running. There, against the far wall — a window that looked out on the Stop N Go lot. "Get that open," she said, then turned toward the front and let off a few rounds of her own. They did next to nothing, she knew, but the fear of being nailed by a stray shot would hold their attackers off for precious seconds.

Jake grabbed an old office chair and heaved it through the window in a crashing explosion of glass and wood that any director would have loved to catch on film. They were out of the building and across the lot seconds later. Thea's heart spasmed as she glanced at the convenience store, the smashed front window and broken door a pair of mismatched eyes glaring at her in accusation.

More shouts in Arabic spurred her on after Jake as they dashed across the street. They ran down to Chicago Ave, making for the El station, agreeing without words that it was their best chance at a getaway since neither owned a car. The police sirens were distinct now, and she saw the telltale flicker of red-and-blue reflecting in the distance. The authorities' impending arrival didn't seem to be scaring off their attackers. The yelling stopped, but when she glanced over her shoulder she saw two men running after them while a third yelled back around the corner. *At least they're not blazing away anymore; must be running low on bullets.*

"Train!" Jake gasped, clattering up the stairs to the El platform. "I think I hear it!"

What timing, Thea thought. If they could jump the train they might just have a shot. Get someplace safe and get ahold of the South Side hunters — hell, maybe recruit everyone in the Midwest — then track these bastards down for payback. Hunters didn't go after the living, but at this point Thea was willing to make an exception. She was most of the way up when she heard two more sets of boots



thundering up the stairs. Jake waited at the turnstile waving a token at her and gesturing at the train just pulling in. Another backward look showed her the flashing lights bouncing off the buildings a few blocks away. The cops were nearing the scene of the crime.

Out of breath, a fierce pain in her side and with a headache threatening to split her skull in two, Thea dashed after Jake onto the train. The two men jumped aboard also just as the doors slid closed. *Of course; why catch a break now?* The handful of passengers on the train knew trouble when they saw it. They brushed past Thea and Jake and their approaching attackers and out through the connecting doors.

She wondered if she looked as panicked and beat as Jake did; felt like it. She wasn't going to give these assholes the satisfaction, though. Gritting her teeth against the pain in her side, Thea stepped forward and faced down the lead man. He wore the same jacket and ski mask as his pals, but he and his buddy had ditched their sub-machineguns. In the harsh lights of the train she could see his dark skin in the exposed portions of the mask. His black eyes glared at her with restrained fury.

"Come on, you assholes," she rasped. "I dropped your damn urn back at the hideout. Why don't you just get it and go?"

"We have the Heart," he confirmed in accented but clear English. "You must tell us where the Amenti is. Tell us, and you shall live."

"What the hell's an 'Amenti'?"

He scowled, lunging forward to halve the distance between them. "Tell us!"

"Hasn't there been enough violence?" Jake said, moving to stand beside Thea. "I think we may be on the same side here. We just need to talk this out."



Thea imagined she looked at Jake as incredulously as the two Egyptians did. She never learned what they might have said in reply, for at that moment the car door opened behind them and a woman and two men stepped through. She was pretty, might have been model material at one point. One of the guys was big and blond, typical Nordic football player type. The other registered as little more than backup deferring to the other man and the woman.

The door's sliding caught the two Egyptians' attention, and each turned facing one another in profile so they could keep an eye on their quarry and on whoever just showed up.

"So what's this all about?" the woman asked with a faint smile.

"Not for you to worry," said the man who'd asked about the "Amenti," eyeing the men who stood behind her.

"Who said I was worried?"

Thea realized she knew the Nordic guy — the brute had almost walked off with Margie at the dance club a few days before. *Holy shit; we're on the fucking El with vampires!* "Jake," she hissed. "Rots!"

His eyes grew wide behind his smudged glasses. She focused to call forth her sixth sense, hoping one of the Egyptians didn't have the urn in his pocket. Her perceptions clarified and expanded but did little to give her any hint of the best way out of the current situation. Off hand, the best course of action seemed to be to just run. Jake didn't enjoy the same degree of heightened senses that she did, but he appeared to reach the same conclusion. Without another word, they started edging toward the next sliding door. The two Egyptians' attention was on the intruders, sensing there was more of a threat there than they'd thought. The big blond guy saw Thea and Jake trying to slip away; the quick wit yelled "Hey!"

They turned and ran as best as their exhaustion and injuries would allow. The ski mask-wearing Egyptians gave



a shout of their own and moved to pursue them. The vampires flashed into action then also, the woman moving with blinding speed to overtake Thea and Jake before they'd gotten halfway to the door. Focused as she was on the creature looming over them, Thea spared little attention to the screams and yells occurring further back in the car.

Thea had no delusions about being able to defeat a vampire, considering her current physical condition. But her senses were focused, her mind braced against any influence the undead might exert. She wouldn't go down easy, and she'd do everything in her power to inflict as much damage on the way. Maybe if she made a move it would give Jake a chance to hide from their perception as he'd done on other occasions. Worth a shot; she wasn't a martyr but she was just too fried to think of anything better.

As it turned out, she never even got the chance. Even as she tensed to throw herself at her opponent, the woman pulled a compact black device from her pocket. Her hand was a blur as it flashed in and jammed the thing into Thea's abdomen. A blaze of fire coursed through her and she fell back, limbs twitching.

What kind of vampire uses a fucking taser?! she wondered just before everything went black.

• • •

Thea awoke with an ache through her midsection and the sun beating down on her face. The latter was more pleasant, and might otherwise have been a sufficient distraction from her aches and pains if recent events hadn't slammed into her memory with all the subtlety of cops on a drug raid.

She gasped in alarm and sat up with a jerk, regretting the sudden move when everything went swimmy from the head rush. Her left side throbbed fiercely; however she'd landed the previous night — at least she assumed it was the previous night that everything had gone

to hell — she must have cracked some ribs or something. When her vision cleared, she looked down to see she was wearing a new navy-blue sweatshirt with some kind of emblem emblazoned on the left chest. She plucked at the fabric and twisted her head around. Chicago Fire Department — District 1. She recalled that emergency medical services fell under their purview, which would explain the bandages she now felt wrapped around her midsection. She felt around the bandage, realizing with dull surprise that she must have been shot. Whoever patched her up did a nice job of it, though they hadn't seen fit to give her anything to help with the pain. She saw she was wearing the same jeans from the other night, though her boots had vanished sometime between then and now. Still had her bra, too, though the way it was binding didn't exactly leave her feeling thrilled.

Something lay about a yard from her, just registering in her peripheral vision. She turned to see Jake Washington sprawled on his stomach, his face turned away from her. His torso rose and fell, but other than that he made no movement. His parka was gone, as were his winter boots. She looked around, hoping to find their coats and boots — preferably next to a door with a big neon sign saying "Exit." No such luck. She saw she was on a floor covered with a plush short shag in a neutral cream color. Berber carpet? She wasn't sure, having no idea what the hell a Berber was, at least in a carpeting context. The carpet extended to walls of a darker putty tone that she thought looked soothing at the moment but would grow dull after a few hours. Two pieces of abstract art hung on opposing walls, one to her left and the other to her right. Aside from hanging opposite one another, there was nothing to distinguish either piece. A rich brown leather sofa was situated underneath the picture to her left. *What, couldn't throw one of us on the couch? Thanks a lot.* A squat, characterless entertainment center in a shiny metallic



finish stood opposite it under the right-hand picture. A door stood to the right of the rectangular console. The ceiling was industrial tiling with a scattering of florescent panels. A door with a rust brown varnish stood closed about fifteen feet in front of her, a pair of potted plants to either side of it. They were ferns of some sort, tended to within an inch of their lives. She suspected they might be plastic, considering their uniform appearance.

Thea shifted around on the floor, gritting her teeth against the throb in her side. Her jaw dropped when she saw where the sunlight was coming from. Not sure she could believe her senses, she lurched to her feet and walked in stocking feet around the wide glass-and-steel desk over to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Slumping forward against the cool glass, she looked at the city spreading out beneath her all the way to the vast lake beyond.

She was in the Sears Tower.

• • •

After recovering from the surprise of being on the whateverth floor — at least two-thirds of the way up, though, considering the view — Thea scrambled over to the sleek white phone resting on the desk. It gave up a dial tone which sustained itself after every beep from the buttons she pressed. She slammed the handset back in the cradle and headed for the door on the sidewall. It opened into a bathroom containing a sink, toilet, and frosted-glass shower stall. The room was as antiseptic and characterless as the rest of the office. She left the door open and headed for the other door, then stopped short a few steps from it.

What was she going to do? Run out if the door opened, leaving Jake behind? She had to know for certain that they were locked in here, though. If that door opened to freedom, she'd just have to drag Jake out of there if he wouldn't wake up. She was saved the problem of how to deal with Jake when the latch didn't budge.



The environment covered for the moment, she went over to check on Jake. Other than drooling into the carpet, he seemed okay. Thea shook him and said his name in a low voice until he stirred. Jake groaned and turned his face into the carpet, mumbling something. She grabbed his shoulder and jostled him again. "Come on, Jake. Daylight's wasting."

A half-second later, Jake popped upright, surging to his feet. The head rush got him just as it had her; Thea moved to one side and nudged him over to the couch. She gave him a pat on the head as he regained his equilibrium, then stepped over to the entertainment center.

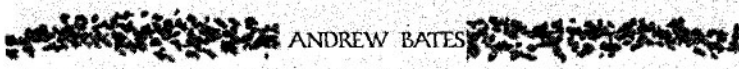
She'd been hoping for a television or stereo — something to find out what was happening in the outside world. Opening the front panels, she discovered it wasn't an entertainment center at all; at least, not multimedia. The metallic-finished console was a wet bar, the front panels opening on a variety of liquor and crystal glasses of varying shapes and sizes with a selection of wines in the bottom. The top was a lid that flipped up to reveal four narrow drawers under a glass counter set up for drink mixing. The glass revealed the drawers' contents, swizzle sticks and long-handled spoons and shot glasses and other tools of the trade. Thea laughed, the movement triggering a flare of pain in her side.

"What's so funny?" Jake croaked. He shuffled over next to her. "Wow, that's a lot of booze."

Thea nodded, her chuckles dying off in a weary sigh. "See where we are?"

Jake turned the direction her finger pointed. "Holy... You kidding me?" He walked over to the windows, looking over the skyline. "This is incredible! Wow!"

"Glad you like it," Thea said, circling around the desk from the other direction and dropping into the large leather chair situated behind it. "Gonna be the last thing we'll ever see."





Jake glanced over at her, then returned to his perusal of the city. "Don't be so pessimistic, Thea. If they wanted us dead, they wouldn't have gone through the trouble of bringing us up here."

Considering everything she'd had to deal with in the past few weeks Thea was not inclined to positive thinking. "Yeah? This isn't a dream vacation, here."

"I'm not saying it is. But think about how much worse off we could be right now."

"Like dead, for one." She saw his shoulders slump as he turned from the window and sat on the corner of the desk. "Already tried it," Thea said when he reached for the phone.

"Yes, like dead," he said at last, setting down the handset. "Or tortured, or, well, worse. All things considered, we're in pretty good shape."

Thea gave a bitter laugh. "No, I know what you mean," she said, waving her right hand as he opened his mouth. "Compared to the straits we could be in, right? But Jake, that still doesn't mean we're free and clear. Just because we're not dead or tortured or worse doesn't mean we're *safe*. You get me?"

Jake frowned, then nodded. One of the things she liked most about him was his irrepressible curiosity and unflagging belief that things would somehow work out. She would have gone nuts long before now without Jake. But sometimes he got so involved in making new discoveries about the supernatural that he lost sight of the very real dangers they posed. Just because something wasn't evil — often a subjective label to begin with — didn't mean it wasn't still dangerous.

In a softer tone, she continued, "Look, fella, it's just you and me now, right? We got to stick together if we're going to get through this."

"Yeah, I know." He chuckled without humor and waved his hand at the skyline. "Each time I think the



things I've been through can't get any more bizarre; then something like this happens."

Jake dropped in the sofa after giving the office a search, while Thea put her feet up on the desk and brooded. They were silent for a while, remembering the drama and horrors of the recent past. Soon enough, Thea realized they were waiting for their captors to make an appearance. *That's what I get for growing up on movies and TV.*

Just then, Jake said, "Hey, Thea. Who do you think put us in here?"

"Those vampires from the El."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm not positive, but pretty sure. Why?"

He wandered over to the wet bar and, after a little digging, found a bottle of tonic water. "Why stick us somewhere they can't get to in the day? Seems like a place like this would give us the advantage, you know?"

Thea frowned, considering. "Well, unless they *can* move around during the day — just not in the sun — it wouldn't much matter where they stuck us. And maybe a corporate site is better than a residential one; wouldn't be anyone round here at night to see them coming and going, and I wouldn't be surprised if this place is sound-proofed. Plus, there might be a psychological factor. We have the whole wide world right out there, under our noses. But that's all the closer we can get to it. They have us by the short hairs, as Parker would say."

Thinking of Parker led to Dean and Romeo and all the others, dead and gone. *Just us now; but for how much longer?* She cleared her throat. "Why, who do you think put us here? Not those Egyptian guys?"

"I dunno; I guess not. How could two of them take down a bunch of vampires if they couldn't get us? And it's not like they cared much about keeping us alive at the



hideout." He shrugged. "The whole daylight think just seemed strange to me. But your explanation makes sense.

"How'd you know they were Egyptian?" Jake asked after a beat. "I mean, Middle Eastern, sure, but specifically? You recognize their accents or something?"

"No, nothing like that. I just assumed. Speaking Arabic, the whole temple deal. Seemed pretty obvious. I mean, maybe my background colored my perceptions, but... why? You think they *weren't* Egyptian?"

Jake shook his head. "I don't have a clue. You all look the same to me."

"You're lucky I'm too worn out to kick your ass, Washington." An idle thought struck her. "What does surprise me is that we're not stuck in some industrial site — a factory or a construction site or something, you know? Someplace nice and isolated, where they can get rid of us without hassle if it comes to that."

"Another point in favor of the idea that they don't plan on getting rid of us?" Jake suggested with a crooked smile.

"Optimist."

"That's me."

• • •

After a fruitless couple of hours in which they tried to escape — forcing the door, checking the ceiling tiles, fumbling with the heating ducts, looking for secret panels — Thea and Jake admitted they were good and caught. They muscled the couch around to face the window, then settled down to conserve their energy and wait. The next handful of hours was occupied with each of them experiencing varying stages of worry, boredom, irritation, boredom, anger, and back to boredom again. If their captors had anyone watching them, they seemed content to let them stew. Then, as the shadow of the tower grew long and dark before them and pointed toward the lake, Thea decided to take advantage of their limited amenities. She slipped into the bath-



room and stripped down to the bandage. Her caramel skin was scattered with yellow and black splotches, bruises that covered most of her body. *Very attractive, girl.* The white bandage stood out against her skin, a thick band of cloth wrapping around her from just under her breasts to above her navel. After weighing the pros and cons, she peeled the bandage away, placing the roll on the counter by the sink.

The bullet wound wasn't pretty; turning and looking over her shoulder, she saw the exit wound was even larger and uglier. Went through clean, at least, and it appeared whomever had worked on her was an expert with sutures. Looking at the fine stitching, she doubted the entry wound scar would even be noticeable after it healed. The one on her back would make for a nice conversation piece by the pool. Facing the mirror again, her gaze went from the wound to the tattoo on her abdomen. She'd gotten three tattoos since joining the hunt. Each blended the symbols hunters used with abstractions of Egyptian hieroglyphs. She crossed her arms over her breasts, her left hand curled around her right biceps. Turning left, she could now see all three — on her shoulder, the back of her left hand, and around her navel.

She'd never considered marking up her body before the hunt; there had to be some connection, though she hadn't given it much thought before. Now, with the Temple of Akhenaton and its Egyptian minions and the mysterious and powerful Canopic jar... how did it relate to her? Since becoming imbued with the awareness of the supernatural, Thea had the ability to sense connections others missed. Call it women's intuition, call it probability awareness, call it a sixth sense, call it precognition — she didn't understand it, but she'd come to rely on it. It wasn't flawless, though, nor did it fill in the blanks. And right now there were too many blanks for her to connect the dots. Soon, though; Thea felt that soon the answers would be in her hands.



Cautious, she stepped into the shower stall. She took a clumsy shower, due to favoring her left side and the certainty their captors would come charging in at that very moment. Her side throbbed by survived and no one burst down the door, though. She emerged ten minutes later, dripping and refreshed. She couldn't find anything other than hand towels, but one was sufficient to towel off her body; she left the other for Jake and let her hair air dry. It would frizz out, but it was a small price to pay for being clean. She'd just tie it up in a pair of utilitarian ponytails once it dried and viola! Problem solved.

She dressed except for the bandage and the sweatshirt, deciding it was best if Jake helped her wrap up her wound. He blushed, seeing her in her bra, but the sutures sobered him up. He drew the bandage around, just as snug as it was before. Slipping back into the sweatshirt, she left the bathroom for Jake to use and collapsed on the sofa with a bottle of Bombay Sapphire liberated from the wet bar.

Jake emerged from the bathroom about fifteen minutes later and gave her a look suggesting he didn't think it was a good idea that she start drinking, especially on an empty stomach. She ignored the look.

"Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"How did it happen? With Parker and Dean, I mean?"

Silence for a moment, then a long sigh as he joined her on the couch. "I'm not much of a fighter, you know. When that guy got me and a clinch I thought it was all over. He was squeezing the stuffing out of me and there wasn't a thing I could do about it. I mean, he was a guy, right? Alive. Not some rot I could shove away with an edge. Our powers don't do squat against the living."

"Some do," she murmured, thinking of a shining rod of light.



"Yeah, some do. Another mystery about who we've become, how all this stuff works. Maybe some hunters' powers are just so damn potent they tear into everything, regardless. Hell, I don't know." He sighed, shifting around on the soft leather. "Anyway, I did the one thing I could think of: acted like he'd strangled me. I was scared shitless — I mean, what if he kept on choking, right? Almost blacked out as it was. Then I was crawling toward a gun when those guys started shooting. I thought... I thought they got *everybody* else. I mean, Parker didn't have a chance. He jumped, but there was nowhere to hide. They... the bullets tore right into him. At least it was quick, I guess."

He took a deep breath. "The way I was laying there I could see him easiest, right? But I did see you and Dean out of the corner of my eye. You were blown right through the window far as I could tell, and Dean... he fell right next to me. I... he was lying there and I felt this *heat* from him, this light pouring from his eyes even, like he was trying to heal himself but it was just... there were too many—"

The leather creaked as Jake started sobbing. He was sitting to her left, so she reached across her body with her good right hand to pat him on the knee. His hand took hers in a tight grip and she held on, offering a comforting pressure. After a minute or so he continued, "He smiled at me, though. He knew he was going but he still found the strength to smile."

"I felt like a coward, faking it there on the floor, but I didn't know what else to do. Then I saw you step forward to the window and those guys still had their guns and I just couldn't lose everybody—" More sobs, then. Thea could think of nothing to say, so she just held his hand.

NINE

The first thing Nicholas noticed was the horrible taste in his mouth. *About the one thing worse than the taste of puke is the taste of old puke*, he thought. Spitting out the stale chunks of vomit and coagulating blood was an effort. He lay on his side drawing rancid breaths until he built up enough energy to move. That brought along dull surprise that he even could move. He raised his left arm, his right shoved underneath his body with the dull weight of a sleeping limb, and tugged at the mass of tape around his head. He gave that up when the tape yanked at his hair. His hand slid along the side of his face, tracking through sticky, drying fluids, and found the lower edge of the tape attached to his forehead. He stopped pulling at it after a second. The adhesive had too good a hold on his hair; even a simple tug sent needles of pain through his scalp. At least it was off his eyes. It took an effort to focus, but he summoned the energy to look around.

He was on his right side on a worn out single mattress, facing a small, spare room. It lacked any defining features — gray stone walls, gray concrete floor, brown wooden ceiling, brown pressboard door. At the center of it all, right before him, was a black shape. Blinking and squinting, he realized he was looking at his captor. Maxwell Carpenter was stretched out on the ground, unmoving, tailored charcoal suit was splattered with bile and gore — from Nicholas spewing, Nicholas realized. He couldn't see Carpenter's face,



but he was certain his captor wasn't playing possum. If Carpenter could move, it was a sure bet he would be trussing Nicholas up again. *Speaking of which...*

It was like trying to tow a semi with his teeth, but he moved his head on the stained pillow to look down at himself. It was tough to get a comprehensive view, given his position, but he could tell the band around his chest had been twisted off. When he convulsed, presumably. His strength was tremendous thanks to one of the amulets Carpenter had neglected to remove. With the enchantment waning from the bands, his convulsions were enough to break him free. At least somewhat; the bands around his waist and legs were still in place, which explained why he had very little feeling down there. That mattered little, though, since his hands were free. He'd just reach down and strip the remaining metal away. In a minute, anyway, once he got his strength back.

After a while longer lying in a pool of his own sick, Nicholas felt rejuvenated enough to set himself free. Thanks to the strength lent him by the bracelet on his wrist, it was a matter of a moment to bend away the lower bands. He snatched at the metal, tossing each like an old twist-tie. They clattered on the cold floor, the enchantment gone now that they had lost their shape. He would have gone over and stomped on them for good measure if he'd had the energy to spare. They were designed as part of a clever plan to imprison Maxwell Carpenter, only to bite him on the ass. He would have to be careful in the future about constructing things that could be turned against him.

Speaking of the asshole who put me in this situation to begin with... Nicholas figured he'd better double check on his captor, make sure he was down for the count. Getting off the mattress was handled with a great deal of caution, the recent agony of his multiple head injuries

fresh in his mind. He was pleased to discover that, aside from an overwhelming feeling of fatigue that his amulets couldn't compensate for, he felt pretty good. The same force that brought him back from death had mended the worst of his injuries. His head ached, as did his chest and a few other parts of his body, but nothing a daylong soak in a hot tub wouldn't cure.

Not having to fear a sudden blazing pain in his skull, Nicholas moved with more confidence. He stepped away from the large pool of blood and vomit he'd disgorged, kneading his right arm with his left hand to wake the limb back up. He wasn't sure how long he'd been dead; from the still-tacky condition of the fluids all over, he guessed no more than eight hours. The mess reminded him of the charnel house his mouth had become. Too much to hope for that this fucker has a breath mint somewhere. He also had to get the tape off his head, maybe a change of clothes, and a shower. Definitely a shower. First things first, though. He hunkered down for a closer look at the body on the floor. Maxwell Carpenter lay spread-eagled on his back, his hand-stitched suit coat flung open to reveal a matching vest and a shoulder holster with a large automatic pistol under each arm. He must have collapsed the same time Nicholas was coughing up his internal organs. The floor tilted away from the bed toward the center of the room, the same direction Carpenter's head was pointed. Looked like the blood had trailed down around his out-flung legs, pooling in his crotch. Carpenter's dead eyes stared at the ceiling, surprise stamped on his face.

Nicholas didn't bother checking for a pulse; the guy wouldn't have had one anyway. Regardless, Nicholas was pretty sure Carpenter wouldn't pop up like some Hollywood villain going for the surprise scare. To be on the safe side, he pulled one of Carpenter's pistols, checked



the clip, made sure the safety was off, and fired rounds into the corpse's chest and head with a precision learned from hundreds of hours at the practice range. The body jerked, giving Nicholas a bit of a scare before he realized it was all from the bullets' impact. He dropped the emptied automatic and grabbed the other gun from its holster, then made his way to the door at the opposite end of the room. This opened on the rest of the basement; he allowed himself some satisfaction that his powers of deduction were proving correct so far. This area had the same concrete floor as the other room, but wood paneling adorned the walls. The paneling had the rich, warm look of real wood, not some cheap substitute. Three other doors, all closed, faced a set of stairs leading up to the ground floor. He headed straight for the stairs, shuffling up and out of the basement.

He found himself in a large kitchen equipped with all the latest amenities. From the look of things, he was in an older house; the kitchen having enjoyed an extensive remodeling. The stairs were situated midway along an interior wall. The bottom half of the kitchen's rear wall was decorated in white wood panels, the top a series of windows that looked out onto a large sunroom. The sun was out, morning light shining down on a frozen lake that looked like it came right up to the back of the house. A hall to his immediate left extended the opposite direction from the sunroom to the rest of the house while a doorway to his right opened onto a lavish dining room.

Nicholas was down the hall and to the front door in seconds, the door already open and a gust of freezing air washing over him before he realized what he was doing. He wanted to get the hell out of there, but running around outside in his present state was not a good idea.

So, what? Was he going to wander upstairs, take a shower and change clothes while a dead man lay in the



basement in a puddle of Nicholas' gore? *Irony on a whole new level*, he thought, heading for the second floor.

• • •

He was halfway up the stairs when he realized he knew this place. He recognized the eternally unfinished basement; the large sunroom with its grand view; the gleaming kitchen with stainless steel gas stove and double door refrigerator; the wide front hall and its leaded-glass door; the framed pictures covering both sides of the hallway; the very hardwood stairs he stood on... It was all familiar now. He knew the upstairs would have two guest bedrooms with a master bedroom at the very back giving an even better view of the lake than the downstairs sunroom did. He recalled that there was another short set of stairs to the attic, which had been converted to two more rooms.

Son of a bitch. He was standing in his dead grandmother's house in Lake Geneva. Annabelle Sforza, his nanna — Nannabelle, as he'd called her since he was little — had been dead for months now. This summer home, like most of her possessions, was locked up in all sorts of legal wranglings. His grandmother was meticulous in life and he suspected that claims of multiple wills and other probate issues were ploys by the various crime families to get their hands on Annabelle Sforza's wealth. Her surviving heirs weren't much of a factor; they amounted to very distant relatives and adolescents, thanks to Maxwell Carpenter's systematic efforts to kill off every last one of her progeny. Nicholas realized that, as her closest living heir, he could make an excellent case for sweeping in and claiming everything. Not something to worry about now.

No, right now he stood in amazement at Carpenter's audacity. The fucker hated Nicholas Sforza's grandmother with an intensity that transcended life itself. It



had brought him back from the grave with a plan of revenge that resulted in the death of Nicholas' relatives. And he was working out of one of the homes owned by the woman he held responsible for his death. It was less than two hours north of Chicago on the shore of a small lake, and was the perfect retreat when the city got too hot and nasty in summer. Wasn't much to do there in the winter, though, so it was left empty with a caretaker checking in periodically. Nicholas suspected Carpenter had taken care of that minor hiccup before even setting foot in the place. Nicholas felt a grudging admiration for Carpenter. Barring unforeseen circumstances, he could get a good six months of use out of the place with nobody the wiser. Nicholas wondered what other resources of his grandmother's Maxwell Carpenter had been using.

Nicholas drew breath to laugh in amazement and almost gagged on the taste in his mouth. That did it. It was past time to get cleaned up.

• • •

It was a good thing he had a fair idea of how he looked or he would've freaked out when he saw himself in the bathroom mirror. His sweater and slacks were torn, bloodied, and covered in spew. His hands and face were scratched and raw from having duct tape strapped around them and then torn off. His cheeks, nose and eyes were a mass of purpling bruises, and he could imagine his hair was a gluey mess under the stained cap of duct tape. At least it was pretty much all cosmetic. He'd look like a punch drunk raccoon after he got cleaned up, but that was a small price to pay for freedom. He ignored the duct tape for the moment, digging into the medicine cabinet and crowing in triumph when he hauled out a half-full bottle of Listerine and an old tube of Crest. He guzzled the bottle, the antiseptic burning



the shit out of the inside of his mouth. He stifled his groans of pain and sloshed the stuff around while he squirted a huge gob of paste on a toothbrush hanging forgotten on the rack. He didn't know whose it was originally, didn't much care. Even if it was his (now dead) cousin Walker's, it would be a fresh breeze compared to the cesspool of his mouth. He spat out the mouthwash, curling his lip at the dark, chunky mess that splattered in the sink. A vigorous brushing and three more healthy gulps of mouthwash later and Nicholas felt among the living again. He didn't much worry about getting knocked around or dirtied up, but he couldn't stand having a fouled-up mouth.

"There you go," he said, leaning his hands on the edge of the sink and squinting at himself in the mirror through the flecks of toothpaste and mouthwash-blued spittle he'd sprayed. A wide grin split his face, teeth shining in the bathroom fluorescents. "So, you got a purse to go with that hat, Mary?"

• • •

The tape was a pain in the ass and he was pissed he had to cut his hair to ragged chunks, but it wasn't like he had much choice. Fifteen minutes of snipping and chopping left him looking like he'd come out the loser in a fight with a rabid lawnmower, but no more duct tape, thank you very much. "Fuckin' duct tape," he muttered, looking over the spiky black mess that was his hair. *Wait; Nannabelle had clippers for that little yappy terrier...*

He found them in the upstairs hall closet, old and worn-out but still functional. With a last wince of vanity, Nicholas ran the clippers over his scalp. A few minutes later and he had nothing more than short dark bristle. He grinned again; the stubble gave him an air of menace he was in the mood to enjoy. "Okay, Mister Bad-Ass. Clean the rest of this crap off, then let's get the fuck out of Dodge."



A quick lather and scrub in the shower and he was dashing through the spare bedrooms looking for appropriate clothes, naked and carrying Carpenter's automatic. He cackled at the figure he must cut. A part of him knew he was on the edge of hysterics, coming down from the high of his encounter with Carpenter, but what could he do but ride the wave? He found a worn-out Bears sweatshirt, some old T-shirt so faded he couldn't even tell what logo it used to sport, a pair of jeans with the knees so thin he could see his skin through them, and some sand-encrusted sneakers. Cleaned up and dressed, Nicholas was struck again by the heat. Although he was almost back to full strength and wasn't exerting himself much, he was sweating like a bastard under his sweatshirt. Why the hell would a dead guy have the heat cranked up so damn high? The whole house was like a sauna. Didn't much matter now, he supposed.

With his personal matters dealt with, Nicholas considered weightier matters. He wanted to rush out of the house and make sure the Heart was safe, but first he had to tie up the loose ends here. Hefting the .45, he decided to play it safe and made a systematic sweep through the house starting in the attic and working his way back to the basement. He wanted to confirm that Carpenter didn't have anyone else trussed up someplace (he didn't) or had popped back up and sneaked off while Nicholas was in the shower (he hadn't). Despite himself, Nicholas was surprised to see Carpenter still lying in the exact same spot as before. Seemed hard to doubt that the asshole's existence was tied to the Sforza family's, though, considering how he ended up.

"You know, you have to admit this is all pretty poetic," he said to Carpenter's corpse. "The whole reason for you coming back was revenge, yeah? Kill off my whole family and rest in peace. Technically you did it, I guess.



Didn't expect me to be able to come back, though, did you? Still, should've kept my mouth shut. If I'd just let you kill me back at the temple, you'd still be gone but I wouldn't have had to give myself this shitty haircut.

"Well, here's hoping you're not resting in peace after all, you son of a bitch."

His eulogy given, Nicholas hopped back to his feet, a part of him still marveling that he felt sprightly and full of energy after literally being dead just a few hours before. He paused at the bottom of the basement stairs, thoughts percolating to the surface of his mind. The scene in the basement was nothing he wanted anyone stumbling across — he was still missing as far as the public was concerned, and it was best for his new life if he stayed that way. Besides, there was still a possibility Carpenter wasn't quite as dead — *really* dead — as he looked. It would be best to play it safe and cover his ass at the same time. Nicholas knew of one thing that would do both to his satisfaction.

He balked at the idea of torching Nannabelle's summer home. A few minutes' worth of discussion with himself concluded it was the best idea all around. The wiser part of him knew it was the one way to ensure a revenant didn't come back, and the nostalgic part of him couldn't bear the thought of anyone using the place after Carpenter had desecrated it.

They kept spare fuel in the boathouse for the couple watercraft stored there. He lugged two cans back up to the house, shivering at the frigid late afternoon temperature. He paused in the kitchen to crank the gas on the stove, then headed back to the basement. He finished pouring one entire jug of gas on Carpenter when another thought struck him. A quick search through the corpse's pockets didn't come up with the car keys he'd hoped, but he wasn't too put out. He'd learned



how to hotwire cars when he was thirteen; keys just made it easier. The search did come up with a nice surprise, though: a money clip stuffed to bursting with cash. Soaked in gas, but still legal tender.

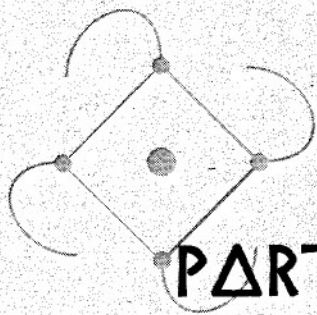
He trotted upstairs and gurgled the contents of the second can on the floor and walls. He almost doused the overcoat that hung on the rack next to the front door, and instead slipped the garment on. He poured a trail of gas out the front, laughing when he saw Carpenter must have shoveled the walk all the way to the garage. For a walking corpse, he sure was a domestic sonofabitch. The gas spilled on his hands stung in the cold, so Nicholas dug for gloves in the coat and came up with car keys. Tossing the keys and catching them with the opposite hand, he gave one last farewell look to the big white house.

"Sorry, Nannabelle. Hope I'm doing right by you," he said. Then he pulled a small box from his jeans' pocket, lit one of the kitchen matches he'd grabbed and dropped it in the trail of gas.

• • •

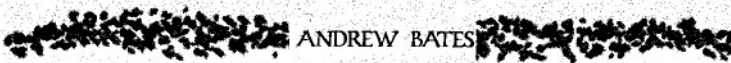
Ten minutes later, Nicholas was steering a tricked-out powder blue Lincoln down I-94 South, with one hand while scanning the FM dial with the other. He felt bad about the house; he had a lot of fun memories of that place. But it was all for the best. As the wiser part of him knew, it was important to honor the past, but it wasn't healthy to stay there forever.

His fingers found a classic rock station blaring the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction." He cranked the volume and sang along at the top of his lungs, grinning and drumming on the steering wheel as he sped toward Chicago.



PART III:
THREADS OF FATE





ANDREW BATES

TEN

Beckett's return to Chicago hit a minor snag. A blizzard rolled over the Midwest, the second in the space of a week. He missed the first one by a few days when he'd fled town before. This one was camped out over northern Illinois, a coincidence Beckett wasn't sure *was* coincidence. He rubbed the bracelet and decided not to be paranoid.

American Airlines flight 1042 diverted to Minneapolis-St. Paul, where the storm had blown through just hours before. Descending, Beckett saw through the first class window — if he was going to fly, he was not going to be crammed in among loud, sweaty mortals — that the city was blanketed in white. While most commerce was shut down for the moment, the airport defied Mother Nature as best it could. Snowplows had cleared most of the runways and harried airport personnel scrambled trying to deal with the resulting re-routings. Beckett decided not to bother waiting out the weather. It was already almost 2 AM local time; if this storm went on any longer, his connecting flight would land after dawn. He slipped from the airport and into the calm, frozen night.

He caught up to the trailing edge of the blizzard after three hours. It was far more savage than he'd expected. Though inured to extremes of temperature, Beckett still felt the slashing, frigid winds and stinging sheets of snow. If this was just the back end, how powerful was it further south? Growling, he forged onward. He'd already spent hours wading through drifts, more



swimming than running. Though his body gave off no perceptible heat to melt the snow that stuck to him, over time the friction of his exertions formed clattering clumps of heavy ice that hung from his pelt. He'd already run from some phantom menace; he was damned if he was going to let a storm keep him away any longer. After another few hours' worth of trudging and snarling, during which time he covered perhaps fifty miles; Beckett admitted Mother Nature's fury was greater than his own. Somewhere in south-central Wisconsin, he went to ground to wait out the storm.

The next sunset he emerged into a new world. The area in which he found himself, an expanse of rolling hills and scattered copses, was layered in a thick pelt of snow. All around him stretched nothing but white.

The blizzard had blown itself out, but it still made things difficult. The land was blanketed in heavy white snow that was up to three feet deep in some places. It was so cold the snow didn't clump; instead, it lay in light, dusty piles that whipped around in stinging blasts before the heavy gusts of arctic wind that trailed after the storm front. There was no crust to walk on, so like the previous night, Beckett was forced to plunge his way through the stuff, using brute force instead of finesse. He found a county road that tended southeast and made much better time on its newly plowed surface. A few hours of travel brought him closer to Chicago; once he began hitting the outlying communities, he left the cleared roads and made his way through surrounding fields and yards. No sense calling attention to himself, trotting down main thoroughfares.

By midnight on Thursday, he had returned to the mill he'd made his lair. Before moving forward with his plans, Beckett decided to take the rest of that night to make sure he had everything in order. If his



suspensions were correct, being sloppy now would end up with him destroyed or worse.

The next evening, after feeding on a deer he came upon in the field near the mill, Beckett headed for the Alexian Brothers Medical Center. He circled around to some bushes to the south and spent some time digging through the powder, then trudged over to the hospital and became human again. After some debate on the best means of entry, he scaled the hospital's wall, his clawed hands digging easily into the concrete. He was tiring of this cloak-and-dagger approach, but his previous visit showed respectable security precautions — the influence of Cainite donations, he felt certain — and he wasn't much of one for going through normal channels.

Beckett pulled a set of lock picks from his jacket and set to work on the roof access door. The wind gusted across the rooftop. It made his delicate work even more difficult but also obscured his footprints, so he considered it an even trade. A few minutes' worth of work and he had the heavy lock open. He popped the door and slipped inside, closing it fast behind him. Beckett suspected there was a security alarm for the door but hoped it only went off when the connection was broken. Security should think it was a hiccup on their board, but a physical check was not out of line. Just to be on the safe side, he went down to the top floor, ducked into an empty room and returned with a cloth to wipe up the snow he'd tracked in. He just slipped back into the room to replace the cloth when he heard the elevator chime and a security guard's heavy footsteps. Peering through the narrow window in the door, Beckett saw it was a different man than the one who'd chased him away the other night. This one, an overly muscled black man, strolled with a minimum of caution through to the rooftop access



stairway. Beckett was away and down the main stairs as soon as the guard was out of sight.

It wasn't easy to find the room in which William Decorah had stayed. All the floors looked the same and he hadn't bothered memorizing the number. After a half-hour's worth of skulking, he felt sure he'd found it. The place was long cleaned out, as antiseptic and characterless as any other room. He stepped over for a look out the window; yes, the angle of the surrounding terrain seemed correct. There was no physical evidence to suggest that Decorah had spent even a minute in this place, but Beckett wasn't interested in the physical.

He withdrew the gloves he'd taken from Decorah's parka and recovered from where he'd left them under the shrubbery. He shook and slapped them together to knock off as much melting snow as possible, then laid them down, next to one another with the palms up, on the metal tray at the bedside. Next came the silver saucer, though this time he had didn't have the target's blood to pour in. His own blood should be sufficient, since it was still coursing through the Indian's veins — if the mortal had ingested it. If not, the spell wouldn't work and Beckett would know he was in serious trouble. He decided to be optimistic.

The ritual was a variation on the one he'd performed to track one of Augustus' killers, though now performed out of necessity rather than choice. Beckett had lost Decorah's trail before he'd found out where the man had gone to ground. Heading back to that neighborhood in hopes of picking up the scent again would be an exercise in futility; even without the two snowstorms to cover any trail that remained, it had been a week-and-a-half. The trail was grown stale, even to his hypersensitive wolf's nose. This ritual would reawaken Decorah's scent for a time; it wouldn't



last through the next night — he lacked sufficient materiel to create a potent working — but that should be more than long enough for Beckett to find his quarry. Unless Decorah hopped a plane to Belize.

Beckett cut his palms and positioned his hands in reflection of the gloves. The gloves began smoldering while the blood boiled in the saucer, catching fire and burning to ash within seconds. A cloud of bitter smoke suffused the room, triggering the smoke alarm and startling Beckett from his ritual trance. Water sprayed from a spigot in the ceiling, dampening the smoke. Beckett snarled in frustration. Healthy sniffs revealed the spell was effective nonetheless, though the water would further reduce the ritual's duration. The smoke had brought forth enough of Decorah's scent from the gloves and the bed for Beckett to begin the trail. He should be able to follow the refreshed scent to the Indian.

But first, he had to get out of this damnable shower.

• • •

He barely cleared the room before security arrived. He left wet footprints to the stairs, but he hoped they wouldn't notice in their concern over checking out the fire. Regardless, he moved rapidly, the Indian's scent strong in his nostrils, vibrant like neon to the eyes. Even though he knew which way the trail headed, he decided to stick to the scent for now; if he got clever and decided to take a short cut, he might end up missing something important. He reached a basement level — Restricted: Maintenance Personnel Only — and followed along corridors and up stairs that brought him to a hall off the employee exit. Decorah had paused by some lockers along the way, perhaps for some clothes to add to his parka and boots.

Seconds later Beckett was outside. The enhanced scent was an irresistible lure that reeled him along as fast as his legs could move. He shifted to the wolf to



cover the ground faster. Within an hour he neared the neighborhood where he'd sensed the presence at its strongest, ten nights before. The scent trail led down a curving road in a sparsely populated neighborhood. The land, once a large farm, had been parceled off into a couple dozen lots. About half were developed, so the houses were scattered with pleasing randomness and enjoyed large yards and clusters of old growth trees. He found the trail headed for what had once been the main farmstead — now a double-sized plot with a house, a barn and a couple small outbuildings. It retained a patch of fallow land around it that extended back from the road for a few hundred yards into a stretch of trees. A number of halogen lights on poles scattered the central property, shedding brilliant illumination over the buildings and beyond. It was clear the combination of open space and lighting was designed to make it impossible for someone to sneak up unseen.

Beckett held back, staying outside the lights as he checked the property further. The farmhouse was like many others of that bygone time when this area was the realm of the family farm. It was a large white wooden structure with two stories and an attic large enough to qualify as a third floor. A covered porch ran the length of the front; another had been added to the back, this one screened in — though now, in the dead of winter, plastic sheets were stapled across its windows. It was mid-evening; lights were on in a few downstairs rooms and he could see multiple silhouettes moving through there every so often. Two people for certain; perhaps more. A doublewide driveway came up from the county road and created plenty of room for parking between the house and the barn on the opposite side. The barn was painted a dark green and appeared in good repair, though it seemed obvious it was no longer used to house



cows or farm implements. A wooden sign hung on hooks, just visible over the mound of snow plowed from the road. With his preternatural vision it was easy to make out the words: Black Hawk Landscaping.

He circled the property and confirmed that, while Decorah's trail had exited along the road a couple times, the most recent scent led back to the property. His body clock sensed there were still a few hours till midnight. He slipped back to the tree line and waited for the house's residents to call it a night. The lights downstairs flicked off one by one over the next few hours, and Beckett saw a couple upstairs blossom to life a couple seconds later. The downstairs back room remained lit even after the upstairs lights went dark; Beckett decided it was left on as a night-light and started creeping forward.

As he neared, his night sharp eyes picked out a figure in the darkened attic window. Curious, he crept back and around until he could see the opposite attic window; sure enough, another figure in the darkness. No one was coming after him right then so Beckett reasoned that he'd kept well enough to the shadows to avoid being spotted. It wouldn't be easy to get closer in; those positions should give the guards a commanding view of forward and rear approaches. Another second's thought and Beckett chuckled. Considering the layout, the barn created a large blind spot. Unless...

Beckett maneuvered around behind the barn. A bay window had been installed in the barn's upper floor, and he caught the variation in shadow behind it that showed yet another person on watch. At least three guards for a landscaping company? Right.

He never considered backing off. If Beckett couldn't slip past a handful of mortal guards, he might as well find a clear spot and wait for sunrise.



Approaching from behind the barn was his best bet. It appeared Black Hawk Landscaping lacked electronic surveillance, so he shouldn't have to worry about tripwires and security cameras. His wolf form was too large to hide from view in the open approach, and his black pelt made him stand out in the shadow-less expanse. Same problem with his human shape.

He prepared to become a bat when the back door of the house opened. Beckett froze. Peering over the frozen crust of snow, he saw two men in heavy winter coats and carrying firearms trudge across the driveway and enter the barn. There were a few windows along the barn's ground level, but all were dark. Beckett continued waiting. A few minutes later, two figures emerged from the barn and headed into the house. Beckett could tell by their posture and gaits these were different men than those who'd passed by before.

A shift change; had to be. But what were they guarding? William Decorah? Had Beckett not followed the trail of a free man, but of a prisoner? Was this a Brujah safe house? It didn't seem the kind of place they would use. So did they keep watch on the "Pale Wolf" Decorah had mentioned? Given the power he felt from the entity, that didn't make any sense. The need for answers grew even stronger, but he forced himself to wait for another hour before slipping toward the barn.

• • •

After a few seconds of weighing pros and cons, Beckett decided a bat wasn't an appropriate approach either. Instead, he focused his will and let go of shape and form, weight and substance. His body dissipated, becoming a small cloud of mist that rolled along the ground. It was difficult to move in this formless condition, especially as the cold tried to crystallize him. He pushed on as best he could, gliding up to the back of



the barn and hugging the wall as he came around the front. He slipped through a small gap between the barn door and the weather stripping that ran around it.

It took a minute to strain himself through to the darkened interior. It was warmer inside, and Beckett found he could move more easily. He had no sense of sight or smell in this form; instead, he enjoyed a kind of radar, the mist's undulations sending out subtle waves that rebounded to create a representation of his surroundings. It did the job, but he much preferred a more complete sensory picture. He also realized that he could no longer register Decorah's trail. Since he'd been mist before coming around the side of the barn, he had no idea if the Indian was even in here. Someone or something was under guard, though. He would discover what secrets the barn kept before moving on to the house.

To the near side was a room, an office for the Black Hawk Landscaping Company, Beckett suspected. The large window set in its wall might as well have been brick for all the good his unique perception did him in this form. He could at least tell from the stillness of the glass that there was no one in the room, since a person moving around would send telltale vibrations through the pane. He could slip under the door without difficulty, but he decided to check the rest of the barn first. Wafting further inside, he perceived a pair of trucks and a van parked in the central aisle. A snow blower, shovels and other winter yard equipment were piled in the back of the near-most truck. Along the side opposite the office were old animal pens, converted to act as storage bays for a variety of equipment. More landscaping gear, Beckett supposed.

A flat platform took up the back center, an open elevator that went up to the loft. To one side a set of stairs had replaced the traditional ladder. Beckett churned up the steps far enough to sense one of the guards by the back window. He pushed himself back downstairs and



debated. Was the other watching the front? So far he'd found nothing worth protecting; was it upstairs? He had to find a way to get up there without being noticed.

It was difficult to defy gravity, even in this almost weightless form, but with an effort of will Beckett clung to the walls and searched the lower floor's ceiling boards for an out-of-the-way gap to strain himself through. He found a promising spot most of the way toward the front and siphoned his way up. Beckett sensed he was in an open area with desks and sophisticated computer systems. No one here, and a partition wall halfway back where the stairs came up that kept him from the rear guard's view. He drifted around to get a better sense of where he was. State-of-the-art landscape office, or was this equipment used for other purposes? Either way, didn't seem like anything worth armed watchmen.

Beckett edged over and determined the other half was nothing more than storage and a spot for the guard's post. The man was alert, but focused on watching outside. Night-vision goggles and a walkie-talkie by his side, what seemed to be a hunting rifle with a large scope attached resting on his lap. Curious; Beckett's instincts said the man was more a hunter than a trained guard.

A minor puzzle compared to what he and the others were protecting. Speaking of which, where was the other guard? Beckett had checked the whole barn. All that could be seen, that is.

Slipping back down, Beckett searched for a hidden passage. He started in the office, then worked his way across the front of the barn toward the back, floating across every plank and poking his smoky shape through the slightest crevice. In the second storage stall he found the trap door. It was concealed quite well, fitted snugly into the existing planks and with some piece of wheeled lawn care equipment parked on top of it.



As he forced himself through the crack along its edge, Beckett perceived the door was heavily reinforced and had two separate deadbolt locks on the underside. He wouldn't be surprised if the door — perhaps even the entire barn floor — had a layer of metal under the weathered wood. The equipment sitting on top of the door puzzled him until a closer look showed the panel was hinged to open as a ramp that would let the wheeled device roll off it and out of the way. Exiting guards must roll the equipment back over the door as they left.

A series of steep, shallow brick steps led down in the general direction of the house. Beckett was surprised to find they went down almost one hundred feet before ending in a wide corridor lined in old mud brick. Beckett rolled slowly down and saw that the passage widened to end in a steel door that compared favorably to a bank vault. There — seated in a chair right in front of the door, rising to his feet in alarm at the sight of the mist roiling down the stairs, grabbing for a two-way radio encased in high-impact plastic, swinging around a vicious-looking pump-action shotgun — was a guard.

Even as the man raised the walkie-talkie to his lips and tried to draw a one-handed bead with the gun, Beckett was roaring forward, gaining substance, becoming human, lashing out with both hands. His left caught the guard's right wrist and yanked back, the arm snapping like a bundle of spaghetti. The man's scream was buried under the shotgun's roar, a flash of white heat blasting harmlessly into the wall while the weapon leaped from the guard's ruined hand. Beckett's other hand was a blur snatching away the radio so roughly he took one of the guard's fingers with it. He crushed the walkie-talkie into useless scrap, while he took a step to the left and kicked the shotgun toward the stairs.

He needn't have bothered; the guard was in no shape to use it. The man was slumped in the corner by the knocked over chair, his maimed left hand jammed into his right armpit to staunch the flow of blood, his broken right held before him and shaking in time to his rapid breaths. Beckett hadn't planned on being so brutal, but he'd been as surprised as the guard. Instinct always took over. And from the stench of the shotgun round — Dragon's Breath white phosphorous, if his nose could be trusted — the guard was serious about his duty.

The fresh blood made Beckett light-headed, but he forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand. He was confident the guard hadn't had time to trigger the squawk on the radio, but the shotgun blast could be a problem. They were a long way underground and the mud bricks had sucked up the sound of the gunshot, but it was possible the upstairs guard heard something. Beckett regretted destroying the walkie-talkie; nothing to be done about it now.

He snatched the shotgun in case the guard recovered enough to think about mayhem, then dashed back up the stairs to the trap door. He pressed a faintly pointed ear against the trap door and heard nothing. No vibrations, either. He waited a while, ten minutes or so, before concluding the distance and thick barrier had eaten the sound.

Returning down the stairs, Beckett's attention focused on the metal door. He should have considered that someone might be behind it. If so, they couldn't communicate with the people above, or Beckett would be clawing his way through flesh and bone. As he walked up, the guard — Native American, he saw — looked up at Beckett through bleary, pain-filled eyes before finally falling unconscious.

He decided not to wake the man for interrogation; best to keep moving while he had the element of



surprise. He looked over the door, gave it a healthy tug. Locked. Multiple locks, just like the trap door. Stronger. Rather than waste time trying to pick them, he went through the guard's pockets. Beckett found a heavy ring with a good dozen keys attached. He discounted half that just didn't look the right type to lock a heavy steel door, and cycled through the rest on the two locks. Soon enough he had the bolts shot back and was pulling the slab of metal toward him.

Beckett moved behind the door as he opened it, just in case. Nothing. A quick peek confirmed the corridor was empty. It extended another ten feet, then turned left. Beckett hefted the shotgun and considered a second before snapping off the trigger. Guns weren't his thing. He'd left Nola Spier the large automatic he'd swiped from the ghoul to do with as she would. Beckett would trust in his claws, his speed and his strength. Dropping the weapon, Beckett followed the hall; it took a right another ten feet after the first turn, then another left. This ended in a door the twin to the one he'd just opened. Fumbling through the keys revealed the locks were different, but the proper keys were nonetheless on the ring.

He placed his hand on the door handle and the sense of dread he'd felt the first time he'd come out this way flared. Beckett hesitated, but realized that while he could still feel the looming presence, it was now as if through a fog. He wasn't sure if that was because "Pale Wolf" or whatever lurked behind this door was focusing its attention elsewhere or if the bracelet obscured his own preternatural perceptions just as it shielded him from others'. It crossed his mind that Nola Spier might have created a useless trinket and he was about to walk right into the mouth of destruction. He remained still, uncharacteristically indecisive.

This was ridiculous. He'd gone into places of which even ancients were fearful. He'd faced horrors beyond imagining and survived to tell the tale. He'd exposed some of the darkest secrets of his kind. He wasn't going to quit now, just because he got a shiver down his spine about what was behind a single door.

Drawing open the heavy steel portal, Beckett stepped inside.

...

A single light hung, unadorned, from the ceiling, filling the room with weak illumination. It wasn't a large chamber, perhaps twenty feet around, with no furniture beyond the low table in the center. The walls were constructed with the same materials as the hallway, mud bricks of such uniform size that they appeared mass-produced. Hide tapestries and beaded hangings, arrayed with pictograms and carvings, adorned the walls. They provided a visual history of a great warrior and teacher, an ivory figure surrounded by a shining aura.

A history of the figure who laid on the hand-crafted wooden table. A history of Pale Wolf.

The body was so white it almost glowed. Lustrous black hair, woven into two thick braids, framed an angular face equal parts benign and feral. A simple loincloth comprised the extent of its attire. The entire figure was lean, almost emaciated, wasting muscles implying frailty. It was mere illusion, though; Beckett knew the creature before him could tear through the thick steel door he'd just opened as if it were a sheet of tissue paper. Beckett felt safe from such a display; the body radiated a sense of permanence such that it was difficult to even imagine it rising. He could sooner picture a mountain going for a stroll.

Beckett knew that, on a certain level, the figure before him was not asleep, had never slept. Here was



the source of that pervasive yet subtle awareness that blanketed the city. Its power was such that it could sense, even manipulate, its surroundings even from the depths of a centuries-long slumber.

Then Beckett sensed that the creature's immense physical gravity and stillness was undergoing a subtle change, a slow rise to join with its already active awareness. Its outward visage was a calm expanse of ocean with a great leviathan churning beneath it toward the surface. The beast was still fathoms under the waves, but it drew ever nearer, inevitability incarnate.

Looking upon Pale Wolf, he thought how foolish it was to have considered some bauble of silver and stone could hope to protect him from the scrutiny of something so ancient. Yet standing at the very locus of its awareness, Beckett could tell he remained unnoticed. Nola Spier's amulet kept Beckett free of the creature's influence, protecting him enough to slip to the thing's very side. His diffused aura was worthy of no more notice than a field mouse. He felt it was a fragile safety, though. The mouse was safe only so long as the wolf focused its attention on the deer on the plain. The mouse would be a snack should it be foolish enough to run under the pale wolf's nose.

With a last look around, Beckett backed out of the room.

• • •

Now that he'd confirmed his suspicions about Pale Wolf — though he remained unsure of what part the ancient vampire played in the city's supernatural machinations — Beckett slipped away to plan his next step.

He paused by the unconscious guard on his way out, lips pursed in irritated contemplation. It puzzled him that such a powerful creature would have relatively simple protection. With further thought, he



decided it wasn't so simple. The grounds were open and well lit with guards watching from elevated positions; the trapdoor was well hidden and hard to penetrate by most mundane or supernatural means; even this guard would be hard to get past if he had a few seconds to prepare.

Pale Wolf's retainers aside, the creature's massive presence was perhaps the best protection of all. Any who entered its far-reaching influence would have to shake off its subtly potent control before even considering an approach. And only someone foolish — or curious — enough would even attempt such a thing. Someone like Beckett.

It was only due to clever investigating and supernatural prowess that Beckett puzzled out Pale Wolf's hiding place. Only thanks to his unique combination of powers and ability that Beckett slipped so close unseen.

Standing around thinking about a Methuselah's security was tempting fate. Beckett shook himself to action and moved to the trapdoor. The fatigue hit him as he turned to mist. He would need to feed once he cleared this place. Matching deed to word, Beckett was soon clear of the ancient's lair and a wolf on the hunt. The search for sustenance was handled with distraction, his mind filled with the implications of all that he'd learned thus far. Mortal monster hunters, suspicious vampire clans, a mysterious walking dead, and now an ancient vampire. Though Beckett didn't yet see how they all connected, he knew it was a matter of time. He was immortal; he had all the time in the world.

ELEVEN

Carpenter was not in good shape. In fact, his whole sorry existence was on the verge of going tits up. It was thanks to the straight razor he carried that he was still in the land of the living at all. He'd brought the artifact with him from the shadowlands; the mere fact that it could cross the boundary between the physical and the spiritual realms attested to its power. Carpenter was a big fan of power, but he was careful not to rely overmuch on anyone or anything other than himself. He knew the razor was capable of far more than what he used it for. He'd long sensed a hunger in it that threatened to overwhelm him if he wasn't careful, so it remained little more than his backup weapon. Considering what he'd been through in the past few hours, he knew he was right to resist its allure. Unfortunately, he hadn't had much choice.

Thanks to his spiritual link to the Sforza family, Carpenter was yanked back to the underworld when Nicholas Sforza hemorrhaged. The punk's grandmother, Annabelle, had betrayed Carpenter, had caused his death. Carpenter repaid her by returning from the grave and killing off her family line. She was to be the last, but she died before he could get to her. Instead, Nicholas Sforza had become the final one, and had proved far more difficult to kill than Carpenter expected. So Carpenter had kidnapped Sforza and dragged him off to figure out just what made the little



shit tick. The tantalizing clues Nicholas spilled about himself had instilled in Carpenter a feeling he hadn't experienced in recent memory: hope. He had watched Nicholas Sforza blow his own brains out, after all — had been the one to force that impulse to begin with. He'd seen the guy get up from a lethal wound and walk away. And now he learned that Sforza did so because he was somehow immortal, a... mummy. The word was laughable to Carpenter, but whatever you called it, he had seen the evidence of Nicholas Sforza's immortality with his own eyes.

And if that son of a bitch could become immortal, Carpenter was damn well going to find out how he could get in on that action, too.

He was determined to solve the mystery of Nicholas Sforza's strange existence before the end came — but the bastard up and died on him first, just like his grandmother had. As Sforza's life force was drawn past the shroud of the living world, Carpenter's went with it. But Carpenter wasn't ready, he didn't want to return to the shadowlands — not yet, not *ever* if he could help it. The underworld was hell, a chaos of rampant emotion and nightmare, a churning maelstrom of horrors. Although he was now nothing more than a shambling corpse, it was a far better existence than being a disembodied ghost was.

The razor kept him around. The beat up old straight razor didn't seem to want him to cross back over either. It acted like an anchor his spirit clung to as the roaring ghost storm swept over him, its psychic waves smashing at him, its spiritual undertow sucking at him with a greedy hunger. He felt Sforza's soul dwindle to nothing, drawn down and away to oblivion. There lay Carpenter's fate as well, if he lost his hold. Carpenter felt the weapon's dark energy then, an evil



that called to him. Having opened himself to it in this weakened state, he couldn't hope to resist its full power. But the alternative was oblivion, and for Carpenter that was no choice at all.

At some point during the hellish eternity Carpenter clung to the razor, he spared an instant to wonder: How could it be that Sforza was immortal as he claimed? He'd just *died*. Unless it was all some trick. Carpenter couldn't imagine just what the punk had hoped to accomplish if that was the case, but the joke was on him. Sforza's soul was lost to oblivion, while Carpenter might cheat death a while longer — if he could just hold on.

It felt like he struggled for millennia, but the grasp of the ghost storm eventually weakened and fell away. He returned to the body he'd taken for his own, but the fit was a poor one. It felt like a strong breeze might shake his soul free. He had to get up, had to get the one thing remaining in the world that could keep him truly anchored. Easier said than done. It was an effort even to think, let alone move. He got no further than focusing through his dead eyes when he got yet another shock. Nicholas Sforza stood above him! Battered and bloody but *moving*.

So it was true — he *was* immortal! Not unkillable, apparently, but immortal. Carpenter appreciated the trick. If not for the straight razor, Sforza's momentary death would have been sufficient to send Carpenter tumbling to the void. There was no way Carpenter was going to let the bastard get away with it, that was certain. He'd wrap the punk back up in those ornate metal bands of his, and by God this time, he'd learn the secret. Summoning the strength to move proved more difficult than Carpenter expected, like moving through molasses. He'd gathered enough energy to



blink when he found himself looking down the barrel of his own automatic. The weapon roared and bullets tore through the corpse he wore. The damage threatened to rip him from his fragile perch; again, Carpenter had to draw upon the coiled darkness of the straight razor to hold on.

The body was a shattered wreck now, its most vital parts — head and heart — shredded by chunks of metal. Carpenter drew upon the razor's strength in a desperate attempt to make the corpse a suitable vessel for his spirit to inhabit again. It was hard to channel the energy; mending seemed alien to the force inhabiting the weapon. It appeared to know only death and destruction. Carpenter focused the same powerful will that sustained him through hell for over sixty years and forced the dark energy to do his bidding.

It took a while, but it worked. He lurched to his feet as soon as he felt the body could move. It was a creaking mess, but at least it was functional. He could sense Sforza nearby, his soul a beacon Carpenter could find from halfway around the world. He made no attempt to follow the bastard, though. Carpenter was in no shape to take the punk on. He had to get away, recuperate, figure out the best plan of attack. He was at the door to the impromptu cell when a tremendous concussion shook the entire house. He was thrown from his feet, feeling the air rush forward past him. Rolling to his side, Carpenter saw a gout of flame shoot down the basement stairs not twenty feet away. Fire ran along the floor, toward him along a path of gasoline — gas that also covered him! Carpenter slammed the door closed and threw the bed over the floor in front of it. The makeshift barrier wouldn't slow the fire for long, but he could use every second. A quick look around didn't show much that could help. Unless—



A desperate plan took form. Carpenter flicked open the straight razor and dashed to the wall to the right of the door. It was drywall, like the other interior basement walls. The razor cut through it like the proverbial knife through butter. He made a quick X and smashed through the wall to the laundry room beyond. The effort exhausted him, giving a good indication of just how weak he was. At his full undead strength, Carpenter could have bashed through a wall like that without aid of any kind — hell, without even slowing down. He didn't bother whining about it, noticing the bright flickering on the far wall that indicated the fire had gotten past the door and single mattress. He scrambled up and away from the hole, then looked to see the inferno the room had become. His corpse couldn't hear very well, but he could imagine the popping and crackling, the hungry roar of the flames... With an effort, Carpenter pulled his gaze away, disturbed by how easily he'd been mesmerized by the fire.

At least as a corpse he didn't need to breathe. Not having to worry about smoke inhalation, he took a minute to figure his next step before he went charging through another wall. First, he had to get out of these gas-soaked clothes. He tore his suit away in a panic and shuffled down the long laundry room toward the industrial sink. Although his mind screamed at him to get out, he took the time to splash water over his naked body. He knew he must look horrific — fresh bullet wounds in his face and chest and a myriad of old scars including a gut shot that still refused to heal and one mangled hand — but he was able to suppress his phobia about neatness for the moment. As long as he didn't stumble across a mirror, he should be okay. Even with the dulled senses



of a corpse, he could feel the heat of the burning house all around him. Looking over his shoulder he saw the back of the closed laundry room door was blistering from the heat in the stairwell. The fire had already rushed in through the hole he'd made at the far end of the room. It was chewing along the interior wall and ceiling as if crawling for him.

Time to go. He looked up at the narrow basement window above the industrial sink, but the damn thing was too small. A layer of snow obscured part of the glass. Seeing how the snow angled, Carpenter had another inspiration. He ran away from the fire surging toward him, over to the far wall. It was a rear exterior wall made of fitted stones with another narrow basement window at the top, this one showing no snow in front of it. He flicked the razor across the wall in another X, the blade slicing as easily into the stone as it had the drywall minutes before. Just in case, Carpenter cut a + in the same spot; he had no doubts about the razor, but his body was a mess already and he didn't trust it to be able to handle more than one run at the stone.

The flames were almost upon him. He backed up as close as he dared toward them to get a running start. Crossing his arms in front of his face, Carpenter ran full tilt at the rock wall.

He burst out the back of the house in a shower of stone, mortar and snow. His momentum carried him a couple feet beyond the opening, then gravity took over. He slid halfway down the slope toward the lake before he could halt himself. Struggling into a crouch, Carpenter turned around and looked back up toward the house. The place was an inferno. The back was blown open, the guts a mess of charring beams. Burning debris scattered the hillside around



him and a rain of ash and soot wafted down over everything. The flames were blinding, but he could just make out the hole he'd made in the house's foundation below the sunroom.

Nicholas Sforza had torched his grandmother's home in as thorough a piece of arson as Carpenter had ever seen. Carpenter felt a strange sensation course through him; with some surprise, he realized it was pride.

• • •

Carpenter sensed that Sforza was moving away to the south, and could think of nothing better to do than wander in that direction. He walked — staggered was more like it — in a daze along the road winding through the neighborhood, the winter air no more frigid than the chill he'd felt in his bones ever since he'd risen from the grave. All his physical senses were atrophied, not just the sense of touch. He relied on his spiritual awareness to note his surroundings. Right then, putting one foot in front of the other required the majority of that attention. As a result, Carpenter didn't catch the car roaring up to him, didn't register as it slid to a stop on the snow-slick road, didn't notice the door open and the man rush toward him. The gasp of the man's shock at seeing the ruined horror of Carpenter's face and chest didn't make a dent on his awareness. His head creaked around with faint curiosity. His arm moved far faster.

Carpenter saw his hand swing of its own volition as the man approached, the razor blade flicking open and slicing off his head. A faint tremor coursed up Carpenter's arm — from the razor, he realized. His spirit self saw a dark cloud roll from the blade and surround the fresh corpse at his feet. A scream that made no sound tore through Carpenter's mind, a cry of anguish as the razor consumed the soul of the man he had just



killed. No, that the *blade* had killed. Carpenter had lost any control of his arm for the brief second it took to swipe the deadly arc.

The weapon had never acted on its own before. Even more disturbingly, it had never drunk a soul before. It pulsed with fresh energy now, power it urged Carpenter to use. It was as if a glamour had fallen from the straight razor, revealing its true appearance for the first time. The straight razor was the physical manifestation of oblivion — the ultimate nothingness capable of tearing asunder his soul. He never would have stolen the damn thing if he had any idea what it was capable of. He had no illusions about what he was, but the thing he held triggered a fear that struck him to the core. Swing the blade the wrong way and it was all over for him. Unfortunately, he had little choice but to use every tool at his disposal for the time being.

With cautious fingers, he flicked the blade back into the handle before looking over the dead man lying in the snow. He was older, heavysset, but close enough to Carpenter's size that the clothes should fit. Carpenter gritted his teeth against the idea of donning flannel shirt and dungarees, but his options were limited. He kept in mind the dozen tailored suits stashed in a place in Chicago. His first stop once he got out of here and got the hammer back. Registering in passing that the razor seemed to have cauterized the wound when it struck, Carpenter dragged the body over to the car, which turned out to be a mammoth Dodge pickup. It had a second row of seats, but Carpenter didn't think it would be a good idea to have a rotting corpse stuffed in the back of the cab. He snapped open the snow-covered tarp over the truck bed and levered the body in. The head followed, thunking on the plastic-lined bed.



Then Carpenter heard the approaching sirens of fire and rescue. The thick black plume of smoke from the burning summer home had alerted someone in the nearby town of Lake Geneva. He hurried to finish snapping the tarp in place, scrambled into the cab and threw the truck in gear. His hearing was poor enough that it wasn't easy to tell which direction the sirens were coming from. He took a guess and roared off in the opposite direction. His instincts proved correct; he didn't encounter anyone until he hit the main county road. He was almost to the I-94 when a pair of sheriff's cruisers roared by, sirens blaring. Carpenter signaled right and headed up the onramp that would take him to Chicago.

●●●

Once the excitement of his escape from the blazing house had worn off, Carpenter again felt the inexorable pull of oblivion. The straight razor promised safety in its embrace, but he had no interest in succumbing to its temptation any further. Already its short-term benefits had proven suspect; he found his soul craving ever more of its dark energy, like an addict hungering for a fix. He would be damned if he succumbed to the thing. With a grim smile, Carpenter imagined that would be literally true.

Still, even without denying the razor's lure, shouldn't Carpenter's spirit be anchored again? After all, Sforza was alive again. Mulling it over as the miles flashed by, he concluded that it couldn't be that simple. The spiritual link remained; that wasn't the problem. Almost being torn from the physical world wasn't something he could just walk away from. Add into that the massive trauma his body had suffered and it wasn't surprising he was having difficulty holding on.



A zombie was only as strong as the corpse he was in, and Carpenter's was in pretty sorry shape right now.

He focused his thoughts on the one thing with the chance to restore him to the full strength and power he'd enjoyed before — the hammer that was his namesake. It was the symbol of what he'd become, and next to Annabelle Sforza was the strongest link to his life. Carpenter didn't want to chance carrying the thing around with him, though. Although it served as an even better anchor than the damn razor did, if an enemy got his hands on it he could use it to control Carpenter — or even destroy it, destroying Carpenter in the process. He'd put the hammer in the safest place he could think of, where his spirit would be drawn if he lost his hold on his body but somehow escaped the pull of oblivion.

The grave of the only woman he ever loved:
Annabelle Sforza.

TWELVE

When Beckett arose the next night, he found a young woman — girl, really — waiting outside the mill. She was bundled against the cold in multiple layers of old sweaters and patched jackets. Ragged, stained mittens covered her shaking hands. Her hair was clumped, oily evidence of life on the street. Her face was bright red from prolonged exposure to the elements, her pale blue eyes glazed with hopelessness. The bitter stench of old sweat and unwashed flesh surrounded her. In older times, he would have called her a street urchin. In any age, he would have labeled her pathetic.

After confirming that she was alone, he emerged. The girl was not surprised to see him. Instead, she gave him a dull nod and said, without preamble, "You're s'posed to follow me."

"Khalid sent you?" She nodded. Considering her appearance, it hadn't been much of a guess. The girl gave him another dull look, then trudged through the clumps of fresh snow toward a culvert.

She was small enough that she could move through the pipe hunching over slightly. Beckett was forced to go on his hands and knees. He debated transforming, then deciding not to. He wasn't sure how familiar this girl was with the ways of his kind. Regardless, it was best to conserve his energy till he had a better idea what he was in for. He shoved his gloves in a pocket, slipped his sunglasses in another, and followed his guide.



They hooked up soon enough with old rural sewer lines and then through even older conduits, making their way east then south. Beckett suspected a number of the tunnels they crawled through were not on any surveyor's maps. Some appeared to have been dug out by hand — or claw, in the case of some of the more deformed Nosferatu.

After a few hours, during which time the closest they came to conversation were her occasional grunts of effort slogging through some noisome half-frozen sludge, the girl stopped under a ladder that led up to a manhole. She leaned against the stained corridor, one hand grasping the lowermost rung and the other gesturing upward.

"I'm supposed to climb up there?" She nodded, then shot him a peevish look when he made no move toward the ladder. He didn't think it was a trap, but he wasn't going to scamper up there blind. He'd already been foolish enough, following some nameless piece of human refuse. No sense being a complete idiot. "You first, my dear."

The girl frowned and muttered something, but heaved herself up the rungs. She was far too weak to push open the manhole cover, and called out in irritation after thumping on it a few times. A few seconds later, fingers blocked the weak light trickling through the holes in the cover and lifted the metal away. One-handed, it looked like. Nosferatu were strong bastards.

A silhouette poked over the hole after the girl climbed out. A rasping voice called down, "Fer Chrissake, Beckett! What kind of gentleman are you, forcing an innocent li'l girl into who knows what danger?"

Beckett followed the girl, the speaker moving aside and extending a helping hand when he reached the top. The creature holding Beckett's hand was a mass



of snarled hair and warts. Beckett couldn't get a very good look at the vampire's face, nor did he want to. He took his hand back and looked around the room once he'd stepped off the ladder.

It was a rough rectangle, crumbled brick and stone truncating one corner. Beckett suspected that's where the original entrance to the cellar was. An old broken still and some warped kegs were shoved out of the way in front of the debris, clearing a fifteen foot area in the rest of the chamber. Eight crates served as makeshift chairs, arranged around the manhole situated in the room's center. The fur-covered warty mass shuffled over to one of the crates; Khalid al-Rashid occupied another.

Beckett nodded to the primogen and took a crate that made him the third point in an undead equilateral triangle. A faint rumble shook the place; perhaps a semi passing nearby or maybe the elevated train. "Thanks for the warning the other night at the museum. I wouldn't have expected Critias to be so militant otherwise."

"I was not sure you would take my words in the spirit they were given. Your perceptiveness is as acute as I was led to believe."

Beckett waved away the compliment. "I was wondering when you would get in touch, though I must admit I'm a little surprised at the manner of the invitation."

"I had wished to speak with you for some time, but you have proven quite elusive."

Beckett saw no reason to tell the primogen that he'd been halfway across the country for the past week. Let him think he possessed some special manner of concealing himself from the ever-watchful Nosferatu.

Khalid glanced at the girl before continuing. She shot Beckett a last look of distrust before scampering

back down the hole. "We considered leaving a note," Khalid said, "but notes are unreliable. They may be misplaced, or written by someone other than who signs them." He shrugged with one hand as if to admit the inherent peril one faced when even considering the written word. "I would have had Bean meet you, but you might well have been gone by the time he arose. And, once on the move, you are a hard one to find." All of which was Khalid's way of saying he knew a lot about Beckett — the puzzle of his recent disappearance aside — and could make his continued existence very difficult if he so chose.

"You come to this city during tumultuous times," Khalid said in unknowing echo of Inyanga's words to him almost two weeks before. "I do not believe your arrival is coincidental to other events now transpiring."

"We're not going to have another go-round about Gangrel working with mortals, are we?" Beckett asked.

Khalid shook his head a fraction of an inch. "I am confident that is not the case, though I have not discounted the possibility. If there is such a union, it may be a small group rather than the clan as a whole."

"But no, I do not refer to that. Instead, I speak of a struggle that has endured for centuries, a conflict that threatens to erupt once again."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Beckett was used to Nosferatu being cryptic, but that didn't make it fun to listen to all the time.

"This, I am willing to share with you. But first I must know why you are here, why you have come to Chicago now, of all times."

"You already said you don't think it's coincidence that I'm here. That would imply you already have a good idea what I'm doing."



"I know a great deal about who you are and what you purport to do, Beckett. But the choices you have made of late may have been the result of motives even you are not aware of."

"Right." Beckett saw he was going to get nowhere unless he went first. "You know me, you know what my main interest is. I came here to speak with Inyanga in hopes that she might give me further insight into the origins of our kind."

Khalid's grotesque features were impassive at the mention of the Gangrel primogen. "Have you yet met with her?"

"You tell me."

"Despite our reputation, the Nosferatu do not know everything," Khalid replied with a hint of a smile.

"Right. Yes, we met, and she agreed to share what she knew. In return, she wanted me to check into these mortals who hunt us."

"Ah."

"Yes."

"Was there anything you found curious about her request?"

"Not really. As I said to her, I'm surprised that more of us aren't looking into it more intently... Hmm. She kept mentioning a 'ghost storm,' that it stirred up something to do with the kine who've since started hunting us. I'd heard rumors of a cataclysm that tore through the spirit world, but that's not my area of expertise." Beckett frowned as details started to click. Ghosts, restless spirits, the walking dead, uneasy souls still bound to their physical forms, the dead man fleeing from Augustus' estate and the burning apartment building—

"Yes, I had suspected as much," Khalid was saying. "She is a clever one, and has amassed much wisdom through the ages." A pause, and the Nosferatu gave



Beckett a critical look. "She did not summon you here?" Beckett shook his head. "Did she expect you?"

Beckett considered. "It's difficult to read her, but I don't think so."

"And Critias was likewise surprised at your presence. So your actions are still..." Khalid broke off his murmuring and returned his attention to Beckett. "Have you found that your actions, since arriving here, have been fraught with unusual coincidences?"

"To a surprising degree, yes." This was getting interesting, especially in light of what Beckett had learned the previous evening. "Why, what do you know about that?"

"They are not, of course, coincidences. This 'ghost storm' (an apt phrase, that) roused many things that had long slumbered."

It was hard to read anything from the ruin of Khalid's face, but Beckett thought he might have caught a meaningful look. So did Khalid know about Pale Wolf, or was Beckett drawing that conclusion based upon his own recent discovery? He decided to toss the elder a few bones and see where it led. "Roused many things, eh? Are you saying the storm awakened some ancients? For years we've been hearing rumors of Methuselahs, even Antediluvians rising from the earth to consume us all and bring on the End Times." He adopted a skeptic look and a lecturing tone. "It's in our nature to fear ultimate destruction from every quarter, Khalid. Even more poetic that it comes in the form of the ancient ones who first gave birth to our various bloodlines. It's all part of our mythology, my friend. I'll grant you there are some creakingly old Cainites hidden somewhere, but they have other things on their minds than the petty squabbles in which we engage."



"I agree that such creatures would care not for our nightly affairs," Khalid replied, tacitly confirming that he was, indeed, talking about ancients — one ancient in particular, if Beckett read things right. "But that is not to say they would have no use for us, should they choose to involve themselves in the modern world."

Which implied Khalid had a theory on what influence Pale Wolf was exerting, which might then explain how it might tie into the other elements Beckett was already mulling over. He decided his best approach was to act the doubter. Khalid appeared to want to sway him somehow, and seeming resistant should make the Nosferatu more forthcoming than if he nodded along like a sycophant.

"Why would they spare one thought for the modern world?" Beckett countered. "Consider how different you and I are from younger creatures like your boy Bean, here. We have to make an effort to pass for human, not just in appearance but manners, reactions, everything. We've transcended so far beyond what we once were that it requires conscious thought to recapture it. The changes Bean and others of his generation have experienced are inconsequential in comparison."

"You call this 'inconsequential'?" Bean chortled, waving two hairy arms (at least, Beckett assumed they were his arms).

"It's hubris on our part to believe that millennia-old vampires have any real interest in us," Beckett continued, ignoring Bean's antics. "If the ghost storm roused any ancients, I doubt they're going to bother with us."

It was hard to tell whether Khalid was frowning or smiling, considering the riot of teeth that was his mouth. "Your view might have some merit, Beckett, but in this case I know that you are wrong. Two ancients have been



using this city as their chess board for since the first trading post was dug into the side of the Chicago river, and we are their pawns."

Two ancients? Beckett wondered just how many layers of mystery he was dealing with here. He allowed a look of extreme skepticism take up residence on his face. "Chicago. Two ancients? A pair of Methuselahs has been squabbling *here* for three centuries? What would they want with this city?"

"Ah; the city is incidental to their struggle. The conflict is personal."

"Fine. Let's assume that. How does that relate to the ghost storm and the mortals?"

"Before I broach that topic, you must understand something. These beings are old — as you say, ancient. Just as you suggest that we transcend undead such as Bean—"

"What the hell, is this Pick on Bean Night?" Khalid's lackey complained. "I'm right here, you know."

"—so too do they transcend us. Their awareness, their capabilities are beyond compare. They have had centuries to build up their respective power bases throughout this region, to recruit their most capable agents. Their plans are complex, their moves and countermoves subtle in the extreme. It is through comparable — no, I must say superior — subtlety that one may hide from their attention, and so remain beyond their grasp."

Beckett had suspected something along these lines, and was even more pleased he'd paid a visit to Nola Spier. "You're suggesting that they control all the vampires in this city except yourself."

"I am almost certain I remain free of their control — though I admit there remains a shadow of doubt. Of more relevance to you is that if they know you are



here, you are more than likely under the control of one of them already."

Beckett still found the idea of two millennia-old vampires battling in Chicago ludicrous, but he had to admit the disparate facts he'd found thus far indicated something out of the ordinary was going on. He'd seen first-hand that one ancient existed, felt its insidious influence. It wasn't out of line to imagine a Methuselah gathering soldiers under its banner in such a fashion, once you accepted the initial premise. The problem remained that he didn't know what it was all about, their conflict. Khalid hinted that he did, and better still, he seemed to be working his way toward revealing it. Beckett just had to convince him that he wasn't under the control of one of these ancients.

Beckett paused in his reply, realizing that although he knew where one of the Methuselahs was, he had no idea of the other's identity. So was he already under the thrall of this other? He didn't think so. He felt more like he was being acted upon rather than manipulated. That implied an attempt to gain control, not actual control already. But the feeling seemed less pronounced since his return; perhaps his bracelet was disguising him from both parties. Even so, Khalid didn't know that. So should Beckett tell the Nosferatu primogen or save that piece of information? He decided upon the latter; it was always a good idea to hold something back when dealing with other Cainites.

"I'll still need more than your conjecture about this, but for the moment let's assume what you say is accurate. What's the point of telling me if I'm already their dupe?"

Bean cackled, then subsided at a look from Khalid. "I do not think you are, at least not yet. Their perceptions operate on a different level from what we understand. Unless one of them called for you specifically,



and I do not think they did, it would take time for them to realize you are here."

Beckett relaxed somewhat. Khalid's assumption wasn't quite correct, but it was enough for the Nosferatu to consider him worthy to be brought into closer confidence. And if anyone was going to know how all the things Beckett had learned were tied together, it would be this master of secrets.

"That is why I tell you this," Khalid went on. "As I said, I believe I remain free of their direct influence — as do one or two others including Bean, here." Bean waved an appendage. "For many years that has been enough. Indeed, I thought little about their existence for some time."

"So what changed that?" Even as he asked, the answer became clear. "The ghost storm."

"Yes. Menele and Helena have been opponents for millennia. The territory that became Chicago was the site of their last great battle. Each lay in torpor for decades after, healing grievous wounds and expanding rarified senses to continue their struggle on a new level. Throughout they have remained equal in power. This has forced them to act with caution and subtlety. Move too aggressively, overextend yourself, and you leave yourself open, yes? There has been little danger of full-blown conflict as a result. Peace, such as our kind can hope for. There have been occasional flare-ups of violence through the years, but nothing of consequence. I believe the ghost storm has changed this, though I know not how yet."

Beckett had come across the identities of many Cainites through his years of research. Menele and Helena sounded vaguely familiar, but stories of ancient feuds were common among his kind. He would have to check his archives for more information, but for now he felt



confident Khalid was telling him the truth, as he knew it. The question was, how did the two tie into Pale Wolf? It didn't seem plausible a third Methuselah could be in Chicago; its mere presence would tip the scales one way or the other. Beckett felt comfortable pegging Pale Wolf as an alias of Menele. (If nothing else, "Helena" was female, and the ancient he'd seen the previous night was not.) Native Americans were protecting him; they could well have given Menele a new appellation in bygone days. Beckett suspected the hangings he'd glimpsed in Pale Wolf's underground lair explained the full extent of the ancient's relationship with whatever tribe guarded him through the years, though he doubted he'd ever have the opportunity to study them.

Beckett crossed his arms, leaning back as if in grudging acceptance of Khalid's claims. "I'm sorry, but even if I believed the rest of it, I just don't understand what they'd be fighting about."

Khalid slumped, as if disappointed. "It seems that as powerful and transcendent as they are, they continue to indulge themselves in a cycle of petty hatred."

"You mean over two thousand years of conflict boils down to the fact that they don't like each other?"

"Ironical, innit?" Bean commented, trying to untangle a snarl in his pelt. Beckett didn't think irony applied, but it did make a kind of pathetic sense. The power of gods and they wasted it on revenge.

"So we have Methuselachs with a grudge, then ghost storm breaks the stalemate in some way you have yet to determine." Beckett suspected Khalid had a very good idea what the reason was, but leave it alone for now. "Again, what does this have to do with me?"

"I had thought that Augustus Klein would be the one," Khalid commented. "Arriving here at the same



time as the other. And perhaps he would have been, had not forces been mobilized to destroy him. Regardless, I am almost certain that you are the catalyst. Your background, your pursuits, are too perfect a fit for coincidence."

"You've devolved into riddles again. Catalyst for what? The other what?"

There was silence for almost half a minute as Khalid debated again whether he was making the correct decision, confiding in Beckett. The room was still other than the fidgeting Bean and Beckett's crimson eyes looking at the savaged mess of Khalid's face. Finally, bracing himself, the Nosferatu primogen returned Beckett's gaze.

"The kine are not the only ones who stand against us in the End Times. The ghost storm has awakened another force, creatures from an age long forgotten. The Methuselahs would direct these entities at one another like they would any other weapon, even though it might mean they would themselves be in danger of destruction by those they manipulate.

"I speak of those who are *truly* immortal. I speak of mummies."

THIRTEEN

Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep was back in Chicago by late afternoon. His bruised face got some strange looks from the tollbooth personnel along the way, but a shrug and an embarrassed "Skied into a tree" seemed to do the trick.

He didn't bother checking on the Orthodox Temple of Akhenaton. If any of his people survived the attack, they would have pulled out of the place soon after. The authorities might have detained some, but all their papers were in order and none of them were foolish enough to have any semiautomatic weapons on them (at least he hoped so). By now, anyone questioned would have been released; anyone in custody was on his own. Nicholas didn't worry that someone might talk in either case; if anything, the men in this Eset-a sect were more dedicated than he was.

Even if the temple was still useful, he had no interest in ever returning there. Not due to the violence that took place there recently (although he wasn't sure how recently, since as yet he still didn't know what day it was). Rather, because the temple had once been the stronghold of enemies of his kind. He'd enjoyed taking over the place, though nowhere near as much as he had taking the Heart back from those petty usurpers.

No, he spared little thought about the Temple of Akhenaton and its pathetic cult. Neither was he wasn't much interested in getting something to eat. (He'd used some of Carpenter's gas-soaked money to buy three Value Meals at a McDonald's on the Interstate along the way back. Coming back to life was hungry work.)



No, right then his concern lay with confirming the Heart was safe, discovering how his men had fared, and learning what day it was. In about that order.

He navigated the streets of Skokie with caution. He'd been to the safe house before; had picked it out himself, in fact. But considering all that had happened he wanted to make sure the place *was* safe before he made an appearance. Carpenter was out of the picture, but Nicholas still hadn't figured out who the fake reporters were or what they wanted with him — unless it had been the Heart, which was possible. Finally satisfied the place was clear, he parked the Lincoln a couple blocks away and slipped up on foot.

The house was as nondescript as you could get — which was, of course, the whole point. He and the others had rigged a number of alarms and traps around the windows and doors just in case, and he had to concentrate to make sure he didn't forget any. He wasn't surprised that Ibrahim was waiting for him, suppressed Mac-10 ready, when he stepped into the front hall. He *was* surprised that Ibrahim was the only one there, though.

"Amenti! You are safe!" Ibrahim cried as soon as the door opened. Nicholas was pleased to notice the man wasn't so overjoyed that he neglected checking past Nicholas just in case. The man had a bandage around his head and his face was bruised almost as much as Nicholas' was.

"What'd I tell you about titles?" Nicholas replied, rubbing his upper arms to get some warmth flowing. It promised to be a frigid night. "You okay? That from the fight at the temple? Where's everybody else, anyway?"

Ibrahim's face fell like a plywood shack in a mudslide. "I do not know, Amenti," he said, ignoring as always Nicholas' resistance to the honorific. "They have not yet returned."

"Returned from where?" His breath hitched as he readied himself for the answer he most dreaded.

"They search for the Heart."



Even expecting it, it was still a shock. He'd hoped the reason his men hadn't stopped Carpenter from running off with him was because they were busy getting the Heart to safety. "Son of a bitch. So you don't even know where it is?"

Ibrahim looked even more uncomfortable than he had a second before. "We did, Amenti. Those in league with the bloodless devil had taken it. We went to recover it — we thought you would be with them also. But it was not so. And when we tried to get the Heart... there was trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"There was conflict, but we recovered the Heart. Then, before we could leave, we were set upon by *ghuls*. We fought them as best we could, but they were too fierce. They took the Heart and left, and we had to flee ourselves from the arriving police."

Ghuls... vampires. As if Carpenter hadn't been bad enough. "So were they all working together, you think?"

Ibrahim shrugged his ignorance, wincing at the motion. "It may be. Duri and Saled have been gone most of the day to discover where it is now being kept."

Too many questions caromed around in Nicholas' head. "Okay, hang on. If those two are tracking the jar and you're here, where's the rest of the crew? Gamal and Abdul and the others?"

"I am sorry, Amenti. We are all that remain." Ibrahim hung his head in shame.

"Down to three?" Nicholas dropped into a creaky old sofa. "Hell, just yesterday — what day is today?"

"It is... Saturday, I believe."

"Already? Christ! ...Sorry, old habit." He rubbed at his temples. "How could we lose a dozen guys in three days? All right, never mind. I have a pretty good idea. So when did you try to get the Heart? Last night? Why in hell did you go at night?"

Ibrahim shuffled and cleared his throat. "Omar thought it best to strike under cover of darkness. Greater chance of surprise, fewer witnesses—"

"Greater chance of *ghuls* and who knows what popping up to throw a wrench in the works. So Omar...?"

"He fell in the struggle, Amenti."

"Well, here's hoping he learns his lesson in the next world." Nicholas thought for a second, then slapped his palms on his knees and stood up. "Now is not the time for gnashing our teeth, right, Ibrahim?"

"No, Amenti!" Even such a simple action like standing with purpose was enough to get the man fired up.

"I'm going to get changed. Duri and Saled keeping in touch on the cell? Good. I take it they haven't reported in for a while; let's hope it's not because Anubis is ferrying them along with Omar to the Blessed Fields." Seeing Ibrahim's shocked look, Nicholas waved placating hands. "That was a joke, okay? Look, did they say they were running silent?"

"No, Amenti," Ibrahim said, returning a weak smile at the attempt at levity. For a trained killer and thief he sure was a soft touch.

"Right; give them a call, then, get them in here. We need to develop a better plan of attack than running around the city hoping to stumble—" A surge of adrenaline sent Nicholas leaping for the phone as it rang. "Yeah?"

The voice on the line said a couple words in Arabic before stopping short. Then, in English, "*Amenti? Is that you?*"

"Saled? Where the hell are you?"

Excited shouting through the phone, chattering in a mix of Arabic and English as Saled informed Duridar that their leader was on the line. "*Osiris blesses us once again, now that you are returned!*"

"Okay, okay. Cut that out. Ibrahim's given me the basics; what can you two tell me?"

"*Ame — er, Nicholas. We have found it! I tell you, we have found the Heart!*"

FOURTEEN

Carpenter reached the Oak Woods Cemetery perhaps an hour or two before sunset. After parking the truck on 67th Street he headed in with a shuffling walk that was almost a run. The place was almost more like a wilderness park than a cemetery. Clusters of trees and a few ponds lent it a naturalness not often seen in cemeteries. In past visits, Carpenter had even seen wildlife — rabbits and foxes and the like — making their way across the consecrated ground. Now, in the wake of two tremendous snowstorms, Oak Woods was blanketed with white. After the second blizzard it appeared the ground crew hadn't had a chance to carve more than a handful of main paths through the snow. Carpenter took one that seemed to lead closest to the Sforza mausoleum. The obelisk to Big Bill Thompson, cartoonish and corrupt mayor of Chicago during much of Carpenter's time in the mob, rose in the near distance, giving him an easy landmark to navigate with. Even so, he could have found his way to Annabelle Sforza's grave in his sleep — if he still slept, anyway. He'd been to Oak Woods often in the months since her death, finding himself drawn back again and again to stand outside her mausoleum, often for hours on end. Being close to her body and the hammer energized him. Along with drawing upon the base emotions of the living — anger, pain, fear — it was the only way Carpenter sustained

the strength to maintain his hold over the corpse he possessed. Aside from the razor, of course.

Even with the snow obscuring many of the grave-stones, Carpenter could pick out the surprising number of monuments fashioned as sarcophagi. They were a popular choice in the wealthier sections of Oak Woods, not that he'd given it much thought before. Thanks to his recent encounter with the bitch's grandson, he had Egypt on the brain. Preoccupied with death, the Egyptians were. And mummies, preserved to last forever, right? So yeah, he could see how the fragments of Nicholas Sforza's explanation might make sense. The question was: how had this "Spell of Life" transformed him from mobbed-up security consultant to deathless mummy? Despite the punk's protests, Carpenter sensed that the "Heart" had something to do with it. Carpenter remembered the powerful aura emanating from the thing, remembered how he'd thought it might be a power source, a battery of some kind. Yeah, maybe that's how the kid did it. Just like Carpenter needed his hammer, maybe Nicholas Sforza needed that "Heart." But why was Egypt important? If only the shitbird hadn't died right then. Well, he was up and around again; Carpenter would just have to capture him again and find out the whole story.

But first, the hammer and regaining his strength. Carpenter felt his anchor's pull grow stronger as he drew near the mausoleum. It called to him, its song drowning out the whispering razor.

The path curved away about fifty yards from the crypt. Carpenter plowed into the calf-high snow, toward a mausoleum that his memory saw in far more detail than his decaying eyes could make out. The Sforza crypt was a wide granite block facing west, with a pair of semicircular wings curling from the front. The



granite wings created a kind of open-air foyer that lent a more secluded feel to those who visited. Two shallow steps led between a pair of squat pillars to the narrow copper doors fronting the mausoleum. The caretakers were paid a handsome wage to keep the metal from oxidizing. The doors glowed in the light from the setting sun, not a hint of green tarnishing their surface. The name "SFORZA" was carved in the lintel above the doors, with an ornately carved cross rising from the roof. Carpenter trudged through the virgin snow to the doors. He paused, loath to mar the beauty of Annabelle's resting place. The old rage surged then, the memory of her betrayal filling him with strength. Even in his weakened state, he was strong enough to smash through the flimsy lock. The copper doors shuddered open, a dusting of snow tumbling inside.

There wasn't much room in the crypt, just enough to maneuver a casket into one of the six slots along the facing wall. Carpenter knew all the names on the marble panels over each; he'd even put two of the residents in there himself. The top two held Antonio and Carlotta Sforza, Annabelle's in-laws (long dead, but in Carpenter's opinion the only good Sforza was a dead one, so it worked out well). The bottom two belonged to Peter and Therese Sforza, Annabelle's son and daughter-in-law (his handiwork). The left center plaque was for Gianni Sforza, Johnny the Stick, the son of a bitch who claimed to be Carpenter's friend, the bastard who stood by as Carpenter was killed, the shitbird who swooped in and married the love of Carpenter's life. Although Carpenter wished he could have been responsible for Johnny's death, he had to be content that the stupid shit met a poetic end, castrated when he was found banging the underage daughter of a made guy.

Carpenter gave the others no more than a glance; his attention was on the right center plaque, the final resting place of Annabelle Sforza. His right hand was at the stone, straight razor out and digging in to pry it loose, before he registered what he was doing.

"God damn it," he muttered, trying to pull his hand back. It took his ruined left hand — two fingers gone when some fucker hand blown up the pistol he was holding — to grab at his right forearm before he could muscle the razor away from the stone. A chunk of marble fell to the floor with a flat clatter. He gritted his teeth with the effort it took to flip the blade closed and shoved it back in his pants pocket. The thing was far too eager to help him out, and Carpenter didn't like it one bit.

Simply being near the hammer and the bitch's corpse was making him feel stronger. He wasn't sure if he was strong enough to pull the marble off by himself, but he was damn sure not going to use the black thing calling to him from his pocket. He stepped up to the crypt panel and was shocked to see his right hand carving away with the razor again! He swore, sheer panic surging through the creaking form he wore. With a cry of effort he threw himself away and wrestled with the blade for a good five minutes before jamming it back into his dungarees. He would have tossed it far away if he could, but he knew he wasn't strong enough. It had seeped too much of its own dark energy into him; it was a part of him now and he couldn't rid himself of it. Not at the moment, anyway.

He spent another few minutes making sure he was in control of himself before stepping up to the crypt panel again. A good portion of the marble was already chopped free, making it easy to grab the remainder and yank it off. He let the stone fall to the mausoleum



floor and reached in to pull the casket toward him. He drew the coffin partway out and flipped the half lid open, his hands fumbling in eagerness.

The decaying corpse of Annabelle Sforza looked up at him. She had been an old woman when she died, her flesh worn and sagging. In the months since her death, the flesh had dried and stretched tight across her bones in a parody of the slender beauty of her youth. Her lips and eyelids strained against the hair-thin stitches that held them shut; hints of the funeral makeup stood out in sharp relief. Carpenter drank in the sight of her, his hands caressing the leathery skin. His fingers were too long dead to feel any real texture, but his soul caught a charge like static electricity. His hands wandered down, pulling at the black gown she wore. There, resting between her atrophied breasts like a parody of the cross around her neck, was the battered and stained hammer.

Carpenter had slipped the tool under her gown at the funeral, feeling it was the most fitting resting place. He smiled again at the memory and took a moment to enjoy the tableau before he reached for the hammer.

And then the razor was in his hand, flashing downward to cleave the hammer in two. Carpenter yelled and swung his body to one side, throwing off the aim just in time. The blade flickered with an oil-slick shimmer as it chopped through Annabelle's arm and the side of the casket. Carpenter spun wildly, turning around to slam his back in the coffin. The razor yanked his arm around and went for another strike. This time, Carpenter used the momentum to grab the hammer with his left hand when the razor swung back for the down stroke. As soon as he touched the worn wood handle, energy coursed through him like he'd grabbed an exposed electrical cable. The blade flashed, burying itself deep in



the center of Annabelle's torso. It would have continued through with little resistance except that his hand slammed into the ribcage. Even as his right arm drew back on the razor, Carpenter swung a clumsy left-handed blow. The hammer came down in a sloppy arc, its stained metal head striking a glancing blow on the blade.

It was barely enough to dent normal metal, let alone the otherworldly steel. Nonetheless, a shudder ran through hammer and razor alike, as if he'd taken a sledgehammer to a boulder. Tremors ran up both arms and through his body along with a blaze of pain that shot through his right arm. His corpse seldom felt true pain, but this was intense enough to rip a strangled yell from him.

Carpenter staggered and would have fallen if he hadn't slammed into the mausoleum's side wall. Painful tingles coursed up both arms and he felt like he'd just gone twenty rounds with a grizzly. As the hammer fed strength to his body, Carpenter tried to figure out what the hell just happened. Obviously, the goddamn razor was getting more willful by the hour. But why would it try to destroy the hammer? It was his last, and most powerful, anchor to the living world; destroying it would plunge him back to hell for good. And the razor had just saved his ass from that very fate not twelve hours ago. Unless...

"You want to get rid of the competition, is that it?" he croaked to the still-vibrating razor. "Ain't gonna happen, pal. Don't think I'm not grateful for you saving my bacon before, but let's not forget who's in charge here. You pull that shit again and I'll use this to pound you into scrap." He felt stupid talking to an inanimate object and stopped with a scowl.

Carpenter suspected that trying to destroy the razor with the hammer would mess him up pretty well



in the process — perhaps even dump him back to the underworld. He was willing to take that chance, if the alternative was to let something else control him.

The straight razor seemed to sense this also. The tremors along his arm stopped and he felt no resistance when he closed the blade into the handle and pocketed the thing. As he straightened Annabelle's ruined corpse as best he could, he struggled to come to grips with how much more bizarre his situation had become. It became clear he wasn't going to get very far with either straightening or coping, so he gave up on both. He pushed the chopped up casket back in its slot and decided not to bother putting the carved stone back. "Don't know how this could get any more fucked up," he grumbled as he stepped through the mausoleum doors.

Seeing the four zombies waiting for him within the crypt's stone wings, Carpenter decided he'd better keep his damn mouth shut from now on.

• • •

Carpenter supposed he shouldn't be surprised. Ever since he'd returned from the dead, he'd been accosted from time to time by other walking corpses. They tracked him down when he stayed in one spot for a while. He was on the move a fair bit so it seldom amounted to more than a minor inconvenience. He came here often enough they might well have been hanging around just waiting for him to swing by.

The quartet standing in the snow was typical of the type — advanced state of decay, the stereotype of the rotting zombie. Carpenter had determined that he was a rare example of his kind, his body fit enough to pass for living, his mind still sharp and capable of independent thought. The others he ran into amounted to little more than brute impulses tied to rotting flesh.



Although at this particular moment Carpenter didn't look much better than any of these guys. Three guys and a gal, actually. Well, used to be. Now he supposed it didn't much matter what gender they'd been.

He never could figure out what the hell these things wanted with him. It wasn't like he went running around trying to find zombie buddies to hang out with, so why were these others so intent on it? Out of disgust, he'd blown away the first zombie he'd encountered this way. Phobic about cleanliness and order, being near a rotting corpse was an affront to Carpenter's senses. The next couple he'd just left after trying to start up futile conversations. After months of this, he'd wondered if these things might prove useful after all. Despite not being very communicative, they took direction well enough. He'd sent a few after some living people who hunted things like him. The hunters ended up butchering the zombies, but it was sufficient to throw the hunters off-track, leaving him to carry on his agenda unhindered. Lacking sufficient self-awareness for tasks of any complexity, Carpenter found they worked well as cannon fodder.

The things stood there, looking at him with clear expectation. A slow grin spread across Carpenter's shattered face. "You guys want to go for a ride?"

• • •

Carpenter half hoped he'd get pulled over. Considering the disgusting noises the things in the truck bed were making as they did God knew what to the headless body, he thought it'd be a hoot to see how a cop would react. "You want to check under the tarp, officer? Go right ahead."

He was feeling pretty damn good. The straight razor still gave him the willies, but they seemed to have reached an understanding for the time being.



Malevolent shaving implements aside, he felt invigorated after reuniting with the hammer. It sat on the seat beside him as he steered the truck toward his nearest safe house. He was close to full strength, he could tell, but he still had to finish healing his injuries. Have to wait till he was somewhere he could focus without distraction. Aside from some necessary glances in the rearview mirror as he drove, he had no real idea how he looked, but he could tell it wasn't good. Now that his need to anchor himself in the body was addressed, his phobia for neatness and order was returning with a vengeance. He had to get some decent clothes and restore his physique to its former condition. The best he could, anyway. There was little he could do about his ruined left hand; he could restore the body's integrity but he couldn't regenerate lost parts. Then there was the gut shot. Nicholas Sforza had nailed him with some kind of magic bullet the day Carpenter captured him. The wound still refused to close and leaked old blood and other bodily fluids. He'd hoped the hammer would give him the strength to restore that injury, but apparently not.

It was dark by the time he reached a dump in Cicero he wouldn't have set foot in under any other circumstances — which is part of what made it an effective place to stash things he needed. Carpenter wasn't sure what to do with the things in the back of the truck; he didn't want them dripping body parts all over the house, but neither did he want them roaming the neighborhood scaring people. Despite his cleanliness fetish, he roused them from the truck and brought them inside. Commanding them to stay in the kitchen made him feel like he was dealing with a pack of unruly dogs, but the important thing was that they listened.

He adjourned to the bathroom, where he stripped off the dead man's work clothes and cast a critical eye



over his injuries. The lower portion of his face was a shattered mess — that would explain why his voice had been a rasping croak — and a tight grouping of wounds clustered around his heart. They were all healed thanks to the energy he'd drawn from the straight razor before. He picked up the hammer and focused his will upon the other wounds, watching as they drew closed. Some evidence remained, a scattering of pockmarks that could be mistaken for the evidence of serious childhood acne or some other old injury. Their presence bothered him, but compared to gaping holes that showed portions of his brain matter, he could deal with it.

Despite focusing intently, the wound in his belly was as raw and red as when he'd first been shot. All he could do was bandage it up. The gut shot continued aching, but the pain was bearable. If — when — he discovered the secret of this Spell of Life, all his wounds should heal. After all, hadn't Nicholas Sforza returned to life after receiving even more serious injuries?

As if thinking of the man flipped some switch, Carpenter sensed the punk's presence not far away. Somewhere to the northeast. He'd driven past the kid before on his way to Oak Woods Cemetery; now it seemed Sforza was on the move.

Carpenter was weary from the struggle to hang on to his corpse. He would have preferred to take a day and build his energy up further before going after Nicholas Sforza again. Yet a sense of urgency filled him; it had taken months to get the punk the first time, and he'd been in much better condition then. No, he felt that he had to move now. He had the hammer and that damnable straight razor, along with four engines of destruction he could unleash on whomever might stand in his way. And, of course, he still had his natural deviousness and unmatched cunning. It would have to be enough.

FIFTEEN

Thea jerked awake, her side throbbing as she struggled upright on the couch. She heard the squeak and crunch of leather as Jake moved next to her. It was dark outside, a half moon joining brilliant stars in the clear night sky. She cursed herself for thinking vodka would be a good idea, and for not taking a nap during the day, and for getting drawn into this nightmare to begin with.

The burly blond vampire stood before them, leaning against the windows, a sneer on his face and a thick, short-barreled shotgun in his hand. As Thea sat up he drawled, "Awww, don't you two look cute?" Thea wanted to punch him so hard he'd crash through the glass. *Soon, though, she promised herself. You'll get yours soon enough.*

"Come on, Graham; get them moving," came a woman's voice. In the reflection on the windows the room's lights created Thea saw the woman — the vampire — from the El, the one who'd tasered her. *Should have some for her, too.*

Jake was on his feet, equal parts wary and curious. He helped Thea up and they came around the couch at the curt direction of the blond one, Graham. The woman stood near the office door, hands in the pockets of her canary-yellow leather jacket, watching their approach. She held up one hand when they were half-way across the room and looked them over critically. Thea was willing to bet she held the taser in her other pocket, ready to whip out at the first sign of trouble.



With a pursed-lip frown better suited to a disapproving parent than a supernatural predator, the vampire said, "The last couple of weeks have been a pain in the ass, so believe me when I say I'm not in the mood for games. We'll have a sit-down and ask some questions. We want just two things from you: cooperation and straight answers."

Thea locked eyes, trying to give as much steel back as she was getting. "Sounds great for you. What do we get out of the deal?"

"You're not in a position to negotiate," the vampire said, breaking the stare to flick her gaze to the one with the shotgun. Thea was surprised the rot looked away first; she caught a hint of emotion, but it was too brief to discern clearly.

There was definitely something strange about this woman's behavior. In fact, both vampires were behaving a little odd. Thea felt the man, Graham, moving around behind them — if it were anyone other than one of the undead, Thea would have sworn he was fidgeting. And the woman in the yellow leather jacket couldn't keep eye contact with Thea or Jake for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Aren't we?" Thea replied, still trying to get a sense of what was going on. "I'd say we're in a prime position to negotiate. You want something. You've already invested a lot of time and effort when you could have just killed us. But if you're going to slaughter us after we tell you what you want to know? I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and let you kill me right now. I don't want to die, but if it means pissing you off it's a fair trade." Emboldened by the strength of her own words, Thea took a step forward. "But you can bet I won't go down without a fight."

The woman moved back, maintaining the distance between them. Then her eyes narrowed and she stomped forward a couple paces to jab a finger at Thea. "We're the



fucking *undead*, sugar. You get me? We can pull answers from you like wringing out a wet rag. We got decades to drag you through flavors of hell you can't imagine before you even *begin* to think about dying. So you want to see what happens when I get pissed off, you just go ahead and clam up."

With that, the woman stepped to one side. Graham barked a command, waving his shotgun toward the door for emphasis. "Damn, Sylvia," he said as they moved to the hall, "you get my blood pumping when you're bad-ass."

That's when it hit Thea. The way the vampires kept as far from their captives as they could; the nervous, fidgeting movements; and just then the tight, strained tone in Graham's voice. The vampires were *afraid* of them! She almost laughed at the idea, then considered it made a kind of sense. After all, she and the rest of the Van Helsing Brigade were responsible for destroying a number of undead critters in the past year. And that was just in Chicago. Other hunter teams were doing the same thing around the world. To Thea, it seemed like they never ran out of things to stake, but the monsters had to be freaking out.

If she was right, perhaps she could turn the situation to their advantage. She didn't know enough of what the vampires wanted to determine a plan of action. She wanted to talk options with Jake, get an idea of how he was reading the scene. She caught his eye as they went down a bland off-white hallway past nondescript doors, but about all she got was that he was as scared and angry and curious as she.

Given her assumptions, at least, Thea assumed most of what this Sylvia had said was bluster. Effective, certainly, but bluster nonetheless. If they could learn anything they wanted through torture or bizarre vampire abilities or whatever she was insinuating, why bother with questioning? Unless "conference room" was a euphemism for "torture chamber," but she didn't think so.



Thea decided the time was past to focus her sixth sense. She imagined she would need every tool at her disposal for what was to come.

They were directed through a pair of large wooden doors which opened into a corner conference room. The decor was a slight variation on the drab office in which they'd spent the day. A rich cream carpet covered the floor, the interior walls a somewhat darker tone. The ceiling lights were off, subdued track lighting along the sides creating a warm, inviting atmosphere. The doors took up much of the one interior wall, while a large triptych occupied the other. Thea looked away from the three paintings after giving them a cursory glance. They seemed to be done in an odd blend of Baroque and Cubist styles, and while she couldn't quite make out the subject matter, the whole effect was disturbing. A large flat-screen television stood in one corner and what looked for all the world like a karaoke machine sat in another. She gave the perimeter a cursory glance, as her attention was drawn to the figure seated at the massive ironwood table.

At the opposite end sat a portly, scholarly-looking man in a tailored suit. He had the look of a kindly old uncle, a demeanor Thea imagined was the result of decades of practice rather than some innate gentleness. She also had no doubt that he was a vampire. Set on the table a yard in front of him was the small Egyptian urn. Its aura, unobstructed by physical barriers, was so potent that Thea staggered. She played off the stumble as weakness from her injury and concentrated on filtering out the aura. She'd had little success the first time she encountered it, but death and chaos had surrounded her. It was tough to focus on anything under such circumstances. This wasn't the most relaxed environment either, but without the immediate threat of violence to distract her Thea could distance herself somewhat from the jar's aura.



She and Jake were seated along the left side of the table, their backs to the window, the Canopic jar just out of arm's reach. She had her senses under reasonable control now. Her perceptions operating an order of magnitude beyond the human norm, Thea saw rippling waves of probability flowing from her friend and the urn. Looking down, she noticed significant ripples coming from her also. A spark of hope fanned to a steady flame. If she could intuit what all these potentials meant and tie in the vampires' fear of them, she might be able to get her and Jake out alive.

The figure at the head of the table was still until they were seated. Then, after a brief glance at each of them, he nodded to Graham. The vampire grinned and slipped from the room. She felt Jake look at her, wondering if they should say something during the ensuing silence. She sat still, hands clasped on the smooth tabletop, her attention on the tattoo that curled up the back of her hand. A blending of the hunter sign meaning "victory" and "war," an Egyptian hieroglyph for "power." She remembered the tattoo flaring to life with a strange, comforting heat when she had fought the undead recently. Was it a phantom sensation, a side effect of the changes the hunt had wrought within her? Or had her subconscious created some kind of... ward, a symbol of power? And if that was so, what did it do? What were her other tattoos capable of?

Thea's ruminations were cut short when Jake gave a strangled cry of dismay. She looked up toward the door and grew faint. Walking in, holding hands with the vampire Graham, was her best friend, Margie Woleski.

• • •

Beckett was surprised at the turn the conversation had taken. "Mummies."

Khalid nodded. "They would be a significant threat to us were it not for their limited numbers. In ancient times, many of the Undying stood equal to even the greatest

Cainites in power. Some among us have wondered if the first of their kind, Ush — which the Greeks mangled to 'Osiris' — might rival the great Caine in power."

"Yes, I've heard some of that. Some legends even claim Osiris started out as a vampire, but his wife Isis performed a great ritual on him, a 'spell of life' to cleanse him of the curse."

Khalid looked at him, mismatched eyes bright.

"What... you're not saying?" Beckett shook his head. "Really, Khalid. This is simply a metaphor, a racial legend just as Caine is."

"I have heard of your doubts that the First of us exists. It may be that Osiris is but legend. Nonetheless, I tell you the immortals exist; I have encountered them myself."

"All right, let us grant you that. How do they tie together with what is happening in this city, and to these Methuselahs you speak of?"

The Nosferatu's face twisted in an approximation of a smile. "Some years ago, a cult of no great influence migrated to Chicago. Call it the Cult of the Sun-Disk or the Followers of Akhenaton; the name matters little, just as the group itself was of no consequence. Its pathetic attempts at basement mysticism were a front for more serious pursuits — ridiculous, since the cult's members had no grasp of what true magic was. The irony is made even greater: they brought with them an item of staggering power, an object that they held jealously not for their own use but because it belonged to their sworn foes — the Undying. Centuries before, these cultists had locked the item away rather than harness its potential for themselves. In that bygone time, the cult had a greater understanding of the mystic arts. It had used this knowledge to perform a great magical working that hid the object from all detection, stored within a stone casket."



Khalid gestured upward. "Effective this was, for the cult arrived in Chicago unnoticed by all. Not even by the two ancients who have commanded this city since its inception. I suspect they sensed something, but neither ever discovered what lay before them. Powerful they are, but omniscient they are not.

"For their part, the cultists had forgotten most of the old lore, and much of what they remembered had wandered from the truth. They no longer knew what they carried with them. It was a sacred stone, and they looked no further for illumination. They built a temple to their false god around it, and devolved with the passing years into scholars of the mundane and trivial."

Beckett restrained his impatience. The old creature would reveal how all the threads intertwined when he got around to it. Interrupting would just delay the telling.

"This item was one of the greatest artifacts of the Undying, stolen from them long before you or I became what we are, before even our cousin Critias was Embraced. The immortals never grew to be great in number, though I know not why. The handful they were searched for this and other lost items, but it was hidden too well. By these modern nights, none could have imagined it had ended its centuries-long journey here, in the heart of the New World." Khalid gave a dry chuckle as if at some private joke. "Then came the ghost storm. It changed the Undying, in some manner I have not yet discerned. I have heard whispers from my clanmates that the mummies grow in number, their ranks swelling as never before in their millennia of existence. With benefit of these greater numbers, the immortals seek out what was lost to them. When they found the artifact hidden here, when they broke the seal of the sacred stone, its existence was revealed to any nearby sensitive enough to perceive it."

"Like Menele."



Khalid nodded. "His rival has become focused on numerous specific plans in the region; Menele appears to keep a broader view. I have thought he has laid back in recent years, as if awaiting something. He may have long suspected the object was here, and bided his time. Now that it is revealed, he moves his agents to gather it—"

"You mean Critias? The Brujah?"

"Yes." Another tortured smile. "Though the wise Critias suspects nothing about being the puppet of his sire, from what I can tell."

Another surprise. "Wait. Menele made Critias a vampire?"

"And brought him here millennia later to serve as his unwitting lieutenant while he slumbers in safety."

"What a tangled web... All right. So why is a Methuselah so interested in a mummy artifact?"

"I cannot say for certain. I know only that it is an item of tremendous power."

Beckett nodded. Based on the almost imperceptible pause in Khalid's reply, Beckett felt certain that the Nosferatu primogen had a far better idea of what this artifact was and what it could do. *It appears Pale Wolf is not the only one interested in getting his claws on it.*

• • •

"When you said it was in an office building, I didn't think you meant *this* office building." Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep shook his head, staring out the front window. They were parked in a dark blue Ford van facing west on West Adams just before South Franklin, the stolen powder blue Lincoln behind them. The Sears Tower rose before them less than half a block away, a huge dark mass in the winter night.

Duridar shrugged, shifting an unlit Camel from one side of his mouth to the other. "What's the difference?"



Nicholas pinched the bridge of his nose. Thanks to some special healing items he had stored in the safe house, the swelling and bruising was gone from his face. There were some twinges now and then, though that might be the result of coping with Duri's terminally laconic attitude. "The difference is that this place is a bitch to break into. Given time and more resources, I could do it. But with the four of us, right here and now? Not a chance."

"Got to take it out of there sometime, right? You don't want to go in, we just wait until they bring it out."

Nicholas had long doubted Duri's dedication to the Eset-a, the cult that had come with Nicholas to recapture the Heart. Duridar Saad wasn't even a native — not that all members of the Eset-a had to be, of course; just the nature of the faith. You didn't find too many Scots being drawn to an obscure mummy-worshipping cult. Duri was Arabic-American, and along with Nicholas had helped the rest of the team go native when they'd first come to Chicago. He'd proven his mettle time and again, all with that same unflappable, even bored, demeanor. Still, Nicholas couldn't help but think Duri was into all this more for the thrill than out of any spiritual dedication. *Whatever. Fact is, he's a helluva shot and I get along with him better than any of the others.*

He stroked the amulet he'd taken from Saled, a scarab on a gold band that slipped over the wrist. He hadn't needed to make it so ornate, but with his rebirth had come an artistic side he'd never known he had. Fact was, he never *had* an artistic side before. Came with the rest of the deal. Anyway, the scarab, carved from green jade with gold inlay, swiveled around like an arrow on a compass, with the Heart as true north. Nicholas had added another feature: the scarab's gold antennae pointed at relative elevation. Right now, the scarab's head faced the Sears Tower, its stubby gold antennae pointing upward at a sharp angle.



The Heart was in there, all right. Somewhere high up, beyond their current reach. He was tempted to just break into the place and go balls-out after it, but they'd have to cover so much ground just to get to the thing that the cops — and who knew what else — would be waiting for them by the time they got back down.

"That's the way it's going to have to be," Nicholas said after a while. "A building at night would've been good odds for us — straightforward layout, nobody around, no traffic in the area. But this place? It just wouldn't work."

He shifted in the seat to look at Duri, Ibrahim and Saled altogether. Approaching headlights illuminated their faces; they looked kids who'd just learned Santa Claus wasn't real. Well, Ibrahim and Saled did; Duri just sat there rolling that damn cigarette around in his mouth. "Okay, here's the plan. Duri, you and Saled take the Lincoln back to the safe house and get some rest. Ibrahim and I will keep watch in the van. We'll rotate every six hours. Soon as it looks like the Heart's on the move, we'll—"

His next words were lost in the horrendous crash as the oncoming truck swerved and smashed into the van.

• • •

Thea Ghandour went from surprise to dread in a heartbeat. Margie wore the same glazed look as when Graham had first tried to steal her away in the dance club a week before. Her skin was the same pale, unhealthy hue as when she'd confronted Thea in their apartment just a few days ago.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Thea wondered if her friend had had the flu to begin with.

"Have a seat, honey," Graham said, guiding Margie to a chair opposite Thea and Jake. The woman was docile, sitting prim and proper in the chair with her hands folded in her lap. She stared at Thea without appearing to recognize her.

"What the hell is this?" Thea said, restraining the urge to leap across the table and tear the Aryan vampire fuck's head off.

"A friendly meeting," said a calm, cultured voice to her left. The portly figure in the suit leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. He directed a well-practiced look of pleasant inquiry at Thea and Jake. Unlike with the other two rots, Thea sensed no nervousness or fear from this one. "We would like answers about some matters in which you have been involved of late. Understanding you might be reticent to come forward with details, we thought to save us all some time and trouble by having your lovely friend attended."

"Margie, are you okay? What have they done to you?"

"Hey, she's fine. Aren't you, honey?" Graham crouched next to Margie, throwing one thick arm around her shoulders and drawing her close. She turned at the sound of the vampire's voice, her face lighting up with the same adoration a dog gives its owner. "See? Just fine."

Jake's hand was on Thea's left arm a second before she would have launched out of her seat. "Okay, let's all be reasonable here," he said. "Thea's friend doesn't have anything to do with this. You can send her home. I promise you that we'll be as forthcoming as possible."

"Admirable attitude, young man!" The tone was supportive, but Thea saw no hint of rapport in the old vampire's eyes. "But I prefer to be sure. You have shown yourselves a resourceful and willful group; having the young lady here ensures your cooperation. You have my word that if we are satisfied with your responses, she will be free to go."

Something about the phrasing set off klaxons in Thea's brain. There was nothing she could do that second that wouldn't end up getting them all killed, though, so she did her best to rein in her temper and follow Jake's lead.

“Okay, well, before we answer your questions, I have one of my own,” Jake said.

“Very well.”

“In the interests of promoting an open dialogue, I was wondering if we could have your name?”

The indulgent smile of a grandfather. “Of course. I apologize for forgetting my manners. You may call me Critias.”

Jake smiled in return like they were old chums, but Thea felt his hand quivering on her arm. “Thanks, Critias. I’m Jake, and this is Thea.”

Thea suspected the old bastard knew who they were, but it was all part of the veneer of civility. Despite all the smiles and polite words, Thea sensed tensions ratcheted to the breaking point, powerful enough that the urn’s throbbing energy faded into the background. “So what is it you want to know?” she asked, trying without success to match the conversational tone.

Critias said nothing for a moment. Thea sensed two differing potentials ripple out from him as his gaze wandered the room. Then his eyes stopped, centered on the table, and one of the threads of possibilities faded away. He pointed an ong finger at the Canopic jar sitting on the table equidistant from them all. “Do you know what that is?”

“A burial jar of a kind used in mummification ceremonies,” Jake answered. Thea let out a startled squeak. She hadn’t told him that; shouldn’t be surprised, though. Jake wasn’t nicknamed “Bookworm” for nothing.

Critias shook his head sadly, as if at an unruly student. “Please, don’t be coy.”

“Sorry?”

“I do not refer to the jar, boy, but to what is inside it.”

Jake shot her a look. She shrugged, not expecting the answer would help much more than the previous one had. “We have no idea. They referred to it as ‘the heart.’”



"Did they?" A wide smile creased the old vampire's face, so lacking in warmth that Thea shivered. "And just who did you steal this 'heart' for?"

"Uh, nobody. We... well, it just kind of happened. We didn't even know what it was. Still haven't figured it out."

"Yes, of course not." The old vampire acted as if he was too polite to flat out call them liars. "So just what *have* you 'figured out'?"

Thea shared a glance with Jake, but neither of them was sure what the question meant. "Sorry?" Jake said.

"Please," Critias said, directing that disappointed look at Thea while one hand gestured in Margie's direction. "Your friend has told us about your Chinatown adventure of last spring. She also confirmed your involvement in the temple affair, if we didn't have the proof before us. All very interesting, I must say.

"I'm curious what other matters you have been involved in. I would like to know how you have learned to do what you do... and from whom you have learned it."

Thea looked at Margie. She was oblivious, her mouth hanging open as if drugged while a vampire whispered in her ear. Graham caught Thea looking and flashed a smile that was all teeth, running his tongue over the sharp point of one fang. Yet the glint of fear in his too-wide eyes gave lie to that promise of mayhem. Thea felt the blood thunder in her temples, holding back with the last shreds of her will. *Not yet; not quite yet.*

"Well," Jake said, "that gets tricky. Before we get into it, I'd like to point out that we're just as interested in understanding you as you are in learning about us. If there's some way we can all find some common—"

"I care not for where your 'interests' lie except where they involve your understanding of us," Critias snapped, his composure the briefest ripple of savagery on the pond



of his otherwise calm demeanor. "You will tell us what you know of our kind and where you learned it, and for whom you took this artifact. If you do not, well..."

As the elder vampire spoke, Graham leaned forward and planted a sloppy wet kiss on Margie's neck. She cooed and giggled like an adolescent trying to act sexy. When Critias' voice trailed off, Graham poked one fang just hard enough against Margie's pale skin to draw blood.

Thea didn't feel herself leap to her feet, didn't notice Sylvia move up behind her. A need for sudden action had seized her, propelling her up — then halting when the vampire's vice-like grip dug into her shoulder. There was a popping noise and a flash and Thea was blinded in her right eye. Thea heard a shriek and then her shoulder was free. Blinking to clear the dazzle, Thea turned and saw the vampire's left hand was on fire... as was Thea's shoulder. Thea gasped and slapped at the flames, which were already dying out. Sylvia wasn't so lucky. In seconds, the fire engulfed her hand and ate its way up her arm. The willowy vampire leaped away from Thea with such speed and force that she slammed into the windows, sending a spider web of cracks through one of the large panes. She bounced off the safety glass like a ping-pong ball and, still screaming, tore out of the conference room trailing a cloud of bitter smoke.

Okay, now it was time, Thea thought.

• • •

Beckett heard a buzzing noise from the hairy lump next to Khalid. He didn't realize it was a cell phone until Bean pulled a small device from somewhere and held it to the matted snarls that seemed to be his head. "Yello?"

Khalid shot Bean a glance, though Beckett couldn't tell if it was from irritation at being interrupted or curiosity as to who was on the line.



"Holy shit! ...No shit? ...You're shitting me! Okay, hold on." Bean paused his scatological commentary and stage-whispered to Khalid, "There's something going on upstairs. Hannah said the chick just lit Sylvia on fire."

"Hannah is not calling from the conference room?" Khalid snapped.

Into the phone Bean said, "Where you calling from, sweets? ...Uh huh. Right." Then to Khalid: "Nope. She, uh, got a little freaked by the fire and skedaddled down the hall. She's pretty sure nobody's noticed her; just figured, out of earshot, call it in, y'know?"

"Very good. Have her return as close as she dares to monitor events. Tell her that above all, she should not make her presence known to the hunters. We are on our way." While Bean relayed the command, Khalid said to Beckett, "This is why I called you here this night. Menele sent forth his agents last evening and captured the artifact I spoke of, along with those who held it."

The various pieces to the puzzle were all coming together, but Beckett nonetheless asked, "Who had it?"

Khalid spoke as he moved for the manhole. "It had been held by one of the Undying in the area. He vanished some days ago, after the item was taken by mortals. By the very hunters you are investigating."

Interesting timing. Beckett had planned on tracking the hunters down that very night until he'd found the urchin waiting for him. He touched the amulet around his neck and was surprised to find Augustus' finger hanging still and unmoving. He'd been so preoccupied with discovering who Pale Wolf was and had later become engrossed in the conversation with Khalid that he couldn't remember when he had last felt it twitching. Whoever these hunters were, the one Beckett had been tracking was no longer a part of their team.



"Come," Khalid's voice interrupted his thoughts. "We must hurry if we are to avert disaster."

...

Nicholas saw the truck's sudden swerve too late to shout a warning. The vehicle slid on the icy road and crashed just behind the driver's seat. Ibrahim and Saled were on the bench seat but neither was buckled in. The impact threw them away from where the huge pickup punched through the van's side, crumpling the Ford's middle and shoving it onto the sidewalk and into the side of the building.

The van's front window survived the impact intact, so Nicholas had a clear view of the truck's bed slanting in toward him. The plastic tarp ripped free from the bed revealing four hideous, decayed things.

"This can't be good," Duri muttered in mild surprise. The left side of his face was bloody from the side window shattering, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. Good sense appeared to have escaped him, though, since he dipped into the fanny pack around his waist and pulled out a grenade. Nicholas didn't even get off a yell before Duri pulled the pin and lobbed it out the broken window at the truck bed. Then Duri threw himself between the seats into the back of the van, calling out "Fire in the hole!"

Nicholas slammed against the passenger side door, his enhanced strength more than enough to pop the thing off its hinges. There was barely room to slip between the side of the van and the building. As he fell back, he caught a last glimpse of two of the rotted abominations scrambling around in the truck bed while the other two dove for cover. Then a roar filled the midnight street, followed by a second as the gas tank blew. It was only luck or fate that the van's tank didn't go as well. The Ford smashed against him, and only his amulet-enhanced strength kept him from getting crushed against the building. A gout of flame flashed over the top of the van followed by a wave

of heat and a thunderous crash as the pickup slammed to the ground. Then, to round it all off, chunks of gore and pieces of metal pattered down from the heavens.

Ears still ringing, Nicholas shoved the van away far enough to slip out. "Up and at 'em, guys! At least five unfriendlies, none confirmed down!" he yelled. The van wasn't a tank, but with the truck cab helping to deflect the blast, the Ford's metal walls should have protected his last three men. No telling how long before the fire got to the Ford's tank, though.

Muffled shouts of affirmation came from inside as Nicholas pulled the Glock from its clamshell holster and grabbed the black scarab pendant from his neck. He flipped its device around in his left hand so the scarab faced away from him and crossed his gun hand over his left wrist. He was just coming around the front of the van when he heard one of the back doors slam open and a flurry of gunfire erupt. Not the quiet stutter of the suppressed Mac-10 his men used, but the heavy staccato cough of a pistol.

He didn't have a chance to check on his men, as a flaming corpse lunged at him from under the burning wreck of the pickup. Nicholas fell back, screaming and swearing and blazing away. He barked out a command with his cries, and was rewarded with a flash of white and a searing blast from the scarab that blew apart the zombie's head and part of its torso. Nicholas lay on the cold asphalt for a second to catch his breath before throwing aside the blackened and melted scarab. It was a potent one-shot charm, but he'd intended to save it in case he met up with a vampire. *Can't complain, I guess, but I better save the other one for now.*

So he was still okay, but what about Duri, Saled and Ibrahim? Nicholas hadn't heard any shots after those rapid-fire pistol rounds, unless there was something more when he'd blasted off half his own clip. No, this silence didn't sound good at all. He rolled on his side and swept



his gaze along the ground under the van. No feet; nothing on the other side of the burning truck, either. What the hell; where was everybody? At least he could see two more burning corpses on the road. Had to be the zombies, so worst case meant three to four left. And not a peep out of his guys. Son of a bitch.

Then he heard the repeating *ponk-ponk* of metal denting and springing back and cursed himself for an idiot. Even as he rolled over he knew he was too late. A Colt automatic pointed at him from the van's roof before he could even begin to bring his Glock around.

"This is just too fucking easy," Maxwell Carpenter said.

• • •

Thea had to admit that, aside from understanding that her tattoos were somehow focusing her mysterious hunter nature, she was as much in the dark as the vampires about what had just happened. It was clear now the creatures were deathly afraid of her and Jake, considering how they scrambled away from them after one of their own went up in flames. She was determined to take full advantage of the shock while it lasted.

Thea launched herself onto the table and took one long stride across to kick Graham full in the face. The vampire's head snapped back and he slammed into the wall. The impact stung her heel, but the lack of traction on the slick tabletop proved the main problem. Thea slid along in her stocking feet and lost her balance as she neared the table's opposite edge. Her legs flew up in the air and she slammed on the wood in a clumsy attempt at a break-fall.

She heard Jake's yell as if from a mile away, busy as she was trying to get her breath back. *Just grab Margie and run*, she wanted to yell back. *Get out of here!* The best she could do was wrench out a wordless gasp. Then the pain of her bullet wound hit, making her curl in a ball — *just my luck if the fall tore the sutures.*



Still gulping air, she noticed a brilliant light coming from the windows where Jake stood, and that old vampire was still cringing away. And there, right in front of her, was the Canopic jar. Two feet to the left and she would have fallen on it. Thea grimaced and tried to focus, get up and protect Margie; wasn't as if one kick was going to drop a vampire.

A hand clamped around her leg so hard she felt the bones in her ankle grind together. She was yanked along the tabletop a second later, grabbing the jar as she went. Maybe she could smash the fucker's skull with the damn thing. Then she was in the air, swinging toward the interior wall. She rolled with it, catching the plaster with her right shoulder and falling to the ground. Dazed, she struggled to regain her senses. Then everything snapped into place with almost painful clarity — just in time for her to see Graham lunge at her with teeth bared.

• • •

Beckett was in the express elevator and heading for the Sears Tower's 73rd Floor far faster than he would have thought possible. It turned out the subbasement in which he'd met with Khalid was part of an area built over years ago just on the other side of the Chicago River. They'd come up in a service tunnel that led into the Sears Tower, and from there it was a cakewalk to the elevator — for which Bean had the security key, of course.

They'd moved at such a pace that talking was difficult, so Beckett held off until they were in the elevator. "So what is this disaster you hope to avert?"

"I explained the status quo between Menele and Helena that has existed in this city, yes? If either ancient was to outstrip the power or influence of the other in a single rapid move, he — or she — would not hesitate to levy that full might against his or her foe in one devastating blow. Of itself, that has little impact on us. However—"

“Considering we’re talking one of the most heavily populated places in North America, there would be significant collateral damage,” Beckett finished.

Khalid nodded. “Exactly. I have no desire to see the death of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of mortals. Even were that of no import, however, such an action would be damning evidence of our existence.”

“Ah. And gaining possession of this artifact would tip the balance that much?”

“I have no doubt.”

Of course you don’t. “So what role do the hunters play in all this?”

“There lies another mystery. I had thought they worked with the Undying, as their goals seem similar: namely, the destruction of our kind.”

“But now you’re not so sure?”

Khalid stepped toward the door as the numbers flashed through the high 60s. “I must gather more evidence before I can say for certain.”

Just before the elevator dinged its arrival, Beckett tried a question that had been on his mind for a while. “By the way, Bean, whatever possessed you to steal Augustus’ head?”

The hairy Nosferatu shook like a hay bale in a strong wind. “Oh, that?” Bean laughed. “I just felt like fucking with the Brujah.”

• • •

Carpenter had seldom seen a more beautiful sight than Nicholas Sforza spread-eagled on the ground below him, anger and embarrassment battling it out on his face, gun pointed nowhere near the proper direction. Carpenter almost felt sorry for the dumb bastard.

“Sorry about your buddies,” he said, not the least bit contrite. “It was a fair fight, though. I can only shoot one-handed now. Have to track down the son of a bitch



crippled me sometime when I got a few hours to kill. Pun intended."

"What is your deal?" Sforza asked, looking more pissed by the second. "You're supposed to be dead."

"I *am* dead. That's the whole point. I know, you meant 'dead for good.'" He shrugged. "What can I say; I missed you. Anyway, here's the deal. Saw my Lincoln parked just back there. You and me are gonna go for a ride, and you're gonna show me how this 'heart' of yours can do for me like it did for you."

"What the hell you need that for? Looks like you can stick around just fine."

Carpenter put a round in the curb next to Sforza's head. "Quit stalling and get moving. Don't have all night."

The bullets that ripped through the roof of the van were a surprise. Carpenter could've sworn he'd taken out all three of the towel-heads in there. There was nowhere to leap but forward so that's the way he went, a couple fingers of hot lead ripping through his legs and throwing off his jump. He landed in a crumpled heap a couple yards from Sforza. It took an effort to move while he focused to mend his ruined legs, so he was to his hands and knees when he felt the pressure of a gun barrel against his temple.

"I swear," Nicholas Sforza said just before he pulled the trigger, "I have no idea what my grandmother ever saw in you."

•••

Thea could perceive impending danger and probabilities with breathtaking clarity — she registered Graham's attack with enough time to roll toward him, even though she somehow knew he was moving twice as fast as she was. She couldn't argue with results. The vampire flashed over her, crashing against the wall.

Thea scrambled to her feet and assumed a defensive stance. She was short of breath, her side burned



like a son of a bitch, her ankle was about to buckle, and she had the Canopic jar tucked in the crook of her right arm like a football. Graham was on his feet just in front of her. He wasn't moving as fast as he had been just a second ago. No, that wasn't right. He was, but she was seeing him move like he was in slow motion — except he *wasn't* moving slow, he was incredibly fast... what the hell was she seeing? This didn't—

Reaction kicked in. Thea saw the feint and the lunge. She spun into the feint to get inside Graham's reach, then swung her right elbow around, using the urn as extra weight to slam into the vampire's head. Input was pouring in almost faster than she could process. Graham grunted and dropped away, trying to come at her from another angle — but she already knew he would go for her wound so she fell back and rolled up onto the table, using the slick surface to spin away and get on her knees as he came in then she had the Canopic jar in both hands and the tattoo on the back of her hand flared to life as she swung down hard on his head—

There was a sharp double report, the first of the jar cracking against Graham's skull and the second the vampire's jaw slamming into the tabletop. Graham staggered back on his knees, blinking and shaking his head. Thea emerged from the strange fugue she was in, noticing a light dusting falling from a narrow hole in the urn. A feral roar erupted then, followed by a powerful "NO!"

The roar was Critias, fangs flashing and talons extended as he flew down the table. The yell came from Jake and carried such force that the vampire coming at Thea visibly flinched. His trajectory was disrupted just enough that Thea could roll back and fall to the floor next to Jake.

Then he was helping her up and she realized the light she'd noticed before wasn't coming from outside the windows — it was coming from *Jake*. Despite its



brilliance, it didn't hurt her to look at. Clearly, though, it was painful to the vampires.

Thea saw Critias and Graham on their feet again, both looking shaken but furious. Bloody spittle flew from gnashing, elongated teeth and fingers curled in rending claws. Surprise struck her as she realized Margie was sitting in the same position she'd been in when hell broke out. God, *why haven't they grabbed her, used her as a hostage?*

Clarity answered, the hyper-acute senses she'd had ever since she'd grabbed the Canopic jar. Her sixth sense was good for spotting trouble, but never had it functioned to this degree. There was no way she should have been able to avoid Graham's attacks, considering how fast he was moving. No way except that somehow the thing she held was heightening her abilities. And with the same absolute understanding, she realized that the only thing the vampires were focused on right now was that same jar. Whatever fear they'd felt toward the hunters before was overshadowed by their lust for the Canopic jar. They would do anything they could to get it from her, and if she read things right, that meant remembering in two seconds that they had the perfect hostage sitting within reach.

A dozen threads of probability snaked across Thea's awareness. She followed the most vibrant and whipped the Canopic jar as hard as she could at the cracked window next to her.

...

Nicholas kicked himself for wasting time making clever quips. Gave Carpenter the fraction of a second he needed to drop out of the way just as Nicholas pulled the trigger. Instead of blowing out the side of the zombie's head, the bullet just creased the back of his skull.

Carpenter spun around and landed on his back in street slush. Then the blur of his hand moving under

his coat and coming out not with another gun but with a fucking *hammer*. Nicholas swung around to fire again, but Carpenter was faster. Nicholas screamed as the hammer smashed the back of his hand and sent the Glock spinning out into the street.

Carpenter lunged with a fucking woodworking tool while Nicholas grabbed for the second scarab around his neck. "Better hope you can get that thing off before I smash your hand to powder," Carpenter said with a grin.

The son of a bitch was smiling? What, did he think this was fun? Asshole. Nicholas jerked in surprise at the stutter of automatic fire; luckily, his opponent did the same. It wasn't one of his men tearing into Carpenter, but it was the next best thing. Nicholas saw Ibrahim, bloody but unbowed, tearing into the last one of the decayed things Carpenter brought with him. The zombie was already a smoldering wreck; Nicholas was surprised it was still moving.

Carpenter seemed just as distracted, so Nicholas seized the chance to swing the black scarab around and trigger it off. The zombie was again a hair too fast. He lunged, the blast furnace crisping much of his right side and turning most of his suit into ash. It was a glancing shot; he was still on his feet. Sure took care of the bastard's good mood, though.

Nicholas noticed the sirens then, louder than he felt comfortable with. *Shit, be here in a minute or two at the outside.* And him in a stalemate in the middle of West Adams with a goddamn zombie. What a joke.

Then Nicholas felt the twitch of the bracelet on his wrist, followed by a faint scream, growing louder. Nicholas spared the bracelet a glance. Sure enough, it was tracking down, and fast. He backpedaled away from Carpenter and looked up at the Sears Tower. The Heart was far too small to see in the dark and at this distance, but he had no trouble picking out the figure hurtling to the ground at terminal velocity.



Beckett heard the roar, like that of a cornered lion, followed an instant later by the heavy crash of glass. He leaped ahead of Khalid and Bean and raced down the corridor. He'd never been to the Sears Tower before, but the layout was straightforward—modern office buildings were a breeze compared to navigating Medieval fortresses—and his ears were plenty sharp enough to guide him to the violence.

The tableau surprised him. Standing in the doorway facing into a conference room was a brutish figure he recognized as the Brujah, Graham. He was holding a curvy blond woman and seemed to be backing out of the room. Two people stood about twenty feet away on the other side of a large table near a gaping hole where a window used to be. One was an attractive Arabic woman who smelled of violence and righteousness. The other was a slender figure whose gender remained a mystery, for a glow of such brilliance poured from it that Beckett couldn't look at it full on. He cringed instinctively, steeling himself against the light with an effort.

Graham spun at the sound of his approach and saw Khalid and Bean arrive as Beckett stepped through the doorway. "Goddamn am I glad to see you!" Graham whined. "You wouldn't believe what they—"

"This is your last chance," the woman interrupted. "I don't give a shit how many reinforcements you get. You don't let Margie go, you won't walk out of here."

"You know who these guys are? They're—"

"The Heart!" Khalid cried, cutting Graham off just as the woman had. "Where is it?"

"I threw it out the window," the woman said, calm eyes taking in the horror of Khalid's face.

A muttered curse and Khalid was gone, back for the elevators. Bean looked at the tableau, then over



to an empty corner. "Hannah? This anything we want to get mixed up in?"

"You kidding?" came a voice. "This stopped being fun about ten minutes ago."

Beckett considered his options. He could follow Bean and the invisible Hannah after Khalid. He could stay and puzzle out the bizarre standoff in the conference room. Or he could chart his own course and see what answers this mysterious artifact might reveal.

Noticing Beckett move forward, Graham shoved his hostage aside and stepped after. "Now that's what I'm talking about!" he said, readying himself for combat. "You and me, Beckett, we'll take 'em down!"

"Sorry, Graham, but you misunderstand," Beckett said as he tensed himself for the transformation. "This is none of my affair."

Then he was skimming through the wintry air on leather wings, flashing down toward the ground.

• • •

Carpenter was running on fumes. That whatever-it-was Sforza nailed him with took a lot out of him. Even drawing upon the hammer's strength wasn't enough right now; all that power was being used to get him patched up. The razor called to him, but with the hammer's help he ignored it. He was putting up a good front, but if the punk made another move there wasn't much he could do to stop it. Then Nicholas Sforza stumbled away from him, looking up—

And Carpenter felt it; the aura he'd sensed when he raided the Temple of Akhenaton — the same aura that the immortal Nicholas Sforza claimed was this treasured "heart" of his. Carpenter's senses, attuned to life force, felt the "heart" plummet down; then there was a faint crash a dozen yards away. Another life force, ancient and



powerful — though not as potent as the other — followed a fraction of a second after. This one made a loud, wet thud when it hit. Was there a scream, too? He couldn't be sure; it might just have been the sirens.

With sudden inspiration he lunged forward, throwing all his strength into a mighty swing with the hammer. Sforza saw the attack at the last moment and threw up his arm just in time to block. There was a clang and sparks flew as the hammer smashed against the thick bracelet the punk wore. Sforza cried out, grabbing at his wrist, and Carpenter took advantage of the opening to shove him hard as he could into the wrecked van. Carpenter spun on his heels, moving as fast as he could toward the aura. There, the parking structure. It would be at the top. Drawing from the hammer for support, Carpenter sprinted for the stairwell and up as fast as his dead legs could carry him.

• • •

Thea wasn't sure what to make of the motley crew that appeared in the conference room doorway. She caught Jake's muttered, "Oh, shit," but she was at the point where she was willing to face any manner of atrocity if it meant her best friend would be safe.

Then half the group vanished as soon as they found out the jar wasn't there. Thea knew what a potent item it was, but they were welcome to it. She might regret the decision later, but at that moment she'd lost too many people close to her to be willing to let her best friend die also. Two vampires against her and Jake? She knew a couple of hunters wouldn't stand a chance, but his whispered words of support lent her the strength to try.

Except the tall guy with the blazing red eyes went right past as if he hadn't even noticed them — leaped out the window just like that crazy old vampire did. Instead of falling like a rock, though, this one flickered



and... compressed, turning into a damn vampire bat!
Just when I think I've seen it all.

"Thea!" Jake yelled. She flung herself to the side, all too aware that the threat was not over yet. It wasn't enough; Graham snatched her by the arm and swung her like a rag doll. Thea knew then that he was going to fling her out the window and there wasn't anything she could do to stop him.

The world turned upside down and she grabbed at anything at all to arrest her fall. She succeeded in smashing her elbow on one of the conference room chairs — then flopped to the ground, the vampire's grip broken. *What the hell?* Sitting up, she saw Jake and Graham rolling on the floor dangerously close to the shattered window. Little can't-fight-worth-a-damn Jake had tackled a vampire to save her! The strange illumination around Jake was all that kept him alive right then. The vampire scrambled away from it like it was giving constant and painful shocks. Thea could see Jake's radiance was growing dimmer by the second; whatever inner fire he'd stoked for it was winding down.

Thea staggered to her feet, fatigue heavy in her limbs. She waited for an opening and, channeling her waning strength, aimed a strike at Graham's head. Her left hand lashed out; although it just clipped his temple, the white flash that accompanied it was powerful enough to dent the vampire's head against the floor. The creature was in a daze long enough for Jake to scramble free before it was rolling into a crouch before the dark hole in the window. Thea had one last good shot left in her, and when he tensed to spring, she used it.

Just as Graham leaped, Thea dropped her right shoulder and charged.

• • •

Beckett flittered down, battling the updrafts and downdrafts circling the Sears Tower, and soon saw



Critias' ruined form on the concrete of a parking structure. Swooping in a circle over the scene, Beckett reflected that a fall of over seventy stories would certainly have meant his destruction. Even with the strength he'd gained in centuries of unlife, Beckett could not have hoped to survive plummeting that far.

It was a testament to Critias' ancient stature that he *had* survived. Flitting above, Beckett could see Critias' pulverized bones drawing together, his torn flesh mending itself, his blood drawing back into his body as best it could. It would be some time before the old vampire was back at full strength, but he would be ambulatory within a few hours.

Impressive as Critias' durability was, Beckett was put further in awe at how much more mighty his sire must be. The influence of Pale Wolf — Menele — had been so subtle, yet so complete, that the Brujah primogen was willing to suffer grievous injury and possible destruction to recover some Egyptian bauble. How could Beckett assume that a flimsy bracelet would make him safe from that kind of matchless power? His instincts said he was still in control of his own mind, but that meant nothing if Menele could influence his own childe unawares.

Yet what else could Beckett do? To succumb to fear and paranoia was to make him a pawn as surely as if he were under direct control. Beckett steeled his nerves and pressed on. Time to find the object of all this excitement.

The area was too much of a mess to make sense of with his present perceptions; he would have to change forms to see if the artifact of the Undying was here somewhere near — or under — Critias' body.

Beckett swung around and was transforming when a figure burst from the nearby stairwell and sprinted over. He was followed a second later by another man who struggled to catch up.



Beckett had no choice but to finish returning to his human shape — trying to reverse a transformation mid-way through was as easy as stopping mid-sneeze. When Beckett appeared, as if out of nowhere, the first man skidded to a stop while the second man, still a few yards away, stumbled and almost fell. Beckett regretted the necessity of killing two mortals with bad timing. Then his hackles raised as the Beast within him shuddered in ancient fear. Whatever it was before him was not mortal.

• • •

"Just my luck," Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep complained to no one in particular. "I use up both my flash scarabs and *then* the vampire shows up."

His weary tone covered tremendous anger and frustration. Carpenter's attack had caught him by surprise — worse, it had destroyed the compass scarab. Felt like his wrist was fractured, too, but that was a minor inconvenience. Ibrahim was there right away, helping him up. The two of them were pelting after Carpenter within seconds, but the son of a bitch had all the lead he needed. He was going for the Heart. And without the compass, Nicholas had every chance of losing Carpenter on the dark city streets if the dead bastard got out of the parking garage before Nicholas could get to him.

No sign of Carpenter on the top deck, though, just some splattered body. Best guess was that he ran down the ramp and out the other side. Nicholas was already angling for the ramp when a *ghul* popped up out of nothing. This was a road block Nicholas did not need right then.

The vampire looked at him with an expression of curiosity mixed with fear. That was Nicholas' best guess, anyway; it was a little hard to read blazing red demonic eyes. Ibrahim, having run up the stairs after Nicholas, took advantage of the distraction to angle around and get a clear shot. Nicholas raised one hand to hold Ibrahim

in place. Recapturing the Heart was far more important than duking it out with a *ghul*. Nicholas would go around this creature if he could, through it if he had to; either way he wanted to waste as little time as possible.

Making things even more complicated, the first cop cars were skidding to a halt down in the street. Nicholas guessed they had maybe two minutes before the police found them, with Carpenter getting farther away by the second.

The vampire was still just standing there checking him out, so Nicholas took it upon himself to break the ice. Just then, the *ghul* said, "You're the mummy, aren't you?" A ghost of a smile flickered on the edge of its lips.

"Our business isn't with you," Nicholas replied, avoiding the question. "You just happen to be standing in the way of where we're headed."

The creature appeared to roll that around in its head. Perhaps a second or two later, it took a step back and held its hands — its large, hairy, clawed hands — up, palms out.

Nicholas shot Ibrahim a glance and nodded. They circled around the vampire and the body on the concrete, Ibrahim keeping his Mac-10 trained on the *ghul* the whole time. It turned with them but otherwise made no move. Nicholas felt confident it wouldn't try jumping them, but he still felt uncomfortable turning his back on it. Carpenter and the Heart were what mattered, though; he had no more time to waste on red-eyed freaks.

• • •

Thea's gamble paid off. When she hit Graham, whatever force infused the tattoo on her shoulder erupted in a white flash and a sharp crack that left her blind and deaf. The detonation blew the two of them away from each other. She slammed her against the table edge and Graham was blasted through the gaping hole in the role of windows. She struggled to her feet, her bleary vision just



making out a shape struggling at the window ledge. The vampire had grabbed a spur of safety glass to stop his fall!

Even now Graham was levering himself up to crawl back inside. Thea tried to dredge up one last burst of strength to knock the vampire away, but the effort proved too much. Pain lanced from her side and sent her tumbling to the floor. Hitting the table had torn the sutures; Thea felt warmth spread down her side as her blood soaked into her sweatshirt.

Then a shape stood between her and the vampire. There was yelling and a heavy thud followed by a rapidly receding scream. Darkness was sweeping across her senses, but she was with it enough to feel hands helping her up, supporting her.

"Jake," she croaked. "I thought you saw good in everything."

"Exception to every rule," Jake replied. "Come on, Thea. Let's get out of here."

• • •

Beckett found the shattered pieces of an urn that reeked of a timeless, dried thing. The contents were gone, but Beckett could never mistake that scent for anything else. He should be able to track the artifact when he needed to. Khalid and his cohorts were sure to be thundering through the streets after it already. The Nosferatu primogen needed Beckett's aid for something; he was confident Khalid would be in touch again regarding the matter of Menele and the mummy artifact.

So what next? Khalid was skilled enough to ferret out the mysterious artifact; that left the immortal and the hunters. Actually, there was one more element. He looked down at the slowly recovering Critias, still amazed at the evidence of a Methuselah's power. Beckett touched the silver bracelet around his wrist and shuddered.



A wet groan came from the body on the concrete. Crouching, Beckett saw Critias' newly-restored eyes flicker open and stab him with a piercing glare. The creature's voice box was not yet restored, but the message was clear enough. "You don't look in the shape to be moved. Are you sure—"

An urgent grunt removed any doubt. Still, where to go? The police were already sealing off the area. Critias was sure to have influence with the authorities, but he was in no condition to exert it. Beckett looked up, a faint noise catching his ear.

The Sears Tower rose before him, a black tower of safety. If he could get Critias inside, his people would take care of the rest. So how—

Of course. He seldom used the shape, but it was perfect for situations like this. Focusing his will, Beckett called forth the change. His face twisted and flattened, nose upturning and ears growing huge and hairy. His fingers stretched and grew thin, a leathery membrane stretching between them and running down his side. His body compressed and sprouted a thick, dark pelt. Within seconds the transformation was complete, a creature neither man nor beast, but a blending of the two.

Beckett grabbed the injured Critias in his massive, taloned feet and spread vast, leathery wings. Sweeping his huge bat wings, Beckett lunged into the air. As he rose into the night, a screaming form shot past in the opposite direction. Beckett's bat-like ears caught the wet sound of Graham's impact on concrete already stained with gore.

Beckett pondered the wisdom of flying Critias back up there. A pair of mortals had just launched two vampires from the Sears Tower. What fate might Beckett meet were he to deliver himself into their clutches. No, they would be insane to still be there. Besides,



Beckett had no idea where else to take Critias and it wasn't easy to carry anything very far in this shape. He'd do a fly-by; if the hunters were still there, he'd try and get Critias to the roof.

Struggling against dead weight and capricious winds toward the open window — the conference room was thankfully clear — Beckett considered letting Critias drop. Another fall would be too much for even venerable Critias to survive. Recent events had placed them in opposing corners, and it would be one less complication for Beckett to deal with. Conversely, it might be to his benefit to have Critias owe him a favor. Yes, a grateful primogen would certainly have his uses.

There was a chancy moment when Beckett had to furl his wings and rely on momentum to carry him through the narrow window. Aside from having to dump Critias roughly on the table and crashing into the far wall before resuming his human form, it went off without a hitch.

He checked on Critias, who seemed to have subsided into unconsciousness again to focus on healing himself. Nothing to do but wait until the primogen's security showed up. Beckett stepped around the table, following the heady aroma of fresh blood. He drank in the scent, not just of the precious vitae but of the woman from whom it had poured. His nostrils flared, burning the scent-memory in his brain. Then his long, slender tongue poked out, flicking over the blood, lapping it up.

He considered following his new quarry. She and her friends were sure to still be in the building somewhere. But no, it was best to stay here for now, take full advantage of rescuing Critias. Beckett would not soon forget the woman's unique scent. When he was ready, he would make his introductions.

• • •



Thea slumped next to Jake on the futon in the far corner of the efficiency he called home. Margie was sleeping the sleep of the dead on his bed at the other end; Thea felt she would soon be out as well. Though her body was beyond exhausted, her mind was still too wired to let her rest.

Jake was silent beside her, lending his support with his presence. She would be dead now — Margie, too — if it hadn't been for the eternally optimistic Jake. His amazing, brilliant aura had held off crazed vampires, and his cool head had led them from the Sears Tower even as the place crawled with security personnel and police. Thea was so out of it from bruising and blood loss that she couldn't remember how they made it out. She recalled waiting hours in darkness, her wound a throbbing ache that closed. Then there was the scurry outside, the faint first rays of dawn just topping the buildings around them; a taxi slipping to the curb just long enough for them to pile in; the hazy recognition of Lupe Droin, a fellow hunter, behind the wheel; a convoluted, backtracking trip that ended at Jake's place. And now, finally, peace and quiet.

It wouldn't last, though; Thea knew that as certain as night followed day. The vampires in the city knew who they were. It was a matter of time before they were tracked down. And Carpenter was still out there somewhere, doing God knew what to his captive, the mysterious Nicholas Sforza. And then there were Sforza's men, the militant Egyptians with a hard-on for the Heart. If any of them were left, they had no idea she and Jake didn't have the damn urn any longer. Thea didn't know what happened to the Canopic jar after she threw it through the window, didn't care. For all she knew, that old chubby vampire had caught it, turned into a bat just like the one with the creepy eyes had, and flown off with it. Good riddance, was all she could say.



No, there would be no peace, and the quiet would end soon enough. Knowing how brief their respite would be made it all the more precious. As a peaceful, almost beatific look stole across her face, Thea Ghandour drifted off to sleep.

• • •

Carpenter sank into the back seat, drinking in the cab driver's fear. The emotion of one terrified hack wouldn't be enough to get him back to full strength, but it sure tasted good. He might even let the guy live. God knew the poor bastard would never again pick up a fare on a dark corner without first checking if he was bloody and burnt.

Carpenter shifted the Colt he'd had in his right holster — his spare, he supposed he'd have to start calling it, since he couldn't do the two gun routine with half his left hand — so it kept touching the cabbie's neck. With his ruined hand, he pulled a singed kerchief from his breast pocket and dug around in his slacks till he had hold of the object he'd snatched from a shattered ceramic jar a few minutes before.

The wasted, withered thing he held up scared the bejeezus out of him. It pulsed with such a powerful life force that he couldn't stand to look at it. It promised a salvation that Carpenter couldn't have imagined even a short time ago. The mere thought he might hold immortality in his hand was more frightening than anything else he'd ever experienced. Not because living forever scared him, but because it awakened in him a feeling he'd lost long ago — hope.

• • •

Nicholas rampaged around the safe house, cursing in tongues modern and ancient. Ibrahim stood by, head bowed in dismay, saying nothing. Not that Nicholas' diatribe was directed at the sole remaining member of



the Eset-a cult dedicated to his service. Ibrahim had performed as well as could be expected, even with two bullets in him from that dead bastard's gun.

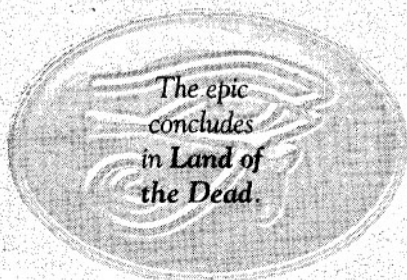
His anger wasn't even directed at Maxwell Carpenter. Not all of it, anyway. That the son of a bitch had held onto his parody of life somehow and come after Nicholas yet again was frustrating. That he'd then stolen the Heart and escaped was incredible.

His anger was directed at himself. Failing to stop Carpenter, Failing to catch the bloodless devil, enraged Nicholas Sforza-Ankhotep. He was an immortal, one of the Amenti, the Undying, the Deathless — a *mummy*. His power was far greater than one shambling corpse that refused to admit it was dead.

And yet Nicholas had acted more like the petty mortal he used to be rather than the hand of eternal justice that he'd become. Despite his mighty spirit, despite all the magics at his disposal, Nicholas Sforza had let the Heart escape his grasp.

Reason returned. Nicholas had made mistakes, and his foes had taken advantage of them. But he was still Amenti. He was still chosen of his god Osiris. The struggle was far from over, and justice would be his.

He had eternity to make it so.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Bates quit a promising career as an astronaut to follow his life-long dream wrangling penguins in the Antarctic. **Heralds of the Storm** was his first novel; **Lay Down With Lions** is his second.

Visit www.devilbear.net to learn more about him.

