

THE UNBEHOLDEN

Masquerade of the Red Death Volume 3
A Vampire: The Masquerade Novel



Robert Weinberg

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Masquerade of the Red Death Trilogy Volume 3

A Vampire: The Masquerade™
novel by Robert Weinberg

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**THE WORLD OF
DARKNESS**



I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart”

To Andrew Greenberg, Daniel Greenberg, and Rob Hatch; three guiding lights in a World of Darkness.

VOLUME 3:
THE UNBEHOLDEN

Author's Note:

While the locations and history of this trilogy may seem familiar, it is not our reality. The setting of *Vampire: The Masquerade of the Red Death* is a harsher, crueler version of our world. It is a stark, desolate landscape where nothing is what it seems. It is truly a World of Darkness.

Prologue

Newark, New Jersey—April 1, 1994:

Of all the blood bars in the world, Nero's Fiddle, in the heart of Newark, New Jersey, was the last place Walter Holmes would have expected to run into a woman from his past. Especially this particular woman.

It was a cool, quiet spring night, and only a few vampires and their accompanying ghouls lingered about the club. The joint was owned by a brutish Gangrel vampire named George Malenko; his three childer served as waiters. The blood was tasteless and flat and supposedly came from a local hospital. A too-loud jukebox in one corner, stocked with the favorite tunes of the anarch crowd that frequented the club, provided entertainment, if it could be called that. "Bela Lugosi's Dead," by Bauhaus, was a particularly beloved piece, and played near-continuously from sundown to sunup.

Walter sat alone, at a rear table, as was his custom, playing solitaire. The most ordinary-looking Kindred in the world, he was of average height, average weight and had features so plain that they were absolutely forgettable. No one ever gave him a second glance. It was generally assumed that he was Caitiff, a clanless vampire of little or no

importance. Which was exactly the impression Walter worked very hard to maintain.

His one defining characteristic, the only thing that set him apart from other Kindred, was his obsession with cards. Like all vampires, Walter Holmes survived by drinking human blood. But gambling was his real passion.

Poker was his particular mania. He played a good game, though he lost as often as he won. His luck, like the rest of him, was average. Usually, Walter wagered for drinks. He was gracious in victory, resigned and calm in defeat. It was the act of playing that mattered to him, not the results. None of his opponents suspected that his endless card games served as the perfect cover for Walter's other, less respectable activities.

Walter Holmes watched. He observed. He spied. Using incredibly heightened senses unsuspected by his comrades, he kept close tabs on his fellow vampires. His vision and hearing were keen beyond measure. Walter heard every whispered conversation, saw every startled look, noted every unexpected reaction. He monitored the darkest secrets, the innermost passions, the most unholy lusts of his brethren. A master of intricate deception, Walter sorted a thousand minuscule details in his mind, mentally resolving hundreds of schemes and intrigues. Then, once each week he reported the details of all of them to his superiors, the elders of the Inconnu.

Only a few vampires had ever even heard of the Inconnu. It was a secret sect of powerful ancient

Kindred, established before the founding of either the Camarilla or the Sabbat. Though scores of rumors and legends existed about the cult, only its members knew the true purpose of the Inconnu. And they were experts at keeping their secrets.

Walter was in Newark because New York City, his usual center of operations, had recently become too dangerous for his continued presence. Melinda Galbraith, the long-missing regent of the Sabbat, had resurfaced a week ago in Washington, D.C. She had managed to regain some measure of control of the sect after a night of violence and destruction in the capital. Justine Bern, Archbishop of New York and Melinda's most significant rival, had perished at Melinda's own hands. As had Hugh Portiglio, Justine's chief advisor. However, it took more than a few executions to become regent once more.

Within nights of her unexpected coup in Washington, Melinda had moved to New York City, where she had seized control of Justine's base of operations. Working at a rapid-fire pace, she labored tirelessly to consolidate and solidify her power. Among the Sabbat, only the strongest survived. Melinda's return had been greeted less than enthusiastically by a majority of Sabbat elders, many of whom had their own schemes for taking control of the cult. Her new reign was shaky at best. Current rumors swirled that she had summoned the four leaders of the Black Hand, the elite warrior caste of the Sabbat, to Manhattan for a secret conclave. If they united behind her, as most vampires expected, her return to absolute authority would become complete.

In the meantime, Melinda was ruthlessly wiping out any opposition to her rule in the New York area. Walter, rarely noticed in such purges but never a fool, was taking no chances. He had left the city days ago. Any Cainite who disagreed with the regent's policies or goals was to be eliminated by her unforgiving agents, the Blood Guard. A vampire without the least trace of mercy or humanity, Melinda demanded absolute and total obedience from all members of the sect. Obey without question or perish was Melinda's credo. Yet, despite her campaign, the regent had been unable to deal effectively with her most dangerous enemy: Alicia Varney, Justine Bern's ghoul, was still alive and at large.

Even Walter, who had played an important role in rescuing Alicia from Melinda's deadly trap in Washington, was not sure where the beautiful woman had gone or how she had managed to disappear so effectively. Alicia had vanished from Manhattan the day before Melinda's arrival. Though the regent had offered fabulous rewards for information about her nemesis, no one had stepped forward to claim the prize. It was as if Alicia had vanished from the face of the earth.

Only a few ancient and very wise vampires realized how extremely unlikely it was that an ordinary ghoul could remain hidden when a Cainite of Melinda's strength wanted her found. Being old and wishing to remain functional, they intelligently kept such opinions to themselves. Walter Holmes was the only vampire who understood that the struggle between Melinda and Alicia was a

reflection of an even greater conflict. The pair served as the avatars for Anis, Queen of Night, and the Red Death—two Fourth Generation vampires possessing near-godlike powers who were engaged in a vicious struggle for control of the entire Cainite race.

As an Inconnu Monitor, Walter was sworn to remain neutral in the Jyhad, the eternal war that raged among the elders of the Cainite race. Normally he watched and waited, but refrained from involving himself in such conflicts. The basic credo of his cult was noninterference. However, even the masters of his Order were frightened by the unnatural powers of the mysterious Red Death. The monster possessed incredible capacities for destruction—capacities that went beyond any Kindred discipline. The elders of the Inconnu were convinced that the Red Death was actually capable of gaining complete control of both the Camarilla and the Sabbat. And this they would not, could not, permit. It conflicted directly with their own secret schemes concerning the Children of Caine. Walter had been instructed to make sure that the Red Death failed. No matter what rules of the Order he had to break. No matter what he had to do.

Tonight, he was biding his time, waiting for disparate events to come together into a cohesive, meaningful whole. He was convinced that the Red Death was preparing some decisive master stroke to seize control of the Sabbat and the Camarilla. Just what that might be, Walter had no idea. The Red Death had been scheming for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Unraveling and thwarting his

plot could not be accomplished in hours. Not even by a mastermind like Walter Holmes. So, in the meantime, he watched and waited. To pass the time, he played solitaire.

His hands moved with the unnatural swiftness of centuries of practice. Shuffling the deck, he dealt himself a circle of thirteen stacks of four cards each. His long, supple fingers blurred with the action. The cards literally exploded from his hands. There was no one, living or dead, who could deal like Walter Holmes.

He had halfway completed the second pass of the Wheel of Fortune when a lone woman entered the club. A tall, good-looking redhead with striking features, she wore a tight green sequined dress and matching high heels. As always, Walter glanced up from the cards to see if he recognized the newcomer. With an unexpected jolt of surprise, he found himself staring at a vision from his distant past.

After nearly twenty centuries of gambling, Walter Holmes had developed perhaps the most noncommittal poker face on Earth. Only an observer of skill matching his own at reading expressions would have noticed the way his eyes narrowed and his fingers hesitated for an instant in the course of his deal. Frowning, he forced himself to concentrate on the cards. Walter Holmes, Inconnu Monitor of New York City, did not believe in coincidence. In the world of the Kindred, there were no chance encounters.

Swiftly, he gathered up the cards from the stacks on the table and began shuffling them. His gaze

never left the woman in green. She looked about the room for a moment, as if searching for a familiar face. When she spotted him, she nodded in recognition. There was no question that the woman in green had expected to find him at the club. Though Walter had made every effort to remain anonymous, some people could not be fooled.

Carefully, the woman picked her way between the tables, heading directly toward Walter. She moved with a slow, seductive grace, accented by her lush curves. No one said a word to her or questioned her presence. She was ignored by vampires and ghouls both. Unescorted ghouls were not permitted in Nero's Fiddle, yet the woman walked the entire length of the room without once being stopped. It was as if only Walter Holmes could see her. Knowing what he did about the mysterious woman, Walter concluded that it was quite possibly the truth. She possessed incredible powers, not the least of which was the vampire discipline known as Unseen Presence, the ability to remain unobserved in any gathering of lesser minds. That covered all of the Kindred in the club.

The woman in green slid into the chair across from Walter. She smiled as he smoothly dealt each of them five cards. "Stud," he announced. "No wild cards. Other than you, of course."

"You haven't changed an iota, Marius," she said, with a chuckle only he could hear. Her soft voice was smooth yet sultry. Her eyes were an intense, deep shade of blue. In the two thousand years since he had first encountered those eyes, Walter Holmes

had never seen their equal. "You look as plain and ordinary as ever. And you are still wasting your time gambling."

"I use the name Walter Holmes now," said Walter. He picked up his cards. The Monitor couldn't suppress a chuckle. Though he had very carefully dealt out the hands in random sequence, he held three sixes, a red queen and a black jack. "You, my dear Leah, are still up to your old tricks, I see."

"I'm Rachel this decade," declared the woman in green solemnly. "Rachel Young. It has a nice show-business ring to it, don't you think?"

"Of course," said Walter, placing the cards face down on the table. "I assumed as much when I read the reports about the Red Death's appearance in St. Louis. You were the singer at the club. Still, I couldn't be absolutely sure. Not until Alicia Varney related how a young man, sounding suspiciously like your brother, Micah, rescued her from the monster in New York. One coincidence in appearance, I could accept, but never two."

"We haven't used those names for a thousand years," said Rachel. "They sounded so...Biblical. For a few centuries, we were Jack and Jill. Lately, my brother's taken to calling himself Reuben. Which of course prompted me to use Rachel."

"From the children's song," said Walter. "How inventive. You do have an odd sense of humor."

The Monitor stared intently at the woman in the green dress. "It is hard to believe you are so incredibly ancient. You barely look a day older than when we first met." Out of habit, Walter gathered

the cards together and reshuffled the deck. "That was two millennia ago."

"One of the benefits of being born into an exceptional bloodline," said Rachel, with a grin. She pointed to the stack of cards in Walter's hands. "There are four aces on top. They are followed by four kings. Then four queens. And so on, through the deck."

"Remarkable," said Walter. He didn't bother turning over the top card. He knew it would be an ace. Though Walter Holmes was one of the most powerful vampires in existence, he had no illusions about testing his abilities against those of his mysterious visitor. She was in a class by herself. "Gambling with you would not be much fun. You manipulate reality too easily."

"Don't make assumptions based on conjecture," replied Rachel, grinning. "Instead of using mage powers, I could have just as easily dominated your thoughts for an instant, implanting the notion in your mind to fix the cards as you shuffled. Either explanation produces the same effect. One requires magick, the other requires Kindred disciplines. I'll let you decide which I used."

Walter shook his head in dismay. "Among my friends in the Inconnu, I am thought to be devious. They should talk to you."

Rachel laughed. "You flatter me. But, then again, you always had a gift for words."

Her blue eyes glowed brightly. "It was nearly two thousand years ago that we met, on that fateful night in Jerusalem. We talked through the night,

and I revealed truths to you that should never have been spoken. In the twenty centuries that have passed, you've never revealed to anyone the existence of my brother or me." The tone of her voice made it clear that she was stating a fact, not a question. "Why not?"

"I believed then, as I do now," said Walter, "in keeping my own counsel. Secrets are not meant to be shared. I am loyal to the goals of the Inconnu, but like many Kindred, I trust only one individual—myself." He smiled. "Sometimes, I even doubt the wisdom of that."

"You are wiser than most," said Rachel. "And I have known many."

"Our conversations marked the first steps on a long journey as yet not completed," said Walter quietly. "It is a trail I must travel alone."

The Monitor waved a hand about, as if taking in all of the other vampires in the room. Sitting with Rachel, he was shielded by her unseen presence. "Besides, who would I have told of my discovery? Creatures such as these? Most Cainites are no smarter, no more intelligent than the kine from whom they are created. In undeath, they harbor the same character flaws, prejudices and hatreds as before. They are ignorant children in a world that is darker than they can imagine."

Walter shook his head in disgust. "The average vampire knows little about the history of his race, nor does he care. One in a hundred knows something of our origins. Fewer than that have heard of Enoch, the First City, or of the Great Flood

that destroyed it. They consider the Antediluvians myths, demigods with no real substance. Ask anyone here if the Jyhad rages and they will laugh in your face, not realizing that they themselves are merely pawns in the eternal struggle."

"The passing of the years has made you cynical and bitter," said Rachel.

"Not true," said Walter. "I have not changed since that night in the Holy City. I am a realist. I accept the limitations of my race. As a Monitor, I have learned patience." He shrugged his shoulders. "Someday, perhaps, I will discover humility."

Walter Holmes' eyes burned with an inner fire. "Two thousand years ago, I participated in a heinous crime against mankind. I have struggled over the centuries to deal with the guilt, but the stain on my soul remains black. Most vampires conduct a desperate fight against the Beast within. I wage my own war with a much deadlier foe—my conscience."

"We are all prisoners of fate," said Rachel. "Destiny is unforgiving. Or so my father told my brother and me when he first revealed his plans for us, millennia ago."

Walter shuffled the cards. He felt uncomfortable discussing the past. "Somehow, I suspect, you didn't come here tonight to discuss the meaning of life. Or the ignorance of the average vampire regarding the ancient history of the Kindred."

"I agree," said Rachel, no longer smiling. "The time for philosophy is over. I assume you can guess why I came searching for you. Events involving the ancient vampire known as the Red Death are

rushing toward a climax. Reuben and I are both very concerned over the outcome of this affair. It seems quite likely to us that your role in the fight may be a pivotal one. About such matters, we are rarely mistaken. Thus, I decided it would be wise to pay you this visit. It is imperative that you cooperate with Alicia Varney in every way possible. The Red Death and his childer, the Children of Dreadful Night, must be stopped."

"I thought," said Walter, his tone calm but deliberate, "that you and your brother did not involve yourselves in the affairs of the Cainite race. You stated that as fact in our conversation many centuries ago."

"The longer we exist," replied Rachel, a smile flitting across her face, "the easier it becomes to bend and twist the rules governing our behavior. As directed by our father, Reuben and I have responsibilities that lie not with the Kindred, but with the kine. We deal with mankind as a whole. However, sometimes, as you well know, the affairs of humans and vampires intersect."

A disturbed look crossed Walter's impassive features. "Are you implying," he asked, "that this battle with the Red Death represents another such turning point in the history of mankind?"

"The vampire who names himself the Red Death threatens the existence of every human, Cainite, Garou, mage, and faerie on this planet," said Rachel. Her voice was as grim as her features. Her hands, folded together, were chalk white. "If his plan to gain control the Children of Caine is not stopped

in the near future, all life on Earth will be placed in terrible danger.

"The self-centered fool has formed an alliance with a race of fire monsters who dwell in the darkness outside our universe. They are the Sheddim, formless masses of raw energy that hearken from an alternate reality. These monsters hunger for entry into our world. Anathema to all life, they cannot cross the barriers between dimensions without aid. To survive in this world, they need a willing host. The Red Death and his brood are providing that assistance."

She paused, her features drawn. "The Red Death and the Children of Dreadful Night, his brood, believe they are manipulating the vast supernatural powers of the Sheddim to become masters of the Kindred. What they do not realize in their colossal vanity is that the monsters are not their unwitting pawns but have frightful plans of their own. Each time the Sheddim are summoned to our world and use their destructive powers, they gain a measure of control over the body of their accomplice. They are interdimensional parasites, feeding on their unsuspecting partners. Soon, the vampires of the Children of Dreadful Night will be gone, totally replaced by their demonic confederates."

"Beings from another universe, they are not bound by the restrictions of ours," said Walter Holmes, the entire scenario immediately becoming clear. To him, the implications were obvious. "They will be invulnerable. And unstoppable."

"They exist only to destroy," said Rachel.

"Millions will die before the mages from our reality can banish the Sheddin. We cannot allow this disaster to take place. The Red Death must be destroyed, breaking the chain that links the fire monsters with our world."

"Alicia Varney is the key?" asked Walter Holmes. "One woman against the Red Death."

"She is no ordinary woman, as I am sure you have discovered by now," said Rachel. "Nor is her friend, Dire McCann, an ordinary man. They are the mortal agents of Anis, Queen of Night, and Lameth, the Dark Messiah. The Red Death considers them his major rivals in the Jyhad. He is obsessed with exterminating them. He fears their powers of retaliation. Control of the Camarilla and the Sabbat is meaningless with such powerful enemies at your back. When vampires of the Fourth Generation battle, the world trembles. Nothing is certain in such a struggle."

"Thus, though we are bound by certain restrictions, we have done everything we can to aid Lameth and Anis in their fight. We cannot do much more. They must solve the secret of the Red Death's identity on their own, then discover a method to destroy him and his Order before the Sheddin are freed. Without your help, we worry they will not succeed."

"I'm not sure I understand," said Walter. He laid the deck of playing cards flat on the table. "My strength is insignificant compared to theirs."

An enigmatic smile crossed Rachel's face. "When the time comes, it will be clear what needs

to be done."

"I will not fail," said Walter, his usually calm voice thick with emotion. "For you, no favor is too great to ask."

Then, he grinned. "Besides, the elders of the Inconnu are equally concerned about the Red Death's ambitions. They are anxious to see him and his brood exterminated. I am already under orders to do everything I can to bring about his end."

Blue eyes gleaming like diamonds, Rachel Young reached across the table and gently touched Walter on the cheek. Her warm fingers burned against his cold skin. "Golconda is within your reach, Walter Holmes. If you can release the guilt and pain that torments you so deeply."

"His eyes," said Walter, shaking his head in despair. "I cannot forget the look in his eyes. It has haunted me for twenty centuries. It haunts me still. Other vampires try to deny their dark heritage but I long ago accepted mine. I am truly one of the Damned."

Rachel pushed her chair back from the table and rose to her feet. "The greatest tortures," she said softly, "are those we inflict upon ourselves."

The young woman held out her hand. "Goodbye, Walter. We will meet again. I feel sure of that. And not after another two thousand years have passed."

Walter stood up and gripped Rachel's outstretched fingers. He could feel the incredible energy pulsing beneath the skin. It was a sudden, sharp reminder of the true identity of Rachel Young.

"Your father?" he asked, unable to resist the

question. "Have you seen him recently?"

"Neither Reuben nor I have encountered him in more than five thousand years," said Rachel, smiling. She understood, as did Walter, that it was information he could never share. "Yet, we are quite sure he is still alive. His death would not go unnoticed by us."

"What of...Caine?" asked Walter, gathering his courage. If anyone alive knew the truth about the Third Mortal, it was Rachel Young. "Does he still exist?"

Rachel shook her head. "I don't know. Nor did my father, when we asked the same question, millennia ago. Even he had no answer for the greatest riddle of the Kindred."

The woman in green chuckled. "It seems that some mysteries are destined to remain forever unsolved."

PART



And again, again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions "Who is he?—whence came he?—and what are his objects?"

—Edgar Allan Poe, "William Wilson"

Chapter 1

Tel Aviv, Israel—April 1, 1994:

Elisha jerked his head up in shock. Something was terribly wrong, he could sense it. Death was rushing toward them. The night air was heavy with destruction and despair. "Beware," an unspoken voice whispered urgently in his mind. "Beware!"

Without thinking, he leapt to his feet, knocking his wooden chair to the floor with a crash. In the parlor, the clock was striking three a.m. "Look out!" he screamed, his gaze sweeping across the faces of his six companions. "Be—"

He never finished. With a roar of exploding wood and masonry, the far corner of the ceiling of the room crumpled to bits like cheap cardboard. Two immense skeletal hands ripped through the roof, tearing open a huge hole. A monstrous skeletal face glared at the astonished occupants of the chamber, its enormous red eyes scanning the seven conspirators. With a cry that seemed to shake the earth, the creature bellowed out words in a tongue Elisha didn't recognize—yet they sounded terribly familiar.

"That's ancient Arabic," declared the gray-haired mage known as Ezra. Elisha was not surprised to see that he was on his feet, standing close to Moses

Maimonides, the Rambam. On the other side of the famous sage stood Judith, Ezra's sister, also a mage of incredible power. Together, the trio were perhaps the three most powerful mages in the world. "The monster is seeking his ancient enemy. It says it senses him in this room. The thing calls him the Binding One."

Again, the skeletal horror roared out its challenge. Bony fingers locked onto the remnants of wall blocking its path into the room. With a crash, the bricks crumbled to powder, sending a cloud of white dust swirling about. With a quick wave of a hand, Rambam dispelled the cloud. Elisha gasped as the monster stood completely revealed in the lights of the room.

The creature radiated raw, elemental power. A thing not human born, it stood nine feet tall at the shoulder, with a massive body only vaguely man-shaped. It had a huge barrel chest; its vast shoulders stretched six feet across. Long bony arms reached down to its knees and ended in shovel-like hands capped with titanic skeletal fingers.

The enormous head did not even faintly resemble something human. The creature had massive, powerful jaws, like those of a predatory beast. Its mouth was filled with huge inches-long teeth. Hellfire gleamed in its eye sockets, set wide apart on its skull. Two giant horns jutted from its head. To Elisha, the thing was a horrid travesty, with elements of man and goat mixed into something resembling neither.

"Azazel," said Dire McCann. The mysterious

detective stared at the monster, a wry smile on his face. In one hand, McCann held a short, stubby machine gun pistol. Elisha had seen him use the powerful handgun before. Firing a continuous string of ammunition, it could sledgehammer the most powerful vampire off its feet. Somehow, Elisha doubted that it would have much effect on the creature that faced them now. From the expression on the detective's face, he obviously felt pretty much the same way. "The Red Death said the Nictuku were rising. He was right."

"The Nictuku," whispered the tall, good-looking platinum blonde at McCann's side. Dressed in a white leather jumpsuit, she had pitch-black eyes and lush red lips. Only the unnatural whiteness of her skin and a certain predatory cast to her features betrayed the fact that she was a vampire. In each of her hands she clutched the long-bladed fighting knife of her clan. Flavia, the Dark Angel, served as Dire McCann's bodyguard. Alone of all those present, she seemed almost pleased to see the monster. Elisha suspected that Flavia considered the creature to be a new challenge to her skills. "I thought they were legends told by the Nosferatu to frighten their childer."

"Evidently not," said Madeleine Giovanni dryly. Slender and not too tall, with straight black hair that fell to her shoulders, she guarded McCann's right. Known as the Dagger of the Giovanni, Madeleine was less flashy than Flavia—but equally deadly. She numbered among the most deadly vampires in the ranks of the Undead.

Again, the monster McCann had named Azazel bellowed its demand. No one answered. The air was heavy and deathly still. There were no sirens in the background, no shouts, no screams of terror from the neighbors. Somehow, the creature had managed to seal Rambam's home off from the natural world. They were facing the monster entirely on their own.

"Our mage powers barely affect the beast," announced Judith, her voice tight with apprehension. "It is incredibly old and possesses some sort of aura that dampens the laws of causality in its vicinity. We've been trying every trick we know to stop it. Nothing works. It is too strong."

"The Nictuku are fourth-generation vampires, created by the Antediluvian, Abisimilard, to hunt down and destroy his original brood, the Nosferatu," said Dire McCann. "In his madness, Abisimilard embraced monstrous, inhuman things. Their strength is legendary. According to most stories, they are not easily thwarted."

The floor shook as Azazel took a step forward. Then another. Huge eyes flared red. Raising a colossal arm, the creature pointed a bone-finger directly at Elisha. There was no need for anyone to translate its ultimatum.

"The monster thinks Elisha is its ancient enemy," said Ezra, his voice shaking. "It calls him the Binding One."

"Hell and damnation," said Dire McCann, sounding astonished. "The Nictuku has mistaken Elisha for King Solomon, the greatest magician of the ancient world. WATCH OUT!"

Azazel's arms shot forward with incredible speed. Elisha gasped as the monster's widespread fingers hurtled toward his face, six-inch nails aimed straight for his eyes. The air whistled and he knew he was a dead man. Then, before he could blink, he was on the floor, a body dressed in black covering his. Over their heads, the Nictuku's claws slashed through empty space.

McCann's machine-gun pistol shrieked. The monster bellowed not in pain, but in anger. The floor shook and bricks and boards went flying. "You are unsafe in this room," declared Madeleine in Elisha's ear. "The Nictuku is ripping the place apart."

For the Dagger of the Giovanni, to think was to act. The vampire moved with inhuman speed, half-carrying, half-pulling Elisha along with her. In a blurred instant, he found himself standing in the doorway to the hall connecting the dining room with the front parlor. Madeleine was beside him, her dark eyes flashing. "Come on," she commanded. "It will take the monster a few minutes to break into the center of the house. The others are waiting in the library. We must join them and regroup while McCann holds Azazel at bay."

The detective stood in the center of the wrecked dining room. He no longer held his gun. Instead, his arms, at shoulder height, extended forward as if pressing against an invisible barrier. With the fingers of each hand he formed a pattern: his thumb pointing inward, his first and second finger tight together, third and fourth forming a second pair. It

was the ancient sign of the Kohan. The air beyond them shimmered and rippled as if alive. It took Elisha a second to realize that McCann was not struggling against some transparent wall but creating one. On the other side, the monster called Azazel raged. Huge claws beat savagely against the magickal barricade. But the creature could not pass.

McCann stood frozen in place, a statue of flesh rigid with strain. His unblinking eyes were fixed on the Nictuku. The detective's expression was grim but determined. To Elisha, McCann didn't even seem to breathe.

Beside him, Flavia crouched, clutching her knives in a deathlike grip. Her gaze flickered back and forth between man and monster. The Assamite knew not to interfere. She was waiting for the instant when McCann faltered, her face glowing with anticipation. To Elisha, the Dark Angel never looked so alive as she did at that moment, while she waited to begin a struggle she could not win.

"It is the dream of all Assamite assassins," said Madeleine, as if reading his thoughts. Her ice-cold fingers tugged insistently on his arm. "There is no greater honor than to die in battle against an implacable foe."

Without a word, Elisha let Madeleine drag him into the library. There, surrounded by thousands of books, the three great mages huddled around Rambam's desk, trying to decide what to do next.

"Elisha," said Maimonides, relief in his voice when he spotted his pupil entering the room. "Thank the Most High! For a moment, I thought

you had perished beneath that thing's claws."

"He's alive and definitely breathing," declared Ezra. "Good enough. No time for concern. If we don't figure some way to destroy that monster, in a few minutes we might not have the pleasure."

"For a change," said Judith, "I agree with my brother. We must come up with a plan immediately. McCann, for all of his powers, will not be able to delay Azazel much longer. Already, I can sense his mystic barrier weakening."

"You are among the most powerful mages in the world," said Madeleine Giovanni. "Three stand against one. What is the problem?"

"The Nictuku repels our most potent spells," growled Ezra. "It is unaffected by our magic. We cannot harm it."

"The law of cause and effect seems to bend around the monster," added Judith. "It is invulnerable to chance and circumstance."

Elisha shivered. He could not imagine any being so strong that it could resist the will of Moses Maimonides and his comrades.

"McCann's will is slipping," said Judith, her voice flat but filled with fear. "We have only seconds left."

"Flee then," said Madeleine Giovanni. "Use whatever special skills you possess to escape. Take Elisha with you. I will stay and delay the monster for the necessary moments."

"Never," said Elisha, his emotions breaking free. "You will be destroyed. I won't leave you to fight that thing alone."

"My sire commanded me to protect Dire McCann," said Madeleine. She swung Elisha around and stared into his eyes. Her voice was strained. "Once I know you are safe, I can obey the dictates of my clan."

"Hah," said Ezra with a snort of amusement. "You can both stop acting noble. The monster's aura renders our departure methods useless. We are caught like flies in a gigantic spider's web. Escape is impossible. We fight or die."

The bearded mage shook his head, his wise eyes twinkling with grim humor. "At least if I perish, it will have been after I witnessed a true miracle. In all my days, I never thought I would live to hear a vampire express such concern for a mere mortal."

"He is no mere mortal," said Madeleine to Ezra, with the slightest of smiles. "I think he is quite special."

"Of course you do," said Judith, excitedly. She snapped her fingers. "So does Azazel. It wants revenge."

"The monster came here searching for Elisha. It called him the Binding One. The Nictuku mistook Elisha for the foe who imprisoned it thousands of years ago."

"So?" demanded Ezra. "We know that. What's your point?"

"Azazel thought Elisha was King Solomon, the Binder of Demons," said Judith. "Solomon the Wise never destroyed monsters. He bound them!"

"We cannot harm the monster," exclaimed Ezra. "It is too strong to be affected by our powers. Now,

you claim this boy—on his own—can imprison it!”

“The monster fears him,” said Rambam. “It recognizes its doom. The spell must...”

Maimonides never got a chance to finish the sentence. A surge of pure, elemental hatred swept through the library like a tidal wave. Walls and ceiling groaned in protest, then collapsed like a house of cards. Falling beams caught Rambam, Ezra and Judith, knocking them to the floor. The door behind Elisha burst off its hinges and slammed into his back, sending him tumbling to his knees. He screamed in agony as the heavy wood frame dropped across his legs, effectively pinning him to the ground. Only Madeleine, with her superhuman reflexes, managed to dodge the debris. Alone she faced the Nictuku, Azazel, as it marched into the chamber, its enormous red eyes burning furiously.

There was no sign of Dire McCann or the Dark Angel. The two knives sunk to the hilt on each side of the monster's neck were mute testimony to Flavia's determination, though the blades seemed to have no effect upon it.

Spotting Elisha, the Nictuku roared in triumph. One huge hand reached for his head, as if to squash his skull like a piece of ripe fruit. Madeleine was there first, but just barely.

There was no time to pull Elisha free. Nor did any of Madeleine's vampire disciplines work against Azazel. Instead, it was her strength against that of a titanic monster thousands of years old. It was an unfair match but she made the most of it.

Standing over Elisha, her legs straddling him,

Madeleine grabbed hold of Azazel's descending arm by the wrist. Instead of trying to stop the motion, she pulled forward with all her strength, letting gravity and the monster's own weight aid her. Madeleine wrenched, dropped and spun in a perfect judo throw. The Nictuku screamed in surprise as it suddenly found itself flying through the air. Like a runaway train, the monster hurtled over Elisha's head and slammed into the ruins of a wall a dozen feet away.

"Up," urged Madeleine, flinging the wooden frame off Elisha's legs like a twig. She pulled him erect. Already, Azazel was rising to its feet, its massive teeth clashing in anger. "If you remember any binding spells, now is the time to use them. There is not going to be a second chance."

Elisha moaned in pain. His legs hurt so badly he could not stand without assistance. He was bruised, battered and bleeding. He felt like he had been hit by a truck. Concentrating was impossible.

"Focus," said Madeleine anxiously as Azazel stood up. The monster's jaws opened. It was like gazing into the mouth of hell. "Focus your thoughts."

"Solomon," whispered Elisha, trying to put his mind in order. He closed his eyes. "King Solomon."

"Focus," repeated Madeleine, sounding desperate. Her fingers dug into his shoulders like spears of ice.

"Solomon the Wise," Elisha murmured again, remembering Judith's words. "The binder of monsters."

Like wildfire, the phrase raced through his subconscious mind. Binding...imprisoning...sealing. The seal...the seal of Solomon the Wise!

Though still a young man, Elisha possessed magickal powers that were almost beyond belief. For him, the will and the way were one and the same. No time at all existed between his stunning realization and the implementation of his desire. Thought and action occurred simultaneously.

Elisha opened his eyes. Mere inches separated his face from Azazel's gaping jaws. But he felt no fear. The two of them might have been millions of miles apart. The Nictuku could not move. The monster was still sentient, its eyes still burned with unnatural life, but it stood frozen in place.

Carefully, Elisha separated Madeleine Giovanni's cold fingers from his shoulders. He put her arms down to her sides. She did not resist. The vampire appeared stunned, incapable of acting on her own. Prepared for the Final Death, she was having difficulty adjusting to this unexpected, last-second reprieve.

"What did you do?" she asked, finally, as some semblance of sanity returned to her features. "How did you stop it?"

"Numerous legends spoke of Solomon's power over genii and other demonic presences," said Elisha, a slight smile crossing his lips. "Whatever Azazel was before Abisimilard made it one of the Nictuku, it remained vulnerable still to Solomon's binding magick. That was what Judith realized just as the monster broke into this room. Though it

could not be harmed by sorcery, it could be imprisoned by it. It just took me some time to realize how to accomplish that."

"How?" asked Madeleine. Her gaze darted over his shoulder, at Azazel, locked in stasis like a fly in amber.

"Yes, Elisha, how?" asked Moses Maimonides. Elisha's teacher was covered with dust but otherwise appeared unharmed. As did Ezra and Judith, struggling out from beneath a nest of broken beams and roof tiles. It took more than a collapsing building to harm a mage. "We were unable to stop the creature. What spell did you finally use?"

"I'm interested in knowing that myself," said Dire McCann from the ruins of the doorway leading to the parlor. The detective appeared exhausted and pale but otherwise unharmed. Leaning against him was an equally wasted Flavia. "When my barrier fell, the monster just brushed us out of its path. Azazel wanted you and wasted no time on distractions. I suspect it feared what you might do."

"Let the boy speak," growled Ezra. He sounded angry. "I want to hear his answer."

"Look at the dust," said Elisha, feeling awkward at being the center of attention. "Stare closely. You can see the pattern if you try."

With Azazel powerless, whatever dominion it held over Maimonides' house was gone. Moonlight streamed through the huge holes in the walls and ceiling. Thousands of tiny motes of dust whirled about in the night air, forming a mystic sigil that totally enclosed the Nictuku. Two crossed triangles

combined into a familiar six-sided star.

"The seal of Solomon," said Rambam. "How obvious. You wisely used the mark of supreme authority over creatures of the netherworld to cage the monster. Though I've never before witnessed anyone controlling dust in such a unique manner."

"It had to be Elisha who formed the emblem," said Judith. "Azazel sensed he controlled the same magicks as Solomon. The Nictuku recognized its worst enemy."

"As I said," declared Madeleine Giovanni, "Elisha is special."

"It has been a night of revelations," said Ezra, staring directly at Madeleine. A few seconds passed, then his gaze dropped to the floor and his voice mellowed. "Somewhere deep in the desert, I am willing to wager there stands an empty tomb where this monster was immured for the past several thousand years. Fools of one sort or another must have released it by destroying the seal of Solomon that kept it imprisoned."

"The question now is not how it arrived here," said Madeleine Giovanni, "but what to do with it."

"A minor problem," said Rambam, stroking his dust-covered beard. "I am blanketing the area with feelings of peace and tranquillity. No one in the neighborhood realizes that anything unusual happened. By tomorrow, my friends in the government will have this house repaired." He looked wistfully at the smashed shelves of his library. "Some of the books destroyed were centuries old. Replacing them will cost me a fortune."

"Hah," said Ezra, the anger gone completely from his voice. "I recall you saying the same words when you fled Egypt seventy years ago. Two months later, your shelves were filled."

"Working with my associates," said Rambam, the slightest of smiles curling his lips, "I will transport Azazel back into the wastes from which it came. There are numerous dry holes left by oil speculators in the Sinai desert. With the proper safeguards in place, the Nictuku should remain entombed for another several thousand years."

"Time for us to leave," said Flavia, wearily. "Dawn is approaching and I need the rest. Not to mention some mortal vitae." The vampire chuckled at the uncomfortable looks given her by the mages. "Don't worry. I'll locate a serial killer or rapist when selecting my victim. Finding such scum is a talent of mine. Too bad I won't have my knives, but better they stay wedged in Azazel than we take the chance of removing them. I can replace them tomorrow."

"Tomorrow night, we should meet again," said Rambam. "There is still much to be discussed. We need to cover matters of supreme importance—questions of life and death."

Elisha could not help but notice that as Rambam said those final words, his teacher's gaze met and held that of Madeleine Giovanni.

And she nodded, as if in reply.

Chapter 2

Newark, New Jersey—April 1, 1994:

"The greatest foe the Sabbath faces," said Alicia Varney, "comes from within. It is their own attitude toward humanity. That's why the sect will never become all-powerful."

"Huh?" said Ronald Jackson, her assistant, sometimes bodyguard, and constant sounding board. "You care to make that statement a little clearer? From what I've seen so far of these characters, they seem to be handling themselves just fine."

They were cruising along U.S. Highway 1 on their way to Newark Airport. Jackson was driving. He was alone in the front. On the seat beside him sat a .357 Magnum handgun, fully loaded and with the safety off.

In the back, on the passenger side, sat Alicia. She held a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun, with an automatic feed, that fired large explosive shells. Neither she nor Jackson expected trouble. But, if it came, they were prepared to meet it without hesitation.

Gunfights between cars filled with rival gang members were commonplace in the Newark area. The death toll from drive-by shootings was so great that it had become the leading cause of deaths on

the highway, surpassing the total from multi-car collisions. Outgunned and outnumbered, police rarely patrolled the highways in squad cars. When a major emergency developed, the cops arrived by armored transport and National Guard helicopter. There was a war on the streets, and the authorities could do nothing to stop it.

Alicia dealt with the breakdown of law and order in the same manner she handled every other problem. Accepting the situation as it existed, she assumed the worst and prepared for it. The car Jackson was driving was one of several owned by Varney Industries, constructed from a lightweight, near-indestructible space-age polymer. A bazooka shell wouldn't scratch the auto's finish.

Inside, the vehicle carried an arsenal of guns and ammunition capable of fueling a war in several Central American nations. Jackson favored the Magnum revolver, but as an ex-Green Beret, he was skilled at using any sort of death-dealing device.

Alicia liked the feel of a shotgun. When she fired at someone, she wanted them to stay down permanently. With its sawed-off barrel, the shotgun was not very accurate. It needed to be fired at close range to be effective. Which was exactly the way Alicia preferred to fight.

It seemed unlikely that a gang war might erupt on the highway at 11 a.m., but Alicia left nothing to chance. She expected the unexpected, and thus was never surprised.

"Members of the Sabbath like to think of themselves as the lords of creation," she declared. "They view

humans as cattle, not thinking, rational beings. The surest path to disaster is underestimating your adversaries."

"Tell me about it," said Jackson, with a nasty laugh. "I served with our forces in Vietnam, remember?"

"Many of the vampires belonging to the Sabbat wield incredible powers," said Alicia. "But the numbers are stacked against them. Brute strength doesn't work when you are facing odds of ten thousand to one. Humans can be quite dangerous when provoked. The Cainites' refusal to accept reality makes them vulnerable." She grinned. "Today, for example, I plan to exploit that particular weakness by leaving the country."

"I was wondering about that," said Jackson, as he steered the car into the highway lane marked *Airport*. The terminal was located at the center of two concentric circles designed without regard to traffic safety. Navigating them required nerves of steel. "Considering how anxious this Melinda babe is to find you, I assumed she would have stationed agents at all the major points of departure."

"I'm sure she's done exactly that," said Alicia. "However, during the daylight, her forces are stretched thin. The regent's staff when the sun is in the sky is minimal. Remember what I said after rescuing you from their clutches? The Sabbat, unlike the Camarilla, doesn't use many ghouls. To them, it would be akin to mortals using farm animals as agents.

"Following the same line of reasoning, the cult hasn't infiltrated the government, the police or the

media as thoroughly as the Kindred. So, Melinda can't manipulate those powerful organizations in the hunt. Unquestionably, the terminal harbors a number of the regent's deputies. The Sabbath is not entirely without human resources. Drug dealers, outlaw gangs, and corrupt cops serve when needed. I am sure there are some ghouls at all three major metropolitan airports. They are watching the train stations and bus depots as well. Dealing with them, however, will not be a problem."

"Those phone calls you made yesterday afternoon?" asked Jackson, as he drove the car into a long-term parking lot on the outskirts of the overseas terminal. A moment later he guided their vehicle into an empty parking space.

Alicia nodded as she climbed out of the car. "Let's just say that I believe in making use of all the resources available, Mr. Jackson. Melinda knows I control Varney Enterprises. She is not aware of my ties with organized crime. Nor does she realize the extent of my influence. For her, it is going to be a painful learning process."

They marched into the departure level of the airport, with Jackson in the lead. Assuming that pictures of them had been circulated among Sabbath packs in the region, they both had performed some minor alterations to their appearance. Working on the theory that the best disguise was to attract attention, she had dyed her hair a dazzling shade of platinum blond. Dressed in a bright metallic silver dress and walking on five-inch stiletto heels, Alicia caught the eye of every person in the terminal she

passed. None of them, however, noticed the slight resemblance to the missing business magnate, Alicia Varney.

Jackson had shaved his head and was dressed in trendy hip-hop baggy gray pants and matching loose-fitting vest. A large Maltese cross on a silver chain hung around his neck. Alicia had wanted her assistant to wear pink and purple, but upon seeing the expression on his face, had backed down. With dark sunglasses and a perpetual scowl, Jackson resembled an aging rock star.

"Our flight leaves in a little more than an hour and twenty minutes," he said to Alicia after checking the departure schedule. "I sent our luggage on ahead and confirmed our seat assignments by phone. It's amazing how cooperative the airline personnel are when they know you have loads of money."

"Wealth is power, Jackson," said Alicia quietly. "Don't let anyone try to tell you different. Money does change everything." She paused. "Have you spotted any familiar faces yet?"

The lines on her assistant's face deepened. "I thought maybe the glasses were blurring my vision. From the tone of your voice, I gather there's nothing wrong with my eyes. I feel like I'm at a Syndicate convention. This place is crawling with mob enforcers and hit men from all over the South and the Midwest."

"The magick of modern transportation," said Alicia, sounding content. "Most of those men and women know little or nothing about vampires. They

are ignorant of the war that rages between the Camarilla and the Sabbat. They are merely kine, unimportant pawns in the vast scheme of things."

Jackson chuckled, finally realizing where Alicia was leading. "They're pawns armed with a hell of a lot of modern firepower."

"A telling observation," said Alicia. "Let's go up to the second-floor bar. Things are going to start heating up in a few minutes and I don't want to miss anything."

Alicia insisted on champagne, the best available. She paid cash. Jackson, whose palate was less refined, settled for a beer and a bowl of pretzels. Their seats in the upper-level lounge overlooked the vast expanse of the first floor of the terminal. It was an impressive sight.

"I've counted twenty-two gentlemen and six ladies who I believe are, to put it politely, on retainer for Varney Enterprises," said Jackson, gulping down his Michelob straight from the bottle. "Judging by the luggage they're toting, some informed person warned them that ghouls can take a lot of punishment before taking a fall."

"I was quite clear on that point," said Alicia. "The term *scorched earth* came up a number of times in my conversations with Syndicate bosses. They probably all think I'm incredibly vicious." She smiled. "Not that I'm complaining. It never hurts for underlings to think their boss is a brutal, cold-hearted, insane bitch."

Alicia sipped her champagne. "It was much easier dealing with the Society of Leopold. I didn't

have to be so coy. They filled in the blanks without much prompting. The brothers were quite enthusiastic once I started naming names and places."

Jackson shook his head. "You cut a deal with the Inquisition? The fuckin' Inquisition?"

"I told them it was a small, anonymous offering from one of the faithful who strayed but had since seen the light," said Alicia, her face as innocent as an angel's. "I provided them with the true names and locations of a half-dozen minor vampire servants of the regent who were quartered in the Wall Street area."

Alicia swallowed another taste of champagne. "The hardest task was finding people who could spot ghouls in a crowd. But I located them. Assembling the necessary firepower was easy. Business is slow lately. Everyone needs work."

A film of ice dropped over Alicia's eyes and her voice grew frigid. "Melinda must be shown that Manhattan is not Mexico City. The Sabbath is not so firmly in control of the city and suburbs as she might think. This demonstration will shake her confidence a bit."

"When is the fun slated to begin here?" asked Jackson.

Alicia glanced down at her watch. "The war starts right now," she declared. "Observe."

The roar of gunfire nearly drowned out her last word.

Gang warfare came to Newark Airport in spectacular fashion. As the clock above the terminal

floor touched high noon—an example, Jackson felt sure, of Alicia's sardonic humor—more than two dozen syndicate assassins pulled out of their bags an incredible assortment of high-powered handguns, machine gun pistols, and pump-action shotguns. With a few unhurried steps, they surrounded seven predetermined targets scattered throughout the first floor and opened fire.

The victims included a mechanic, a ticket taker, two bums, even a nun in full habit. The only thing linking the victims was a certain grossness to their features, an unnatural, almost bestial glaze that became more evident as the clothes they were wearing were ripped from their bodies by the constant barrage of bullets.

Alarms and sirens roared throughout the entire complex and were ignored by the killers. Instead, the executioners focused their complete attention on their targets. Astonishingly, though two of the victims went down, the other five still stood. Three of them held guns of their own and were returning fire. The nun had a big burly gunman by the throat and was choking the life out of him. The mechanic had bludgeoned two of his attackers unconscious and, using them as a shield of human flesh, was making for the exit.

"Cainite blood provides humans with extraordinary strength and stamina, Jackson," said Alicia, unconcerned. She drained the champagne in her glass. "It does not, however, bestow immortality."

As if responding to Alicia's words, half a dozen

men stepped out from behind the telephone kiosks at the front of the terminal. Jackson's eyes bulged when he saw the fuel tanks they carried strapped to their backs, the nozzles they held in their hands.

"Flamethrowers," he declared, shaking his head in amazement as a wall of fire engulfed the mechanic and his two prisoners. In operations like this, there was no time for rescue missions. Or mercy. The smell of burning flesh filled the building. "How much did this operation cost?"

"Running similar ventures at all the airports, train and bus stations set me back around twenty million dollars," said Alicia, trying to signal for a refill on her champagne. The bartender, like everyone else in the bar, appeared hypnotized by the holocaust taking place on the first floor. "Mediocre service at this place. Remind me not to leave a tip."

"Twenty million dollars?" repeated Jackson as the bogus nun turned into ash beneath the unforgiving blast of the flamethrowers. She was the last of the ghouls to die. Seven piles of blackened bones marked their passing. "That's an expensive lesson."

Gathering up their wounded, leaving their dead, the syndicate killers disappeared out the front doors of the airport. The clock at the ceiling of the terminal showed five minutes past the hour. The first policemen arrived on the scene at ten after. "It's worth every penny," replied Alicia. "Though I doubt if it will make much of an impression on the Sabbath hierarchy. They never learn. Melinda, though, will get the message. She's the one who matters."

Alicia reached out and gently patted her

assistant on the cheek. "Our gross receipts won't suffer, Jackson. The word is out on the streets. Tomorrow, hookers across the country raise their asking price two bucks. Businesses pay another buck this month for protection. Juice loans jump another percentage point. Call the increases an education tax." Alicia laughed. "The best thing about illegal enterprises is that rates are adjustable at a moment's notice."

Pushing her chair back from the table, Alicia stood up. "We better get moving. I don't want to be late for our flight."

"You expect the authorities are going to permit planes to take off after this carnage?" said Jackson.

"Of course," said Alicia, sounding bewildered and innocent. She frowned, but her eyes were twinkling. "Why shouldn't they? Obviously, what we just witnessed had nothing to do with the operations of this airport. I suspect it was the beginning of a major gang war between competing East Coast crime families. It probably involved control of the drug market. According to the newspapers, there's a fortune to be made in dealing in such stuff. In fact, I'd be willing to wager scenes like this took place all over the metropolitan area this morning."

Jackson sucked in a deep breath. "I wouldn't be surprised if those few bodies that can still be identified by the authorities turn out to be reputed mob gunmen."

Alicia nodded. "I bet you're right, Mr. Jackson. It's terrible what these crime bosses will do for money. They are greedy bastards."

"I've heard a crazy theory," said Jackson, "that certain members of the FBI believe that a solitary criminal mastermind secretly controls all of the major syndicate operations in this country. This latest outbreak of gang warfare should put that notion to rest for the immediate future."

"I should hope so," said Alicia as they walked out of the bar. "Who would be naive enough to believe one man could be that powerful?"

"Man?" asked Jackson, as they strolled down the ramp to the departure gates. "Who said anything about a *man*? Most theorists, based on unconfirmed reports from mob informants, suspect a woman is the genius behind this underworld empire."

"How intriguing," said Alicia, with a knowing smile. "A crime lord in skirts."

"Or a silver dress," said Jackson quietly.

They both laughed.

"By the way," Jackson remarked, as they neared the proper gate, "why are we flying to France?"

"The meeting was arranged a week ago," said Alicia. "I have a date with a friend at a sidewalk café near the Opera House. It's a favorite rendezvous point of ours, and I don't want to be late."

Chapter 3

Sicily—April 1, 1994:

Two vampires stood stiffly before Don Caravelli, Capo de Capo of the Mafia, waiting for him to speak. They had been motionless and silent for the past thirty minutes. Eyes closed in contemplation, the Boss of Bosses had yet to say a word to either Cainite. Don Caravelli liked keeping his underlings in suspense. It put them on edge. He preferred his subjects nervous—they were easier to manipulate.

Don Torazon was short and squat, with wide shoulders, dark hair and a swarthy complexion. His flat, unimpressive face disguised the mind of a master plotter. Before becoming a vampire, he had owned one of Italy's largest banks. Possessing a sardonic sense of humor, he liked telling associates he had been a bloodsucker long before he was a vampire.

On his right was Don Brusca. A massive Kindred, nearly seven feet tall and weighing over three hundred pounds, the Mafia chief exuded brute strength. Thick cheekbones, a prominent nose, and a massive forehead made his face appear as if it were cut from granite. The cut of his expensive suit could not hide the huge muscles of his chest and arms. Before his Embrace, Don Brusca had been a killer,

a murderer for hire. As a member of the Damned, he remained true to his original calling.

Both gangsters were extremely dangerous Cainites. Each had his own specific strengths and weaknesses. They served Don Caravelli well. In the Mafia, however, sometimes service was not enough.

The wall behind the Capo de Capo gave the two vampires something to contemplate while they waited. It was covered with an incredible variety of edged weapons. There were swords, knives, axes, lances, pikes, scythes and sickles. An amazing collection, it was one of the finest assemblages of death-dealing instruments in the world. Don Caravelli knew there were rumors among the rank and file of the Mafia that he had used many of these weapons during his violent rise to leadership of the organization. Others claimed that he was the finest swordsman in the world, a fighter without mercy or forgiveness. The rumors were all true. He had started many of them himself. Others might rule through cunning or politics; he maintained absolute control of his brood by terror.

"In a little more than a week, I will be leaving this citadel for the first time in years to attend a Kindred Conclave," he declared, finally deciding that the pressure had built to the point he desired. His voice was mellow and easy, betraying no emotion. He wanted the pair to relax, but not too much. "The most powerful Princes in Europe plan to be there. I go as the leader of the Mafia and as an elder of the Brujah clan. As you are well aware, this journey is not without its risks."

Opening his eyes, he let his gaze travel back and forth between his two lieutenants. "Such meetings are conducted by Justicars of the Camarilla and their Archons. Violence between clans is strictly forbidden. However, no such rules govern personal vendettas. Oftentimes, Conclaves serve as neutral ground for the settling of blood duels. As you both know, for the past century, I have been involved in such a feud."

He paused, letting the full impact of his words sink in. After him, these two vampires were the most powerful bosses in the Mafia. They were smart, savage, and very determined. If he was to be destroyed, one or the other would assume control of the organization. "For decades, Madeleine Giovanni, of the Clan Giovanni, has sought to destroy me to avenge the death, at my hands, of her father. She is relentless and ruthless and obsessed with my destruction. I will never have peace until she is wiped out of existence."

Don Caravelli smiled. His two assistants, not sure where he was leading, nodded and smiled as well. "I have learned through channels that the notorious Dagger of the Giovanni will be attending this Conclave. Fate at long last has delivered the bitch to me. I fully intend for her to meet the Final Death at this meeting—preferably at my hands."

Don Caravelli laughed, the sound filling the room. "Destroying her is a pleasure I have anticipated for decades. I hope to make her death an extremely painful and extended one. Revenge is sweetest when savored slowly."

He saw no reason to mention his bargain with Elaine de Calinot of Clan Tremere, who had promised him Madeleine's head in return for his slaying the mortal detective, Dire McCann. Don Caravelli was not a fool. He felt confident that he could destroy the Dagger of the Giovanni in a fight. However, he also recognized the fact that the slightest mistake in such a battle would mean his end. Recently, Don Lazzari, his most competent aide, had underestimated Madeleine's skill. It had been his final error.

Killing a human, no matter how powerful a mage, seemed much safer to Don Caravelli than confronting his nemesis. He did think it odd that Elaine de Calinot preferred dealing with Madeleine to facing McCann. Something to do with conflicting magicks, he assumed. The Capo didn't care. The deal had been made. He and the Tremere mage were allies. At least, until the killing was done.

Don Caravelli rose to his feet. "It is possible," he declared solemnly, "though unlikely, that I will not survive this encounter. If so, it is well known that, with the recent elimination of Don Lazzari, one of you two will rise to the position of Capo de Capo of our brotherhood."

There was no longer any humor in his voice. It was time to offer the ultimate gift. "Will it be you, Don Torazon? Or you, Don Brusca?"

Neither vampire said a word. They seemed unsure of what their leader expected them to say. Cautious, cunning men, they guarded their inner

thoughts carefully. Speaking out of turn was risky and neither Cainite believed in taking unnecessary risks.

Each had belonged to the Mafia for more than two centuries. They had been Embraced in the chaotic times before World War One. Don Torazon was the more devious of the two. He specialized in extortion and blackmail. Don Brusca, who often had difficulty controlling the Beast within, handled murder and assassination. Both possessed the necessary skills to run the organization. Individually they schemed in secret for such an opportunity, recruiting less powerful members of the brotherhood to their cause. Neither was foolish enough to openly challenge the Capo for his position. Don Caravelli ruled with an iron fist.

"Well?" asked Don Caravelli, his voice louder. "Well, which of you is it? Who will be my successor?"

"I-I am the one, Don Caravelli," said Don Brusca, surprising the Mafia Lord. Don Caravelli had been sure that Don Torazon, the banker, would speak first.

"No," said Don Torazon, immediately. He stared at his greatest rival in disgust. "My name is respected throughout Europe. I deserve to rule."

"My name," said Don Brusca, turning to face his companion, "is whispered in fear across the continent. Respect means nothing without dread."

"You," said Don Torazon, his lips curling in a sneer, "are an animal and a fool. You cannot control the Beast. Under your rule, the Mafia would collapse like the husk of a drained kine."

Don Brusca snarled, revealing his fangs. His hands curled into claws. "Your blood is mine," he declared, his face a mask of hate.

Don Torazon laughed. Though a foot shorter than Don Brusca, he did not appear concerned. Instead, he looked to Don Caravelli. "My Capo?"

"Two rivals for the leadership of the Mafia would tear our brotherhood apart," said Don Caravelli, stepping away from his desk. "Before I leave for the Conclave, there must be a clear successor. Might makes right. Whoever survives is my choice."

Howling with bloodlust, Don Brusca leapt at Don Torazon. His hands swept through empty air. The other vampire, moving with speed unnatural even for one of the Undead, was behind his rival. Don Torazon's fingers clutched Don Brusca by the neck and squeezed. Hard.

Don Brusca shrieked in unexpected pain. Immediately, he dropped to the floor and rolled, pulling his tormentor with him. Don Torazon had speed but Don Brusca knew the tricks of gutter fighting. They scrambled back and forth across the floor, gouging and wrenching, each trying to tear the other apart. Vampire disciplines meant nothing. The two were equally matched in offensive and defensive powers. It was a battle of Don Brusca's raw strength versus Don Torazon's speed and cunning.

Don Caravelli watched with the casual interest of a spectator at a horse race. It mattered little to him who won or lost. The ultimate prize went to the winner. The Capo de Capo had no favorite.

Bellowing like a wild animal, Don Brusca

struggled to his feet. On his back, his arms wrapped around the big vampire's neck in a stranglehold, was Don Torazon. The smaller Kindred's legs were locked around his rival's waist, securing his position. If Don Torazon could snap Don Brusca's spine, the fight would be over.

Reaching up, Don Brusca grabbed a finger of each of Don Torazon's hands. With a hard jerk, the big vampire broke the grip around his neck. Savagely, he tried to mangle the extended digits of his enemy, but Don Torazon wrenched away before any damage could be done.

Nimbly, the smaller vampire dropped to the floor and seized Don Brusca by the ankles. Wrenching with all of his strength, he sent his opponent staggering. Without pause, Don Torazon lunged upward, butting his head into the small of Don Brusca's back. Caught off balance, the huge vampire crashed face first into the brick fireplace with stunning impact. Don Brusca didn't move. Weird babbling noises came from his throat.

Don Caravelli was impressed. He had never realized Don Torazon possessed such keen fighting skills. Killing mortals was easy. Destroying Kindred was not.

A determined expression on his face, Don Torazon stepped forward, ready to finish the battle. Stone ground against stone. Don Brusca, his eyes glaring madly, whirled. The big vampire's nose was broken, squashed flat against his face. His jaw slanted at the wrong angle and a sliver of bone protruded from his left cheek. The strange sounds

came from his smashed larynx. It didn't matter. What counted were the heavy bricks he held in each hand, ripped right out of the massive fireplace.

Don Brusca's arms swung in short deadly arcs aimed directly at Don Torazon's head. The short vampire, unable to change direction, desperately attempted to duck out of the path of the bricks. He only partially succeeded. His left shoulder absorbed one blow, but the other block slammed into the right side of his skull with deadly impact. Shrieking in pain, he collapsed to the floor at Don Brusca's feet.

Head bobbing up and down like that of a toy doll, Don Brusca half-knelt, half-collapsed in front of his enemy. Mouthing guttural noises, he raised the bricks high into the air. The action left his neck exposed and unprotected. That was all the time Don Torazon needed. The short vampire wrenched a saw-toothed dueling knife from inside his jacket and thrust it with all of his strength into the unguarded flesh.

"Death, you bastard!" cried Don Torazon as he jerked the knife in a fierce ripping motion across the other's throat. Made of the finest steel in the world, the razor-sharp blade sliced easily through skin and bone. There was no escape. Don Torazon had the strength of ten men. Like a piece of rotten fruit, Don Brusca's head toppled off his huge body. The big vampire's eyes were still wide with astonishment and horror when his skull crashed face first into the floor.

With a curse, Don Torazon pushed the decaying

corpse of his rival to the side. Shakily, he climbed to his feet. His right ear was gone, and much of his skull was smashed into pulp, but it didn't matter. Time and human blood healed such wounds. He had survived and Don Brusca was in hell.

"A splendid fight," said Don Caravelli. The Capo de Capo smiled. In his hands rested the massive battle ax from the rear wall. "I made the correct decision. Leaving you behind in this fortress to plot against me while I traveled to the Conclave would have been a terrible mistake."

Don Torazon's hands were just rising in protest when the blade of the ax separated his head from his shoulders.

"Trust no one," said Don Caravelli, addressing the headless corpses of his two most dangerous assistants. "Especially beware of those who might thrust a knife in your back."

He laughed as he wiped the ax clean and replaced it onto the brackets on the wall. "You fools assumed I cared who succeeds me as leader of this brotherhood. The Mafia mattered nothing to me. My only concern was ensuring that no potential rivals arose during my absence."

Don Caravelli walked over to the headless body of Don Torazon. Savagely, he kicked the decaying torso of his former lieutenant. He despised stupidity. "A strong leader remains in power by destroying any possible rivals before they become too ambitious. It is a wise philosophy. Over the past centuries, it has served me quite well."

The two corpses dissolving at Don Caravelli's feet bore mute testimony to the truth of his words.

Chapter 4

Vienna, Austria—April 1, 1994:

Etrius dreamed...

He stood inside a huge cavern. Surrounding him were his companions in peril. Behind them stretched the long, dark tunnel leading to the outside world. To their right, a dozen feet ahead, rested a massive stone sarcophagus, the reason for their presence in this house of stone.

An hour earlier, they had finally located the hidden door on the face of the cliff that blocked passage to the chamber within. To their surprise, it had been guarded only by a massive stone construct, a ponderous golem that moved with neither grace nor speed. Destroying it had been easy. Opening the massive stone door that swung outward had been much more difficult. Still, the task had been completed and in single file, they had descended the sloped passage that brought them to this chamber. No one spoke. Tonight, Tremere would achieve ultimate power. If he had the strength and the courage to seize it.

Etrius was the only member of their inner circle who still had doubts. Though the mages of the Order of Tremere had been vampires for more than a hundred years, he still suspected there were secrets

about the Undead they did not know. His companions had no such fears. Their researches into the Cainite legends had convinced them that the one way for them to achieve proper recognition by the other vampire clans was for their leader to become a member of the Third Generation. That meant that Tremere had to locate one of the fabled Antediluvians and drink his blood, thus gaining his powers. That was the purpose of this expedition.

A decade of searching had uncovered the resting places of four ancient vampires sleeping in torpor. For some reason that Etrius could not remember, they had settled on attacking Saulot, the founder of the mysterious clan known as the Salubri. Whatever the logic, it had proved correct. They were in Saulot's crypt. His stone coffin awaited them.

"Push back the lid of his sarcophagus," commanded a voice from the darkness. The chamber was thick with ancient, powerful magick. No spell or chant would work here. To open the coffin, they needed brute strength. "Working together, you can move it."

Etrius couldn't identify the speaker but somehow it didn't seem to matter. Now that they were inside the tomb, there was no turning back. All of his doubts had vanished during the descent into the earth. He no longer worried about the wisdom of their actions. What was done was done. Saulot must be destroyed so that Tremere could assume his rightful place among the leaders of the thirteen Cainite clans.

"Damned thing is heavier than the pillars of Hercules," declared Goratrix, as he bent his back to the task. "It must weigh tons."

"It must be held in place by Saulot's power," said Meerlinda, the only female of their group. She was straining against the stone lid with all of her might. "Nothing could weigh this much."

"Push," commanded the voice from the darkness as they continued to struggle. "The morning fast approaches. Push."

"How in the name of all the demons in hell does Saulot move this slab?" asked Abetorius. "I see no hinges. The lid remains in place by weight alone. He would have to lift it off from inside the sarcophagus...."

It was a chilling thought, one that should have caused them to pause in their efforts. Yet they did not. An overwhelming passion to finish the job held them in an unbreakable grip. There was no room in their minds for questions. Groaning, cursing, complaining, the seven inner council members continued to struggle with the stone block.

Finally, with a shriek of protesting rock, the lid started to move. "Harder," commanded the voice from the darkness. "Push harder."

Etrius pushed. He had no choice. The stone slab filled his thoughts. Getting it off the coffin was the most important task in the world. The job consumed him, filled him with a frenzy that could not be denied. He strained like a vampire possessed. Or a vampire Blood Bound and forced to obey the dictates of its master.

Inch by inch, the unyielding lid scraped across the top of the coffin. Slowly, the inside of the coffin became visible. A solitary figure, dressed in a cloak of black and silver, lay within. It was Saulot, the Antediluvian, founder of the Salubri clan.

With a crash that shook the entire chamber, the stone slab fell to the floor. The coffin was open. Wildly, the seven council members crowded around the sarcophagus, peering at the sleeping Saulot.

A tall, distinguished man, he appeared completely at ease. There was no sign that he sensed their presence. His arms were folded across his chest, his fingers interlaced in peaceful repose. Etrius could not remember ever before seeing a vampire who looked so relaxed and in absolute harmony with his surroundings.

"Destroy him," whispered the voice from the darkness, as if awed by the presence of the Antediluvian. "Drink his blood before he awakens."

Tremere shoved his way past the seven council members, his hands trembling with suppressed passion. "My destiny awaits," he declared, his eyes burning with unconcealed lust. Etrius noted unconsciously that this voice was not the same as Tremere's. It seemed unimportant.

Cautiously, Tremere put his arms beneath Saulot's head and shoulders. The Antediluvian didn't stir as Tremere slowly raised his body into a sitting position. Etrius felt fingers of fear creeping down his spine. Despite being in torpor, Saulot should have sensed their presence. He should have reacted, returned to consciousness. But, he did not. It was very strange.

Evidently, Etrius was not alone in his feelings. "Drink," ordered the voice from the darkness. "Drink."

Tremere drank. Fangs extended, he bit into Saulot's neck and drank deeply. Time stood still as he drained the elder vampire of his vitae until there was no more. Then, staggering, almost falling, he released the empty shell of Saulot, letting the body fall back into the coffin.

"It burns," said Tremere, his voice thick with emotion. "His blood burns inside me. I can feel the power, the incredible power like fire in my veins."

Shrill demonic laughter filled the cavern. "It is done," someone screamed. "The deed is done."

Etrius, his senses reeling, gripped the edge of the sarcophagus. Tremere had succeeded in his quest. He had diablerized a member of the Third Generation. The Antediluvian Saulot was no more. In his place stood Tremere. The leader of their Order literally glowed with unholy energy. To Etrius, Tremere somehow seemed...bigger. More dangerous. Diabolical.

Then, Etrius glanced into the coffin and noticed Saulot's face.

Dissolution had not set in. Saulot appeared as before, sleeping peacefully in his tomb, his features calm. However, now his lips were curled in a slight, sardonic smile. Moreover, in the center of his forehead, a third eye, an unblinking *fully aware* third eye had opened and stared at the vampires surrounding the sarcophagus.

"The third eye!" Etrius screamed, pointing at

Saulot's face. "*The evil eye!*"

Panic swept through their ranks like a whirlwind. Inspired by an insane fear that could not be quelled, they struggled like maniacs to push the stone lid back onto the coffin. Horror gave them the necessary strength. In minutes, the cover was in place. Yet, there was no escaping the feeling that that monstrous third eye was still watching their every move. Howling in unnamed dread, they swept up through the tunnel leading to the outside of the mountain and out into the night. Behind them, the massive stone door slammed shut, sealing Saulot's resting place forever. Nine of them had entered. Nine of them left.

Etrius woke....

Shaking with horror, he rose from his coffin. A thin sweat of black blood covered his hands and face. He often dreamed of that fateful night over eight and a half centuries ago, but never before in such detail. As in the case of his nightmare about the transformation of the council into vampires, Etrius understood that the dream was more than mere recollection. It was a sending, a message from an unknown player in the eternal game known as the Jyhad.

Etrius was not convinced that the recollection was entirely true. Some elements, he suspected, had been colored by the passage of time. However, there was no denying the fact that nine vampires had descended into Saulot's tomb. The inner council consisted of seven members. Tremere brought the total to eight.

The voice in the shadow, the unseen presence they had accepted without question, made nine. He had been the master schemer who had been at least partially responsible for what had taken place in the chamber. Etrius felt certain that the selection of Saulot as Tremere's victim had involved the same figure.

Beyond any measure, he knew that the mysterious whisperer in the darkness was the Count St. Germain.

Muttering curses, Etrius fingered the heavy steel key that hung by a black cord around his neck. The token unlocked the passageway down to the caverns beneath the Chantry house where Tremere rested in torpor. It never left Etrius' possession. Whenever he grew nervous, he touched the key for reassurance. Tonight, Etrius felt the need for a great deal of reassurance.

He had dreamt of that terrible night in Saulot's crypt hundreds of times before. Always his nightmares had been vague and indistinct. Never before had he remembered St. Germain's role in the events that had taken place. It was yet another example of how the mysterious Count had manipulated and deceived the clan Tremere for nearly a thousand years. And how he remained unsuspected and unnoticed by those he used as pawns.

Etrius paced to and fro in his sanctum. Like most Kindred, he did not believe in coincidences. These dreams, revealing St. Germain's treachery, indicated that major events involving the Count were about

to take place. Or that the such events were already happening. It was not a pleasant thought.

Tremere, the Inner Council, and thus the entire Clan Tremere had served as playing pieces in St. Germain's game for centuries. Etrius seethed with rage. As proud as he was cautious, he hated the notion that he had been exploited with such ease. However, Etrius knew that revenge was best served cold. Anger wasted valuable energy. Logic, not emotion, would ensure the Count's demise.

Elaine de Calinot believed him. She was the only member of the Inner Council who realized the truth. The others were unsuspecting fools. Her plan, set into action, was to convince the elders of the Camarilla that the frightful spectre known as the Red Death was actually St. Germain and had to be destroyed. She was certain that a blood hunt for the Count would ultimately result in his destruction. Etrius was not as positive.

On his own, he had sent Peter Spizzo, a vampire whom he knew to be both ambitious and relentless, hunting for St. Germain. Etrius had promised him a place on the Inner Council if he eliminated the Count. Spizzo had a talent for making the impossible happen. He never failed. Unknown even to Elaine, he remained Etrius' secret weapon.

Already, Spizzo had discovered that St. Germain had been hunting for hundreds of years for the *Apocrypha of the Damned*. Consisting of the fabled lost sections of the *Book of Nod*, the volumes supposedly contained Caine's greatest secrets, as recorded by Seth, the first ghoul. Though Spizzo

feared that St. Germain had located the fragments, Etrius was not so sure. He questioned whether such books truly existed. A hard-headed materialist in his fashion, sometimes Etrius even wondered if Caine himself wasn't merely a convenient legend to explain the existence of the Kindred.

Idly, Etrius debated about whether he should inform Spizzo of his dream. It might be significant that St. Germain had helped choose Saulot as Tremere's victim. Perhaps the Count was an enemy of the Antediluvian. Or he could have been working as an agent of another Third Generation vampire seeking to destroy a rival. In the Jyhad, anything was possible.

Without warning, an unnatural numbness gripped his mind. Etrius recognized the feeling. Another mind was sharing his thoughts, viewing the world through his eyes. In the past, he had always ignored the sensation, believing the presence to be Tremere. Now, he was not so sure.

It might be Tremere. A few nights earlier, when discussing St. Germain with Peter Spizzo, he had been convinced that it was the leader of their clan listening to the conversation. However, in the episode before that, shortly after his first dream about St. Germain, he had not been as certain. It could have been another. Tonight, he felt the same way. Tremere might be sharing his thoughts. Or, it could be an entirely different vampire—with more sinister motives.

With a terrible, sinking feeling, Etrius realized that he couldn't even trust his instincts. His

assumptions might be true—or they could be reversed. He had no way of knowing. Tremere could be spying on him. Or St. Germain. It was maddening.

Cautiously, Etrius focused his gaze on the huge map of the world that covered one entire wall of his sanctum. Most of the planet was divided into seven territories, each controlled by a member of the Inner Council. Letting reflex take over, he mentally started reviewing the countries in their domains. It was an exercise he often used to relax and calm his thoughts. Tonight, it served another purpose. Within seconds, his mental eavesdropper had departed. Still, Etrius was left without a clue to the observer's identity.

It was then, with that thought in mind, that Etrius realized that once again, in this dream, he had not gotten a clear look at the features of the Count St. Germain. The face of the mysterious vampire remained nothing more than a vague memory, always glimpsed in shadow. Having remained in the background, St. Germain was an unknown. The Count could be any of a thousand vampires. He could be a respected member of the Camarilla. The diabolical mastermind might even be a Justicar. Or a leader of the hated Sabbat.

It was a grim reminder to Etrius of the danger he faced. He was entirely on his own, a fly caught in a spiderweb of treachery nearly a thousand years in the weaving. There was no one he could trust. Absolutely no one.

Chapter 5

Paris, France—April 2, 1994:

"Never attribute to chance," declared Phantomas solemnly to a nearby rat, "what can be linked to an ongoing, easily available conspiracy."

The rodent stared with uncomprehending eyes at the incredibly ugly, green-skinned Nosferatu. Phantomas laughed, a shrill, wild sound that bounced off the walls of the huge underground cavern that served as his headquarters. "You appear puzzled, my little friend. Do not despair. You are in good company this evening. Very good company, indeed. Some of the most powerful Kindred in the world share your bewilderment."

Chuckling to himself, Phantomas waddled over to his desk nestled in the center of a vast network of advanced computer systems. Sprawling into his chair, he pulled a thick sheaf of papers from the pocket of his robe. Carefully, the vampire spread the top seven letters across the top of his desk. Eyes sparkling with unconcealed glee, he read through the messages again.

"Poor Etrius," said Phantomas, not sounding particularly forgiving. "None of his fellow Council Members believe him. Most of them think he is insane. What a shame. They lack the necessary paranoia to be true players in the Jyhad."

Phantomas found the seven sheets fascinating. The earliest was from more than a week ago and had been faxed by Etrius to the other six members of the Inner Council. The other pages were all dated from the next night and contained the fax replies to his message. The subject of all the correspondence was the Count St. Germain and his role in the founding of their clan. None of the six letters were sympathetic to Etrius' claims.

The least of the replies, from Elaine de Calinot, declared that she was too busy with affairs in Africa to listen to stories of long ago. The other extreme came from Meerlinda, leader of Clan Tremere in America, reminding Etrius that she had been at the events described and she was quite sure—beyond any possible doubts—that St. Germain had not been involved in or present at the transformation ceremony. She blamed Goratrix for the disaster. Meerlinda went on to suggest that Etrius had lost his grip on reality due to his preoccupation with Tremere's safety and that perhaps it was time for him to relinquish his post to someone more competent. Left unsaid but implied was that Meerlinda was the obvious choice.

The correspondence was highly secret and obviously not meant to be read by anyone other than the members of the Inner Council. Phantomas wasn't worried. He had been perusing confidential documents from all of the Cainite clans for centuries. Years ago it involved great risks, with him forced to hypnotize scribes and spies to obtain the information. Recently, the electronic information

age had made such perils unnecessary. Phantomas loved long-distance telephone lines, faxes and e-mail. Each advance in the communication revolution made his work easier and safer.

Messages once sent by courier and taking days to be delivered were now routinely faxed over the telephone lines. Or they were sent electronically by a computer network. Privacy was guaranteed against unauthorized readings. The scientific wizards who operated the communications systems were emphatic in their assurances. However, hackers never worried about guarantees. They looked on such promises as challenges. No secret was safe from hi-tech computer pirates. And Phantomas was the king of the electronic buccaneers.

An incredibly sophisticated computer system of his design monitored the phone lines of Cainite elders throughout the world. Whenever a vampire leader called or sent a fax transmission to another telephone number under surveillance, a duplication program kicked in. The original message was recorded if it was a conversation. When it was a fax, it was copied electronically and then later transferred to paper. A similar system, able to crack any network safeguards, handled computer e-mail.

Some nights there were only a few messages between the clan elders. Other times, there were many. Phantomas had been too busy lately to keep close track of the communications. Tonight had been the first time he had gone through the conversations and faxes in more than two weeks.

"If Etrius has not gone insane," declared

Phantomas to his rodent audience, "his claim that this clandestine figure, the Count St. Germain, has been manipulating the Tremere clan raises a number of interesting points. Someone with a suspicious mind, someone who takes and correlates data from a dozen different sources to form a conclusion, someone who sees plots and conspiracies everywhere, someone *just like me*, might consider the information a major revelation."

Phantomas chuckled and rubbed his grotesque, clawlike hands together. "Before I draw too many conclusions, I think a brief check in my encyclopedia of famous vampires is in order. Let me see what data I have regarding the Count in question."

It took brief seconds for Phantomas to type St. Germain's name into his computer search system. Instantly, a short biographical paragraph appeared on the green screen. Phantomas' eyes narrowed in annoyance. The lack of credible reference points listed after the article was immediately apparent. The information was based on numerous unconfirmed stories taken from secondary sources. While an overwhelming desire for completeness forced Phantomas to use such hearsay evidence, he considered it much less accurate than sketches based on a half-dozen or more first-hand references.

According to the listing, St. Germain originally appeared in Vienna in 1740, where he quickly gained a cult following among humans as an accomplished alchemist and musician. Many thought he possessed the secret of eternal life, a

claim he did not deny. Oftentimes, his remarks in public contained cryptic references to historical figures, some dating back to ancient Egypt. Other mortals, including government authorities, considered the Count an accomplished trickster and charlatan.

Among the Kindred, he was believed to be a member of Clan Tremere and originally from Transylvania. At least one rumor in the file claimed that St. Germain was a member of the Inner Council who had tired of clan pursuits and had gone off seeking Golconda. However, none of the stories ever actually described him attending Chantry meetings in Vienna and there was no hard evidence linking him to Tremere or his disciples.

After problems in Austria, St. Germain surfaced a few years later in France, where he became a favorite of the Queen. Again, there were rumors of him owning a secret "elixir of life" that granted immortality. Though he was prominent in human society, there was no mention of his visiting the vampire prince of Paris or having any contact with other notable Cainites in France.

Later reports had him in Russia, in Germany, and in Italy. He appeared and disappeared like a will-o-the-wisp. There were rumors of him visiting Africa, along with references to certain explorations and expeditions to the Near East.

In 1784, St. Germain was supposedly killed by unknown assassins while visiting Venice. However, there was little proof that the event actually took place, and Phantomas strongly doubted that it had.

Evidently, St. Germain grew tired of playing with humans and desired to exit with the same flair with which he entered mortal society. His retreat, however managed, was expertly handled, as there was no further mention of him among the Kindred.

"An interesting history," declared Phantomas, focusing his attention on the large gray rat sitting on top of his computer monitor, "but it reveals very little. I suspect much of the true story will never be told. St. Germain is most likely just one of a number of aliases used by this mysterious mastermind. Like many of our race, he changes his name to suit the circumstances. I do think that the connection with Clan Tremere is relevant, though. Especially when the rest of these documents," and Phantomas sorted through the other papers he had retrieved from the fax messages, "are taken into consideration."

The gray rat squeaked and leapt off the monitor. Phantomas shrugged. "I thought they were interesting."

There were more than thirty letters, addressed to the most important Camarilla elders in Europe, including such notables as Lady Anne, Prince of London; François Villon, Prince of Paris; and Gustave Breidenstein, Prince of Berlin. Other than the address and formal title, the content of every missive was the same. Karl Schrekt, Tremere Justicar, as was his right and his duty, was announcing an emergency Conclave of the Kindred to discuss the menace of the Red Death. The meeting was going to be held in approximately one week in Castle Schrekt, a huge 15th-century fortress

that belonged to Schrekt, located in the ancient city of Linz, Austria.

While replies were slow in coming, Phantomas felt certain that nearly all those invited to the Conclave would attend. The leaders of the Kindred were concerned about the Red Death. He was a menace that threatened their very existence. More importantly, they feared incurring the displeasure of Karl Schrekt. Crossing a Justicar was an invitation to the Final Death. Of the seven, Schrekt had earned the reputation of being the most inflexible and ruthless. And he was known for never forgetting an insult.

Phantomas raised his right hand, fingers extended. "Point one," he declared, folding down his first digit. "Etrius, a member of the Inner Council of the Tremere, suspects that his clan has been manipulated for centuries by a mysterious vampire known as the Count St. Germain. Furthermore, it seems likely that many members of the Tremere, perhaps including the most powerful among them, are unwittingly Blood Bound to this stranger. Since none of the other Council members believe Etrius, he must act on his own.

"Two," he continued, folding down his second finger, "Karl Schrekt, Justicar and member of Clan Tremere, calls a Conclave to discuss another enigmatic figure, the Cainite who calls himself the Red Death. While Justicars act independently of their clan, no one is naive enough to believe that Schrekt is not in constant communication with the Inner Council. He is especially close with Etrius. It

therefore seems quite likely that this meeting concerns not just the Red Death but the mysterious St. Germain as well.

"Three," he recited, folding a third finger. "The Red Death somehow knew the exact moment to launch its first attacks on the Kindred. Using the Teleportation discipline, the monster arrived in the proper unoccupied location while everyone's attention was focused elsewhere. It was as if the Red Death could see what was taking place in the area beforehand."

Phantomas paused. "A Blood Bond of sufficient power enables the master to see through the eyes of its pawn. It is quite useful in preparing sneak attacks like these. As best as I can determine, whenever a visit from the Red Death occurred, a member of Clan Tremere was present beforehand. Sheer coincidence, or advance planning? I suspect the latter."

The vampire bent its fourth finger, closing its hand into a fist. "Fourth and most important. I know that the Red Death is an ancient Cainite once worshipped in Egypt as Seker, Lord of the Underworld. He is a member of the Fourth Generation, for only a Methuselah possesses the necessary power to master the Teleportation discipline. His lineage is unknown to me, though I have suspicions.

"If we assume that Etrius is correct and the Red Death is linked with Clan Tremere, he is therefore also connected somehow with the death of Saulot. The ties are tenuous, I realize, but they do exist."

Phantomas slammed his clenched fist onto the table that held his computer monitor. "Mixing these elements together and applying strict logic, what was vague and mysterious becomes obvious. The veil of secrets constructed over the centuries by Seker is ripped to pieces. I know who the Red Death really is. More importantly, I know what he plans to do next. The only problem," and Phantomas' voice grew uncertain and troubled, "is that I don't know how to stop him."

Chapter 6

New York, New York—April 2, 1994:

"I am going out for a few hours, Darrow," said Alexander Vargoss. There was a hint of menace in his voice. "I wish to observe the attractions of this notoriously sinful city up close. Make sure you are here when I return."

"Where would I bloody go?" replied Jack Darrow, his voice steadier than his nerves. Something terrible lurked behind his prince's eyes, something unholy. What once could be said in jest no longer could be said at all. Alexander Vargoss, Prince of St. Louis and elder of the Ventrue clan, had undergone a radical shift in personality. Not a turn for the better, in Jack Darrow's opinion. "I'm not stupid enough to wander into a blood bar. Too many friggin' Sabbat vampires in Manhattan. Not to mention those damned Lupines. Fightin' werewolves ain't my idea of a fun evening."

Darrow hesitated. He decided a dash of respect was in order. "Besides, your word is law, Prince. I don't do nothin' or go anywhere without your permission."

Vargoss nodded, as if waiting for the correct response. "I know that, Darrow. You truly are a loyal servant. That's why you still exist, unlike those

other traitors who thought to deceive me. You are not foolish enough to try to serve two masters." The prince's voice turned to ice. "It is a lesson I'd advise you not to forget."

"I'm faithful to you alone, Prince," lied Darrow, trying to keep his voice from trembling. It was yet another veiled threat. He felt certain that Vargoss knew of his ties with the Mafia. The prince constantly dropped hints that he was aware that Darrow was a spy reporting back to the crime empire. Yet, though he made numerous oblique references to Darrow's dual loyalty, Vargoss left him alive and unharmed while destroying nearly all of his other retainers. "You can trust me."

"I trust no one," said Vargoss. He stepped to the front door of their hotel room. He smiled. "*No one*. It is a philosophy I advise you to adopt."

"Wise words, my Prince," said Darrow, bending his head in a short bow to hide his expression of contempt. He didn't need Alexander Vargoss lecturing him on trust. Like most vampires, Darrow was extremely paranoid. He was convinced that everyone was out to get him. Thus, over the decades, he had worked with confederates and allies, but no partners. He had managed to survive for over a hundred years following the dictates of one man—Jack Darrow. He had no plans to suddenly reverse that philosophy. "I will await your return."

Without another word, Vargoss was out the door and gone.

Darrow counted to twenty, giving the prince plenty of time to change his mind and to return to

their suite. Satisfied that Vargoss was on his way elsewhere, Darrow slipped out the door and headed for the emergency stairwell.

The corridor of their hotel was deserted. A drab, sterile edifice in downtown New York, not far from Madison Square Garden and Penn Station, the building was managed by ghouls Blood Bound to a member of the Giovanni clan. The inn served as a waystation for vampires on their way to Europe. Payment was in advance and no questions asked. It offered no amenities and little service. It did, however, guarantee safety within its walls. For most Cainites traveling in a hostile environment, that was enough. A major battleground between the forces of the Sabbat and the Camarilla, New York was considered deadly territory by most vampires. It was not a place Darrow would normally choose to visit.

Each morning, coffins containing guests were loaded onto a truck traveling to Kennedy Airport, where they were transferred to a special cargo plane flying to Berlin. It was the fastest and easiest method for Cainites to cross the Atlantic. The flight was another Giovanni operation, and the pilot and crew were also ghouls. Strictly neutral in the war between the Sabbat and the Camarilla, the Giovanni were content to take money from both sides. Tomorrow, Darrow and his master were scheduled for the crossing.

Just a few days before, the prince, with Darrow's assistance, had destroyed his own headquarters, the suburban St. Louis night spot known as Club Diabolique, by fire. Afterward, Vargoss blamed the

crime on the fiend known as the Red Death. Sanctimoniously, the prince swore vengeance against the monster he claimed was responsible for the disaster.

Less than twenty-four hours later, a summons arrived from Europe. The Tremere Justicar, Karl Schrekt, was holding an emergency Conclave in a week to investigate the menace of the Red Death. Vargoss' presence was required. Arrangements were made for the prince and Darrow, his bodyguard, to travel to New York, and then from there, to Austria. It was all very neat, quite precise. To Darrow, it was a little too neat, too precise.

The bodyguard watched and waited and asked no questions. He knew that Vargoss, not the Red Death, had torched the Club. Equally disturbing was the fact that the prince had been aware of the upcoming Conclave the day before it was announced. To Darrow, those facts indicated a conspiracy at the highest levels of the Camarilla. Not sure of the consequences, Darrow reported the truth as he understood it to the Mafia. And was ordered, in no uncertain terms, to keep a close watch on Alexander Vargoss.

Cautiously, Darrow hurried through the hotel lobby and onto the street. He scanned the thoroughfare anxiously for the prince. With a grim smile of satisfaction, Darrow spotted Vargoss a hundred feet away. The prince was traveling on foot, heading north, directly toward Times Square. Locating Vargoss was easy. The dangerous part of his mission was going to be following him.

If Vargoss ever suspected Darrow was on his trail, it would mean the Final Death for the bodyguard. Darrow had no illusions about matching his power against that of the prince. Vargoss was deadly. He could crush a vampire like an insect. Or worse, as demonstrated recently—burn him to ashes with the touch of a hand. As he left the shelter of the hotel entrance, Darrow wondered for the hundredth time why he didn't just start walking in the opposite direction and never come back. Vanishing into the slums of New York wouldn't be hard. There were hundreds of places one could hide and never be found. In the past hundred and fifty years, Jack Darrow, ex-sailor for the Crown, had become an expert at disappearing when necessary.

He doubted that Vargoss considered him important enough to hunt down. It wasn't the prince's vengeance he feared. There was another he served who was without forgiveness.

Jack Darrow had been Embraced by an ambitious naval officer, Sidney Carstairs, in 1850. The vampire had bold plans and needed someone tough and resourceful to protect his back. Darrow had been his choice. Though Carstairs was a member of the Brujah clan, he felt no particular loyalty to his brethren. Nor did he feel any necessity to share his schemes with clan elders. Brujah were notoriously independent, and Carstairs was typical of the line. He was vaguely aware that his aspirations crossed those of a certain Don Caravelli, leader of a band of Italian outlaws, but he didn't care. Not until the night that he and Darrow, returning to his estate

from a midnight jaunt, were ambushed by half a dozen Brujah thugs.

Carstairs' cries for clan justice and mercy were greeted with hoots of laughter. He was bound, then nailed with steel stakes to a huge cross to await the deadly kiss of the morning sun. Darrow, his childe, and therefore guilty by association, was given a choice: become part of the Mafia and survive, or join his sire in the Final Death.

Darrow, practical and not ready to quit the world, viewed it as no choice at all. Switching allegiance wasn't difficult, especially with his ex-master shrieking in horror and pain a score of feet away. It was a lesson that Darrow never forgot. Crossing Don Caravelli, leader of the Mafia, was a mistake made only once.

Shaking his head to banish old memories, Darrow focused his energy on Alexander Vargoss. The Mafia expected detailed reports on the Prince's mysterious activities. It was Jack Darrow's job to provide them. Don Caravelli accepted no excuses. The price for failure was the Final Death.

Trailing Vargoss wasn't difficult. The prince walked at a brisk but unhurried pace. Though it was three a.m., the streets of downtown Manhattan were still crowded with people. Vargoss, dressed in a stylish charcoal gray suit, drew a few stares but otherwise attracted no attention. No beggars or thieves approached him. The prince had a certain presence that strangers dared not penetrate. The lowlifes of Times Square instinctively sensed that messing with Alexander Vargoss was bad business.

Darrow possessed no such aura. He discouraged meddlers and pests in a much more straightforward manner. Street people scurried from his path in superstitious panic. Cheap hoods and gang members gave him a quick glance then stepped back, their gaze fixed on the sidewalk. Even the persistent chanting of the Far Eastern cult members turned silent as Darrow strode past. Vargoss inspired respect. Darrow inspired fear.

A big, burly figure, well over six feet tall, the bodyguard dressed in black leather pants, black boots, and an open black leather vest. He appeared unaffected by the cold winds that whistled down the Manhattan streets. Dozens of large tattoos, blue, red and black, covered his pale white skin. His dark hair, pulled straight back and tied in a knot, his eyebrows that met over his nose, and his narrow, pointed beard combined to give his face a demonic appearance. Lips curled in a perpetual snarl, eyes blazing with an unholy fire, Jack Darrow exuded menace.

Darrow was tough as brass knuckles. He was a dangerous fighter, hardened by a century of conflict. Confident of his own abilities, he also was aware of his limitations. A veteran of hundreds of riots, brawls and altercations, Darrow understood that the best conflicts were the ones avoided.

Vargoss walked along Broadway as if the street belonged to him. Despite his claim of curiosity, he paid no attention to the bright lights of the world's wickedest city. His pace never slowed as he passed the numerous live sex shows, the theaters

advertising snuff films, the topless and bottomless bars with their barkers loudly hawking "lap dancers to make your wildest fantasies come true." The prince was intent on his destination and nothing else. He was going somewhere—and it was not a sightseeing trip.

Staying two blocks behind his quarry, Darrow kept pace. He hugged the shadows, though the prince never turned. Like Vargoss, he was singularly unimpressed with the sights and sounds of degeneracy. Except for the improvements of technology and cosmetic surgery, modern day Times Square offered the same charm as the brothel row of nineteenth-century London. Sex, despite the glossy packaging and display, did not change over the years. Nor had the depths of depravity sunk any lower. Only the names and accents were different.

The crowds thinned out to a few drunks once Vargoss crossed 45th Street. Darrow, cautious that he not be noticed, was forced to drop further and further behind. He hoped that the prince did not have much further to travel. Staying hidden among the concrete goliaths of midtown was difficult. Remaining out of sight as they made their way into the better section of town would be nearly impossible. And not far ahead was Central Park, the deadly gathering point of New York City's werewolf population. This neighborhood was not safe for vampires.

At Fiftieth and Broadway, Vargoss turned to the east. The prince was walking faster now, leading Darrow to speculate that he was approaching his

goal. When Vargoss passed Radio City Music Hall, Darrow muffled a curse. Though he was no expert on New York geography, the bodyguard had a terrible suspicion he knew where Vargoss was heading. A few minutes later, his worst fears were confirmed as the prince hurried down the steps leading to the lower level of Rockefeller Center.

Creeping to the railing that served as a barrier to the daytime tourist crowds, Darrow inched his head up to the railing. The complex was deserted. Fools who wandered about alone late at night this near to Central Park rarely survived till morning. The famous arena was known as a tourist mecca by day, a death trap by night. None of which worried the prince of St. Louis.

In the center of the huge courtyard that served as an ice rink during the winter months stood Alexander Vargoss. Facing him was a woman. She, also, was a vampire. Darrow recognized her immediately. He could not believe his eyes.

Not only was Darrow the bodyguard for Alexander Vargoss, he served as his security chief as well. It was his job to know his master's enemies. The list included those leaders of the Sabbat known to the Camarilla. Topping that deadly register was the woman now engaged in deep conversation with Prince Vargoss. Her name was Melinda Galbraith. Considered one of the most dangerous vampires in the world, she was the regent of the Sabbat.

Staring at Melinda, Darrow recalled unconfirmed rumors of her vanishing in the earthquake that hit Mexico City six months earlier. With a shrug of his

big shoulders, he brushed the tales from his thoughts. The regent appeared to be all too real.

Flattening his body against the concrete wall that surrounded the Center, Darrow extended his sense of perception out toward the couple. He was very careful. Melinda was notorious for her cruelty. Dying did not appeal to Jack Darrow. Years of torture first enchanted him even less.

"...the last pockets of resistance on Long Island," were the first words Darrow heard. It was Melinda speaking. "The wilder ones rejected the dictates of my new order. They had dreams of setting up an anarch free state. Justine was tough and exceedingly cruel. To her mix, I added my own contribution: speed. Justice needed to be swift. A few vampires drawn and quartered, with their individual limbs and heads tossed into a raging fire, made a strong impression. The rebellion ended as quickly as it started."

"Very good," replied Vargoss. Both of their voices were soft, almost muffled, but audible. "I was not worried, merely concerned. The revised plan proceeds on schedule?"

"You expected anything less?" asked Melinda. "Our greatest talent lies with our unique ability to instantly adapt and change ourselves and our course of action based on the circumstances."

Both vampires laughed, though Darrow wasn't sure why.

"The meeting?" asked Vargoss. "A date has been set?"

"I called it for a week and a day from today,"

replied Melinda. She muttered a name Darrow was unable to catch. "...Objected to a gathering of all the major players of the cult in one location, but I insisted. After all, I am the regent of the Sabbat."

Again, both vampires laughed. Darrow felt uneasy. There was more to this secret rendezvous than Vargoss betraying the Camarilla and turning to the Sabbat. An unspoken bond linked the two Cainites in a manner he couldn't fathom. They shared a common agenda. It was as if they were *allies*.

"The trap is set?" asked the prince. "What about the Varney woman? I gather she is still at large. The news is filled with reports of sudden outbreaks of gang violence at the airports and train stations."

"Anis taunts me," said Melinda. "She controls a vast network of mortal agents whom she uses with extreme effectiveness. Matching her skill is impossible. Fortunately, I don't need to play the game. Her efforts are minor irritations. The only way she can stop us from seizing absolute control of the Sabbat is by making an appearance at the meeting here in New York next week." The regent laughed. "If she dares, I will destroy her."

Darrow shook his head in bewilderment. Anis, the legendary Queen of Night? Control of the Sabbat? He didn't understand what he was hearing. Nor did he like it.

"Do not underestimate her," said Vargoss. "We all did. Remember Washington."

"I remember," said Melinda. Even using his Auspex power, Darrow could detect the anger in the

regent's voice. "There is only so much energy Anis can channel through her puppet without burning the woman's body to a cinder. In Washington, Varney was aided by those pesky robots and Lameth's agent, Dire McCann. Standing alone, she is no match for me. No human is."

Darrow's eyes bulged in astonishment. First Anis, now Lameth, the Dark Messiah. Another legend, somehow linked with the human detective, Dire McCann. It seemed unbelievable, but somehow he knew Melinda Galbraith wasn't mistaken.

"Beware," said Vargoss. He sounded unconvinced. "Anis is no fool. She must have some countermeasure planned."

"I'm not worried," said Melinda. "New York is mine now. I control the city. Any allies she had are destroyed. Making it past my agents into my headquarters will be a challenge. Though I almost hope she survives. Her appearance at the gathering would capture the attention of the four Seraphim of the Black Hand. The distraction would suit our plan quite well."

Melinda laughed, a harsh, cruel noise without a trace of humanity. "The trap is set and ready to be sprung. Yours, by far, is the much greater challenge. Dozens of elders will be at the Conclave."

"The fools suspect nothing," said Vargoss. "Most will arrive and depart without sensing any change. All goes exactly as we hoped. In less than ten days, control of the Camarilla will be ours."

"You asked me about Anis," said Melinda. "What about Lameth? He is the more dangerous of the two."

"The doings of the Dark Messiah remain a mystery," replied Vargoss. "However, I would be quite surprised if Mr. McCann doesn't make an appearance at the Conclave next week. We are preparing a special welcome for him."

"The detective has confederates among the Cainite race," said Melinda. Darrow thought he detected a mocking tone to her voice. "According to my sources, a certain Alexander Vargoss told the Assamite assassin known as the Dark Angel to protect him. Plus, he possesses mage powers."

"Alliances have been formed to strip McCann of his protectors," replied Vargoss. "We are prepared for any possibility. If and when a final confrontation takes place, he will stand alone. As you stated about Alicia Varney, despite the forces he controls, the detective is only human. He merely serves as agent for Lameth. No mage can defeat the combined might of two elder vampires. His fate is sealed."

"A little more than a week until we take control of the Sabbat and the Camarilla," said Melinda.

"Ten days to our final triumph," said Vargoss. "The world will be ours. Forever. And neither the Dark Messiah nor the Queen of Night can do a thing to stop us."

To Darrow, listening with a mixture of horror and amazement, it sounded less like a promise than a threat.

Chapter 7

Tel Aviv, Israel—April 2, 1994:

Madeleine stepped into Moses Maimonides' library. As always, she wore a plain black slip dress with a solitary silver necklace. With her straight black hair and pale white features, she looked more like a lost and lonely teenager than a century-old vampire. "You asked to see me, respected sir?"

"Yes, I did," said the mage. He was sitting behind his desk; a massive leather-bound book lay open in front of him. In a large oak chair at his side sat the female mage known as Judith. She smiled and nodded at Madeleine. "Please come in and sit down. Make sure you shut the door. I want our discussion to be private."

Madeleine did as she was told. Raised by the strict code of the Giovanni, she treated her elders, whether they be Cainites or mortals, with deference and respect. Maimonides looked directly at her from across the huge desk. "Please do not call me 'respected sir'. I prefer to be addressed as Rambam."

"As you wish, respect...Rambam," said Madeleine. Her gaze briefly swept across the room. "I am amazed at the speed with which your home has been restored. After the events of last night, I thought it would be months before it would be repaired."

"Possessing no physical skills myself, I am constantly astonished at what can be done by dedicated craftsmen," said Rambam, chuckling. "Though, honesty forces me to admit that luck played a major role in facilitating the repairs. By an astonishing coincidence, all of the materials necessary for rebuilding my home were available in government warehouses throughout the city. In an equally improbable turn of events, a number of carpenters employed by the Interior Department had just completed a major renovation job nearby and were immediately assigned to the project."

Rambam folded his hands together, almost as if in prayer. His voice sounded solemn. "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Madeleine couldn't help but smile. "I suspect that much of that luck came about through your incredible ability to twist reality to suit your purposes. I believe the proper phrase is 'God helps those who help themselves'."

"Perhaps," said Rambam, "I jostled the project in the proper direction. Nothing major, of course, merely an insignificant and unnoticed push. One cannot be too careful with the dangers of upsetting the natural balance and creating Paradox."

Madeleine nodded. Her clan consisted of vampires and necromancers. She understood the perils of being a mage. "You wanted to speak with me," she said, changing the subject. "Without my companions present?"

"Correct," repeated Rambam. "McCann, at my request, took Elisha and Flavia with him to make

arrangements for the next stop on your journey. He wants to travel to Switzerland. There is a certain being with whom he wants to confer. I believe he plans to tell your companions that you needed to confer with your sire and will join them later. Ezra is tending to business in their home cities. Judith requested that she be allowed to sit in at this meeting. I agreed, as it concerns her as well as you, and I value her opinion. We three should be free from interruptions for the next hour."

"What do you want?" asked Madeleine. "I really should not be here. My mission is to guard Dire McCann. If anything happened to him while I was conferring with you, it would be impossible for me to explain to my grandfather, Pietro. He expects perfection from me."

"I understand," said Rambam. "However, your mission has taken an odd turn, has it not? You seem to have become involved with my pupil, Elisha. Last night, you saved his life when Azazel attacked. Several times, in fact. In this very study, you indicated a willingness to sacrifice your own existence for his. Like my colleague, Ezra, I find these actions quite unusual for a vampire. Especially taking into account your reputation as a merciless Giovanni assassin."

"It was quite noticeable," added Judith.

"I suspect lying to two of the greatest sages ever to walk the earth would be a waste of time," said Madeleine.

"Nicely stated," said Rambam. "And quite true. Judith's powers are quite formidable. For myself, I

will merely say that I can immediately separate the truth from fiction. Nor do any of the vampire disciplines such as Majesty or Presence work against me. I cannot be deceived."

Madeleine smiled. "How do you cope with Dire McCann?"

"Mr. McCann is very careful in what he does and does not say," said Rambam, with a smile of his own. "He conceals secrets extremely well. Sometimes, I am not sure that he knows their answers. We can discuss the detective at greater length, if you wish, in another conversation. For the present, please address my question. Your reply is quite important. It is literally a matter of life and death."

Madeleine nodded, her features turning serious. Trained in deception and deceit, she realized, looking into the depths of Maimonides' eyes, that none of her tricks would work on the mage. Whatever the consequences, she had to tell the truth.

"To understand my recent actions," she began, "you must know *who* I am and what made me the *way* I am. Otherwise, nothing else makes sense."

Rambam nodded but said nothing. He waited patiently as she gathered her thoughts. Judith likewise made no sound. She was Rambam's shadow.

"I am Madeleine Giovanni, of the clan Giovanni," said Madeleine. At first, the words were difficult to say, but the more she spoke, the easier it became. She had held the truth inside her for too long. It felt good, it felt right, to finally reveal her innermost feelings to someone else. Someone,

though little more than a stranger, seemed to care.

"My father was Daniel Marista Giovanni. For centuries, he faithfully served his father, Pietro Giovanni, as a ghoul. Finally, a little over a hundred years ago, the clan elders decided that he should be Embraced and become a member of the Undead. As was the custom with our family, before his transformation, Daniel married and fathered a child—me. In such a manner, the bloodline of the clan continued from one generation to another.

"My mother died giving birth to me. My father, who had during the intervening months become a vampire, was busy with clan affairs and was rarely about. His visits with me over the next decade were short and without feeling. I was raised by a governess in a harsh, cruel environment, surrounded by vampires, necromancers and ghouls. Knowing nothing better, I survived. I had no friends, no interests other than the family business. Clan Giovanni was my life. It was understood that when I reached the proper age, I would marry some wealthy or important financier to bring new blood into the clan. My destiny was set from the day of my birth. Until my father was killed."

Madeleine paused, faced with an uncomfortable truth. "Before that occurred, I accepted my fate with the blind trust of a child. I existed but I had no reason for living other than to satisfy the demands of my family. I knew nothing of love, of joy, of passion, even of sorrow. I had no feelings until my father was executed by Don Caravelli. Then, and only then, did I experience a true emotion. *I hated.*"

"A life without love?" said Judith. "How terrible for you."

Madeleine shook her head defiantly. "Daniel Giovanni never meant anything to me. He had been my biological parent, no more. But, by killing him, Don Caravelli somehow intruded into my space, my world. He offended the honor of my clan, my honor. An overwhelming, all-consuming rage filled the emptiness inside of me. From that moment on, my entire existence focused on revenge. For the first time in my life, I had a purpose, a reason to exist.

"For the next twelve years, I trained rigorously. At first, my grandfather tried to discourage me. But once he realized I could not be swayed, I could not be stopped, he changed his mind and agreed to cooperate. Always practical, I think he accepted the inevitable and decided to profit from my stubbornness.

"Since I desired to become an assassin, a killer, a destroyer, he hired the greatest experts in those arts available. I learned my skills from the greatest terrorists and saboteurs in the world. Day and night, for more than a decade, I worked, until there was no more I could learn.

"That was when I asked Pietro Giovanni, my grandfather, father of Daniel, for the final gift. As was my right, by the clan ritual of Blood and Revenge, I requested that I be Embraced. Only as a vampire did I stand any chance of destroying Don Caravelli. It was a petition my grandfather could not deny. On my twenty-third birthday, having never truly sampled life, never experienced love, I became a member of the Undead."

Rambam closed his eyes, a thoughtful expression on his face. "From what Elisha told me, I gather your father's murder remains unavenged?"

"For more than eight decades, I have served as the Dagger of the Giovanni," said Madeleine. "Hundreds of enemies of my clan, mortal and Cainite, have perished by my hand. Yet Don Caravelli has managed to evade my powers. He still survives. He is my bane."

"As Judith observed," said Rambam, "a remarkably depressing tale. But I am not sure how your story relates to my question."

"A few weeks ago," continued Madeleine, "my sire, Pietro Giovanni, sent me to America. His instructions were brief. 'Protect the mortal named Dire McCann. Protect him at all costs from his enemies.'"

"The enigmatic Mr. McCann," said Rambam. "How fascinating to learn he has such close ties with the Giovanni."

"While searching for the detective, I encountered three runaway teenagers." A brief smile crossed Madeleine's lips. "Actually, they encountered me. They tried to steal the truck I was using for transportation cross-country. For a reason I did not totally comprehend, instead of killing them, I recruited the trio as my helpers."

"Your lost youth?" said Rambam quietly.

Madeleine nodded pensively. Rambam instinctively seemed to sense her innermost thoughts. "I suppose their pain stirred feelings within me. The debris of modern civilization, the

three boys had no one other than each other. Their childhood had been stolen from them, just as mine was taken from me. I could not abandon them to fate. Just as I could not allow Don Caravelli to escape punishment for the destruction of my father, I could not let those children be crushed by circumstances."

"Despite your hatred," declared Rambam, "there still exists within you a spark of humanity. Never forget that. Even among the Damned there is still hope for redemption."

"Darkness and light," said Judith. "Sin and forgiveness. One has no meaning without the other."

There was a strange expression on Madeleine's face. Her eyes were dark and clouded with emotion. "I tried for days to mentally explain away my feelings for the boys. It didn't work. I recognized that I was lying to myself. Needing to concentrate on the issue at hand, I pushed the entire situation out of my mind. I thought it best under the circumstances." She paused. "Then I met Elisha."

It was difficult for Madeleine to speak but she forced herself to continue. "As soon as I was introduced to Elisha, I sensed his power. In the course of my adventures for Clan Giovanni, I had encountered several mages. None of them burned with such incredible mental energy. I perceived his interest in me. Being a loyal member of clan Giovanni, I immediately said what I could to encourage his attention. Convincing such a powerful mage to cooperate with our clan would

have been a major coup. He was young and naive and quite gullible."

"I assume your training included the art of seduction," said Rambam, laughing softly.

"Of course," said Madeleine. "Though I was not a particularly adept pupil. Having never experienced sex or love, it was difficult for me to simulate either."

"A deficiency that has not stopped many other women from pretending to be overwhelmed by both," said Judith, laughing.

"Elisha is filled with the romanticism of youth," said Rambam, "but his experience in the material world is as limited as yours. The two of you make an interesting pair."

"I soon realized that," said Madeleine. "His innocence made him charming. Despite my training, I found myself liking Elisha. He desired me, but yet he respected me. We talked and he listened to what I had to say. Elisha treated me like a person, not a thing." Her voice grew soft. "Not like one of the Undead."

"As you stated," said Rambam, "he is a naive and guileless youth. He has not yet grown callous from the cruelty that exists everywhere."

"I wanted his companionship," said Madeleine. "I wanted him to like me, to be my friend. After a century of being alone, I needed someone to care."

She hesitated. "Still, I understood his importance to the Giovanni. I witnessed the potency of his blood that night in Washington. A taste of it healed Flavia in an instant. He was a rare

prize. I found myself torn between my own needs and those of my clan."

"Elisha comes from an ancient line of mages," said Rambam, his eyes twinkling. "Over the centuries, many of his ancestors studied with me. I keep a close watch on his family."

Madeleine's eyes widened, immediately realizing what Rambam was implying. "He is your descendant?"

"His heritage is unimportant to this conversation," said Rambam, firmly.

Judith laughed. "Caught by your own words, teacher. You underestimate Madeleine."

Rambam snorted in annoyance. "Sometimes you talk too much, Judith. A habit you share with your brother." He looked at Madeleine. "Please return to your story."

"Before I could come to any decision regarding them, the three boys I had befriended were attacked by Mafia scum. One child was killed. Another was taken by Don Lazzari, assistant to Don Caravelli, to provide entertainment. The third, fortunately, escaped. The last child was able to provide me with enough information to allow me to rescue his companion and exact final justice on the crime lord."

A hardness returned to Madeleine's voice. "Saving the children made me understand I could not betray Elisha to my clan—to be manipulated, corrupted and ultimately destroyed. He trusted me, as the children had trusted me, and I would not forsake him."

There was steel in her tone. "I have not. I will not."

"You saved his life the other night," said Rambam. "At a risk to your own existence."

"I did what I had to do," said Madeleine. "To me, there was no choice involved."

"That spark I mentioned is obviously a flame," said Rambam. "My friend, Ezra, is correct. You care for Elisha. You care for him a great deal."

Judith nodded. "Even vampires can fall in love," she declared.

"I sacrificed any chance I had for love a century ago," said Madeleine, her voice flat. "No matter what my feelings, I am forever damned."

"In this world," said Rambam quietly, "there are no absolutes. There is a spell, known to a select few, that reverses the Embrace. It requires great powers and many days of preparation. Two mages working in tandem are required. I am one of the handful of mages who can perform it. Judith serves as my assistant."

"Dire McCann mentioned such a spell on our trip across the ocean," said Madeleine, a mixture of awe and disbelief in her voice. "I thought he was inventing myths to distract me."

"Judith and I have executed the spell twice before," said Rambam. "It works—sometimes. Moreover, while the subjects become mortal, they retain many of their Cainite powers, as well as incredibly elongated life spans."

"You—you would perform this incredible ritual—for me?" asked Madeleine.

Rambam smiled. "If not for you, for Elisha."

"The price?" asked Madeleine. "Everything has a price."

"Perhaps for the Giovanni," said Rambam, laughing. "Not for me. Moses Maimonides does what he wants without regard to payment."

"When?" said Madeleine. "When can this miracle be done?"

"As soon as you like," said Rambam. "If you want, we can start making the preparations tonight. That is why Judith returned."

Madeleine sat still for a minute. Slowly, ever so slowly, she shook her head. "I cannot. Not now. Not yet. Though there is nothing in the world I desire more, I must remain as I am. Some night, Don Caravelli and the Dagger of the Giovanni must meet. One of us will be destroyed. Fate demands it. If I survive that encounter, then we can talk. Only then."

"Revenge means that much to you?" asked Rambam.

"Revenge is unimportant," said Madeleine. "*Honor is what matters.* I pledged my soul that I would eliminate Don Caravelli. My clan, my sire, expect it from me. Even for the gift of life itself, I cannot break my word."

Rambam shook his head. "I admire your determination, if not your wisdom. So be it. The choice is yours. The path to mortality remains open. Remember, though, the spell is a secret known to but a special few. If I perish, this opportunity dies with me."

"Then," said Madeleine, with a smile, "I will pray for your continued good health."

Chapter 8

Tel Aviv, Israel—April 2, 1994:

"We're going *where*?" asked Flavia. "And why?"

"To Bern, Switzerland," said McCann. He held up a thick envelope. "Here are the airplane tickets. We leave tomorrow shortly after sunset. The flight will put us down in plenty of time for you and Madeleine to find shelter before morning."

Elisha, McCann, and the Dark Angel were sitting around a table at a small sidewalk café less than a mile from Rambam's house. The detective had left instructions for his two companions to meet him there after sundown. Madeleine, according to McCann, was due later. After days without contact, she needed to call her sire in Venice and report.

Elisha was dressed casually in blue jeans and a pullover Notre Dame sweatshirt. Flavia, requested by McCann to dress inconspicuously, wore low heels, a navy blue skirt and light blue blouse. Nonetheless, she held the attention of every man in the outdoor restaurant.

Elisha beckoned to a waiter. "Coffee," he ordered. "The house wine for my two friends."

The young man grinned as the server walked away. "Protective coloration. Besides, the house brand is so bad that if anyone sees you pouring it on the ground, they won't be surprised."

"I need no further refreshment," said Flavia. Face slightly flushed with color, she grinned savagely. Her smile displayed two rows of perfect, white teeth. "The fine citizens of this city owe me a favor. Their streets are safer tonight: one fewer maniac prowls after dark. He paid the ultimate price for his transgressions."

The Dark Angel's gaze once more rested on McCann. "I repeat my initial question. Why Switzerland? We need to find the Red Death and his brood. Vampires hate the Alps and their eternal snow. There are no Kindred in the frozen waste."

"There are a few," replied McCann. "Anywhere mortals live, there are vampires among them. But, I agree, not many. It doesn't matter. I am going there to see an old, very close friend. He is not a vampire."

"McCann, why is it that when you use the word *old*," said Flavia, "I tend to think in terms of millennia?"

The detective laughed. "My intonation, perhaps? Or maybe my habit of taking the letters and making them into two syllables? No matter. Your suspicions are correct. This particular friend is extremely ancient and remarkably wise. I'm hoping he will be able to provide me with a clue to the current whereabouts of the Red Death."

Elisha shook his head in bewilderment. "He's not a vampire, yet he's thousands of years old? Who is this friend of yours, Mr. McCann? Or, should I ask, *what* is he?"

"The world is filled with mysteries, Elisha," said Dire McCann. "No matter how much you know,

there are always unexpected surprises lurking in the darkness. My friend is neither vampire nor mage. But he has lived a very long time."

"I hate surprises," said Flavia. "They invariably mean trouble. Especially when you are involved with them."

The waiter returned with their drinks. Elisha sipped at his coffee thirstily. Flavia stared at her wine glass suspiciously, as if waiting for it to jump off the table at her. McCann lifted his glass halfway to his lips but did not drink.

"There is a minor problem with this visit," he declared, trying to keep from laughing but barely succeeding. "My acquaintance in the mountains has a strong aversion to vampires. Elisha and I are going to visit him. He has expressed interest in meeting our young ally, having heard of him from Rambam. You and Madeleine will have to remain in Bern while we travel into the mountains. It should only be for a night."

Flavia's eyes narrowed. "This isn't another one of your independent adventures, is it, McCann?" There was a dangerous edge to her voice. Elisha, staring at the vampire, shivered. Hands pressed against the table top, Flavia looked like a jungle cat ready to pounce on its victim. "I warned you about leaving me behind a second time. There are limits to even my patience."

The detective put down his empty glass and wiped his lips. "You didn't exaggerate on the quality of the wine," he said to Elisha, ignoring Flavia. "It tastes like vinegar. Bad vinegar at that."

McCann turned and stared at the Dark Angel. "I assure you, there are no tricks involved with this expedition. My friend is the party who first supplied me with information that Baba Yaga had risen from torpor. He maintains a vast network of informants and spies throughout the world that matches the best efforts of the Nosferatu or the Giovanni—and his agents all report directly to him. Very little of importance escapes his attention. If anyone knows how to locate the Red Death, he is the one.

"Unfortunately, my comrade is engaged in an ongoing struggle with an extremely malevolent vampire. This phase of the Jyhad has lasted for five thousand years and it shows no sign of coming to an conclusion. My friend values his privacy and refuses to take chances. Thus, he has agreed to meet with me, but on the condition I bring no Cainite into his fortress."

"Yet this cryptic figure is willing to admit you..." said Flavia, her voice trailing off into an unstated question.

"We share a common interest in alchemy," said McCann. "Plus, over the years, I have earned his trust. Many of our goals coincide."

"How convenient," said Flavia sarcastically. "Does this being who is neither vampire nor mage have a name? Or perhaps a title?"

"He had both," said McCann. "Neither of which I am going to tell you. Some things are better not known."

The detective's gaze traveled across the patio. He rose to his feet and raised a hand in greeting.

"There's Madeleine."

"Saved by the bell," said Flavia, as Madeleine sidestepped through the tables to join them.

With a sinister smile, the Dark Angel peered over her untouched wine glass at Elisha. Softly, so that only he could hear her, she stated, "You're going with McCann to this fortress. Perhaps, after the trip, the two of us can discuss your visit. I very much want to learn who lives there." Her long tongue darted out and licked her red lips. "I am mistress of pleasures your Giovanni girlfriend couldn't begin to imagine."

Elisha kept his mouth shut. The Dark Angel scared him. She was the most voluptuous, sexy young woman he had ever encountered. Yet, he knew without question that she had a soul of ice.

"Were you able to contact Pietro?" asked McCann as Madeleine dropped into an empty chair next to Elisha. The dark-haired vampire flashed him a quick smile. There was an odd expression on her face. Elisha wondered what she had discussed with her grandfather.

"I talked with him at length," said Madeleine. "He was surprised to learn we were in the Middle East. Because the line was not secure, we spoke in generalities, resorting to specific shared memories that would puzzle anyone eavesdropping. It took some doing, but I was able to warn him about the Red Death. He promised to alert members of our clan to be on the lookout for the monster. I promised to call him again tomorrow."

"You missed the latest revelation," said Flavia.

"McCann is taking us with him on a mountain-climbing expedition. Except that you and I are going to stay in the lodge."

"What?" asked Madeleine. "Mountain-climbing? I do not understand."

"Neither do I," said Flavia. "Though that hasn't stopped McCann in the past."

The detective shook his head in mock dismay. "Pity the poor, mistreated Assamite. Fighting a legendary monster wasn't exciting enough for her. Already, she craves new thrills."

In a few short sentences, McCann summarized their plans for the next several days to Madeleine. As he spoke, tiny lines of annoyance appeared across her forehead. By the time the detective finished, the Giovanni vampire appeared to be as angry as Flavia.

"How can I serve as your bodyguard if you refuse to let me accompany you on such a dangerous mission?" she asked, angrily. "Besides which, not only are you putting your own life in jeopardy, but that of Elisha as well. You mentioned how this mysterious being values his privacy. What if he suddenly decides that he has revealed too much about himself to Elisha? What happens then?"

She paused, but just for an instant. There were storm clouds in her eyes. "Clan Giovanni has been active the past few decades in Switzerland, working with the banking industry. Over the years, unsettling stories have been repeated concerning a mystic superhuman living somewhere in the vicinity of Bern. These tales claim that anyone who sees his face dies. Can you guarantee that Elisha will be

spared such a fate? That he will return from this outrageous expedition unharmed?"

"My acquaintance spreads those lies to ensure that he remains undisturbed," said McCann. "While he is somewhat overbearing and arrogant by nature, he is not cruel. He would never kill anyone without a good reason."

"As for the few mountaineers who stumble upon his hideaway, he erases their memory of the place and sets them free. A trail of corpses is much more difficult to explain than an occasional traveler with a blank spot in their thoughts."

"Dire McCann calling someone else *arrogant*?" said Flavia, with a laugh. "I am truly sorry I will not get to meet this unique individual."

Under half-closed lids, her eyes, staring directly at Elisha, burned like coals.

"What happens if your friend doesn't have any useful information for us, Mr. McCann?" asked Elisha, avoiding Flavia's gaze. Dealing with the Assamite was going to be a problem. "Where do we go next?"

"Paris," said the detective. "I have a rendezvous with Alicia Varney there. Hopefully, she will know something we don't. Alicia likes to stay informed."

"I look forward to meeting the notorious Ms. Varney," said Madeleine. "Pietro curses her name frequently. I am not sure of the exact cause of his dislike, but I gather it involves her financial maneuvering. My grandfather dislikes anyone who controls vast wealth. She must be a very interesting woman."

"She's unlike any other," said McCann. "We are very close."

Flavia laughed without amusement. Elisha wondered, as was often the case, what he didn't know.

"Time for us to visit Rambam," said McCann. He rose from his chair. "There are a few more details I want to get straight about the Red Death before we say goodbye."

They left the café in a group. Every man watched Flavia saunter out, her hips swaying sensuously. The Assamite liked being the center of attention. Walking down the street, the sidewalk forced them into couples, McCann with Flavia, Elisha with Madeleine.

"You seem pleased with your phone call," said Elisha. "It must have been good news."

"It was quite satisfying," said Madeleine. Catching him totally off guard, she linked an arm with his. Though her skin was cool to the touch, Elisha didn't mind at all. "I won't forget tonight's conversation for a long, long time."

And, though Elisha asked her again and again what she had discussed, Madeleine refused to say another word.

Chapter 9

Sicily, April 2, 1994:

Carefully, Don Caravelli studied the picture on the closed circuit TV screen before him. It was one of twenty such monitors located in the security center of his fortress. This particular camera was hidden at the front of the main conference center of the building. It provided a panoramic spread of the entire room. Before attending any important meetings, the Capo de Capo liked to spy on his underlings. He wanted to make sure they planned no surprises. Remaining in control of an organization based on assassination and intimidation took a healthy dose of paranoia. Don Caravelli trusted no one because he could trust no one.

"They carry no weapons?" he asked Marius Michaud, security chief for the complex.

"Nothing that registers on our metal detectors," replied Michaud. "Per your instructions, they were also searched upon arrival. None of them are armed."

"Good," said Don Caravelli. "It never hurts to remind them of my power over their lives."

The thirty vampires crowded into the chamber appeared ill at ease. That was to be expected. By

now, they would have heard of the executions of Don Torazon and Don Brusca. Though the waiting Kindred numbered among the most vicious, callous killers in the world, they shared one common dread. They feared their leader, Don Caravelli. As absolute master of the Mafia, he held their existence in his hands. And, he was often known to squeeze his huge fingers into fists.

They had come from all over Europe at his command. The word had gone out last night and the response, as expected, had been immediate. None dared miss this meeting. When Don Caravelli snapped his fingers, his underlings jumped. His word was law.

Satisfied that all was in readiness, Don Caravelli left the control room and walked the hundred paces leading to the conference hall. An instant hush fell over the crowd as he entered the chamber.

"My friends," he declared, acknowledging their presence, as he made his way to the podium at the front of the room. "Please sit down." Before he reached it, they were all in their chairs.

"I want to thank you for attending this meeting," he began, his gaze traveling up and down their ranks. There were nineteen men and eleven women. Each had waded through rivers of blood to assume their position as a captain of the Mafia. "Normally, I dislike holding such hurried gatherings, but these are not normal times. I need your help. Two mortals, working with certain Kindred, threaten the very existence of the Mafia. They must be destroyed."

No one said a word. Don Caravelli expected

silence. They understood that lurking behind the polite language was a command. The Boss of Bosses wasn't asking a favor. He was giving orders to be obeyed. Immediately.

He raised a hand and the room went dark. Projected onto the white wall next to him was a photo of a beautiful young woman.

"I am sure you recognize her features," said Don Caravelli. "You have seen them many times in the past. This seemingly young and innocent lady is named Alicia Varney. Ms. Varney is neither young nor innocent. She is one of the richest humans in the world. She also is the power behind the American Crime Syndicates. She has been one of our worst enemies for decades. The time has finally come for us to rid the world of her presence. Though mortal, she has proved impossible to kill. Many of our brethren have tried, all without success. Do not underestimate her or her companion. They are not ordinary humans. Do not treat them as such."

The picture disappeared. It was replaced an instant later with a line sketch of a man's face.

"The name of her friend is Dire McCann. He works as a detective. In private, he claims to be a rogue mage. Strangely enough, no photo of Mr. McCann exists." Don Caravelli's voice exuded menace. "I find this fact quite disturbing. There are too many questions about Dire McCann that have no answers. The only certainty is that he is extremely dangerous."

Don Caravelli snapped his fingers and the lights returned. "Both of these mortals know a great deal

about the Children of Caine. Varney is a ghoul. McCann may be one as well. As I said, verifiable facts about him are scarce.

"I believe that these two kine are somewhere in Europe. They belong to an insidious plot by certain elders of the Camarilla to destroy the Mafia. What the fools cannot control, they seek to smash. I will not permit that to happen. Nor will you.

"It is your job to find these mortal troublemakers. Seek them out wherever they are. Time is growing short. Gather together whatever force is necessary—I repeat, *whatever force*—and destroy them. Surround them, kill them, and bring me their heads. Please me and you will be rewarded. Fail me..."

Don Caravelli let his voice trail off. There was no reason for him to make threats.

"Are there any questions?" he asked.

"You mentioned that these kine travel with Kindred." It was Serge Reejmar from Hungary. "Should we destroy them as well?"

Don Caravelli smiled, showing his teeth. He nodded. "If you can," he stated, preferring not to mention the identity of the detective's companions. The less said about them the better. "However, I am less concerned about the vampires in their company than the humans. McCann and Varney are your targets. Spread the word. As of yet, they are unaware of our interest in them. Keep it so. Let them discover that the Mafia is hunting them when the trap closes, not before."

The Capo de Capo's gaze swung around the room in an arc that took in all present. "No more

questions." His voice was curt. "You have your instructions. Obey them. *I want their heads.*"

Without another word, another gesture, Don Caravelli left the room. The first steps had been taken to fulfilling his part of the bargain with Elaine de Calinot. His troops had been called into action. The Mafia was the most widespread criminal network in Europe. His agents were certain to find the humans. And when they did, death would follow.

Ten minutes later, after a brief trip to the security center, Don Caravelli opened the door to his inner sanctum. He was not surprised to see Elaine waiting for his arrival. He had been expecting the return of the Tremere Inner Council member.

"You seem to have no difficulty bypassing the elaborate security measures of my citadel," he remarked as he took his customary seat in front of the wall of weapons. "How depressing. I should have the devices checked. Or perhaps it would be less bother if I merely tear Marius Michaud to pieces."

"Whatever you prefer," said Elaine. She remained standing, leaning slightly against her wizard's staff. Her bright blue eyes twinkled with amusement. "Neither solution will serve any purpose. Machines cannot cope with an elder of Clan Tremere. Security chiefs are as easily fooled. I am invisible unless I want to be seen."

"I have had no problem seeing you," said Don Caravelli.

"Remember my exact words, assassin," said Elaine, with a laugh. "Consider this brief demonstration a lesson."

The Mafia chief's eyes bulged in disbelief. The Tremere sorceress was gone. Elaine and her staff had vanished the instant she had finished speaking. It was as if she had been swallowed up by the floor. His senses, a thousand times more acute than any human's, could not detect the slightest indication of her presence in the room. Astonished, he started to rise from his chair to search the spot where she had been—only to discover the edge of a dagger touching his throat.

"I trust my point is made," said Elaine, as she flicked the knife down at Don Caravelli's desk. Tip first in the wood, it quivered from the force of impact. "Many vampires think they understand the Obfuscate discipline. Only a few have truly mastered it. I am seen when I wish to be."

"A good choice of weapons," said Don Caravelli. Faster than the eye could follow, he wrenched the dagger from the desktop and sent it flying across the chamber. It slammed into the far wall with enough force to bury the blade up to the hilt. "Demonstrations are always so educational. Especially when they are conducted between trusted allies."

Elaine chuckled. "An excellent observation," she declared. "You make a fine associate, Don Caravelli. I suspect you are a terrifying enemy."

"The blood of my adversaries speaks for me," said Don Caravelli as Elaine walked around to the front of his desk. "Their wraiths quake at the sound of my name."

"And yet, you fear the rage of a young girl," said Elaine.

Don Caravelli cursed. "Madeleine Giovanni is the bane of my existence. She is a relentless killer and totally without mercy." A flicker of a smile crossed the Capo's lips. "Actually, she and I share many of the same traits. Despite her origins, Madeleine could easily be mistaken for one of my childer. The bitch is my nemesis."

"She will be stopped," said Elaine. "It is part of our agreement. Fulfill your end of the bargain and the Dagger of the Giovanni will never trouble you again."

"The hunt has begun," declared Don Caravelli. "If, as you told me, the humans are in Europe, my agents will find them. Discovering that one of them was Alicia Varney was an unexpected pleasure. It raises the stakes another notch. Her death is assured. As is the end of Dire McCann."

"I hope so," said Elaine. "For your sake."

The blond woman paused. "Tell your soldiers to pay very close attention to Paris. I have a strong feeling that these two annoying kine will surface in the City of Lights."

"Paris?" repeated Don Caravelli, trying to keep the curiosity from his voice. He sensed there was more to Elaine's remark than a fleeting suspicion.

"There are stories, unconfirmed tales, of an ancient Nosferatu vampire who dwells in the tunnels beneath the streets of the metropolis," said Elaine. "According to these rumors, his name is Phantomas. I believe that McCann and Varney are searching for him."

"Good," said Don Caravelli, choosing his words

carefully. "We can bait a trap using his name. Do you know the reason why they are looking for this particular Cainite?"

"I have no idea," replied Elaine.

Don Caravelli nodded, sensing she was lying. "It doesn't matter," he declared, smoothly. "His name will be enough."

"Kill him if he interferes with your plans," said Elaine.

"Of course," said Don Caravelli. "My word is my bond. I will not let anyone stop me."

However, before destroying Phantomas, Don Caravelli fully intended to twist all of his secrets out of him. Especially those that worried Elaine de Calinot. The Tremere vampire was right. Don Caravelli was a dangerous enemy. And he trusted no one, including his allies.

Chapter 10

Paris, France—April 3, 1994:

It has been said that if a person sits long enough at the Café de la Paix, opposite the Paris Opera House, the entire world will pass by. Though times have changed since those words were first uttered, the outdoor restaurant still serves as the premier people-watching spot in all of Paris. It is a hub around which the entire metropolis seems to revolve.

There are a few places grander than the Café in the City of Lights, but not many. It is a favorite lounging spot for the rich and the powerful, the famous and those wishing for fame, the notorious and those wishing for notoriety. The prices, like the setting, are magnificent. An afternoon meal at the Café would pay for seats at the Opera. Only the very rich or the very foolish indulge in more than coffee and pastries. The well-to-do sip wine and watch the rabble of France wander past the outdoor tables.

The young couple seated at a small table to the rear of the patio attracted little attention from the late-afternoon patrons of the Café. For all appearances they were rich and seemed to be deep in conversation. Such people were better left alone. A faint facial resemblance established them as

brother and sister, not lovers. None of the staff could remember when they had arrived, or what they had ordered. It didn't seem to matter. With this pair, it never did.

The man was tall, though slender, with blond hair and light-blue eyes. His skin was the color of burnished bronze. He was dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and white slacks. His shoes and socks were also white.

His sister wore a white knit top, a short white knit skirt, and pale stockings with white heels. An intriguing pattern of stars and crosses ran up the backs of her nylons. Her hair was bright red, while her eyes were the same brilliant blue as her brother's. She had a figure to make men, especially Parisians, stop and stare. Oddly enough, for all of her spectacular good looks, she attracted no attention.

They chatted in normal tones, talking and laughing, yet their words did not carry beyond their table. From time to time, the young man or the young woman would glance out into the street, as if expecting to see someone they knew. They were in no hurry. Events were moving along as expected.

"When is Alicia due?" asked the woman, who called herself Rachel Young. Over the centuries, she had been called Leah, Mareth, Tablis, Seramis, Elizabeth, Jill, and a hundred other titles. Only her brother and her father knew her real name. It had been lost for over 7,000 years.

"I believe she flew in late last night by jet," replied her brother. He used the name Reuben, though he had as many earlier identities as that of

his sister. They were twins. "I expect she and Jackson will arrive at the Café early tonight. McCann never seems to be around during the daytime. He avoids the sun."

"So I've noticed," said Rachel. "Observing him in action has been a humbling experience. I truthfully cannot figure out his exact relationship with Lameth. At times, McCann seems to be nothing more than a clever detective with a flair for the dramatic. Then, unexpectedly, he exhibits some extraordinary power. Or he mentions events that took place fifty centuries ago. The man is a walking enigma."

"He is no ghoul like Alicia," said Reuben. "Nor is he a mage like he claims." The young man shook his head. "He is unique. I suspect we will never learn Dire McCann's secret."

"I don't give up that easily," said Rachel. "Once this mess with the Red Death is settled, I intend to discover everything I can about Dire McCann."

She laughed. It was a sexy, sultry sound that could send shivers up the spine of a priest. Yet not a man in the Café reacted. Reuben and Rachel did not want to be heard. Or noticed. And what they wanted, came to be.

"Well, I hope you get the chance," said Reuben. "The Red Death is poised to take over both the Sabbat and the Camarilla. If McCann and Varney don't contact Phantomas soon, the world is going to grow uncomfortably hot."

Rachel grimaced. "If the Sheddin intrude in our reality, that would be a major disaster. We would

have to intervene directly in the affairs of mankind, which would create all sorts of problems."

"Not to mention, raise a lot of questions we don't want to answer," said Reuben. "No, our original plan is still best. We've done everything we possibly could to steer Lameth and Anis in the correct direction to confront and destroy the Red Death. It's up to them now to finish the job."

"Phantomas has guessed at least part of the truth about the Red Death," said Rachel. "He possesses a remarkable talent for piecing together obscure bits of information and assembling them into an astonishing mosaic. His deductions were brilliant."

"Assembling his encyclopedia for the past millennia has given Phantomas remarkable insight into the Cainite mind," said Reuben. "His knowledge enables him to unravel the most complex plot like a spool of thread."

"It's a good thing he doesn't know very much about us," said Rachel, her blue eyes twinkling. "I like my privacy."

"Chance enabled him to link me with Khufu," said Reuben. He grinned. "That's the problem with having your features engraved in stone. It hardly matters. McCann guessed our identities when he spoke with Maimonides. And the Egyptian knows of us and our work."

"Our friend in Switzerland won't say a word about us," said Rachel. "After all, we provided him with a lot of the original documents regarding Baba Yaga he sent to McCann. And the detective has so many secrets of his own, he's not going to be

spreading tales about either of us."

"I guess so," said Reuben, shrugging. "I bet Father never had these sorts of problems maintaining a low profile."

"It's hard staying out of sight when you're trying to manipulate history," said Rachel, chuckling.

Reuben smiled in return. "Speaking of which," he declared, changing the subject, "I trust you've been monitoring Elaine's various schemes?"

"I think so," said Rachel. "She's awfully talented at weaving cloaking spells. Fortunately, I'm better. Her recent efforts have complicated the game, I must admit."

"There's a lot of Mafia hoodlums roaming the streets," said Reuben.

"There's little we can do about them," said Rachel. "Elaine played her trump card in recruiting Don Caravelli. He controls a horde of criminals. They're everywhere."

"I'd be very disappointed if Alicia or Dire McCann was gunned down by a Mafioso triggerman before they had a chance to find Phantomas," said Reuben.

"It would be terribly anticlimactic," said Rachel dourly. "Fortunately, they have proven to be quite adept at defending themselves. The streets of Paris might run red with blood, but I doubt that any of it will belong to McCann or Varney."

"Time for us to get moving," said Reuben. "Alicia is on her way here. I sense her moving through the city. Though she is a pleasure to look at, I think it would be prudent for neither of us to be around when she arrives."

"What about the check?" asked Rachel. "The wine was an expensive vintage."

"None of the waiters remember bringing it to us," said Reuben. "It's not written on any of the receipts. Accounting for the bottle might prove to be difficult."

"Whoever picks up the tip will manage to fudge a solution," said Rachel. "Remember, this is Paris, where the help is always so inventive."

"I love Paris in the springtime," said Reuben.

"And I love Paris in the fall," returned Rachel. "Assuming it still exists by autumn."

"We can only hope," said her brother. His tone was grim, and there was a note of desperation in his voice. "The Masquerade of the Red Death is nearly complete. In Linz, the masks will finally come off. And the Sheddin will either triumph or be destroyed."

Chapter 11

Bern, Switzerland—April 3, 1994:

Their plane landed on Swiss soil a few minutes after midnight. A black Mercedes-Benz limousine was waiting for McCann and Elisha at the terminal. Flavia was not pleased. Nor was Madeleine Giovanni.

"I don't like this, McCann," she said as the driver stood patiently waiting a dozen feet away. A beanpole of a man, tall and thin, his hairless face was the color of old leather, and completely without expression. Dressed entirely in black, he was definitely not Swiss. Elisha thought he looked Arabic. "You might be walking into a trap. How can Madeleine and I come to your rescue if we don't know where you've gone?"

The detective laughed. "I'm sure that by now Madeleine could locate Elisha if he was buried beneath a glacier." Seeing the expression in the Giovanni vampire's eyes, McCann hurried on. "Not that she needs to worry about something like that happening. This entire trip was arranged over the telephone. I swear we won't need saving. Elisha and I will be quite comfortable. We'll probably rest better than you two."

"My contacts in the city have obtained an

attractive chalet for our use," said Madeleine, her voice as cold as the night air. "It will serve for the short time we are here. Flavia and I will be fine. Which does not mean I approve of this ridiculous jaunt. I am strongly opposed to your taking such a risky venture for no real purpose. We should be hunting our enemy, not making an unnecessary trip to the Alps to confer with mysterious strangers."

"We need information," said McCann. The detective sounded slightly exasperated. Elisha didn't blame him. Though he hadn't known Madeleine very long, Elisha realized that she had a stubborn streak that could frustrate even the strongest will. He still found her incredibly fascinating, but she did have her minor faults. "I hope to obtain some very important leads on this visit. Judge its worth after I return, okay?"

"I still don't like it," grumbled Flavia. She stared at the chauffeur. "How do we know we can trust this character? Our enemies are everywhere."

"His name is Echbatana," said McCann, gesturing at the driver to step closer. "He has served as my chauffeur numerous times in the past. A loyal servant to his master, I assure you his will cannot be bent to serve another."

Flavia stared at the leather-skinned man, her eyes blazing with suspicion. He met her gaze unflinchingly. After a moment, the Assamite turned away, shaking her head in frustration.

"His mind is harsh and unyielding as weathered stone," she declared. "And it is closed to my thoughts. This one could be an Assamite in mortal

form. His master, your friend, must be an interesting person, McCann, to command such devotion."

"Mr. McCann seems to have an extremely wide variety of acquaintances," remarked Madeleine.

"If you live long enough," said the detective, taking Elisha by the elbow, "you get to meet a lot of interesting people. Including you two fascinating ladies. Elisha and I will meet you tomorrow night at your chalet. Until then, keep out of trouble. No wild parties."

The detective nodded at the chauffeur. "Let's move, Echtabana. We've spent too much time talking."

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the driver, his voice as rough as his features. "My master awaits."

The limousine featured a portable bar and dark tinted windows. Impossible to see inside the passenger section of the car from the outside, it was equally impossible to see out from within. Elisha, who had been hoping to see the Alps, was not happy.

"The one thing I learned from previous visits to Switzerland," said McCann, answering Elisha's unasked question as Echtabana steered the car into the tangle of roads surrounding the airport, "is that staring out the car windows in this country is not advisable. The drop is usually several miles straight down. Scenery in the Alps is best viewed from a stationary location."

"I'm not fond of heights," admitted Elisha. "There aren't many mountains in Israel."

"Well, there's not much desert in Switzerland,"

said McCann, smiling. "My friend is familiar with both types of terrain. As you may have also guessed, he values his privacy highly. No one knows the exact location of his fortress. It sits somewhere in the mountains outside of Bern. While he trusts me more than most, I'm sure that the doors and windows won't budge until we arrive at our destination."

"How long is the trip?" asked Elisha.

"About two hours," said McCann. "Of course, we might be driving in loops for most of that time and the building is actually located twenty minutes from the airport. Only Echtabana knows for sure, and he will never tell."

"Flavia seemed impressed by him," said Elisha. "I thought that was pretty amazing."

"She doesn't pass out compliments lightly," said McCann. "I'll have to mention her words to my friend. Though I doubt that it will mean much to him. He hates and distrusts the Kindred, although he has some respect for the Assamites."

"You mentioned the Jyhad," said Elisha. "I didn't think it involved humans as well as vampires."

"My friend is somewhat more than human," said McCann. "As you will learn shortly. Now, calm down and relax, Elisha. I haven't had much free time to concentrate on my problems the past few days without Flavia or Madeleine constantly interrupting. I need to gather my thoughts before we arrive."

"But..." said Elisha.

"Quiet," said McCann.

Elisha, taught by Rambam always to respect his elders, stifled the hundred questions burning in his mind. Closing his eyes, he settled back on the comfortable cushions of the limousine, knowing he was too excited to rest.

McCann's hand on his shoulder woke him up a few minutes before their arrival.

"Sorry," said Elisha, groggily, as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. His fingers were stiff. "I didn't expect to doze off."

"No problem," said McCann, gesturing to the empty wine bottle in the trash bin attached to the portable bar. "A few glasses of an excellent white zinfandel kept me company. I valued the silence."

"Are we nearly at the fortress?" asked Elisha, straightening up in the seat.

"Any minute, according to Ectabana," replied McCann.

"I hope Madeleine is okay," said Elisha, his thoughts wandering for a moment. "She sounded disappointed that she couldn't come with us."

"On that count, I wouldn't worry," said McCann, smiling. "Madeleine Giovanni has managed to survive for close to a hundred years as one of the world's premier assassins. I somehow suspect that while meeting you has been a major event in her otherwise dull existence, it didn't wipe away any of her skills or talents. She'll survive without you for a day."

Elisha felt his cheeks heat up. He knew he was blushing.

"The car's stopped," said McCann, sparing Elisha

from any further embarrassment. "We've arrived."

A moment later, Echtabana opened the door on the right-hand side of the limo. "Gentlemen, please follow me. My master awaits your presence in the reception room."

Echtabana's master sat in a comfortable-looking armchair in front of a small cocktail table in a parlor decorated entirely in blue and gold. At his side stood a tall major-domo, dressed entirely in black, his features as dark and impassive as those of the chauffeur.

"My friends," said McCann's mysterious friend, rising to his feet as they entered the room, "welcome to my home. It's good to see you both. Please, sit down."

The man gestured to two seats directly across from him. McCann took the chair to the left, Elisha the other. Echtabana circled around the table and took a position by his master's armchair, opposite the major-domo.

"Something to drink after your long ride? Or perhaps a little food?"

"I'm fine," said McCann. "I had some wine in the car. But Elisha might like something."

"A glass of ginger ale would be nice," said Elisha, hesitantly. "And I am a bit hungry. We only had a snack on the plane."

The man glanced up at his major-domo. "You heard. A glass of ginger ale for our young friend. I will have my usual. Then have the chef prepare something special. We can eat as we talk."

The short exchange gave Elisha a few seconds

to scrutinize their host without obviously staring. The man appeared to be in his early twenties, only a few years older than Elisha. He was about six feet tall and wore dark pants and a gold pullover shirt. Though he was sitting, he looked to be in superb physical condition. He had a strong chin, hawklike nose, jet black hair, and skin was the color of molten gold. His right eye blazed with intelligence; his left eye was covered by a jeweled patch.

"As you desire," murmured the major-domo, "so shall it be done." Bowing slightly, he glided from the parlor.

"Khemis can be so dramatic," said the man, chuckling, as he focused his attention on McCann and Elisha. "He likes to ham it up for visitors. Usually, he says, 'yes, boss.'"

McCann grinned. "You've been letting him watch too many Indiana Jones movies on TV, Prince," he remarked.

"More likely Jeeves and Bertie Wooster than Dr. Jones," said the other man. "But Khemis, despite his affectations, is efficient. Here are our drinks."

Elisha stared at his soft drink. It was served in a crystal goblet edged with pure gold filigree. The glass had to be worth thousands. It seemed sacrilegious to use it for soda pop.

"You have yet to introduce me to your young protégé, McCann," said their host, as he took a sip of amber liquor from a similar goblet.

"Sorry," said McCann. "I've forgotten my manners. Prince, I'm honored to present to you Elisha Horwitz, student of the noted scholar and

mage, Moses Maimonides. Elisha, Prince Horus of Egypt."

Their host inclined his head in a slight bow. "A pleasure, Elisha. Rambam has spoken to me about your extraordinary gift. I see by your aura that he did not exaggerate."

Elisha blushed. It sometimes seemed as if his teacher had discussed his abilities with every other mage in the world. Elisha didn't mind the attention. He did worry about living up to his advance billing.

"You've taken the title of the ancient Egyptian sky god, Prince?" he asked, trying to make conversation. Preferring to keep their real names secret, many powerful mages took the identities of famous mythological beings as aliases.

Horus roared with laughter. McCann sighed heavily. Elisha blushed, bewildered, and wondered what he had said wrong.

"A natural mistake," said the prince, wiping tears from his eyes. "I am not using Horus' name, Elisha. I *am* Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, brother of Anubis, and nephew of Set the Corrupter. Though I am not a god, I am one of the world's few immortals. I can be killed but never stilled. *I am a mummy.*"

Chapter 12

The Swiss Alps—April 3, 1994:

"Let me see if I understand all this," said Elisha, half an hour later. There was only so much information he could absorb in one sitting. Keeping facts straight wasn't easy when in the company of Dire McCann. "You can actually be killed. But sooner or later, your spirit and body reunite and you return to life looking exactly the same as you did before."

"It is part of the secret known as the Spell of Life," said Horus, popping a grape into his mouth. A huge platter of fruits, cheeses and exotic pastries rested on the table separating them. The prince nibbled on red grapes. Elisha snacked on cheese. McCann, as usual, ate nothing.

"My mother, Isis, a brilliant sorceress, discovered the formula nearly five thousand years ago. She used it to save me from the wrath of my uncle, Set, who was a member of the Damned. I'm not sure whether I owe her my thanks or my hatred. When offered the same opportunity for immortality, she refused the gift. Isis passed into the Land of the Dead millennia ago. She left me alone to battle my uncle, Set, and his brood of vampires."

"You've managed to recruit a fair number of

troops in the war over the centuries," said Dire McCann.

Horus shrugged. "Several dozen loyal retainers serve me in my unending struggle with the Corrupter," he declared. "But how can a handful of mummies prevail against the hordes of the Followers of Set? Whenever their numbers are few, the Setites merely Embrace a new legion of acolytes."

"You could stop fighting," said McCann.

"Never," said the prince, angrily. "Set destroyed my father, Osiris, and killed my brother, Anubis. He blinded me in one eye. The fiend is the lord of darkness and corruption. As a child of the sun, it is my holy mission to put an end to his evil."

"Somehow, I thought you might say that," said McCann, smiling.

"Can I ask a question?" asked Elisha.

"Of course," said Horus, his rage vanishing as swiftly as it had appeared. "What do you wish to know?"

"Even though you control vast magickal powers," said Elisha, "you are mortal and can be killed. When that happens, your soul departs your physical form and dwells in the spirit world. After years, your body regenerates, your soul returns, and you are reborn. Am I right so far?"

"A much-simplified explanation, but essentially correct," said Horus.

"Why, then," continued Elisha, "if your soul must reunite with the same body, don't your enemies destroy that physical form while it's empty? That would break the cycle and counter the Spell of Life."

"They have tried," replied Horus, an odd smile on his lips. "Not once but numerous times. At best, during one such attempt my uncle was able to remove my left eye and destroy it. The Spell of Life involved drinking certain powerful elixirs and potions as well as reciting numerous mystic chants. Together, they granted me immortality as well as bestowing on my body a limited invulnerability. It can be grievously damaged, even hacked to pieces, but over the years, decades, sometimes centuries, my form regenerates and becomes whole again." The prince shook his head. "Even if I wished to end my own existence, it is impossible. As a mummy, I am fated to walk the earth forever."

"When Rambam learned I planned to visit Horus," said McCann, "he requested that I bring you with me. I suspect that he hopes that someday in the future you will study with the prince. Horus is the greatest alchemist in the world."

"I would be quite pleased to accept you as a student, Elisha," said the prince. "Your mage skills and my teachings combined would be an interesting mix."

"McCann, however, is being too modest. Lameth, the Dark Messiah of the Kindred, has long been regarded as history's supreme alchemist. McCann is privy to many of his mentor's secrets. We have spent many many hours together in my laboratory trying to reformulate ancient elixirs using modern ingredients."

Elisha kept his mouth shut but let his thoughts roam free. On board the cruise ship journeying from

America to Israel, Madeleine had entertained him with the various legends regarding the Fourth Generation Methuselah known as Lameth, the Dark Messiah. It had been a fascinating recital.

According to the most widely accepted version of the legend, Lameth had been a powerful Atlantean magician Embraced many thousands of years ago by an Antediluvian Cainite. Seeking relief from the blood lust that haunted every vampire, he had invented a magickal elixir capable of artificially inducing Golconda. Drinking the potion produced the inner peace sought by many of the Children of Caine. Such a potion could have been the salvation of the Damned. However, instead of sharing his discovery with the rest of his kind, Lameth had divided the potion with his lover, Anis, and then destroyed the formula. Both vampires vanished from sight, never to be seen again. Lameth's treachery was never explained. Over the centuries, he became known as the Dark Messiah, for he alone possessed the secret of salvation for his race.

Elisha, knowing how time and history tended to distort the facts, suspected the legend contained only a bare hint of truth. Still, he could not help but wonder if thousands of years later, Lameth was having second thoughts.

"Enough about the past," said McCann gruffly. As usual, whenever talk turned to the Dark Messiah, he seemed anxious to change the subject. "We need to talk about the present. Specifically, I'm concerned about the vampire who calls himself the Red Death. Were you able to discover anything about his whereabouts?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid," said Horus. "There's been a great deal of talk about him ever since the Conclave was announced. But no facts."

"Conclave?" said McCann. "What are you talking about?"

"I assumed you knew about it," said Horus. "Evidently, I was mistaken. Karl Schrekt, the Tremere Justicar, has summoned the most powerful Kindred of Europe to a Conclave next week at his castle in Austria. The subject of the meeting is the Red Death."

McCann whistled. "A Conclave, with the elite of the Camarilla elders in attendance. What better place for the Red Death and his brood to carry out their diabolical plans?"

"You think the monster would dare attack the combined might of dozens of vampires?" asked Horus. "Much as I hate the Children of Caine, I respect their powers. Challenging such a group would be suicide."

The detective nodded. "I agree. It just feels right." The detective's features twisted in annoyance. "The timing works. Too many mysteries surround the Red Death and the Children of Dreadful Night. He must have a plan. But I'll be damned if I can figure it out."

"I *was* able to learn more about the situation in Australia," said Horus.

"The killings?" asked McCann.

During the course of the first meeting at Rambam's home, Dire McCann had described the strange doings in Australia, Russia, and South America. Nictuku has risen in all three locations.

The most dangerous was Baba Yaga, the Iron Hag, who had seized control of Russia and threatened the Kindred of Western Europe. Equally frightening but thus far much less active were Nuckalavee, the Skinless One; and Gorgo, She Who Screams in Darkness.

"Right after your phone call," said Horus, "I transferred three agents from Brisbane to Darwin. They had strict instructions to investigate the murders but otherwise stay uninvolved." The prince snorted. "The last thing I wanted was to have my men killed by a vampiric monster described by the aborigines as 'The Devourer of Skulls.'"

"Nuckalavee was considered the least intelligent of the Nictuku," said McCann. "He was only remotely human before his Embrace by Absimiliard. Afterward, he became known as a relentless destroyer abomination, attacking anyone or anything that crossed his path, living or undead."

"In total, forty-seven people were killed during the course of three days," said Horus. "Each night, despite elaborate security measures, settlers in outlying districts were slaughtered in their homes. As were all animals in the area. In every case, the victim's head was gnawed off his body as if by gigantic teeth. No traces of their skulls were found."

"Nor will they be," said McCann.

"The deaths ended as abruptly as they began. Three nights of madness, then nothing more. It was over. No clue to the killer's identity was found. Two days after the last murder, the aborigines who had descended on Darwin in a mass exodus began

returning home. The local government, of course, tried to claim full credit for the natives' departure. But, my agents made it clear in their reports that the reason had nothing to do with politics. In some manner, the aborigines sensed that the danger was past. Nuckalavee had returned to torpor. It was safe for them to leave."

"He's back asleep in his tomb beneath the Macdonnell Mountain range," said McCann. "A very strange story."

"The news about the horror you named Gorgo is much more disturbing," said Horus. "My agents in South America cannot find any trace of her in Buenos Aires. She evidently killed the entire Kindred population of the city, then vanished. There were no clues to where she went next. The monster is still at large. If I were you, I would watch my back very carefully."

"I gather she did not, like Nuckalavee, return to her tomb?" said McCann.

Horus shook his head. "No. My men did check. The caverns are the site of a major archeological dig. Any disturbance in the area would have been noticed. They did, however, learn something you will find interesting."

"The news," said McCann, "is not going to be good."

"Is it ever?" asked Horus, chuckling without humor. "The scientists at the excavation were puzzled by a minor mystery at the entrance to the underground network. Photos taken of the area five years ago show a small hill covering the passage

leading down. That was why the tunnels were not discovered until recently—they were hidden from sight. Yet, no record exists of any other expedition to the area. Whoever unsealed the caves did so, and then left."

"The Red Death would never do such a thing," said McCann. "He and his brood fear the monsters. They think their return signals the approaching apocalypse. But if the Children of Dreadful Night didn't release the monsters, who did?"

"The best thing about the Kindred," said Horus, "is that no matter what the crime, there is never a lack of suspects."

"What of Baba Yaga?" asked McCann, shaking his head as if trying to banish the troublesome information from his mind. "Is she on the move as well? I might as well hear all the bad news at once."

"Don't be so pessimistic, McCann," said the prince. "The Iron Hag is having major difficulties controlling the Soviet Republics. Baba Yaga and her servitors remain firmly rooted in the past. They are unable to deal with a population that wants changes and wants them now. My agents inform me that revolution is brewing in several key Russian states: they are going to cause problems for the witch in the months ahead. Yeltsin is not a strong leader. The Mafia has already established a powerful crime syndicate in Moscow. The Army of the Night is not as powerful as many believed. They are having difficulties dealing with the Tremere—and the Garou."

Horus smiled, a knowing look on his face. "The

Iron Hag is learning a lesson that usurpers have discovered throughout history. Stealing a crown is easy. Holding it is much more difficult."

"Spoken by one who's had a great deal of experience in such affairs," said the detective, brightening.

"If not for the machinations of the Corrupter and his lackeys," said Horus, solemnly, "Egypt under my guidance would still rule the world." The proud expression on the prince's face indicated that he was not jesting.

"Better you than the Red Death," said McCann. "If I don't discover what the monster plans next, I'm afraid that might happen. Or the world will be engulfed in fire."

"He fears you, McCann," said Horus. "The monster and his brood feel you threaten their plans. Find out why and you will uncover his schemes."

"Unfortunately," said McCann, "you were my last, best hope in that regard. I don't have a clue where to find the monster. And if I can't locate him, I can't stop him."

"I know a great deal," said Horus, "but there is another whose knowledge of the current events involving your race dwarfs mine. Though this mysterious figure tries to remain hidden, over the years I have detected him lurking on the computer nets, skimming information much like I do from hundreds of sources. He is the unmatched master of stealing secrets."

"Is he man or vampire?" asked McCann.

"I'm not sure," said Horus. "Though, he seems

most interested in transmissions involving the various clan elders. Making an educated guess, I would say he is one of the Damned."

"You don't know his name?" asked Elisha.

"I do not," admitted the prince. "He is the phantom of the nets. However, carefully checking the Europhone relay system, I was able to pinpoint his location to a single city."

"Which is?" asked McCann.

"Paris," said Horus. "This elusive ghost who haunts the cyberworld lives in Paris."

"How convenient," said Dire McCann, smiling. "That's our next destination."

Chapter 13

Paris—April 3, 1994:

"Have you ever been inside the Paris Opera House, Mr. Jackson?" asked Alicia, as the maitre d' at the Café de la Paix escorted them to their table.

"Can't say I have, Miss Varney," replied the bodyguard, staring at the huge building across the street. "I never was much for opera, if you know what I mean. Been to Paris a few times in the course of my travels, but never in this section of the city." He glanced down at the menu and shuddered. "Too rich for my blood, I must admit."

"Money can't buy happiness," said Alicia, smiling, "but it helps make the suffering bearable. I think I will have champagne. Would you care for a glass of wine?"

"I'll take a beer," said Jackson. "Do they have any pretzels, I wonder?"

"We will settle for an appetizer of hot pigeon truffle pie and a loaf of bread," said Alicia firmly. "It's a specialty of the restaurant. You need some culture in your life, Jackson."

"I've managed fine without it so far," said the bodyguard. He grinned. "You sure didn't hire me because of my refined taste or civilized temperament."

"Welcome to Café de la Paix," interrupted their waiter, speaking English. Evidently he had pegged them as tourists by their outfits. The man sounded weary and bored. "You are ready to order, Madame?"

"We are," replied Alicia, in perfect French. She had spent several lifetimes in the city. After telling him what they desired, she looked at the waiter with narrowed eyes. "Don't think for a moment about serving me the cheap stuff reserved for tourists. I expect the Chateau Phelan Segur 1979 and I will be very disturbed if given anything else." She paused and glanced at Jackson. "More important, my friend will be insulted as well. And he does not take slights well."

Jackson obliged with a nasty grimace. When he wanted to, the bodyguard could look quite menacing. The waiter scurried away from their table, his face white.

"Was that necessary?" asked Jackson. "You told me this is a high-class restaurant."

"In Paris, it never hurts to stay in practice," said Alicia. "The citizens are of the opinion that living in this city makes them superior to everyone else in the world. If you don't snap the whip, they will rob you blind. Even at the finest establishments in town."

"You were saying about the Opera House?"

"It is a wonderful place," said Alicia. "I spent many happy hours in days gone by watching some of the world's greatest singers perform there. Now it has been converted into a tourist attraction and museum, with the only occasional ballet showing.

It is still worth seeing, whether you appreciate the arts or not. The main stage is the largest in the world. It can hold hundreds of performers at one time. And, the huge foyer and famed marble staircase are equally impressive."

Jackson shrugged. "I heard that there's a ghost who supposedly haunts the building."

"I've heard similar stories," said Alicia. "Everyone who visits Paris sooner or later discovers the legend of the Opera Ghost. It is an interesting tale. More importantly, there is a network of catacombs that supposedly snakes through the city like a hydra. No one knows for sure who built them. The tunnels have never been fully explored; the few who have tried disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. The manager of the Opera House has refused to let anyone into the passages for years, fearing the bad publicity. They remain one of the mysteries of Paris."

"Why do I suspect that you are telling me these stories for a reason?" asked Jackson.

The arrival of their drinks and the pigeon truffle pie brought their conversation to a momentary halt. The champagne met with Alicia's approval, though Jackson was less impressed with the appetizer and bread.

"A close friend told me that an ancient vampire lives in those catacombs," said Alicia. "No one knows much about him, other than that he is supposedly very knowledgeable about the history of the Kindred. His name is Phantomas and he shares his domain with thousands of sewer rats."

"How pleasant," said Jackson, sarcastically.

"Remember when I went to visit Madame Zorza, the gypsy fortuneteller? She told me the ratman knows the answer. But that he hadn't been asked the question. I need to find this Phantomas and discover what secrets he holds concerning the Red Death."

"You're planning for us to go down into those tunnels?" asked Jackson. "I hate crawling through sewers."

"Don't worry," said Alicia. "This mission is my baby. I'm not going by myself, however. We're scheduled to rendezvous with Dire McCann at this restaurant in the next day or two. I want to confer with him before making any rash decisions. Wandering through those caves is not my idea of a good time either; Mr. McCann is going to provide me with some company."

"Odd coincidence that you're meeting McCann at the restaurant directly across from the Opera House where your quarry might live," said Jackson. "It's amazing the way things work out sometimes."

Alicia smiled. "I don't believe in coincidences in a world filled with unseen manipulators, Jackson," she stated. "But, I must admit that it seems that blind destiny has drawn me to this location."

"Not just you, Miss Varney, from what I'm seeing," said Jackson. He gestured with a raised eyebrow at three large figures huddled around a nearby table. "Those geeks have Mafia written all over them. I've noticed a surprising number of the Cosa Nostra in the city. Usually, they keep a low

profile. Any chance someone might have told them you were coming for a visit? You're not one of Don Caravelli's poster girls. He'd be quite happy to see you laid out on a slab. Or up to your neck in concrete."

"I was extremely careful not to mention our destination to anyone other than my friend in New York City," said Alicia. "And I feel certain he can be trusted."

"Well, just like you not believing in coincidence, Miss," said Jackson, "neither do I when it involves gangsters. The thugs at the other table gave us the eye a while back and didn't react, so I'm guessing our disguises are still good. There's a phone in the back of the restaurant. I'm gonna make a few calls. See what I can learn."

"I'll drink my champagne, eat some truffle pie, and soak in Paris," said Alicia. "Take your time."

Jackson returned to their table ten minutes later. From the grim expression on his face, Alicia knew the news wasn't good.

"Nothing definite," said the bodyguard. "I didn't expect anything straight up. With the Mafia, it's always rumors, no hard facts. Don Caravelli runs a tight operation. Nobody dares reveal his secrets. Not if they want to stay functioning."

"The Capo de Capo is an exceptional leader," said Alicia. She smiled, as if amused by some fleeting thought. "Nor is he burdened by such human traits as forgiveness or mercy."

"Yeah," said Jackson. "He's a mean mother. The whole organization is scared to death of him. And,

when you consider who makes up the membership roster, that's a pretty frightening thought."

"The rumors?" asked Alicia.

"There was a big meeting the other night at the Don's fortress in Sicily," said Jackson. "All of the lesser bosses were in attendance. According to the word I got, the Don put an open contract on two people. They're to be killed on sight."

"Two?" repeated Alicia. "You're moving up in the world, Jackson."

"Not me," said the bodyguard. "I didn't get any names, but one of the pair was a lady. She sounded just like you. No surprise. The other was a man all right—an American detective with ties to the Kindred."

"Dire McCann," said Alicia. She frowned. "What reason does Don Caravelli have for hunting McCann?"

"From everything you've told me in the past," said Jackson, "I'd venture to guess that the Capo has joined forces with your buddy, the Red Death."

"A depressing though probably correct assessment of the situation," said Alicia. Her features twisted in annoyance. "First Melinda Galbraith. Now Don Caravelli. Who else is this monster planning to recruit?"

"He's certainly lined up a lot of firepower to murder two people," said Jackson. "Then again, the Red Death blew up the Washington Navy Yard trying to destroy you and McCann. And he didn't succeed."

"McCann and I are difficult to kill," said Alicia,

grinning.

"I heard another interesting story from our contacts," said Jackson. "I'm not sure if it has any direct significance to your situation, but I figure I better mention it."

"Wait," said Alicia. She raised a hand to attract the waiter's attention. "I'm out of champagne. When your voice sounds like that, I know I'm going to need another drink. Do you want another beer?"

"I could use one," said Jackson. "And get something solid to eat. This pigeon pie is fine for nobility. I need real food."

Alicia placed their order, then settled back in her chair, a determined look on her face. "Okay, let's have the rest of it."

"Something very strange took place in Marseille two nights ago," said Jackson. "Eleven people disappeared without a trace over the course of a few hours. They somehow vanished from their homes and businesses. Nobody saw them taken, nobody heard anything strange, but they're gone. Even for a hellhole like Marseille, that's a pretty high toll for one evening. Moreover, all the victims shared one trait in common. They were night people. Busy during the darkness, never seen during the day."

"Vampires?" asked Alicia.

"Seems quite possible," said Jackson. "My sources don't speculate on stuff like that. The police are trying to blame the disappearances on a gang war, but nobody buys that explanation. Besides, there's the boat."

"Boat?" said Alicia. "I dislike like it when you're

being dramatic, Jackson. What boat?"

"A few hours before the disappearances," said Jackson, "a cargo ship from South America sailed into the harbor. It caught the dock workers by surprise because no boat was due. When the harbor police went on board, they found the captain and three crew members dead in their cabins, and the rest of the ship's company dazed and bewildered. I wasn't able to get any details about how the four had died, but I gather it wasn't from natural causes.

"The remaining sailors had absolutely no idea where they were or why they were there. They had no memories of their trip across the Atlantic. Nor did any of them know when or how the captain and the others had died. It's a bizarre story. It may not be related in any manner to the disappearances, but I remembered what you said about there being no coincidences."

"The boat came from South America," said Alicia. She remembered a chilling declaration during a conversation two weeks ago in the Washington Navy Yard. "Did your sources say where in South America?"

"From Buenos Aires," said Jackson. "Does it matter?"

"It matters," said Alicia grimly. "Definitely, it matters. Another player has just entered the arena. Hopefully, McCann will arrive here shortly. We need to find this vampire called Phantomas in a hurry. Because we're no longer the only ones looking for him."

PART

2

I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me...

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Pit and the Pendulum”

Chapter 1

Paris—April 4, 1994:

"It's been a long time since we've shared a bottle of wine at a Paris café," said Dire McCann, looking across the table at Alicia Varney. He smiled. "It seems like an eternity."

"Close enough," answered Alicia, chuckling. She took a sip from her glass. McCann's goblet was already empty. "Over a hundred years. The price of champagne has risen dramatically since those days."

"You look as radiant as ever," said the detective. "Some women age well. You do so *exquisitely*. Of course, you have always been a beauty."

"The Queen of Night has a certain reputation to maintain," said Alicia, sounding slightly smug. "I must say your taste in humanity has remained fairly consistent over the eons. Tall, dark and handsome, with a slightly sinister streak. Despite minor differences, I've never had any trouble recognizing you in mortal garb."

McCann frowned. "So you told me in Washington. I need to correct that. Being predictable is dangerous."

They sat at a table for two on the front patio of the Café de la Paix. The night air was cool and crisp. An hour before midnight, the outdoor patio of the

café was packed with guests. A few tables to their left, huddled in a very private discussion, were Elisha Horwitz and Madeleine Giovanni. A dozen steps to their right sat Flavia and Jackson, immersed in a technical discussion of their favorite killing techniques. It was springtime in Paris and love and death were in the air.

McCann and his entourage had arrived at the café shortly after ten in the evening. Alicia and Jackson were already there, dining on roast duckling with spiced honey, French bread, and the inevitable bottle of the restaurant's best champagne. Once introductions were made, despite some minor grumbling from the two vampires, they decided to split into three groups. McCann and Alicia wanted to talk privately and their wishes were not to be denied. A fat bribe to the maitre d' ensured that they were all seated fairly close together.

The detective and the lady had spent the past hour detailing their adventures since the explosion at the Washington Navy Yard. Alicia told of her several close encounters with the minions of Melinda Galbraith, carefully leaving out any mention of Walter Holmes. McCann spoke of his meeting with Rambam and the mage's revelations concerning the monstrous fire creatures known as the Sheddin. He did not allude to his later rendezvous with Horus. Both knew the other wasn't revealing everything that had happened in the past few days, but both knew that nothing relevant was being kept secret. McCann and Alicia trusted each other, just not too much.

"Even Lameth, the Dark Messiah, can fall into a pattern of behavior," said Alicia. She reached out and patted McCann on the cheek. "In a way, I find that thought reassuring. It makes you seem slightly less inhuman."

"You make me sound diabolical," said McCann, grinning.

Alicia nodded. "You are. As Anis and Lameth, we have known each other from a time before recorded history. We have been lovers, often conspirators, for centuries. You shared with me, and me alone, your greatest discovery, the potion that earned you the title the Dark Messiah. Yet, for all of this, I have always realized that there were secrets that you kept entirely to yourself. Of all the plotters of a race of plotters, you have always been the most enigmatic, the most mysterious. Over the eons, that has never changed. I assure you, I find your ability to resist me quite frustrating. Also, terribly inhuman."

The detective laughed softly. "We've had this conversation before. The last time, if I remember correctly, was at this very café, a little more than a century ago. My answer now is the same as it was then. Be patient. At the proper time, all my secrets will be revealed. And all your questions will be answered."

Alicia snorted in derision. "A wonderful stall for a peasant girl, not a queen. You offer me an answer that is no answer. *At the proper time?*" she repeated, mocking his words. "When will that be, my love? A moment before Gehenna?"

She leaned forward, her eyes glowing. "McCann, listen. The Red Death has demonstrated what one determined Fourth Generation Methuselah can do. Consider two. Most of the great ones are gone or in torpor. Working together again, combining our powers, we could seize control of both the Camarilla and the Sabbat. Each of us separately strives toward that same goal now. As partners, we could reign supreme over the living and the Undead."

"Perhaps," said McCann. His expression was harsh and unyielding. "But at what price? The destruction of the Masquerade? The death of thousands, perhaps millions? Hell on Earth, or worse? It is not a risk I am willing to take. I am not, nor will I ever be, the Red Death."

Alicia pouted, wrinkling her nose in annoyance. "Thus, you carefully plot to gain mastery of the world through high finance. Instead of conquering the earth, you seek to buy it."

"While you, perched atop your spider's web, hope to steal it," said McCann sarcastically.

Alicia's jaw dropped in surprise. "The Crime Syndicate? You know?"

"Of course," said McCann. He sighed, shaking his head. "I'm a detective, remember? Give me a little credit. I've been aware of your control of organized crime in America for years. You structured the mob hierarchy in much the same manner as the thieves' guild you operated in the Middle Ages. Like you said, we tend to think in patterns."

"A point well made," said Alicia. "We tend to see faults in everyone else but never in ourselves."

"If it's true with two wonders such as ourselves," said McCann cheerfully, "then it should also hold for the Red Death. The monster's overconfidence will prove to be its undoing."

"He may be overconfident," said Alicia, "but with good reason. So far, our opposition to his plans consists primarily of remaining alive."

"Our time is near," said McCann. "The Red Death has tried desperately to eliminate us, with good reason. Our fury will destroy him."

"This Phantomas, the ratman, as Madame Zorza called him, is the key," said Alicia. "He holds the answers."

"Still conferring with that fortuneteller?" said McCann. "I'm surprised you believe in her outlandish predictions."

"Mock her if you wish," said Alicia, "but I've found her prophecies to be quite accurate."

"Once you decipher them," said McCann, smiling. "Which, if I remember, can often take years."

"She does tend to speak in obscurities," said Alicia. "Listen. See what you think of these lines."

"Three, thirteen, one," she began, repeating word-for-word the gypsy's warning. "*The numbers always matter. Many are not what they seem. The numbers always matter. The answer is in the past. The answer is in the future. The children play the game. The rules are in no order. The numbers always matter. The ratman knows the answer. But he has not been asked the question. And most of all, the numbers always matter.*"

McCann blinked. "That's it?" He grimaced. "It makes no sense."

Alicia laughed. "My feeling exactly. I said the same thing when she spoke those words to me. Since then, I've given them a lot of thought. And the meaning behind the lines is starting to pull together."

"Go ahead, explain," said McCann.

"Some of it is pretty easy," said Alicia. "Three, thirteen, one, for example, is no mystery. They're the mystic numbers that define our race. One vampire, Caine, his three childer, and their thirteen descendants, the founders of the original clans. If the numbers always matter, then clan affiliation must be very important to the secret of the Red Death."

McCann shrugged his shoulders. "Okay. A little stretch, I think, but it is fortune telling. Neither of us has been able to identify the Red Death's clan line. Obviously, as certain traits are common to specific bloodlines, that knowledge would be invaluable for combating the monster. Keep going."

"The line about many are not what they seem," said Alicia, "I think refers to the fact that there were four Red Deaths, not one. The number mattered then as well. The additional monsters nearly proved our undoing. As doppelgangers, they were definitely not what they seemed."

"Maybe," said McCann. "Maybe not. I'm less convinced on that line. What else?"

"The answer being in the past and future is clear enough," said Alicia. "We're fighting for control of

the future. The secret to defeating the Red Death lies in the past, in learning its history. Not only do we need to discover the monster's sire, but something of its antecedents."

"I'll concede that point," said McCann. "Rambam supplied part of the information already with his warning about the Sheddim. Basic strategy dictates that you need to know your enemy before you can crush him. It's definitely true about any of the Fourth Generation."

He smiled. "Next lines are mine. *The children play the game. The rules are in no order.* Reuben and Rachel are the children. And they are definitely participating in a game without set rules: the Jyhad."

"I guessed the Jyhad," said Alicia. "But how do our mysterious benefactors qualify as children?"

"At Maimonides' home I finally realized the truth," said McCann. "A chance remark he made set me in the right direction. Reuben and Rachel are revenants, the children of a ghoul. Their powers are inherited directly from their parent, who derived his strength from the vampire he served."

"Revenants?" said Alicia. "What revenants possess abilities greater than those of most Kindred?"

"Think of their father," said McCann. "Name the most powerful ghoul who ever existed."

A curious expression passed over Alicia's features. "Caine's other brother—Seth," she declared in a whisper. "Caine's ghoul. That's why they looked so familiar. I remember seeing paintings and statues of him in the Second City."

"A figure nearly as mysterious as the Third

Human," said McCann. "Supposedly the first mage, named the protector of the kine in the legends of the Kindred, Seth has not been seen in more than seven thousand years. No one knows his fate. It's long been assumed he is no longer involved in the affairs of the Kindred. That may not be the case."

"Or his children might pursue goals of their own," said Alicia.

"Whatever motive they have," said McCann, "Reuben and Rachel are definitely the children. The game, as I said, is the Jyhad."

"The ratman knows the answer," said Alicia. "But the question has not been asked."

"Perhaps you're correct," said McCann. "Maybe Madame Zorza is pointing us in the right direction. I've been told by a reliable source that this Phantomas knows the deepest secrets of the Damned."

"I've heard the same from another very dependable informant," interrupted Alicia.

"As I said, the Red Death fears us," said McCann. "It follows that he is not invincible."

"If we can learn its bloodline," said Alicia, "I suspect all our other questions will be answered."

"Assuming this Phantomas knows the lineage of the Red Death," said McCann, "it seems possible to me that the monster can be defeated before he puts his plans into effect..."

"...at the council meeting of the Sabbat hierarchy in New York City next week," concluded Alicia.

"...at the Conclave of Kindred elders in Linz,

Austria, also next week," countered McCann.

"What an unusual coincidence that two such important meetings are taking place on the same night," said Alicia.

"Among the Undead, there are no coincidences," they both declared solemnly at the same time. Then burst into laughter.

"We are agreed, I suspect," said McCann, "on when the Red Death plans his coup?"

"Of course," said Alicia. "The monster hopes to seize control of the Camarilla and the Sabbat at these twin gatherings. All of his scheming, his various attacks, have focused on forcing the leadership of the two cults to assemble at approximately the same time. Whatever evil he is plotting will happen then. Unless we stop him before he acts."

"If we don't," said McCann, "the ultimate winners will be the Sheddim. Sooner or later, the Red Death or one of his brood will summon the demons again. And the world will be engulfed in fire."

Alicia shuddered. "I have my ambitions," she declared. "As do you. But what meaning is there to ruling a landscape of ashes? The Red Death is mad."

"He and his brood, the Children of Dreadful Night, are so fearful of the Antediluvians," said McCann, "that they are blind to the menace of their unholy allies."

"How ironic," said Alicia. "In seeking to save the Cainite race, the Red Death and his childer are about to destroy it. Ur save us from such noble efforts."

"Ur?" repeated McCann, smiling. "It's been a long, long time since you appealed to the god of your childhood."

Alicia nodded slowly. She licked her lips. "Centuries," she declared. "Perhaps more than that." Her brow wrinkled in thought. "I sometimes wonder exactly how long. Do you, McCann?"

"What?" asked the detective. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean. I never worshipped Ur. Nor did I live in the metropolis named after him."

"How long ago was it that I was a princess of the magnificent city of Ur," asked Alicia, "and you were the greatest sorcerer of Atlantis? We were lovers in those times, before either of us was Embraced. Our romance was legendary. Exactly when were those days? Do you remember?"

The detective opened his mouth to reply. Then closed it before saying anything. A minute passed before he finally replied. "Nearly six thousand years ago."

"Sixty centuries?" asked Alicia, shaking her head. "A very long time ago. Yet, I clearly remember drinking your potion—Lameth's elixir—in the Second City. That was the night I told you of my scheme to destroy my sire, Brujah, by seducing Troile and then persuading him to commit diablerie."

McCann nodded, a strange expression on his face. His voice sounded different, distant. "That moment is etched in my memory forever," he declared. "I will never forget that conversation."

"Really?" asked Alicia, her voice turning cold.

"Are you sure, beyond any shadow of doubt, that it actually happened? I am not so convinced. The Second City was destroyed *seven thousand years* ago, when humanity rose up in revolt against the Third Generation. Seventy centuries, McCann; a thousand years supposedly before either of us was born."

"But," said the detective, "that can't be. We lived in the Second City for hundreds of years before I discovered the proper formula. Brujah was your sire. Asshur was mine. The revolt took place partially because of our efforts to overthrow the Third Generation."

"So we believe," said Alicia, "but are those memories reliable? Could I have lived in the Second City and the ancient citadel named after my god, Ur? Is it possible for you to have been an alchemist of lost Atlantis and a sorcerer of the Damned? Are we remembering the truth, McCann, or what we are supposed to think is the truth?"

"You think someone has tampered with our memories?" asked McCann.

"A strong will can impose false memories on a lesser mind," said Alicia. "Each of us has used such techniques on our various pawns throughout history. They remember what we want, not what actually happens. Their reality is shaped by our desires. Perhaps, over the ages, our thoughts have been molded in a similar fashion."

"Nonsense," said McCann angrily. "We are the avatars of two of the most powerful vampires in the world. Our willpower cannot be bent and shaped so

easily. Whatever gaps exist in our memories are the result of the passage of millennia. Time jumbles our thoughts, not the unseen hand of the Antediluvians. We are free from their domination. Our minds are our own. Never forget that. We are free."

"Perhaps you are right," said Alicia. "Perhaps." But she did not sound convinced.

Chapter 2

Paris—April 4, 1994:

"I've never been to Paris before," said Elisha. Wide-eyed, he watched the crowds of people surging past the open-air café. "It's awfully busy for this time of night."

Madeleine smiled. "Actually, the sidewalks seem less crowded than usual. Decades ago, when the Opera House was still in use, this street was impassable when the show let out."

"You've been here before?" asked Elisha.

"Many, many times," said Madeleine. "Family business brought me to the City of Lights quite often during the two world wars. There were deals to be made, contracts to be negotiated, enemies to be eliminated. Paris and I are old friends."

Elisha shivered, listening to Madeleine's words. Sometimes he almost forgot she was not as young as she looked. And that killing the foes of her clan was her profession.

The Giovanni vampire's eyes widened in dismay. She reached over and placed cold fingers on top of his. "Please do not hate me for what I am, Elisha. My family honor is all that ever mattered to me. Until I met you."

"Can you read my mind?" he asked, amazed. He

did not draw his hands away. "Or was I just being obvious?"

"Very obvious to someone trained in reading the slightest nuances in a man's expression," said Madeleine with a faint smile. "Yours are not difficult to comprehend. Few mortals are so honest about their feelings."

"I'm pretty naive, aren't I?" said Elisha, feeling foolish. "Definitely not romantic or handsome. Especially when compared to the sophisticated men you've met over the years."

Madeleine laughed, clapping her hands together in delight. The noise attracted the casual glances of several patrons of the Café, but after seeing who had made the sound, they hurriedly turned away. An undefinable air of menace sheathed the young woman in black. Paying attention to her did not seem like a good idea.

"Your impression of me," said Madeleine, "is tainted by your affection. My existence as the Dagger of the Giovanni is neither romantic nor satisfying. Most mortals fear me, Elisha, sensing my true nature. Those whom I encounter in the course of my duties rarely have the opportunity to impress me with their charm. They are too busy praying for a mercy I cannot deliver."

"The constantly feuding clans of the Camarilla hate the Giovanni, fearing what they do not understand. Since we interact with humanity and treat mortals with respect, the Sabbat considers us traitors to the Cainite race."

She paused. "Among my own clan, I am an

outcast and a pariah. Bound by centuries-old traditions and beliefs, most members of family Giovanni treat women as inferiors. Few are Embraced, and of those, fewer are awarded positions of any authority. While none dare show their discontent openly, fearing the wrath of my grandfather, there are many in my family who would be pleased to see me destroyed. I am too powerful for their liking and they suspect that someday I will succeed my sire as master of the Mausoleum."

Madeleine smiled. "The thought tempts me, just to see the expressions on their horrified faces before I had them put to the knife."

Elisha licked his lips nervously. Madeleine had a way with words that he found disconcerting.

"I'm sorry," said Madeleine, obviously noting his expression. "I didn't mean to frighten you. It is merely wishful thinking on my part. My grandfather is a ruthless figure who enjoys the control he wields in the clan. There is little chance that Pietro would ever offer me his position. And, there is less chance I would accept."

"I wasn't worried," said Elisha. Then, after a few seconds, he shrugged. "Well, maybe a little."

Madeleine shook her head and flashed a smile. "Your glass is empty," she said, abruptly switching subjects. She obviously was not anxious to discuss the internal politics of her clan. "Would you like another coke?"

"Yes, please," said Elisha. "Maybe something to eat as well. I'm sick of airline food."

"It looked horrible," said Madeleine. "Even to

me. I'll order you some dessert. Their cocoa and raisin buns, with frozen yogurt and orange zest, are quite famous. I'm sure you'll like them."

Elisha nodded. Fortunately, Madeleine spoke French as well as eleven other foreign languages. Hebrew and English, along with a smattering of Latin for his studies, were the extent of his linguistic abilities. While she spoke to their waiter, he stared out into the crowded boulevard. If anything, there were more people on the street now than before.

"In case you're wondering," said Madeleine softly, so that only he could hear, "four Kindred are within striking distance. Two are seated at a table in the café. The other pair are pacing back and forth on the sidewalk a dozen feet beyond the patio. Eleven heavily armed ghouls are also within striking distance, some in the restaurant, the rest walking the street. Backing them up are a dozen normal humans who must be Mafia gunmen."

The inside of Elisha's mouth was suddenly very dry. "Are you certain they are looking for us?"

"According to what Miss Varney and Mr. Jackson said," declared Madeleine, "I cannot imagine who else they would be hunting for. Their leader, Don Caravelli, tends to view events in black or white. Success or failure. I'm sure his henchmen don't want to risk disappointing him. Once they are certain of Dire McCann and Alicia Varney's identity, they will attack. It won't be long."

"On a crowded street like this?" asked Elisha.

"Innocent lives mean nothing to scum like them," said Madeleine. "Be sure to enjoy your cocoa

and raisin buns. The food will probably be your last nourishment of any sort for hours. That is why I thought it best for you to eat now. Once the fighting starts, I doubt if we will have time to break for snacks."

Elisha glanced over at Dire McCann and Alicia Varney. The detective and the lady appeared to be deep in conversation. Neither of them seemed to be paying the least bit of attention to their surroundings.

"They are aware of the presence of their foes," said Madeleine, following the direction of Elisha's gaze. "Do not be fooled by their innocent appearance. Each of them is ready to fight. As are Flavia and Mr. Jackson. When the attack comes, they will react appropriately."

"What I don't understand," said Elisha, "is why they are meeting here, out in the open, knowing their enemies are searching for them."

"Two reasons," said Madeleine. "First, they obviously have important matters to discuss without delay. Wherever they go in the city, the chances are equally good that they will be spotted and an attack readied. It is easier to take care of business now and worry about the danger afterward."

Elisha shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "I'm not sure if that makes much sense. What's the second reason?"

"You must never forget that Dire McCann and Alicia Varney are acting in some unknown fashion as agents for two of the most powerful vampires who ever existed—Lameth, the Dark Messiah, and Anis,

Queen of Night. As Methuselahs, these Cainites possess near godlike powers. They are close to immortal. As players in the Jyhad, they consider themselves among the secret masters of the world. Neither of them are very adept at compromising."

Madeleine smiled and continued. "I have encountered the same sort of personality disorder with my own sire, my grandfather, Pietro Giovanni. Such powerful beings refuse to be cowed by the actions of others. When threatened, instead of proceeding with caution, they become defiant. Often angry. The two of them know they are in the center of a Mafia trap. They don't care. For all of their wisdom, they are surprisingly arrogant. Nothing frightens them."

"It's hard to imagine anything rattling Dire McCann," said Elisha thoughtfully. "He always gives the impression of being so...prepared."

Madeleine nodded. "Exactly the point I was making," she said. "His supreme self-confidence leaves no room for negotiation. That is why the Red Death is so relentless in its attempts to destroy McCann and Miss Varney. Among Methuselahs, there is no middle ground."

The Dagger of the Giovanni smiled. "Since we have no choice in the situation, best to accept it with good graces. Here are your cocoa and raisin buns and Coca-Cola. I hope it is not too sweet a combination. I am not a good judge of nutrition." Madeleine stared closely at Elisha's teeth as he took a bite from one of the buns. Her gaze followed every motion of his jaw. The young man

seemed entirely unaware of the attention. "Eat hearty," she commanded.

The next few minutes Elisha devoted to his food. The fancy dessert was extremely sweet but delicious. The buns were a welcome relief after the mystery meat he had been served on the flight from Switzerland. Madeleine, meanwhile, kept up a steady stream of chatter, detailing several of her adventures in Paris during the Nazi occupation. By the time he was finished with his snack, Elisha knew the full story behind the disappearance of a trio of "lost" masterpieces from Paris art museums. And how their capture put an end to a secret German attempt to invade England. It was an exciting tale, and one he had no doubt was true.

"So you never returned the artwork to the proper authorities?" he asked, licking the last taste of frozen yogurt and orange zest off his spoon.

"The proper authorities, as you deem them, were at that time in history a degenerate band of collaborators and traitors," said Madeleine. "Giving them the paintings would have been as bad as turning the pieces over to the Nazis. I would have burned them all before doing that."

She smiled. "The treasures decorate the walls of my suite in the Mausoleum. Three wonderful paintings in exchange for England's safety. I felt it was a fair price for the nobility of France to pay."

"I'm not sure all Frenchmen would agree with you in these turbulent times," said Elisha. "Now, most of them seem to hate the English. And the Americans as well."

"Trying to comprehend modern nationalism," said Madeleine, "is much like understanding Cainite clan affiliations. It makes sense to those involved, but to outsiders, it appears to be madness. One set of loyalties is more than enough for me."

"By the way," said Elisha casually, "what did you and Rambam and Judith discuss the other night? Before you met us at the restaurant?"

Madeleine's eyes widened in surprise. However, she did not evade the question. "Matters of life and death," she declared without hesitation. "When did you realize the truth?"

"Immediately," said Elisha, grinning. "I spent half my life with Rambam in that house. When a stranger enters, even if I am in the neighborhood nearby, I sense their presence. As I did yours and Judith's. Why didn't you tell me right away that you had been there? Was it a secret?"

"I thought it best not to speak of that particular conversation until after we deal with the Red Death," said Madeleine. "If the monster wins, my talk with Rambam won't mean a thing. The world will be dealing with much more serious problems. If we defeat the Methuselah's plans, then I will reveal everything we discussed. I promise."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," said Elisha, sounding bewildered. The young man looked as if he was ready to laugh—or cry. He just didn't know which.

"I know," said Madeleine, anxiously. "Please, Elisha. You must not pursue this matter any further."

The vampire closed her fingers over his. Her

hands felt like ice. "Rambam and I spoke of the future, Elisha. A future I never thought possible. That much I can tell you. If you care for me, ask no more."

"I-I care," said Elisha, his voice trembling slightly. "But I still don't understand why you can't reveal the rest."

"In this world," said Madeleine, with a faint smile, "not all conversations are meant to be shared. See if you understand this instead. Actions often speak louder than words."

Rising to her feet, Madeleine leaned across the table and kissed Elisha lightly on the lips. Her mouth was cool, but he was not chilled. "I will not lie to you ever," she said softly as she resumed her seat. "If you must know the truth, I will speak. But I beg that you do not."

"When he first sent me to find Dire McCann," said Elisha, "Rambam warned me never to believe anyone, especially the Kindred. That the world was filled with lies, and deception was everywhere."

He stared straight into Madeleine's eyes. "Yet, for all of his admonitions, my master also told me that when all else failed, to trust my heart." Elisha smiled. "I hate not knowing all the answers, but I'll survive. Keep your secrets. At least until we defeat the Red Death."

A tear of black blood trickled down Madeleine's right cheek. Self-conscious, she reached up and brushed it away. "You cannot realize how..."

Madeleine never finished the sentence. Moving with inhuman speed and grace, she rose to her feet

and hurtled past Elisha to the next table. Two middle-aged men, dressed in evening clothes, had been sitting there for the past twenty minutes, discussing the opera season and sharing a bottle of house red. They were just reaching for their guns when Madeleine struck. A twist of her tiny wrist snapped the first killer's neck with an audible crack. His companion died without a sound, the bones in his face crushed by the same delicate fingers that had gently touched a tear a second earlier.

The battle of the Paris streets had begun.

Chapter 3

Paris—April 4, 1994:

"I prefer a single knot in a strangler's cord," said Jackson. "It serves as an anchor and chokes any last gasps in your victim's throat. For those who deserve an especially nasty day, a sharp stone in the center of the knot heightens the pain tenfold."

"A nice touch when using a scarf," agreed Flavia, "but wire works better. A finely honed piece slices through skin and muscle like a knife. Combined with the famous Bengali twist, a wire garrote silences the mark quickly and efficiently."

"Wire is effective, I must admit," nodded Jackson, warming up to the topic. "But so many office buildings have metal detectors that its use is limited mostly to outdoors. A silk scarf can be carried anywhere. It works wonderfully well as a fine killing instrument. And it adds a touch of class to any outfit."

They both laughed. Jackson found the Dark Angel's company refreshing. She knew more about the art of assassination than anyone he had met since his days in Vietnam. If possible, she was even more ruthless than his employer, Alicia Varney. And in a savage, untamed fashion, she was equally beautiful.

"My sister, Fawn, favored long red silk stranglers'

scarves," said Flavia. "She thought it provided an interesting contrast to the white leather we normally wore. Myself, I thought it was too ostentatious. I was never as outgoing as Fawn. She was always the exhibitionist."

"Was?" asked Jackson, picking up on the past tense.

"The Red Death destroyed her," said Flavia. Her voice, flat and cold, was no longer amused. Dark fires burned in her eyes. "The monster burned her to cinders."

"I'm sorry to learn of your grief," said Jackson. "Did she die fighting?"

Flavia nodded. "She met the Final Death in battle, as all true warriors desire. It was a noble end. Still, my honor cries out for revenge. I have sworn an unbreakable blood oath to destroy the monster. Or die in the effort."

Jackson nodded. "No surprise with what you say. Funny thing about vampires. Despite all the talk about being undead, it seems to me that the Kindred are plenty passionate about lots of matters. Just that your focus is different than humans'."

Raising a hand, he gestured to their waiter for another beer. "Another glass of wine?" he asked Flavia.

"Of course," she answered. "The liquid forms such intriguing patterns on the floor. And, the empty glass helps maintain the illusion of life."

The Assamite glanced over at Dire McCann and Alicia Varney. They were intent on their discussion. As were Elisha Horwitz and Madeleine Giovanni.

Nodding in satisfaction, she looked once more at Jackson.

"Lust never dies," said Flavia, sensuously licking her upper lip with her long tongue. She laughed, a deep throaty sound that was both sexy and inhuman. "It is merely transformed by the Embrace. Our passions turn darker and often deeper. Witness our companions, enveloped in their elaborate mating rituals. Some vampires swear that sex is better after death. That since the act requires greater concentration, the results are much more intense."

Jackson gulped down his beer. Discussing sex with a beautiful woman dressed in a skintight white leather jumpsuit was not the way he had expected to spend the evening.

Flavia grinned, obviously sensing his discomfort. "What do you think, Mr. Jackson? Would making love to me be worth the risks involved?"

"I doubt many men could resist your charms, Miss Flavia," said Jackson honestly.

"Most men?" replied Flavia, laughing. "That's not who I meant. Most mortals don't interest me. What about you, Mr. Jackson?"

Jackson shook his head. "You're tempting," he said. "Extremely so. Living or dead, you're a dangerous woman. Still, I value being free too much to yield to my desires. I'm not afraid of putting my life in peril. That's easy. With you, though, it would be my soul. And that I'm not willing to risk."

"You are no fool, Mr. Jackson," said Flavia. "Which makes you doubly dangerous. Too many Cainites underestimate mortals. Men such as you

serve as a wonderful reality check. I'm pleased to have made your acquaintance."

"Likewise," said Jackson. He finished his beer and wondered if he wanted another. "What about Mr. McCann? From what I've heard, he strikes me as the type who would make any vampire think twice about relationships."

"Dire McCann is the most dangerous man in the world," said Flavia. "He stands on the border between life and death but belongs to neither. I hope someday to know the truth about him. But I'm not counting on it."

"The crowd is growing restless," said Jackson, uneasily. Nerves on edge, he was sensitive to the slightest change in their surroundings. People were shuffling in their chairs, crowding in from the street. "You think the Mafia is getting ready to make a move?"

"Definitely," said Flavia. She grinned savagely. "Right now. This instant. No more waiting. The dance begins."

Jackson never saw the Assamite leave her chair. Flavia moved so fast she seemed to vanish before his eyes. She materialized ten feet away, in front of a table she had identified earlier as the location of two Mafia Kindred. Though her opponents were vampires, with reflexes and strength a dozen times faster than any mortal, they were helpless against the Dark Angel.

Flavia moved with the sinuous grace of a king cobra. With her right hand she grabbed one killer by the neck. With her left, she snared the other man

by the shoulder. Both tried to resist, but the Assamite was inconceivably strong. Seemingly without effort, she jerked her two victims out of their chairs and into the air. They slammed into each other with a crunch of breaking bones. Their features shattered with the impact. Smashing them together again broke their rib cages and spines. Contemptuously, the Dark Angel dropped the pair to the ground and whirled away, looking for new prey.

The Kindred, Jackson knew, were difficult to kill. They were not, however, impervious to grievous bodily harm. As Flavia had just demonstrated. Neither vampire was capable of doing any damage in the near future.

The time for watching was over. Jackson rose to his feet, a Skorpion machine gun pistol sliding into his right hand. Normally, he preferred a heavier gun, like a .45, but in close quarters the portable machine gun pistol worked best. A dozen Mafia henchmen, mixed in with the diners on the patio, were just now rising to their feet. Another dozen milled about on the street. Evidently, the gangsters had all received a signal to attack. Unfortunately for them, their intended victims had also been expecting the message. And they reacted much faster.

Flavia had already taken out the most dangerous of the Mafia hitmen, the two vampires located in the café. From the corner of an eye, Jackson noted that Madeleine Giovanni was breaking necks and mangling flesh with a nonchalance born of a century of executions. The bodyguard shook his head in

astonishment. If he didn't act quickly, there would be no targets left. McCann's female protectors were a two-woman gang. While not a vain man, Jackson did consider it his duty as a bodyguard to account for a good number of ghouls and mobsters.

Grunting obscenities, two husky gentlemen dressed in black pushed over one of the small patio tables, ducked behind it for shelter, and began wildly spraying the crowd with bullets. Nearby patrons screamed in terror and ran for the exits.

Coolly, Jackson aimed and fired. At this distance, he couldn't miss. The killers dropped like rag dolls with the stuffing knocked out of them. A third and fourth man, forcing their way through the panicky crowds in the general direction of Miss Varney's table, met their maker in similar fashion. Catching sight of an attractive young woman armed with a butcher knife and with a homicidal look in her eyes, Jackson brought her down as a cautionary measure. She might not have been Mafia, but she looked ready to kill. In riot situations, there was no time for questions.

A ghoul, armed with two stilettos, proved to be much more dangerous. Six shots to the body slowed the charging man down but didn't stop him. Coolly, Jackson ducked under the killer's wild swings, thrust the gun into the man's open mouth, and thumbed the machine gun pistol to automatic. Even a ghoul couldn't fight with most of its head gone.

The entire firefight lasted less than a minute. The crowd melted into the night, leaving behind

only the dead. Senses alert, Jackson scanned the area. There was no sign of his employer or Dire McCann. The only people still left standing on the patio were himself, the Dark Angel, and Madeleine Giovanni. Elisha Horwitz sat alone at a table, his eyes wide with astonishment. He appeared to be counting the more than thirty bodies that littered the sidewalk. All of the Mafia thugs had perished. But so had a half-dozen innocent bystanders, caught in the crossfire.

"That was quick," the young man remarked. "I didn't even have time to be scared."

"These were the sacrificial lambs," said Flavia. In one hand she held a glistening steel short sword. Jackson swallowed hard, noting that there was no sign of either vampire. The Dark Angel had made sure they would not be a problem later on. "They were here merely to confirm our identities. I'm sure the real shock troops are on the way."

As if in response to her remarks, two black touring sedans roared down the street, heading in their direction. Heavy-duty machine guns, poking out of the armor-plated windows, shrieked a song of lead. Jackson hit the floor, as did Madeleine and Flavia. Only Elisha seemed unconcerned. The young man's brows knitted in concentration. He made no other move.

The glass doors fronting the patio exploded as a hail of bullets tore them to shreds. However, by some miracle, the gunfire never touched Elisha. The lead seemed to bend around the young man. He sat

untouched in a torrent of gunfire.

Elisha is a mage, Jackson remembered, as he sensed reality flicker. An instant later, the machine gun in the first car coughed, made a grinding noise, and stopped firing. A load had accidentally caught in the muzzle. It happened so fast there wasn't enough time for the triggerman to stop firing. With a roar, the rear of the first car burst into fire as the machine gun exploded. Tires screeching, the car lurched across the street and slammed into the reinforced metal fence protecting the Opera House. Another explosion rocked the car as the extra magazines of ammunition exploded. Flames engulfed it. No one emerged.

Seeing the fate of the lead car, the driver of the second vehicle immediately slammed on the brakes. Gears screamed as the car began skidding to a halt. But before it could come to a full stop, the auto hit a patch of oil left when the other car first exploded. Brakes locked, tires turned. Still speeding at a fast pace, the second vehicle whipped about in a wide circle. Spinning helplessly out of control, the big car slammed into the burning wreckage of the first auto. With a whoosh of burning gasoline, the second car's engine ignited.

Shrieks of agony poured from the vehicle but no one came tumbling out onto the street. Jackson suspected that the locking mechanisms on the doors were jammed. The car seemed to jump up into the air as the machine gun and drums of ammunition detonated. It was an ugly,

horrifying way to die. Mentally, Jackson made a promise never to cross a mage.

Elisha's face was pale white. "I didn't mean to be so violent," he declared.

"Do not concern yourself with their fate," said Madeleine Giovanni, rising to her feet and taking one of Elisha's hands in hers. "You did what was necessary. Those men meant to kill us. If it was us burning, they'd be laughing."

Flavia nodded. "How many blameless bystanders died here tonight?" she asked Elisha. "A competent assassin never stains her hands with innocent blood. They paid the price for their ineptness."

"I guess so," said Elisha. "I just don't think I'll ever find killing anyone—even enemies—easy."

"More power to you, kid," said Jackson. "The world could use a few people with morals. Not many around these days."

The bodyguard glanced about. Alicia Varney and Dire McCann were nowhere to be seen. The street was deserted; the crowds had vanished. All was quiet, except for the roar of the burning cars. "No sirens," he remarked. "That's not good. The police should have been here by now."

Madeleine Giovanni closed her eyes. She shook her head. "I sense at least a dozen Kindred approaching from three different directions. Brujah, mostly, though several Gangrel travel with them as well."

"Hunting parties," said Flavia. "The authorities have been paid off. We are on our own."

Madeleine opened her eyes. "We cannot remain

in this spot much longer. Where are McCann and Miss Varney?"

"Just comparing notes," said Dire McCann, stepping onto the patio from inside the restaurant. Right behind him was Alicia Varney. "We needed a few moments of quiet to make plans."

The detective grinned. "Got noisy here for a few seconds. You quieted things down in a hurry, though."

"They were merely the appetizer, McCann," said Flavia. "The main course is on the way. There's probably a small army of them. Don Caravelli seems intent on making you two dead. He has spared no expense. Do you have any plans to discourage him?"

"The situation is rather complicated at the moment," said McCann. He sounded almost apologetic. "Sorry, but we need to split up again."

"McCann and I must locate an ancient Nosferatu who lives in the catacombs beneath Paris," said Alicia. "One of the entrances to his lair, I believe, is hidden somewhere in the lower levels of the Opera House."

"While we're searching," said McCann, "you'll have to fight a delaying action against the Mafia. Alicia and I suspect that we are not the only ones who are anxious to find this particular vampire. We can't permit our enemies to find him first. That would be a major disaster."

"So the two of you go hunting," said Flavia, "while we stick around and keep Don Caravelli's goons busy?"

"Essentially, yes," said McCann.

"How long do you want us to play?" asked Flavia.

"Most of the night, I'm afraid," said McCann. "You know what Nosferatu lairs are like. Besides, though all we want to do is talk to this vampire, he doesn't know that. Locating him might be difficult."

"Four of us against several gangs of hitmen," said Jackson. "That's pretty long odds, even considering the talents involved."

Madeleine Giovanni smiled. To Jackson, she looked much too young to be an assassin. He also knew that with vampires, appearances were often deceiving. "I think I can even the odds by a measure. Clan Giovanni has offices in Paris. My cousins, Cesare and Montifloro, are stationed here. If I call them, they will be bound by family honor to provide me with assistance. The two of them never pass up the opportunity for a fight. Especially when they learn that it is against the hated Mafia."

"Cesare Giovanni, the knife fighter?" asked Flavia.

"The same," said Madeleine. "He taught me the art."

The Assamite laughed. "I've seen him duel. He is a master with two blades. It will be a pleasure to work with him."

"Time for us to go," said McCann. Hand in hand, he and Alicia started walking across the street to the front entrance of the Opera. "Tomorrow evening, at midnight, come to Versailles. We plan to rendezvous there. If we aren't present, return the next night. In the meantime, take no avoidable risks in this skirmish. But hold them as long as possible."

"It sounds like a fun evening," said Flavia.

Jackson shook his head in astonishment. The Assamite actually meant what she said.

Chapter 4

Paris—April 5, 1994:

His gnarled hands trembling with fear, Phantomas desperately clutched the sheaf of fax papers he had retrieved from the message center five minutes earlier. "I do not like this," he declared, his voice growing louder and more shrill with each word. "I do not like this turn of events one bit!"

All around him, the huge gray sewer rats who shared his kingdom squealed in response. Phantomas was linked with thousands of rats on a basic thought level by the vampire discipline known as Animalism. He could sense their emotions and force them to obey simple commands. However, the bond worked two ways. When he was angry or upset, the rats sensed his distress. Tonight, they scurried across the floor madly, as their master paced back and forth waving a handful of papers in the air and shouting in impotent rage.

"Look at these!" he screamed. "Look at these reports. Three nights ago, eleven citizens vanish without a trace in Marseille. Eleven! Disappeared without a trace! No bodies. I cross-checked their names from the official police reports with my encyclopedia. Every victim was a member of the Kindred. Six of them were Nosferatu.

"A boat docked earlier that evening in the harbor. The ship came from Argentina. Several of the crew were dead and the rest had no memory of their trip. Something terrible arrived on that vessel. It brought to our shores a monster, a thing that threatens the existence of all the vampires in Europe. A horror that swiftly approaches Paris.

"The next evening, six vampires vanished in Lyon. Again, the majority of them were Nosferatu. One of the missing was Rocholone, a Sixth Generation Kindred elder of great powers. According to the police reports, the only unusual occurrence the entire night was that near midnight, forty-seven windows shattered in the neighborhood where the disappearances took place. No one could explain why the glass broke, though several residents complained of hearing an extremely high-pitched shriek an instant before the disaster."

Phantomas squeezed his hands together, crumpling the papers between his fingers. "A shriek, indeed," he declared, dropping like a stone into the chair fronting his main computer monitor. His features were distorted with fright. "A scream seems more likely. The monster always screams at the moment of triumph. In that manner she has earned her title: Gorgo, She Who Screams in Darkness."

Haunted eyes stared at the block walls of the underground hideaway. "Last night, she descended upon Fontainebleau. According to my records, only two Kindred inhabited the town. They were Toreador, of course, artists wallowing in their memories of the court of Henry II. Their

disappearance has not yet been reported by the police, but the two hundred and thirty shattered windows at the palace made today's morning news. Gorgo has a voice like no other creature on earth."

Phantomas dropped the faxes to the floor. He rested his hairless head in both of his hands, supported by the desk. "Fontainebleau is a mere forty-five kilometers from Paris. She Who Screams in Darkness has probably already entered the city. I am not a fool. Absimiliard directed the Nictuku to locate and destroy the most powerful elders of the Nosferatu clan. Two thousand years of existence puts me in that category. Gorgo comes searching for me."

Shaking his head in despair, he dropped his left hand onto the computer keyboard. "First, the Red Death tries to destroy me. Afterward, he sends that trio of maniacs into my lair. Now, I find myself being stalked by one of the Nictuku. It doesn't seem fair. All I ever want to do is sit quietly and work on my great encyclopedia. I have no desire to be engaged in any manner in the Jyhad."

The rats squeaked in agreement. Despondent, Phantomas sat motionless in front of the unblinking monitor. Only the rats made any noise. A minute passed. Another. Slowly, the vampire straightened.

"My wishes," declared Phantomas, speaking to the huge gray rat sitting on top of his monitor, "obviously mean nothing to the Red Death or the Nictuku. It is time they learn that I am not that easy to eliminate. A Roman soldier never surrenders. My enemies may possess great powers. However, to destroy me, they must enter my lair. And, here,

beneath the streets, I reign supreme."

Feverishly, Phantomas started typing on the computer console. His fingers dashed across the keyboard with astonishing speed. "A quick diagnostic check of the system is in order," he declared, his voice picking up strength with every word. He nodded in satisfaction as long strings of symbols flashed across the screen. The Nosferatu could read computer language as fast as he could type.

"The systems are all on-line and functioning perfectly," he declared after a few seconds. "The sensors and sound units are performing at maximum efficiency. The backups are ready. The series override is set."

Phantomas pounded on three keys. "The walls are shifting, locking into pattern fourteen, the endless repeating loop. Fourteen exits have been closed, leaving six open. The traps set off by the Unholy Three are in place once more. The wall they destroyed has been replaced. All traces of their passage have been eliminated."

Five command lines followed. He nodded with satisfaction, noting the immediate response. "It is a plan worthy of the grand Julius himself. Brash and bold and filled with trickery." Phantomas chuckled. "Some lessons are never forgotten. Hail, Caesar!"

The vampire jumped out of his chair as if propelled by springs. Three steps brought him to the wall of the chamber. Spreading out his fingers in a reach no mortal and most vampires could not encompass, Phantomas pressed four hidden switches

at the same instant. Without a sound, a slab of the brick wall slid away, revealing a glowing panel of electronic lights. Reaching inside, Phantomas turned on five switches. Smiling, he pulled the fake section of brick back into place, making sure it snapped closed. His second line of defense was set.

"Now, I must download the entire encyclopedia onto my failsafe backups," he confided to the rats following him about. "No matter what happens to me or my lair, the volume will be safe in a dozen other locations throughout the world."

Fifteen minutes later, the job was done. Phantomas felt quite pleased.

"A fool," he confided to the rats, "knowing he is the object of Gorgo's affection, flees, trying to outrun her wrath. A stupid choice, for no one can escape the inevitable. A wise man confronts his enemy. Only by facing your worst nightmares can you defeat them."

The rats squealed in agreement. Phantomas settled back into the chair in front of the main monitor. Anyone entering the catacombs would set his master plan into operation. There was nothing more to do but wait.

Gorgo would come tonight. He felt certain of it. Her reception, however, was going to be different than any she had ever encountered. She Who Screams in Darkness was going to be surprised. Or so Phantomas hoped.

Chapter 5

Paris—April 5, 1994:

The doors to the Opera House were locked.

"No time for finesse," said McCann, grasping the handle of one of the ornate doors. He twisted. With a crack, the mechanism snapped.

"After you," he said, pulling the door open. "I neutralized the alarms, of course."

"I expected no less," said Alicia, walking past him into the building. "Meanwhile, I made certain the watchmen throughout the building are sleeping at their posts. They will not wake before morning. We can explore without any unexpected interruptions."

McCann chuckled. "We make a wonderful team of thieves. Think of the fun we missed all these years."

"Breaking and entering is a waste of time," said Alicia, as they hurried through the promenade leading to the Grand Staircase. "Organized crime is much more profitable."

"Manipulating international currency markets is better still," said McCann.

Alicia shook her head in dismay. "Over the centuries, you've lost your sense of adventure, McCann. What thrill is there in trading money?"

"The thrill of victory," said the detective, laughing again. "Someday, I will own the world."

"We shall see about that," said Alicia, with a laugh of her own. "My plans..."

Her voice faltered, then stopped entirely as they reached the white marble splendor of the Grand Staircase. "I had forgotten how magnificent this place was," declared Alicia, her eyes shining with unconcealed delight. "It's been too many years since my last visit."

"I remember you once mentioned being here on opening night," said McCann. "The guest of some king, were you not?"

"Alfonso XII of Spain," said Alicia, staring at the statues of Muses guarding the entrance to the main floor of the opera. "We were very close personal friends."

She glared at the detective, as if daring him to make a comment. Wisely, McCann said nothing. "What a night that was," she declared passionately. "These stairs were filled with the rich and famous of Paris. The President of the Republic, Marshal McMahon, was here, as was the Lord Mayor of London, along with his sheriffs, swordbearer and halberdiers. The Kindred Prince of Paris, François Villon, attended the performance, surrounded as usual by his doxies, as did a number of other members of Clan Toreador. Among the Kindred, there were whispers that much of Garnier's extravagant architectural designs owed a hidden debt to the prince. Knowing Villon's taste for excess, I suspected then that the stories were true. Viewing

the opulence a century later, I am convinced of it."

The chatter of machine-gun fire brought Alicia's recollections to an abrupt close. "It sounds like the Mafia's returned in force," said McCann. "We'd better move. I doubt they'll prove to be too much for Flavia and Madeleine, but no reason to leave anything to chance. You know this place. My trips to Paris were always just to visit you. I didn't waste my time on sightseeing. Where are we going to find the entrance to these fabled catacombs?"

"In the basement," said Alicia. "Far, far below."

"That should be easy enough," said McCann as he followed Alicia through the hallway leading beneath the Grand Staircase.

"Don't be so sure," said Alicia glumly. "There are seven floors beneath street level. The basement rooms are so immense and the ceilings so high that entire stage sets are stored in them. During the Commune of Paris, the basement of the Opera House served as a military prison. No one knows for sure how many men died during the siege of the city. But tradition says that their wraiths haunt the lower levels."

"What a pleasant thought," said McCann as they pushed open the doors marked *No Admittance*. "Any other tidbits of information I should know?"

"The firing outside has stopped," said Alicia. "That's good news. The attack is over."

She paused as they encountered a stone stairway leading down into darkness. "However, it appears that the electricity is off from the second basement down."

"The custodians probably shut down the power in the evening to save money," said McCann dourly. "Typical French. I can see in the dark. You?"

"Reasonably well," said Alicia. "Our biggest problem will be when we come to the lake."

"Lake?" repeated McCann as they descended. The detective did not sound pleased. "Did you say lake?"

"It is located on the lowest level beneath the street," said Alicia. "An underground stream originally ran through the site. Garnier used steam pumps for eight months to dry out the soil and lower the water table. Once that was done, he built a double-layered concrete foundation. Despite his efforts, a lake formed many feet beneath the main stage. This is our destination. Supposedly, the entrance to the catacombs are concealed by the water."

"No one has attempted to explore this unusual body of water?" asked McCann.

"Not recently," said Alicia. "A few years after the Opera opened, several brave groups announced their intention to locate the mouth of the reservoir. The first two attempts failed. The next three parties disappeared without a trace. No one has tried since. There are certain innate problems with conducting an investigation. Wait. You will see for yourself once we find the entrance to the lake."

"The government?" asked McCann. "No one worries about the safety of the building with a stream in the basement?"

"The city officials could care less," said Alicia.

"Their attitude is, why spend money if it can be avoided? The Opera has endured for more than a century. The foundation remains in good condition. Like most politicians, they are much more concerned about important matters like bribes and graft."

"Human nature never changes," said McCann. "I often wonder if Caine faced similar problems when he constructed Enoch. If prostitution is the oldest profession, what then of politics?"

Alicia laughed. "What difference is there between the two?"

They spent twenty minutes searching the bottom floor of the basement for the proper door. Alicia had only visited the lake once before and that had been over a century ago. There were hundreds of rooms to be investigated. Finally, just as McCann's nerves were beginning to frazzle, they found the right location. A long, narrow hallway ended in a heavy steel door marked "Danger—Do Not Enter" in huge red letters. The room was locked shut.

"I remember now," said Alicia. "The lake lies beneath our feet. Beyond this portal is a trapdoor that leads to the very lowest level."

"A trapdoor," said McCann. "Not even a dock? Don't tell me we have to swim to the catacombs?"

"There should be a rowboat moored to the ceiling close the trapdoor," said Alicia. "At least, there was one a century ago."

The detective shook his head in dismay. "If I had known our destination, I could have brought an inflatable life raft. I hope, your memory and

the manager's agree on the details."

Alicia reached out and put both hands on the lock. "Let me try this one," she declared. "It looks fairly simple."

She flexed her fingers gently across the metal. With an almost inaudible click, the lock opened.

"Show-off," said McCann, tugging at the massive barrier.

Alicia smiled. "There's a place for brute strength in the world. But finesse works fine in most situations."

In the center of the hidden chamber was a large trapdoor with a metal ring in the center. Resting against the wall were four large wooden oars. Next to them were several flashlights. Taking one, McCann pressed the "on" switch. White light flooded the room. "Fresh batteries," said the detective. "Someone must have been here recently. The oars look well maintained. Maybe things aren't as bad as I expected."

Reaching down, the detective pulled open the door in the floor, revealing a patch of absolute blackness. Alicia pointed a flashlight into the dark hole. The beam revealed a smooth body of water four feet below the level of the brick ceiling. McCann groaned. A small rowboat, barely large enough for two people, rested on the surface of the lake, a heavy rope tied to a hook in the ceiling.

"Not a hell of a lot of room between the roof and the surface of the lake," remarked McCann. "It's going to be an extremely claustrophobic boat ride."

"This is as far as I ever went," said Alicia.

"Stories claim that several tunnels lead from the edge of the lake to the catacombs. "The problem is that the passages are barely visible when the water is this high."

"Terrific," said McCann. "Finding them is going to be lots of fun. Not that we have much choice. You want to get into the boat first? I'll pass the oars through to you. Take a flashlight. Night vision or not, I prefer navigating with the lights on."

Alicia lowered herself carefully into the boat. With her legs stretched out in front of her, she was just able to sit on the bench without her head touching the red bricks of the ceiling. "Lower me the oars," she said. "Be very, very careful when you climb aboard. There's no way you're going to be able to sit upright. You'll have to crouch on your knees. I think there's enough room. It's going to be a tight fit, though."

McCann handed the oars to Alicia, then gingerly climbed over the side of the trap. Cautiously he rested his feet on the bottom of the dinghy. Slowly and carefully, he let his weight settle into the boat. If the rowboat capsized, dumping them into the lake, getting back up through the trapdoor would be very difficult.

"Not my idea of comfort," he declared a few minutes later, his arms resting on the edge of the boat. Chin perched on top of his fingers, the detective scanned the surrounding darkness, trying to spot a break in the walls of the gigantic chamber. "Any direction in particular you want to try first?"

"You tell me," said Alicia, dipping the oars into

the water. With McCann crammed into the boat on his elbows and knees, she was forced to row. She did not look happy. "You're the detective, remember? Make it snappy. We don't have all night to locate these damned catacombs."

McCann's brow crinkled with concentration. "Over there," he declared after a few seconds, waving to the right. "I sense a break in the walls. Further on, there's a cave with a beach. It has to be the entrance to the tunnels."

"Odd smell in this place," said Alicia as she steered the boat in the direction McCann indicated.

"You noticed too?" said the detective. He dipped a hand into the icy cold water of the underground lake and scooped out a sample. He raised his palm to his lips and licked.

"Damn," he said. "Just what I feared. Makes sense, though. There's a trace of Cainite blood mixed in this water. This entire lake is a gigantic blood pool."

"A blood pool?" repeated Alicia. "That might explain what happened to those other explorers. Nosferatu seem to favor such traps. If Phantomas is a Methuselah, his blood is extremely potent." She shuddered. "What sort of underwater monsters live beneath the Opera House?"

As if in response to Alicia's question, the water ahead of them quivered. Something was moving beneath the surface, heading in their direction.

"I have a terrible feeling," said Dire McCann grimly, "we're about to find out."

Chapter 6

Sicily—April 5, 1994:

The intercom buzzed on Don Caravelli's desk. Reaching over, the Mafia chieftain pressed the speaker button. "Well?" he asked.

"Our agents have made positive identification of their quarry in the vicinity of the Paris Opera House," declared the voice of Marius Michaud. "Both McCann and Varney are definitely there."

"Excellent," said Don Caravelli. Across the desk, seated in a comfortable easy chair, was Elaine de Calinot. Resting across her lap was her long staff. Her face registered no expression at the news. "When will the attack begin?"

The line was silent for a minute. There was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm in Michaud's voice when he resumed speaking. "The first attempt ended nearly an hour ago," said the security chief, speaking slowly, cautiously. "It was not successful. All of our agents in the vicinity were destroyed. Not one survived."

"Madeleine Giovanni was there, I suspect," said Don Caravelli. "She does not believe in leaving loose ends."

"She and the Assamite assassin known as the Dark Angel proved to be unkillable," said Michaud.

"The few instances our forces came close enough to mount a serious attack, bad luck plagued their every action. Cars exploded as gas tanks ruptured, fires erupted in vendors' carts, weapons misfired or jammed. It was as if the laws of chance turned against them."

"A mage," said Elaine softly, so that only Don Caravelli could hear her. A grim smile crossed her bloodless lips. "They must have recruited a powerful mage to their cause. Whoever it is bends probability to aid them."

Don Caravelli nodded. He appeared to be remarkably composed, considering the bad news he was receiving. It didn't matter. The initial contact meant nothing. That his agents were being slaughtered by the dozens was equally unimportant. The final results were all that mattered.

"I assume our representatives resumed the attack?" the Mafia Lord asked Michaud.

"Of course," said the security chief. "They had their orders. A second foray proved equally unsuccessful. Again, none in the party escaped the Final Death. The battle has since left the Opera and has degenerated into a running street battle in the opera district, between our forces and those of Madeleine Giovanni."

"What are you implying?" asked Don Caravelli, frowning. "The bitch has gathered reinforcements?"

"Two members of Clan Giovanni operated an office in Paris," said Michaud. "We never thought they would take an active role in the fight. They arrived unexpectedly, accompanied by a number of

ghouls. Their presence has offset our numerical superiority. The newcomers battle like demons."

"You never *thought*," repeated Don Caravelli. Sarcasm dripped from his voice. "How unfortunate. I will remember that once this episode is complete. For now, call in more agents from the surrounding countryside. It is your one chance to redeem yourself, Michaud. I want that Giovanni bitch destroyed, and her meddlesome relatives and friends with her. Do you understand? No more mistakes."

"As you command, my Don," said Michaud, his voice dull with shock. There was no escape. Destroying Madeleine Giovanni was impossible. Don Caravelli's command was in reality a death sentence. The intercom clicked off.

"I was growing tired of that fool," said Don Caravelli, with a cruel smile. "Finding a replacement for him shouldn't prove to be difficult."

"He never mentioned Varney and McCann after the initial attack," said Elaine, with a wave of a hand. A member of the Tremere Inner Circle, she was not concerned about the fate of underlings. "I feel certain our twin targets are no longer with their assistants."

Don Caravelli nodded. "I agree. They left their aides to carry on the war while they went searching. What better distraction than a firefight in the streets of Paris."

"Local folktales state that there is an entrance to the ancient catacombs located somewhere beneath the Opera House," said Elaine.

"Interesting," said Don Caravelli, "but

unimportant. My representatives in the city found four secret portals to the tunnels scattered throughout the city. Each of them descends into the lower depths from a different direction. We have this Phantomas surrounded. All that remains is to spring the trap, crushing him and your enemies like bugs."

"If the fighting started an hour ago," said Elaine, rising from her chair, "McCann and Varney are probably well on their way to the Nosferatu's lair. Waiting too long to attack would be a terrible miscalculation. Together, the three will prove to be formidable opposition."

"Don't make the mistake of judging my assault squadrons by the incompetence of those battling the Dark Angel and Madeleine Giovanni," said Don Caravelli, picking a throwing ax off the wall. He felt much more secure being armed when Elaine was standing. The touch of cold steel always comforted him. "Those fools are cannon fodder. They are expendable, meant only to give a semblance of truth to the attack. While McCann's friends paint the streets of Paris red with blood, our clandestine army will be busy hundreds of feet down, searching out and destroying our true enemies."

"Phantomas is a Methuselah," said Elaine. "McCann and Varney may be human but they have powerful mentors."

Don Caravelli sneered. "Why am I not trembling? After our discussion, I secretly instructed my top killers throughout the Continent to assemble in Paris. These are no ordinary vampires, Mistress

de Calinot. They are the finest, most dangerous murderers of my organization. An army of assassins, they are armed with the most up-to-date technology and weapons available. Doppler echo guns and motion detectors will make finding Phantomas and the two humans a trivial exercise. By morning, those three nuisances will be no more."

"I hope so," said Elaine. "For your sake."

Don Caravelli's grip tightened on the ax. "A threat, Mistress de Calinot?"

Elaine laughed. "You misunderstand me, Don Caravelli." The Mafia chieftain thought he detected the faintest note of sarcasm in her voice. "We are allies, partners in our quest to gain control of the Cainite race. I was merely expressing my concern for your safety."

Her voice grew cold. "If Dire McCann and Alicia Varney somehow survive the night, you will have made two extremely powerful enemies. Madeleine Giovanni is unquestionably a deadly foe. However, compared to Lameth and Anis, she is little more than a nuisance. Even the Red Death fears the wrath of the Dark Messiah and his consort."

"You presume to speak now for the Inner Council of the Tremere and the Red Death as well?" said Don Caravelli, his tone equally icy. "As lord of the Mafia, I fear no one—including this mysterious Nosferatu and the two mortals searching for him."

Reaching into the pocket of his suit, he pulled out a compact cellular phone. Eyes burning, he pressed a four-button code. The connection, made by satellite relay, took less than a minute.

"Now," said Don Caravelli into the mouthpiece. Then broke the connection.

"The search has begun," he declared, his eyes burning. "My agents will report as soon as contact is made. The catacombs will serve as the tomb of our enemies."

Elaine smiled. "Destroy those three," she declared, "and the world is ours."

Chapter 7

Paris—April 5, 1994:

Dire McCann pulled out his machine-gun pistol and rested it on his lap. Eyes narrowed in concentration, the detective let the tips of his fingers touch the surface of the underground lake. McCann cursed. "What the hell..."

"Watch out!" screamed Alicia.

Two gigantic heads rose out of the lake a few feet ahead of the rowboat. The creatures resembled immense, multi-colored cables, terminating in huge mouths filled with needlelike, five-inch teeth. Black eyes located directly above the gaping jaws fixed on Dire McCann. Hissing like giant steam locomotives, both monsters lunged forward at the surprised detective.

Instinctively, McCann rose to meet their attack, the gun in his hand momentarily forgotten. With a thunk that echoed through the basement, the detective slammed his head into the brick ceiling. Groaning in pain, he collapsed to the floor of the rowboat, as the two horrors slashed at the spot where he had been an instant before. The boat rocked as the snakelike monsters slammed hard into its sides. Then, with a splash, the creatures fell back into the water. As did McCann's machine gun,

tumbling down into the inky blackness of the lake.

Like enormous king cobras, the two monsters again lifted their heads up from the water. Their huge teeth gleamed like daggers in the dim glow of the flashlight. Spawn of the Nosferatu blood pool, the eels possessed an unnatural intelligence. They were filled with a mad desire to destroy anyone invading their lair.

Snarling with anger, Alicia released her grip on the oars. She pointed her hands directly at the morays, focusing her immense will. Bright sparks leapt from her fingers, expanding into fireballs as they moved. The fire caught the monsters full in the throat. Hissing in agony, they dived beneath the surface of the lake.

"Eels," McCann spat out angrily from the bottom of the boat. "Moray eels. A dozen of them, maybe more, scattered throughout the pool. Huge things."

"Impossible," said Alicia. "Morays are tropical fish. I know. They require warm, temperate seas. I had a tank of them years ago."

"Tell them," said McCann. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, McCann gripped the edge of the rowboat and pulled himself to his knees.

"*Fuck!*" screamed Alicia, as a red-and-silver eel hurtled toward her from the left. She turned in her seat, hellfire darting from her hands. The sparks sizzled against the monster's smooth skin but otherwise had no effect. The moray kept on coming. At the same instant, a green-and-gold monster surfaced a yard behind the boat. Its open jaws were wider than Alicia's head. There was no way she could avoid both attacks.

She didn't have to. Hands moving with blurring speed, Dire McCann grabbed the red-and-silver eel a few inches beneath its head. Jerking with all his might, the detective shifted the direction of the moray's lunge. Its speed and momentum were so great that there was no way the eel could stop. Its mouth smashed into the neck of the second attacker. Involuntarily, the monster snapped its jaws shut. Immense teeth buried themselves in the unprotected muscles of its victim. Thrashing about insanely, the two leviathans sank beneath the surface of the lake.

"That was impressive," gasped Alicia, her face white.

"I thought so too," said McCann. He flexed his fingers. "Don't count on me doing it a second time. It was a lot more luck than skill."

"Eels don't make noises like that," said Alicia.

"They don't grow to thirty feet, either," said McCann. "Amazing how a blood pool can affect things."

The detective stared into the dark water. Nothing stirred. His eyes narrowed. "They're beneath us," he stated, sounding grim. "A dozen of them, by my count. That's a lot of eels. Plenty of teeth."

"They're starting to rise," said Alicia. "There's no way we can defeat twelve of those monsters all at once."

"Don't underestimate yourself," said McCann. "How's your control of that Temporis discipline?"

"Same as always," said Alicia. "I can manage it

for a short interval. Stopping or changing the time flow isn't easy. Especially in such surroundings."

"A few seconds should be enough for my needs," said McCann. The water around them was churning. The boat rocked as gargantuan bodies crashed into the wood. "The sooner the better."

Alicia sucked in a deep breath. The shimmering, scaleless heads of seven eels broke the surface, completely surrounding the boat. The rest of the monsters remained below the lake's surface, trying to smash the rowboat from underneath. Massive mouths opened. The monsters hissed in triumph. Abruptly, the sound ceased. Time froze.

"Good timing," said McCann. There was an odd glow in his eyes, a strange, demonic ring to his voice. "Very dramatic."

"Just for you," said Alicia, her voice sharp with pain. She licked her lips, her eyes half-closed with the strain. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead. Her fingers were clenched in bloodless fists. "We are outside the hourglass, in a pocket out of time. I can't maintain this state very long. Whatever you're planning, do it quick."

McCann placed one hand gently on the motionless water. The air in the boat seemed to ripple with vast psychic forces. "Enough," he declared. "It is done."

Alicia sighed with relief. Reality shimmered as the pocket of time surrounding them dissolved. The unearthly hissing of the eels filled the darkness. Then, abruptly, the noise rose in pitch. The morays were shrieking—not in triumph but in terrible pain.

Dire McCann laughed. It did not sound even remotely human.

A wave of searing heat swept across Alicia's face, causing her to blink in pain. Clouds of steam filled the cellar. All around the boat, the water of the lake bubbled and boiled. The smell of burning flesh and muscle was everywhere. Alicia gagged for an instant, then mentally blotted the stench from her nostrils. She shook her head in astonishment as she caught a glimpse of their attackers. Pinpoint black eyes glazed in death, the giant moray eels were sliding downward into the depths of the underground lake. Somehow, with the touch of his hand, McCann had killed every one of the morays surrounding their boat.

"I boiled them alive," said the detective, answering Alicia's unspoken question. He grinned. "The time pocket provided me with the necessary instants to focus my thoughts on the water molecules in the lake. When you released the field, the liquid became superheated in a span of microseconds. Nothing living could survive in that cauldron. Generating heat isn't hard if you already know how to control the weather. The really challenging feat was making sure the boat didn't catch on fire."

"Eel soup," said Alicia. "I thought I had lost the capacity to be amazed by anything, McCann. But you manage to do it without effort."

"I try hard," said the detective. He pointed to the right. "The steam seems to be disappearing in that direction. That's where I earlier sensed a break

in the cellar walls. There's a tunnel beyond, and a beach. It has to be the entrance to the catacombs."

"Enough water's turned to steam for you to sit up," said Alicia. "Maybe you'd like a chance with the oars?"

The detective smiled. "You've done so well, I hate to deprive you of the privilege of continuing. After a certain age, exercise is good for you."

Alicia glared at him. Hastily, the detective reached for the oars, which remarkably had survived the eel attack without being crushed to splinters. "You navigate. I'll row."

The trail of the steam brought them to a narrow break in the cement foundation. Five feet wide, the opening was barely a foot above the water line. Carefully, the detective pulled in the oars. It was going to be a tight squeeze.

"Duck," he said, crouching in the front of the boat. Reaching out, he grabbed hold of the crumbling edge of the opening and pulled hard. Wood scraped against concrete as the rowboat slipped beneath the broken wall and into the dark stream beyond.

"That wasn't so bad," said McCann, sitting up. The roof was higher here. He waved the flashlight about. They were in a small cavern, twenty feet wide by thirty feet long. The ground sloped upward, with the underground lake terminating in a finger of brown dirt a dozen feet square. At the far end of the cave was a dark opening that could only be the entrance to the catacombs.

"There's an iron ring driven into the ground,"

said Alicia. "Obviously, we aren't the only ones to come this way. This isn't the first time this place has been used to enter the tunnels."

"Or maybe it served as a spot to leave them," said Dire McCann. "Keeping those eels alive and vicious required a small but constant amount of Phantomas' blood. He must have come to this lake fairly frequently over the years to feed them. Afterward, he may have left through the Opera House."

"With his Nosferatu powers, departing would have been no problem," said Alicia. "His presence in the building for the past century must have contributed to the many legends of the Opera Ghost. Think of it—Phantomas of the Opera. It has a dramatic ring. Sounds almost like an opera itself."

"Good title for a thriller novel," said McCann as he steered the rowboat to the beach. Grounding the boat in the earth, he leaped out and secured it by rope to the metal stake. "We're here. The catacombs await. You ready?"

Alicia scurried out of the rowboat, clutching the flashlight. "Too bad we lost your gun. A blood pool here indicates to me that Phantomas does not enjoy socializing. There are likely to be other monsters ahead."

"Working as a team," said McCann, "we can handle anything."

Far off, in the absolute darkness of the catacombs, something screamed. A high-pitched, inhuman howl of absolute insanity, the noise bounced back and forth off the walls of the cavern. One minute, two minutes, five minutes, it

continued with ear-piercing intensity, stopping Alicia and Dire McCann from moving. The sound was the distillation of madness in auditory form. And both the detective and the lady knew its origin.

"Gorgo?" asked McCann, an astonished expression on his face. "She Who Screams in Darkness is here in the catacombs? I thought that monster was somewhere in Argentina."

"I-I forgot to tell you," said Alicia, with a sigh. "It's a long story. But you guessed right."

The detective shook his head. "I'm not terribly surprised," he declared. "The Nictuku labor under Abisimilard's command to destroy the most powerful Nosferatu vampires in the world. Phantomas certainly belongs to that elite group. He makes a natural target. Gorgo was the most driven of the lot. Sooner or later, she had to come hunting for him. I only wish she had scheduled her visit for another night."

"We'd better find Phantomas right away," said Alicia, shining the beam of the flashlight into the tunnel. "Before Gorgo does."

"Right," said McCann. "Or there won't be much left to find."

Chapter 8

Paris—April 5, 1994:

Alarm bells were ringing everywhere in Phantomas' command center. The shrill noise upset the horde of gray rats who covered the floor of the chamber. They squealed in annoyance. Phantomas, sitting at his chair in front of the main computer monitor, could sense the rodents' anxiety. It wasn't any surprise. He felt quite upset himself. As he expected, his underground catacombs had been invaded. However, he had been totally unprepared for the sheer numbers of his foes. It was no longer a battle between him and Gorgo. Several unexpected wild cards had entered the game.

"There are intruders in six different passages," he muttered to himself as his clawlike hands flew across the keyboard. First, he shut off the alarms. The bells were upsetting his rats. Their constant chattering made it difficult for him to concentrate. Then, with inhuman speed and agility, he called up the latest information gathered by his hidden video cameras. It was not a cheering scenario.

"These invaders think to trap me in my own lair," he snarled angrily. "The fools. I may be one against many. But a cornered rat fights the hardest."

Four tunnels, leading to his lair from major

landmarks located in the four corners of the city, were filled with Mafia scum. Evidently, their plan was to surround him from all sides. Phantomas snorted in derision. As if there weren't a dozen other emergency exits from his lair. Cornering him wasn't so easy.

Each gang consisted of two Brujah and three Gangrel vampires. The Brujah were there as leaders and fighters. The Gangrel, with their wolflike disciplines, acted as scouts. A half-dozen ghouls accompanied the expeditions. Thieves and murderers, they carried flamethrowers and powerful submachine guns. All four groups were connected to the others by walkie-talkies and cellular phones.

Phantomas had never directly dealt with the Mafia before. A denizen of the shadows, he had always believed himself unknown to the bosses of the crime empire. Tonight's four-pronged attack made it clear that he had been mistaken. He suspected that the Red Death was somehow involved in this sudden reversal of fortune.

The gangs had been in the catacombs for close to an hour. Originally, they had been advancing at a much faster pace, confident that there was nothing Phantomas could do to stop them. They had abruptly slowed down when Gorgo made her presence known. Most later-generation Brujah and Gangrel had no idea that the Nictuku existed. But the horrible screams uttered by the monster were enough to frighten the bravest vampire. The thugs had come searching for a single Nosferatu seemingly afraid of his own shadow. They had not expected

to encounter She Who Screams in Darkness.

Despite the incredibly sophisticated electronic surveillance devices used in his spy system, Phantomas could not pinpoint Gorgo's present location in the catacombs. The Nictuku's shriek had shattered the lenses of half of his cameras hidden throughout the cavern complex. Sporadically, the focus mechanism on his main computer monitor went berserk, making it impossible to see anything more than a blur in the tunnels. Gorgo was in the west wing of the labyrinth, in the outermost ring of the catacombs. He estimated that it would take her an hour or two to escape the maze formed by the tunnels. Phantomas shook his head. The only sure way to discover what Gorgo was doing was to go out and search for her, and he had no intention of taking that risk.

Two mortals had entered the catacombs using the passageway connected to the Paris Opera House. Adventurers or fools, Phantomas decided, lured by the wild stories of the phantom's treasure. Humans were such dolts, believing the most outrageous stories as long as they concerned money. For a moment, Phantomas considered flooding the hallway with poison gas. He hated fortune hunters. Then, he relented, realizing that if the pair had come searching for buried loot, it was because of rumors he himself had started. It seemed unfair to penalize the two for his sense of the dramatic.

"These two entered from the tunnel at the far end of the lake beneath the Opera," murmured Phantomas, struck by a new thought. "I wonder how they avoided the giant eels."

Three keystrokes revealed the answer. "Dead," said Phantomas, addressing the rats at his feet. He shook his head in bewilderment. "They are all dead."

Mutated by his blood to four times their size and ferocity, the morays had served as effective guardians to the entrance of the catacombs for decades. Kine or Kindred could not cope with the needle-teethed monsters. The fact that they had been wiped out by these seemingly innocent mortals was difficult for Phantomas to accept.

"Obviously, I have made a terrible error in judgment," said Phantomas softly. "This pair is neither *innocent* nor *ordinary*."

His hands flashed across the keys again. The cameras in that particular tunnel were working fine. They were far enough away from Gorgo to have escaped being damaged by her scream. Adjusting the focus and infrared lighting, Phantomas zoomed the picture in on the woman's face. She looked vaguely familiar.

Running a subroutine that scanned thousands of newspaper files, it took his computer two minutes to identify the intruder's features and print her name beneath the close-up. She was Alicia Varney, one of the world's richest women. Her name appeared in red letters on the screen, notifying Phantomas that the woman was also mentioned in his encyclopedia. A keystroke recovered the reference. According to his masterwork, Alicia Varney served as Justine Bern's ghoul.

The Nosferatu shook his head, dismissing that

notion immediately. He had studied faces for centuries. This woman's features displayed incredible strength of character. She could never obey the commands of another. She might be a ghoul. But no one was her master.

Fingers dancing across the keyboard, Phantomas directed his cameras to focus on Varney's companion. Obeying instructions, the devices zeroed in on him. Then they shifted direction a second time, trying to lock on to his features. Then shifted yet again. Several minutes passed as the image changed from camera to camera in the tunnel. None of them were any different. In spite of all attempts, the picture refused to sharpen.

Phantomas shook his head in annoyance. First Gorgo appeared. Then the Mafia thugs. Now these two humans, one of whom had features that defied modern technology. It was a very frustrating night. As always, he felt certain that all three events were linked in some manner. He just did not know how, and he suspected that he was quickly running out of time to discover the connection.

Another typed command filtered sound from the hidden microphones in the walls of the corridor through the speakers of his computer. Matching voices with sound files was much more difficult than tracing pictures. Still, his system was capable of astonishing tricks. Meanwhile, he concentrated on what the two were saying.

"You sense anything strange going on in these tunnels?" asked the woman he had identified as

Alicia Varney. "I seem to be detecting an awful lot of motion for a secret underground maze."

"Me too," said the man without a face. "It's not just you, me, and Gorgo down here. There's a bunch of other Kindred wandering about."

"They're Mafia thugs," said Alicia Varney. "If Don Caravelli knows about both of us, McCann, then he's probably learned about this Phantomas as well. I've fought the Capo de Capo for years. He is very thorough."

"Makes sense," said the man called McCann. "One thing in our favor, at least. The two of us working together might not be able to defeat Gorgo. She has a reputation for being one of the most powerful of the Nictuku. I'm not sure flesh and blood could survive a close encounter with her screams. Still, we stand a lot better chance of dealing with her than do the Mafia gangs."

Alicia Varney laughed. "No question about that. She's definitely after the Nosferatu. However, her mission won't stop her from pausing for a few snacks on the side."

Phantomas' jaw dropped in astonishment. He tried to speak but no sound came forth. Several seconds passed before he even noticed that a name in red letters had flashed onto his computer screen beneath the flickering image of the man accompanying Alicia Varney. He was Dire McCann. The cross-check with his encyclopedia identified McCann as a rogue mage and detective in the employ of Alexander Vargoss, vampire Prince of St.

Louis. Prince Vargoss and his brood, Phantomas recalled, had been one of the first targets of the Red Death.

The thought prompted him to do a quick scan on Justine Bern as well. The archbishop of New York had also been among the earliest Cainites to battle the monster. A review of the two attacks confirmed Phantomas' suspicions. McCann and Varney each had been present when the Red Death appeared.

A further scan of reports received from Washington wove the net tighter. The detective and the ghoul had been in the city during the Sabbat siege. So had the Red Death. Linking them with the monster wasn't possible, but Phantomas worried less about the possible than the probable.

Now, the two were in his catacombs, hunting for his lair. They seemed to know about Gorgo and the Mafia gangs. Only a few humans were aware of the existence of the Kindred. Even fewer knew anything of the Cainite race. It was impossible that they would have information about the Nictuku. Yet, they did. There was something distinctly inhuman about these mortals. It didn't take Phantomas long to guess the truth.

"Masqueraders," he whispered. "They are Masqueraders."

There were stories, never confirmed but never disproved, of certain Fourth Generation vampires who were masters of the discipline known as Dominate. Their minds were so inconceivably powerful that while resting in torpor, they could mentally reach out and take control of an ordinary

mortal. In essence, they possessed the body of their host. They lived again, vicariously experiencing all the pleasures of mortal life—from the touch of sunlight to the thrill of sex. To ensure the safety of their puppet bodies, these Methuselahs endowed their mortal form with certain of their powers. The legends called such vampires Masqueraders.

While researching his encyclopedia, Phantomas had come across many references to such beings. He had never found any actual evidence that they existed. Now, he felt certain that two such Masqueraders were in his catacombs.

He had been searching desperately for some clue to the whereabouts of Anis and Lameth. According to his encyclopedia, they were the only two vampires who could help him defeat the Red Death. He had been unable to find any trace of either Methuselah. Perhaps they had been in full view throughout his investigation, just not in the form he expected.

Gorgo screamed once more, bringing his mind back to the situation at hand. His computer monitor shuddered but the glass did not shatter. Her cry seemed louder. The Nictuku was getting closer. A quick check revealed that fewer than one-tenth of his hidden cameras were still functional. The four gangs of Mafia thugs were anxiously discussing whether to advance or retreat. They feared whatever monster lurked in the tunnels. But they feared the wrath of Don Caravelli as well. At present, they were not moving, trying to gather the necessary courage to continue.

Alicia Varney and Dire McCann were hurrying

through the catacombs, weaving their way closer and closer to Phantomas' sanctum. He felt certain that they sought him for the same reason he had been anxious to find them: to destroy the Red Death.

Unfortunately, the necessity to communicate with anyone in the catacombs had never occurred to him before. Thus there were no speakers in the walls of the tunnels. He could follow the progress of the humans, but he could not speak to them directly. There was no way for him to urge them to greater speed. It was a three-way race to his lair. And if they did not arrive first, there would be hell to pay. Literally.

Chapter 9

Venice—April 5, 1994:

Pietro Giovanni listened to the voice on the other end of the telephone line and scowled in annoyance. He did not like what he was hearing.

A tall, lean man with graying hair and the face of an aristocrat, Pietro was impeccably dressed in an expensive three piece charcoal gray suit, white shirt, and drab blue tie. He favored conservative, quiet clothing. The only trace of color in his outfit was the blood-red rose he wore in his buttonhole. During his lifetime, Pietro had raised beautiful flowers. Undeath had not destroyed that love. He owned one of the finest arboretums in the world. His roses were spectacular. No one knew his secret, but there were rumors. Terrible, horrifying rumors. With the Giovanni clan, there were always rumors. Many of them were true.

He sat in a huge black leather chair behind an ebony desk. There were no papers on the desktop. Pietro Giovanni did not handle matters involving paperwork. As manager of the Mausoleum, the monolithic building in the center of Venice that served as headquarters for Clan Giovanni, he was involved with much more important concerns than shuffling memos.

Behind Pietro, panoramic picture windows of dark-tinted glass offered a magnificent view of Venice. Oftentimes, in the darkness just before dawn, he stood at those windows and surveyed the city, like a king examining his kingdom. The comparison was an apt one. As an elder of the Giovanni clan and manager of the Mausoleum, Pietro controlled wealth beyond counting. In this modern age, money meant power. Pietro was very powerful.

There was no time this night for contemplation. Pietro had been interrupted in the middle of an important conference by this phone call, and the news had been disturbing. Especially when coupled with his earlier conversation with his guest.

"What of Villon?" he asked the speaker on the other end of the line. "This battle involving Madeleine and her two cousins has been raging in the streets for hours. Why hasn't the prince of Paris acted? He knows she is my childe, and my granddaughter as well."

Pietro's brow wrinkled in anger as he listened to the answer. Strange, unholy fires danced in his eyes. His gaunt features took on a skeletal appearance as he grew angrier and angrier. His voice, when he spoke again, was calm, but it was the peace of the damned. His tone was that of the medieval Inquisitors who had condemned innocent women to the flames for witchcraft. There was no pity, no mercy, and certainly no forgiveness.

"So," he declared, "the prince feels that protecting members of Clan Giovanni from the

wrath of the Mafia is not his responsibility? I understand his reasoning. After all, our clan is not a member of the Camarilla, and we are sworn not to interfere in its politics. In a contrived, cowardly fashion, Villon's refusal to guarantee the safety of my childe makes sense. All vampires know of the enmity of the Giovanni and the Mafia. Villon has every right to consider the feud between our clan and the crime cartel a personal one."

Pietro paused, letting his servant on the other end of the connection speak again. Only half-listening, the elder vampire looked for his guest. He had left his chair and was roaming the office. Pietro finally located him, standing quietly at the far end of his sanctum, examining a rare Etruscan vase. The man appeared to be oblivious to his conversation but Pietro suspected his visitor was listening closely to everything being said on both ends of the line. His location didn't matter. If he wanted to eavesdrop, he could have been standing outside the building and managed. Though mortal, he controlled powers that were equal to the greatest vampire disciplines. Pietro did not fear his visitor, but he did respect him. He didn't trust him. The man had no sense of honor.

"Prince Villon should be made aware that I am aware of his breach in hospitality," said Pietro. "Please be sure to inform him that I am severely disappointed that he allowed my favorite childe to be treated in such fashion. Perhaps a small reminder would help underscore my annoyance."

The voice on the other end of the line chattered

like a machine gun. Pietro smiled. He chuckled coldly.

"An interesting amusement," he declared, after a moment's thought, "but much too broad to be practical. The treasures of the Louvre, despite Villon's conceits, belong to the world, not just to him. Destroying any of them would be counterproductive. We need something with a touch more immediacy. Something personal."

The voice spoke again. The smile on Pietro's face widened as he listened. "Much better," he declared, sounding satisfied. "Villon likes to surround himself with a herd of witless beauties. The egotistical fool believes himself irresistible to women. It is a tiresome notion that needs deflating. Use what resources you must. Demonstrate to the prince of Paris that beauty is only skin deep."

There was a satisfied expression on Pietro's face when he broke the connection. In life, he had been a practical, hardheaded merchant with little tolerance for fools. In undeath, his patience was even more limited. Villon had not only endangered the safety of Pietro's child, but he also had shown disrespect for clan Giovanni. Such insults could not, would not, be tolerated. Tomorrow night, he would awaken to a harem of skeletons.

The Giovanni elder's smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Once again sitting across from him, on the other side of his ebony desk, was his mortal ally and spy. The information he brought was as unwelcome as the stories from Paris.

"You are sure of the truth of these matters?" Pietro asked. "Madeleine has always been loyal to

her clan. More importantly, she has always been loyal to me."

"My sister, Judith, trusts me implicitly," said the gray-bearded mage named Ezra. "I am her older brother. There is no reason she would lie to me." Ezra laughed. "Like our teacher, she is too naive. Judith possesses a childish faith that good will triumph over evil. She doesn't realize that the world is colored in a multitude of grays, not in black and white. She and Rambam are fools."

"Unlike you," said Pietro, his tone neutral, "who recognize that compromises must be made in order to survive and prosper."

"I realize that good and evil are two faces of the same coin," said Ezra. "What is darkness but the absence of light? A wise man appreciates both the positive and negative aspects of existence."

Pietro nodded, saying nothing. Ezra was a thinker, and as such, needed justification for his actions. The mage was an important ally. However, Pietro knew better than to trust him. A man who would betray his family and friends had no honor.

"When I asked her for the details of her meeting with Rambam and Madeleine," continued the mage, "Judith recounted the conversation in detail. Your childe told of her upbringing in your clan, of the murder of her father, and her obsession to avenge his death. She described her training and her career as the Dagger of the Giovanni. From my sister's account, it sounded like Madeleine was remarkably candid."

"Honesty makes a good impression," said Pietro.

"I am convinced Madeleine would never reveal any clan secrets, no matter what the reward."

"Even mortality?" asked Ezra, sounding unconvinced.

"Madeleine has been a Cainite for nearly a century," said Pietro. "She knows nothing of life, nor would it hold any temptation for her. I know my granddaughter. She exists only for revenge."

"Perhaps," said Ezra. "Though I suspect you are betrayed by your own wishful thinking. Besides, what happens once Madeleine destroys Don Caravelli? Without the Mafia Capo as a focus, will she remain loyal?"

"My granddaughter is a member of Clan Giovanni," said Pietro, his voice a cold whisper. "Be careful of your accusations."

Ezra licked his lips. He raised his gnarled hands in protest. "I meant no disrespect," he declared, his gravelly voice shaking. "You know I have a habit of talking too much."

"A dangerous trait, my friend," said Pietro, coolly. "It will get you into trouble someday. Consider the words forgotten."

Pietro leaned forward, his elbows on the ebony desk. "Madeleine is the student of the greatest experts in espionage and subterfuge who ever lived. She understands that the easiest way to gain someone's confidence is to seemingly put yourself at their mercy. Confessing your sins works wonders in garnering sympathy. I assure you, this is not the first time she has used such tactics to gain the trust of her intended victims. She is playing Rambam and your sister for fools."

"What about the boy, Elisha?" asked Ezra.

"You said yourself that he is young and naive, and quite taken with Madeleine," said Pietro. "It sounds like my childe has woven her web with the consummate skill of a master tactician. I think she has the situation under control."

"There is the detective," said Ezra. "Dire McCann. What about him?"

Pietro's eyes blazed red. The vampire rose from his chair. Stepping to the windows that overlooked the city, he stared into the darkness. "Dawn is approaching. If you have anything else to report, do so now."

"McCann..." said Ezra.

"My good friend Dire McCann has nothing to do with this situation," said Pietro. From his tone, it was clear that this was not a matter for discussion. "Madeleine is an independent agent. In performing her duties, she reports only to me. However, to satisfy your doubts, I will request that she return to the Mausoleum as soon as is practical. In the course of her debriefing, I will question her about Rambam's offer. That should settle any questions about her loyalty."

"I ask for nothing more," said Ezra, his voice smug and satisfied. "My only concern is to protect the interests of my friends."

Pietro nodded. "Your loyalty is appreciated," he declared solemnly. "Be assured, it will be rewarded."

What the Master of the Mausoleum left unsaid was that if Ezra's tales proved unfounded, that reward would be a long and very painful death.

Chapter 10

Paris—April 5, 1994:

"This goddamned place is a maze," said McCann, half an hour after leaving the boat. "We've been wandering these catacombs for thirty minutes without coming across any sign of Phantomas' lair. As best I can tell, we're going around in circles. I'm getting frustrated."

"Can't you use one of your godlike powers to locate the Nosferatu's sanctum?" asked Alicia, her expression as disgusted as McCann's. "You control the weather and all those other neat things. Isn't there something in that bag of tricks for finding errant Kindred?"

The detective shook his head. "Madeleine Giovanni possesses a discipline that allows her to pinpoint any powerful vampire," he declared, "but it's not a talent I share with her. Besides, it wouldn't matter if we knew where Phantomas was: I'm pretty sure he's at the center of this labyrinth. What we need to do is find the proper tunnels to bring us to his hideaway. We're not moles; we can't just burrow a path through the walls to reach him."

"I feel like we're characters in a Sartre play," said Alicia. "All we need is Lucifer, dressed in faded blue jeans, commenting on our predicament."

"Actually," said McCann, "I'm surprised we haven't run into Phantomas. With all the activity in these catacombs, I would have expected that he would have deduced by now that we're the only ones in the tunnels who are on his side. It's clear that the others are his enemies."

"Maybe," said Alicia, "the problem is communication. You've noticed the traps and such in the walls and floor?"

"Of course," said McCann. "No surprise. Nosferatu aren't partial to visitors. "

"But none in this section of the maze is operational," said Alicia. "Phantomas has shut down the boobytraps that lie in our path, clearing the way to his lair. Obviously the Nosferatu wants us to find him."

"Following a trail of nonfunctioning snares will take hours," said McCann. "Gorgo's screams have been getting louder: she probably senses the presence of the Mafia vampires in the labyrinth. It won't be long before she starts smashing walls to find Phantomas. I want to be safely out of here before that happens."

"Do you hear something?" asked Alicia. "There's a weird sound, like lots of things moving in the darkness."

McCann stood still, an intent look on his face. "Ahead of us fifty feet. Not Kindred. You're right. There's a lot of movement in the tunnels. I'm not sure what it is. But we'd better find out."

Lights from their flashes illuminating the corridor, McCann and Alicia marched forward.

They didn't have far to go. Their tunnel crossed paths with another about fifteen yards further. The floor of this tunnel was alive: hundreds upon hundreds of rats covered the ground. Squeaking wildly, they formed an arrow pointing to the west.

"Rats?" asked Alicia. "Madame Zorza did call Phantomas the ratman."

McCann laughed. "It's the Nosferatu's beacon to his headquarters. The rats are deserting a sinking ship. He's commanded them to leave his lair before the Nictuku arrives. All we need do is backtrack their trail." The detective paused. "You're not afraid of rats, are you?"

Alicia snorted in amusement. "I lived in Paris during the days of the Commune," she declared. "We ate rats to keep from starving. They don't scare me."

Together, the detective and the lady plunged into the rodent-filled tunnel. The rats, fleeing for their lives, ignored the two mortals. The passage twisted and turned at right angles. Parts of it were covered with thin pools of water. In other sections, the passage was only a foot wide and a few feet high. Everywhere, there were rats. They were a living, squeaking thread in the heart of the labyrinth.

After twenty minutes of pushing against the rat horde, McCann and Alicia emerged into a huge cavern filled with computers. The walls glowed green from the reflection of the light of a dozen monitors. The floor here was devoid of life. All of the rodents had fled. Only one creature still remained: Phantomas.

The vampire stood waiting for them at the far

end of the chamber. He wore a formless gray robe that barely concealed his misshapen, twisted body. Five feet tall, he had broad shoulders and arms that stretched nearly to the floor. His fingers were incredibly long and thin, almost like bones. His skin was a mottled shade of green. He was completely hairless.

Nosferatu were notoriously ugly and Phantomas was a prime example of his clan. His nose was huge and bent; his skin was wrinkled as if by a thousand years of worries; his eyes were sunken black pits, with red fires glowing at their center. A mouthful of yellow teeth gleamed in the green glow. It took McCann a few seconds to realize that the monster was smiling.

"Welcome to my sanctum," said the ghastly figure, his voice surprisingly mild and pleasant. "I, as you must have guessed, am Phantomas, a humble member of Clan Nosferatu. I have the pleasure of addressing Dire McCann and Alicia Varney?"

"That's us," said McCann. His gaze traveled across the astonishing display of high-tech gear. "Nice place you've got here. Wonderfully electronic."

Phantomas laughed. "It's nothing much, really," he declared. "Still, it has been my home for centuries. I will miss the solitude. Until recently, it was always wonderfully quiet—a perfect place to conduct research without interruption. But no longer. The traffic lately has become unbearable."

"You're planning to leave?" asked Alicia, picking up the thread of thought. "Abandon your lair?"

"I waited only for your arrival," said Phantomas. "As you must know, Gorgo, She Who Screams in Darkness, is in the labyrinth. My kind has an aversion to the Nictuku. They do not believe in compromise. There are also a horde of Mafia hooligans running around the tunnels, armed with flamethrowers and machine guns. I could destroy them like the vermin they are, but such pests are impossible to eradicate completely. They are like ants: you may kill them, but more will always return."

"An apt comparison," said McCann. "Now that we're here, what do you plan to do next?"

"There is no reason to remain," said Phantomas. "I've been making preparations for the past hour. It will only take a few minutes to finish the job."

He stepped to a narrow desk holding a computer keyboard. His thin fingers flew across the keys. Phantomas typed faster than the eye could follow. "My rats are gone," he said, sadly. "Them I will miss the most. They were good company. But, the nice thing about rats is that wherever you go, there are always plenty to be found."

A dull thump echoed through the cavern. A second followed. Then another after another, until the air was filled with a muffled roar. The floor shook, as if it had been hit by an enormous hammer.

"Explosives detonating at the thirty-seven different entrances to my catacombs," explained Phantomas. "I'm destroying them all. The tunnels are sealed. No one can get in. Nor can anyone within get out."

"Gorgo and the Mafia gangs?" asked Alicia.

"They are trapped in the maze," said Phantomas, chuckling. "Sooner or later, they will discover each other in the tunnels. Poetic justice, in my humble opinion. The justice of Phantomas."

The vampire pressed another series of keys. He nodded in satisfaction. "I've used sliding walls to seal off the passages leading to the buried exits. The maze now forms a self-contained loop with no visible means of departure. It is a labyrinth with no beginning or end."

Stepping away from the keyboard, he tugged at a switch on a control panel on the wall. "That fuses the mechanisms in all the equipment outside this chamber. It also opens all the pits and traps." He pulled a second lever. "That releases my pets from the three blood pools in the catacombs. If the Mafia scum manage to avoid Gorgo, the giant leeches will finish them."

"You seem to be well prepared for disaster," said McCann.

"A trait of my clan, I believe," said Phantomas. "We expect the worst and are rarely disappointed. Are you ready to depart? I sense Gorgo approaching. I fear all of this activity has alerted her to my location."

"I've dealt with the Screamer before," said Alicia. "If she gets too close, her voice can shatter all the bones in your body. It's a very unpleasant sensation."

"All the more reason to make our exit," said Phantomas.

He picked up a small black attaché case from the table holding his keyboard. "The most powerful portable computer in the world," the vampire declared. "I designed it myself. It holds my entire encyclopedia on its hard drive."

"Encyclopedia?" repeated Dire McCann.

"An annotated index to the elders of the Cainite race," said Phantomas. "It holds the secret of the Masquerade of the Red Death."

A shriek that rattled the walls put an end to any further remarks. Every computer monitor screen in the hideaway exploded. Hurriedly, Phantomas pulled a third switch on the control panel. A section of the wall slid back, revealing a small compartment. The shrill scream drowning out any possibility of talk, the vampire gestured to McCann and Alicia to enter the hidden room. They needed no urging. Gorgo was close enough that the air vibrated with her cries.

Phantomas squeezed in after them. It was a tight fit, but the door closed without any problems. Power hummed and an unseen hand pressed down on them. The compartment was an elevator and it hurtled upward at an astonishing rate of speed.

"Three, two, one," Phantomas counted down, with Gorgo's screams muffled by the walls of the elevator shaft. A thunderous roar greeted the last number. "The explosive charges planted throughout my lair just brought down the ceiling. I doubt if Gorgo was caught by the blast, but one can always hope. In another ten seconds, this shaft will also collapse. Thus, when the door opens, I would advise that we exit immediately."

They made it out of the chamber with three seconds to spare. A hundred tons of rock ensured that no one would follow.

"Where are we?" asked Alicia. They were inside a building filled with boxes of electronic equipment. "What is this place?"

"It is one of the several warehouses I own throughout Paris," said Phantomas. "I use the elevator to transport important computer equipment down to my lair. We are on the Ile de la Cité, not far from Notre Dame Cathedral. It is one of my favorite spots in the city."

"What about Gorgo and the Mafia gangs?" asked McCann.

"They are sealed in the catacombs a hundred feet beneath the streets," said Phantomas. "Sooner or later, She Who Screams in Darkness will escape the tunnels. Or perhaps she will sink back into torpor. I don't care. I have dwelled in this region for nearly two thousand years. It is time for me to leave and settle elsewhere. Luxembourg, perhaps. Or Belgium."

"Before you make any travel plans," said McCann, "we need to have a long talk. We've been told you have information we desperately need concerning a mutual enemy."

Phantomas smiled. "I fully understand. You are searching for the truth about the Red Death. It will be my pleasure to reveal everything I know. Until that monster and his brood are destroyed, none of us will be safe. My guess is that he schemes to gain mastery of the entire Cainite race."

"That's the least of our worries," said McCann. "The Red Death has to be stopped soon, or he will unwittingly release an ancient race of fire demons upon the Earth."

Phantomas' green skin turned a shade lighter. "What is the name given these monsters?" he asked.

"They are known as the Sheddim," said Alicia.

Phantomas nodded, as if he had expected that answer. "I have seen that name once before," he declared. "Now, at last, I understand why it was revealed."

Chapter 11

Paris—April 5, 1994:

They settled on the grass in front of the Statue of Charlemagne, across the street from Notre Dame and not far from Point Zero, the mark from which all distances were measured in France. It seemed an appropriate spot to discuss their mutual concerns. At this time of night, no one was about. They could speak freely—and frankly.

Phantomas, feeling somewhat uncomfortable without tons of rock over his head, sat with his back to the statue. His portable computer rested on his lap. Later, if he learned what he needed to know, he would turn it on and complete the riddle of the Red Death. He saw no reason to run down the batteries until he was sure that his two companions would fill in the blanks.

Alicia Varney was even more beautiful in person than she had appeared on his computer monitor. With her dark hair, strong features and perfect body, she reminded Phantomas of the ageless beauties captured on canvas in the Louvre. Without question, she was one of the most attractive women in the world. He already knew she was one of the most deadly.

Dire McCann did not appear the least bit

unusual. There was a dark, sardonic look to his face and eyes that Phantomas found vaguely disconcerting. Staring at the detective, the Nosferatu vampire could discern nothing so unusual about him that cameras refused to transmit his image. Yet, that was exactly what had happened in the catacombs. A thousand years spent studying the Kindred had taught Phantomas to be wary of seemingly unexplainable situations. He felt quite sure that there was more to Dire McCann than he was revealing.

"I think introductions are in order," said Phantomas. "Much of what I want to tell you is based on speculations on my part. The more I know about you the better. Please be honest. Without your cooperation, I cannot guarantee the veracity of my conclusions."

"I have nothing to hide," said Alicia, her eyes sparkling. "Ask me what you will."

"I'll answer as best I can," said McCann. He didn't explain what he meant by that remark, and Phantomas felt it best not to inquire.

"My true name is Varro Dominus," said Phantomas. "I came to this region as a scribe with Julius Caesar twenty centuries ago. While on this island, I was Embraced by a member of the Nosferatu clan. Unwilling to return to Rome in my transformed state, I elected to remain here. Over the years, the city of Paris arose around me."

He paused for an instant. "In life, I was trained as a scholar and historian. I had a passion for knowledge. As a vampire, my interests did not

change. A thousand years ago, I conceived my great project, and I have been working on it ever since. It is nowhere near complete, yet I suspect it is the reason the Red Death wants me destroyed. I am compiling an encyclopedia of the Cainite race. My work is the most comprehensive and accurate history of our kind ever recorded. It lists, to the extent that I was able to discover, every major vampire who ever existed, with whatever information I could assemble about them."

Phantomas looked at Alicia. "You are Alicia Varney, one of the richest women in the world. According to my records, you are also a ghoul of Justine Bern, the Sabbat archbishop of New York. That I doubt. I suspect you are a Masquerader, serving Anis, Queen of Night. Am I correct?"

Alicia's eyes widened with Phantomas' questions. Then she burst out laughing. "A Masquerader? I haven't heard that silly name in a hundred years." She nodded, still grinning. "I have been called that, though I find the term ridiculous. Personally, I prefer to be called a debutante. Or fellow traveler."

"Then you admit you are mentally linked with Anis?" asked Phantomas. Talking to his rats had been a lot easier. Their answers were always straight to the point and not the least bit confusing. And they didn't chatter so much.

"I am the Queen of Night's ghoul," said Alicia, as if sensing Phantomas' discomfort. "In a manner impossible to describe, Anis shares my mind while she rests in torpor. Thus, she experiences life in human form, while I gain a small measure of her

powers and memory. It is a fair bargain that satisfies us both. The relationship between us is hundreds of years old."

Phantomas nodded, feeling slightly more confident. He turned to Dire McCann. "Your name is Dire McCann. Among the Kindred, you are thought to be a rogue mage of the Euthanatos Order, working as a private detective. Recently, you have served Alexander Vargoss, Prince of St. Louis. I suspect your mage powers are a sham. Instead, I believe that like Miss Varney, you are a Masquerader, serving Lameth, the Dark Messiah."

McCann shook his head. "I'm afraid you're mistaken." He paused, as if carefully picking the right words. "*I am the voice of Lameth.* The Dark Messiah speaks to me in my dreams. Sometimes, in extreme emergencies, he directs my actions. In some unknown fashion, he shares certain powers with me. Occasionally, he even speaks with my voice. However, I am no ghoul. Nor am I a puppet. I am Lameth's ally, not his servant."

"How long have you been involved in this arrangement?" asked Phantomas, careful to keep the doubt he felt out of his voice.

McCann frowned. "I'm not exactly sure. For years, though I can't pinpoint when it actually began." The detective appeared confused. "Like Alicia, I sometimes find the Methuselah's memories spilling over into my thoughts. I remember events that took place thousands of years ago. It is quite disconcerting. I am convinced that I am not the first mortal Lameth has worked with in such fashion.

But, more than that, I don't know."

"In any case," said Phantomas, realizing he would get no better answer, "suffice it to say that you both serve as the avatars for extremely powerful Fourth Generation vampires. As such, you are major players in the Jyhad, the eternal struggle for domination of the Cainite race. It is not surprising that the Red Death has tried to destroy you. He understands that his rule would never be safe unless all of his potential enemies are neutralized first. He wants to eliminate me because he believes I possess the truth about his heritage and thus realize his weaknesses."

"Do you?" asked McCann.

"I am not sure," said Phantomas, honestly. "I might. Before drawing any conclusions, though, I feel it vital we exchange what little each of us knows about the monster. Both of you have battled the Red Death. What can you tell me about our common enemy?"

"I first encountered the monster in the secret chambers of a club called *The Devil's Playground* in New York City," declared Alicia Varney. In clear, concise terms, she described her two encounters with the Red Death. Alicia also mentioned her problems with Melinda Galbraith and her suspicions that the regent of the Sabbat was somehow linked to the monster. Phantomas had no reason to doubt the truth of Alicia's statements. He also felt sure that she was not revealing all that had occurred. He expected no less.

"Like Alicia," said Dire McCann, "I have only encountered the Red Death twice. The first was in

Prince Vargoss' headquarters in St. Louis. The second was when Alicia and I fought the four monsters in the Washington Navy Yards. I doubt that either of my experiences will add much to your knowledge. You are welcome to whatever information I possess. More important, however, is the truth about the Sheddin, and of the unholy bargain made with them by the Red Death."

McCann proceeded to describe his two fights with the monster, as well as what Rambam had told him in Israel. Again, Phantomas felt that he was being told an edited version of the events in question. But, he needed nothing more. Together, McCann and Alicia's adventures confirmed what he already suspected. They merely added corroborating detail.

"My lone confrontation with the Red Death took place not far from here," said Phantomas. He described his meeting with the monster in the Louvre. "Unlike the two of you, I chose to run, not fight. I am a scholar, not a warrior."

"Waiting for us to arrive with Gorgo so near took a certain amount of courage," said Dire McCann. "I think the spirit of a Roman soldier still exists within you, Phantomas."

"I do have my moments," said Phantomas, remembering his encounter with Le Clair, the leader of the Unholy Three. "Still, the Red Death fears my brains, not my brawn."

Alicia smiled and gazed up at the massive statue of Charlemagne. "I knew Charles," she said, abruptly changing the subject. "We met shortly

before his end. For such a big man, he had a squeaky, high-pitched voice. He was not an impressive speaker."

"He died under mysterious circumstances," said Dire McCann. "Drowned crossing a river, if I recall. An odd death for such an accomplished horseman."

Alicia shrugged her shoulders. "The king had a bad habit of asking questions about subjects he should have left alone," she declared, pouting. "As was often the case in those turbulent days, he paid the ultimate price for his curiosity."

McCann laughed. "You are a beautiful woman, my love, and a deadly enemy. Only a fool or a madman would think to challenge the Queen of Night."

The detective looked at Phantomas. "The fury of Anis is legendary," declared McCann. "So is the wrath of the Dark Messiah. Both Methuselahs possess incredible Cainite powers. Yet, the Red Death sought us out and tried to destroy us. He even admitted to us in the Navy Yard that he considers Alicia and I, as the avatars of Anis and Lameth, his only true rivals in the Jyhad. I don't understand why. What common bond links the three of us together in this deadly conflict? There are other powerful Methuselahs scattered throughout the world. Some of them are active in the Jyhad. They also control vast powers. What makes the two of us so special, so unique that the Red Death has spent all this time scheming against us? I don't understand why he fears us more than the others. Nor am I even sure if his logic makes any sense. For all we know, the monster

could be insane and have no real reason for attacking us."

"I doubt that," said Alicia. "He struck me as a control freak. The Red Death knows exactly what he's doing. Remember, he bragged about how he had studied our efforts for centuries before he finally decided to act. He is convinced that we are the two special vampires who can threaten his plans. As Phantomas stated, the monster wisely sought to eliminate his most dangerous foes from the game before he started playing. What we didn't realize was that his first attempts to destroy us were merely bait to lure us into a much more dangerous scenario. He did nearly destroy us at the Washington Navy Yard. We were just a little trickier—and luckier—than he expected."

"That still doesn't address the main point," said McCann. "Why pick on us and not Helena? Or Dark Selene?"

The two mortals' tone of voice indicated to Phantomas that they had engaged in similar arguments for centuries. He was not that patient.

"The dawn approaches," he declared, raising his voice loud enough to cut off the ongoing conversation. "Shortly, I must seek refuge in one of my warehouses."

"I'm bushed," said McCann, sounding weary. "It's been a long night. Boiling eels is tiring business. I can use some rest. Besides, I want to check out how our friends fared against the Mafia. We can continue this conversation tomorrow."

"I agree," said Alicia. "While I have absolute

faith in Jackson's abilities, I still want to make sure he survived in good shape. Shall we meet here again tomorrow at midnight?"

"Another location, less exposed to traffic, would be better," said Alicia. "The Musée Rodin? There is plenty of room inside to sit and talk. The building closes at sunset, but that means nothing to us. *The Kiss* has long been one of my favorite sculptures. It would be nice to see it again."

"A good choice," said Phantomas, breaking into the conversation. He was a quick learner. Both humans liked to talk. The only way to make his points was to break into their banter. "Before we scatter, however, I must ask each of you one final question.

"Much of my theory regarding the Red Death's scheme hinges on the ancient history of the Kindred. I still need to know two things. Among the numerous legends and myths that exist about Anis and Lameth, *there is no mention of their sires*. They are Fourth Generation Cainites without antecedents. I assure you this information is vital to the Masquerade of the Red Death. They are the final pieces to a complex puzzle. Which of the thirteen Antediluvians Embraced Anis, Queen of Night? And who was Lameth's sire?"

Alicia scowled. "Is this absolutely necessary? I strongly dislike discussing my past. Especially with a Kindred historian."

"Absolutely necessary," declared Phantomas. "You have my word that I will never reveal your secret. To be frank, the work I do on my

encyclopedia is entirely for my own amusement. I never plan to publish it. Considering the thousands of secrets it contains, I would not dare!"

"I am a childe of Brujah," said Alicia. "As was Troile. Thousands of years ago, in the Second City, Troile diablerized our sire and took his place as an Antediluvian. Troile, not Brujah, is the true founder of the clan known as Brujah. However, there still exist a small number of vampires who can trace their lineage back to the original Brujah. I am one of them. I am a true Brujah."

Phantomas nodded, his eyes burning with red light. "Perfect. As I suspected. What about Lameth, Mr. McCann?"

"The Dark Messiah was the first childe of Asshur," said the detective. "He was the Third Generation vampire also known as Lucian and Cappadocius. Augustus Giovanni destroyed him in the 12th century to form clan Giovanni. Most of the Children of Asshur were wiped out by the Giovanni. The few survivors, like Lameth, went into hiding."

Phantomas clapped his hands together in excitement. His portable computer, forgotten for an instant, tumbled to the ground. The vampire wasn't worried. The casing of the machine could withstand a major bomb blast without damage. "I knew it," he declared, "I knew it. The final mystery is clear. I know for sure what bond links the two of you with the Red Death. Everything is perfectly clear."

"Well?" said Alicia Varney.

"What?" asked Dire McCann.

The tone of the two mortals made it quite clear to Phantomas that he dared not leave the park without revealing at least a hint of his revelation. The right word, he decided, would satisfy their curiosity until the next night.

"There are a number of Fourth and Fifth Generation vampires capable of winning the Jyhad and gaining mastery of the Cainite race," he declared dramatically. "However, only a very select few are capable of retaining that power if the Antediluvians stir. Since their sires no longer exist, no mental ties bind them to the Third Generation. They are the Red Death, Lameth, and Anis. You three are the *Unbeholden*."

Chapter 12

Paris—April 6, 1994:

They resumed their discussion, in the heart of the Rodin museum, shortly after midnight the next evening. A mental web across the building ensured that they would not be disturbed. If necessary, they could talk till morning.

Elisha, Jackson, Flavia, and Madeleine Giovanni had survived the battle in the streets without incident. The addition of Madeleine's two cousins, along with a company of Giovanni ghouls, had caught the Mafia thugs in an unexpected and extremely deadly crossfire. Only a few managed to escape the wrath of the Giovanni steel. Faced with the prospect of admitting failure to Don Caravelli, they had faded like shadows into the back alleys of the city.

Once this conference came to an end, Alicia and McCann were bound for different destinations. Alicia would attempt to thwart the Red Death's coup against the Sabbat in New York, while McCann's group would seek to prevent the monster's assault on the Camarilla in Linz.

Jackson was waiting impatiently for Alicia at Orly airport. She had chartered a jet to return them to New York as soon as tonight's business was

concluded. The summit between Melinda Galbraith and the leaders of the Black Hand of the Sabbat was scheduled to take place later in the week. The Red Death was certain to make an appearance. Alicia fully intended to disrupt that meeting. She was counting on Phantomas to provide her tonight with the necessary weapon to smash whatever alliance developed.

Madeleine Giovanni, Elisha, and Flavia had already left Paris. Word had come from her cousins that Pietro Giovanni, Madeleine's sire and manager of the Mausoleum, urgently wished to confer with his childe at the clan headquarters. Confused and concerned about the unexpected summons, she had no choice other than to obey. Elisha and Flavia traveled with her. However, they planned to keep strictly out of sight during Madeleine's trip to the Mausoleum. For all of Elisha's curiosity about the world, there were certain places he had no desire to visit.

Before they departed, it was agreed that they would rendezvous with Dire McCann in Linz, Austria, the night before the Kindred Conclave. By then, the detective hoped to know what the Red Death planned for the meeting. And have some idea how to stop the monster from destroying the earth.

"That was unfair," said Alicia to Phantomas, smiling slightly, once they were all seated and comfortable, "departing immediately after you made that cryptic remark last night. I found it nearly impossible to sleep with that term, the Unbeholden, running through my thoughts."

"My apologies," said Phantomas sincerely. "I meant no harm. Please excuse my rude behavior. Most of my existence has been spent in the company of sewer rats. My social skills are quite outdated. Knowing what to say and when is often a problem.

"Much of what I will say, you already know," Phantomas continued. "The trick is putting the facts together so that they make sense. As a historian and researcher, I have learned to piece together fragments and bits of information from a variety of sources so that they form a finished picture. That is what I have done regarding what I call the Masquerade of the Red Death."

"I think I know how the whole thing started," said Alicia, unable to keep from sounding smug. Late last night, certain aspects of their battle had finally begun to make sense to her. "The Red Death was worried about Gehenna. He felt certain that the awakening of several of the Nictuku signaled the beginning of that long-anticipated night when the Antediluvians would rise out of torpor and once again take control of the Cainite race. He wanted to do everything possible to stop them."

"Correct," said Phantomas. "Many vampires share that horror. They fear that when the Third Generation returns, the ancients will hunger for the blood of their descendants. As founders of the thirteen vampire clans, the Antediluvians possess tremendous power over their childer and grandchilder and so on, down through the generations. None of the members of their individual clans will be able to resist the Antediluvians' demands. Blood calls to blood.

However," the Nosferatu paused, to emphasize his point, "there are a few vampires, a very few, who are not bound to a Third Generation sire."

"The Unbeholden," answered Alicia. "A trio of Fourth Generation vampires consisting of Lameth and Anis, and, according to you, the Red Death. In each case, their sire was destroyed centuries ago, leaving them free from the mental domination of any Antediluvian."

"The Lasombra and the Tzimisce clans, the mainstays of the Sabbat, claim that the Antediluvian founders of their bloodlines were destroyed during the great revolt," said McCann.

"It is possible," said Alicia. "However, I have been involved with the Sabbat for centuries. Rivalries are bitter and deadly. I assure you, there is no chance that any of the cult's Methuselahs are Unbeholden."

She saw no reason to mention that she had played an active part in the eradication of her sire, Brujah. Or that she had encouraged Lameth to do the same. There was no reason to reveal to Phantomas any more than he needed to know. Idly, she wondered if maybe the Red Death had also brought about the destruction of his sire. The more she considered the notion, the more likely it seemed.

"Lameth, Anis and the Red Death are the only three who matter," said Dire McCann, picking up the thread of thought. "Their freedom from mind control makes them the obvious choices to lead the rest of the Cainite race. They alone can stand

against the Third Generation, perhaps even rally other vampires into resisting the ties that make them prisoners of their heritage."

"The Red Death evidently saw himself as the savior of the Damned," said Phantomas. "He and his brood had been preparing for centuries to seize control of the Children of Caine. When the sudden emergence of the Nictuku forced him to act before he was ready, he decided to eliminate the only two vampires he viewed as potential rivals—Lameth and Anis. Thus, he adjusted his plans accordingly. He wove together a complex scenario that combined his scheme for conquest with surprise attacks on each of you."

"More than that," said Dire McCann. "The Red Death planted traps within traps. Each escape plunged us into an even more dangerous snare. Only our unique powers and a great deal of luck kept us from being destroyed."

"Not just luck," added Alicia. "Don't forget the help of two unique individuals."

McCann grinned. "Seth's children made the difference. Rambam refused to discuss them with me other than in vague generalities. I got the impression that the mage believes they follow commands given to them by their father. Perhaps those instructions came originally from Caine. Or, they might actually be functioning as independent agents. I doubt we will ever learn the truth."

"According to the sage, the two revenants normally just monitor the activities of the Damned. They are forbidden to interfere except in the most

extreme circumstances, and even then, they can only do so much. Rambam is convinced that it is their responsibility to safeguard humanity's survival. Thus, they ignore Cainite manipulation of mortal history. They only act when all mankind is threatened. As is the case with these interdimensional monsters, the Sheddim."

"Their assistance nullified the Red Death's initial attacks," said Alicia. She frowned. "Strange. It never occurred to me before, but since then, they haven't appeared again."

"Why should they?" asked McCann. "Obviously, when the Red Death first summoned the Sheddim from the Broken Spheres, the spell alerted Seth's two children. Sensing the danger to humanity, they used their unique powers to investigate and discovered the Red Death's scheme. Unable to combat the Methuselah themselves, the revenants focused on recruiting two pawns to fight their battle for them. Us. We've been acting for them ever since. Not that we had much choice. Their interests and ours are the same. The Red Death must be destroyed to ensure both our own, and humanity's survival."

Alicia shrugged. "An interesting point, but it really doesn't matter. We now know why the Red Death considers us his enemies. We also know the identity and the motives of our mysterious allies. None of these facts will help us defeat the monster. Isn't it time we discussed what is really important? Who is the Red Death, and how can he be defeated?"

Phantomas smiled. "I expected sooner or later you would raise that point."

The ancient Nosferatu popped open the top of his portable computer. A flick of a switch started the machine humming. "I prefer to be exact when it comes to important facts," said Phantomas. "The vampire we call the Red Death is an ancient Cainite originally known as Seker, Lord of the Underworld. For the past thousand years, he has used the name Count St. Germain. Like both of you, he is one of the Unbeholden."

McCann shook his head. "I don't remember encountering any vampire named Seker. His name sounds Egyptian. After the fall of the Second City, Lameth avoided that part of the world."

"As did Anis," said Alicia. "She ruled as the God-Queen of southern Kush for more than ten centuries, trying to develop a warrior civilization to conquer the world. It was a fruitless attempt, but fun while it lasted."

"Lameth spent much of the period in Asia," said McCann. He offered no other explanation, and Alicia knew better than to ask.

"Names mean nothing to Antediluvians or Methuselahs," continued the detective. "Witness my own sire, who changed his appellation to fit the civilization in power. At various times throughout history, I have been known as Lamech, Lameth, Lazarus, and Lorath. The same holds true with our enemy. St. Germain, Seker, and the Red Death are merely convenient titles. Enough suspense, Phantomas. To what bloodline does the Red Death belong? Who is his sire?"

"St. Germain is the first childe of the Third Generation vampire known as Saulot," replied the

Nosferatu. "Though I have no hard evidence, I strongly believe that he manipulated the mage, Tremere, and his disciples, into becoming vampires through black magic."

"Then, after he established a Blood Bond with Tremere and every member of his Inner Council, St. Germain directed the mage to diablerize Saulot, who rested in torpor. When Tremere destroyed the Methuselah's sire, St. Germain became one of the Unbeholden. Plus, having ensured that Tremere and his disciples were under his sway, St. Germain gained a measure of control over an entire vampire clan."

Alicia laughed. She knew that she shouldn't but she couldn't restrain herself. Her guess had been correct. "Sound familiar?" she asked Dire McCann.

"Too much so," said the detective, glaring at her. "You talk too much."

Alicia grinned. She looked at Phantomas. "History repeats itself over the millennia, my Nosferatu friend. You can safely assume that St. Germain is not the only vampire to engage in such behavior. The links between us three are stronger than you ever imagined."

Dire McCann grimaced. His eyes had a far away look, as if he were seeing things not visible to the others. "St. Germain cannot be a childe of Saulot," he declared, in a voice not entirely his own. "I vaguely remember Saulot from the Second City. He was the greatest philosopher of the Third Generation. Unlike the other Antediluvians, he passionately hated being a vampire. He was a mystic and a dreamer. He aspired to reach Golconda, the

state of grace where his bloodlust would be stilled. I thought his followers espoused the same values?"

Phantomas nodded. "You are partially correct. St. Germain was Embraced by Saulot over six thousand years ago, long centuries before the Antediluvian turned to pacifism. After the destruction of the Second City, Saulot abandoned his few childer. The Antediluvian traveled to Asia, where he became a convert of the arcane Brotherhood of the Third Eye. It was there that he achieved Golconda. When he returned to Europe, Saulot preached a creed of self-discipline and purity of spirit. Those few vampires he created after his return followed the same philosophy. They became known as the Salubri.

"After Tremere diablerized Saulot, his clan viciously wiped out every member of the Salubri they could find. Supposedly, a few escaped the slaughter and continue to roam the earth, searching for inner peace. No Cainite realized that St. Germain, a childe of Saulot but not a Salubri, existed."

"That's why Madeleine Giovanni didn't recognize the Red Death's bloodline," said McCann, the strangeness gone from his voice. "The Red Death doesn't belong to any of the thirteen existing clans."

"Exactly," said Phantomas. "Nor could she identify the bloodlines of Lameth or Anis. They, too, are not members of any clan. The Antediluvians who transformed them into vampires are dust. You three have no master. You are truly unbeholden."

Chapter 13

Paris—April 6, 1994:

"All well and good," said Alicia, breaking the ensuing silence. She sounded exasperated. "We know the Red Death's identity. We know his motives. We know his bloodline. Terrific. What the hell good does any of this information do us? We still don't have a *fucking clue* about how the Red Death plans to gain control of the Camarilla and the Sabbat! Anybody want to tell me the answer to that question?"

"It will take a minute to call up my file on Saulot and the Salubri," Phantomas declared nervously. "I am sure you won't be disappointed."

"We already know more than you realize about the Red Death and his brood," said McCann, speaking to Alicia. "It's no surprise that he's tied to Clan Tremere. That teleportation spell he used in his first few attacks required a focal point. Tyrus Benedict and Hugh Portiglio served that purpose admirably. And Phantomas told us that a Tremere mage was the guest at Prince Villon's reception at the Louvre."

"Who better to discover a lost section of the *Book of Nod*," said Phantomas, "than a wizard of Clan Tremere?"

"Equally important," declared McCann, "is the fact that, while we have no idea how many vampires belong to his bloodline, it is quite clear that only three of them other than himself control Body of Fire. Destroying these four will thwart the Sheddin's scheme for engulfing the world in flame."

Alicia shook her head. "What? Just four? I assume you refer to the quartet who attacked us in the Navy Yard in Washington?"

"Of course," said McCann. "I've known it ever since that night. The Red Death desperately wanted to destroy us. Body of Fire was his greatest weapon. He lured us to the Navy Yard, where he and his childer attacked us. If other members of his bloodline possessed the power, don't you think he would have employed them as well? Why use only three assistants if he had a dozen? Or a hundred? The greater the odds, the better his chance of success."

McCann paused, letting the words sink in. "When I originally probed the Red Death's mind, I learned that raising the Sheddin took several powerful vampires working together. Only Fourth or Fifth Generation Kindred could channel such power. Having destroyed his own sire, do you think St. Germain would trust any more Cainites with the secret of Body of Fire than necessary? The three vampires who were at the Navy Yard were St. Germain's only childer. The Children of Dreadful Night are their descendants. They possess the powers St. Germain inherited from Saulot. But, they do not control Body of Fire."

"So, we aren't fighting a numberless horde," said Alicia. "Four against two. The odds aren't so bad."

"Other than that they are incredibly powerful vampires and we are merely the human avatars of similar vampires," said McCann. He laughed. "Madame Zorza had it right. *The numbers always matter.*"

"Just as important," said Phantomas, "is the knowledge that the original Red Death, St. Germain, is a coward."

"What?" said Alicia. "He didn't seem terribly frightened during our first confrontation in Manhattan."

"Ditto, the attack in St. Louis," said McCann.

"In each case, he used his Body of Fire power to create a panic," said Phantomas. "The same happened in Paris, though I am not certain whether it was St. Germain or one of his childer who was responsible for the attack at the Louvre. I repeat, he is a coward. A Fourth Generation vampire, he possesses much greater power than any foe he has faced. Yet, he was thwarted in each of the attacks you mention. And when he confronted the both of you, he relied on the aid of his three childer in the battle."

"He did seem rather cautious that night," said Alicia. "Though he claimed in Washington that he acted that way to lure us into his real trap."

"Nonsense," said Phantomas. "A basic rule of war is to kill your enemy at the first possible opportunity. The Red Death is more than careful. He is a coward."

"After failing to eliminate me at the Louvre,"

continued the Nosferatu, "he could have attacked me in my lair beneath the streets of Paris. He did not. Instead, he sent three other vampires to finish the job."

"Same logic applies to Flavia," said McCann. "The Red Death sent Makish to eliminate her instead of confronting her himself."

"St. Germain takes action only if absolutely necessary," said Phantomas. "If possible, he prefers working through proxies. It seems unlikely that he will face you in either New York or Linz. Instead, your opponents in those battles will be his three childer, with St. Germain safely remaining in the background. Locating and destroying the true Red Death will be your greatest challenge."

"No surprise in that," said McCann. "Like many of the Fourth Generation who have existed for thousands of years, St. Germain genuinely fears the Final Death. It is a lot easier to use agents and Blood Bound childer than to risk your own immortality."

The detective smiled. "His viewpoint isn't that difficult to understand. After all, we serve as the avatars of Anis and Lameth. Despite our struggles with the Red Death and his minions, neither the Queen of Night nor the Dark Messiah is in any actual danger. We're taking all the risks."

"I concede the argument," said Alicia. She sighed. "Does your computer have any real information that we can use against the Red Death and his brood? Or are we going into battle as much in the dark as when we started?"

Phantomas gazed down at his computer screen

then looked up at Alicia. He smiled grotesquely. "I think I have the knowledge you require," he declared. "The ratman does indeed have the answers. It just took a little longer to retrieve it from the computer memory banks than I estimated."

"Tell us," said McCann.

"Little is known about Saulot and his childer," said Phantomas. "But all of the few stories and legends that are recorded agree on one detail. The brood of Saulot possessed a unique discipline that enabled them to circulate unnoticed among other vampires. It is the reason why no one is sure if the Salubri still exist. Possibly, they have been hiding among the Kindred for centuries. The attribute is a combination of several Cainite powers. The name given to this discipline is quite fitting. It is called *Deceptio*."

Alicia cursed. McCann laughed. Neither of them sounded pleased.

"Saulot's childer can imitate perfectly any vampire they meet," said Phantomas. "They literally become a duplicate of their targets, down to the slightest detail. Their powers are the same, as are their features. It is impossible to distinguish them from the original."

"Except for the memories," said Alicia. "They can't steal the memories and experiences of their victims. That's their only weakness. At last, everything makes sense. The mysteries are clear. The riddles are solved."

"In Washington, at the Navy Yard," said McCann, his voice filled with anger, "the four Red

Deaths had absolutely identical features. I should have realized right then that the others were duplicates of their leader. The truth stared me in the face and I ignored it."

Alicia shook her head in disgust. "Don't feel bad. I should have guessed when I heard of Melinda's supposed return from death. Melinda Galbraith, regent of the Sabbat, isn't under the mental domination of the Red Death. Nor has she made an alliance with the usurper. The real Melinda vanished in the disaster in Mexico City and has never come back. Instead, an impostor has taken advantage of the situation and assumed her identity. It is a childe of the Red Death—masquerading as Melinda Galbraith—who destroyed Justine Bern and now leads the Sabbat."

"No doubt she intends to use the meeting in New York with the leaders of the Black Hand to further consolidate her control of the cult," said McCann.

"My thoughts exactly," said Alicia. "Using Body of Fire, the false Melinda plans to destroy the Seraphim and replace them with members of the Children of the Dreadful Night. Four vampires enter the council chamber. Four leave. Nothing seems different. Yet, the brood of the Red Death has seized complete mastery of the Sabbat without anyone realizing a coup has taken place."

"A diabolical scheme," said Phantomas. "Simple but effective. The conspiracy of the Red Death turns out in truth to be a masquerade."

"It doesn't take much vision to assume a similar strategy is planned for the Kindred Conclave in

Linz," said Dire McCann. "St. Germain has ties with Clan Tremere. It is no coincidence that Karl Schrekt, Justicar of that same clan, is the one who organized the meeting. Ironically enough, the avowed purpose of the Conclave is to discuss the menace of the Red Death. During the course of the affair, St. Germain intends to destroy most of the important leaders of the Kindred, replacing them with doppelgangers from his own bloodline. Again, the Red Death will seize control of the Camarilla in one bold, secret maneuver."

"Remember the line from the prophecy," said Alicia. "*Many are not what they seem*. Now it makes sense. It's the final secret of the vampire who calls himself the Count St. Germain."

"We have the answers," said Dire McCann. "We know the truth. Now the only question that remains is: can we stop them?"

PART



Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask...untenanted by any tangible form.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death”

Chapter 1

Venice—April 8, 1994:

When she entered the office of her grandfather, the first thing Madeleine noticed was that he was not in his usual place, sitting behind his huge ebony desk, waiting for her. Instead, her sire stood with his back to her, staring out the huge picture windows that opened onto the Venice night. It was a sure sign that Pietro was troubled. When he turned, she saw that instead of his usual red rose, he wore a white carnation in his buttonhole. Another sign of trouble.

"Madeleine," he said, gesturing her to the red leather armchair facing his desk. "My childe. Please, sit. Thank you for attending me tonight."

"Your wish is my command, sire," said Madeleine, respectfully. "Though, I must admit, I am not sure why you wanted to see me. I am still engaged in my mission. Dire McCann needs my assistance. At the moment, he stands unprotected."

Pietro frowned, his eyebrows knitting together in thought. "I will not keep you long. Our clan owes McCann a debt that cannot be repaid. I merely wanted to hear directly from you how the assignment progressed."

"I call whenever possible, grandfather," said

Madeleine. She felt extremely uneasy. Trained to read expressions, even those of the Undead, she knew Pietro wasn't telling her the whole truth. He had summoned her to the Mausoleum for a purpose. "I make every effort to keep you informed of my situation."

"I know, Madeleine," said Pietro. "Still, phone lines can be tapped. The Mafia is a consistent annoyance. I thought it best we talk in person. How does this hunt for the Red Death progress? From your recent reports, I gathered that McCann hopes to confront the monster at the Conclave in Austria a few nights from now."

Madeleine nodded. "The situation has not changed, Grandfather. The detective is convinced that the Red Death plots to take control of the Camarilla at that meeting. McCann is determined not to let that happen. I suspect the confrontation will be extremely violent."

Pietro chuckled. "You have a wonderful talent for understatement, my childe. I am sure Dire McCann appreciates your aid and assistance. Violence seems to follow in his wake."

The elder Giovanni paused, and then began again. "Are you aware that Don Caravelli plans to attend this Conclave?"

For an instant, Madeleine said nothing. Though she prided herself on concealing her surprise at such remarks, she required a few seconds to regain her composure, and her voice.

"The lord of vermin dares leave his lair?" she said, her voice calm and steady. "Has Caine

returned? Or has some other miracle occurred of which I am unaware?"

Pietro laughed. "I suspected you would find the news of passing interest," he declared. "Conclaves are neutral ground. Clan feuds are strictly forbidden."

The elder Giovanni smiled. It was a death's-head grin. "Personal vendettas, however, cannot be denied. Your argument with Don Caravelli is a matter of honor. If challenged, the Capo de Capo would have no choice but to respond. Or be declared an outlaw by the Camarilla."

Madeleine shook her head. "After so long, why is he taking the risk? He knows I will be waiting."

"Perhaps Don Caravelli grows bored in his fortress," said Pietro. "Maybe he is tired of guarding his back. Remember, he is considered to be one of the most dangerous vampires in existence. His reputation for ruthlessness is matched only by your own. Destroying Don Caravelli will not be easy, even for the Dagger of the Giovanni."

"I ask merely for the chance to present my claim to Don Caravelli," said Madeleine. "I am prepared to let fate dictate the outcome."

"If Don Caravelli agrees to a duel," said Pietro, "be prepared for base treachery. He is a vampire without honor."

"Nothing he tries will stop me, Grandfather," said Madeleine, loosening for a moment her tight grip on her emotions. "Nothing."

"I know that, my childe," said Pietro. "That is why I feel certain of your success."

He paused, leaning forward on his desk, his brooding eyes staring into hers. "After you have destroyed him, Madeleine, what then? Revenge for the death of your father is near. Once that has been achieved, what follows?"

Inwardly, Madeleine's thoughts turned ice cold. Pietro had never before asked such a question. She understood immediately that this inquiry was the real reason she had been summoned to the Mausoleum. Several facts were instantly clear to her, including how to answer the question.

"I am the Dagger of the Giovanni," she replied, her voice deliberate. "You know that, Grandfather. My desires are those of my clan. I honor the Giovanni traditions."

"In life and in death," said Pietro, as if completing an ancient ritual. "Your cousins spoke of a powerful mage at your side in Paris?"

"Elisha, student of Rambam," said Madeleine, without hesitation. She knew her grandfather was lying about her cousins. It didn't matter. Better to discover the worst than be surprised later. "He is undoubtedly one of the most powerful mages I have ever encountered. And, he is still very young."

"Word is that you are quite taken with him," said Pietro. His tone was pleasant, but Madeleine felt the threat behind the statement.

"Word?" repeated Madeleine, sarcastically. "Which one of my foolish cousins makes such a judgment? Cesare? Or Montifloro?"

Her voice grew contemptuous. "Both are highly regarded experts in seduction and intrigue. They see

me with a mortal and instantly believe I am entranced. What brilliance, what depth of analysis. Did they also say I was so moonstruck by this mage that I lost my fighting edge? Maybe they think they could take my place as the Dagger of the Giovanni?"

"Peace, Madeleine," said Pietro, raising his hands in a placating gesture. "Neither Cesare nor Montifloro said such nonsense. As always, they expressed amazement at your fighting skills. They merely thought it strange to find you in the company of a mage. No insult was intended."

Madeleine nodded. The problem was not with her cousins. It was with Pietro. She needed to convince him that her association with Elisha was for the good of the clan.

"The young man is a friend and ally of Dire McCann," said Madeleine. "He accompanies the detective everywhere. Young and naive, he finds me attractive; he has very limited experience with women. I have done my best to stimulate his continued interest. So far, I think I have succeeded. Would you have me act otherwise, Grandfather? Such a powerful mage would be a welcome addition to our ranks."

Pietro nodded. "Our ultimate goals require the aid of great mages. You did well, my childe. Excuse me for sounding concerned. There were, after all, those children...."

"Young boys, loyal to me unto death," said Madeleine, letting a note of anger creep into her voice. She was an expert at deception. But so was Pietro. She had to make sure her lies were

convincing. "They enabled me to destroy Don Lazzari. The two survivors will make excellent ghouls. Much better than some of the less ambitious relatives we are forced to employ."

"I agree," said Pietro, grimacing. "You need not remind me of the faults of your relatives."

Her sire leaned forward on his desk, his gaze fixed on her. "Otherwise, then, this Elisha means nothing to you? He is merely another conquest for the Dagger of the Giovanni?"

Madeleine assumed a puzzled expression. Her decades of training now served her well. Her grandfather wanted to believe her. She was his favorite. It was important that she remind him of that fact. "I do not understand your question, Grandfather. How could this mage mean something to me? Mean what? You are my sire, my lord. I am Blood Bound to no other."

Pietro laughed. "How could I ever doubt your loyalty, Madeleine?" he declared. "You have always been my jewel. It is inconceivable that you would ever betray your honor...even if you were offered the gift of life."

It was a casual, offhand remark, meant to catch her completely off-guard. But Madeleine was prepared. Ever since Pietro had mentioned Elisha, she had been waiting for the question. She was prepared with her lies.

"The gift of life, sire?" she said, sounding bewildered. "What do you mean?"

"Rambam," said Pietro, an annoyed expression on his face. "The master mage knows a formula that

can make a vampire mortal once more."

"Impossible," declared Madeleine. "I don't believe it." She shrugged. "Besides, why would any Cainite want to undergo such a ritual? Forsake immortality and the joys of power for the shallow lusts of human existence? Such a notion is insane."

Pietro rose from his chair. Wordlessly, he walked over to the windows overlooking the city. He stared out into the darkness for several minutes before he spoke.

"Your words, of course, make perfect sense," he declared. "Why would someone devoted to death be interested in a gift of life? Only a fool would suggest such a ridiculous idea. Only a greater fool would believe him."

"I am sorry, Grandfather," said Madeleine innocently. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Pietro. "As master of the Mausoleum, I deal constantly with deceit and intrigue. I forget at times that loyalty and honor still exist."

He turned and smiled at Madeleine. "The Dagger of the Giovanni is made of the finest steel in the world. It cuts deep. And it always cuts true."

"Thank you, Grandfather," said Madeleine. She almost felt sorry for Pietro. Almost.

"Enough of this senseless discussion," said Pietro. "Go now. We will discuss your future once Don Caravelli has been eliminated. Give my regards to Dire McCann. Tell him to come visit me after the Red Death is destroyed. I miss playing him in chess."

"I will pass along your message, Grandfather,"

said Madeleine, making ready to depart. "Goodbye."

Though her voice did nothing to betray her true emotions, Madeleine felt sure that this parting would be her last farewell.

An hour later, she spoke of the meeting to Elisha, back in his hotel room in the Grand Plaza. Flavia was out and about, hunting for sport and food.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Nothing I did not expect," replied Madeleine, patting him on the cheek. "I thought my debt to Clan Giovanni would soon be fulfilled. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Will you wait a little longer for me, Elisha?"

"Of course," he said, smiling at her. "I learned patience from a master."

"Speaking of whom," said Madeleine, "Rambam should be warned that his associates are not as trustworthy as he believes. One, if not several, have betrayed his confidences to my grandfather. I suspect Judith, but I could be wrong. There is no reason to rush to conclusions. The traitor will be revealed soon enough."

"A traitor?" said Elisha, looking distressed. "Betrayed? It can't be true."

"Didn't you once tell me that Rambam warned you to trust no one?" said Madeleine, smiling. "Well, your mentor was correct. In these dangerous times, loyalty and trust mean nothing. Even honor can be corrupted if the price is high enough."

"What are you going to do?" asked Elisha. He

paused for a second, then corrected himself. "What are *we* going to do?"

"You are going to continue your studies," said Madeleine. "I will continue to serve my clan. We will be patient, very patient. It may take years, perhaps even decades, to put our plans into effect, but we are in no rush. Mages can slow their aging, while vampires don't worry about the passage of time."

"Remember when we were in Paris, and I spoke of my feeling that many of my relatives fear that Pietro may someday pass control of the Mausoleum into my hands?" asked Madeleine. "I said then I would never accept the position. After the meeting tonight, I have reconsidered."

"I no longer wish to have my fate—or yours—decided by another. My destiny demands that I act in our interests. This night, my effort begins. As I said, I have no idea what amount of subversion and intrigue will be necessary to achieve my goal. But, I assure you, one night, Pietro Giovanni will name me his successor." There was no trace of doubt in her voice. "Whether my grandfather wants to or not."

Chapter 2

Newark, New Jersey—April 9, 1994:

"The meeting between Melinda Galbraith and the leaders of the Black Hand is taking place tomorrow evening at midnight," said Walter Holmes. He smiled, a very ordinary smile. "It will be in the main banquet hall of the Neapolitan Club on New York's upper East Side."

"The Neapolitan Club?" asked Alicia, a bemused expression on her face. "I thought that was a ritzy nightspot. I never realized it also served as a Sabbath rendezvous."

They sat at a booth at the rear of Nero's Fiddle in Newark. Upon her return to the New York area, Alicia had immediately phoned the Inconnu Monitor and made arrangements to discuss what she had learned overseas. She had spent the past hour with her recounting what Phantomas had revealed. As expected, Holmes had accepted the news of the multiple identities of the Red Death serenely, and had expressed little concern about the Sheddin. Only the increasing speed at which he shuffled the ever-present playing cards in his hands betrayed his fears.

"It never has before," said Holmes, starting a game of solitaire. A cup of inexpensive blood stood

untouched on the edge of the table. Next to it was Alicia's half-empty wine glass. For a vampire hangout, Nero's Fiddle had a surprisingly good wine cellar. "The Seraphim don't entirely trust Melinda. With good reason, since she assassinated her way to the position of regent of the cult. Nothing was stated aloud, but the Black Hand councilors insisted that they be allowed to select the site of the conference. The location was just communicated to Melinda tonight. A friend of a friend passed the information on to me. The nightspot is owned by a holding company that fronts for many Black Hand activities. It will be empty tomorrow except for those invited to the meeting and their bodyguards."

"Along with several gatecrashers," said Alicia. "I plan to attend this executive gathering. The false Melinda expects me to say hello, I am sure. I would hate to disappoint the bitch by not making an appearance."

"I shall be there, in the rear of the chamber," said Walter. He dealt out a hand of solitaire. His eyes intent on the cards, he continued to speak. "A few dozen Sabbat loyalists have been invited to attend and witness the proceedings. A further assurance against treachery, I suspect. By an odd twist of fate, I received one of those invitations."

Alicia chuckled. "Fate twists and turns in your direction quite often, Mr. Holmes. It is amazing how such an unassuming, innocent figure can wield so much power without anyone being the wiser."

"It is a gift I have carefully cultivated over the centuries," declared Holmes, with a slight nod.

"Unfortunately, I cannot obtain an extra invitation for you. As New York is a dangerous place for vampires, the club will be well protected. Getting past the guardians patrolling the entrances may prove to be difficult. Even for Alicia Varney."

Alicia shrugged. She did not look worried. "Jackson is arranging a small diversion," she declared. "He specializes in such espionage. The few who remain at their posts will be dealt with in a conclusive manner. It is a pet project. The leaders of the Black Hand are arrogant, extremely proud Cainites. Ruthless, dynamic assassins and terrorists of the Sabbat, they don't believe in surrounding themselves with a horde of bodyguards."

"Once inside the banquet, you have a plan of action?" asked Holmes.

"Not exactly," said Alicia. "I doubt that I need to do much. My arrival should set off fireworks. The false Melinda has been walking a tightrope since beginning this charade. If challenged, her masquerade will collapse. I intend to present that challenge. A few pointed remarks are all that's necessary to reveal her deception."

"You don't fear the leaders of the Black Hand will refuse to listen to someone who breaks into their conference?" asked Holmes. "As you stated, they are arrogant and proud Cainites."

Alicia grinned. "On the contrary, considering the risks I'm taking, I would be quite shocked and surprised if they didn't want to hear what I had to say. The Seraphim are deadly killers. They are not stupid."

"According to what you have told me," said Holmes, "the vampire masquerading as Melinda Galbraith is one of four Cainites who uses the Body of Fire discipline. Exposing her true identity, I suspect, will force her into a desperate attempt to destroy everyone in the council chamber. Afterward, she could blame the carnage on the Red Death."

"My thoughts exactly," said Alicia. "I hope that she reacts in such fashion. Otherwise, I would need to prove she is an impostor. That might not be so easy."

"Being burnt to cinders, however, is not an acceptable alternative," said Holmes dryly. He turned over a card in his solitaire hand. It was the ace of spades. Alicia knew he had drawn the card to emphasize his point.

"You worry too much about minor details, cardsharp," said Alicia with a laugh of disdain. "I am prepared to deal with the consequences of my actions if necessary. However, I'm not too proud to ask for help, especially when dealing with the Red Death."

"The masters of the Inconnu want this monster destroyed," said Holmes. "I've been instructed to provide you with whatever assistance is required. After I pass on your latest revelations, I am sure they will be more adamant than ever that the ancient vampire and his brood be smashed. When you need my aid, I will be there. No matter what the consequences of my actions."

"It may mean revealing your true nature to the leaders of the Black Hand," said Alicia.

Walter Holmes shrugged. "I have spent years in my Walter Holmes persona infiltrating the Sabbat hierarchy," he declared, his voice slow and calm. "Sacrificing all of that work would be disappointing. But I gave my word. I do not go back on a promise."

Somehow, Alicia had a feeling the poker player was no longer discussing the masters of the Inconnu. Having more than her own share of secrets, she did not pursue the subject further.

"It should be an interesting evening," she said instead.

"Gambling has taught me to expect the unexpected," said Walter Holmes. "Tomorrow should prove to be a major test of that training. I believe that in describing the forthcoming encounter, interesting is an understatement."

Alicia grinned. "It will be more exciting than a poker game, Mr. Holmes."

She rose to her feet. "I'd better get going. Jackson needs to know the location of the meeting so he can prepare his surprises. My body needs sleep. Perhaps even some special nourishment for extra energy. I will see you tomorrow evening."

Holmes raised a hand from his precious cards in a brief wave. "You may not see me, but I will be there," he declared. "Good luck."

"Thanks," said Alicia. "Until then."

The few neonate vampires in the club didn't stir as she walked past them and out the front door. They wanted no part of her. Ready and anxious for the upcoming battle, Alicia projected an aura of savage invulnerability. She was not a lady to be crossed.

Fifteen minutes later saw her in the back of her limo riding to a secret hideaway across the river from Manhattan. Jackson, who was driving, was already describing possible diversions for the next night.

"A major fire," he suggested cheerfully. "Torching a few buildings a block away wouldn't be hard. It's an expensive section of town. The fire department would send a lot of equipment. It wouldn't disrupt the meeting, but it would create a great amount of noise and traffic."

"Too obvious," said Alicia. "Besides, the fire might suggest the presence of the Red Death. We don't want this rendezvous moved or canceled. I just want the guards' attention diverted long enough so that I can enter the building."

"A gas explosion?" muttered Jackson. "A high-speed car chase?"

"You've been watching too many films, Jackson," said Alicia, stretching out on the cushions of the limo. "Surely you can outdo Hollywood. I know time is a factor, but I've provided you with an unlimited budget. Give me something different."

"I have an idea," said the driver. "Tell me if you like this concept."

He described his idea. Alicia smiled her approval. It was a spectacular diversion. And it was definitely different.

Chapter 3

Vienna—April 10, 1994:

Etrius closed and bolted the door to his study. Deliberately, he walked across the floor from one corner of the room to the other. His gaze searched the dark corners, carefully checking for shadows. Under normal circumstances, he never worried about invisible spies. But these were not normal circumstances.

Confident that the room was empty of anyone but himself, Etrius recited aloud a binding spell that sealed the entrance. A second recitation, spoken in clear, firm tones, protected the walls, floor and ceiling of the chamber from any vampiric discipline. A third casting made sure that no rat, bug, spider or magickal construct could bypass his first two spells.

Reviewing his efforts, the Tremere wizard grunted in satisfaction. The room was thoroughly protected from physical or mental assault. Ordinarily, he didn't rely on such elaborate precautions. Now, with his thoughts consumed by fears of the mysterious St. Germain and the equally frightening Red Death, he dared use no less.

Feeling slightly reassured by his work, Etrius

walked over to the huge red fireplace that dominated one wall of the study. A roaring fire blazed. The logs feeding the flames were magical. They were never consumed.

Twisting three fingers in a certain pattern, he successfully killed the blaze. Reaching out, he placed the same hand on the bricks and spoke a single word. Its four syllables had been used by sorcerers for eight thousand years and contained immeasurable power. Without a sound, the fireplace shifted five feet to the right. Behind it was a massive oak door. A special key that could not be duplicated opened the lock to that door. It hung about Etrius' neck.

The vampire mage lifted his left hand to the black cord circling his neck. The steel key dangled on the cold flesh of his upper chest. The cord was protected by the most powerful binding spells in the world. Only Etrius could remove it. Only Etrius could use the key it held.

Tremere had become a member of the Third Generation by drinking Saulot's blood while the Antediluvian slept unprotected in torpor. It was a lesson the vampire mage never forgot. Concerned that he might suffer a similar fate, Tremere had supervised construction of a special crypt in the eldritch caverns beneath the clan Chantry House in Vienna. The one entrance to the tomb was behind the oak door for which there was only a single key: the one Etrius wore around his neck.

Placing the steel key in the lock, Etrius opened the door. Beyond was a black tunnel leading down.

Two hundred and thirty-seven steps took visitors to the cave in which rested Tremere's sarcophagus. Etrius had counted them many times. Tonight, he planned to count them again. A grim expression on his face, he stepped into the passage and began his journey downward.

A hundred complex spells protected the tunnel. Torches that burned with the same unnatural flame that burned in the fireplace provided the only light, as electricity did not work in the passage. The stone walls were sealed with the identical binding spell used in the study. Earth Meld was useless here, as was the Teleportation discipline. Tremere wished to sleep undisturbed and had done everything possible to ensure his safety. The only weak link in his defenses was Etrius.

The shaft ended in a small cavern twenty feet long by fifteen feet high. Its roof stretched thirty feet up into the darkness. In the center of the room rested a massive stone coffin. Past the sarcophagus was another passage, leading down into the unexplored depths. No one knew what lay beneath the tomb. There had been times when Etrius thought he heard whispers arising from the abyss—but he was never sure, and he had no interest in exploring.

Gathering his courage, Etrius approached Tremere's coffin. For many years he had come here only when mentally summoned by his mentor. Such calls had become less and less frequent over the past few decades. Tremere rarely stirred from torpor. Etrius had hoped for the ancient vampire mage's

advice regarding St. Germain and the Red Death, but Tremere had not responded.

Steeling himself for the worst, Etrius pushed aside the lid to the coffin. Nightmarish memories bubbled through his mind. In this dark, oppressive netherworld beneath the Chantry House, separating reality from dream was difficult. He recalled once finding a gigantic white worm nestled in the coffin. A similar visit had found the stone box empty, while a third had shown two bodies lying within. More recently, there had been a third, unblinking eye in the mage's forehead, much like the one possessed by Saulot. Etrius was not sure if any of these visions were true. It was possible that none of them were. He hoped they were merely dreams.

To his immense relief, a man's powerful body occupied the coffin. His strong, dynamic features were at rest, his lips curled in a slight smile. The vampire mage gave no sign of being aware that someone was near. Etrius, however, was certain that if he tried to reach over and touch Tremere, he would be stopped.

"Shortly after midnight tonight," Etrius whispered, "the hunt for St. Germain begins. Elaine de Calinot and I plan to accuse him of being the Red Death. Our Justicar, Karl Schrekt, will call for a Blood Hunt. After nearly a thousand years, the hunter will suddenly find himself the hunted."

The vampire in the velvet-lined box did not reply. Etrius had entertained vague hopes that perhaps Tremere would have some comment on how to proceed. The ambitious plan had one major flaw.

It required reaction from the Red Death. If the monster did nothing, a Blood Hunt would be meaningless. And St. Germain would remain a sinister force manipulating Clan Tremere.

Five minutes Etrius waited. Nothing. Tremere did not move. His features grim, Etrius pulled the lid back onto the coffin. Whatever strategy he used, it had neither the approval nor the disapproval of the master of the clan.

Carefully, he checked the cavern for anything unusual. Nothing appeared to be out of place. Nodding, Etrius returned to the stairs. Slowly but steadily, he climbed the two hundred and thirty-seven steps leading upward to his study. The weight of the world pressed down on Etrius' shoulders. He battled shadows, with only Elaine de Calinot as his ally. And he wasn't sure that she could be trusted.

Reaching the top landing, he opened the door behind the fireplace and stepped out into the study. Behind him, the massive door automatically locked shut. The key was once again around Etrius' neck. He carried it with him at all times. Only the members of the Inner Council knew of its existence, and its purpose.

Etrius murmured the correct counterspell, and the fireplace slid back into place. The chamber was exactly as he had left it. Nothing had been disturbed. Nothing moved. The safeguards were all in place. The spells remained unbroken—but not undisturbed.

Frowning, Etrius mentally scanned the binding spells that protected the room. The fault lines were

faint but distinct. The effects of such wizardry were impossible to erase. Someone had tested the chamber's defenses, and searched for entry into the room, while he had been in the cavern below.

Eyes narrowing to tiny pinpoints of red anger, Etrius reached out with his thoughts and examined the binding spells of the Chantry House. Woven together by the entire Inner Council, the protective aura was the most powerful shield against psychic attack in the world. The magickal web showed no signs of tampering. Whoever tried to break into the study had been already inside the Vienna stronghold.

Someone knocked on the door. The harsh rapping echoed through the chamber. "What do you want?" growled Etrius, summoning the full force of his powerful will. He would not be humbled without a fight.

"It is I, sire," came the soft but distinct reply. "Your childe and servant, Peter Spizzo. Is something wrong?"

Relaxing only slightly, Etrius released the spells that sealed the room. "Enter," he said.

Spizzo slid into the room. A Cainite skilled in the arts of espionage and deception, he stayed always in the shadows. He looked concerned. "St. Germain?" he asked.

Etrius nodded. "Who else could it be? He must know of my efforts. A short while ago, I think he sought to surprise me in the study and destroy me. The coward. We are getting close to him, Spizzo. Very close."

"Corner a jackal and he will fight, sire," said Spizzo. "Leave St. Germain to the Justicars of the Camarilla. Soon it will be their fight, not yours."

"A good decision," said Etrius. "All of the preparations are made, I assume?"

"The limousine awaits you," said Spizzo. "It should only take us a few hours to reach Schrekt's castle."

"Excellent," said Etrius. His voice became grim. "The quicker we depart, the better. Remember what I told you earlier. Trust no one at this conclave. Not even Elaine de Calinot. Though we are partners in this adventure, I am not sure of her motives. She could be a pawn of St. Germain. No one in Clan Tremere is above suspicion. Do not let your guard down for a moment."

"Have no fear, sire," said Spizzo, a sinister smile darkening his features. For an instant, he looked satanic. "I understand treachery quite well."

Chapter 4

Sicily—April 9, 1994:

Marius Michaud, ex-chief of security for Don Caravelli's fortress, howled in agony as the burning poker touched his right cheek.

"Gently," said Don Caravelli to Luigi, a Mafia underling of limited intelligence but absolute devotion. The Capo de Capo chuckled. "We don't want poor Marius' eyes burned out immediately. Michaud must suffer for his incompetence. What lesson would there be if we ended his agony too quickly?"

He patted Luigi on the arm. "A tender touch, my talented executioner. Like that of a lover. Caress his skin with the hot iron before blinding him. Do not rush."

"As you command, my Capo," said Luigi, nodding his massive head in agreement. They stood in one of the many dungeons in the lowest level of the Mafia keep. Marius Michaud was bound to the wall with reinforced steel chains. A thick metal collar around his neck and another circling his forehead held his face immobile. He could shake from side to side, but that was all. There was no way he could escape the thick iron rod held in Luigi's hands. He had been screaming steadily for the past three hours. He would continue to scream for many

more hours and days to come. The vengeance of Don Caravelli was unforgiving.

"I grow bored of this entertainment," said Elaine de Calinot, resting wearily on her staff of power. "We should be making preparations for our departure. Enough of your cruelty. Torture is unbearably dull."

"However, it serves a noble purpose," said Don Caravelli, turning to her. "Through the miracles of electronics, Michaud's screams of pain can be heard throughout my citadel. The agony he endures will hopefully persuade others not to make the same mistakes. The best lessons are those taught by example."

"The best lessons," said Elaine de Calinot, her eyes flaring, "are those that need not be repeated."

Don Caravelli shrugged. "As you wish. Luigi knows his task. Michaud will meet the Final Death when we are in Austria. There is no reason for us to remain here."

The Mafia chieftain nodded to his henchman. "Make him suffer, Luigi," said Don Caravelli. "I want Marius to beg for the Final Death."

"It shall be done, my Don," declared Luigi, as Don Caravelli and Elaine de Calinot exited from the chamber. "When death comes, he will welcome its embrace."

"Your torturer is overly dramatic," said Elaine as they strolled through the passageway leading to Don Caravelli's personal quarters. "He sounds like a buffoon."

"Luigi is lacking in wits," said the Capo. "His

loyalty, though, is unwavering. At the moment, I value certain character traits more than others."

The Mafia chief glanced at Elaine. "You didn't seem very concerned about him seeing you. Until now, you've stayed hidden whenever you've visited my fortress. Has your policy suddenly changed?"

"His mind is so weak that erasing all memory of my visit takes no effort," said Elaine. "Already, his thoughts grow dim. In a few minutes, he will not recall a thing about me."

Their conversation came to an abrupt end as they reached the entrance to Don Caravelli's study. Pushing open the door, the Capo de Capo stepped aside and politely gestured Elaine forward. "After you," he declared, bowing his head slightly.

"You have good manners, Don Caravelli," said Elaine as she stepped into the chamber. "A rarity in this modern age."

Don Caravelli laughed, a harsh, cruel sound. "I don't mean to disappoint you, my lady," he said, the tone of his voice faintly mocking, "but my courtesy extends more from the fear of a possible dagger in my back than from genuine good graces. I prefer to have my enemies ahead of me, not a step behind."

"So," said Elaine, turning about in the center of the floor to face the Capo. She appeared to be amused. "Am I now classified as an enemy of Don Caravelli?"

"A mere slip of the tongue," said Don Caravelli smoothly. Incredibly light on his feet for a man his size, the Mafia chief skirted around Elaine and slid into the massive armchair behind his desk.

"How could we be enemies?" he asked, spreading

his hands as if in apology. "We are allies, devoted to our common goal of ruling the Cainite race. A few minor setbacks are surely not reason for us to dissolve our compact?"

"Of course not," said Elaine, the sardonic smile on her face matching that of the Mafia Don. They were both lying and they both knew it. It was not important. Elaine was using Don Caravelli and Don Caravelli was using Elaine. It was, in their separate opinions, a fair trade. "Why should we quarrel? Especially as our hour of triumph fast approaches."

"Our plane leaves in less than an hour," said Don Caravelli. "We will arrive well before dawn. Most Kindred will not be there until tomorrow."

"Good," said Elaine. "I can use the extra time to confer with my associates who are already at the castle. Final details must be reviewed in case anything needs to be adjusted."

"You still have not explained exactly what deviltry you have planned for this Conclave," said Don Caravelli. Casually, he reached back behind his chair and pulled the double-bladed ax from off the wall. With seeming disinterest, he examined the finely honed edges. "I think it is time I learned something of your plans."

Elaine laughed. "Slaughter," she declared. "Karl Schrekt is blood bound to the members of the Inner Council of the Tremere. He is my unwitting pawn. The Justicar has been following my commands for weeks. This Conclave is a ruse, a meaningless assembly intended to be a death trap for the majority of the Kindred elders attending. Their blood will soak the stones of Schrekt's castle. When

the killing is over, Clan Tremere will reign supreme over the Camarilla. And I shall rule the Tremere."

"What of Etrius?" asked Don Caravelli. He knew a great deal about the politics of the Kindred clans. Blackmail was a profitable Mafia sideline. "He considers himself leader of your clan. He will not take kindly to your ascension."

"Etrius is a fool, prying into secrets best left undisturbed," said Elaine. "His paranoia has proved useful in staging this drama. However, after the Conclave, he will no longer be necessary. Only one can rule the Tremere. He shall not survive the evening."

Don Caravelli shook his head in astonishment. "You actually think you can destroy several dozen of the most powerful vampires in Europe without a struggle? Justicars and their Archons wield great powers. However, I doubt that even Karl Schrekt and all of his assistants can overpower such a group."

Elaine waved her staff in a small circle. "I have been planning this coup for a long, long time, Don Caravelli. There is no chance for failure. Schrekt's assistance is hardly important. Others in the castle will handle the killing." Her features turned serious. "Aid me and we will rule together. Turn against me and you will be numbered among those destroyed."

"You leave me little choice," said Don Caravelli, lifting the battle ax. "Madeleine Giovanni survived the attack in Paris. You promised me you would destroy her. I am still waiting for that to happen."

"The Dagger of the Giovanni is scheduled for elimination with the others attending the

Conclave," said Elaine. "Though, if I recall correctly, you promised to eliminate Dire McCann in return, and he remains active."

With one swift motion, Don Caravelli slammed the battle ax down into his desk. The steel blade sliced six inches into the solid oak.

"Flesh and blood is no match for tempered steel," said Don Caravelli. He wrenched the ax out of the desk. "This ax travels with me to Schrekt's castle. I intend to fulfill my end of the bargain. I have relied on incompetent assistants for too long. The final blow shall be mine."

The Capo's face wrinkled in anger. "And if, by chance, Madeleine Giovanni crosses my path before this grand execution you have planned, she too will feel the kiss of cold steel. The bitch has plagued me long enough. This Conclave will bring our feud to an end."

"The Conclave signals an end to many things," said Elaine de Calinot, an almost religious fervor in her voice. Her eyes glowed with fanatical intensity. "It is a conclusion of old traditions and a new beginning for the entire Cainite race."

"The rule of the strong," said Don Caravelli, running his fingers over the steel blade of the ax. "And for me, freedom."

"After tomorrow night," said Elaine de Calinot, her eyes still burning, "your worries about Madeleine Giovanni will be over."

The Tremere mage laughed. However, despite Elaine's promise, Don Caravelli was not reassured.

Chapter 5

Linz, Austria—April 10, 1994:

"Waiting for me long?" came a voice behind Elisha. Caught by surprise, the young mage nearly fell from his chair. Dire McCann moved without making a sound. "Sorry if I'm late."

"Not a problem," said Flavia, staring at the detective with an amused expression on her face. She was dressed in a white leather catsuit that clung like a second skin to her lithe figure. Madeleine Giovanni, as usual, wore a black slip dress with a silver necklace around her neck. Elisha's outfit consisted of blue jeans and a faded sweatshirt. "We needed the extra time to put on our fancy outfits."

"We only came downstairs a few minutes ago ourselves," said Elisha. "We've been rising with the moon. The sun set less than an hour ago."

"Are you hungry, Mr. McCann?" asked Madeleine politely. "Elisha just ordered his breakfast. We could probably get you something as well. Shall we summon the waitress?"

McCann shook his head. "No thanks. I ate on the road. Besides, Karl Schrekt employs a large band of ghouls to run his castle. There's plenty of food fit for human consumption in the kitchens. If I need a sandwich, I'll grab it there."

"You expect there will be time for eating?" asked Flavia. "Madeleine and I discussed the situation last night. We feel certain that whatever the Red Death plans will take place early in the Conclave. The longer he waits, the less chance he will have of catching the attendees by surprise."

"I suspect you're correct," said the detective, easing himself into a chair next to Elisha. "My hours spent with the Nosferatu historian proved most informative. Based on what I learned, I understand the full extent of the Masquerade of the Red Death. The Methuselah and his entire bloodline possess a unique discipline called *Arcanorum*. They are able to disguise themselves as any vampire they come into contact with. Using this discipline, they become exact doppelgangers of the original Cainite."

Elisha bit his lower lip, trying to extrapolate what McCann's revelation meant in terms of the Conclave. He needn't have worried. Madeleine was already cursing in guttural Italian.

"A brilliant deception," she declared, after a few seconds. "The most important Kindred in Europe are invited to a Conclave at Karl Schrekt's castle. There, they are surprised and destroyed by the Red Death using his unstoppable Body of Fire power. However, their deaths are never noticed, as all of those destroyed are replaced by their exact duplicates. The Red Death gains total mastery of the Camarilla by replacing the cult's top leader with members of its own bloodline."

"I like it," said Flavia, a note of admiration in her

voice. "Simple but effective. It is an excellent scheme."

The Dark Angel looked at McCann. "Now that we finally understand the Red Death's strategy, how do you plan to stop it?"

McCann smiled. He waved a hand in Madeleine's direction. "Simple. We combat one unique power with another," he declared. "Madeleine has the ability to sense the bloodline of any powerful vampires in the nearby surroundings. Remember, she used it in Washington to locate me when I rendezvoused with the Red Death."

The Dagger of the Giovanni nodded. "I sensed you were with several elder vampires," she stated. "However, I only recognized Makish's clan. The others were a mystery to me."

"The Red Death is a childe of Saulot, the Antediluvian diablerized by Tremere a thousand years ago," said McCann. "His brood, the Children of Dreadful Night, thus belong to a unique but otherwise extinct bloodline. The Red Death's childer can take on the appearance of Tremere, Ventrue, Brujah, even Gangrel vampires. It doesn't matter what they look like on the outside. The one thing they cannot disguise is their distinctive clan identity. Madeleine is our secret weapon. She can pierce their most convincing impersonations without effort. Once we are certain which Kindred are the enemy, we destroy them."

"Despite their elaborate masquerade," said Flavia, "the plotters cannot escape their heritage." She laughed. "More than most, they are the Damned."

They fell silent as the waitress set a platter of waffles and a pot of coffee in front of Elisha. It was an odd meal for nine at night, but after sleeping all day, it was the only thing on the menu that fit his mood. As soon as the serving woman left, Elisha raised his fork to attract attention.

"Pardon me," he said, "but am I the only one who sees one glaring problem with this plan? We are relying on Madeleine to identify these monsters. We know she can do it. Which leads me to suspect that our enemies will also be aware of her power. The instant she walks into that castle, Madeleine is going to become the target for the entire brood of the Red Death. The success of their coup depends on eliminating her as quickly as possible. If our enemies succeed, we're finished."

"I am ready for trouble," said Madeleine, calmly. Her eyes were icy jets of frozen fire. "In fact, I relish the thought of it."

"Problem is," said Flavia, "they'll never confront you face to face. I've visited Schrekt's sanctum before. That castle is honeycombed with secret passages. The doppelgangers will remain in the shadows and try to stab you in the back."

"Much like my family," said Madeleine, with a faint smile. "I will be on my guard."

"There's Don Caravelli, too," said Elisha, between mouthfuls of waffle. "You said that the Mafia chief is coming to the Conclave. He's your sworn enemy. He'll do anything to see you destroyed. Plus, we know from the attack in Paris that he's somehow aligned with the Red Death."

Madeleine's smile widened. "I am not disturbed by Don Caravelli's attendance at the conference, Elisha. I am pleased that he will be there. Quite pleased."

"Well," said McCann, rising to his feet, "you'll be seeing him soon enough. Finish up your meal, Elisha. Tonight's the big night. I believe our limo has just pulled up to the front door. It's time for us to make our grand entrance at Schrekt's castle."

"Limo?" asked Elisha, gobbling the last remaining crumbs of the waffles. "The castle's not far. I thought we were going to walk there."

Flavia laughed. "Appearances, my naive young mage. Appearances. Important figures like princes and elders never arrive on foot. It is a sign of wealth and power to be driven to one's destination. Never forget that. It's as true for kine as it is for Kindred."

After settling the bill, the four of them climbed into the plush white stretch limo. It was less than a mile to the castle, and Elisha would have preferred walking with Madeleine. But he had no say in the matter. Dire McCann was in charge and he knew exactly what he wanted to do.

Like a modern moat, a twelve-foot-high steel fence crowned with sinister foot-long spikes surrounded the huge castle. The sole gate directly fronted the entrance to the fortress' interior. A dozen security guards, clad entirely in black, guarded the checkpoint. Half of them were ghouls, the rest vampires. None of them were smiling.

"Yes?" said their leader, a tall, thin man with a vandyke beard, wire glasses, and dead white features,

as they climbed out from the car. He stood in front of the car and stared at them with icy-gray, hostile eyes. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"We are here for the Conclave," said Dire McCann, amused by the arrogant manner of the security chief. "I believe we are expected. My name is Dire McCann. My friends and I were invited by Karl Schrekt."

At the mention of McCann's name, the security chief's eyes popped wide open. The reference to Karl Schrekt had him standing at attention. "My—my apologies, Herr McCann. I did not mean to be impolite. I am Dietrich Grill, head of perimeter security. My master left strict instructions for you to be shown to your rooms immediately."

"No offense taken," said McCann, as the four of them walked to the gate. "You were just doing your job."

"Thank you, mein Herr," said the Dietrich Grill, his voice still quivering with fright. Schrekt's temper was notorious, and he was an unforgiving master. "Thank you."

The security chief's gaze quickly shifted from McCann to Madeleine Giovanni, then to Flavia. "The Dagger of the Giovanni?" he asked. "And the notorious Dark Angel? I am honored by your presence."

Madeleine merely nodded. She disliked bragging about her exploits. The fewer people who were aware of her deeds, the better she like it. Flavia, who used her fame as a weapon, ran her tongue across her upper lip, then winked. Considering the circumstances

tonight, she was more reserved than usual.

Grill beckoned to one of the guards. "Herr McCann and his party are quartered in Suite C on level three of the west wing. Escort them there immediately. *Macht schnell!*"

Mentally, Elisha shook his head in astonishment. He was beginning to wonder if there was anyone the detective did not know.

"Again, Herr Grill," said McCann, as they followed their escort into the castle, "thank you for your cooperation."

"My pleasure," said the security chief. "The Conclave begins at midnight in the great hall."

"We will be there," said McCann. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Their quarters consisted of two huge rooms, connected by an oak door, in the highest level of the castle. Each chamber contained two large beds and two coffins. The stone walls, ancient and cold, were covered with a variety of expensive wall tapestries, depicting scenes of the Crucifixion. There was even a small bathroom, complete with shower stall. There were no mirrors in either apartment.

"Very nice," said Flavia, strolling through the rooms. "Only the very best for Dire McCann." The Dark Angel stared at the detective. "How do you know Karl Schrekt, detective? He does not have many human friends."

"I did him a favor a few years ago," said McCann. "Schrekt needed help with an investigation involving a group of rogue ghouls plotting against

the Tremere. I provided the necessary assistance. Unlike many Kindred, he's not the type who forgets a debt, even if it's owed to a mortal."

"How convenient," said Flavia, the sarcasm obvious in her voice. "I'm consistently amazed by the number of vampires who owe you favors."

"I keep busy," said McCann, grinning. The detective seemed to enjoy taunting the Dark Angel. He was perhaps the only man, Elisha realized, who could do it and stay alive.

"Whatever the reason for his hospitality," interrupted Madeleine, "Schrekt's assistance tonight may prove to be important. I studied his confidential file carefully during my visit to the Mausoleum. Though he is a member of Clan Tremere, the Justicar is obsessive in his loyalty to the Camarilla. Schrekt considers enforcing the Traditions of Caine to be his sacred mission. There is no question that he is not allied with the Red Death."

"Assuming, of course," said Flavia, "that he's the real Karl Schrekt and hasn't already been replaced by a member of the Children of Dreadful Night."

"If a doppelganger was in his place," said McCann, "he wouldn't have allowed me into the castle. The Children of Dreadful Night look right but they don't possess the memories of their doubles. I think we can assume this Schrekt is the real article. However, I'm not sure about anyone else."

The detective turned to Madeleine. "Now is as good a time as any to scan the castle for vampires not associated with any of the normal bloodlines. We should know how many of the Children of

Dreadful Night are present in the fortress."

Madeleine nodded. She closed her eyes, a look of intense concentration cloaking her features. After a few seconds, her face wrinkled in distress. In a rare display of emotion, she ground her teeth together.

"There are approximately seventy vampires in the castle," declared Madeleine, opening her eyes. "Of that number, I sense over thirty Kindred all with the same bloodline as Mr. McCann's enemies in Washington. With so many, identifying their individual generations is impossible. However, all of them are quite powerful."

"Naturally," said McCann. "To impersonate elder vampires of other clans, they need to be of the same generation. Otherwise, they would not be able to duplicate their victim's powers and disciplines."

"What wonderful news," said Flavia, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Instead of just worrying about the Red Death and his three childer, we have thirty more of his descendants to deal with as well. McCann, even with Karl Schrekt's assistance, I think we are at a disadvantage."

"You stated in Rambam's study that terrible odds were a challenge," said Dire McCann, seemingly undisturbed by Madeleine's revelation. "Don't tell me that you've changed your mind. I thought Assamites never worried about numbers."

"I'm not complaining," said Flavia. "Merely commenting on the situation. We're a long way from St. Louis. I had hopes of confronting the Red Death in a return engagement. The wraith of my sister still cries out for revenge."

An odd expression crossed McCann's face. "You will," he declared. "Don't ask me how I know. I just do. The Red Death fears you, Flavia, and with good reason. You will encounter him for a second time. I just don't know the outcome."

"That's enough for me," said the Dark Angel, her hands curling into fists. "I've learned not to argue with you, McCann. If you say it will happen, I believe you."

"It is nearing midnight," said Madeleine. "Dietrich Grill mentioned that the Conclave will begin at that hour in the great hall. We should be there."

Elisha, who had been sitting on one of the beds listening to the swirling conversation, rose to his feet. He bit his lower lip in anticipation of the upcoming gathering. The notion of seventy vampires in one room made him nervous.

"Sit down, Elisha," said McCann, the same inscrutable expression on his face. "You and I are not attending the Conclave. It's for vampires, not mortals. Flavia and Madeleine are going. We will wait here."

"What?" said Flavia, stunned. "What are you talking about, McCann? We can't go to the meeting on our own. The Red Death is planning a mass slaughter, remember? We need you there to expose his scheme."

"I also find your statement quite unnerving, Mr. McCann," said Madeleine. "I have been charged by Pietro to protect you. At this instant, in a castle filled with enemies, I strongly feel that our

separating would put your life in peril." She paused. "Also, I am in complete agreement with Flavia. We require your guidance at the Conclave. Without you, the two of us will not know what to do."

"Watch and listen," said the detective. "I assure you, that will be enough. The Red Death is aware of your identities and your association with me. Whatever he plans, you will be among his first targets. I truthfully am not sure what he will do. Follow your instincts. Each of you is numbered among the finest assassins in the world. Tonight, you probably will have the opportunity to prove it."

"What about the two of you?" asked Flavia, shaking her head in dismay. "I assume you aren't planning to sit here and play cards."

"No such luck," said McCann. "The leaders of the Children of Dreadful Night, the original childer of the Red Death, will quickly sense that Elisha and I are alone here. They know that no ordinary vampires could kill me. So, they'll come themselves. I'm not sure how many of the three are present. We will discover that soon enough. Unfortunately, I suspect none of them will be the actual Red Death. We've determined that he prefers to remain in the background, manipulating his bloodline."

"It's safer that way," said Flavia. "Still, I should remind you—based on remarks you've made in the past few weeks, it seems nearly impossible for two humans, even if they are both powerful mages, to defeat a pair of elder vampires. Especially if the Kindred in question have mastered the Body of Fire discipline."

"The chances of such an event taking place," said Madeleine, "are about as likely as the chances of you and I defeating an entire chamberful of disguised assassins."

"Don't give up," said McCann. "The Red Death thinks he has the situation under control. As before, he has become overconfident of success. That mistake will cost him dearly."

"Overconfident?" asked Flavia, as she walked to the door of the suite, Madeleine following. "It appears to me that the Red Death has little reason to worry. You obviously feel differently, McCann."

"The Red Death has forgotten that he deals not only with Dire McCann," said the detective in a deeper, more commanding voice, "but with Lameth as well. And the wrath of the Dark Messiah is all-consuming."

Chapter 6

New York—April 10, 1994:

Alicia crouched in the near-total darkness of an alley a block away from the Neapolitan Club. She was dressed in a form-hugging black catsuit made from a newly developed high-tech fiber used by the government space program. The synthetic mesh was dense enough to stop a bullet, yet lighter than cloth. It covered Alicia from head to toe, except for her hands. She preferred to leave them free. A mask of the same substance concealed her face, other than her eyes and two slits for breathing. On her feet, she wore high-impact studded boots, each with a knife sheath holding a perfectly balanced stiletto. Alicia fondly referred to the outfit as her "ninjawear."

Beside Alicia crouched her black panther, Sumohn. Though they had been waiting in the darkness for more than an hour, the huge cat had not uttered a sound. It had waited as patiently—perhaps even more patiently—than her mistress. Wiry muscles rippled beneath the gigantic jungle beast's skin. Death lurked in its yellow eyes. It sensed there would be killing tonight.

The monstrous feline was seven hundred years old. Like Alicia, it was Anis' ghou. Kept alive by

small amounts of the Methuselah's blood, the black panther possessed a near-human intelligence, though it still had the mind of a beast. Its reflexes were a hundred times faster than anything living and many things undead. Even vampires feared Sumohn, and with good reason. Over the centuries, the cat had managed to destroy a number of Cainites. The beast had claws and teeth sharp enough to cut through steel bars. Decapitating a vampire was no more difficult.

"Where the hell is he?" Alicia whispered to herself, trying to control her growing frustration. Their plan required exact timing, and precious minutes were ticking by too quickly. It was shortly after midnight. Vampires had been entering the Neapolitan Club for the past hour. Melinda Galbraith, accompanied by a small group of the Blood Guard, had arrived a half-hour ago. Over the next thirty minutes, the four Seraphim had come, each from a different direction. They obviously did not trust their fellow board members very much. The meeting inside was just starting. Alicia dared not wait too long before making her appearance. She couldn't give the Red Death a chance to strike.

As if in response to her question, a dull throbbing noise filled the night air. Alicia looked to the sky but couldn't see anything. Not yet. The haze and pollution filling the air made visibility difficult. But, she knew what was going to happen next. Jackson had planned everything down to the most meticulous details.

Reaching down, Alicia laid a hand on Sumohn's

neck. "Be ready," she whispered, the words strengthening the telepathic link between the two of them. Without a sound, the jungle cat rose to its feet, and opened its mouth in a silent snarl of satisfaction. Black panthers were savage hunters. Unlike most predators, they often attacked for no reason other than for the joy of the kill. Jackson's strategy was intended to prevent a confrontation, but with elite troops like the Blood Guard, there were no certainties. Sumohn was Alicia's insurance policy. No one was going to stop them from seeing the Seraphim.

The whirring sound grew louder and louder. The air shook with the noise. Mixed in was the chugging of a motor, a loud irregular mechanical cough. The ever-present garbage and debris of New York City swirled in tiny vortices as if stirred by some colossal unseen mixer. The beating was closer now. Much, much closer.

Alicia could see lights, red, white and yellow, two hundred feet overhead. A massive drumbeat filled the night, drawing closer.

Alicia's gaze fixed on the front entrance of the Neapolitan Club. It remained closed, though there was no question that the monstrous metallic heartbeat could be heard inside. The Blood Guard were steadfast at their posts. Alicia expected no less, though she suspected that at least one member of the squad would soon come out to investigate. They couldn't risk not learning what was happening outside. In Manhattan, what you didn't know could hurt you.

The lights were only a hundred feet from the street when one of Melinda's bodyguards finally pushed open the door of the nightclub and stepped outside, scanning the sky for the source of the disruption. The vampire's head jerked back in surprise when it caught a glimpse of what hovered above. Immediately, he rushed back into the club.

"Six of them went inside with Melinda," said Alicia. "Let's see how many come out to watch the show."

She didn't have to wait long for her answer. One, two, three, then four vampires came hurtling out of the club's entrance. Their eyes were fixed on the enormous machine less than a hundred feet above them and descending rapidly.

The helicopter blades produced a continual thunderous roar. The street vibrated with the throbbing, tiny waves of stress rippling through the concrete, sending a spider's web of cracks through the cement. Car horns honked in the distance and far away, a police siren wailed. The shrill crackle of a radio transmission gone sour echoed like breaking glass off the walls of the nearby skyscrapers.

The vampires were hypnotized by the rapidly dropping machine. One raised his hands, as if trying to stop the helicopter's descent by force of will alone. It didn't, couldn't work. The combination of twenty tons of metal and gravity was impossible to stop.

Seventy-five feet from the ground, the sickly, irregular screech of the aircraft's engine suddenly ceased. The huge elevator blades continued to twirl

for an instant, then froze. Metal scraped on metal as the helicopter plummeted to the pavement.

Alicia released her grip on Sumohn's fur. "Let's go," she commanded in the split second before the crash. The beast needed no further urging. It dashed across the city block that separated them from the Neapolitan Club, Alicia moving nearly as fast in her wake.

The helicopter crashed into the street less than a hundred feet from the nightclub. It struck with the force of a meteor hurtling from the skies. The noise assaulted eardrums like a hammer blow to the forehead. The concrete bucked and shook like a living thing, as wave after wave of kinetic energy exploded through the sidewalk. Huge red gouts of flame shot up from the wreckage, and thick black smoke flooded the area. No one seemed to notice how quickly the fire spread. Deep inside the twisted metal men screamed. The wail of sirens amplified a hundredfold, as dozens of police patrols, riot squads and ambulances raced to the scene. Even in Manhattan, where bizarre occurrences were commonplace, a helicopter crash in the middle of an East Side street, seven blocks from the mayor's mansion, was news.

The four Blood Guards rushed down the front steps of the Neapolitan Club, captivated by the spectacular violence of the disaster a few dozen feet away. Creatures of destruction, they were inevitably drawn to the site of the carnage. The distraction would only hold them for a few seconds, Alicia realized. But a few seconds were all that she needed

to cut behind the quartet, wrench open the doors of the club, and slip inside, Sumohn faithfully at her side.

The glare of the fire, reflected through a dozen arched stained-glass windows that lined the outer wall of the foyer, cast a red glow on the reception hall. Two Blood Guards were relaxing casually in front of a huge set of double doors, each of them loosely gripping a machete in one hand. Neither had a chance to use his weapon.

Sumohn slammed into the guard on the left with the force of a bulldozer. The big cat hit the vampire full in the chest, sending him crashing to the floor. He never had a chance to scream. The jungle cat's teeth sank into his face, in a horrifying parody of a kiss. With a rumbling growl from deep in its throat, the panther snapped its massive jaws closed, tearing the Cainite's face into ribbons. A second bite, instants later, removed the remnants of his head from his shoulders. Like a jar of overheated silly putty, the Blood Guard's body dissolved into a puddle of formless, bubbling goo.

Alicia had no fangs or claws, but she did have her knives. A hundred years of rigid training had honed her skills to perfection. As a ghoul, she did not possess the inhuman speed of a vampire. Still, she knew how to use the element of surprise to make her first strike count.

The Blood Guard had just raised his machete to waist height when Alicia spun past him in a dancer's pirouette and with a graceful flick of her hands plunged her matched daggers deep into his eyes.

The vampire screamed in shock and pain. Dropping his machete, he grabbed for his eyes. Which was exactly what Alicia expected. The Blood Guard were trained killers, ruthless and without pity. However, they rarely encountered resistance or victims who were capable of causing them pain. As was the case with many of the Undead, he was completely surprised at the discovery that his opponents could fight back. And when Alicia was involved, Final Death was always the outcome.

The machete, specially treated against vampire disciplines, proved an excellent weapon to use against its owner. Alicia swung the knife in a neat arc directly through the vampire's neck, easily beheading him. The decapitated body dropped to the plush white carpeted floor like a sack of cement. A few seconds later, Alicia retrieved her knives and resheathed them in her boots. All that remained of the second Blood Guard were several stains on the carpet.

She tossed the machete into the coat-check room. Carrying a naked blade into the banquet room would be a mistake. From now on, she would have to use words, not steel.

Drawing in a deep breath, Alicia reached for the handles of the double doors leading to the next chamber. With a jerk, she wrenched them open and stepped into the banquet hall. Sumohn, a silent black shadow, followed.

Four powerfully built male vampires sat behind a white skirted table on a slightly raised podium. They were the leaders of the Black Hand, the

Seraphim, the warlords of the Sabbat. Directly across from them, separated by an empty space of perhaps twenty feet, were approximately two dozen Cainites. Alicia quickly scanned the crowd for Walter Holmes but didn't see him.

"About time, bitch," said Melinda Galbraith, standing in the area separating the Seraphim from the faithful. The regent wore a blood-red dress. She appeared to be quite pleased to see Alicia. "We've been expecting you. Welcome to your execution."

Chapter 7

Linz—April 10, 1994:

Jack Darrow glanced uneasily at the clock in the suite. It was a few minutes after eleven. In less than an hour, the Conclave was scheduled to begin, and there was still no sign of Alexander Vargoss. The prince had left their rooms nearly three hours ago, promising to return shortly. As each second ticked by, Darrow grew more and more nervous. He was scheduled to testify about the Red Death tonight before the elders of the Camarilla. Without Vargoss' support, the bodyguard felt certain that the elders would not believe him. And, the price of lying to the Grand Council of the Camarilla was the Final Death.

Jack Darrow was no coward. Originally a sailor in the King's Navy, he had been a tough, relentless fighter when alive and was equally formidable in undeath. Still, the Justicars were known for their fondness for long, torturous executions. Darrow didn't mind a cold, quick death. The thought of being immersed for a decade in a pool of acid was not one he cared to dwell on.

With a sigh of steel against steel, the hinges of the entrance turned. Moving with surprising speed, Alexander Vargoss slid into the chamber. The

prince's white cheeks were touched with red and his eyes burned with ghastly light.

"They are here," he announced to Darrow. "I expected no less. Tonight, there will be a final reckoning."

"Bloody hell," said Darrow, his muscles tightening with worry. "Who's here?"

"That renegade, Dire McCann, of course," said Vargoss, "along with the Dark Angel, and Madeleine Giovanni. They arrived in the castle not long ago. Most likely, they plan to attend the Conclave as well."

"No big friggin' deal that I can see," said Darrow. "What's it matter right now? I know you said that McCann's a traitor. And you ain't a big fan of Flavia anymore since she's been hooked up with the detective. But neither of them's been around since you sent them huntin' for the Red Death. That Giovanni dame's got no quarrel with you. Considerin' her reputation, she's probably better off left alone."

Vargoss' face contorted with rage. His lips pulled back, revealing his fangs. Darrow took a step back, stunned by the prince's reaction.

"Those three are annoying scum who have thwarted my plans for far too long," snarled Vargoss. Gone was any trace of the gentlemanly airs that the Ventrue prince normally affected. "My hour of triumph is nearly at hand. I cannot take any chances. Those interlopers must be destroyed before they interfere again. This time, I will crush them like bugs beneath my feet."

Vargoss' burning gaze fastened on Darrow. "Do you remember, Darrow, the conversation we had in St. Louis about serving two masters? How I said that splitting your loyalty was a sure path to destruction?" The prince's voice was softer now, but no less sinister. "Do you remember?"

Darrow nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

"That same night," said Vargoss, "I put an end to that Nosferatu traitor who was secretly conspiring against me. What was his name again?"

"Uglyface," said Darrow, his muscles tightening in horror. The prince had turned the Nosferatu's bones to mush with a single touch. The thought of carrying the grotesque Kindred jellyfish outside to burn away when the sun rose still gave Darrow the creeps. "His name was Uglyface."

"He was much uglier after I finished with him, Darrow," said Vargoss. "Yet, I was merciful. Imagine if I had decided to leave him in the club, as a living carpet. Wouldn't that have been a sight!"

Vargoss laughed insanely. He held up his hands. A dull red glow emanated from his fingers. Darrow froze. He knew that one wrong word, one wrong move, would signal his end.

"The choice is yours, Darrow," said the prince, the fingers of his right hand curling into a crimson fist. "Do you serve me or Don Caravelli? Decide quickly. There is much to be done so I need your answer now. Which is it to be: unlife, or the Final Death?"

"I s-serve only you, Prince," said Darrow, stumbling over his words. "You can trust me. I

demonstrated that the night I torched the club with you in St. Louis."

The prince nodded, his lips twisting into a devilish smile. "I felt certain that you would make the right choice, Darrow. You have always impressed me with your ability to adjust swiftly to any circumstances."

"I try, Prince," said Darrow. "I try my best."

"Tonight, I want you to use that ability for me," said Vargoss. "Shortly after the Conclave begins, Madeleine Giovanni is certain to confront Don Caravelli. Despite Camarilla hostility to the Giovanni clan, there is no great love for Don Caravelli among the cult elders. They will permit the duel to take place. Either Don Caravelli or Madeleine Giovanni will be destroyed."

Darrow shook his head. "Tough bet. Neither of them is a pushover."

The prince chuckled. "It doesn't matter to me who wins. Only the amount of time it takes matters. During the fight, I want you to speak to Flavia. Tell her that I order her, as is my right by contract, to eliminate the winner of the duel. After such a match, neither combatant will be able to defend themselves against her attack."

"The Dark Angel ain't gonna like it," said Darrow. "She ain't gonna like it one friggin' bit."

"I don't care what she likes or dislikes," said Vargoss. "The Assamite is bound to me by an agreement with her clan. Her wishes are unimportant. If she refuses to follow my orders, she will be forever disgraced."

"Honor means everything to an Assamite," said Darrow. "Especially one like Flavia."

"I agree," said Vargoss. "Which is why I expect her to obey my orders."

The prince laughed again. It was not the mad chortling of before. Instead, it was soft and low and, in a way, much more frightening. "Then, when she finishes and for a moment, stands off guard, I want you to finish the job, Darrow. Destroy her. Destroy the Dark Angel."

"Whatever you say, Prince," declared Darrow, with a shrug of his shoulders. He had expected no less. "Bloody arena's gonna resemble a charnel house by the time this friggin' duel's over."

"More than you realize, Darrow," said Prince Vargoss ominously. "Much, much more."

Chapter 8

New York—April 10, 1994:

"I must admit," said Reuben, finishing an egg roll, "I have no idea how Alicia plans to stop the Red Death. It should be an interesting fight."

"Don't look at me," said Rachel, ignoring the plate of Chinese-American appetizers that sat between them. One hand was wrapped around a cup of tea, but she did not drink. "I'm out of my league. When Methuselahs battle, anything can happen. Their powers are awesome. How Alicia and Dire McCann intend to combat the Red Death's otherworldly fire confounds my feeble powers of deduction."

"These are delicious snacks," remarked Reuben, carefully wiping his greasy fingers on his napkin. As usual, he was clothed entirely in white. It was a few minutes past midnight and they were at one of their favorite restaurants in Chinatown. "You should try some."

"Not right now," said Rachel. She was dressed entirely in black. It served as a perfect contrast to her bright red hair and perfect skin. "I'm too nervous to eat. Alicia is about to battle Melinda. In less than twenty-four hours, McCann and his crew will be defending the Camarilla. How can you manage to

swallow a mouthful with the world hovering on the brink of destruction?"

"Easy," said Reuben. He reached for another egg roll. Holding it up, he gestured to his sister. She shook her head, grimacing. With a smile of satisfaction, he started to nibble. "There's nothing we can do at the moment other than wait and watch. So, why worry? If the Red Death triumphs, we'll be forced to act. If McCann and Alicia defeat the usurper and his childer, then we're home free. Since we're stuck on the sidelines, there's no useful purpose in remaining tense. So I relax."

"And when you relax," declared Rachel, "you like to eat. Just like that time in Rome, with that Father Naples character."

Reuben shrugged. "I was merely doing my job," he declared. "Gorgo had just awakened in Peru. I wanted to learn whether the Society of Leopold had any information about her or the other Nictuku. My interview with Father Naples convinced me that they were unaware of the monsters. Of all mortal organizations, the good brothers were unquestionably the best informed about the Kindred. Once I dismissed the possibility of human complicity, I focused my entire attention on the Jyhad. It didn't take me long to discover the Red Death and its plans for conquest. From there, the trail led to Dire McCann and Alicia Varney."

"The Society still has a question mark next to Naples' obituary," said Rachel.

"He had a heart attack shortly before I arrived," said Reuben. "He should have died instantly. I gave

him another hour. It enabled the old warrior to enjoy a few more glasses of wine." He grinned. "Besides, the fanatics of the Society need a few mysteries to keep them inspired. I provided them with motivation."

"You never lack for a glib explanation, do you?" asked Rachel. She reached for her cup of tea. It was cold. Emptying it on the floor, she poured herself another. No one in the Chinese restaurant questioned her actions. No one ever did.

"I hope not," said her brother. "Otherwise, I've wasted thousands of years of practice."

Rachel laughed out loud. Then sobered immediately. "McCann told Phantomas we're Seth's children."

"Who cares?" said Reuben, eyeing the subgum fried rice. He heaped a large portion of it on his plate, sprinkled it liberally with soy sauce, and began eating. "McCann and Alicia aren't going to tell anyone else their suspicions. It's not their style. The most Phantomas will do is put their theories in his encyclopedia. I can live with that."

He grinned, pouring himself a cup of tea. "Actually, I like the idea of my name being in print after all these centuries. Besides, none of them grasped more than the barest inkling of the truth. Our deepest secrets are safe."

"What if Phantomas publishes his encyclopedia?" asked Rachel.

"It will never happen," said Reuben. "You heard what he said in Paris. He's assembling the tome for his own pleasure. The secrets contained in that

volume would rip apart the Camarilla and the Sabbat. It is the most dangerous book in existence."

"Before he abandoned his hideaway," said Rachel, "he transmitted copies of the encyclopedia to a number of other computer databanks throughout the world. That could be a problem."

"He thought he did," said Reuben, chuckling. "Phantomas has an affinity for machinery. So do I. When the Nosferatu goes to erase the information, he'll discover the transfer never happened."

"Sometimes you amaze even me," said Rachel. She stared at the feast spread before them. "Maybe I will try a small serving of sweet and sour chicken. It does look appetizing."

"Go ahead," said Reuben. "If the world is going to burst into flame, it will do so whether you've eaten or not."

"Do you think Alicia and McCann have a chance against the Red Death?" Rachel asked as she dished out the chicken, pineapple and sauce onto her plate. "Truthfully?"

"Alicia stands nearly alone against the false Melinda Galbraith," said Reuben. "Plus, she can't forget the possible threat of the Seraphim, not noted for their kindly disposition toward mortals. At least, she has that monstrous black panther with her. The fight seems evenly matched."

"What about McCann?" asked Rachel.

Reuben shook his head. "The detective is faced with two of the Red Death's childer. His chances of survival appear slim at best."

He paused. "Which leads us to the most

interesting question of the evening. Together, McCann and Alicia are facing the three children of the Red Death. St. Germain is playing it safe and letting his brood fight for him. He's lurking somewhere, hidden in the background. Consider his earlier schemes and their backups. I can't believe St. Germain doesn't have a last surprise planned if all else fails. What is the final secret of the Red Death?"

Chapter 9

Linz—April 11, 1994:

Three minutes after Karl Schrekt welcomed the elders of the Camarilla to the Conclave, Madeleine Giovanni rose to her feet and demanded the right to speak. Her actions caught nearly everyone in the huge meeting hall by surprise.

Located in the great room of the castle, the assembly hall was shaped like a huge horseshoe. Four rows of chairs formed a gigantic U, with the Justicar's podium at the center of the arms. Speakers addressed the attendees from the ancient stone and earth floor in the middle of the amphitheater. Centuries ago, witches and warlocks had been burned at the stake in the same spot.

The Justicar was a vampire of few words. A stocky figure, with broad shoulders and grim, harsh features, he spoke in slow, measured tones. He curtly thanked the various princes of the major European cities for attending the conference, pretending that they had done so out of concern for the safety of the Camarilla and not their own personal safety. He assured them of the importance of the meeting and declared a truce between all clans. Afterward, Schrekt made his one mistake.

"We are gathered here to discuss the ravages of

the outlaw known as the Red Death," declared the Justicar, his gaze sweeping in a half circle that took in the entire crowd. "However, before beginning our investigation, I must follow tradition and ask the question. Are there any members of this Assembly who come seeking justice?"

That was the moment Madeleine stood up. She was seated on the left side of the chamber. "I demand justice," she said, her icy voice filling the room. "Blood calls out for blood. I claim the right of revenge against my father's murderer. I challenge Don Caravelli, of Clan Brujah, to a duel. To the Final Death."

"The bitch cannot speak," bellowed Don Caravelli from across the amphitheater. The Mafia Capo was also on his feet, his eyes blazing with anger. "As a Giovanni, she doesn't belong to the Camarilla."

Madeleine smiled as she stared at her enemy. She sensed his fear—and his confusion. For some unknown reason, he had not expected her to be at the meeting. "The Camarilla claims that all vampires, regardless of their clan, are members of the sect." She looked to Karl Schrekt. "Is that not correct?"

"It is," said the Justicar. He betrayed no surprise at Madeleine's question. "Still, to address the Conclave and make such a request, you need the backing of two members of the Assembly. Do you have such support?"

"I stand by her," said Flavia, immediately rising beside Madeleine. "Let them fight."

No one else spoke. Madeleine had been counting on Dire McCann to be her second backer but he was not there. No other Kindred dared risk the wrath of the Mafia chieftain. Her claim appeared doomed.

"I acknowledge the childe's grievance," a woman's voice pronounced from across the huge chamber. On her feet, next to Don Caravelli, was a tall blond woman in a Tremere mage's robe. In one hand, she grasped a long staff. "Let them fight."

Karl Schrekt's eyebrows rose. For the emotionless Justicar, it was a sign of extreme astonishment. "Elaine de Calinot, of Clan Tremere, has seconded the demand. The duel shall proceed. Don Caravelli, advance and face your accuser."

His face a mask of rage, the Mafia Capo whirled to confront his companion. Elaine's features were serene. Before Don Caravelli could say a word, she whispered a few sentences to him. Instantly, the anger seemed to melt from his body. He nodded, a slow smile spreading across his face. He turned to stare at Madeleine. Elaine continued to whisper. Don Caravelli's grin broadened.

"The bitch doesn't frighten me," he declared, walking toward the center of the arena. "I fear no one."

Madeleine smiled. At long last, she faced her enemy. His talk meant nothing to her.

"As is the custom, the duel shall be to the Final Death, with no mercy given or allowed," said Karl Schrekt. His harsh features scanned the crowd. "Any who seek to interfere with the fight shall pay the ultimate price."

"Conclave tradition permits the duelists to use any weapons in their possession," said Don Caravelli swiftly, before Schrekt could signal a start to the fight.

"It is the law," admitted the Justicar.

"Good," said the Mafia chief. Around his shoulders he wore a black satin cape. A swift motion of his hands sent the garment tumbling to the floor. Reaching over his neck, Don Caravelli pulled forth a double-bladed steel battle ax. "I came prepared for trouble."

Don Caravelli held the massive weapon with both hands. The fingers of his right hand were at the top of the shaft while those of his left were at the bottom. The grip gave him perfect control of the weapon, allowing for remarkable power in his every swing.

"I killed your father, bitch, and I'll kill you," the Capo declared. "Slicing your pretty head from your shoulders will be a true pleasure."

Madeleine smoothed down her black tank dress. The clinging material made it quite clear that there was no place for a concealed weapon. "For one such as you," she declared, "I require nothing more than my bare hands."

She looked to Karl Schrekt. "Let the duel begin."

"So be it," said the Justicar, nodding. "To the death."

Instantly, Don Caravelli lunged forward, swinging the heavy battle ax in a downward spiral meant to end the fight in one blow. It never connected. Madeleine, moving with blinding speed, darted to the left, avoiding the attack with ease. The steel blade slammed into the dirt and stone, sending sparks flying.

Reaching out, Madeleine snapped the fingers of one hand against Don Caravelli's right wrist. It was a bone-breaking, crippling blow. The Mafia Capo grunted with unexpected pain, but he did not loosen his grip on the ax. Snarling, he wrenched the weapon free from the earth and whirled to face her again. Don Caravelli was much stronger and much more durable than his protégé, Don Lazzari, whom Madeleine had killed a few weeks earlier.

Leaping up into the air, Madeleine lashed out with a kick aimed at Don Caravelli's head. Wisely, he jerked his face out of her path, not trying to deflect the killing swipe. Though he was much taller and heavier than Madeleine, Don Caravelli knew that his enemy was quite capable of ending the fight with one blow.

Shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet, the Capo brought the ax around in an underhanded cut aimed not at Madeleine's torso but at her slightly extended arms. The steel blade glistened in the amphitheater light. The weapon moved so fast that the air sang with its passage. The maneuver would have sliced off the hands of any ordinary vampire. But nothing about Madeleine Giovanni was ordinary.

Knees folding, Madeleine fell backward, her hands flashing up in an arc over her head. With incredible suppleness, she touched the floor behind her head with her fingers, forming a bridge with her body as the arch. As the ax sliced in the space occupied an instant ago by her hands, she lanced one leg upward. The curve of her ankle caught the

weapon in the middle of the shaft, wrenching it forward. Don Caravelli, propelled by his own momentum, went sailing into the air. He landed on the floor with a loud crunch a half-dozen feet beyond Madeleine.

Dropping to the concrete, Madeleine spun onto her stomach then pushed up into a sitting position. Her eyes widened in surprise. The Mafia Capo was also rising to his feet. The fall, which should have broken half the bones in his body, had barely shaken him. Shaking his head as if to regain his balance, Don Caravelli raised the ax to shoulder height. The slightest smile played across his cruel lips.

"You are extremely fast, bitch," he declared, "but I am stronger. And in the end, strength always defeats speed."

Madeleine said nothing. She had no words to waste on the Capo. Her eyes narrowed. Beyond Don Caravelli, in the seats surrounding the arena, a tall, vaguely familiar-looking man was kneeling at Flavia's side, whispering to her. The expression on the Dark Angel's face indicated that she did not like what she was hearing.

"Darrow," Madeleine whispered to herself as Don Caravelli took a slow step forward. Then another. His eyes glowed with a fierce humor. The Capo was in no hurry. He resembled a predatory beast stalking his prey.

The man talking to Flavia was Alexander Vargoss' assistant, Darrow. Madeleine wondered what he was saying. Whatever it was, the Dark Angel seemed finally to agree to his demands.

Folding her arms across her breasts, Flavia nodded her head. Darrow slipped into the empty chair beside her, a satisfied look on his face. Then, there was no more time for watching.

Don Caravelli feinted with the ax to Madeleine's right. She ducked slightly, bending back and twisting her shoulders at a forty-five degree angle. Jerking his left hand forward, he brought the shaft of the ax up in a short, vicious chop aimed at Madeleine's unprotected face.

Already off-balance, there was no way she could avoid the blow entirely. The ironwood handle of the weapon slammed into her chin with a crack audible throughout the arena. With a cry of pain, Madeleine stumbled backward, desperately trying to maintain her footing.

Anxious to follow through, Don Caravelli dropped both his hands to the base of the ax and swung it at Madeleine's legs. A crippling blow to either limb would put her at the Capo's mercy. And, in this fight, as declared by Karl Schrekt, there was no mercy.

Reflexes born of thousands of hours of training took over. Madeleine vanished. The ax cut through empty air. Don Caravelli cursed. Growling with rage, he slammed his weapon against the heavy flagging stones that made up the floor. "The bitch seeks to hide using Earth Meld," he declared angrily, his eyes fixed on the ground where Madeleine had disappeared. "She can't escape me that easily."

For most vampires, the discipline that allowed them to sink into the earth for protection was

exactly that. They could blend their physical form with the ground but not shift from that spot. Only a very few possessed the ability to move while melded. It was Madeleine's greatest skill, and was what made her one of the world's most dangerous assassins.

Without a sound, a dark shadow rose up from the ground a few feet behind Don Caravelli. As quickly as she had sunk into the floor, Madeleine reappeared from it. Don Caravelli's attention never wavered from the spot where she had been a moment before. He did not realize she stood behind him until it was too late.

With inhuman grace, Madeleine leapt into the air, planting her feet squarely in the middle of the Mafia Capo's back. At the same instant, her hands wrapped around his neck, her fingers meeting beneath his chin. In her short black dress, the Dagger of the Giovanni resembled a gigantic black widow spider hooked onto the spine of its victim.

Shocked, Don Caravelli dropped his ax and clawed at the digits circling his windpipe. His bones were harder than iron but it didn't matter. Even steel bars snap when pressure is exerted in the right place. Madeleine was an expert at finding the correct locations.

Jerking her arms tightly to her body, Madeleine thrust into the space between the Capo's shoulders with all the strength in her legs. Don Caravelli gurgled in shock as his back broke and they tumbled in a heap to the floor.

Moaning, the Mafia Capo stretched out his arms

for his ax. Amazingly, even with his broken back he was still able to move. Madeleine, bruised but otherwise unharmed by the fall, moved faster. Leaping over Don Caravelli's body, she grabbed the ax handle with both hands as she fell smoothly into a front forward roll. With perfect form, Madeleine came to her feet, the weapon clenched tightly in her fingers.

"Bitch," growled Don Caravelli, his red eyes glaring up at her from the floor. "You beat me with a trick. I knew accepting your challenge was a mistake. You were my bane. That other bitch, Elaine, promised me I couldn't lose. I never should have trusted her."

Madeleine's gaze swept the crowd. There was no sign anywhere of the mysterious Tremere council member. Nor did she spot Darrow's boss, Alexander Vargoss. Both had evidently left the meeting hall while the fight was taking place. She felt certain she knew their destination.

"Elaine lied," said Madeleine. "She used you like a pawn then left you to be destroyed."

"I'll kill her," snarled Don Caravelli, straining to move off the floor. "I'll kill you both."

"Your killing days are finished," said Madeleine.

The steel blade sliced effortlessly through the muscle and bone of Don Caravelli's exposed neck. Madeleine struck with such force that the handle of the ax quivered as the blade sank inches into the floor. Don Caravelli's head, eyes wide with astonishment, rested on the pavement for an instant, then turned to dust. His body remained

headless for a few seconds more, then it, too, disintegrated.

"Justice is served," intoned Karl Schrekt, his voice as cold and detached as ever. "We will take a short intermission, then resume the meeting. Hopefully, there will be no further delays."

Wearily, Madeleine walked over to where Flavia waited. Standing at the Dark Angel's side was Jack Darrow. In each hand, the Assamite held one of her deadly short swords.

"Well," Flavia said, as Madeleine drew close, "after decades of waiting, was revenge as sweet as you hoped?"

Madeleine shrugged. "The honor of my clan was served. Personally, I felt nothing. He did not fight as well as I expected. His senses were dulled, I suspect, by treachery."

"This one," said Flavia, gesturing with her head at Darrow, "brought me a message from Prince Vargoss concerning the duel. According to his command, I was to kill the winner."

The Dark Angel frowned. "By Assamite code, I cannot disobey a direct order from the one who holds my contract. In your weakened condition, it would be a simple task to destroy you."

Madeleine nodded. Having seen Flavia fight, she wasn't sure she could defeat the Assamite even when she was at her best. "I cannot ask you to forsake your honor," she declared.

"There is no need to do so," said Flavia. Spinning, she plunged one of her short swords into Jack Darrow's stomach. The big man gasped in

shock, doubling over with pain. As his head descended, Flavia's other sword licked out and sliced it neatly from his shoulders.

"Alexander Vargoss was many things," said Flavia, pulling her weapons free of the dissolving corpse. "But most of all he was always a gentleman. He fought his own fights. Whoever issued that order was not the prince. That Darrow obeyed the impostor's commands without hesitation branded him a traitor as well."

"We'd better find Dire McCann," said Madeleine. "I suspect my duel with Don Caravelli was intended to serve merely as a diversion. The real battle, the one involving the Red Death, is taking place upstairs, even as we speak."

Chapter 10

New York—April 10, 1994:

"Nice to see you again, too, Melinda," said Alicia, smiling. "Sorry I'm late. Pretty dress. Red is your color."

Alicia looked at the four Seraphim. Two of them she had met during her years pretending to be Justine's ghoul. At the far end of the table sat Jalan-Aajav, a monster in human form, one of the most vicious and evil vampires in existence. Originally a Mongol warrior in the service of Genghis Khan, Jalan was considered the Sabbat's deadliest assassin. A short, powerfully built vampire with swarthy features and wild eyes, Jalan was notorious for his murderous rages. Impatient and extremely arrogant, he possessed a savage, uncontrollable temper. His greatest pleasure was terrorizing both kine and Kindred. No one knew exactly how many he had killed over the centuries, but the number was in the thousands.

Nearest to her sat Djuhah, the most recent addition to the Seraphim. Tall and slender, with aristocratic features, he was a rebel Assamite whose rise in the ranks of the Black Hand had been as swift as it was unexpected. Djuhah's skin was the color of aged parchment and his eyes were black as coal.

Cool and calculating, he was slow to anger, making him the most dangerous of all the Seraphim. Jalan was fire; Djuhah was ice. Whispers named Djuhah the true leader of the Black Hand.

"I've come here for a reason," Alicia began, directing her remarks to the Seraphim. Melinda she ignored. "A terrible danger threatens the Sabbath. As a loyal member of..."

"Shut up, you lying traitor," interrupted Melinda angrily. She turned to the Seraphim. "I told you she would show up and try to make trouble. Varney's a troublemaker. She's the one who advised Justine to attack Washington and nearly ruined our secret plans for the city. No more useless talk. I've been hunting her for a week. Now she dies."

Sumohn, sensing the menace in Melinda's posture and the tone of her words, growled. Involuntarily, the regent stepped back a pace. Jalan-Aajav half-rose from his seat, his eyes glittering, his right hand holding a bowie knife.

"Not yet," said Djuhah. He waved Jalan back down. "There are too many unanswered questions that need to be addressed before we destroy this kine. We are in no rush. She will die, but not until the truth—the entire truth—is uncovered."

Melinda hissed, an inhuman, snakelike sound. "She must die now," the regent demanded. "Before she can spread more lies and half-truths."

"We are quite capable of making our own decisions, Melinda," said one of the two Seraphim Alicia did not know. A short, squat black man without a trace of hair on his head, the tone of his

voice made it clear that he was not a friend of the regent. "Keep quiet. Or you will be silenced."

Djuhah nodded his agreement. Melinda, her features twisted in rage, took another step away from Alicia. The regent's hands curled into fists.

"I always thought it strange that a mere ghoul served Justine as an advisor," said Djuhah. "When I raised the question with the archbishop, she never gave me a satisfactory explanation." He stared at Alicia. "Perhaps you would care to do so now. Tell me also, how you manage to control a black panther I perceive to also be an astonishingly powerful ghoul. There were guards outside—Blood Guards—and yet you managed to elude them and enter this chamber. Again, not the action of an ordinary ghoul. Exactly who are you, Alicia Varney, and why does the regent fear you so badly?"

"I fear no one," declared Melinda. Alicia, her senses alert, noted that the regent's hands were still clenched into fists. Her fingers were slowly turning a reddish hue. At the same time, the banquet room was starting to grow warmer. It was as if someone in the room had turned on a heater.

Alicia kept her features composed. Melinda didn't realize it, but she was her own worst enemy. If the regent had treated Alicia as a minor annoyance, a turncoat of little importance, an irritation to be dealt with in the future, it was doubtful that the Seraphim would have bothered to listen to her. Instead, Melinda had alerted the leaders of Black Hand to Alicia's mysterious heritage. After the regent's ranting, they dared not

ignore Alicia, or what she had to say.

"I am a ghoul," said Alicia, picking her words carefully, "as is Sumohn. We just are not Justine's ghouls. I serve as the avatar for one who is greater than any archbishop."

Before any of the Seraphim could say a word, she rushed on. "The query that matters, however, is not my identity. I am no threat to either the Sabbath or the Black Hand. Our goals are the same. But the monster masquerading as Melinda Galbraith feels otherwise!"

"What are you claiming?" said Jalan-Aajav, on his feet for a second time. "Melinda stands before us. She is no impostor."

"Are you sure?" Alicia retorted, pressing her advantage. "Among the Damned, changing faces, even bodies, is not impossible. How do you know that the true regent—the leader who was missing for months in the ruins of Mexico City—stands before you tonight? I maintain that she is an impostor."

Dramatically, Alicia raised an arm and pointed a finger at the motionless Melinda. "I say she is not Melinda Galbraith. She is the usurper known as the Red Death!"

A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd of vampires on Alicia's left. Included in the group, she felt certain, were several of the Children of Dreadful Night.

Djuhah shook his head in disbelief. None of the other Seraphim appeared to be convinced. "She is the real Melinda Galbraith," declared Jalan-Aajav.

"We are not fools to be so easily deceived."

"Proof," cried someone from the crowd of Sabbat loyalists. "What is your proof?"

Alicia almost burst out laughing. She recognized Walter Holmes' voice. A shill in the audience could work wonders.

The Assamite Seraph nodded. "You make an incredible claim," he declared. "What proof *do* you offer?"

Alicia smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. Even Jalan-Aajav sank back into his chair at the sight of her expression. There was a great deal of Anis, Queen of Night, in that smile.

"Ask Melinda," said Alicia, her tone calm and deliberate. "The Red Death possesses the power to duplicate any vampire it has ever met. Sometime in the course of the centuries, it must have encountered the regent and memorized her appearance. However, while the impostor can steal appearances, it cannot capture *memories*."

Alicia stared at the regent. "Who was your sire, dear Melinda? Surely you remember that? Or, tell us, when did you come to America? With whom? And how did you end up in Mexico City?"

Melinda shook her head. "I don't remember," she declared, her voice shaking. "The terrible cataclysm in Mexico, it—it damaged my memory. My thoughts are not clear."

Djuhah's expression was frigid. "You cannot recall the identity of your sire?" he asked. "I find that difficult to believe. You hated her, you despised her, with an overwhelming passion."

"The disaster," repeated Melinda. The red glow from her fingers had spread to her arms. The banquet hall was much warmer than before. Alicia knew that her greatest challenge was yet to come. "The pain clouds my mind."

"The catastrophe in Mexico City?" said Alicia. "A terrible event. Most of us are still unsure of what occurred. Perhaps, since you survived, you could describe the events?"

Melinda shook her head. "I cannot. It is all a blur. I don't remember."

"Can't remember?" questioned Jalan-Aajav, his voice harsh and guttural. There was a trace of doubt in his eyes that had not been there before. "Or never knew?"

"Your clan?" asked the black Seraph. "To what clan do you belong? Surely you cannot forget that."

"Lasombra," said Melinda immediately. "I am Lasombra."

Very slowly, Djulah shook his head. "Not true. Of all the Sabbat, only the Seraphim knew Melinda's secret. She was a Toreador *antitribu*. Melinda merely claimed to be Lasombra, since before her ascendancy the regent of the Sabbat traditionally came from that clan. You are a liar."

Melinda's features wavered, grew fuzzy. A wave of intense heat swept through the room. Sumohn roared. Several vampires screamed. Djulah remained standing, his eyes widening in shock. Jalan-Aajav was already over the table, a few feet behind the false Melinda, grasping a dagger in each hand. But even he was not foolish enough to attack

the being who stood in place of the false regent.

"I am the Red Death," declared the monster, ripples of scorched air rising from its gaunt frame.

The creature stared at Alicia. "You have meddled with my plans for the last time, Anis. There is no place to hide. First you, then these four fools who name themselves Seraphim, will taste the Final Death." The Red Death waved a burning arm at the leaders of the Black Hand. "None can stand before the flames of the Sheddin."

"Even the fiercest fires last only so long," said Alicia, resting one hand on Sumohn's neck. The black panther's unnatural vitality flowed into her, doubling Alicia's strength. "Yours is about to burn out."

As if sensing Alicia's purpose, the Red Death stepped forward, arms lifted to gather the woman in its dread embrace. But it acted an instant too late. Drawing on all of the strength in her body, projecting the full force of her will, Alicia dilated the time stream around the Red Death.

For the space of a heartbeat, a pocket of time surrounded the monster. It was trapped, unmoving, by a whirlwind of temporal distortion. A tick of the clock passed in the real world, but for the Red Death, caught by the time dilation, twenty minutes rushed past. Alicia could maintain the spell for only an instant. Though she was Anis' ghoul, she was able to control only a tiny measure of her mentor's energy. Any more power would turn her body to dust. Gasping for breath, she dropped to her knees as the dilation ended.

The Red Death stood in exactly the same position as before, its emaciated arms still stretched out in a death grip. However, no fire burned in its limbs. The unnatural glow had departed from its body. The Body of Fire discipline lasted only a quarter of an hour. And, trapped in Alicia's time bubble, the Red Death had been burning for five minutes too long. The power of the Sheddin was gone.

"No," said the usurper, bewildered. "No!"

Alicia struggled to her feet. Her entire body was exhausted, totally drained of energy. The Red Death no longer possessed the Sheddin's fire, but it was still an incredibly powerful vampire. If not stopped, it could easily rip Alicia to shreds and escape before anyone in the chamber reacted. It could not be allowed to escape.

"A temporary victory at best, Anis," said the Red Death, evidently coming to the same realization. Its long fingers stretched out for Alicia's shoulders. "I will return again."

"Not likely," said Walter Holmes quietly. The poker player stood at Alicia's side. In his hands, he held what looked like a long wooden staff, crowned by a steel head. It took a moment for Alicia to realize it was a spear, a very ancient spear—a Roman soldier's pilum.

Holding the weapon tightly in his hands, Walter Holmes thrust it at the Red Death's throat. There was no time for the monster to dodge. The spear head caught it right below the chin. The Red Death shrieked once, a ghastly cry of terrible pain. Then,

exactly as if it had been exposed to the sun, the usurper crumbled into a small pile of ashes. In seconds, even the ashes dissolved.

"A useful gadget," murmured Alicia, glancing at Walter Holmes. A dark shadow quivered over his features, making them impossible to see clearly. The Monitor still hoped to keep his identity secret. "That's no ordinary spear."

"I've kept it with me for a long time," said Holmes softly. "A reminder of past sins. I believe a quick exit is in order."

"My thought exactly," whispered Alicia. The vampires in the banquet room were frozen into a stunned silence by what they had just witnessed.

"The Red Death schemed to replace the Seraphim with other shapechangers," Alicia declared loudly. "Beware. Those deceivers are still among you."

She stepped back, Walter Holmes moving with her, the spear guarding their departure. Sumohn was already out the door. Alicia's gaze swept the room, fixed on Djuhah. The Seraph's expression was grim. For an instant, his eyes looked into hers, and he nodded in understanding. She knew, without any doubts, that the Children of Dreadful Night who remained in the chamber were doomed.

Then, she and Walter Holmes were out of the room and running through the hall leading outside. There was no sign of the Blood Guards. Alicia kept expecting to see Jalan-Aajav come charging after them, but he never appeared. A minute later, they were in front of the club, with Jackson roaring up in her limo.

"Coming with me?" Alicia asked Walter Holmes, as her bodyguard flung open the door to her car. "Jackson and I are planning a long vacation, far away from city life. We've been discussing Hawaii. Or maybe even Tahiti."

The Monitor shook his head. The Roman spear he had used to destroy the Red Death had vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared. "No thank you. After the events of this evening, I think it best for me to totally disappear from sight for a time. I've always wanted to play poker in Las Vegas. Now seems like a good time to make that visit."

"You'll never have trouble finding a game in that town," said Alicia, grinning. "Good luck. And thanks for your help."

Impulsively, she reached out to hug the Monitor. But he was no longer there.

"We will meet again," said his voice in Alicia's mind as she hurriedly climbed into the back seat of her limo.

"You did it," declared Jackson as he stepped on the gas, sending the car roaring out into traffic in the direction of the airport. "You won."

"The battle's only half over," replied Alicia, her voice grim. "I defeated one of the Red Death's childer, and that was with Walter Holmes' help. Dire McCann fights the rest. If anyone can vanquish them, he's the one. But I surely don't know how."

Chapter 11

Linz—April 11, 1994:

"The duel between Madeleine and Don Caravelli is about to begin," said Dire McCann. His eyes were fixed on the door to their room. "Be ready. Company should be arriving at any moment."

The phone in their suite rang. Calmly, the detective walked over and picked up the receiver. The conversation was short but evidently the news pleased him. When he hung up, there was a smile on his face. "Alicia defeated the Red Death masquerading as Melinda Galbraith. The destiny of the world rests entirely on our shoulders."

Elisha grimaced. It was a weight he didn't need, or want.

"Most people think they can avoid their fate," said McCann, as if reading Elisha's thoughts. "It is not that easy. Destiny calls and you have no choice but to answer. No choice at all."

"I can sense two vampires walking down the corridor leading to our rooms," said Elisha. He felt incredibly tense. Every muscle in his body seemed to be strained to the limit. He wondered how McCann managed to remain so calm. "Do you think one of them is the true Red Death?"

The detective shook his head. "I doubt it. Phantomas claims that the original Red Death is a coward. At least partially, I agree. The Methuselah fears the Final Death, so he uses his childer as agents. This pair is most likely the remaining two of them."

"They're right outside the door," said Elisha, nervously. "What should we do?"

"Be patient," said McCann, smiling. His face quickly turned serious. "No matter what happens, do not let either of them come in direct contact with you. No doubt they've already summoned the Sheddin using Body of Fire. They are walking infernos. One touch will turn you into ashes. Fortunately, they cannot maintain that state very long. Alicia confirmed that in our phone conversation. Once their power dissipates, we'll strike."

"If they've raised the Sheddin," said Elisha, "is the world already doomed?"

"Not yet," said McCann. "My talks with Rambam convinced me that the fire demons only gain power through destruction. That is why we have to stop the Red Death and its childer before they use their discipline to incinerate another victim. We must destroy this pair before they can strike again."

The door to the suite, left unlocked, swung open. Two Cainites stood there: a man and a woman. Elisha did not recognize either of them, but obviously Dire McCann did.

"Prince Vargoss," said the detective. "Elaine de

Calinot. How kind of you to pay us a visit."

"The masquerade has come to an end, McCann," sneered the vampire McCann addressed as Vargoss. "The conquest of the Camarilla begins with your death."

"I'm honored," said McCann. "Though many others over the centuries have tried to destroy the Camarilla with a remarkable lack of success. I doubt if you will do any better."

Vargoss laughed. "Our plans cannot fail. No one realizes we are here. All attention is focused on the duel between Madeleine Giovanni and Don Caravelli. Once you and this irksome kine are destroyed, we begin our schedule of secretly destroying the elder Kindred at the Conclave and replacing them with our childer. One by one the unsuspecting fools shall succumb to the fires of the Red Death."

"An imaginative scheme," said McCann. He shook his head. "But it won't work. I won't let it."

The face of Vargoss shimmered. It was as if an invisible curtain had fallen across the vampire's features. Swiftly, the eerie rippling effect engulfed his entire body. The process was not as much a replacement as a *transformation*. Beside him, his companion's features were also changing. In mere seconds, Alexander Vargoss and Elaine de Calinot were gone, supplanted by identical monsters, the reflection of their dread sire.

The creature who had, instants before, been Prince Vargoss, was tall and thin, clad in a tattered shroud held in place by moldering white bandages.

Its face was that of a long-dead corpse, with decaying skin stretched across a hairless skull. Streaks of crimson marked the face, arms and chest. Clawlike hands glowed with a fierce red light.

"I am the Red Death," intoned the twin horrors, stepping into the chamber. Waves of heat rose from the creatures, and yet, they did not burn. "There is no escape."

McCann laughed. "Escape? Who said anything about escape? Kill me if you can. First, though, you have to catch me."

The detective glanced a signal at Elisha. The mage grinned, despite the proximity of the two monsters, realizing now what he was expected to do. At long last, Elisha understood why McCann had insisted he come along on this mission. Using Body of Fire, the twin monsters were nearly indestructible. They were, however, still bound by the laws of chance and happenstance.

Though just a young man, Elisha was already an extremely powerful and gifted mage. He knew better than to try to alter reality. Bending it, however, was not a problem.

The Red Death who had been masquerading as Alexander Vargoss took a step forward. Immediately, the carpet beneath its foot sizzled, smoldered, then turned to ash. Before the monster could react, the wood floor crackled and disintegrated. The Red Death tottered off balance, desperately trying to keep its feet.

Instinctively, the second Red Death reached out to help the other. Living flame touched living flame.

The air in the room popped as both monsters flared brilliant crimson for an instant. With a curse, the first Red Death dropped to the floor, setting the remaining boards on fire. The second Red Death shook its head, momentarily stunned.

"Best for us to retreat to the other room of the suite," said McCann, his features grim. "It won't take long for the fools to focus the Sheddin's fire into their upper body."

"Let them," said Elisha, as they hurried through the connecting door into the second chamber. "I've got plenty more tricks."

"Body of Fire requires all of their concentration," said McCann. "As long as they maintain that form, they can't use any other discipline. So, they can't stop you with their normal vampire powers. Fifteen minutes and their strength will be gone."

The air in the other room popped again, while a blast of intense heat charred the wood door. "Even vampires sometimes get their feet tangled when they walk," declared Elisha.

"They won't give up," said McCann. "The Red Death fears me too much to try to implement its plan before destroying me. The Camarilla is safe until the monsters finish with us."

"I like living too much to let them burn me to ashes," said Elisha. "They might get close after fifteen minutes, but not close enough."

Again, Elisha couldn't help but wonder why the Red Death was so afraid of Dire McCann. He suspected he would soon find out the reason.

Fifteen minutes—nine hundred seconds. Each

second was a war between unnatural magick and focused chance. While the forces controlled by the Red Deaths were horrendous, they could not vanquish someone who could twist the basic laws of the universe to suit his purpose.

No matter what the monsters tried, Elisha countered their effort without conscious thought. They acted. He reacted.

The first Red Death stepped into the doorway between the rooms. As it did so, dozens of bricks burst from the walls, as the cement and plaster holding them in place burst into flames. The blocks slammed like huge bullets into the vampire's chest, exploding into powder on contact.

"There's rats in the castle," said Elisha to Dire McCann. "Lots of termites too. Amazing what those pests can do to floors if left unchecked."

As if echoing the young mage's words, the floor beneath the twin Red Deaths suddenly collapsed into a thousand wood splinters. The two monsters crashed onto the steel support beams below. An instant later, high powered sprinklers sprayed the astonished vampires with ice water. Clouds of steam filled the chamber.

"I bet they won't be able to see well in the fog," continued Elisha. "No matter which way they turn, they'll probably walk right into a piece of furniture. It wouldn't surprise me if they stumble back into the other room by mistake."

The two vampires possessed disciplines that made a mockery of modern science. Nothing in the universe, however, could defeat directed circumstances.

By force of will, one Red Death finally succeeded in turning its entire body into a blazing inferno. The flames normally would have reduced everything in the room, and much of the surrounding castle, into cinders. Yet, at the precise instant that he flared to incandescence, all of the air molecules surrounding him moved to the right corner of the chamber, leaving him burning in a near vacuum. The odds of the molecules ever assuming that position were small enough to be considered zero by most calculators. But, it *could happen*, and Elisha possessed the necessary strength to make the possible probable.

Without fuel, the flames about the Red Death flickered and died. An instant after the fire vanished, the molecules in the room returned to their normal distribution in the chamber.

Fifteen minutes after the first attack by the two Red Deaths, the flames disappeared. The Body of Fire discipline only lasted for a quarter of an hour. Elisha breathed a sigh of relief. His body felt as if it had been twisted, bent, smashed and pelted with rocks. Muscles he didn't know existed ached. His head was throbbing with unmerciful pain. He doubted if he could have held off the creatures another minute. Whatever fighting was necessary fell to Dire McCann. Elisha was incapable of lifting a finger to defend himself.

The four of them stood less than six feet apart. In the smoldering wreckage of the suite's rear bedroom, McCann and Elisha faced the doppelgangers of Prince Alexander Vargoss and

Elaine de Calinot. Neither Red Death bothered to assume the shape and features of its sire. Both vampires appeared to be exhausted, totally drained of energy. Yet, it was obvious from their stance that they did not plan to retreat.

"We have reached a standoff," said Alexander Vargoss. "The Sheddin failed us. Our powers are at a low ebb." He smiled, a vicious smile. The false Vargoss sounded undaunted. "But, then, so are yours. In Washington, we made the mistake of using Makish and his explosives instead of finishing the job ourselves. That was an error we will not repeat a second time. A pair of humans are forced to match their mortal strength against the power of two Fifth Generation vampires. I accept those odds."

"You, then," said Dire McCann, with a laugh that was not remotely human, "are a fool."

The two vampires froze in shock. Their eyes widened as they sensed something strange, something alien about the detective. Elisha licked his lips and stepped back from McCann. Reality twisted. The detective's features began to change. Like the Red Death, he *transformed*.

The detective grew taller. His shoulders widened. His face turned dead white and ashen tattoos of mystic significance spiderwebbed across his cheeks. A tangible shadow shrouded his features. His thin bloodless lips curled in a sardonic grin. There was still a part of Dire McCann in that face, in those pitch-black eyes. But there was more, much more.

"Who are you?" whispered the false Elaine de Calinot.

"Can't you guess?" said the being who had been

Dire McCann. His voice, though not loud, filled the room. "I have always been here, masquerading just as you have been. However, instead of disguising myself as another vampire, I've been pretending to be mortal."

"Lameth," said Elisha, stating the obvious. "You're Lameth, the Dark Messiah."

The tall figure dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Of course I am," said Lameth. "Was there ever any doubt that when the time came for me to appear, I would return?"

Eyes that flashed like thunder glared at the two Red Deaths. The walls trembled when he spoke. "Was there ever any doubt?"

"But what about Dire McCann?" asked Elisha, who possessed more courage than he realized. "He was real. He was human."

"Not exactly, Elisha," said Lameth, his voice losing some of its force. "After thousands and thousands of years, even immortals can grow bored with their existence. Anis solved the problem by drifting into torpor and living vicariously through her puppets, like Alicia. I chose a similar but very different path.

"Over the millennia, I have created a series of human personalities. None of them have any idea that they are mere extensions of my own thoughts. I carefully secure myself in a small section of their subconscious, observing their actions, participating in their adventures, and speaking to them when necessary in their dreams. Creations of my will and desires, they never question why certain of their memories seem incomplete. Or why they keep such

odd hours or never actually consume any food or drink."

"Impossible," growled the false Alexander Vargoss. "McCann was human. What you are saying is nonsense."

Lameth laughed. "Why would I lie? I am among the first of the Fourth Generation and one of two ever to achieve Golconda through artificial means. My powers are beyond your limited comprehension. Flavia once called me a Masquerader. She had no idea how true the term is. No being except an Antediluvian can detect my true nature. A few others—a handful of powerful Cainites or mages like Rambam and Horus—are able to sense that Dire McCann is more than he seems. Such perceptions open doors that otherwise would remain closed to an ordinary man. But none of my compatriots possess the vision needed to pierce my disguise, and guess the truth."

The false Alexander Vargoss' face contorted with sudden panic. Lameth shook his head, as if reading his thoughts. "I obviously cannot permit you to share this knowledge with others. That is why you can no longer move. Nor use your teleportation power. I have my own plans for the Camarilla. There is no mercy in the Jyhad. It is time to put an end to your schemes."

Lameth stepped forward. He reached out, with hands ending in long fingers.

"You cannot!" screamed the false Vargoss, as Lameth clenched his fingers around his neck. The false Elaine remained silent as he did the same to

her. The resigned expression on her face made it clear that she understood that the Dark Messiah could do whatever he pleased. "I refuse to submit."

"Your wishes mean nothing to me," said Lameth and squeezed his fingers shut.

A thousand sparks, like miniature lightning bolts, exploded in the chamber. Elisha's eyelids slammed shut and he flung up an arm to shield his face. The outburst lasted for just an instant. Then, the room was absolutely silent, except for the sound of Elisha's breathing.

Carefully, Elisha lowered his arm and looked around. There was no sign of the two Red Deaths. They were gone, destroyed entirely by the fury of the Dark Messiah.

"What about me?" asked Elisha, staring at the solitary figure standing a few feet away. He tried to keep his voice steady. "Now, I know your secrets."

Lameth chuckled softly. "The human mind is easily deceived, Elisha. Dire McCann won't recall exactly what happened here tonight. Neither will you."

"You could be wrong," said Elisha, not convinced.

"About what?" asked Dire McCann.

"I—I'm not sure," said Elisha, trying to catch hold of the thought flitting through his mind. It was too late. Whatever he meant to say was forgotten. "Must not have been important."

The detective frowned. "The battle isn't over. Alicia destroyed one Red Death in New York. We succeeded in eliminating two others here. That

accounts for three of the four. But the last is the most dangerous of them all.

"The elders of the Camarilla are safe. Without the Body of Fire discipline wielded by the false Vargoss and Elaine, the Children of Dreadful Night won't dare attack the leaders of the cult. St. Germain has lost in his bid to become master of the Kindred. But, he himself is still at large."

Like two bullets, Madeleine Giovanni and Flavia, the Dark Angel, burst through the doorway leading to the front room of the suite. Both pulled up short, seeing McCann and Elisha, alone and evidently unharmed, in the middle of the ravaged chamber.

"What happened?" asked Flavia, gesturing to the burnt wreckage of the furniture. "The other room looks like a fireball swept through."

"Lameth destroyed the two childer of the Red Death," said Elisha. He didn't remember the details of the encounter, and for some reason, they didn't seem important. "They were disguised as Prince Vargoss and the Tremere council member, Elaine de Calinot. Using Madeleine's duel as cover, the pair tried to eliminate us, but were themselves undone."

"We suspected as much," said Madeleine. She looked about the apartment. "Lameth intervened?"

"He did," said McCann. "Now that the two impostors have been destroyed, can you use your special sense to locate the most powerful of the Children of Saulot remaining in the fortress?"

Madeleine concentrated. "Too many aggressive minds make such a task impossible," she declared

after a moment. Then, she turned her head as if in surprise. "Two extremely powerful vampires are leaving the Castle. One is Tremere, a council member from the strength of his thoughts. The other, judging by the force of his will, must be St. Germain."

"We can't let him escape," said McCann, heading for the door. "St. Germain must be destroyed. The link he forged with the Sheddin has to be broken. It is the final hour of the Masquerade of the Red Death."

Chapter 12

Linz—April 11, 1994:

Etrius waited nervously outside the huge council chamber in Karl Schrekt's castle. He stood alone, a look of deep concentration masking the fears that engulfed him. The duel just ended, he was convinced, was but another diversion engineered by St. Germain to deceive those present at this meeting. The Tremere elder was certain that the fight concealed much more diabolical purposes than mere revenge. He was determined to find out the truth—even if it meant confronting the monster known as the Red Death.

There were dozens of other Camarilla elders in the reception area, but Etrius knew better than to count on any aid from them. There was no love between the Tremere and the leaders of the Kindred. Most of them would probably applaud if Etrius suddenly burst into flame, never realizing that they might be next. Despite all the rhetoric, Etrius understood that the task of defeating St. Germain's mad plans rested entirely on his shoulders.

"You seem lost in thought, sire," remarked Peter Spizzo, appearing seemingly out of nowhere. The spy moved with such grace and speed that he was nearly invisible. Spizzo possessed an exceptional flair for

blending in with his surroundings. It was, Etrius believed, the least of the spy's abilities.

"I was wondering about Elaine de Calinot's location," said Etrius, truthfully. "According to our plan, she was to join me in our presentation to the Assembly. The last time I saw her was when she spoke out in favor of the duel. Elaine was not present when Don Caravelli succumbed to the Final Death. I find her absence disturbing."

"Don't worry," said Spizzo. "I am sure your colleague knows exactly what she is doing. She will return before the meeting resumes."

Etrius nodded as if in agreement. In reality, he was signaling to Karl Schrekt on the far side of the hall. The Justicar dipped his head in response. Slowly, without making a fuss, he began walking toward Etrius and Spizzo. As did, from half a dozen other locations in the chamber, his deputies.

"I discussed this Conclave with Karl Schrekt the other night," said Etrius, as if making idle conversation. His gaze was fixed unwavering on Spizzo's dark features. "In passing, I mentioned your investigations regarding St. Germain. I assumed he would be aware of your inquiries."

Etrius' face hardened into a stone mask. "The Justicar knew nothing of the interviews you claimed to have made with clan elders. Suspicious by nature, he did some checking. None of the conversations you described ever took place. You contacted no one, spoke with no one, traveled nowhere. Everything you reported to me was a complete fabrication. Which means, the tales you told me concerning *The Apocrypha of the Damned* were all lies."

"Nonsense," said Spizzo. "Schrekt is ambitious. He wants a place on the Inner Council and sees me in his path. The only lies are the ones he is telling."

"Schrekt is fanatic in his devotion to the Camarilla," said Etrius, sneering at Spizzo. "He has no ambitions other than to remain as Justicar. You, however, are a complete mystery. In checking my diaries, I can find no record of your Embrace. Nothing."

The look of distaste grew on Etrius' features. "I am very, *very* careful in noting such events. More than you realized. Even you cannot alter behavior developed over a millennium. Peter Spizzo is nothing more than a convenient new identity you developed to spy on my activities. But there is no disguising the face behind the mask. You are the Count St. Germain."

Spizzo's eyes narrowed in annoyance. He glanced around. Karl Schrekt stood at his side. Nearby were the Justicar's assistants. There was no place for him to turn. He was surrounded.

Out of nowhere, a whispered word echoed through the great hall. For an instant, all conversation ceased. Then, the noise vanished, leaving behind a bare impression of a sound spoken but not heard.

Peter Spizzo's face contorted in a mixture of disappointment and pain. "My ambitious plans seem to have just suffered a major setback," he announced calmly. "I was a fool to challenge the might of the Dark Messiah. Fortunately, a chance for victory still remains."

"The game is over, impostor," said Karl Schrekt, placing a hand on the vampire's shoulder. "You've lost."

"Not yet," said Spizzo, staring at the Justicar. He spoke in tones so soft that only Schrekt himself could hear the words. "I always believe in preparing an alternative solution to my problems. That's the main reason I made sure *you* organized this Conclave. As a member of Clan Tremere, you are Blood Bound to me by ties as old as your clan. Just like your mentor, Etrius, whose mind I now have under my control. Release me. Now. Then, tell your assistants to depart. Etrius and I are leaving the castle. We do not wished to be stopped. Understand?"

Trembling with impotent rage, Schrekt removed his hand from Spizzo's shoulder. The Justicar gnashed his teeth in anger. His will was no longer his own. Etrius stood silent, unmoving, watching and listening but no longer comprehending. One moment he had been in complete control of the situation; the next, he discovered he was no longer master of his own mind or body. Like Karl Schrekt, his thoughts were completely dominated by the desires of Peter Spizzo, the Count St. Germain.

"Away," Schrekt growled to his assistants. "Immediately. Etrius and Spizzo are departing. Do nothing to hinder them. It is my command. Do nothing."

Spizzo smiled as the Justicar's assistants turned away. Tough, dangerous killers, they had been trained to obey Schrekt's every wish. Loyal beyond death, they never questioned his word.

"For a thousand years, I was content to remain in the background of Clan Tremere, manipulating events by telepathic commands and false memories,"

said Peter Spizzo. "The notion of challenging an Antediluvian, even one deep in torpor, did not appeal to me. Now, unfortunately, I seem to have no other options left.

"Dire McCann and his troublesome brood have destroyed my childer. It is time to take the final risk. Etrius and I are going to pay a visit to my old friend, Tremere. Centuries ago, he did me a great favor by sending my sire into the darkness. I think the moment has arrived for me to repay my debt."

Chapter 13

Vienna—April 11, 1994:

"He has disappeared!" cried Madeleine as five of them raced through the empty halls of the Tremere Chantry House in Vienna. She pointed to the ornately carved door at the end of the hallway. "A minute ago Etrius and St. Germain were in that room. Now only the Tremere wizard remains. The Red Death is gone!"

"Like hell," snarled Flavia and smashed shoulder-first into the massive wood door. It exploded into a thousand fragments. The Dark Angel stumbled into the chamber, followed by Dire McCann, Karl Schrekt, Elisha and Madeleine. "He won't escape me a second time. He won't."

Etrius, sprawled on the floor, looked up at them with dull, uncomprehending eyes. There was no sign of his companion, the vampire who called himself Peter Spizzo.

"There," said Madeleine, pointing to the black hole in the opposite side of the room. "It is a tunnel leading down. I can sense a hundred spells protecting it from magick of any sort. My tracking power cannot detect anyone within its walls."

"That's where St. Germain has gone," said McCann. The detective bent down next to the

Council member. "The passage must lead directly to Tremere's tomb."

Karl Schrekt pointed at the open door of the passage. "The key to that portal hangs around Etrius' neck. It's the only one in existence. It works only for him. That's why St. Germain took Etrius along. The Red Death couldn't enter the crypt on his own."

It had been Schrekt who had personally driven them to Vienna. The Justicar blamed himself for St. Germain's escape and hungered for revenge. His presence had gained them immediate entrance to the Tremere Chantry House.

"I can hear him scrambling down below," said Flavia. "We still might not be too late."

Without another word, the Dark Angel, twin swords out, hurtled herself into the darkness. She was determined to make the Red Death pay for the destruction of her sister. No matter what the final price.

"Stay here," said Madeleine, glancing at Elisha. "It is not safe below. The counterspells will neutralize your mage powers. Flavia needs my help. St. Germain must be stopped before he summons the Sheddim to destroy Tremere. I will return as soon as I can."

Then, she, too, vanished into the tunnel.

The detective shook Etrius violently by the shoulders. "Snap out of it," he commanded in a voice that could not be disobeyed.

The Tremere wizard's eyes cleared. With a snarl of rage, he pulled himself free of McCann's grip. "St.

Germain," he muttered angrily. "He brought me here. Taunted me. Laughed at me. Told me how I would serve him as a slave for all eternity. Then, he forced me to open the door to the crypt. A master spell guaranteed I could never do so when under the domination of another. Yet, I did what he asked without protest."

"Such guarantees are mostly useless when challenged by the will of a Methuselah," said McCann. "What does he plan to do? Can St. Germain be stopped?"

Shakily, Etrius rose to his feet. He staggered to the black hole in the wall. "Tremere lies in his crypt in the caves beneath our feet. St. Germain hopes to drink the Antediluvian's blood. If he accomplishes that, his powers will increase a hundredfold. He will be invincible."

"St. Germain needs time," said McCann. "Flavia and Madeleine won't give him any. They will force him to fight."

"The Red Death," said Elisha, his mind leaping to the obvious conclusion. "St. Germain will transform into the Red Death and destroy them using Body of Fire!"

"And if the Red Death's powers increase a hundredfold, so will the Sheddim's," declared McCann. "They'll be able to enter our world regardless of St. Germain's wishes. We can't let that happen. Come on."

The four of them pounded down the steps leading to Tremere's crypt. Elisha counted. There

were two hundred and thirty-seven stairs. The number had a mystic significance, but he couldn't remember what it was. All he knew was that if they were too late, Madeleine would be nothing more than ashes. And the Sheddim would be released upon an unsuspecting world.

The shaft ended in a small cavern twenty feet long by fifteen feet high. Two torches illuminated the chamber, casting weird shapes on the walls. Its roof stretched thirty feet up into the darkness. In the center of the crypt rested a massive stone coffin. The lid of the sarcophagus had been pushed aside, revealing the sleeping form of Tremere within. Beyond it, another passage lead into unknown depths. Flavia crouched there, clutching her twin swords. Her eyes glared crimson with desperation. Madeleine Giovanni was beside her. A few feet away stood the monstrous form of the Red Death, glowing with hellfire, its deadly arms spread wide in a fiery embrace.

"Watch out!" screamed Elisha desperately as the Red Death's fingers grabbed for Madeleine's shoulder. They never made contact. St. Germain's hand halted inches from her flesh, as if encountering an invisible barrier. Howling, the creature turned to face its new enemies, in the front of the crypt.

"Too late, McCann!" it shrieked. "You can protect your friends and yourself from my fire, but, you can't stop me from drinking Tremere's blood. I have won!"

Its body burning with white flame, the Red

Death stepped to the side of Tremere's tomb. Staring at the motionless body of the Antediluvian, St. Germain laughed wildly.

"There's still a small chance," whispered McCann, his face contorted from the effort of maintaining the force barrier that protected them from the hellfire. "St. Germain in the Body of Fire discipline can't touch Tremere without burning the Antediluvian to cinders. Instead, he must wait until the instant the fires burn out. There will be a period of a few seconds when he is vulnerable before he can drink Tremere's vitae. Keeping this shield intact until then, I won't be able to react fast enough." He looked at Karl Schrekt and Etrius. "Strike then, if you wish to remain free."

The Justicar nodded, his features grim. "I will do my best," he swore. Etrius nodded, saying nothing.

Then, there was no time left. St. Germain leaned forward, his gaze fixed on Tremere. The unholy fire surrounding the Red Death's body flickered, dimmed. Schrekt crouched, ready to attack. Etrius raised his arms, murmuring the beginning of a powerful binding spell. Elisha bit his lower lip. Across the chamber, Flavia moved, creeping slowly toward the coffin, her swords gleaming in the torch light.

Fangs bared, St. Germain's head flashed downward. Then, with a shriek of horror, he jerked back in sudden fear, as Tremere smoothly rose to a sitting position in his coffin.

No one moved. Tremere, his features serene, turned and looked straight at the Red Death. Softly,

in tones only St. Germain could hear, the Antediluvian spoke.

"No!" screamed the Red Death, a look of absolute horror engulfing its features. "NO!"

Eyes wide with shock, the monster staggered back from the coffin. At the same time, Flavia shook off the unnatural fear that had held them all paralyzed, and leapt forward, her twin swords flashing. Red Death and Assamite assassin collided.

St. Germain's arms wrapped around Flavia in an unexpected but deadly embrace. The last traces of hellfire flared. Flavia ignited. Yet, even as she burned, the Dark Angel's blades were in motion. St. Germain's body was solid once again. The Dark Angel's aim was true. The tempered steel swords slashed into the Red Death's neck. Features twisted in a mask of despair, St. Germain's head tumbled to the ground.

They swayed there for a moment, burning Assamite and headless Methuselah, and then they were gone, their ashes crumbling to the cavern floor.

The air in the chamber quivered. Directly above the spot where St. Germain had perished, a ghostly ball of fire shimmered in the darkness. Though it possessed no features, no true form, there was no question that the creature was alive. A horror from outside space and time, it was totally, absolutely alien. Hatred for all life poured from it in waves of mental energy.

For a heartbeat, the Sheddin raged in Tremere's tomb, seething impotently as the doorway between dimensions tightened around it, then closed. It

disappeared in a flash of blinding light, trapped once again in the shattered spheres. The menace of the Red Death had come to an end.

Tremere once again rested in his coffin. There was no sign that he had ever moved. No one knew what words he had said to the Red Death.

"By destroying St. Germain," said Dire McCann, "Flavia terminated the Sheddim's last link with our plane of existence. Our world is safe." He smiled. "At least, it's safe from outside interference."

Epilogue

Vienna—April 11, 1994:

"It's done," Madeleine Giovanni whispered, as if she were afraid to raise her voice in the darkness. "The Masquerade of the Red Death is over. St. Germain's final scheme has been defeated. Flavia perished but she achieved her vengeance. Blood answered blood. She destroyed the Red Death."

The others nodded in silent agreement. Only a small pile of dust remained of the renegade vampire who plotted to control both the Camarilla and the Sabbat and the assassin who destroyed him. A whisper of wind crept like a serpent out of the black tunnel leading to the mysterious depths beyond. For an instant, the ashes swirled in the glare of the single torch; then they vanished, as if they had never been.

There were tears in Elisha's eyes. The only human among them, he experienced emotions that had been muted in the others by centuries of death and destruction.

"Cry not for our friend," said Madeleine, putting a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Flavia died in true Assamite fashion. May all our ends be as glorious."

"We must go," declared Etrius, glancing fearfully

at Tremere's stone sarcophagus. "He does not tolerate visitors long. Even those who come in his defense."

"But what did Tremere say to St. Germain?" McCann heard Karl Schrekt ask Etrius as together they pushed the heavy lid back onto the coffin. "What words frightened the Red Death so badly that they gave Flavia the time necessary for her to strike the final blow?"

Etrius shrugged. "I don't know. And, with St. Germain destroyed, it is a mystery that will never be solved."

"Let's get out of here," said Elisha, starting up the steps leading to the surface. "I don't like this place. There are more wraiths around than just those of Flavia and St. Germain. And they are not very friendly."

Etrius led the way, with Madeleine and Elisha following. Karl Schrekt was steps behind them. McCann came last. Moving more slowly than the rest, he paused for a moment at the base of the stairs, staring at the stone coffin in the center of the cave. The master plotter of the Methuselahs shook his head in dismay. The others didn't realize their luck. Some secrets were better not revealed. Of all his companions in peril, he alone had heard what Tremere said to the Red Death.

"Foolish puppet," the dead-white horror had declared, chuckling softly. To McCann, the Antediluvian had sounded vastly amused. "Did you really think this entire intrigue to be your own? Did you actually believe you were anything more than a

pawn in our eternal game? I was the one who awakened the Nictuku, beginning this entire masquerade. My dead hand guided their steps, just as it did yours. *The plan was mine, always mine.*

"The Fourth Generation, like all Cainites, regardless of sire, are bound to the Antediluvians with unbreakable chains. There is no escape. You are all doomed to share the same fate when Gehenna comes."

And, McCann had no doubt whatsoever that buried in the depths of that mocking tone had been the voice not only of Tremere, but of Saulot.

"It may not have been the truth," said Dire McCann aloud, as if trying to sweep away the doubts that chilled his spirit. His words echoed in the empty vault. "Tremere could have been lying. He *must have been lying*, in a desperate attempt to save himself from the Final Death. He played St. Germain for a fool."

Yet, even Lameth, the most powerful sorcerer ever to walk the Earth, the greatest schemer of the entire Cainite race, could not keep a measure of uncertainty from his voice. "*My destiny is my own,*" he declared fiercely. "I am free, completely free of their plotting. No matter what Tremere said, no matter what his words implied, *I am Unbeholden.*"

Then, he, like the others, departed the crypt. The ancient chamber was once again deserted, devoid of life. All was still, all was quiet—except for the barest hint of sound, the shriek of a ghostly wind rushing through the unexplored caverns far below. Or perhaps it was the insane chortling of demonic laughter.

It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor his deeds.

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd"

A Few Final Words from the Author:

Any work the length of *The Masquerade of the Red Death* requires the aid of many people. I would like to thank the following whose help proved invaluable.

To Andrew Greenberg and Daniel Greenberg and Rob Hatch, all pillars of wisdom about the vampires of the World of Darkness. Special thanks to Rob, not only a great editor with whom to work, but who also allowed me to kill off several of his creations!

To Brom, whose covers gave life to three of the major players in these books.

To my friend, Stefan Dziemianowicz, my first reader, whose advice and suggestions were, as always, right on the mark.

To my wife, Phyllis, for everlasting patience. To my son, Matt, whose knowledge of and enthusiasm for the World of Darkness proved invaluable.

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To the Rolling Stones for "Sympathy for the Devil," to Billy Idol for "Dancing with Myself," to Bauhaus for "Bela Lugosi's Dead," and to Los del Rio for "Macarena." All sources of constant musical inspiration.

And, to anyone whom I might have accidentally forgotten, my apologies and thanks as well.

Each book in this trilogy was one novel, of three sections, and thirteen chapters. As Madame Zorza said, "The numbers always matter."

Dire McCann's story has been told. I doubt if he will return any time in the near future. Madeleine Giovanni's adventures remain for another day (or night). If you enjoyed *The Masquerade of the Red Death*, please look for my new trilogy set in the World of Darkness, tentatively titled *The Horizon War*. The first book should appear sometime in late 1996 or early 1997.

Bob Weinberg
December 1995

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Weinberg is perhaps the only World Fantasy Award-winning writer ever to serve as the grand marshal of a rodeo parade. He is the author of eight novels, five nonfiction books, and numerous short stories. His work has been translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Bulgarian. A noted collector of horror and fantasy fiction, he has edited nearly a hundred anthologies and short story collections of such material. At present, he serves as Vice-President of the Horror Writers of America, teaches creative writing at Columbia College in Chicago, and is beginning work on a new World of Darkness trilogy set in the world of *Mage*.

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VAMPIRE
THE MASQUERADE



Saturday, 20 June 1999, 4:29 AM

Piedmont Avenue

Atlanta, Georgia

Leopold sat with Michelle draped across his lap. They were both naked, though the cold of his workshop basement did not affect Leopold's body as it did hers. Though unconscious, Michelle reacted to the chill. The nipples of her small breasts were pointed and ripples of goose bumps appeared and disappeared across her long legs and up the small of her back to her slender neck.

He'd bitten her inner thigh, where the femoral artery began its descent down the length of her leg. She had feigned her passion at first, but she was slightly startled when he bit. He swallowed several mouthfuls of blood very quickly then, and her excitement became more authentic. Light-headed almost instantly, Michelle must have imagined Leopold very talented and eager to please.

After those first few mouthfuls of blood, though, Leopold was only interested in satiating himself. He fed infrequently because he felt awkward luring women to his basement for what he knew they assumed was sex despite the excuse of modeling for him. They always laughed at that, and then took it back a little when they saw that he really did have a workshop in the basement, but then laughed again when he asked that they take their clothes off.

It was even harder with men, because the man he might desire as a model wasn't necessarily gay, so rarely did he get them to his basement willingly. With them, it took some careful convincing, Kindred-style.

Like some of the girls—or perhaps they were

women already, Leopold found that he was already losing the ability to guess the age of a human—Michelle simply took her clothes off and came at Leopold. So many of them just wanted a place to stay for a night. They were willing to work for the roof over their head, but the only work they knew was sex, and Leopold imagined they'd rather have it over sooner than later.

As he did with all the potential models he brought home, Leopold had picked up Michelle along Ponce before nearing his Piedmont Avenue home. Those that seemed disinclined to join him could always be nudged a bit. Leopold knew few of the potentially awesome powers possessed by some Kindred beyond this one, but he had no trouble convincing most mortals that he was harmless and friendly.

Michelle came along without such need to exert himself. She was a pretty girl who had obviously been on the streets just long enough to know how to use her good looks, but not long enough to understand that her good looks wouldn't last. There was something in that tarnished beauty that fit Leopold's mood.

When she sought his sexual attention immediately, Leopold regretted the lost opportunity to sculpt his vision of her, but he was not interested in imposing his will over another mortal that night. He accepted her desire and hopefully did something toward fulfilling it as well. At least she would have a safe roof this night.

He laughed a little at his idea of a safe house. He was keeping her safe by his standards, but Leopold doubted Michelle would characterize a place where

she lost a couple of pints of blood to a fanged monster as safe.

Then he sobered and swallowed his laughter. Could this be what Kindred meant when they spoke of losing their humanity? Leopold had felt the Beast—that part of him that exulted when he stalked and killed and lost control of himself—but it was a simple matter to keep it at bay if he let his conscience be his guide.

But where had his conscience led him tonight? Laughter over draining the life blood from a world-weary soul like Michelle? Yes, he needed that fluid to live, but when had it become comical? Where was the sense of violation? Tragedy?

He knew there were many Kindred who regretted the loss of what they considered to be the human parts of themselves. Not the superficial losses, like breathing, or even the psychological ones like sunlight. But the essential qualities that defined humanity. The capacity to love, to dream, to empathize.

There were also plenty of Kindred who did not regret the loss, particularly the vile members of the Sabbat—those murderous and heinous vampires who cared little for Kindred other than themselves and to whom Kine were cattle indeed. Kindred of the Sabbat, and some of the Camarilla too, seemed to toss away carelessly a vital portion of themselves. Perhaps they considered such sentiments as mercy or love as the vestigial organs of mortal existence, but Leopold could not fathom the profound impact of such loss.

But perhaps he was on that very road.

Leopold inspected the wound he'd opened on Michelle's inner thigh. The ragged gash where he'd bitten her was right along the line molded in the

skin by the elastic of her skimpy bikini underwear. That made him feel oddly queasy. Regardless, his work couldn't be left undone and especially when he could undo some of the harm, so he wet his tongue in his mouth and tentatively extended it toward the wound. As he licked it, tasting the blood of the injury once more, the rent skin mended. So well, in fact, that the traces of the elastic line were gone too.

Then Leopold regarded Michelle herself. She was paler now, and prettier for it. The ruddiness of the strains she placed upon her body with hard living and low-grade drugs was somewhat washed away. Her almost luminescent skin made her starved body diaphanous and the bruises from frequent injections less evident.

Hers was a beauty he could still capture and preserve. Many Kindred, especially Toreador, might think to cup their hands around her flame through the Embrace, transforming her into a Kindred as well. Leopold didn't wish to have such thoughts himself, and he was pleased that such ideas were still secondary to his first impulse: to immortalize her in stone.

THE UNBEHOLDEN

"He came like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel..."

-- from the "Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allen Poe

Masquerade of the Red Death Trilogy Volume 3 Written by Robert Weinberg

THE THREAT

The Red Death, leader of the cult of vampires known as the Order of Dreadful Night, is about to seize control of the two secret organizations that rule the World of Darkness. The only obstacles to his plan for global domination are two humans, Dire McCann and Alicia Varney.

THE HORROR

Unknown to the Red Death, his unholy allies, fire demons from another dimension have been manipulating him for their own ends. If the Red Death succeeds, unimaginable terror will be unleashed upon the world.

THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

Now is the time for the battle of the Unbeholden. From the catacombs of Paris, to the deserts of Israel, to an ancient crypt far beneath the streets of Vienna, Dire McCann and the Red Death engage in a titanic struggle from which only one can emerge victorious. It is a duel to the death, a battle that will at last reveal the astonishing truth behind the Masquerade of the Red Death.

VAMPIRE
The Masquerade



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