

B O O K T H R E E
TRILOGY OF THE BLOOD CURSE

DARK PROPHECY



Gherbod Fleming

VAMPIRE

The Masquerade

DARK PROPHECY

GERBOD FLEMING

Dark Prophecy

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ONE

Nicholas raised his face from the collection of sinew and fleshy matter that had been a Spanish sheep-herder. A crimson strand of spittle dangling from the corner of Nicholas's mouth caught on the breeze and fluttered over the evening's prey. Nicholas sniffed the air. He stood to his full height and sniffed again.

The now-unattended sheep had scattered when Nicholas pounced on the small, old man. The shepherd had had no time to struggle or even to call out. With his neck broken and his throat ripped open, his blood stained the land of his fathers.

Nicholas smelled nothing threatening on the wind, and the snowcapped Pyrenees were, aside

from the occasional anxious bleating of sheep, silent. The hunter felt little in the way of relief, however.

The body at his feet was a silent accusation. Nicholas had not intended to kill, merely to feed. He did not require so much blood that he couldn't have left the wrinkled shepherd asleep and clutching his jug of *vino*. There was no *need* for Nicholas to have killed.

His concern was not for the Masquerade, cowardly concession to the mortal world that it was, foisted upon the Camarilla clans by the Ventrue. Rather, he was disturbed by the recklessness of his hunt. As a Gangrel, Nicholas did not mimic the ineffectual niceties of mortal society but existed, instead, as a solitary predator. He was accustomed to survival by instinct. But this kill...it had strayed far from the instinctual to a rage that lay buried more deeply within Nicholas.

The blood curse. He knew that was the answer.

The ancestors—Ragnar and Blaidd, old, powerful, and long gone—who had increasingly been asserting their claim to his blood, had deserted him as suddenly as they'd reappeared, and in their place was a fury so ancient and pure that Nicholas lost himself in it. Gone were thoughts of his pressing quest for vengeance against Owain Evans; gone was all that Nicholas's friend Blackfeather had taught him. There was only bloodlust—driving, consum-

ing. The mutilated shepherd was damning proof of it. Just remembering the attack, Nicholas could feel the rage again rising like bile to be vomited onto the earth. And it struck fear into him.

Not since the night at Evans's estate in Atlanta had Nicholas lost himself so completely. His insides burned; the gnawing hunger took hold despite the presence of the freshly ravaged corpse on the ground. Nicholas felt his own mind, his will, receding, sinking beneath the upwelling fury. He watched himself, as if a stranger, leap upon a nearby sheep. Claws struck deep, and the lifeblood of the pathetic beast poured forth. Nicholas drank, then, as the animal ceased to struggle, he let the blood spill over his legs and feet. He stood over his kill and roared triumphantly to the night.

Nicholas felt his claws rip through fleece and flesh. He tasted the blood that gushed into his mouth. Yet he was merely a spectator to the slaughter. Unable to intercede, he watched, as if from farther and farther away, while he tracked one hapless sheep after another. With each liter of blood that flowed, Nicholas came closer to drowning beneath the fury, beneath the hunger.

And still the blood flowed.



The branches of the living tree, malevolent tendrils, latched onto Owain and wrapped tightly

around his arms and torso. He struggled, but his preternatural might availed him nothing. The branches held fast, wooden manacles and chains that dug into him the more fiercely he fought.

Lightning illuminated the figure standing alongside Owain at the crest of the knoll—an old man whose dark beard and white robes tugged at him in the gusting wind. Thunder shook the hillside. The old man held a wooden staff but did not lean upon it for support. Rather, he brandished it at Owain, shook it in the face of the imprisoned vampire.

Owain was helpless. The branches wound around his neck, snaked down around his legs to his knees. He strained against the wooden bonds, but it was no use. He was the captive object of the old man's anger. Again, the old man shook his staff at Owain and, above the rumbling of sky and hill, spoke: "*Hoard the nights that have fallen unto you.*" The old man's cheeks and balding pate were flushed; red splotches marked his ire. "*I, Joseph the Lesser, tell you, it avails you nothing.*"

The familiar words assaulted Owain. The branches, tightening their grip, seemingly shared the old man's anger. Owain had no breath to hinder, but his bones and joints were beginning to grind and pop under the relentless pressure. Despite the mounting agony, he couldn't shift his gaze from the blue-gray eyes that watched him with such fury.

“The shadow of Time is not so long that you might shelter beneath it,” said the old man. His words rang in Owain’s ears, even over the roar of the wind and the incessant rattle of the leaves whirring violently in small vortices along the ground, only to jerk suddenly into the air and sail into the darkness.

As the old man spoke, one of the branches of the living tree uncoiled from Owain. It withdrew somewhat, though its tip still pressed against his chest.

The old man’s anger having reached a crescendo, he took his staff in both hands and raised it to the heavens and shouted above the storm: *“This is the Endtime!”*

Suddenly the branch against Owain’s chest pulled back. The tip was now a giant thorn, sharp as any blade. It glinted for an instant in the flash of lightning, then struck with blurring speed. The thorn splintered the ribs that momentarily blocked it from Owain’s heart. Living wood ripped into the vulnerable organ.

In his final seconds of mobility, Owain threw his head back, an agonized scream strangled upon his lips—

“Sir? Sir...!”

Owain’s mouth and eyes strained agape. His back arched in pain as every muscle tensed.

“Sir...!”

The branches shook Owain. No—not the

branches, not the tree. A woman stood over Owain, was gripping him by the shoulders and shaking him.

“Sir! Are you all right?”

Owain clutched his chest with both hands. No wooden appendage pierced his flesh. A moan of mixed fear and relief belatedly escaped his lips as he collapsed into his seat.

Kendall Jackson still held Owain by the shoulders. Her dark hair hung in her face as she leaned over him. “Sir?”

Owain struck her a blow that sent her reeling backward across the small room. “Don’t touch me!” he snapped.

She slammed into the far wall and slid to the floor with a grimace. She remained where she sat, watching in pained confusion as Owain took stock of his surroundings—a long, narrow compartment; leather-upholstered, high-backed benches; lush oriental carpet; mahogany tables on the other side of the two-foot aisle.

His disorientation was heightened by the fact that the props surrounding him were a collection of lies. The scene, ostensibly the interior of a nineteenth-century railroad luxury car, was not what it purported to be. Not that the carpet wasn’t an exact duplicate of what would have been found on the long-defunct Osgood Luxury Line between New York and Boston, and not that the seats weren’t actual refurbished benches from the decom-

missioned cars of the prestigious Wroughton Service out of London, but the various elements had been acquired purely for effect.

Owain slid his hand along the buttery, tufted leather of his seat. Each button was engraved with a Textura "G." There were many Cainites, Owain knew, who were even less comfortable with modern methods of transport than he was. Some elders, long past the need or desire to travel widely, would not deign to set foot in or on a contraption powered by internal combustion. Others refused, understandably, in Owain's opinion, to entrust their safety to mechanized flight.

This compartment was an attempt on the part of the Giovanni to accommodate the latter—those Cainites who, through some necessity, had to traverse the Atlantic but lacked the wherewithal to arrange a more civilized cruise. With a little imagination, they might possibly convince themselves that they were carried along by rail rather than by the grace of God and modern technology.

Though Owain possessed a keen skepticism regarding flight, he also knew unequivocally that he was currently thousands of feet above the ocean. The railbaron trappings were coincidental. He had needed to depart Spain with some haste, and this small jet had been available; never mind that he had agreed to pay the Giovanni a sum sufficient to purchase a plane. Such was the price of expediency.

Owain should have been able to rest easily. He and his retainer Kendall had escaped the death-trap that Toledo had become—the deathtrap that Owain had made it.

For decades, Owain had existed as a Camarilla elder and kept his Sabbat connections hidden. Yet when, at the request of his former friend El Greco, he had attempted to pose as a Camarilla elder to infiltrate a rival Sabbat faction, Owain had, within a handful of nights, failed miserably.

Irony never ceases. Owain thought.

He pondered the weighty repercussions that had accompanied this particular irony. Owain had watched from a nearby rooftop as Carlos, El Greco's Sabbat rival, burned the hacienda of Owain's one-time ally and annihilated the aged Toreador and his handful of servants, among them the sniveling Miguel. *A shame, that,* Owain thought—that Miguel should perish at someone else's hand. *What's the good of carrying a centuries-long grudge if you're not able to finish it personally?*

The whole affair in Toledo might have played out differently had El Greco more accurately apprised Owain of the situation there. Instead, the old Toreador had kept from Owain the fact that Carlos had long ago wrested control of the city from El Greco—a detail of some importance. Misinformed and chafing under the compulsory nature of the assignment, Owain had proceeded clumsily.

He could see that in retrospect, even mere hours after his escape. Becoming aware of the volatility of the situation only later, Owain had blundered ahead, and in the end, it was El Greco who had paid the price.

El Greco's demise evoked in Owain more ambivalent emotions than did Miguel's, but only slightly so. Owain and El Greco had been friends several hundred years earlier, but among Cainites, friendship was less an enduring bond and more an infrequent accident of circumstance, one that inevitably twisted itself into an emotionally incestuous, manipulative entanglement. Owain and El Greco's relationship had certainly followed this path. When El Greco coerced Owain into participating in the plot against Carlos, Owain's apprehensions had become reality, and any warmer sentiments that might have lingered in Owain's breast withered. El Greco had survived not much longer.

Not that Owain regarded the resolved drama as a morality play of some sort—the scheming Toreador undone by his own treacherous plot—with El Greco's death as divine judgement. Quite the contrary. Owain held no illusions concerning his own heroism. In his time, he had contrived plots of greater vileness. He had been the oppressor of the downtrodden and the vanquished. The only difference between him and El Greco was that El

Greco was now a soon-to-be-forgotten pile of ash, while Owain still walked the earth.

Owain regarded El Greco's death rather as a comedy of errors. The Toreador's own derangement had rendered him incapable of accepting reality, of recognizing that he was no longer the great power he had once been. *Not insanity*, Owain decided. *Vanity*. And now El Greco was no more.

Over the centuries, Owain had not only learned but had also, at different times, exploited and been trodden underfoot by the primary lesson of history: *There is no divine justice*. The spiteful Divinity observed His creation with cold, uncaring eyes, and was divine only in the sense that His callousness and vengefulness far surpassed that of any mortal.

A jostling patch of turbulence distracted Owain from his philosophizing and put the torch to the paper-thin illusion of a nineteenth-century rail car. As the plane, as well as its contents and passengers, bounced, he noticed there were no windows behind the lowered shades on the cabin walls—a functional precaution, amidst the diversionary scenery, to protect the specific clientele of the Giovanni clan. No Cainite wanted to fall victim to a delayed departure or landing only to find himself greeting the morning sun as a result.

In fact, Owain realized, the sun's rays were undoubtedly beating down upon the aircraft at that very moment. He and Kendall had reached Madrid

only shortly before dawn, and they could not have been in the air for more than a few hours. That partially explained the extreme mental lethargy he had been mired in upon first awaking from the visions.

The visions. Owain involuntarily shuddered. Onset of madness? First sign of the blood curse? He had been vigilantly attempting to put them out of his mind since they began several weeks ago, and now was not the time to change tack. He felt almost drugged as his daytime slumber called to him. He closed his eyes, until the plane suddenly jerked again and rattled beneath him.

At this point, Owain realized that his servant, watching him intently, still sat on the floor at the base of the opposite wall. He'd hit her solely by reflex, not intentionally. Owain had never struck her before, but such was the life of a ghoul, constantly subject to the whims and fancies and angry outbursts of her domitor, upon whom she was dependent for the blood that elevated her above mere mortals and extended her life. There were certainly worse masters than Owain. He did not make a habit of abusing his servants. There was Randal, whom Owain had dispatched rather unceremoniously not long ago, but Owain felt that he'd been sufficiently provoked in that case. Discipline must be maintained.

"Come," Owain gestured to Kendall. "Sit."

She paused only momentarily before complying, obedience overcoming any hesitancy she felt. *The way it should be*, Owain thought, admiring his retainer and congratulating himself on his choice.

Kendall took her seat beside him. Owain leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he spoke to her. “We will arrive in Atlanta before long, I suspect. See that I am not disturbed until after sunset.” He sensed the motion of her silent nod.

Bone weary as he was from the calamities of the previous night, true rest eluded Owain. He unclenched his fists, forced himself to spread his fingers on his lap and to try to relax. Slumber was an anxious affair, carrying with it, as it always did these days, the potential of disturbing visions. They were not Owain’s only or even most pressing worry, however.

Though it was true that his personal connection to the Sabbat had died with El Greco, Carlos would not need indisputable evidence to pursue Owain. The testimony of the treacherous Javier, along with Owain’s flight, would be proof enough for Carlos to want to even the score with Owain. After all, Owain had voiced his knowledge that Carlos was responsible for unleashing the blood curse upon Cainite society. That alone might goad Carlos into striking from across the Atlantic. And because that fool Gangrel, Nicholas, descendent of Blaidd—and *wasn’t that a complication from unforeseen quarters?*

Owain thought—had managed to reveal Owain's identity, there was no mist of anonymity into which he could disappear. Or, Owain wondered, would Carlos sit back, watch and wait for year after year until the perfect moment presented itself? Regardless, Owain's estate would, by necessity, become a fortress, one even more secure than the castles that had protected him from threats during his mortal days.

Beyond the actual dangers that he would undoubtedly face, a weariness of spirit plagued Owain. It brought down upon him with crushing force the weight of all of his years. *Here I am again fleeing Europe*, he thought. *Fleeing somewhere. Fleeing someone.*

Nearly seven hundred years ago, he had fled his homeland of Wales—after better than two hundred years of struggle and disappointment, granted, but nonetheless, he had fled. His subsequent stay in France had propitiously concluded after a much shorter interval. Leaving had been quite the prudent move, and Owain didn't consider abandoning permanently the obdurate French and their ways much of a hardship. But later, in Spain, he'd fled unlife itself by retreating into prolonged torpor, and not since he'd at last emerged had he been able to rekindle the passion and fervor of his mortal existence. Something about that extended slumber had sapped the fire from his soul, had left him a para-

sitic automaton. Migration again had seemed a plausible remedy, but it had resulted in little more than a change of venue for the familiar emptiness.

In the past months, however, his numb existence had been broken open, and again he had been exposed to the tumultuous emotions of the living: anger, pain, disappointment. As chilling as those years of emptiness had been, Owain was ready to return to them. The dull ache of ennui was preferable to the renewed, hammering agony of hopes unfulfilled, of dreams torn to pieces.

The visions only heightened the pain.

Their onset had coincided with Owain's discovery of the siren. As with the creatures of myth, her entrancing voice had drawn Owain in, had beguiled him with visions of his homeland. And even more miraculous than evoking images of home in Owain's mind, the innocence and the depth of emotion enshrined within the siren's notes enabled Owain once again, for the first time in centuries, to feel passion for the hills of Wales, to experience love for the one who had been forbidden to him in life, and whose memory he had held close to his heart all these years. Angharad.

Damnation, man! Owain cursed himself. He could not escape her name.

He dreaded the visions not so much because of the menacing figures and apocalyptic voices that assaulted him, but because he could not stand to

behold again the beautiful lands and enduring love from his first years. For with the return of passion and love came greater awareness of loss and pain. *Better to be numb. Damn her.* In one night, the siren had destroyed the walls that Owain had struggled for centuries to build. *She deserved her fate.*

Why, then, Owain asked himself, did he so violently resent Prince Benison, who ordered her destruction? Could it be because Owain would bear any torture to hear that song again?

Owain's eyes snapped open. This line of thought, he decided, was getting him nowhere. Kendall, sitting next to him, observed his agitation with concern. "Is this chamber so small," Owain snapped, "that you must sit practically on top of me?"

Without protest, Kendall moved to a seat farther away.

Still, true rest eluded Owain. Though the visions kept their distance, his mind was full of images of Toledo: of stooped El Greco; of Miguel and his infuriating sneer; of Carlos, smug in his victory; of that damnable Gangrel; of the flames spreading throughout El Greco's abode. The entire episode had been a journey of loss. And, again, Angharad's name had been dangled before Owain like a cruel trickster's carrot. *Project Angharad.* How had her name become connected to the curse? Coincidence? Owain didn't believe in coincidence—not

while the cruel trickster wore the trappings of the divine Creator.

A long sigh escaped Owain. He had lived so long, but lived so little. "Peace," he mumbled as the day finally took him in its clutches. When was the last time, he wondered, that he had known a moment of peace? *If only I could have died a mortal death in Wales...*

But, indeed, he had not.

And now the visions returned for him.

TWO

The ringing phone jarred William Nen awake. He clumsily reached for it and grabbed the receiver just as the second ring sounded. "Hello?"

"Dr. Nen?"

"Yes?"

"The bodies that you examined—where did they come from?"

"What?" *Bodies?*

"How long do you estimate before this new hemorrhagic fever sweeps across the country? What do you estimate the death toll will be?"

Not altogether awake and completely unsure of what was going on, William hung up the phone. It rang again almost immediately. Instead of an-

swering, he turned off the ringer and stumbled out of bed to do the same to the other phone. Half-listening to the reporter's voice as it was recorded by the answering machine, William retrieved the newspaper from the front porch and was greeted by the flabbergasting headline: *CDC FEARS WORLDWIDE EPIDEMIC*.

In total shock, he read the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article, which quoted facts and figures from the report that he had just completed the night before! The same report that Nen remembered having left on his desk when he rushed home to be with his wife after a full Saturday of double-checking data and summarizing his findings. The report that he had planned to deliver personally to the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention first thing on Monday morning.

How could the report, barely finished, have made it into the papers? Nen had worked in near isolation for weeks. His supervisor, Maureen Blake, had advised him to let the matter drop. She probably assumed that he had done so. But Nen had persevered. He could not forget the faces of the people he'd failed to save over the years—mothers and children in the Sudan and in Zaire. They visited his dreams, accused him of not caring, not trying. And so, despite Blake's advice, Nen had pushed ahead. He could not 'let drop' a potential hemorrhagic fever that might kill hundreds or thousands—fatalities

mostly preventable if only the word got out in time.

He stared dumbfounded at the newspaper. This was never how he had intended for word to get out. Calm, rational, public-education campaigns and timely quarantines when necessary—those were the responsible strategies that could stave off an epidemic. This headline, on the other hand, smacked of tabloid sensationalism. It could spark mass hysteria.

My God. William covered his face. *How did this happen?*

He had sought the help of his pathologist friend Martin Raimés in analyzing some of the blood samples, but Martin had never been privy to the scope of Nen's hypothesis. Even had someone known every detail of his work and gotten access to the report on his desk, why would anyone be inclined to give the information to the media? And how could the *AJC* have printed the article so quickly? There couldn't have been time for a reporter to have confirmed the data or even to have checked with another expert. There were, in fact, no corroborating views in the article—only the information and conclusions of Nen's report.

The phone was still ringing. The answering machine picked up call after call from different reporters wanting to speak with William. Though his name didn't appear in the article, they had ferreted him out somehow.

Leigh shuffled into the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee maker. “What in God’s name is going on?”

Nen held up the newspaper for her to see.

“Oh.”

The rest of the morning and that afternoon were more of the same. The answering machine filled up. Eventually Leigh unplugged the phones. By that evening, several reporters had found their way to the house. William stood in the doorway speechless, flashbulbs blinding him, questions shouted at him, until Leigh had stepped in. “This is our home,” she snapped. “You all will have to wait until tomorrow to have your questions answered at CDC.”

That night when the doorbell rang after 10 PM, Leigh was primed for blood. “I am going to *shoot* those parasites!” She stomped to the front door. From inside the house, William heard her tone suddenly change. “Dr. Blake...I thought you were a reporter.”

William joined his wife at the door. “Maureen, hello.”

Dr. Blake nodded her greeting. She was dressed as she would have been at work—slacks, attractive sweater, flats. She always struck William as very professional, even-tempered. Tonight was no exception. “It sounds like you’ve had a long day.”

“You could say that,” said Leigh.

“I tried to call earlier, but there was no answer.”

“We...uh...took the phone off the hook,” William explained, now feeling as if he had done something wrong. “Reporters were calling all day. Maureen, I have no idea how that story...”

Dr. Blake held up a hand to stop him. “I wouldn’t worry about it, William. We think we know what happened. But I would like to take a little of your time and discuss how we plan to handle the press, so you’ll know before you show up tomorrow. Can you come with me?”

William looked over Maureen’s shoulder. A long, black limousine idled at the curb.

“Concerned citizen,” Dr. Blake offered by way of explanation.

“Oh.” It was all very strange to William. But what part of the day hadn’t been? “Come on in while I put on my shoes.”

Within a few minutes, Maureen and William were heading down the sidewalk toward the limo. Maureen opened the back door and stepped aside for Nen to climb in. He slid onto the seat and found himself to the right of a large, bearded man in a dark and somewhat old-fashioned suit that smelled strongly of mothballs. “Hello,” said William nervously. The man, his light-green eyes very intense even in the shadows, merely stared back at Nen. Dr. Blake climbed into the car to Nen’s right and closed the door. The limousine pulled away from the curb.

“William,” Dr. Blake said, “this is J. Benison Hodge.”

Nen nodded at the man again, not sure what the stranger had to do with CDC or the press. *Must be a lawyer*, William thought.

“Dr. Nen,” said Hodge. His deep, rumbling voice carried a stiffly formal edge. Nen got the feeling that the man was angry with him and only partially restraining his emotion. “Did you present your report to the news media?”

“No, of course not.” William was caught having to look back and forth between Hodge and Blake. “I have no idea how they...someone must have taken...the reporter, we have to check with—”

“The reporter,” Hodge interrupted him, “has been dealt with. Why did you not, when ordered to by your superior, abandon the research you were conducting?”

Nen’s mouth dropped open. After a surreal day, to be whisked away at night in a limousine and aggressively questioned by this lawyer... “Ordered? It wasn’t exactly—”

“Mr. Hodge,” said Maureen, “it was more a suggestion than an actual order.”

Hodge glared at Maureen with a ferocity that surprised William, who pressed himself back into the seat so as not to fall under that stare. Maureen quickly lapsed into silence.

“Did you not understand,” Hodge asked Nen,

“that it was the wish of your superior that you discontinue your research?”

William could now feel Hodge’s stare boring into him. Those light eyes flashed cold fire. “I...well...yes, I...did realize. That. I did realize that.”

“Yet you continued,” said Hodge. “Why?” There was a hard edge to the question, an accusation.

Nen shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He looked to Maureen for support, but she was staring down at her lap. “I thought we were going to talk about the press and—”

“Why?” Hodge demanded.

William’s face whipped around to the burly lawyer. Those eyes. Hodge’s gaze took hold of William, kept him from turning away. A fit of trembling wracked Nen’s body. For a long moment, he was unable to speak as coherent thought fled him. William stared into those eyes with mounting fear. *Dear God. I’m going to die. Dear God.* No threat had been spoken, yet there was no doubt in Nen’s mind that his physical well-being, his very life, depended on his answer. Suddenly he felt nauseated, and with no other warning, he leaned over and vomited onto the floor of the limousine. “Oh, God. I’m sorry...please don’t...I didn’t—”

“Answer,” said Hodge.

Nen sat up, wiped his mouth. He began hesitantly, but his words quickly gained the strength

of his conviction. "I didn't understand why she suggested I stop the investigation. I thought the potential danger warranted more research. Even though it wasn't ebola. Whatever it was, whatever it is, it's something we haven't seen before." He paused and swallowed. "I didn't give the report to the papers...but I think it's accurate."

"I see." Hodge sat quietly but did not shift his gaze from William.

Having answered the question, Nen quickly looked away. Maureen, he noticed, had not moved from her previous position, staring down at her lap. They rode in silence for some time. William was still frightened, and slightly embarrassed at having thrown up in the car. This lawyer was intimidating beyond reason, and William could not explain why. But still his fingers quivered.

"Look at me," said Hodge.

Against his better judgement, almost against his will, Nen turned to face the imposing lawyer again. Hodge's eyes were alive with barely controlled anger. Within that boundless sea of green, William was lost. He was falling...falling....

"Your research is flawed," said Hodge. "You will find errors in your work. Many errors and illogical conclusions. You will renounce your findings and destroy the data samples. The entire project has been compromised, tainted. Do you understand, Dr. Nen?"

Falling...falling... "Yes. I understand."

Hodge nodded, pleased. *“Afterward, you will take a long vacation. Take your wife wherever it is she would most like to go. You work too hard, Dr. Nen. You must learn to relax. Do you understand?”*

“I understand...” Nen was standing at the curb in front of his house. Maureen stood by the open door of the limousine. Leaning toward William from within the car was Mr. Hodge. “I understand that you’re a lawyer,” said Nen, suddenly not quite sure what he was talking about.

“Very good,” said Hodge. “You have been most helpful, Dr. Nen.”

“And remember,” added Maureen, “you say nothing to the press but ‘no comment.’”

William nodded. That he could remember.



Owain stepped off the plane in foul temper. By flying westward, they had landed in mid-morning despite having left Madrid shortly after dawn. Physiologically, no Cainite was affected by inconveniences such as jetlag, but Owain, unaccustomed as he was to far-reaching, high-speed travel, was nonetheless disturbed by sudden time shifts even in the best of situations. This was not the best of situations.

Upon landing, Kendall informed Lorenzo Giovanni, who had come aboard to greet them, that her master did not wish to be roused until

shortly after sunset. Lorenzo graciously conceded and retreated back down the stairs. He made sure that the private hangar the jet had taxied into remained silent for the remainder of the day. No mechanics or work crews attended the plane. Refueling would wait.

This courtesy allowed Owain ten more hours of uninterrupted, vision-plagued slumber. By the time the sun set, he was prepared never to close his eyes again. He had not been subjected, thankfully, to images of his homeland or of his beloved Angharad. He had, however, been dogged by the ominous words of the angered Joseph, and always the living tree ensnared Owain with crushing force, finally to draw back, snakelike, and strike savagely at his heart.

Owain distractedly rubbed his chest as he disembarked. The thickly carpeted stairs muffled his footsteps. Kendall followed, silent in her pantherlike grace.

Lorenzo waited at the bottom of the stairs with his ever-present bodyguard, Alonzo. Their impeccably kept suits and immaculate grooming were in stark contrast to Owain's torn and bloodstained shirt. Owain reminded himself not to fidget with the captured revolver tucked in his belt, lest he alarm the mammoth Alonzo.

If Lorenzo noticed the firearm, he made no indication. He grasped Owain by the shoulders as the sullen Ventrue stepped onto the hangar floor.

“Owain, my friend, had I known you were returning, I could have sent a plane for you.” Lorenzo lightly kissed Owain, first on one cheek, then the other, but Owain felt nothing of genuine warmth in the gesture. “My associates in Madrid—I am sure they charge you too much, especially on short notice. Is it not so?”

Associates. Those *associates*, Owain suspected, were most likely actual relatives of Lorenzo’s, along some convoluted, incestuous branch of the Giovanni family tree. Even family were merely *associates*, *rivals*, to the Giovanni. *How much less consequential is a ‘friend?’* Owain wondered.

“With me,” said Lorenzo, “there is no charge for your travel.” He waved his hand dismissively as if brushing away the fee.

Owain nodded, knowing that Lorenzo spoke half-truths at best. Though the Giovanni ghouls might not require Owain to write a check of the type he would send to Madrid, there was always a price. The Giovanni were not a clan of travel agents. Every relationship cultivated, every favor tendered, happened in order someday to be exploited to the benefit of the clan. Owain was completely aware of the snares he danced around in dealing with Lorenzo.

“Come,” Lorenzo said, ushering Owain toward an office attached to the hangar. “What news do you bring from Madrid?”

“All is very quiet there,” said Owain, his blood-stained and disheveled clothing bearing witness to his blatant lie.

Lorenzo smiled genuinely this time.

They filed into the office, a small room that barely accommodated four people. The furnishings were spartan and generic enough to confirm that Lorenzo did not frequent this facility. Giovanni banking interests in Atlanta undoubtedly commanded most of his attention. Owain sat, while Kendall stood just behind him. Their positions virtually mirrored those of Lorenzo and Alonzo behind the desk.

“Unlike Madrid, Atlanta has been far from quiet while you were gone,” Lorenzo said, his genial tone suddenly turning more serious.

Owain did not reply.

“There is much unrest concerning Prince Benison’s decrees,” Lorenzo continued. “He is correct, of course, that the anarchists do not know their place. Yet trying to impose discipline on them so forcefully...” he paused, grimacing as if in pain, “it causes many problems.”

“Indeed?” Owain’s response encouraged Lorenzo to reveal more details, while at the same time not committing Owain to agreement with the Giovanni. Lorenzo, for his part, was ostensibly doing nothing beyond relating events, yet his implication that Benison was at fault was almost certainly an overture to Owain.

“Oh, yes,” Lorenzo assured him. “Some anarchs flee the city, as is their right, but others go into hiding rather than accept Benison’s decree. They will not choose a clan. They will not sacrifice in the least their freedom.” Lorenzo covered himself nicely, Owain noticed. Deriding the anarchs’ wantonness was *de facto* support for the prince—significant, should this conversation be overheard, or reported later.

“The prince cannot be pleased,” commented Owain. He didn’t know more than what Lorenzo had told him about what was happening in the city, but Owain had predicted trouble when Benison had announced his decrees back at New Year’s. Owain thought he could see where Lorenzo was leading with these oblique statements.

“He does not suffer dissent gracefully,” said Lorenzo. “He will exile or...*persuade* the anarchs one or two at a time, but that could take a great while.”

Owain nodded. *And how long will he have before the Camarilla Inner Circle steps in to settle the unrest?* That was the unspoken question. The justicars would not risk another Anarch Revolt. Not with the instability the blood curse had already left in its wake. “Indeed,” said Owain. He and Lorenzo regarded one another in silence for several moments. “The situation bears close scrutiny,” said Owain at last.

“Indeed,” Lorenzo echoed. With that, his bearing immediately resumed its earlier, more convivial manner. “I have delayed you too long already,” said Lorenzo, “and you returning from a lengthy journey. Forgive me.” Rising from his seat, he bowed respectfully to Owain.

“Not at all,” Owain said, also rising. Pleasantries were exchanged, then Owain and Kendall proceeded to the Rolls Royce that they had left in the hangar upon their departure several weeks before.

The situation must be truly precarious, Owain thought as they drove toward home, for Lorenzo to have been as forthright as he was. Owain could tell what the Giovanni was thinking—that Benison might very well run out of time in quashing the anarch resistance, that he might attract the unwanted attention of the Camarilla powers-that-be and be removed from his position.

And who would take his place?

Eleanor? She was more than competent, but competence was a far lesser consideration in these matters than were the effects of politics and intrigue. No, in marrying Benison, Eleanor had slit her own political throat. She had displeased her justicar sire, Baylor. Without his endorsement, the Inner Circle would never support her as a candidate to serve as prince in one of the more important East Coast cities.

The Inner Circle could bring in an outsider, but just as likely the mantle of leadership could fall to Owain. The Ventrue were always willing and able to make such sacrifices to serve their fellow Cainites.

That scenario was the eventuality for which Lorenzo Giovanni was preparing. He was most certainly hedging his bets, testing the waters. His verbal sparring with Owain had been an attempt to feel out the Ventrue's position and tentatively offer Giovanni support, but in a manner that left the Giovanni uncompromised should Benison solidify his position, or should Owain stumble.

Owain had played his part in the charade out of habit more than ambition. There were countless variables and numerous potential resolutions to the current political uncertainty, but even should temporal control of Atlanta fall into Owain's lap, he was not sure that he would accept the burden. Such prominence would increase the motivation and the opportunity for Carlos to seek revenge.

More importantly, however, Owain simply didn't care any more. He harbored a personal grudge against Benison for the destruction of the siren, but toppling a prince was far different from taking his place. After his sojourn in Spain, Owain desired nothing so much as to withdraw, both within his estate and within himself, and to heal his wounds. He wanted to blunt the pain and the loss that had

been thrown in his face all too often of late. Perhaps an opportunity to strike at Benison would present itself, but lacking that, time and isolation would be Owain's elixirs.

He stared out the tinted windows of the Rolls as Kendall followed the most direct route home. *Adref*, Owain thought. *Homeward*. The buildings and streets that they passed—they meant nothing to Owain. He did not resent this new home. *Home* at least in the sense that he had spent most of the past seventy-odd years here, but upon returning from Spain, Owain realized that he felt less of a connection to Atlanta than he had to Toledo. This city was a safe haven, of sorts, more so than some places but no more so than many others. He gazed more intently at the downtown skyline, the modern city interlaced with interstates, the arteries of mortal life that pulsed around him and from which he was completely separate.

And as Owain looked out over the city, he became lost. He could pick his way among the landmarks; he could find whatever he needed to find, but to what end? He was returning *home* to lick his wounds and bide his time—until what? Until another century had passed? And then another?

Eventually, he slumped down into the seat and ignored the progression of scenes filing past the window. What, he wondered, were his prospects?

To have anyone and anything he cared about torn from him? The siren, after awakening painful memories in him with her beautiful song, had been destroyed. Owain's oldest surviving friend had, one night ago, been destroyed. Now back in Atlanta, Owain remembered Albert, a source of occasional entertainment if not an actual friend—slain. How many more links could be added to the chain?

Finally, Kendall turned onto King Road. The governor's mansion was only a few blocks away. Most of the venerable members of the King Road Club lived within ten or fifteen minutes' drive. Owain thought of Franklin West, the near-octogenarian and rare mortal whose company Owain valued. The last time Owain had fed from Franklin, the old man's blood had tasted sweetly of absinthe. Owain sighed. Franklin would not last much longer. He would pass on like all the others. Owain could make a ghoul of him, but that would create many complications and most likely would only delay the inevitable. As with Gwilym.

The approach to Owain's estate was, as always, quiet. The car paused momentarily as the wrought-iron gates swung mechanically open. Then the Rolls continued up the twisting driveway.

Adref.

Homeward.



Ron watched from his hiding place across the street as the Rolls Royce pulled to the gate, waited for it to open, and then headed up the driveway. *Hot damn!* He couldn't believe his luck. *I'm gonna be in for soooome kind of reward*, he thought. Kline, Prince Benison—everybody was going to love Ron.

He pulled his .38 special from his jacket pocket and checked the cylinder. Satisfied, he returned the gun to his pocket and pulled out, instead, his cell phone. As he dialed, another thought came to him: *They want this guy dead or unalive. If I pop him, and he's an elder, there's some high-octane blood just waiting to be had. Wouldn't want it to go to waste.*

Ron ran his tongue over his fangs in anticipation. He could taste blood already.



The Rolls stopped at the front door of the main house. The sky was clear as Owain stepped out of the car into the brisk March night. Crickets and night birds serenaded him, but otherwise there was no greeting party waiting. Not that he was expecting a celebration upon his return, but normally Arden and Mike, Owain's fairly reliable security team, would have at least acknowledged his presence. On the drive up, Owain had seen no lights on at the carriage house where the two stayed, so he had assumed they would be in evidence at the main house. Owain could tell by her expression

that Kendall, too, noticed the lack of a reception.

The front door was unlocked—another oddity.

Owain and Kendall stepped into the foyer. The lights that were connected to the computer timer were on, but none of the others seemed to be. The house was deathly silent.

“Señora Rodriguez!” Owain called out. There was no reply. He glanced back at Kendall whose head was cocked in puzzlement as she scanned the foyer and attached hallways. “Check around,” said Owain.

Kendall nodded and slipped silently toward the sitting room.

Owain opened the door to the study. He crossed the darkened room to his desk lamp and clicked it on, bathing the black-walnut desk in light. Much of the rest of the room remained in shadows, but that was no impediment to Owain. He removed the uncomfortable revolver from his belt and set the firearm on the desk as he quickly took a mental survey of the room. Everything seemed to be as he had left it: the few papers on his desk, the chess board still set with Owain’s stunning defeat, books undisturbed on the shelves—

Owain’s gaze froze on the books, on one book in particular—his commonplace book. Instantly, every muscle in his body tensed. *The vision*. His thoughts, much to Owain’s chagrin, were never far removed from the unrelenting phantasms. One specific image sprang to his mind. Had it really been

only one night, Owain wondered, since he had been trapped in his former tomb by Carlos and his minions? He looked down at his clothes, at the dried blood of the nameless woman, the Sabbat neonate who had tried to stop him. Already, it seemed as if years had passed.

As Owain had fled along the passage that only he had known of, he had been confronted by two strangers, one after the other. In the unnatural darkness of the tunnel, they had seemed very real, but their words had been ones from Owain's visions. The chess master and the knight *must* have been a vision. How else could they have come and gone completely unnoticed by an elder Cainite? But then again, that frantic night had been full of specters and interlopers who disappeared without a trace before Owain's eyes.

The knight had held a book that Owain recognized—his commonplace book. Not as it appeared before him on the shelf at present, but adorned with the original cover that Angharad had embroidered with the crest of House Rhufoniog, Welsh grouse trussed. The knight had opened the book and had read prophetic words.

This is the Endtime.

The words of Owain's visions.

Owain stared at the commonplace book. For the briefest of moments, his sight wavered. He thought he saw the embroidered cover on the book...but

it was not so. That cover had been dust for many centuries, as had the loving hands that crafted it. The book before Owain was covered in fine, unmarked leather.

Ever so slowly, Owain raised a quivering hand toward the book. He touched it lightly, ran his fingertip down the supple spine—

“Sir!”

Owain wheeled about to find Kendall standing in the doorway of the study.

“I think you’d better come take a look at this, sir,” she said with an expression of urgency that Owain had never seen on her face before.

He looked at the commonplace book on the shelf and then at Kendall again. The anxiety in her eyes carried much weight with Owain. Reluctantly, he turned away from the bookcase.

She led him back through the sitting room to the stairs leading down to the wine cellar. Owain, of course, no longer partook of wine, not directly at any rate, but he felt compelled to play the proper host for his occasional mortal guests, and toward that end, his cellar was well stocked. At the foot of the stairs, Kendall led him past the locked door behind which Owain’s safe was secured. There were no signs of tampering on the door. Kendall was taking him to see something else. Exactly what became quite obvious as soon as they entered the wine cellar proper.

Kendall stopped just inside the door. Owain stepped past her. The dim lighting was more than enough illumination for him to make out the scene that awaited. At the far end of the cellar, wine racks had been pulled from the wall and tossed carelessly to the side. Shattered bottles of cabernet and merlot littered the floor. Along the cleared portion of wall stood Señor Rodriguez, Señora Rodriguez, and Arden—each held aloft by railroad spikes pounded through the right wrist, through the left wrist, and into the mouth through the back of the throat. Leaning against the wall was a sledgehammer, its business end resting on the floor in a large pool of tacky, drying blood.

Owain stepped closer to the bodies. Even several yards away, his shoes crunched down on fragments of teeth scattered about on the floor amidst the broken glass, but he continued until he was within a few feet of the wall.

The hands had been spiked first, he imagined. One, and then the other. Owain could almost hear the metallic strike of sledgehammer against spike, and then a second blow, and maybe a third to make sure that the spike, after being driven through the flesh and splintered bone, dug into the brick and mortar behind.

It looked as if each victim's mouth was stuffed full of rags to make sure the spike could not be spit out, though whoever struck the blows had not

taken great pride in accuracy. The remnants of the ghouls' faces were largely shapeless masses of split skin and protruding bone fragments flattened against the wall.

Owain couldn't think of anything useful the ghouls could have revealed. He informed them of very little regarding his activities—a precaution against just this type of occurrence, although Owain had always thought of his precautions as merely that. Precautions. He never thought they would come into play.

Slowly, carefully, Owain studied the broken bodies from where he stood. The sheer brutality of the mutilations was obvious. The attacker may well have been after information, but he or she had enjoyed the work.

“And Mike?” Owain asked without turning from the bodies.

“No sign,” answered Kendall.

Owain heard her shifting weight from one foot to the other as he continued staring at the bodies. “Are you glad you weren't here?” He wasn't sure why he asked the question at first, but then realized that he was prodding her, seeing what she was made of.

Her weight shifted back to the other foot. “If I'd been here, this wouldn't have happened.”

Kendall's answer brought half a smile to Owain's face, but he did not turn to share it with his ghoul.

“Finish checking the house. And outside.” Her footsteps receded out of the wine cellar and up the stairs.

Owain stood there motionless for several minutes. Four bulging eyes stared back at him through the murky confines of the cellar—four because one eyeball each of Arden’s and Señor Rodriguez’s had been ruptured. Owain could read pain, and some fear, in the twisted contortions of their faces. As he looked at them, he tried to imagine what it was like, what they had felt, what had run through Señor Rodriguez’s heart and mind seeing his wife of a century and a half spiked to the wall beside him, knowing there was nothing he could do to keep her from a tortured death.

Owain was unable to summon the first ounce of empathy. He felt nothing.

For a moment he closed his eyes. He pictured himself, wrists spiked to brick, a third spike held between his teeth, awaiting the blow of the sledgehammer, and he felt...*relief*. Relief at the thought of final death, of release from his miserable earthly existence. An instant of agony to end centuries of suffering.

Standing there before a jury of his three stricken ghouls, Owain tilted back his head and laughed, but the sound was merely a cruel mockery of laughter, an utterance of pure self-loathing. “If that’s what you’ve wanted all this time,” he asked him-

self aloud, “why haven’t you greeted the sun any of the mornings these past nine hundred years? Why not greet it today?”

He waited. But the jury did not speak. The broken bodies faced him in silence unbroken. *Coward!* he wanted them to say. He wished they would rip their pierced limbs from the wall and point bloody, accusing fingers at him. *Coward!*

Then he might prove them wrong. Then he might walk outside to an open field and await the sun to refute the accusations of the jurymen. But they stared blankly at him, and Owain was left to laugh again, more quietly this time, derisively.

Perhaps he was a coward. Or perhaps the beast within his soul that drove him throughout his existence would not allow him such an easy escape. Survival was as much a part of him as suffering. His instinct for each was honed to near perfection. *And surely the Almighty above has not finished His sport with me yet,* Owain thought.

That was when he heard a gun being cocked behind him.

Slowly, Owain turned around.

“Stay right there or I’ll blow your brains out, man,” said the Cainite at the other end of the wine cellar. He wore black leather and ripped jeans, the uniform of the unenlightened neonate. “I don’t need a stake to toast your ass.”

Owain sighed. He thought he recalled having

seen this impudent childe at some official function or another. *Brujah*? Owain tried to remember. That seemed most likely. The Ventrue elder couldn't help wondering if the blood of Caine had, indeed, been spread too thin.

Despite the gun aimed at his head, Owain absently wondered at his own lack of anger, all things considered. His haven had been violated, was at present being violated *again*, his ghouls had been tortured and murdered, and a foolhardy, not to mention disrespectful, *Brujah* whelp was threatening him. Owain felt that he should be in a rage, yet he was experiencing barely a tickle of annoyance.

"Did you do this?" Owain asked, turning his head to indicate the ghouls behind him.

The *Brujah* chuckled. "You should be worrying about your own neck."

Their gazes locked, and Owain did not let go. "*Why is that?*" His voice took hold of the young Cainite's thoughts, not attempting to take control, but beginning to push them in the direction that Owain wanted them to go.

The *Brujah*, having no idea that Owain had brought his powers to bear, maintained his smug overconfidence as well as his aim at Owain's face. "Because the prince knows what you're up to, man. Your gig is up."

Prince Benison. The Kindred who was responsible

for the destruction of the siren, for the death of Albert.

“We just do the prince’s dirty work, but it’s a living, and hell...” the Brujah shrugged, “it’s fun.”

The knowledge that the prince had set all this in motion started heating within Owain a calm fury, the first pangs of the rage that had been strangely absent until now. Or maybe it was the sneer of this neonate, who took such obvious pleasure in having deprived Owain of the usefulness of his household ghouls, that engendered Owain’s ire. Either way, the simmering rage quickly rose to a furious boil. No outward sign, however, betrayed Owain’s anger. He held the emotion within, savored it.

Owain took a step forward, not for an instant releasing the gaze of the younger Kindred. “You must have enjoyed breaking into my haven, into my *home*.”

The Brujah watched Owain but seemed unconcerned that he was moving closer.

Owain took another step. “Murdering my ghouls—that must have provided no end of entertainment.”

Owain continued forward. He was within a foot or two of the weapon still pointed directly at his face. He made no effort to move out of the line of fire. The Brujah saw each step, heard every word, but such was the force of Owain’s voice and of his

gaze that the neonate saw no need to respond.

“Invading the haven of an elder,” said Owain. “Not an opportunity that presents itself every night, is it? Normally, every level of Kindred society would rain vengeance down upon your head, but if the crime is at the prince’s behest...” Owain shrugged. His visage took on a sudden sternness. “There are other reasons this type of social miscarriage does not happen.”

The Brujah’s expression indicated nothing out of the ordinary. He still watched Owain closely, listened intently. Even when Owain reached over to one of the intact wine racks, took a bottle, and smashed it so that he held the jagged remnant like a knife, even then the neonate did not react.

Not until, with a quick and powerful flick of Owain’s wrist, the Brujah’s entrails spilled out onto the floor at his feet did any true surprise register on his face. He dropped his weapon, staggered back a few steps and collapsed, the string of his atrophied intestines marking his path.

Owain looked upon his handiwork. The quiet rage still burned within him. The Brujah quivered on the floor as blood poured from the gaping wound in his abdomen. It was not a killing blow, Owain knew. Not to a vampire. Blood could heal such a wound.

Turning away, Owain returned to his ghouls and took in hand the sledgehammer that leaned against

the wall. He felt its weight—the weight that would begin to set aright the scale of justice.

Owain returned to the whimpering Brujah. The first blow ended it. The dull thud. The brain was the other organ essential to a vampire, along with the heart. He raised the hammer again.

Benison.

The name rang in Owain's mind with the impact of the second blow. But there were others, he was certain. He lifted the sledgehammer again....

Kline.

Owain could see the bullish Brujah's handiwork here. This former Kindred on the cellar floor had not acted alone nor of his own accord. Owain raised the sledgehammer once more.

Benison.

The raving architect of destruction.

Kline.

As surely as his axe had ripped apart the siren.

Benison.

Kline.

“Sir!”

Owain paused with the sledgehammer raised above his head. Kendall faced him from the doorway of the cellar, bewilderment apparent on her face.

“We had a visitor,” said Owain. He lowered the sledgehammer to the floor and laid the implement to rest beside the remains of the uninvited guest.

As Owain stepped past Kendall, his fury was unabated. The attack on the Brujah was a slow, deliberate venting, but still the images of the dead that Benison had claimed surfaced, one after another, in Owain's mind: the Rodriguezes and Arden, spikes pounded through the backs of their mouths into the wall; the siren, cleft in twain by a maniac's axe; Albert, staked by his clansman the prince and left out for the sun.

Still unexplained were Albert's final words: *What would Angharad think?* The lingering enigma only added to Owain's fury. How many ways would the name of his lost love be tarnished?

His thoughts occupied by the mystery unleashed by Albert, Owain stopped in front of the door at the base of the stairs. Allowing himself another brief surrender to rage, he kicked in the door. The deadbolt held but the rest of the door splintered, the pieces scattering into the small room beyond. The safe, aside from the wooden bits of door lying all around, stood undisturbed.

"Ms. Jackson."

"Yes, sir?" Leaving behind, for the moment, the carnage in the wine cellar, Kendall quickly caught up to him.

"You know the combination to the safe."

"Yes, sir."

One pained step at a time, Owain began up the stairs as he instructed his surviving ghoul. "There

is a ceramic...creature. Bring it to the study.”

“Yes, sir. And, sir...”

Owain paused.

“I might have found Mike. There’s a fresh grave out back,” said Kendall, “Next to the old kitchen outbuilding...what used to be the outbuilding,” she corrected herself. “It’s been knocked down, collapsed.”

Owain said nothing and continued on his way. At the top of the stairs, he stepped into the sitting room. He walked through, then stopped and came back. Moving to the far wall, he took from its resting place his sword. Even after all this time, the blade felt perfectly balanced in his hand, very much a part of him. Owain smiled grimly. Firearms might be the weapons of the modern age, and a broken wine bottle was certainly efficient in a pinch, but this sword, *this* was the weapon of a true nobleman.

Returning to the study, Owain felt that he was being denied in totality the calm isolation for which he had been longing. At his desk again, he closed his eyes, tried to put out of his mind for the time being the grisly scene in the cellar. He attempted to suppress his rage, which lurked in ever-increasing strength just below the surface. He took a deep breath but felt little in the way of calming effect.

Owain opened his eyes, placed his sword upon the desk, then took from the shelf the common-

place book. Just as he opened the aged tome, Kendall entered bearing the ceramic armadillo that Albert had entrusted to Owain's care.

"This is what you wanted?"

"Yes. Put it here."

She set it on the desk.

Owain looked back down at the book. To his horror, a large drop of fresh blood marred the page where seconds ago it had not. He jumped up from the desk and realized that his hands and clothes were covered with blood and extraneous bits from the Brujah. Owain himself had dripped blood on his most treasured book.

"Damnation!" He wiped his hands on his pants, but his clothes were so blood-soaked, and that on top of the dried blood from the Sabbat vampire in Spain, it did little good. "Go upstairs and bring me fresh clothes," he told Kendall, who hurried to comply.

Owain wanted very badly to turn through the pages of the commonplace book, to search for the words that the knight had read in the vision. But Owain could not take the chance of marring the book further. It was the one physical reminder of Angharad that he possessed. She had given him the book. She had written some of the entries. Though none were of a highly personal nature, it was her handwriting. She had put quill to this paper centuries ago. Owain forced himself to be patient.

He turned instead to the physical reminder of Albert, the ceramic armadillo, which mattered less to Owain. After all, Albert would not need it back. Owain picked it up, his fingers leaving bloody marks wherever he touched it. He shook it, as he had the night that Albert had presented it to him. Nothing.

Owain looked at the bloody armadillo again, then smashed it to the floor. At that same moment, the front doors of the mansion slammed open. Seconds later, Xavier Kline, axe in hand, came striding into the study. He wore a long jacket over his tight shirt and jeans. Behind him, his Vietnamese underling took up a position in the doorway. She held a shotgun perched against her shoulder.

Kline took two large steps into the room and unlimbered his axe. "Hiya, Owain. Long time no see."

THREE

Owain and Kline were separated by the heavy, black-walnut desk. On the right of it lay Owain's sword, on the left the captured revolver from Spain. Kline, holding his axe in front of him, poised to strike, watched Owain's eyes.

"*What is the meaning of this?*" asked Owain, using both voice and mind to subtly direct Kline's thoughts. Owain suspected that the blood of Caine was not so weak in this brute as it had been in the other pathetic Brujah. Trickery would need to be more indirect to be effective, but it still might allow Owain to survive this encounter.

"The meaning of this," Kline scoffed, "is that your ass is mine. The prince says so."

Thu, Kline's underling, stood in the doorway with her shotgun. She seemed content to observe for the moment, but no doubt would lend Kline a hand should he somehow have trouble with a lone Ventrue.

"Leave now and I shall spare you," said Owain.

Kline turned his head slightly to the side. "Come again?"

"Leave now and I shall spare you," Owain said again.

"Huh." Kline scratched his chin. "That's what I thought you said." He chuckled for a moment, then burst into laughter. Thu shared his amusement. "Right," said Kline. "Pick your weapon, richboy."

"This is your last warning," said Owain.

Kline was finished with toying. His mocking smile shifted to a snarl. With surprising speed, he raised the axe into the air.

Owain dove for his sword just as the axe crashed down into the desk...by the gun. Had Owain gone for that weapon, he would have lost a hand, or more.

Even with his inhuman strength, Kline struggled for a second to pull his axe free of the hard walnut. Owain rolled and leapt to his feet. He had no way of knowing if his mental proddings had influenced Kline, or if the hulking Brujah would have struck toward the handgun regardless. Either way, Owain was now armed and more than ready for a fight.

Kline apparently was more interested in collecting his reward from the prince as quickly as possible. He smiled at Owain and stepped far to his left. “Okay, Thu, let him have it.”

Thu seemed pleased to get to take part. She was all giggles as she cocked the shotgun and pointed it at Owain. At that instant, the top of Thu’s head exploded, blasted from behind.

She looked very surprised, even raising one hand halfway toward her face. Then she collapsed to the floor.

Kendall, her .45 magnum still smoking, quickly stepped into the room and retrieved the shotgun, which she promptly leveled at Kline.

Kline, suddenly on his own, looked back and forth between Owain and Kendall. Owain could virtually see the wheels turning in the Brujah’s mind as he most likely tried to determine if he could launch his axe at Kendall—the same way he had attacked the siren—dodge most of a shotgun blast, and still recover a weapon quickly enough to confront Owain. The room was probably too small for Kline to throw the large axe, but Owain rendered the question moot. He raised a hand to Kendall.

“Ms. Jackson, I shall handle this duel, thank you,” said Owain.

Kline seemed more surprised than Kendall. She nodded and stepped back out of the room to allow

the combatants more space. Kline smiled, pleased with this unexpected reprieve. He bowed. "Well thank you, your Ventrue lordship. I'll only have to kill you one at a time." He shook off his long jacket and let it fall to the floor behind him.

Owain didn't waste his time with taunts. He stepped toward the Brujah, who stood nearly a foot taller. Kline swung his axe almost immediately.

Owain deftly sidestepped the blow and slashed at Kline's exposed right side. Steel met flesh. It was not a telling blow, but Owain pulled back his blade decorated with first blood.

Kline did not cry out. In fact, he paid no attention to the small gash, though it bled freely. Watching Owain more warily, the Brujah kicked two chairs out of the way. Otherwise, the desk was the only real obstacle in the room. The table that the chess board rested on was in an alcove out of the way.

The opponents slowly began to circle. Kline feinted and watched closely as Owain started to dodge. Again Kline feinted, and then he swung. Owain avoided the blow and opened a second gash just below the first. This time Kline did growl, but more from frustration and anger than from pain.

Owain was growing more confident with each strike. It had been more than one hundred years since he had been in a duel, but he was satisfied with his performance thus far. He did realize, how-

ever, that gnat-like, irritating wounds would not carry the day against Kline.

With little warning, Kline swung his axe again. Again Owain eluded the blow, and the blade sailed harmlessly past his face. But somehow, at the last second, Kline managed to shift the direction of his axe's momentum. The blade that had passed arced around and dug into the side of Owain's calf just below the knee.

Unexpected pain shot up Owain's entire right side. As his leg buckled, the axe came free. Kline jerked it into the air for another blow.

With only the strength of his left leg, Owain hurled himself over the desk. He needed space, or else the behemoth would follow his success with smothering attacks and the affair would be over.

Kline reacted quickly and struck at the moving target. Owain skidded over the desk as the axe crashed down. The head of the axe again bit into solid black walnut. Owain slammed onto the floor in the corner. He expended a precious second to assess his leg. The wound was deep and painful and sprayed blood into the air, but when Owain climbed to his feet, the leg supported his weight.

Kline had freed his axe from the desk and was charging straight at Owain. Owain feinted left then right then dodged to the left. Kline's attack fell to the right. The axe missed and chewed up the hardwood floor instead of Owain.

Kline, with all of his force behind the charge, and Owain's blood on the floor sabotaging his footing, could not stop. The Brujah slammed into Owain with the force of a truck, just as Owain swung his sword with all of his might.

The terrible impact of the Brujah snapped Owain's head back and wrenched the sword from his grasp. The charging, falling Kline slammed Owain into the wall, crushing him back into the drywall. Bones cracked. Lights danced before his eyes.

All was blackness for a moment.

Owain's eyes fluttered open. Kline was dragging himself to his feet. Embedded into the left side of his massive neck virtually down to the spine was Owain's sword, the end of the blade jutting out behind Kline, hilt and pommel to the front.

Kline screamed in pain. He waved his arms around frantically, his left hand interrupting the spraying arc of blood from his neck. He grabbed at the sword but was not clear-headed enough through the pain to pull the weapon free. The blade cut deeply into his fingers as he took hold of it.

Owain, showered by the constant fountain of blood from the Brujah, climbed groggily to his knees. He reached down to clamp a hand over his own wounded leg, but with the movement, a burst of pain drew his attention to his left shoulder. That arm hung at an awkward angle from his body. A

small, sharp bone poked through Owain's blood-drenched shirt. Caught off-guard by the sudden, on-rushing pain, he slumped back against the crumpled wall.

Still Kline bellowed in unendurable agony. He grabbed the sword so angrily that the blade cut through the tip of his middle finger, which bounced onto the floor. His right arm waved as he staggered and tried to keep his balance.

Through a haze of pain and blood, Owain saw the axe next to a deeply hewn divot on the floor. With his good arm, he took hold of the handle. Kline, occupied by the sword lodged in his neck, offered no resistance.

Owain swung, but the blade-heavy weapon was awkward in his single hand. The axe dug into Kline's side just below his left arm, but not so deeply as to cause great damage.

The attack did, however, get his attention. And further stoked his pain-driven rage.

Kline momentarily forgot the sword, or at least ignored it. With both hands, he grasped Owain by the neck and, with a mighty roar, lifted him into the air.

Time seemed to freeze for Owain as he was held airborne, but all too soon he came crashing down, head and shoulders first, onto the desktop. The searing pain again visited dancing lights upon Owain. His left shoulder and arm went suddenly

numb, as if they had been severed and were no longer part of him.

Kline collapsed on top of Owain. Blood still spurted from the Brujah's neck, but not as forcefully now. His strength was fading but far from gone. He gripped Owain's neck more tightly, began twisting to the left.

Pinned beneath the massive weight of his opponent, Owain could not even press his mangled shoulder against the desk for leverage. His vertebrae and neck muscles were strained to the breaking point.

Owain reached up with his right hand and gouged at Kline's eye. A quickly formed claw dug into flesh, raked the eyeball itself. With a growl, Kline bit savagely into Owain's wrist. Owain pulled back his hand but left gouged chunks of skin and tissue between Kline's fangs.

Owain felt something in his neck pop. Kline twisted his victim's head with renewed vigor.

Casting about for any source of aid, Owain noticed something on the desktop jabbing him in the back. *Desk lamp?* Surely that had been knocked off earlier. He frantically slid his bleeding hand under his back and felt the crumpled pages of the commonplace book.

He slid his hand. More to the side...and felt the hard metal of the revolver.

Owain pulled the weapon from beneath him.

With his head twisted the other way, he couldn't really see what he was doing. He tried to press the barrel against Kline's temple and could only hope he wasn't about to shoot himself.

He squeezed the trigger.

The blast at close range was deafening. He pulled the trigger again. Another blast.

The pressure against Owain's neck ceased. Kline slid backward off the desk and crashed to the floor.

Owain knew he needed to get up, to make sure that the fight was over, that there was no way Kline could ever recuperate no matter how much blood was available. But lying there on the desk, Owain lacked the will to force his battered body to move.

Even over the ringing in his ears from the gunshots, Owain heard the footsteps approaching. Thankfully, they were the familiar footsteps of Kendall Jackson. She paused over Kline, then placed a gentle hand on Owain's good shoulder. "You almost shot yourself, sir."

Painfully, Owain turned his face toward her. He had almost forgotten about her observing the duel, not interfering, as per his instructions. "You don't have to be so damned obedient next time," he mumbled. Owain gestured weakly toward Kline. "Make sure."

Kendall understood. She stepped back from Owain, and the roar of the shotgun put the revolver to shame. "If the prince okayed this," she pointed

out, "there may be others on the way."

Owain sighed. Peace. Isolation. That was all he wanted. To nurse his hatreds in private for a decade or two. Instead, he returned home to find his haven violated, his servants mutilated and murdered, and then to be, himself, beaten to a bloody pulp.

"Do you need help getting up?" Kendall asked.

"My shoulder. You have to pop it back into the socket."

Again, Kendall went efficiently about her task. She set down the shotgun and circled around the desk. "Here." She placed a spongy roll of fabric in Owain's mouth. Without further delay, she straightened his arm out at an angle to his body. That in itself pained Owain considerably, but was minor in comparison to the agony that ripped through him as she jerked his arm upward.

Owain clamped down on the material between his teeth. The fabric also served to muffle slightly his throaty yowl of pain.

"Nope," she said. "One more."

The pain shot through Owain's left side again, but instantly lessened as the arm popped back into the joint. Owain lay on the desk panting reflexively against the pain.

"Your collarbone is broken too," said Kendall. "Compound fracture. Is that something you can heal with blood?"

Owain managed a nod and spit the fabric from his mouth. “After it is set. Yes.” Feeling like he was bruised and lacerated from one end of his body to the other, he laid his head back and closed his eyes again. He wanted rest; he wanted blood to heal his wounds, his physical wounds at least. But Kendall was correct. If Prince Benison had authorized these attacks, then there might well be other assailants on the way. That did not even begin to address a question profoundly puzzling to Owain: *Why? Why* would Benison send Kline and his cronies after Owain?

The Sabbat? Owain wondered. Had the prince somehow discovered Owain’s connection—*former* connection now? Wouldn’t that be a great irony, Owain mused, for his ties to the Sabbat to be exposed just after he had managed to sever them? Someone in Atlanta could conceivably have recognized Miguel several weeks back. Or Carlos might have wasted no time in spreading news of what had happened in Toledo, though that seemed doubtful. Carlos would probably wish, as did Owain, for the entire matter to die quickly and quietly.

Owain was confounded by the turn of events, but there was no time to ponder the numerous questions. He and Kendall needed to be away from there. While he had been thinking, she had been wrapping his injured leg, but that was not going to be enough.

"I need your blood," Owain said.

She did not hesitate in the least but rolled up her sleeve and offered her arm to him. Owain could sense, could smell, the blood flowing just below the surface of her skin. He bit into the flesh of her soft forearm.

At once, blood from the precisely tapped artery filled his mouth. In his weakened state, Owain could not restrain a moan of pleasure. He played the part of the thirsting man in the desert led to an oasis. He felt Kendall's heart beating true and strong, and as he drank, the power that he had imparted to her returned in part to him. He also felt the gash on his leg, other minor wounds, all beginning to knit together, to regain health.

Kendall dropped her head to his chest. She writhed in the pain and the ecstasy of the Kiss.

Owain wanted to keep drinking of her, to take as much blood as he could, to feel her soul mingle with his own...but he needed her physically strong. Even all her blood would not be enough to heal him completely, and he needed her help. Also, unless his shoulder were treated properly, his collarbone set, the power of the blood would serve only to fuse misaligned bone, muscle, and tendon, possibly crippling him. Even as he tried to will the healing vitae away from that area, he could feel his body beginning to mend.

Owain withdrew from her arm, more whole than

he had been, if not fully recovered. Kendall, draped across his body, held on to him. Her legs would not support her full weight.

“Help me up,” he instructed her.

Somewhat shakily, she lifted herself from on top of him. After steadying herself for a moment, she helped him rise to a sitting position on the desk. Still favoring his broken shoulder, Owain was stronger but far from well. He was no longer bleeding, but he was still weak. The gauze bandage on his leg, he noticed, was no longer necessary. Then something struck him as odd about what he saw.

“Where did you get fresh bandages?” he asked.

“There.” Kendall pointed to a mass of both rolled and unrolled bandages mixed among the broken fragments of the ceramic armadillo on the floor. In addition to Owain’s bloody fingerprints from before, the ceramic pieces and bandages had been sprayed with Kline’s blood. The armadillo must have been packed so tightly, and then the hole sealed, that there had been no sound of contents shifting when Owain shook it. Again the obvious question: *Why?*

Owain staggered to his feet. He made his way around his poor desk, marred by axe and bullet holes, splattered with blood and unidentifiable gore. Gently and carefully, he knelt among the armadillo parts and sifted through the bandages. Only one roll attracted his interest; he felt something wrapped within the gauze.

The press of time was weighing heavily on Owain. He glanced at Kendall who was now struggling to her feet. Obviously, they were not going to make a lightning-quick escape; they needed every minute. Reluctantly, he stuffed the roll of gauze into a pocket. "Let's go."

Kendall nodded relieved assent. She helped Owain to his feet. He took the revolver, that weapon of modern cowardice, from where he had left it on the desk. "This came in handy after all," he admitted and tucked it in the waistband of his pants. "My sword." He leaned against the desk while Kendall retrieved his weapon of choice. She had to brace her foot against Kline's body and work the sword back and forth with both hands before it finally came free. Owain wiped the sword on a strip of gauze and then slid the blade under his belt. Kendall carried the shotgun in addition to her pistol. Fully armed, they helped each other to the door.

"Wait!" Owain staggered back to the desk. On top lay his open commonplace book. The top corner had been sliced off by Kline's axe. Several pages were torn loose. Practically all the leaves were crumpled or ripped; many were covered, or at least speckled with, smeared and drying blood. Owain's heart ached at the sight of his most prized possession, which he had safeguarded for hundreds of years, in such a lowly state. He felt that blow even

more keenly than he had Kline's axe. Long gone was the cover that Angharad had embroidered for the book, and now the contents were a step away from complete obliteration.

Owain reached out for a pressed leaf that, somehow, had survived so long intact in the pages, but when his fingers only lightly touched it, the leaf crumbled away to dust and was carried away by a draft. Suddenly stricken with grief for that which he would never recover, Owain lifted the page to which the leaf had been attached. Written in Angharad's hand was *whitethorn*, and beneath the word a space lighter than the surrounding, yellowed parchment was visible, and in the space the leaf had covered, written in the same hand, were the words, *Let it be thus. Thy will be done.*

"Sir?" Kendall, patient but clearly not wanting Owain to slip into an extended reverie, waited in the doorway. She had retrieved the suit that she'd fetched for him before the latest intrusion.

Owain's shock at the state of his book and presence of the long-hidden words was complete, but there was little for him to do except gather the loose pages and carry the sad bundle in his one good hand. He glanced longingly once more at his nearby chess board. Something distant, some germ of a thought, began to tug at Owain's mind, but there was no time. They needed to leave, if they hadn't lingered too long already. He rejoined

Kendall and, at last, they departed.

The front door was still open from Kline's indelicate entry. The night air struck Owain as particularly crisp after the heat and blood of battle within the demolished study. Kendall led him to the back door of the Rolls.

"Where should we go, sir?"

"Away from here," was Owain's only reply. What else could he tell her? So secure had he always been, he had never established alternate havens within the city. Who could threaten an elder of his status and resources?

As if he needed an answer to that unvoiced question of old, Owain saw, through the trees, headlights racing up the driveway from the direction of King Road.

Kendall saw the lights at the same instant. She slammed Owain's door and sprinted for the driver's side, her physical weakness overcome for the moment by the rush of adrenaline.

The other car screeched around the final curve as it cleared the woods without slowing. The black limousine was not made for such high-speed maneuvers, but the unseen driver handled the vehicle skillfully.

Kendall jumped into the driver's seat and had the engine gunning before her door was closed.

The limo, still at top speed, swerved into the driveway loop that circled the fountain and headed

straight for the front of the Rolls.

Kendall threw the Rolls into reverse and hit the accelerator. They began to race backward out of the loop.

But the limo was moving too quickly. It cut the circle sharply and rammed into the front of the Rolls. Owain's car spun out of control. It smashed backward into the wall of the fountain and came to a halt with sickening finality.

The double impacts propelled Owain from one side the Rolls to the other in rapid succession. He landed roughly on his broken shoulder. It was all he could do to fight off the dancing lights that again filled the blackness. He forced himself to hold onto the pain, to maintain consciousness, though the lure of peaceful oblivion was enticing indeed.

“Owain Evans!”

He heard his name being called but could not summon the will to peel his face from the leather seat. Even when the rear door was ripped from its hinges, he didn't look up. He didn't need to. He recognized the voice.

“Owain Evans! Your prince would speak with you!” shouted J. Benison Hodge, prince of Atlanta.

FOUR

And lo, the Earth shall open her womb and the Beast shall crawl forth.... The Undoing of the Children of Caine is at hand.

Kli Kodesh allowed the emptiness to wash over and through him. He imagined himself free of the mirror arcs of his prison—space and time—the walls of which had long eluded him. He had once spent a century counting his footsteps, calculating the yards that he'd traversed, yet never had he approached any boundary of his enclosure. Likewise, the vagaries of time had long since ceased to hold meaning for him. Seconds stretched into years, while conversely decades might pass more quickly than the single beat of a human heart.

But now the walls were within sight. The mortar that held stone to stone chipped and fell away. Soon the prophecies of Joseph the Lesser would breach the ramparts, and Kli Kodesh would be free. *How generous of the Arimathean*, thought Kli Kodesh, though he well knew that generosity had nothing to do with the besiegement of the Damned.

A nearby sound, however, put the lie to Kli Kodesh's oblivion. Footsteps. The soft brushing of feet across the stone slabs of the vault floor.

Countless stacked boxes, crates, and chests formed corridors within the vast chamber, the existence of which was known only to a handful who walked the sanctified halls far above. In the darkness, Kli Kodesh held his place among the arcane flotsam of centuries.

The shuffling footsteps came closer, until a robed figure emerged from behind a nearby stack. The hood of his cloak concealed his features. The keeper of the vault paused only briefly, then continued on his way, his methodical steps again scraping through the tomb-like silence of the chamber, which rose to invisible heights. Kli Kodesh watched the Capuchin recede into the darkness. The keeper knew many of the secrets of this place, but fewer than Kli Kodesh.

Kli Kodesh placed his hand on the crate for which he had traveled to this crypt beneath the Accursed City.

The Beast walks the Earth. The Undoing of the Children of Caine is at hand.



The shifting of protruding bone was almost more than Owain could stand as Benison laid hands upon him and dragged him from the wrecked car. Owain's growl of pain through clenched teeth did nothing to dissuade the prince. Owain, from the corner of his eye, saw Kendall pressed against her seat by the airbag that had deployed when the Rolls struck the fountain.

Fortunately, though of small consolation, Benison had Owain by the right arm, so the searing pain from Owain's jostled left shoulder was less than it might have been. Unfortunately, the prince was plainly working himself into one of his legendary murderous rages.

Benison lifted Owain to his feet, then shoved him backward against the side of the car. "Leaving again so soon?" snarled the prince. "I think not! We have much to discuss." The prince took a step back and drew the Civil War officer's saber that hung at his side.

Owain was collapsed in pain against the car. As he hugged his left arm to his body in an unsuccessful attempt to alleviate the throbbing, he noticed that Benison's ghoul Vermeil had propped a machine gun of some sort with a small bipod on the hood of the limo. The gun was, of course, trained

on Owain. Through the constant tremors of pain, he began to laugh quietly.

Benison was taken aback by this strange behavior. He stood, sword drawn, and watched Owain. "This is no laughing matter," the prince said with grim determination.

A new wave of pain brought Owain up short. After a moment he was able to speak. "Is that to aid discussion?" He nodded toward Vermeil and the machine gun.

"I will have justice." There was no hint of compromise in the prince's voice, nor of mercy.

"And Kline?" Owain scoffed. "That was for discussion too. I guess you sent him to ask me some question."

"I will have justice!" Benison repeated. His wide eyes shone with anticipation of battle.

Justice? This wasn't making sense to Owain. "Justice for what?"

Benison's eyes, Owain could tell, were tinged not just with battle lust but with madness. His bushy, auburn beard added to the formidable impression of his muscled girth. With trembling hand, the prince reached into the pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a bundled white cloth. Without compromising his sword hand, he began to unwrap the cloth, then let it fall to the ground. Benison held Owain's dagger, gilded hilt glittering in the light of the nearby gas lamp.

The dagger was a surprise to Owain, and not a pleasant one. He had slammed the dagger into the floor at the church the night the siren had been killed, the night the siren had been *murdered*. With the memory of her broken body, the smoldering rage within Owain began rising to match his pain. An axe had flown end over end through the air and struck her full in the face and neck. Owain could still hear that final instant of beautiful song, cut off as the axe split open her esophagus.

And here, standing before Owain, was the architect of that senseless destruction. Benison, with his messianic delusions, had ordered her murdered. Owain began to will freshly consumed blood to his injured shoulder. He would not be defenseless in the presence of this madman.

“Justice,” said Owain quietly, echoing Benison. The agent of the siren’s destruction, Owain thought with satisfaction, lay inside less than one hundred yards away—lacking most of a head.

Owain and Benison turned as one as the driver’s door to the Rolls creaked open. Kendall slowly extracted herself from the deflating airbag and stepped out of the car. Owain could not see from his vantage point if she concealed behind her the shotgun. She was in plain view of Vermeil, directly in his commanding field of fire. The collision had certainly done nothing to steady her after the blood loss of Owain feeding.

“What words of defense do you offer for yourself?” asked Benison, distracted from the object of his righteous indignation for only an instant. “This is your dagger.”

“If it is?” asked Owain. He had little hope of talking his way out of this confrontation, but with each minute he delayed, his vitae exerted its power. A thin veneer of flesh was already forming around the protruding collarbone. The bone itself was beginning to fuse together, though not in the proper location. Still, he would be better able to meet immediate danger if he could use his left arm and move with less pain. The prince didn’t seem to notice Owain’s injured shoulder or its increasing recovery. Or Benison, in his rage and confidence, did not care.

“There is no ‘if,’” said Benison, brandishing the dagger at Owain. “This is your dagger. You were at that damnable, demonic chapel the night the witch burned!”

Owain stared at the dagger. Was there any point in denying it was his? he wondered. Benison didn’t seem to be in a reasoning mood, but arguing might buy more time for Owain’s shoulder to stabilize.

“Who says it’s mine?” Owain demanded.

“It is yours,” said Benison. His eyes narrowed to a hateful glare. “You were there. You saw the witch die!”

Owain tensed. In his mind, he saw again the be-

ginning of the final blow. He watched helplessly as Kline raised his axe for the *coup de grâce*. Benison stood only feet away. Owain wanted to scream at the prince, to expose his petty, ignorant piety. But more than that, Owain wanted blood. He clenched his fists in anger, *both* fists. His shoulder was mending, but he needed a few more minutes. Owain kept his rage in check, letting it burn slowly.

“You have been lied to,” said Owain. He wracked his brain for ideas. *Who could have told him?* Had Albert, during pre-execution torture perhaps, told the prince of Owain’s presence at the rites? Owain thought that Albert had seen him at the church one night.

“I have seen with my own eyes,” said Benison, shifting his grip on his sword. His eyes and nostrils flared. Owain thought that the prince might snap and attack at any moment. But Owain, facing this tyrannical destroyer of beauty, felt himself capable of doing the same.

“I doubted the Tremere magic at first,” Benison continued. “But she used my sword,” he raised it before him, as if to make his point, “to show me my past. Just as she used your dagger to show me *your* past. You were there.” The prince pointed his blade at Owain, then hurled the dagger to the ground.

“You’ve been tricked,” Owain insisted. “You believe a Tremere?”

“I believe my wife,” said Benison, a sudden, calm reverence taking hold of him.

Owain felt his own sword hanging from his belt. He was in no mood to argue with the maniac prince any longer. “Eleanor,” said Owain. “The lying whore.”

The prince’s face reddened almost instantly. He drew in a deep breath and seemed suddenly taller. With a deafening roar, he charged Owain.

Owain drew his sword as he dove to the right. His movements felt awkward with his misaligned shoulder. Rolling and jumping to his feet was painful but possible.

Benison was on him at once, raining blow after blow down upon Owain. Owain managed to block the attacks but just barely. The prince was completely in the grip of battle rage. Each powerful blow of steel on steel reverberated through Owain’s body. He retreated step after step. Luckily, there was much room for maneuver. Otherwise, Benison’s superior strength would have been overwhelming.

After the first flurry of attacks, Owain began to hold his own. Though weakened from injuries and the healing expenditure of blood, he was a skilled swordsman and, fortunately, did not rely on raw power. One after another, he turned aside the forceful strikes of the prince.

Still Benison pressed the attack. Fueled by rage and brute force, one blow striking true could end

the duel. There was little of finesse about Benison's style with the sword. He needed none. His saber carried the force of thunder. Relentlessly, he attacked, blow after blow. Madness and righteous indignation glinted in his eyes.

Owain deflected each attack, but his defense was growing steadily less flashy, less precise. Gone were any stylistic flourishes of the blade. He had lost too much blood, been through too much tonight already. Benison's attacks were coming increasingly closer to finding their mark.

Benison swung again. Owain parried, and the two blades, upright and crossed, locked between the two combatants.

"Righteousness will triumph," muttered the prince. "The devil has taken you in. The city must be cleansed."

Owain was occupied trying to keep his blade up as Benison pressed the locked swords with his fearful might. *Devil. Demon.* The words stuck in Owain's mind. The prince spoke of the siren. Never having heard her song, he had decided she was some demonic creature—more so than any of the rest of them—and had her killed.

"Cleansed," said Owain with a pained sneer. "Of beauty?"

Benison leaned more heavily against the crossed swords. "Primus will not be destroyed!"

Primus? Owain was too busy trying to survive to

put much thought into deciphering the meaning of Benison's words. But even as Owain strained against his overpowering foe, memory of the siren was ever-present. Benison's religious drivel retreated as if into the distance. The fountain was suddenly silenced behind him. The delicate strands of the siren's song were all that Owain heard. He wasn't sure if the notes came from his mind or on the night breeze, but what did it matter? As the swords edged closer to his face and he faded in this contest of wills, at least he would die with the sound of that lilting melody filling his ears.

Owain dropped to one knee. The swords were inches from his face now. The prince pressed down with all of his considerable might.

"Satan's bitch had to die," Owain heard Benison say.

Satan's bitch.

Owain remembered how he'd first seen her in the sanctuary—her ethereal white gown, her gentle face turned upward, eyes closed in humble supplication. *Satan's bitch?* She had returned beauty to him. If that was the work of a demon, then so be it. God had never seen fit to send an angel to comfort Owain.

Owain raised his face to the crossed swords. He stared into Benison's face from merely inches away. "If she was evil, then God will damn her soul. But that is not *your* prerogative."

For much of the night a cold anger had been burning within Owain. Gaining strength from each injurious attack he sustained—the Brujah in the cellar, Kline, Benison—the fire had begun to reach into the past, drawing fuel from insults both real and imagined. Carlos, El Greco, Miguel—all had wronged Owain in various ways. The prince's talk of the siren not only added another abuse against Owain, it reawakened her song, and those notes that touched Owain's very soul took him back, opening even the pages of history to Owain and his fury.

With renewed strength, Owain braced himself against Benison's attack. Glaring into the prince's murderous eyes, Owain let the flames of hatred sweep over him. Slowly, the crossed blades began to recede from his face.

Benison grimaced and snarled as the swords were pushed, an interminable fraction of an inch at a time, closer and closer to him.

A low growl of pure hatred and fury began within Owain's belly. It gained force and volume as he pushed Benison back, as Owain stood again to his feet. The briefest flicker of doubt creased Benison's evangelical zeal. Owain had seen that expression on others—the confusion of the hunter who has become the hunted.

With an explosion of primal rage, Owain knocked Benison backward and off balance. The

prince stumbled several steps, then caught himself. He faced Owain more warily now, but with no less determination. Confidence and surety born of divine sanction still shone in his eyes.

“If it is a reckoning you want,” said Owain, “a reckoning you will have. And you have no idea of the justice that *I* deserve!”

Now it was Owain who launched himself at the prince. From how many battles had Owain emerged victorious? How many lives, both mortal and Cainite, had he cut short with his blade? With each crash of the swords, he could picture another. The years had left much blood on his hands. And he wanted more.

Owain attacked mercilessly. Benison was not unskilled with the sword, but both his temperament and his unrefined strength lent themselves more to the driving frontal assault than to prolonged defense. His parries were functional if not graceful, and even in the face of Owain’s breadth of experience and innate talent, the prince gave up ground grudgingly.

“Primus will not be destroyed,” Benison muttered over and over. After each of Owain’s blows, the prince repeated his mantra: “Primus will not be destroyed.” He seemed to draw renewed vigor from the words.

Owain fainted low then struck upward. Benison blocked the thrust, but Owain’s blade careened off

the prince's and caught Benison across the face. A gash opened from near his left ear to his nose. Blood began to flow into the auburn of his beard. An inch or two higher and Owain would have had the prince's eye.

But the wound was not serious, and the embarrassment of first blood seemed to bolster the prince. He began to press the attack after parrying Owain's blows. Benison held his ground, began to move forward again. His sword no longer carried the redoubled force of unchecked madness as he settled into a calmer rhythm of blows, but his untiring strength began to drive Owain back again.

Owain had come close. A half-blinded prince might likely have made the difference. But the trials of the night, as well as of the past nights, were taking their toll. He had lost much blood to Kline and had been forced to use more in healing himself just to stand a chance of surviving this duel. Now, the emotional force of rage mostly spent for both Owain and Benison, the prince was driving before him the weakened Ventrue.

For the first time since the fight began, Owain risked a quick glance around. Where, he wondered, was Kendall? Was she sneaking around for a surprise shot? But then he saw her, pale and leaning against the car. Vermeil still watched her. Kendall's strength and much of her blood, too, were already expended. No help from that quarter.

What strength remained was rapidly deserting Owain. Only his years of experience were saving him at this point, and as his reflexes slowed, each of Benison's blows came closer to landing.

The prince could sense impending victory. The pacing of his attacks slowed slightly, but he struck each blow with focused determination and force. Owain's wrist and arm began to ache from the repeated impacts. Soon, he knew, the prince's blade would slide past his weakened defense. Owain was giving up ground. He was back nearly to the wall of the fountain now.

Then, from the woods down the hill, came the roar of a car engine. Several cars, from the sound of them. Benison heard the noise as well. He slowed but did not suspend his attacks. Owain fought fatigue and distraction, watching closely in case the prince lowered his guard, but Benison had not forgotten his opponent.

First one car, then a second, and a third, tore around the curve from the woods. Owain's back was mostly to the glaring headlights. Benison shielded his eyes and, still, pressed the attack. From the corner of his eye, Owain could see Vermeil looking back and forth between the duel and Kendall on one side, the approaching cars on the other.

In rapid succession, the cars, headlights trained on Owain and the prince, slid to a halt on the far side of the fountain.

“Benison, stop!”

One more blow crashed against Owain’s blade, but then the prince took a step back. Benison maintained his guard and squinted into the headlights. Owain was not sure if he could have summoned the strength to attack even had Benison completely ignored him. Edging away from the prince, Owain glanced across the fountain as well.

At least a half-dozen vehicles were lined as far back as the edge of the trees. By the fountain, and concealed by the blinding light, stood the figures of numerous individuals. Lighting and movement made it impossible to tell exactly how many.

“Listen to our demands!”

This time Owain recognized the voice of Thelonious, Brujah primogen of Atlanta. Benison recognized Thelonious as well. The prince’s bearded jaw jutted forward in renewed anger.

“I do not bargain with traitors!” Benison called back.

Owain stepped back a little farther, his sword lowered at his side. The blade felt as if it weighed hundreds of pounds. This exchange between Benison and Thelonious was surprising to Owain. He knew from what Lorenzo Giovanni had said that the anarchists were displeased with the prince. Apparently, Thelonious had thrown in his lot with the rabble. *Not too surprising*, Owain decided on second thought. Almost every Brujah he had

known was either a romantic utopian like Thelonious, who wanted to right the injustices of the world, or a thug like Kline whose perfect world consisted of license to abuse whomever he pleased.

“You are the one who has betrayed the Cainite race,” said Thelonious to the prince.

Benison tightened his grip on his sword. “I? I have betrayed our race?” He was shocked by the accusation. “I offer salvation to this city. To the world!” The fanatical glint returned to Benison’s eyes as he spoke his gospel. “It is you who are the traitor. The duty of the primogen is to assist the prince in ruling.”

“The duty of the primogen is to guard against the abuses of the prince,” Thelonious countered.

Benison was known among the Kindred as an orator and debater of some skill, but this night his often shallow reserve of patience was completely dry. He stepped toward the fountain and raised his sword. “You will surrender at once, or there will be no mercy.”

Owain heard the click of various firearms being cocked or loaded among Thelonious’s troop. The prince seemed to take no notice of such ominous portent. Owain eased farther away from Benison.

A shot rang out from somewhere in the crowd. The bullet zinged between Owain and Benison. Owain dove to the side. Benison, however, charged ahead. He leapt the low wall of the fountain and

splashed forward through the knee-deep water.

At the same instant, Vermeil opened fire on the gathering with his machine gun. Bodies dove in every direction for cover. The blinding headlights, one after another, burst in showers of sparks and glass. Screams and the hiss of air escaping punctured tires filled the night.

Yet amidst the chaos, Benison charged forward. He didn't care that he would soon block Vermeil's field of fire. The prince existed solely to assail those who would oppose him and his holy vision.

Owain scrambled on hands and knees away from the circular drive. Kendall, having dropped to the ground at the first sound of gunfire, was hot on his heels. From the side of the swirling mass of bodies, Owain had a clearer picture of the scene. He could see now that Thelonious had brought with him a significant number of supporters, at least ten, maybe fifteen. Among them, Owain caught a glimpse of Benjamin, suspected lover of the prince's wife Eleanor.

That should make for an interesting dynamic, Owain mused, when a stray bullet pierced a nearby tree and reminded him that this was not, perhaps, the best place for spectators.

Kendall had caught up with him now. For the moment, at least, they were completely forgotten, Benison and Vermeil focusing on the anarchists and vice versa. Owain was not inclined to test how long that would last.

“I thought you probably wanted this,” said Kendall, as she pulled from the wad of his dress clothes she’d tucked beneath her shirt the tattered commonplace book, which Owain had undoubtedly dropped when the limo slammed into the Rolls. Somehow, she had managed to salvage the treasure that Owain had forgotten.

Meanwhile, Benison waded across the pool and into battle. He ignored the bullets flying wild as well as those that ripped into his body. Among Thelonious and the anarchs at last, the prince wielded his blade with deadly intent. Cainites, and parts of Cainites, flew in every direction. Never mind that they outnumbered Benison better than ten to one. Neither the odds nor the anarchs’ mismatched collection of clubs, stakes, and handguns slowed Benison in the least.

“Let’s go,” said Owain. He was far from convinced that the prince would fall, even against so many. It was just this type of head-on confrontation that Benison thrived upon. Even thronged tightly around him, the anarchs appeared to be no match for his sword.

Even if Thelonious managed to prevail, Owain, in his weakened state, didn’t want to confront *any* Cainite, especially a mob of anarchs incited to violence. That was an equally unhealthy scenario for an elder such as himself.

He and Kendall rose to a low crouch and dashed

for the tree line. Amidst the carnage by the fountain, no one noticed them. Just within the cover of the woods, the two skirted the driveway and circled behind the melee. An anarch floated face-down in the fountain, blood turning the water a sickly, light red.

Still Benison hacked away, while the anarchs assailed him on every side. How the prince had avoided having his head blown off, Owain couldn't fathom.

Several of the anarchs' cars, doors open, lights on, had been left partway down the drive, away from the current bloodshed. Normally Owain could have ensured with the slightest concentration that he and Kendall would not be seen as they raced for the last car, but he was doing well to keep moving. He had no energy to spare.

The intensity of the battle, however, served to shield them as Owain could not. The second car they checked, a battered dark sedan, still had the key in the ignition. They jumped in, Kendall behind the wheel. Owain could drive if pressed, but she was far more versed in the operation of these modern vehicles.

Away from the fight, exhaustion swept over Owain. He was thrown back against the seat as Kendall gunned the engine and the car sped away from the main house—from what had passed as his most recent home. Owain didn't look over his

shoulder to see if anyone noticed their escape. He didn't care. He let his sword drop from his hand. It fell against the door, and then there was only the sound of the engine, and the ground passing beneath them.

Owain expected Kendall to ask him where they should go, but she drove in silence. He did not have an answer for her, at any rate. Perhaps she knew that already. She had grown fairly adept at reading his moods and intentions—a valuable, and potentially dangerous, asset for a ghoul.

The wind blowing in the open window was merely cold, not refreshing. Owain pulled his blood-stiffened hair away from his face. He needed to think, to decide what to do next. Several hours of darkness remained. For the moment, he simply closed his eyes and laid his head back. Owain allowed himself the luxury of losing himself in the sound of the engine as he and his one surviving ghoul sped away from the haven that had never truly been his home.

FIVE

The stolen car pulled up to the private hangar that was owned by an obscure import-export company, the subsidiary of some branch of a division of some larger subsidiary. In front of the hangar stood the current acting manager, Lorenzo Giovanni, and his bodyguard, Alonzo.

Owain stepped out of the car. He was not impressed with the decrepit vehicle. It lacked much of the comfort that he had grown accustomed to with the Rolls. The dented sedan with the odd-colored rear panel had possessed the paramount advantage of accessibility, however, and it had gotten Owain and Kendall where they needed to go.

For the second time that night, Owain greeted Lorenzo.

“I did not expect to see you again so soon,” said Lorenzo. Polite to a fault, he still had to have noticed Owain’s rather wrinkled attire. Owain’s subterfuge of carrying his sword wrapped in his suit jacket was thin as well.

“I apologize for bringing you out here again,” said Owain, as he and Lorenzo exchanged kisses on each cheek. “I know you have more important duties.”

“Nonsense,” said Lorenzo, gripping Owain firmly by the shoulders. “I came as soon as I received your call. What else would I do for a friend?”

That was exactly what Owain was wondering—what else would Lorenzo do?—and was the reason Owain wanted to waste no time.

As he and Kendall had rushed away from the estate, he had felt that Benison was on the verge of scattering the anarchs. They had the advantage of numbers, but Benison was a born warrior. Owain had seen the type before. They had to be brought down with guile, not naked force.

At any rate, if the prince chased off the anarchs, he might pursue them, or he might return his attention to Owain. And Owain was most definitely not ready for another fight. He needed time to rest and recuperate. Already he had deformed his own shoulder by forcing it to heal before the bone was set, but he’d had no choice.

Owain was less concerned that Benison would catch up with him than he was that Lorenzo, seeking political advantage, would delay Owain's departure. Owain and Giovanni were on favorable terms, true, but a fledgling alliance could turn quickly should one side be able to realize unparalleled advantage over the other.

Lorenzo smiled reassuringly at Owain.

Owain knew with what little regard the prince held the Giovanni. That was the primary reason that Lorenzo had made subtle overtures to Owain. Who but a Ventrue was a more natural candidate to usurp the title of prince from Benison? In Atlanta, no one. And as the political situation unraveled around Benison, with the anarchs revolting and the possibility of intervention by the Camarilla Inner Circle, Lorenzo had proven increasingly friendly.

But what if, Owain wondered, the prince were able to solidify his position, perhaps by single-handedly defeating much of the anarch faction? The Camarilla would be far less likely to interfere if order was restored, and then any enemies of the prince would be not rival claimants but outlaws. How much more favorably would Benison view the Giovanni if the clan's representative in the city were to hand over to the prince a criminal and a heretic?

"The plane is ready?" Owain asked.

“It is being prepared,” said Lorenzo.

Owain could not read the ghoul. How much of what had transpired did Lorenzo know? Was the prince’s desire to see Owain dead common knowledge? Owain had no way to know. Benison could have offered a reward, for all Owain knew. But then why would Lorenzo have proven helpful earlier in the evening? Perhaps he was playing a waiting game, watching to see if the balance of power would shift for or against the prince. If that were the case, then Owain’s fate could well depend on the outcome of Benison’s battle with the anarchs, and how soon the Giovanni learned of it. There was no time to be lost.

“You would be more comfortable waiting on board.” Lorenzo gestured to the small jet nearby. A ground crew of three checked various pieces of equipment and fueled the plane.

More comfortable...or trapped, Owain thought. *Could Lorenzo be so relaxed if he were leading the fly into the web?* Owain did not like the idea of shutting himself in the plane before it was ready, but neither did he want to alert Lorenzo that anything was amiss—more than the phone call, or the battered sedan, or Owain’s peculiar garb had already alerted the ghoul.

“How soon will we be able to depart?” Owain asked.

“Within the half hour,” said Lorenzo.

“You’re too kind.” Owain nodded to Kendall. She had left the shotgun in the car. The weapon was all but impossible to conceal and, again, Owain wanted to avoid alarming Lorenzo.

The four began walking toward the plane. Owain watched carefully for any sign of ambush or trickery. The ground crew, Owain sensed, were all mortal. Each seemed to be engaged in some technical activity, not that Owain could have distinguished a legitimate maintenance task from a ruse.

Owain, Kendall, and both Giovanni paused at the foot of the stairs to the plane. “I wish you a peaceful journey,” said Lorenzo. “I am pleased that I have been able to help you.”

Owain was not sure if it was the nuances of the Giovanni’s slight Italian accent or the particular phrasing Lorenzo chose that froze the Ventrue, one foot on the first of the stairs. He looked at the open portal at the top of the stairs, and it seemed to him the gaping maw of some ravenous beast. A chilly sense of foreboding welled up within Owain. He gripped the handrails on either side of the stairs with such force that, were it not for his weakened state, his fingers would have dug into the soft metal.

“Are you all right?” Lorenzo asked from behind.

Owain could feel their eyes turned to him, their gazes boring into his back. *He knows*, Owain thought. *He knows, and I am climbing to my doom.* It was not too late for Owain to turn and flee. The car

was not far. Lorenzo, Alonzo, the ground crew—none of them could stop Owain. But he had already, after unceremoniously fleeing his own estate, determined the only course of action that was acceptable to him. He would not remain in Atlanta in hiding, nor would he flee to some other American city to become entangled in the machinations of some other group of scheming Kindred. Eleanor had beaten him. She had joined forces with the Tremere and, with the aid of their magic, had revealed a portion of Owain's disloyalty to the prince. Owain's place in the city was already destroyed, and he did not care enough for Atlanta to fight for a new place. His dislike, rapidly blooming into unqualified hatred, for Eleanor, he would hoard. For now, he would leave the city, the continent, and pursue a plan that would redress at least some of the wrongs that had been perpetrated against him. Perhaps at some point in the future, he would see Eleanor again....

Currently, however, his path led him away, and the first step of that path lay directly before him.

"Owain?" said Lorenzo, concern in his voice.

Slowly, Owain turned. *Is your concern for me, dear Lorenzo? Owain wanted to say, or for your treacherous designs, that I might walk away and ruin them?* But Owain held his tongue.

Lorenzo and Alonzo regarded their guest with mild confusion. Kendall watched her master closely.

“It has been quite some time, Lorenzo,” said Owain, “since you came into the service of your family.”

The seeming *non sequitur* puzzled Lorenzo. “I have seen my share of nights spent in honorable duty,” he said.

“And do not these vehicles,” Owain gestured to the jet behind him, “make you uneasy in the least?”

Lorenzo smiled despite himself, convinced now, just as Owain intended, that the Ventrue’s hesitancy was a result of skepticism in the face of modern technology, a common enough affliction, as the Giovanni well knew, among elder Cainites. “I assure you,” said Lorenzo, “no detail has been overlooked.”

The words struck Owain like a physical blow. *No detail has been overlooked.* He glanced around behind his host. *Probably the hangar is full of assassins hired by the Giovanni to chase me down should I try to flee,* Owain thought.

No detail has been overlooked.

“Indeed.” Owain turned reluctantly and began to ascend the stairs. He would take the chance that Lorenzo, if not necessarily trustworthy, was at the least not informed of the prince’s whereabouts and activities that night. If Owain was wrong, he realized, he was climbing into his final tomb. He was playing Jonah to this metallic whale, without the benefit of a loving God to act as guardian and pro-

tector. Owain heard Kendall's footsteps as she climbed the stairs behind him. He did not look back as he stepped through the door.

The interior of this plane provided no fantasy diversion for the wary traveler but was instead a luxurious suite furnished with thick, leather couches and chairs. Owain collapsed into one of the chairs. Kendall, ever vigilant, investigated the rear bedroom before returning and giving in to her exhaustion.

The door to the plane slammed closed. The sound echoed in Owain's mind like the grating of a stone lid slid shut atop a great sarcophagus.

Within the half hour. That was when Lorenzo had said the plane would be ready to depart. Thirty minutes—short enough to sound imminent, long enough that a delay of fifteen to thirty minutes—time aplenty to arrange an attack—would not arouse undue suspicion. Owain laid his head back on the chair. The fight was beaten out of him. He had given in not to despair but to resignation. *If treachery is to occur, he thought, let it happen now, and we will be done with it.* He and Kendall sat in silence. There was nothing to say. Either hired killers of the Giovanni or maybe the prince himself would rush on board, or the plane would take off shortly. Owain did not care which. Betrayal would bring an end to struggle, an option that sounded more attractive with each passing moment. For

nearly a millennium, he had known nothing but struggle, and accompanying many of those struggles was defeat. What was one more defeat that would bring unending rest? Rest that, in his weakness and cowardice, Owain had lacked the will to visit upon himself. The opportunity had presented itself to him with every sunrise, year after year after year. Despite the seductive promise of release, however, Owain had lacked the courage for suicide. He had failed night after night. Each sunset was, for him, another stamp of defeat.

The slamming sound of metal on metal distracted Owain. The entire plane shook slightly. Kendall was out of her seat instantly, .45 drawn and aimed forward, prepared should either the door to the cockpit or to the outside open. Owain merely sat and waited. A moment passed.

“Closing a compartment beneath the plane?” Kendall guessed.

“Perhaps,” said Owain.

Kendall sat, and for some time they remained there without speaking. Undoubtedly the cabin was bugged, and besides, what was there to say? As the ground crew ostensibly completed preparations, every routine sound from outside the plane conjured some imminent menace. Kendall kept a hand on her weapon. Owain closed his eyes and tried to find again the comfort of numbness, the emotional emptiness that had been his only refuge for so many

years. But the siren, with her gift of song, had in return taken from Owain the capacity to lose himself in nothingness.

He greeted almost with disappointment the sound of the engines firing to life. The plane moved slowly at first as it taxied to the runway, then Owain was pressed into his chair as they picked up speed and lifted off. He sighed audibly. *You had your chance, Lorenzo*, Owain thought. The journey would continue.

There were, of course, no windows in the cabin. Owain could not see Atlanta falling away below the plane, but already he could feel the separation. He would never return to this place, he felt. There were many arrangements to be made. His lawyers would have to wire him funds, to oversee the sale of the estate. Beyond that, there was nothing to hold him there.

Owain might have felt liberated at this turn of events. He had access to virtually unlimited financial resources and the opportunity to begin anew almost anywhere he chose. Instead, he felt what he had felt, in varying degrees but without fail, since he'd first left his native Wales hundreds of years ago—adrift, rudderless, subject to the fickle winds of change. There had been various ports of call over the years—France, Toledo, Atlanta—but always Owain had known in his heart that these places were merely markers upon his journey, never

the destination. Always he had desired to move homeward. *Adref*. But always that had been denied him. So now, his existence in Atlanta destroyed, himself chased away by the prince's wife as surely as the Normans had chased him from Wales, Owain was again adrift.

Lorenzo Giovanni had not relieved Owain of the burden of continuing his journey, so Owain would pursue his own plans. He would not look to a new beginning, but to the wrongs of the past. For the time being, there was only one betrayal that he could address, and the desire to do so led him to his next destination—Berlin.

As he and Kendall had escaped from Owain's estate, Owain had had no idea where he should turn, neither for the long term nor in the next few hours when the sun would begin to rise. He'd pondered the possibility of calling on one of his mortal acquaintances from the King Road Club. He could commandeer a windowless basement or some other such accommodations. In fact, he'd realized, he could force his way into practically any mortal dwelling to wait out the daylight hours, but mortals could be so unpredictable, and one never could be sure who might drop by or what complications might arise.

Owain's concentration had been hampered, however, by fatigue and by his consternation at being chased from his haven. Even thoughts of vital, practical considerations had given way to reflec-

tion on the losses he had suffered. Changing clothes in the backseat of the dilapidated stolen car, he'd thought about the few material items that held any meaning for him. His fingers had caressed the commonplace book that he held against his chest. The damage to the book distressed him, but the keepsake survived. Owain's sword, as well, he had to admit, carried as much sentimental as practical value.

These two items, however, were the extent of what had been salvaged. Owain closed his eyes at the thought of Kline's axe digging into the black-walnut desk that had been a treasure for years.

There was the chess set also—the board fashioned of the finest cherry wood, the pieces carved by an artisan who'd witnessed with his own eyes the fateful Battle of Hastings and had crafted from memory the likenesses of Harold Godwin and William the Bastard. Owain had cared for the set for nearly nine hundred years, yet it was another casualty tonight. *Another casualty that Benison will one day pay for with his lifeblood!* thought Owain.

As he'd savored the pain of loss, drinking of it deeply to firm his resolve against all who had wronged him, against Benison, against God Himself, Owain had been struck by what a pious man might claim as epiphany. A nagging, unrecognized thought from earlier in the evening had come back to him.

Before Owain had left his study that last time, he'd looked around the room. His gaze had come to rest on the now lost chess set, but there had been no time to reflect upon what, in the car an hour later, had become so painfully obvious.

The board was still set with the game that was Owain's great humiliation. His long-time opponent El Greco had, with one move—*Rook to King's Knight five*—taken advantage of Owain's overconfidence to transform seemingly inescapable and total defeat into sudden victory. El Greco's porous defense had been a ruse, a trap of the grandest magnitude, a trap that Owain had charged headlong into with much gusto.

But Owain remembered what he'd seen in Toledo—the game that was displayed by El Greco's desk. The old Toreador had pointed at the board, the board that was set with an endgame in which white was on the verge of defeat. *You have bested me on that field of battle*, El Greco had said, as if that game was the same one that Owain would have set upon his board in Atlanta. Owain had attributed the comment to dementia at the time, but now he did not think so.

In addition to the unexplained remark, there was the letter that Owain had discovered, the letter that supposedly he had written, the letter in his own handwriting that *could not be his handwriting*. *My luck is holding in matters more weighty even*

than chess, so do not condemn your own abilities overly much, the letter read.

El Greco thought that Owain had bested him at chess. In the forged letter, the faux-Owain had claimed victory. Meanwhile, Owain had believed that El Greco had beaten *him*. Coincidence?

Of course not.

It was this realization that had led Owain in search of aid from the Giovanni yet again. This was the discovery that pointed him to Berlin. For there, in the once-divided city, was a small inn to which both he and El Greco had long directed their correspondences, *their chess moves*. The two Cainites, one a priscus of the Sabbat, the other ostensibly a Camarilla elder, had not wanted their interactions discovered. With the chess moves years, if not decades, apart, a mere misdirection of the couriers to a third point had seemed ample precaution.

Apparently not, thought Owain.

El Greco had made the arrangements. Owain had always sent his couriers to the inn. The arrangement had proceeded smoothly, or so Owain, and apparently El Greco, had believed. Someone at the inn, however, had played each of the elder Cainites as a fool. Letters had been replaced, and the deception had been carried out flawlessly. Owain had been unable to find fault with the forgery of his own writing. *How long has it been, he wondered, since I received an unaltered letter from El Greco?*

What was doubly insulting was that whoever had carried out this charade had maintained two separate chess games, one against Owain, one against El Greco, and had soundly beaten each of them.

As Owain rested on the Giovanni jet speeding across the Atlantic, he seethed with the knowledge that not only had he been outmaneuvered and forced by Eleanor to abandon his haven, he had also been duped by an unknown.

But why? Owain wondered. *What was the point of stealing a game?* For that was what had happened. *What did this someone have to gain?* The answer to that question, Owain believed, awaited in Berlin. He already had quite definite ideas about what the mystery chess master had to lose.



Kli Kodesh traveled through a haze of violence, betrayal and death. The images swirled around him like a maelstrom, assailing him from all sides. It was his legacy, a curse visited upon him long ago, in the days when the legions of Rome still occupied the Holy Land.

He was much changed from the young firebrand who had raged against Caesar's yoke and sold all his possessions to feed those starving in the streets of Jerusalem. That young man had died centuries ago—not on a Roman spearpoint, but crushed beneath the weight of thousands of hurled stones,

stealthy knife thrusts, creaking nooses.

Time had turned his two consuming passions—his hatred of all things Roman and his struggle to redeem the poor—inward. Kli Kodesh no longer looked up to see the unspoken accusation on the faces of those surrounding him. All were lit by the same inhuman fire—rage, vengeance, cunning, suffering. All were the same to him now.

If he could not shut out the unending procession of violent acts, at least he could avoid any awareness of individual depravity and suffering. He would not meet their eyes, but kept his gaze low, focused on their hands. The clenched fists, the hands raised in supplication, the wrists opened and spilling life, these were his go-betweens, his points of contact with his fellow man.

Kli Kodesh reached out hesitantly to brush one of the hands that came to him through the maelstrom. He saw the fingers curl, jerk, clench. Kli Kodesh felt the chill before his fingers closed on the swollen, blue flesh—a living hand no longer.

Defeated, he released his grip, watched the cold hand spiral outward into the storm. Already there were dozens of others slapping, clutching, clamoring for attention. He brushed them aside with a sweep of his arm and with his free hand took up his burden once again.

The long oaken box dragged behind him. The wood was ancient and faded. It creaked ominously

and threatened to splinter apart at each new bump or gap in the road.

Through the cracks, it was possible to catch a glimpse of the box's contents—a patch of faded finery, a curl of midnight-black hair, a hint of bloodless and ghostly pale flesh. A handful of centuries had crept past since last the light of the moon had played upon the wood grain and metal bands.

The box and its contents were not heavy, but Kli Kodesh found them a great burden. He suddenly felt very old and very tired. His two-thousand-year exile was, at last, drawing to its close. Surely the final release was at hand. This was the Endtime. This was the Ravening. These were the days of Burning Blood.

What had begun with the first Kinslaying outside the gates of Eden would be undone. The benighted fellowship that Kli Kodesh had joined with a betrayal in another garden outside the walls of Jerusalem, would be broken. The Earth would shrug off its plague of the Damned, and those who hungered for blood would no longer stalk wretched man.

Kli Kodesh had gathered and hoarded scraps of prophecy, saga and lore. For two millennia he had sifted shards of the future from the uncertain sands of time. Kli Kodesh followed the treacherous lines of prophecy as easily as most men trace a route on a map.

Many uncertainties still remained in his mind, however. Too many uncertainties.

He had first glimpsed the Final Pattern taking form as he emerged dripping from the sea and stumbled into the City of Angels. Kli Kodesh tracked the elusive pattern across the Atlantic and back to its lair in the City of the Scar. There, at the center of the vast web of prophecy, he saw before him a shining path stretching away towards the City of the Sword and a meeting with the one whom the ancient tales named the Kinslayer.

Kli Kodesh could feel the very fabric of time beginning to unravel. The Grand Alignment that would bring about the promised release was close at hand. Kli Kodesh was intent upon hastening that end.

No lesser quest would have brought him back to the Accursed City, to the nest of the hated Golden Eagle, to Rome. He had seen seven angels perched upon the Seven Hills, each bearing a golden trumpet and a flaming sword.

He'd known it was time. Time to descend upon the City of the Adversary with wailing and gnashing of teeth. Time to harrow the catacombs of the Bishop of Rome and loose what had been bound after Jacques de Molay and the last Templar Masters were put to the torch. Time to retrieve the ancient box, the repository sealed with the Power of Three—the triple ward of ancient sigils, holy

blood and the secret name of Baphomet.

Kli Kodesh had slipped secretly past the keeper of the vaults to claim his treasure, the final fragment of the converging Triad.

Yes, surely a great reckoning was at hand. Even now he could make out, from somewhere inside the decaying wooden box, the faint scratching of bloodied fingernails, the rising howl of the Ravening Beast straining against its tether.

SIX

Nicholas lay naked in a tight ball on the ground as a light dusting of snow fell upon him. As the burning spread throughout his body, he wished for death, for an end to the pain, for peace.

Why? he wondered. *Why?* Most of the Cainites he had seen or heard of with the blood curse had died within days, weeks at the longest. Yet Nicholas's suffering had continued for months. Not only continued, but grown far worse. The curse would not relinquish its hold on him, would not abandon him to death.

The Gangrel tried to restrain his whimpering. His eyes squeezed tightly shut, he tried to listen to his surroundings, to the sound of each snowflake

that landed around him on the mountain, to the cold breeze that caressed the Alps. Nicholas did not know if he was still in France or if he had crossed into Switzerland. He did not care.

Again the burning shot through him.

He pulled his knees more tightly to his face, bit into his forearm until he could taste the blood—the cursed blood that was his tormentor. He could barely feel the snow against his naked back and hips.

How often had he fed the past few nights? He could not remember. How many mortals, how many animals, had failed to slake his thirst?

Death, he pleaded. *Let it come for me.*

But what came for Nicholas was the hunger, and inevitably the unrelenting pain.

He wished for Blackfeather, his friend. The strange Cherokee Gangrel, with his spraypainted circle and his Zippo and crumpled cigarettes, had somehow kept the pain at arm's length. Neither gone nor forgotten, but imperceptible. Blackfeather had seemed to see so much that, for Nicholas, was beyond perception.

Forces rising from beyond the Veil, Nicholas thought. He had felt them. They had tasted of him. *There is more at work here than the curse.*

But then the pain washed over him again, and all semblance of thought fled, chased by the imagined odor of searing flesh. The burning was born

in his belly, but so quickly it spread. It tore upward through his chest and heart, tasting the blood that flowed within him, wanting only more. The pain ripped into his head, forced screams from his throat, pounded at his temples. He covered his eyes lest they explode into the night.

And then it was gone. For the moment.

Nicholas sobbed tears of blood onto the fresh snow. He was falling again. As surely as if he had leapt from an alpine peak, he was falling, and something far older was rising for him.



Owain stood near the crest of the green hill. A short distance ahead of him was a lone hawthorn tree, its branches bearing leaves but no flowers. Heavy fog encircled the hill, but Owain was not concerned by his isolation. He eyed the hawthorn warily. Vague remembrances tugged at him; half-formed images danced through his mind like so many spectral interlopers, revealed momentarily in his peripheral vision but gone if he tried to confront them directly.

Inexplicably, he was drawn through the night toward the tree. As surely as a moth investigates the open flame, Owain climbed the slope. He knew that this scene had been played out many times in other worlds, in other times, yet that knowledge did not stay his advance. In his mind's eye, he

glimpsed that same hawthorn, willful and animate, its branches reaching for him, violently taking hold of him.

Owain found himself clutching at his chest. Was it through memory or premonition that he felt thirsting tendrils of wood penetrating his flesh as easily as roots spread through the soil? But, no, he saw again. It was merely a tree that stood before him. These irrational fears, impossible flights of fancy, could not come to pass. No more so than that a man, once mortal but denied true death, could walk the earth for hundreds of years.

As Owain stood with his hand upon his chest, he was distracted from his fears by an oddity that only slowly dawned upon him. He took away his hand, then slowly returned it to his breast. Again, he felt the strange sensation of a rhythmic pulse, a heartbeat—the beating of his mortal heart.

Owain jerked his hand away from his chest, afraid that he might be mistaken. He looked at his fingers, and they were the fleshy digits of a mortal, not the drawn, white fingers of a Cainite. Blood coursed through arteries and veins. He breathed in deeply and felt air fill his lungs. Above Owain, the clouds began to part. The night had turned into glorious daybreak, and the rays of the sun were burning away the engulfing fog. Owain incredulously raised his hands toward the sun that, for so long, had been forbidden him.

He realized then that he was no longer alone atop the hill.

Stepping from the receding fog on the far side of the hilltop was the form of a woman. She stood tall, her bearing as proud as her stride was graceful and confident. Her shimmering dark hair, hanging loose to her shoulders, framed her gently rounded face. She approached the hawthorn, then stopped, the hem of her gown flowing about her and rustling the grass.

“Angharad,” Owain said her name, not quite believing.

She stood resplendent in the dawning light.

Owain took a step toward her. His heart pounded thunderously now. He felt the long-forgotten beating at his temples, in his neck, in his wrists. She stood waiting for him.

Throughout his brief mortal life, she had been his one true desire. Yet he had denied himself her, and she him. All out of loyalty to a brother who’d then had Owain murdered, who had inadvertently perpetuated Owain’s unfulfilled longing throughout eternity.

But Owain’s mortal heart was restored to him. Angharad was restored to him.

She stood, waiting, smiling calmly, before the hawthorn tree. The curve of her lips, her gentle eyes, beckoned Owain forward. Each step brought him closer to the desire of so many centuries—to

take her in his arms, to revel in the knowledge that they would never again be parted, to join with her in the most spiritual union born of precious mortality.

“Angharad.” He knelt before her, and as he took her hands in his, tears of joy streamed down his face—not the bloody tears of the eternally damned, but the salty pearldrops of love fulfilled, of humanity. Owain buried his face in her gown. He felt beneath his cheek the gentle curve of the belly that would never bear child.

“Owain.”

For centuries, he had tried to recall exactly the tone of her voice, the sound of his name upon her lips. After so long, her mere speech unsteadied him more than any lover’s caress. Owain kissed her hand tenderly just once, and she drew away from him.

“Owain.”

He looked up into her eyes. They were soft, still, but suddenly black, black as...black as Owain’s own. Black as his eyes; black as his soul after so many years of longing and hatred.

Angharad reached into the folds of her gown and brought forth a gilded dagger, Owain’s dagger. She held it across her upturned palms for him to see.

Again, as with the hawthorn tree behind Angharad, distant memories struggled to make their way to the surface, but they were mere fragments of thoughts, stone with no mortar or

foundation. Owain did not want to lend form to them. He did not want to see the dagger, the gift to his nephew Morgan, whom Owain had sent to certain doom. Owain did not want to see the dagger that he knew more recently had cost him a haven of long standing.

He wanted to reclaim his love as lover. He wanted to reclaim his humanity.

“Owain,” she said his name again. He gazed into the eyes, black upon black, that were mirrors of his own. And she named him.

“Kinslayer.”

Owain recoiled from his love, and as he knelt before her and before the hawthorn, the rays of the emerging sun burned him. His flesh began to sizzle and pop, and in only a moment was fairly boiling, as if it were liquid. He cowered from the sun, but there was no shade to protect him.

“Kinslayer,” she named him again, and only then did he see the upraised dagger in her hand. She plunged the blade down into his chest, into his beating heart.

Owain grasped the gilded hilt protruding from his breast. His blood flowed freely onto the earth, and as he slumped over to the ground, he could see the hawthorn tree behind Angharad. It was blooming. Before his eyes, as his vision faded, flowers were opening, and like so many snowflakes, the petals drifted silently to the earth.



The sheet and blankets were ripped loose from the bed. Owain held them bunched at his chest, his fingers clenched in a deathgrip. *Come back!* He moaned as the images of the vision quickly receded into that hazy realm of dream. But they had been so real. *She* had been so real.

But as the seconds passed, her reality was revealed as mere illusion, her snow-fresh skin as ethereal phantasm, that stuff of the mind that served to heighten anticipation and desire, yet rarely fulfilled. Owain was not atop a grassy hillside. There was no hawthorn, no fog. No Angharad.

Owain let his head loll back on the pillows. He was alone in the spacious bedroom. Beyond the closed double doors lay the rest of the palatial hotel suite. In every city where brokers of power and influence came into contact with one another, and Berlin was certainly one of those cities, there were guests who preferred security to a view. Owain was interested in a different security than most, and though interior suites, devoid of windows and limited in access, were not inexpensive, he was not a victim of budgetary constraints.

Kendall had secured the room, and Owain, expelled from his haven and suffering debilitating physical weakness, had thankfully collapsed onto

the king-sized bed, his body demanding long-denied rest. That was three nights ago.

Three nights and days of unending visions, one scene blurring into the next and the next. Always, there were similarities—hill, staff, tree, tower—but always there were differences as well. The shadowy chess master might beguile Owain, or the stranger Joseph might rail against him. Or, Owain recalled with pained heart, he might glimpse his beloved.

The most recent vision was the worst. He had not seen her through a distant window, nor had he, as a specter incapable of speech or touch, watched her helplessly. Those past visions had been tantalizingly painful in their own right. This time, however, he had been there with her. He had touched her hands, pressed his face against her body in a gesture more intimate than ever he had dared in mortal life. Owain closed his eyes again. He wanted so desperately to see her, to be with her again. He had been with her, and she had known him. And she had accused him.

Kinslayer.

Owain winced. He opened his eyes slowly. He was still so tired.

Kinslayer.

He could not deny the charge. After forty years of unlife, Owain had returned to his homeland Wales. He had snapped his brother Rhys's neck and tossed the stinking carcass down a staircase. Within

a matter of nights, Owain had orchestrated the death of his brother's eldest son and had enthralled the other. Morgan. How naïve and ambitious he had been. How much like Owain himself. How utterly human.

In attempts to crush that human spirit, Owain had pushed and goaded Morgan to atrocities nearly as foul as those committed by Owain himself. But in that regard, Morgan was strong. The fire of rebellion burned ever brightly within him, and soon Owain, frustrated, grew tired of his game and sent his nephew to his doom.

Kinslayer.

Truer words had never been spoken.

But why did Angharad name Owain thus? That question bothered him more than any nonexistent vanities he might have harbored regarding his own moral character. She had never known of those deeds. The last time Owain had visited her, old and blind, tucked away in the Abbey of Holywell, Rhys and Iorwerth were already dead, but Morgan still lived. She had known of none of it. Then how did she name him?

"She is of the visions," Owain reminded himself. "A phantasm of your mind. Nothing more." He winced again, for these spoken words robbed him of this recent memory of her. "It was not her." The white skin he had touched was not her. The gentle eyes that had gazed down upon him were not her.

Neither the harsh accusation nor the hand plunging the dagger into his chest were her. But Owain would have had it all real, even the dagger. So much would he endure for love.

Owain shook his head forcefully. Such thoughts were too painful. He resolved to banish them from his mind.

Searching for any distraction, he heard from beyond the double doors the sound of the cardkey placed in its slot in the hallway. The door to the suite opened, and Owain heard the familiar footfalls of Kendall Jackson, returned from her day's errands.

Slowly, he rose from the bed. Enough time had passed in rest, and there was not so much blood at hand that his body could effectively use another night of idleness. He started toward the doors, but an item on a table by the wall caught his attention—the roll of gauze that he had discovered among the innards of the smashed armadillo. He had felt something within the roll, but events had not allowed time for inspection at his estate, and since then, he had done little other than rest. And dream.

Owain forced away thoughts of the visions. He turned his full attention to the roll of gauze, which he began painstakingly to unwrap. He was prepared for anything. The armadillo had belonged to Albert, after all, who even in death had managed to shock Owain.

What would Angharad say?

Kinslayer.

Owain was prepared for anything—anything except, perhaps, a beautifully crafted golden locket. It was unmarred by time or rough treatment. The design was stately, elegant, free of the busy ornamentation that might have come from Victorian influences. The unadorned beauty was not what he had expected of Albert, but when had the Malkavian ever proven predictable?

Ever so carefully, Owain opened the locket. He was greeted by a tiny picture, a crude, ink drawing of a young woman. Owain turned on a lamp and held the picture in the light. On closer inspection, he decided that his first impression was not completely accurate. The sketch was not so much crude as it was, like the locket itself, simple, and that simplicity managed to convey a depth of caring emotion. The woman's brow, nose, and mouth were rendered with only a few light lines, yet a strength of features, and of character as well, was conveyed. Her chin and her unbound hair were soft curves. They suggested a gentleness of spirit. Even the eyes, although only the slightest of marks, were full of concern and caring. This woman was no person that Owain had ever met, but in a way, he realized, she was a composite of many women—patient, nurturing, comforting—who toiled daily for their families. This woman, depicted with but a few strokes of pen

and ink, was more real, Owain realized, than the phantasms of his visions, was more alive than he or any of his kind. Could Albert, trapped in his madness, have drawn this?

Owain could look upon the soulful eyes no longer. He flipped over the picture, which was loose in the locket, and on the back of the paper he saw a scribbled word in a hand that he did recognize as Albert's: *Mother*.

For a moment, Owain replayed in his mind the image of Benison driving the stake into Albert's heart. The impact, the dull thud, had echoed throughout the abandoned warehouse. Owain looked again at the picture, and the eyes held a deep and profound sorrow that, moments before, he had not seen, that had not been there.

Owain snapped closed the locket. He gripped it tightly in his fist.

Albert has visited his madness upon me, thought Owain, but he knew that he had more than his share of madness to contend with already. He gently placed the locket atop the unwound roll of gauze and left it on the table.

Owain pushed open the double doors from his room. In the large sitting room, Kendall was laying out on the conference table her purchases of that day. She looked businesslike in a tightly fitting dress cut high above the knees. A mauve jacket and heels, as well as her hair pulled back

and styled, lent a fairly executive slant to her slightly provocative attire. She was very pale, and Owain could see that her movements were laced with fatigue. He'd fed on her twice more since they had arrived in Berlin. In a strange city with no contacts, he was rather limited by his proclivities in feeding. He felt that merely flipping through the social register and selecting nourishment at random might draw unwanted attention, and he needed still more blood after his close escape from Atlanta.

"Good evening, sir," said Kendall, noticing that her master was up and about for the first time in several nights.

"Ms. Jackson...Kendall, you may call me Owain," he said, as surprised as she at his own words. Owain had never encouraged familiarity on the part of his ghouls. *Not since Gwilym*, he realized.

"As you like," she responded after a brief, perplexed pause. "I did as you asked."

Owain looked over the items she was laying out on the table: a three-piece suit, charcoal gray, conservatively cut; tie, belt, shoes, and socks to match; dark overcoat; more casual attire; pocket watch and chain; a few other odds and ends, among them a money belt.

"Good. Very good."

Shortly after arriving in Berlin, Owain had called one of his lawyers in the States and arranged for

the transfer of several hundred thousand dollars. Kendall had played courier and retrieved a portion of the funds. Alongside the clothes, she laid out the money belt and then placed on the table a briefcase, which she opened.

“Of the money your lawyer wired,” she reported, “I took out ten thousand dollars, as you requested. Half in American dollars, half in deutsche marks.”

Owain nodded his approval. All was as he had instructed. He had come to expect no less from Kendall. “Good,” he said again. “I’ll be ready to leave within the hour.”

He took several of the items from the table and returned to his room. First on the agenda was a shave and a shower. He quickly disposed of the two days’ growth of stubble that greeted him every sunset. Next, he spent longer than he’d intended beneath the nearly scalding shower. Owain no longer perspired or produced appreciable body odor, but he had accumulated the dust of three cities and the grime of two bloody duels.

Afterward, looking in the mirror, he could see that most of his wounds had healed. Only light scars remained as tell-tale signs of the bloodletting. Except for his shoulder, of course. His left collarbone, though covered now with healed-over skin, bulged out in a peculiar and painful-looking way. It did cause Owain some discomfort, and he tended to move stiffly, attempting to favor it. Not for sev-

eral centuries had he found himself in as desperate a situation as in the duel with Benison. At some point in the future, Owain would have to have the shoulder rebroken and set properly. At least he possessed the financial wherewithal to hire an actual surgeon and have the job done properly, unlike many Kindred who would have been forced to rely on some unskilled companion and most likely to rebreak the bone several times before getting it right. For now, however, Owain would have to make do with his deformity.

He dressed quickly. This was a night for the suit. He wrapped the money belt around his waist beneath the shirt and filled the compartments with bills. He was not trusting enough of any hotel or its employees to leave large sums of money lying around. After attaching the pocket watch and chain, Owain had second thoughts. For no particular reason aside from the fact that he was not a strong devotee of carrying a timepiece, he removed the watch and attached to the chain instead the golden locket. He did not open it again and look upon the picture, but merely the feel of the locket, as he pressed against his vest pocket, he found strangely comforting. There was another item that Owain refused to leave behind, even though the hotel management had instructions that under no circumstances was any member of its staff to enter the luxury suite. He took the tattered common-

place book and placed it in the inner pocket of his overcoat, which he pulled on over his suit, then pulled back his hair and tied it smartly behind his head. Finally, Owain hooked his sword onto the leather straps that Kendall had instructed a tailor to attach on the inside of the overcoat.

Poking his head into Kendall's room on the other side of the sitting room, he found her cross-legged on the floor, hands upon her knees, eyes closed in meditation. She had changed from her banking attire into more loose-fitting slacks, and a black, sleeveless sweater. Sensing his presence almost immediately, she joined him in the front room and pulled on the jacket she had worn earlier.

"You found the address?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Very good. Then let us go."

It was nearly midnight when they left the hotel. In addition to the other acquisitions, Kendall had rented a car, a sparkling Mercedes, smaller and more modern-looking than Owain would have preferred, but it would do. Throughout the half-hour drive to Hasenheide Park, Owain remained attentive. He had heard stories over the past few years about the feuding princes of Berlin, and of how they guarded their territories jealously, accosting any and all visitors. Owain, however, could see no sign of being followed. In fact, he saw no sign of Kindred activity whatsoever. Except for a few small

knots of roving mortals, the streets of Berlin were fairly deserted. *Not surprising*, he thought, *if the curse swept through here as it did elsewhere*. Venturing out into public could prove deadly for Cainites at present. There was also the possibility that the Hasenheide was not a main attraction for the Kindred of Berlin. Especially at night, the sprawling parkland was devoid of mortals. No mortals, no excitement, no food.

The park itself was not Owain's destination. Kendall skirted Hasenheide, keeping to the older residential areas that surrounded it. She had reconnoitered the route earlier that day. When at last they reached their destination, she pulled over and parked opposite a quaint inn that lay across the street from Hasenheide. The inn, having survived the massive destruction visited upon much of the city during the second world war, was older than the other houses around it and was predominately a retreat for German honeymooners of scarce means. Despite the lateness of the hour, a light burned in the front hallway.

Owain stepped out of the car and turned back to Kendall. "Watch closely. If you see anything suspicious, don't hesitate to join me." He patted the sword beneath his overcoat. "Understood?"

"Understood."

Owain knew exactly what to do. He had given instructions to the couriers bringing his chess

moves to this very building for decades. Silently, he approached the inn. The shadows from the edges of the road reached out to conceal his passing. As he crossed the street, Owain absently took from his vest pocket Albert's golden locket and began to pass it between his fingers, over and under, over and under, then a quick tug on the chain and back to the beginning. He slipped the small piece back into his pocket as he climbed the steps to the front porch. The front door to the inn was opened and closed before even the slightest breeze was able to steal inside. The small bell on the door did not sound.

The front hallway was deep and narrow. The decor was as quaint as the preserved facade of the building. The inn obviously catered to those in search of a charming getaway. There was little evidence of luxury or, in Owain's mind, of taste. Several doors leading to other rooms and corridors were all closed. A single lamp illuminated the recessed counter to the left of the foyer, and behind the counter sat a gnarled old woman.

Owain doubted that she heard him approach the counter, but she did not jump when he spoke. "You are Frau Schneider?"

She looked up from her book with eyes that were nearly hidden by rows of deep wrinkles both above and below, so much so that her face seemed to be frozen in a perpetual squint. She answered him in

careful but understandable English. "You must ring the bell."

Owain looked at her, puzzled. There was, indeed, a bell on the counter, but he saw no need to use it. "Frau Schneider," he said again, "I have a message for Herr Schneider. I would speak with him. He would do best not to disappoint me."

She squinted unblinking at him. She was mortal, this woman. Her face was like a map of the years she had witnessed. A stranger in the middle of the night was nothing new to her. She was not about to make allowances. "You must ring the bell."

For the first time in many nights, Owain smiled. He found amusing the idea that this small, hunched woman would make demands of a Ventrue elder. She obviously had no idea who he was, *what* he was. Either that, or she thought that her age protected her. But Owain was ten times older than she. He knew how little protection the years afforded. He again took from his vest pocket the locket and passed it through his fingers. With exaggerated motions, he raised his other hand and rang the bell.

Instantly, the lights went out. Total darkness consumed Owain.



Watching. Waiting. Kendall felt like she spent nine-tenths of her time being ready to do her job, but then again, being ready was her job, as much

as taking care of a problem when it arose. Kendall could see clearly the inn across the street. During the day, she had taken a break from banking and shopping to scout out the location. And now, here she was. Waiting. Watching. Owain had been gone for several minutes.

Owain. She was still getting used to calling him that instead of “sir.” That had come out of the blue—him asking her to call him by his first name—and Kendall was just as happy not to be “Ms. Jackson.” Kendall’s boss had acted unpredictably in the past, but always with a hidden motive, it had seemed to Kendall. Recently, however, he seemed to be pulled in a lot more directions than she had seen before. He didn’t seem to be acting as much as *re-acting*. The trip to Spain with that bastard, Miguel, for instance, had been a near-disaster. And now they were in Germany. She couldn’t remember Owain even having left Atlanta before.

Of course, Kendall reminded herself, she’d only worked for Owain for a few years, and he’d been around a *lot* longer. Anyway, it wasn’t her job to advise her employer. Just wait, and watch, and if need be, act. For now, the inn looked perfectly normal from the outside.

SEVEN

He could feel them watching him from the cover of the thick underbrush. He could not see them—they were not so careless—but their agitation filled his nostrils; their threatening growls carried farther on the night air than they realized.

Yet Nicholas was not fearful. He was no longer capable of fear. It had fled him not long after hope.

He rolled among the bushes as if the crackling leaves and the pinpricks of the brambles might ease the burning within him. The others kept their distance. They did not know what to make of him. Or else they had seen others stricken by the curse, and the watchers merely waited for him to perish. If only he could.

But a merciful death was denied Nicholas.

For the past few nights he had stumbled northward, half-blinded as if in a dream, a nightmare without end. He saw with one eye the world of man, with the other the world of spirit. Neither realm was real to him. He could make sense for no more than seconds at a time of anything he saw—brief, static slices of eternity.

One moment he traversed the rugged hills of Germany, while legions of chittering wraiths, dead but deathless children to his Piper of Hamelin, streamed after him. Then the shades would take on blacker substance as the countryside faded away, leaving Nicholas to stumble along—to where, he did not know. He knew only that the hunger drove him before it, ever denying him rest or solace.

For nights he had continued northward—how many nights, he did not know—until, finally, he had staggered headlong into the River Havel. The shades had not so much as paused. They'd forged ahead, transforming the calm waters into a churning cauldron of undeath. When Nicholas crawled out onto the western bank, they were with him still. If anything, he attracted more of the restless dead wherever he went.

Nicholas had charged blindly into Grunewald Forest, wanting desperately to escape the clinging hordes of the dead. But one thing Nicholas had learned, one thing that he doubted even wizened

Blackfeather had realized—Nicholas hadn't stumbled upon a rent in the Veil back at Evans's estate. Nicholas was the rent. He had become a disruption between the worlds that drew like moths to the flame the blindly gibbering dead. They swarmed after him, crawled over him when he fell to the ground. He could not be rid of them. And throughout the heartland of the Holocaust, they were ever-present.

Thankfully, his vision began to shift from the world of Oblivion. Then it was that the burning took hold of him again. A world of pain, a world of death. Two sides of the same coin.

Nicholas rolled spasmodically among the foliage, his naked body scarred and bleeding. They watched him still from the cover of nearby underbrush. Not the dead of that world but the predators of this one.

Let them come, Nicholas thought, Nicholas pleaded. *They would do me a mercy.*

But they did not come that night. Nicholas was alone. Alone with the slaving legions of the dead who crawled over him and through him like maggots upon a rotting carcass.



Owain jumped to the side and dropped to a defensive crouch. Just as quickly, his trusted sword was in his hand. He did not hear Frau Schneider moving for cover, nor did he hear any other move-

ment. Aside from the ticking of a clock behind the counter, Owain felt completely isolated, as if he were the only one in the inn—but he knew he couldn't be that lucky. He wondered if there were mortals upstairs, if the sounds of an attack would alert them, but that concern was very much secondary to survival.

After a few brief seconds of blindness, Owain's eyes began to adjust to the darkness. In a moment, he would be able to see as well as if there were light. But just then, a light came back on, and then off again. On and off. On and off it blinked rapidly, playing havoc with Owain's potent night vision. The light was different from the usual illumination in the hall. Rather than the warm glow of the foyer lamp, this blinking light was tinted cold blue.

Owain quickly threw his back against the wall. His eyes darted from point to point as he scanned the room around him. The strange, bluish light—he couldn't tell where it was coming from—still flashed, but not at regular intervals. The periods of light and dark followed one another in rapid succession, but the length of each flash and of the space between them was seemingly random. The difference in the intervals was only fractions of a second but was enough to keep Owain's vision from adjusting as much as it could have with consistent timing. The room about Owain took on the disconcerting and jerky look of an old silent

film—and Owain found himself playing a part.

Suddenly, there was a man standing before Owain, only feet away. But with the next flash of the light, Owain was again alone. A moment later, the stranger was back but several feet from where he had stood a second before.

Owain held his sword before him, not yet attacking, but trying to assure that anyone who approached him too quickly would be impaled.

But the strange figure came no closer. One moment it was straight ahead. A few flashes later it was off to the left. Then on the other side of the narrow hall. Then back before Owain again.

Another change in his surroundings caught Owain's wary eye. The four doors that he could see around the hall were all open now, and watching him from the darkness beyond the foyer were many pairs of eyes. Somehow, the flashes of light failed to illuminate beyond the main hallway. All he could see beyond the room were the eyes, and they changed positions as frequently and unpredictably as the stranger before Owain.

Satisfied that, for the moment at least, he was not being attacked, Owain attempted to study the shifting stranger more closely. He was tall but hunched over, and the glimpses Owain caught of his face showed it to be terribly disfigured by warts or growths of some sort. Perhaps it was an effect of the flashing light, but Owain could not tell for cer-

tain that the stranger was looking at him. The eyes seemed to shimmy slightly, or maybe they were misaligned. The stranger was never visible long enough at once for Owain to be sure of much of anything.

“Who are you?” Owain called out, his sword still poised.

The stranger may have grinned, but Owain was not certain. The eyes hovered and shifted positions in the background. How many creatures inhabited that darkness—five, ten, more?—Owain could not ascertain. Attempts to count were futile.

“I’m here for Herr Schneider,” said Owain. “To talk with him.”

At once, the flashing lights stopped. Darkness returned. Owain braced himself, expecting attack during the seconds his eyes needed to adjust. But no attack came. Neither were the eyes or the stranger visible any longer. No matter what Owain’s eyes revealed or failed to reveal, however, he could feel the presence of the others.

“Show yourself,” he commanded but to no avail.

“You would speak with me,” said a voice that Owain could not pinpoint. “I would do best not to disappoint you.”

Owain forced a laugh. His words of moments before smacked of foolish bravado, but they seemed to have served their purpose. “I would face Herr Schneider.”

“You would not,” the voice replied. Owain thought he heard claws scuttling in the darkness beyond the doorways, or perhaps it was the sound of chittery laughter.

Owain tried to follow the sound of the voice, but it seemed to come from nowhere in particular. Owain had played this trick upon the Sabbat neonates in Toledo, but the stranger played it more deftly than Owain could. He would not see this creature unless the stranger wished to be seen. Recognizing his handicap, Owain put away his sword, fastening it beneath his overcoat.

“You trust us?” the voice asked, puzzled or maybe only amused.

“I trust that I offer you no harm,” said Owain, “and so you have no reason to harm me.”

“We will see,” said the disembodied voice.

Owain marveled at the lack of success he was having tracking the voice. He was in the presence of a master. Free of his weapon, Owain slid his hand down the dangling chain to the locket. “You are Herr Schneider?”

“There is no Herr Schneider,” said the voice.

Of course there is no real Herr Schneider, Owain thought. *What does this creature take me for, a fool?* So far, the stranger had deflected every statement. Perhaps, Owain decided, a more direct tact would yield more substantive answers. “I am Owain Evans, also known as Owain ap Ieuan. You are the

one who, in the name of Herr Schneider, received my chess orders?”

A long pause followed. Owain could feel all those eyes watching him from the darkness even if he could not see them. His eyes were well adjusted to the dark now, but still he could not see beyond the shadowy doorways that lined the foyer. Those he faced were skilled at deceiving the eyes of even one of Owain's age, whose eyes were trained over the centuries in the ways of darkness. *Nosferatu*, Owain suspected. Who else could hide so easily from him?

“Why do you come to Berlin?” the voice asked at last.

The change of subject was not lost upon Owain. “To answer these questions.”

“Then answer them.” More chittery laughter from the shadows.

“To *find* answers to my questions,” Owain chose his words more carefully. He passed the locket along through his fingers, back and forth.

“Do you seek answers, or do you seek vengeance?”

The question surprised Owain. He was also surprised to find that he could not answer it. Back in Atlanta, his desire for vengeance, had been stoked to a fever pitch. His hatred had been his sustenance against Kline, against Benison. But since the combats, his fire had drained away, much the way it had so slowly over the preceding centuries. Hatred

could sustain him for only so long.

Then he had been driven by necessity—to flee Benison, to flee Atlanta, to secure shelter in Berlin. Having escaped immediate danger, he had proceeded with his current course of action because...because it was all that was available to him. He could do nothing, which meant subjecting himself to the increasingly frequent visions, or he could seek answers to the mysteries that dogged him. But why seek the answers if not for vengeance?

Knowledge or vengeance? Owain could not distinguish the two any longer. One led inescapably to the other. He could not separate them.

“I do not know,” he said at last.

Owain restrained a start as before him suddenly stood, where a moment before there had been no one, the stranger. Owain’s guess of Nosferatu rang true. Now that the stranger stood revealed in the shadows of the room, the odor of sewer refuse, which until then had been masked, became apparent. The warts that Owain had glimpsed were sprinkled among crusty boils and lesions that seeped pus onto the stranger’s ragged clothes. His left arm hung limp at his side.

The Nosferatu limped toward Owain. Owain thought that perhaps he preferred seeing the creature only in the limited glimpses of the flashing light, or not at all. But slowly the stranger approached. Owain restrained the impulse to reach

for his sword, to ward off this monstrosity. The Ventrue suspected that the stranger's brethren were not far away, that they would be upon Owain in seconds, like so many rats upon a carcass, were he to threaten their representative.

The Nosferatu raised a misshapen hand to Owain. Closer. Closer.

If it touches my sword, Owain thought, I will leave the monster's head lying at its feet.

But the stranger reached instead for Owain's left hand, for the locket that he held. The thick, clumsy fingers touched Owain's own, rested atop the locket.

"I am Ellison," said the Nosferatu. "You search for answers of a lost love."

Owain blinked, uncomprehending. He could not be hearing what he thought he was. A hint of tenderness in the raspy voice of this monster? Concern from this creature which, until now, had only frustrated Owain with word games?

Owain jerked back his hand, stuffed the locket back into his pocket. Ellison, too, pulled back his hand as if bitten.

The darkness of the back rooms suddenly shot forward to within a few feet of Ellison. Many sets of eyes were again visible. An ominous mixture of growling and hissing filled the room.

Owain slowly raised his hands to show he meant no harm. Ellison seemed unconvinced. He eased back a step from Owain.

“It would be best that you left this city,” said the Nosferatu, all hint of compassion gone from his voice, replaced instead by the earlier, mocking tone. “You have presented yourself to neither prince. Such is the way of a spy, and they see spies in every shadow.”

Owain’s throat tightened in near-panic. The Nosferatu seemingly had been willing to help him but was offended somehow. This avenue could not turn out to be a dead end. Owain had nowhere else to turn. The messages had come to this inn. The Nosferatu’s own question, *answers or vengeance?*, proved that he knew there was something done to Owain for which he might seek vengeance. Owain could not leave empty-handed.

“You must tell me of the letters,” he said.

The growling and hissing that surrounded Ellison grew louder. “You must go.”

The specter of failure loomed more imminent. Owain bristled at the thought of being summarily dismissed by a sewer-dwelling caricature of humanity, yet there appeared little hope of forcing answers from Ellison and however many others of his kind were with him.

You must go. The words flooded Owain’s heart with despair. “But where?” he asked himself, not quite realizing that he had spoken the question aloud.

A second time, Ellison stepped close to Owain.

Always cautious were the Nosferatu's movements, always wary. Slowly, he raised his good hand. He touched his own chest, took hold of something beneath his filthy rags. Then, with what Owain could only interpret as timidity or perhaps reverence, Ellison reached over and gently touched Owain's side, his vest pocket where the locket rested.

"You must go," Ellison said again, but then he added in a whisper, "to England, to Glastonbury." The Nosferatu gently patted Owain's pocket a second time. And then was gone.

Owain faced an empty room. The doors that had been open, forming a gallery of eyes, were now closed. Ellison, his mysterious companions, Frau Schneider—all were gone. Owain stood alone. He took the golden locket from his pocket. Relieved by its touch, he clutched it in his hand.

England. Glastonbury.

Owain wondered if he could trust the Nosferatu. Ellison could have disappeared whenever he'd liked. There was no reason to distract Owain, to offer him diversionary information. No obvious reason, at any rate. The workings of the Nosferatu mind were nearly as alien to Owain as those of the Malkavian.

Owain glanced around the darkened foyer. What had become of Frau Schneider? Had she disappeared with the Nosferatu? Had she been one of them, her true nature hidden from Owain? He al-

most wished that he would see her again—*I'll ring her damned bell*—but to no avail.

Owain slipped from the inn as silently as he had entered, but he felt far less impressed with his own mastery of stealth and cunning.



Ellison left without conversing with the lesser Nosferatu who had accompanied him to the inn. He was too shaken by what he had seen. So shaken, in fact, that he had offered information without extracting any price whatsoever in return. Certainly the slip was not lost upon his clansmen. Would one of them take his failing as a sign of weakness and challenge him? He doubted so. And regardless, there was not a one of them he feared. Still, it had been a careless error.

But the locket...

He climbed downward, more deeply beneath the city, the entire time clutching the locket that hung from a string around his neck. The brash Ventrue possessed just such a locket. Ellison had been shocked to see it, had been doubly shocked that the foreigner would flaunt it so. *I should not have been surprised*, Ellison chastised himself. *Isabella never promised that she would make no others. Why would I think that?*

A more disturbing fear struck him as he continued to descend. *Did any of the others notice?* he

wondered. *What if they guess at my secret, learn of my treasure?* The thought was too awful to contemplate. He would listen carefully in the coming nights, and if he heard from his brethren the slightest rumor, he would strike quickly and without mercy. *I will rid Berlin of every other Nosferatu before I sacrifice my treasure!*

Ellison came to a dead end in the tunnel. He knelt in the half-foot of squalid liquid that lined the passage and pulled aside a stone from the wall, then, after replacing the stone, crawled on, chin-deep in the refuse and excrement.

But what of the Ventrue? Did he pose a threat? Ellison and the others could, most likely, have destroyed the stranger. Then he would have posed no threat. *But with open confrontation,* Ellison reminded himself, *battle can always turn against you.* He thanked his good fortune that neither of his princes seemed destined to learn that particular lesson. He preferred that they struggle against one another, that each desperately required the services of the Nosferatu.

The crawlspace opened into a small, cozy lair, lined with rat fur and warm mud. *No,* Ellison decided, *better to have sent the Ventrue on, to have him gone from my city.* Isabella would deal with him as she saw fit. The Ventrue carried one of the lockets. He had obviously dealt with her before.

Convinced that he had decided correctly, Ellison

curled into a ball in the narrowest corner of the tiny chamber. Above him were tons upon tons of earth and rock. Not even one of his brethren would track him here. As he held his locket to his chest, he felt himself drawn once again into the presence of his beloved Melitta. She rested safely still, and one day soon she would return to him.



The scrabbling sounds from within the large box were louder and more constant now. Kli Kodesh sat motionless. He had not moved, had not blinked, in hours. The motes of dust that drifted through the air in the remote farmhouse settled onto his statue-like form.

The moment of victory was rapidly approaching, the long-awaited hour of release. Never could he remember his breast being so filled with savored anticipation. He hated for the feeling to pass. He hoarded the seconds, plucked each one from the future and turned it over in his hand for as long as he could before allowing it to proceed into the past. Always before, time had refused to hurry, refused to ease the boredom that was Kli Kodesh's constant companion. Now, neither would time slow to extend his pleasure.

After so many years, the strands of prophecy were drawing together, entwining with one another so that the tapestry of time might be made whole. Kli

Kodesh had followed the strands with the skill of a master weaver—skill born of centuries of observation and contemplation. He had traced the strands from the City of Angels and descended into vaults beneath the City of the Adversary to retrieve the coffin-sized box which now rested before him. He had played Demeter to the imprisoned Persephone so that the seasons might progress, so that history could be fulfilled.

Slowly, reluctantly, Kli Kodesh stood. From within the box wafted the sounds of futile struggle that he had ignored since leaving the Accursed City. But he could see that the appointed time was at hand.

And lo, the earth shall open her womb and the Beast shall crawl forth seeking the blood to slake its thirst.

The metal bands that had held the box closed lay already broken on the floor. Kli Kodesh reached out, and with the flick of one finger, the wooden lid fell away. Inside the confines of the box lay a Cainite whom Kli Kodesh had not set eyes upon for hundreds of years, not since the night that Montrovant, slave to his obsessive quest, had been rendered a slave to metal and wood as well.

Montrovant squinted against the forgotten brightness of light. Though the crate was open, he still lay bound within bands similar to those that Kli Kodesh had removed from the exterior of the box. Montrovant was smaller than Kli Kodesh re-

membered, hunched over, his skin drawn and pale from lack of blood. He struggled against the metal bands, but he lacked any strength to effect his escape.

Kli Kodesh raised his arms above his head. "Return to the surface world, lovely Persephone," he intoned in lofty fashion, yet Montrovant only struggled more violently against his bonds. Kli Kodesh frowned, but then remembered that Montrovant could not see the part he was to play in this, the eschatological drama. Montrovant always had been rather short-sighted. Thus his current predicament.

Kli Kodesh placed a finger over his own lips. "Hush, hush," he said as if cooing to a restless infant, but the gesture had no more calming effect on Montrovant than had the previous statement. Again, Kli Kodesh frowned. He raised a thumb and finger to scratch the hair of his chin. In the City of the Sword, he had tempted the prophecy and spoken briefly with the Kinslayer, but otherwise, many years had intervened since he had last interacted with any living or undead. The social niceties, so fickle from era to era, were foggy memories.

"The time has come for your quest to continue," said Kli Kodesh. Still, Montrovant tossed his head feebly from side to side. His eyes rolled up into his head. "Hmph," Kli Kodesh snorted. Growing weary

of unrequited conversation, he reached for the large pot that he had placed beside the crate. "Perhaps this first." He easily lifted the pot above Montrovant and then tipped it just enough that a trickle of blood began to run onto Montrovant's face.

The captive vampire blinked as the blood splattered on his face but then, almost instantly, opened his mouth. Soon he began snapping at the thin stream of blood. Eventually, however, he lay quietly and drank. A spasm of ecstasy periodically passed through his body.

Kli Kodesh relished his role as nursemaid. He continued the steady stream of blood from the pot. The farmer and his wife had been so cooperative. And the children—he mustn't forget the children. Or perhaps Kli Kodesh had come, over the years, not to notice the protestations of mortals. As with a fish drawn from the Sea of Galilee, there was a certain amount of flopping about, but never much of a struggle.

At last, Montrovant lay quietly exhausted, his body only beginning to recover from over six hundred years of torpor. Almost as an afterthought, Kli Kodesh snapped the last metal bonds. He had nothing to fear from Montrovant. There was nothing even one as old as the recent captive could do to harm Kli Kodesh.

"The time has come for your quest to continue,"

said Kli Kodesh a second time. “Listen carefully, and I will tell you of the Kinslayer and of the relic you seek.”

EIGHT

The interdependent, interlocked, incestuous world of international finance was truly a blessing. With a few phone calls out and a few favors called in, Owain was able to arrange transport for himself and Kendall from Germany to England. He did not wish to push his luck with the Giovanni. Certainly by now Prince Benison had raised a hue and cry and offered a bounty for Owain's head. Owain did not deceive himself into thinking that Lorenzo, even if the ghoul proved cooperative, held enough sway within his family to protect Owain. Instead, Kendall packed Owain's meager possessions, and the two drove through the night to Hamburg.

There at the waterfront, they located *La Sirène*,

a merchant ship of questionable seaworthiness, sailing under a Dutch flag, commanded by an inebriated French captain. Everything about the man irritated Owain—his loud, disingenuous laugh; the odor of sweat, salt, and cheap whiskey that clung to him like a second shadow; the too-obvious leer he directed at Kendall. But the small boat was available to Owain without delay. Allowances had to be made.

Owain's brusque, compelling voice, utilizing the dark powers he had mastered over the centuries, penetrated the captain's fog of alcohol and visited upon him a rather abrupt sobriety. Owain gave orders that, unless some emergency arose, he and his assistant were not to be disturbed until the ship reached the southern coast of England past Bournemouth.

The captain demurely acknowledged his instructions and then showed Owain and Kendall below to their cabin—more accurately described, Owain thought, as a large closet. But there was enough room for both him and Kendall to stretch out, and, again, allowances had to be made.

The following days and nights blended one into the next without clear division, a hellish montage of motion, noise, and heat. Apparently the cramped cabin was adjacent to the ship's engine room, for as soon as the small vessel was under way, its swaying and bucking on choppy seas was accom-

panied by the sounds of mechanical cacophony, the roar and ominous rattling of strained machinery. More noticeable than the pungent odor of diesel fuel or the continuous din, however, was the sharp jump in temperature. At first the wall connecting to the engine room, then the floor, grew hot to the touch. Within half an hour of departure, the heat generated by the clamoring engine pervaded every inch of the cramped cabin.

Owain noted the various unpleasanties without comment, without visible reaction of any sort. The heat and the noise were to him a wall, a surreal buffer against the harsh realities of the outside world, which had intruded upon his settled unlife in the past months with such a vengeance. He had no need for fresh air and no desire to stroll about on deck and take in the view. There was nothing and no one Owain wished to see, and the fewer sailors who saw him the better. So he and Kendall kept to themselves. They remained within the rocking compartment surrounded by the heat and dissonant whine of machinery.

For much of the journey, Owain passed in and out of fitful slumber. There was still much healing for his body to accomplish as he regained his strength. He fed again from Kendall and could tell that she was still weak. Feeding from her so often was dangerous—for Kendall because of the physical threat, for Owain because it robbed him of the

services of a skilled and vigorous retainer—but desperate measures were in order, and once Owain was fully recovered, he could easily restore her to the height of her endurance.

Owain awoke frequently, during daylight hours as well as night, driven from rest by the ferocity of his visions. Often the distinction was subtle and without meaning—waking or dreaming? Was his hair, plastered to his face and neck, wet from the moisture of the thick mist blanketing the hill where the ominous tree awaited or from the condensation that coated every surface in the steamy cabin? Did the hillside rumble beneath his feet, or had the ship passed into rougher water? Was the taste at his lips his own blood as the tree crushed the life out of him or the salty presence of the North Sea?

One world was as oppressive as the other, but while the domain of flesh and blood made no demands of Owain, his visions were peopled by those who held him responsible for acts known and unknown.

“Hoard the nights that have fallen unto you.” The old man fairly spat the words at Owain. *“I, Joseph the Lesser, tell you, it avails you nothing.”*

Joseph. The name tugged at Owain’s memory. *Joseph...*

But the old man, enraged, frothy saliva catching in his thick beard, raised his staff above Owain.

The scene on the hillside whirled before Owain.

Joseph...the staff...the staff that had shifted and changed, transformed before Owain's eyes into the infernal hawthorn. Always grasping, clutching, crushing Owain's bones, piercing his flesh to drink of his unholy blood. Owain could not free himself, could not move. His struggles availed him nothing.

Before Joseph could hurl more invective at Owain, however, before the hawthorn could plunge like a diablerist's stake into Owain's heart, the ever-present mist rolled across the hillside. Gone was the shouting; gone was the old man, the tree. The fog obscured from Owain all sight, all sound, all sensation save the vague impression of motion—swirling mist, rolling sea...

The passage of time also grew vague, stretching out into the blanketing mist until the pause between two beats of a heart could be mere seconds or perhaps decades of silence and stagnation. It was the heartbeat, his own heartbeat, that drove Owain onward, for the mist did part, and he found himself still upon the hillside—or perhaps again upon the hillside, the same hillside, yet worlds apart from that which he had last experienced.

The hawthorn stood serenely, innocently, not writhing and twisting, not stained by blood, and there beside it stood Angharad, her white gown shimmering against the darkness. It may have been the tears welling up in Owain's eyes that lent the

radiance to her raiment. He stumbled forward half-blinded, full of wonder at the miracle of his furiously pounding heart, *his mortal heart*. And there, not a dozen yards away, awaited his only love.

His feet moved agonizingly slowly. They could not keep pace with the feverish anticipation that pulsed with mortal blood through his body. Centuries of stale death had served merely to mask, not to destroy, his desire. With each ponderous step, he moved closer, never allowing his gaze to wander from her for fear that she might again be stolen away.

Finally, Owain fell to his knees before her. He raised her hands to his lips, and his tears fell upon her pale skin. He let the touch of the woman he'd abandoned hope of ever seeing again wash over him. His eyes closed against the streaming tears, Owain reached upward with tremulous hand, slowly, until his fingers came to rest on Angharad's breast. Her skin was smooth beneath the gossamer fabric of her gown. A shudder ran through her body at his touch, and she called his name with the pain of regret. "Owain..."

He kissed the curve of her belly and held her tightly. Her knees buckled, but he supported her, kept her upright, but when Owain looked up, he saw that it was not a lover's swoon that she suffered.

Protruding from Angharad's chest was a gilded

dagger, and grasping the hilt was Owain's own hand.

"Owain..." she called him again. But then Owain saw that her eyes were darker than the blackest stormclouds, and her pain transformed to anger. "*Kinslayer*," she named him.

And then Owain was falling away from her, down the hillside, into the consuming mist. He tried to protest, to proclaim his innocence, but his hands were covered with blood. It ran down his wrists and forearms, soaked into the cloth of his shirt. Angharad was far in the distance now, swallowed as was Owain by the mist. He thought he could still see her, but perhaps he was merely seeing what he wanted to see. There was only the mist, but Owain, helpless and alone, felt no despair at his renewed loss. He was enveloped by something much worse—the hollowness that long ago had told him he would never see her again, the emptiness that was the death of hope.

For some time—minutes? hours?—there was only emptiness, the void and the swirling mist. Desire, longing, anticipation, fulfillment, frustration—all were miles away, years long past, and in their place, nothing. Owain emerged only slowly from the fog. He found himself in what at first seemed to be a new place—the stuffy, cramped cabin. He felt the stringy grain of the coiled rope beneath him, the rough texture of the canvas sacks he leaned against.

The engine still strained and coughed in the next room, and the acrid smell of diesel permeated every inch of Owain's surroundings, clung to his clothes and body.

Several feet from Owain sat Kendall, eyes closed in meditation, legs folded beneath her. Stripped to her T-shirt, she was nonetheless covered with sweat. As Owain looked at her, faint vestiges of feeling tugged at him from the other side of the mist. He remembered the beating of his heart, the mortal tears, and for a moment, he looked at her as a mortal man might have. Grimy and disheveled, she was still an image of sculptured beauty. Her arms and legs were visibly muscled, the expression on her face calm, quiet, contemplative. Her shirt, nearly saturated with moisture, clung to her shoulders, her back, her chest.

Owain felt himself reaching out to touch her, to place his fingers upon her warm, moist skin, but as he did so, he caught sight of his own hand, his unnaturally pale fingers, blue veins visible near the surface. His skin, he knew, was dry despite the humidity, and cold to the touch. He could will blood to the limb if he wished. The flesh would grow ruddy and warm, yet it would remain merely an illusion of life. The tissue, his hand, would remain as lifeless as ever it had been for the past centuries. Owain himself would remain a mockery of the living, no more than a facade of humanity.

He raised his hand to his face. Cold, dead fingers met equally lifeless flesh. He felt the stubble along his jaw—a further mockery of life. The whiskers would never grow longer. If he shaved them away, they would reappear the next night in identical fashion. Owain absently traced the line of his nose, remembering how, as a mortal, he had reveled in the fresh scents of spring, the heady perfume of a beautiful woman. Now he could smell blood running through the veins of a mortal yards away, but most other odors, both pleasant and foul, were generally wan and listless if they managed to catch his notice at all. His fingers touched the lips that, long ago, had tasted the kisses of young women but now served only as a gateway for fresh blood. The visions had allowed him a glimpse of his lost humanity, had afforded him the briefest memories of mortal passions, then had snatched them away. For as the mist faded, so too did the emotions they engendered. Owain might know anger. He might kindle the hatred and disgust that had always been his lot, but of more tender feelings he was as empty as he had ever been, and more painfully aware of his lacking.

Kendall, silent, still, sat before Owain. She was his ghoul, yes. His unholy blood ran through her veins. But the spark of life still flamed within her. She was still human, and in that way, Owain realized, she was his better. Her life was superior to the

hollow charade that was his existence. *She can feel what I hardly remember.*

In that instant, as he gazed upon her beautiful, human form, Owain saw the trap he was leading her into, the familiar damnation that awaited her. He had never stated that he would one night fully Embrace Kendall; there existed between them no inherent agreement to that end. Yet there was, Owain realized, an unspoken assumption on both their parts, the expectation that loyal servitude would eventually be rewarded, though whether the term of that servitude might be years, decades, or centuries had never been made explicit.

Reward, thought Owain, the irony only too apparent to him. Is that truly how she thinks of it? This curse that, had I but the courage to face the morning sun, I would gladly end? He recognized, too, the disingenuous nature of his own question. Although Owain had never spoken to Kendall of her desires or motivations, he could not feign ignorance of that which compelled her. The beacon of seeming immortality attracted humans more assuredly than flies to a three-day rotting corpse.

And it most certainly was a trap he had laid for her, that he had laid for all the mortals who had served him over the centuries, for Owain needed them desperately. The particular faces might be insignificant, but he unquestionably needed the link that his servant ghouls provided him to the

modern world, the world of constant change to which Owain had long since ceased truly to belong. One after another, he had used the mortals, and one after another each had perished. Whether death had come at the hands of some enemy of Owain's, as with Gwilym captured by the Inquisition, or at the hands of Owain himself, tired of ineptitude or presumption, as with Randal, death had always come. And so, eventually, death would come for Kendall.

Owain watched her intently. Even in such inhospitable environs, an air of serenity clung to her, surrounded her as completely as the veil of hatred and loss surrounded Owain. *What peace is it that she finds in meditation?* he wondered. *What release? Does she bide her time waiting for her "reward?"*

If that were the case, she would be, Owain knew, sorely disappointed. He had indeed taken many a ghoul over the centuries, but never had he extended the curse of the Dark Father, never had he bestowed that *reward*. Nor would he.

Shutting his eyes against the sight of her, Owain turned away from Kendall, aware that he was the worst type of charlatan. He extracted her service, her loyalty, tacitly dangling before her the prospect of vulgar immortality, knowing full well that he would never allow that to pass. And more than just her service, Owain extracted her very soul, for in partaking of the unholy blood, there was a price

to be paid to the vengeful God who, after all, had set the curse in motion. Kendall would perish in service to Owain, or perhaps she would outlive her usefulness, and he would withhold from her the transformative vitae, which by that time would have extended her existence long beyond her natural time. She would wither. She would die.

No. Owain opened his eyes. *It will not be so.* Owain would save Kendall from her predetermined fate—not, he told himself, because she deserved any dispensation. For what mortal was truly innocent? And not as an attempt to lessen the stain of corruption upon his own black soul. Instead, by saving her, Owain would manage to do on behalf of another what he had failed to accomplish in centuries of unlife—evade the judgement of the wrathful Deity who allowed, who had *caused*, Owain's lingering, nightly damnation. Owain would release Kendall from service to him. He would free her before it was too late for her to lead the rest of her mortal life, before her time, like his, had passed.



They watched Nicholas for several more nights but came no closer. Ever so often, he would catch a glimpse of glaring eyes, and the snarling wafted in and out of his awareness. They kept him under constant scrutiny, and at times Nicholas heard the voices of their minds.

Outsider. Intruder. Our forest. Outsider.

Or were those the voices from the other side of the Veil? He couldn't always be sure. One world wrapped around the other, fused, shifted, disappeared only to emerge again.

The watchers, for the most part, stayed out of sight. Less hesitant were the legions of restless dead. They tromped carelessly through the forest and brought Grunewald to life with scrabbling, erratic motion, like the flight of hundreds and thousands of black leaves upon the breeze. Nicholas lay exhausted as the shades crawled atop him. They slithered past one another, jostled one another aside, to come close to him, to touch him. They lifted his limp arm and cackled with glee as it fell again to the earth, ten times, twenty times. They suckled and slavered at the cuts and scrapes upon his body. The more daring forced open his mouth, pressed their amorphous corpora down his throat in search of that which drew them.

Nicholas balanced precariously between the world of the watchers and the world of the wraiths. During the day, he found the slightest release as his shade-bloated body sank into the earth. For a few, far too brief hours, he was swallowed by the silence of the grave, but then when he emerged after sunset, it all began again, and every night more of the legions of the restless dead found their way to him.

They came in awkward, obscene gaggles of pitch black. Unused to the hint of corporeal form that contained them, they stumbled over one another, lashed out at one another in their frustration to touch Nicholas. They climbed over one another, scraping and clawing mercilessly in pursuit of their goal. Here, a wraith was swallowed beneath the rising tide of his brethren; there, another took umbrage at the aggressive advance of a rival and ripped an arm-like appendage from the offender, who howled and jabbered in pain. A pack of shades, like dogs beneath the butcher's table, pounced upon the discarded limb.

All the while, Nicholas lay helpless, poked and prodded, overwhelmed by the immensity of the shadow brood that engulfed him. The Rent was growing ever-larger, ever-brighter, around him. Less and less frequently did he see the trees of Grunewald; seldom did he hear the rush of the river. These sights and sounds were distant and vague, one-dimensional remnants of a world he was being pulled away from. They were subsumed by the hungering, gibbering dead.

Nicholas fought off the weight of the dead and climbed to his feet. Squirming shades tried to latch onto him, to hook their claws into him. A few managed to hold their places. The rest slid down his leg and immediately began to scramble up again. Nicholas stood atop a precipice. Behind him

lay the increasingly insubstantial world of the body. Before him gaped a huge chasm, the bottom and the far side obscured by the light flooding through the Rent. The tear in the Veil was growing. It pressed toward the edges of the chasm, reached for Nicholas, and just as the restless dead in the physical world clamored after him, the shades streamed through the Veil. Their forms passing through the Rent were packed as thickly as a plague of locusts, and the brilliant, blinding light appeared to flicker. Nicholas was drawn to the light. It called to him, found reflection within his soul.

Why are you still here?

Countless hands caressed Nicholas's bare chest, sifted through his hair. They urged him forward, toward the consuming light.

Why are you still here?

The light beckoned. The shades smelled blood, real blood, as Nicholas leaned over the edge of the cliff. But the voice...it came from another source...from behind him.

Leave us now or die.

The blinding light was a part of Nicholas. It not only washed over him but emanated from within him as well. He could not for long keep it at bay. But there was a voice, a challenge from...from that other world.

Slowly, Nicholas turned away from the chasm. A thousand furious shades bayed at him like wolves

at the moon, but he did not pause, and as he turned, the light dimmed. The otherworld receded. The din of the shades spiraled away, water down a drain. The shades, too, were sucked back to the otherworld. They dug in their claws and teeth and voiced piteous wails, but faster and faster they disappeared, until finally Nicholas stood firmly amidst the world of the flesh, face to face with another of his kind.

“Leave us now or die,” said the other Cainite.

Nicholas, not yet fully comprehending the words, stared blankly at the stranger. *Gangrel*. Through the echoes of the otherworld, Nicholas could feel the connection of blood. He could feel the blood flowing through this *Gangrel*, back through his sire and his sire’s sire and his before him, back through the eons to a common source. Nicholas was suddenly growing warm. He tried to tear at his clothes but realized they were long since gone. The light was rising within him again, the fire of ages. He heard, as if from a great distance, the screeching of the shades.

Nicholas’s attention shifted back to this world, to the stranger standing before him—a wild-haired man with bloodlust in his eyes. Nicholas raised a finger to the air and, from their common source, traced the stranger’s blood—thrice-great grandsire, sire’s grandsire, sire.... Nicholas concluded his cipher with a name upon his lips. “Lutz.”

The stranger opened his mouth to speak but came up short. A throaty growl rumbled to the surface.

“Lutz,” said Nicholas again.

“This is our forest,” said Lutz. “You are not welcome here.”

Our forest. Nicholas remembered the watchers. They remained just out of sight, but their snarls echoed through the trees. This Lutz, Nicholas realized, would test their Gangrel blood. *Very well.* The light was very near the surface again. Nicholas’s vision grew dim as the illumination from the Rent beamed from his sockets. With each breath, light poured from his mouth, but Lutz seemed to take no notice.

From deep within Nicholas rose ancient words of challenge.

“I am the flood: bringer of life.

“I am the ship: pulled by current.”

Lutz growled and crouched low. “Take your cursed blood elsewhere. Leave our forest or die.”

Nicholas did not struggle as the light of the Rent washed over him, covered him like a rising tide. He saw the watchers as they leapt at him from their cover. The others were not of the blood. They were driven by rage. Claws and fangs flashed.

From beneath the surface of the light, Nicholas

gazed up as his body, light and fire streaming from every pore, responded to the onslaught.

“I am the wave: scourging shore.

“I am fire: scourging bone.”

The smell of burning fur and scalded flesh filled the forest, as did screams of pain. The restless dead, again unleashed, poured forth from Nicholas. They climbed from his mouth, pulled themselves from his chest, his eyes. Chittering with mindless joy, they swarmed over newly found sustenance, unmoving piles of smoldering flesh.

Hovering on the precipice between the worlds, Nicholas smelled not the conflagration in his midst but the blood of his ancestors, and memory tugged at him—memory of wrongs to his blood still to be redressed, memory of the slayer of his kin. Like the shades, Nicholas was driven by the scent of blood, the blood he would reclaim.

He turned west and began with unsteady strides. Wraiths clung to his ankles, his back, but they fell away and he gained momentum. One great stride carried him over the river and he left the forest behind.

The shades were left to their meal in the scorched glade. Some, satiated, stumbled away. Others sniffed their way along, tracing the path of Nicholas’s footsteps as they chased after the light.



The first sensation that Kendall noticed, as she drifted back to the surface from her meditative trance, was a bead of sweat running down her back. The droplet began between her shoulder blades, then made its way down to the small of her back before soaking into a fold of nearly saturated T-shirt. Even this sensation, however, was less unpleasant than the sweltering heat in the cabin, or the musty stench.

The things I do for that man, she thought, although she realized at once that “man” might not be the proper word.

Owain, she knew even without opening her eyes, still lay nearby. Kendall had heard him turning and muttering in his restless sleep. *Nightmares—correction, daymares. Whatever.* She knew better, after seeing him act similarly on the plane and experiencing his violent reaction to her well-intentioned intervention, than to attend to him. She could still feel the soreness in her jaw, though his blow hadn’t left noticeable bruises.

Oh well, she thought. *Occupational hazard.* She’d realized full and well when she signed on for this job that it wasn’t normal punch-the-timecard-and-go-home employment, and if a paycheck every two weeks were all she was getting, it wouldn’t be worth it. But how many people got to work for someone

who'd been around for hundreds of years? How many people might have a chance to become like him? It wasn't exactly what she'd expected when she'd quit divinity school. She'd never really fit in there anyway, and though the other students had appreciated the self-defense classes she'd taught, her penchant for firearms had definitely set her apart from the crowd. But if she hadn't found the eternal, at least she'd stumbled across the immortal.

So she put up with the insane hours—*Hell, no worse than med school would've been*—and with Owain's occasional burst of temper. *And with this shithole boat*, she reminded herself, as if she could forget.



The din of the engine, the shifting of the boat upon the undulating waters, had become so much background noise to Owain over the course of the journey, but the clomp of footsteps approaching the cabin was like the roar of thunderous, crashing waves to him. The instant bare knuckles rapped against door, Kendall, a vision of quietude the moment before, was in full motion. Her magnum, never far away, was in her hand and ready as she pressed her back against the bulkhead by the door.

"Yes?" Owain called loudly enough to be heard in the hall.

“We’re well past Southampton.” Owain recognized the captain’s voice rising over the churn of the engine. “We’ll be to Weymouth shortly.”

“Very well.”

The captain’s footsteps, Owain noticed, retreated more quickly than they had approached the cabin. *He’s a wiser man than I gave him credit for being*, Owain thought.

Within a few minutes, Owain and Kendall were up on deck. They traveled with few encumbrances. Owain had eschewed the suit he’d worn in Berlin in favor of sweater, slacks, and the long overcoat, which served moderately well to conceal his sword. He shifted constantly among his fingers the locket, Albert’s locket, as the captain nervously pointed out the most promising spot on the shore to make a landing. Kendall, wearing black jeans and a dark polar fleece against the early April chill, carried a small bag over her shoulder with a change of clothes and a few odds and ends for each of them.

They climbed aboard a dinghy, along with one of the merchant sailors to man the oars, and were lowered from *La Sirène* to the water. Twenty minutes later, the dinghy scraped aground. Owain stepped into the surf and then onto the shore of England, land of his Embrace. The sailor, relieved to be rid of these pale, mysterious passengers, shoved off without a word.

Owain allowed himself only a brief moment to

survey the rocky shoreline. Literally centuries had passed since he had set foot on English soil. The land held equally as much pain as nostalgia for him. Standing on the rough beach, the waters of the Channel lapping not far behind him, Owain felt a certain affinity for Cornwall, this portion of Britain that, throughout history, had played the role of disfavored stepchild to England proper almost as much as had his native Wales.

Wales. Owain raised his face and took in the sea fragrances that were so similar, yet not quite identical, to those of his homeland, which lay less than two hundred miles distant. He could feel its pull upon him.

And why shouldn't I return? he wondered. A blood hunt had been called against him all those years ago, and in the world of the Kindred that meant he would never again be tolerated in the lands of his forefathers. Though the Ventrue he had struggled against had moved on or perished, the condemnation would be upheld by whomever ruled these modern nights. Owain had long since lost track of the political maneuverings and upheavals in his former home. *But blood hunt or no, he reasoned, I could keep to myself. I would prefer solitude to the petty bickering of our kind. Besides, he shrugged, the Camarilla, and probably the Sabbat as well, will be searching for me, would welcome my final death. What difference could an ages-old blood hunt make?*

There was no time at the moment, however, to ponder such possibilities. A mission of vengeance remained unresolved. Someone had duped Owain, had intercepted his correspondences to El Greco and replaced them with forgeries—with perfect forgeries. The letter that Owain had seen in Toledo, the letter that supposedly *he* had written, the script supposedly rendered by his own hand, was a creation of such perfection that Owain could have believed the words for his own. He admired, yet at the same time was enraged by, the audacity of the falsehood, but such deception, directed at Owain as it was, could not stand. A *galanas*, an honor-price, was due. And Owain was determined that it would be paid in blood.

You must go to England, the Nosferatu in Berlin had said. *To Glastonbury*.

Glastonbury. Perhaps when this debt was rectified, he could turn his thoughts to insinuating himself quietly into some obscure corner of Wales. Perhaps then he could afford to release Kendall from her service to him. Once he established a haven and secured a reliable herd so that he might feed in peace and safety, then he could release her to live the rest of her mortal life.

For the moment, however, he required her various skills. With a nod, she turned and jogged toward town to carry out Owain's unspoken command. Within the hour, she returned in a small,

puttering automobile, procured from the streets of Weymouth. Owain climbed into the compact vehicle, which made the cabin aboard the ship, in retrospect, seem quite spacious. Without delay, they headed north along the twisting English byways.

Kendall appeared to have no trouble shifting gears with her left hand instead of her right. Back in Berlin, she had purchased a map of Britain while Owain had made arrangements for their sea travel. Glastonbury was not far distant from Weymouth, less than two hours' drive, and Kendall pushed the little car to what definitely sounded like the limits of its capabilities. All the while, Owain stared silently out the window, taking in every night-shrouded detail of the quilt-work countryside.

They abandoned the car just beyond the town of Street and covered the final two or three miles to Glastonbury on foot. The landscape was too flat for Owain truly to feel at home, but he and Kendall made good time. As they drew close to the village, the dark silhouettes of small groupings of hills became visible against the backdrop of the cloudless night sky. One silhouette in particular, the largest of the hills, attracted Owain's interest. This hill stood well above the others, but what captivated Owain was the lone tower occupying its crest.

Kendall continued on several yards before she realized that Owain had stopped. "Sir...? Owain?"

“The tower,” he said almost inaudibly. It was a haunting vision that Owain had seen many times, though he had never set foot here before. The hill upon which the tower stood, Glastonbury Tor, was the object of legends. Owain was familiar with some of the tales—gateway to the underworld, or the otherworld; hillfort to the Bretons and then the Romans; place of power for the most ancient druids; there were as many stories as storytellers—flotsam of the mind accumulated over the years. Yet strangely enough, the visions had not dredged these bits of arcane trivia from the depths of his mind. He had failed even to recognize the tor until he saw it in person.

Owain, and Kendall beside him, began to climb. They traversed level after level of the terraced slope, long overgrown with grass. As Owain approached the crest of the tor, the tower loomed increasingly taller. It rose forty or fifty feet above this, the tallest of the hillocks. The stonework was exactly as he recalled from the visions. The open doorway seemed to Owain the maw of a beast that hungered for his undead flesh. He halted atop the final terrace.

Kendall ventured on to the tower. She disappeared through the open doorway only to re-emerge a few moments later. “It’s a chapel to St. Michael,” she said.

Owain nodded. Michael the archangel.

The tower was only yards away, but Owain's thoughts were occupied by another hill, which he knew would be nearby. "Stay back from me," he said to Kendall, as he forced himself to turn away from the tower. There were some demons, he knew, that he must face alone.

Owain descended the tor and crossed the lowland between the hills. To the north lay the small village of Glastonbury, its buildings and streets much the same as they had been for hundreds of years. This was a land of tradition, of antiquity, unlike the upstart former colonies across the Atlantic. If he concentrated, Owain could hear from the village a half mile away the voices of mortals, contented souls in a pub that had not yet closed.

Owain's footsteps seemed to him to cover too little distance. He felt the weight of the sky, of the heavens, pressing down on him as if to crush him. Again he began to climb, as the hill he recognized oh so well rose before him. He walked among the same disturbing images that he'd tried for weeks to ignore. Owain drew the locket and chain from his pocket, let them slide through his fingers again and again as he climbed. There was no question that he had closed himself to the message of the visions. He'd had no stomach for the evocative images of the past, for the mysterious condemnations heaped upon him by stranger and loved one alike.

And there'd been no time, he tried to convince himself. All hell had broken loose in the past few months. Patterns he'd established over spans of decades had unraveled before his eyes in a matter of nights and weeks. The incomparable beauty and truth of the siren's song had shattered the wall of comfortable disinterest that had enveloped him; she had exposed the nearly forgotten yearnings, the tiny remnant of humanity, that dwelled within his otherwise hollow soul. El Greco had thundered back into Owain's unlife to bring a storm of deceit and destruction, and now Owain found himself branded a traitor by an erratic Malkavian prince. At the same time, Owain had earned the enmity of a bishop within the Sabbat.

So much change so quickly. It did not rest well with a creature who had walked the earth for nearly a millennium. Ironically enough, it was this isle where Owain's thoughts had most often lingered, and it was here that, despite his recalcitrance toward the visions, they had led him. But to what end?

He continued to climb until, as he approached the shoulder of the hill, he saw before him that which he knew he must find, that which struck terror into his heart. A score of yards up the slope from where he halted stood the hawthorn tree of his visions. Owain hesitated to move closer to the tree that had grasped him and sought his blood,

his destruction. The tree that was real. He felt he had wandered again into one of the visions. A chill shot down the length of his spine. Only the absence of the obscuring mist comforted him at all. The differences from his visions, however, served only to make more vague the foreboding that gripped him, to render it more enigmatic, more disturbing. He might actually have been less ill at ease had the tree, in fact, become animate and attacked him.

Owain wanted to turn and run. He had come to Glastonbury to confront whomever had violated his privacy, not to be cast into the torturous world of his dreams. Yet he did not turn away from the tree, for though it didn't touch him, it held him to that spot just as surely. In the few visions where the hawthorn hadn't taken on monstrous form, another figure had appeared. As the mists receded, she would emerge into the clearing—Angharad. Owain waited, he realized, for his one love to join him. He hoped against hope that in just one more minute she would appear and beckon to him. But this night, this hillside, was not a vision. The visions could have been no more cruel than to whet his appetite with a desire never to be fulfilled.

“In ancient days,” said a low, feminine voice behind him, “the surrounding lowlands remained flooded for much of the year. These hills stood as islands upon an island.”

Owain stiffened. The voice was not Kendall's. With great trepidation, he turned. The woman he saw was not tall; she stood half a head shorter than he. The rich brown hue of her long and elegantly simple dress complemented her well-tanned features. Owain was both relieved and saddened beyond measure that she was not Angharad.

"The Holy Thorn." She nodded toward the hawthorn. "According to legend, Joseph of Arimathea, protector of the sangrail, who founded the Abbey of Glastonbury, drove his staff into the ground here on Wearyall Hill, and the staff took root. Branches grew, then blossomed and flowered."

In the words she spoke, Owain heard traces of a faint Spanish accent, mostly overpowered by the more formal tones of perhaps an English education. More important, however, were the words themselves. They struck Owain like lightning from the heavens.

Joseph of Arimathea.

Hoard the nights that have fallen unto you. I, Joseph the Lesser, tell you, it avails you nothing.

The old man. The staff. The tree.

Owain stared at her dumbfounded.

Joseph of Arimathea. *This is the Endtime!* Predictions of Gehenna. But what did the keeper of the grail have to do with the return of the Dark Father?

"Who are you?" Owain's words seemed very

small, as if they were swallowed by the vastness of the night.

“Owain!” Kendall was running up the hill. She had her weapon drawn. She, too, had been slow to notice the presence of the stranger.

“You have traveled far to see me,” the woman said calmly. “I’ve been expecting you. Will you come?” She indicated the village below.

Thoughts of anger and vengeance were driven from Owain’s mind by bewilderment. For a split second, he’d expected to turn and see Angharad. His impossible hope of centuries had been piqued and then crushed. Now, this woman—she spoke simply of legends, but her words hinted at Owain’s torment.

Kendall, red-faced from exertion and the embarrassment of protection not provided, reached Owain and the woman. The ghoul breathed heavily, and held her gun by her side, as there was no apparent danger.

“Will you come?” the woman asked again.

Owain nodded. He followed her as she started down the hill and left Kendall, perplexed, to trail after them.

NINE

“You’ve been expecting me,” Owain said to the woman. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting too long.”

She led him and Kendall down into town, to a brick house with dormer windows and a slate roof similar to most of the other homes in the bucolic village. Unlike its neighbors, however, a light still burned inside despite the lateness of the hour. The house was on the southern edge of Glastonbury, within view of the ruins of the old abbey.

The woman smiled graciously, either missing or choosing to ignore Owain’s sarcasm. “Oh...I’ve been waiting for quite a while.”

As they approached the house, the fog of *déjà vu*

and bewilderment that had afflicted Owain was fading. Simultaneously, the realization sank in that he had found the person the Nosferatu had sent him to meet. Owain held his hands down by his side. A conscious effort was required to prevent his fingers from stretching into razor-claws. This was the woman who had deceived both him and El Greco. Owain did not abide being trifled with, did not ignore being bested.

“You do not fear me?” he asked as they reached the front door.

The woman’s smile waned. Her expression grew serious, though not worried. She opened the door. “I know who you are. I know *what* you are. But, no, I do not fear you.”

“Perhaps you should,” said Owain.

Again his rancor was lost upon her. “Perhaps you and your...companion,” she looked at Kendall with a studied eye, “would care to come inside. The day begins early in a small town, and I suspect none of us would profit from the dairyman or a neighbor spying you on the front walk.”

Owain hesitated. He had been driving himself to this point, to this confrontation, with little thought for contingencies. Whether he tried to unravel the secrets of this mysterious woman or merely ripped her throat open as compensation for her meddling, either way he shortly would need to seek shelter from the morning sun. She stood with

one arm outstretched toward the open door. After another moment, Owain relented and stepped inside the house. Kendall followed. The interior was what Owain would have expected from any of the dwellings in the village. A small front hall opened into sitting and dining rooms and also led back to a kitchen and pantry. To the right of the hall, stairs led upward.

“You seem to know of me,” said Owain. “I am at something of a disadvantage, I’m afraid.”

The woman closed the door behind them. “My name is Isabella.”

“Isabella...?”

“My family name would mean nothing to you. I prefer to let my ancestors rest undisturbed.” Isabella fastened the deadbolt on the door, then turned to Owain and Kendall. “May I take your coat? Your sword?”

Owain smiled but otherwise ignored her question. “I didn’t know your name until now, Isabella,” he began. She nodded as if in acknowledgment. “But I do know something about you. You’re a bit of a chess player, I believe.”

“It’s such a wonderfully intricate game, isn’t it?” Isabella leaned her back against the door and crossed her arms before her. Her eyes were dark but sparkled with life, took in every detail, missed nothing.

“You are also fairly skilled with pen and paper,” he added.

“Penmanship is so dreadfully neglected by most these days,” she tsked. “Quite the shame.”

Owain stared at her. He was perplexed by her flippancy, which was so at odds with her solemn demeanor earlier on Wearyall Hill. If she knew what he was, as she claimed, then she knew also what he was capable of. Was she incredibly foolish, or did she somehow truly have nothing to fear?

“Sir...” Kendall directed his attention to the window near the door. The morning sky was growing dangerously light.

“The hours do slip by, don’t they, Owain?” said Isabella. “We will have much to discuss, no doubt, but perhaps we should delay until a later time.”

Owain studied her intently. His impression was that there was much to learn about her. He could almost certainly reach out and snap her neck where she stood—she seemed nothing more than a mortal to him—but that would leave many questions unanswered. “Agreed.” He would, he decided, humor her, for the time being.

“Then come this way.” Isabella stepped past Owain and Kendall and led them through the back hall to the kitchen. She opened a door that revealed stairs descending to a cellar and gestured for them to proceed downward. “The accommodations are far from luxurious, but they should fulfill your needs.”

Owain stood before her at the top of the stairs.

He had no reason to trust her. All he knew of her was that she dealt in lies and trickery, yet here he was blindly accepting her hospitality. But he had left himself few alternatives. Owain chided himself for racing heedlessly about like a New World neonate.

Isabella saw his hesitation and, again in tones of complete seriousness, said, "I vouch for your safety beneath this roof, Owain ap Ieuan."

Their gazes locked. Owain was unsure of what he saw in her deep soulful eyes, but he spied no betrayal there. Slowly, he began down the stairs.

"There is a lock on your side of the door," Isabella said, "if that will ease your rest." Her words were half reassurance, half goading jest.

Kendall pulled the door shut behind them, and Owain heard as his faithful ghoul pulled the bolt across. He also heard footsteps from above as Isabella moved away from the door.

Owain was angry with himself. He had expected in Glastonbury to find the culprit responsible for the forgeries and then, after beating an explanation from the individual, to be on his way—to Wales perhaps, to establish a new haven and possibly to set Kendall free. Stumbling across the scenes of his visions, however, had quite fundamentally shaken him, and he had regained only a portion of his composure before encountering Isabella who, in turn, had been expecting him and

seemed not the least daunted to meet one of the Damned. He felt as if he were being pulled along by the tide of events.

At the bottom of the stone stairs, Owain turned the corner and staggered. Struck by the shock of disorientation only possible for a creature who'd seen hundreds of years drift past, he stumbled back into Kendall, who had come down behind him.

"Sir?"

Owain extended a hand against the doorframe to steady himself. He looked again at the room before him. The contents were unremarkable of themselves—rustic bed with hand-quilted cover and feather pillows; a tall wardrobe of oakwood; a stuffed boar's head trophy mounted on the wall—unremarkable except that they were the same furnishings that had adorned Owain's room hundreds of years earlier during his mortal days.

Owain glanced back at Kendall. With her black jeans, the pistol beneath her jacket, she was his anchor holding him to the modern world. She began to speak, but Owain raised a hand for silence. The most violent of his disorientation having passed, he stepped carefully into the room.

How could she?

He moved to the center of the room and slowly turned in a full circle. The stone walls and floor, the size of the room... *How...?* Owain looked over at Kendall and reminded himself that it was this

room, not her, that was out of place. She watched him as he moved about the room checking, in turn, each item of the spartan furnishings.

He opened the wardrobe and found it empty. Running his hand along the fine oak, he realized that the grain was a better quality, the piece as a whole in better condition, than the wardrobe he had used as a boy and young man. Owain closed the door and stepped around to the side of the wardrobe, where he squatted down low, again running his fingers along the wood.

“Ha!”

Alarmed by his outburst, Kendall rushed into the room, hand on her gun.

Owain grinned up at her from beside the wardrobe. “When I was a boy,” he explained, “I was horseplaying with my sword in my room—strictly forbidden by my father. At any rate, I swung a bit too wildly once and tore a gash in my wardrobe.” He turned back to the piece of furniture before him. “I scoured the spot and then stained it—not perfect, just good enough not to attract notice.” Owain resumed rubbing the side of the wardrobe. “But I could always find it if I looked.” He smiled again at Kendall, who had very little idea of what he was talking about. “Not here. And these stones...” He stood and crossed to the wall over the bed. “They’re the right color and shape for the most part, but the pattern is not quite...it was more like...” He

marked with his fingers where the different stones should have been located.

For easily half an hour, Owain examined every detail of the room and explained to Kendall what was not quite a match to the room he had known in his youth. He pointed out every flaw, every mistake that Isabella had made. The weave of the wool blanket was too fine, the grains of the stand for the wash basin too coarse. Owain took strange comfort in the fact that the entire room was merely a simulation, not an exact replica, of his one-time chamber. But as his limbs grew heavy and his concentration wavered—sure signs that the sun had risen above the horizon outside and that slumber called to him—he came again to the significant questions: how, and more importantly, why? How could Isabella have gotten so close to the details of Owain's mortal life? How could she have known that he would come to this place? Why should she take any interest in him in the first place?

But day was well underway, and Owain began to lose focus. His thoughts wandered. Grudgingly, he took off his overcoat and kept it wrapped around his sword as he placed them in the wardrobe. He felt, too, in the pocket of his coat the tattered remains of his commonplace book. There had been no free time to inspect it further or to attempt to repair it.

There was time for little else this morning. Strug-

gling to keep his eyes open, Owain lay down on the bed. Noticing that there was no rug or chair in the room, he slid over and made room for Kendall. She nodded appreciation but did not join him.

As the last of consciousness fled and his emotional guard lowered, Owain remembered the brief second of hope beside the Holy Thorn before he had turned and seen Isabella....

Ah, hope is cruel.

As he closed his eyes, the day claimed him. As did the visions.



The next evening, even after waking, Owain did not feel that he had stepped completely from the visions. The places he had seen—Wearyall Hill, the tor overlooking Glastonbury—were uncomfortably nearby. If he walked a few hundred yards out of this house, phantasm and reality would merge.

Kendall was already up, though the rumpled blankets beside Owain told him that she had rested at least part of the day. He watched her watching him as he sat up. She was still very pale. He should feed her again soon. But what of his desire to set her free? Why not begin now the painful process she would undergo—withdrawal from the lack of vampiric vitae, which currently imbued her with preternatural strength and stamina? Owain ratio-

nalized that he still needed her, but procrastination, he knew, would only provide excuses for further delay in freeing her. She nodded good evening to him, and he knew he could not release her yet. His current surroundings were too strange, too unpredictable. He might need her at any second, and without her he would feel completely devoid of anything or anyone familiar. So much had changed so quickly.

Soon, he silently promised. *Soon*.

Sitting in bed, Owain glanced around the room, at the cool stones and the hand-crafted furniture. How many mortal mornings had he greeted similarly? Except it was night now beyond these walls. He could tell by the degree of responsiveness returning to his limbs, his mind. The time of day was another detail that Isabella could not control, just as she could not exactly reproduce the room of Owain's youth. *Now to find out what she is all about*, he told himself.

He rose from the bed and washed his face with the water in the basin. Kendall, seated on the bottom step just outside the doorway, was situated so that she had been able to watch Owain resting and see the door at the top of the steps at the same time.

"How much sleep did you get?" he asked.

She seemed caught off guard by the question but hesitated only briefly. "Couple of hours."

"You sleep now, then." This definitely surprised

Kendall. By way of explanation he added, "You may be up all day tomorrow."

But that's what I do, her slightly puzzled expression seemed to say. "Are you sure?" she asked at last.

Owain nodded. "You'll know if I need you," he said, as he hooked his sword onto his belt, then stepped past her and began up the stairs. *She's conditioned to go days and nights on end with little or no sleep*, he reminded himself with a certain amount of irritation. But he recognized his own motivations. If he couldn't bring himself to release her yet, perhaps he could shield her from harm.

He slid free the bolt and opened the door to find Isabella seated at her kitchen table. Her hands were wrapped around the cup of tea she sipped while she waited. "Good evening, Owain."

He could not restrain a smile at her audacity. "We have much to discuss."

"I agree." Her eyes sparkled, but every once in a while her gaze carried a hard edge as well. "Do you require sustenance?"

"Sustenance..." he repeated. "Such a sterile word, don't you think?" He stepped closer to her. "Do I require *sustenance*? Must I feed? Do I thirst for mortal blood? Do I desire a human sacrifice?" He placed both hands on the table, leaned forward very close to her until the steam from her cup drifted only inches from his face. "Let's not mince words. Is that what you ask?"

Isabella's expression changed not at all. Nor did she flinch or draw back from him. Very slowly, deliberately, she nodded once. "Yes."

Owain stood upright again. "At present, I do not." He could, of course, use more blood—not for many years had he exerted himself, or been injured, to the extent that he had recently—but he did not *require* it, and he did not choose to reveal details of his feeding habits to this enigmatic woman.

Again, she nodded. "Then let us go upstairs. We can sit in more comfort and, as you said, we have much to discuss."

She rose, and Owain followed to the front of the house and up the stairs. "Do you live here alone?" he asked as they climbed the steps.

"I do."

"No servants? No husband? No lover?"

She paused at the top of the stairs and turned back to him. "Boorishness does not suit you, Owain."

"Whereas forgery and fraud are so much more attractive?" he replied at once.

Isabella continued without comment into one of the three rooms off the upstairs hall. The room was simple and functional—unadorned brick on the exterior wall, white plaster lined with wooden shelves on the others. The shelves were filled with various items: small clay urns; glass vases holding dried flowers; decorative containers of different

sizes and types. The items, though numerous, were not crammed onto the shelves. Rather, each piece was situated as if in a precise spot. Owain felt that he could be viewing a museum exhibit, or gazing upon the worldly effects, the personal trinkets, of a dowager in her declining years.

Isabella sat in one of two plain, wooden chairs at a table near the left wall and indicated that Owain should take the other seat directly across from her. On the table between them was an interesting array of objects: a tall candle in a dark, wooden holder; a box of wooden matches; at the center of the table, a shallow bowl that appeared to be made of gold; and an earthenware pitcher.

Owain waited while Isabella struck a match and lit the candle, which sputtered to life. Sickly sweet smoke drifted lazily toward the ceiling.

“Owain ap Ieuan,” said Isabella, “you have many questions for me, and I for you. You do not know me, and you have no reason to trust me. You may even have reason to distrust me,” she added, cutting off Owain, who had opened his mouth to say just that. “But let me tell you this: what I will reveal to you is quite worth your while, and those questions that I will not answer or that are irrelevant, I will respond to as such.”

“So you would answer some of my questions but not others?” Owain asked, somewhat incredulously. He summoned his iron will and let it snake across

the table upon the sound of his voice. *“I prefer that you answer all my questions.”*

Isabella’s eyes were caught in his gaze. She stared directly back at him. Her mouth slowly opened. “Life—and unlife as well—is a series of disappointments.”

Owain shot up from the table. His chair clattered to the floor behind him. He drew back a hand to smash across the table and scatter the collected items, but he held his blow. “You toy with me, woman!” He seethed with anger. “I do not think you recognize the fragility of your situation.”

She looked up at him with complete calmness, as if nothing he could do could surprise or alarm her. “I quite disagree. I recognize perfectly my ‘fragility.’ I recognize that, with one blow of your hand, you could crush my skull. Or you could take me in your hands and drain every ounce of blood from my body. But do you know if I am highborn enough for you to stomach my blood?”

The question staggered Owain—another secret that should be unknown....

“You could destroy my body,” Isabella continued, “but my spirit would roam free. You might have your satisfaction, or even your blood, but you would never learn what I have to teach.”

Owain lowered his hand.

“You see,” she said, “I do not hold you here against your will. You are here for knowledge. As am I.”

Owain's flash of anger gave way to amazement. *How does she...?* Speechless, he sat back down.

"You would ask questions of me," Isabella prompted.

Owain took a moment to collect himself. There was no way he could have been prepared for this. Never in all his years had he come across anyone so infuriatingly arrogant but with the power—knowledge being power—to justify her bearing. He would play her game for now, but once he had discovered what he wanted to know, she would no longer have that power over him, and he would stay his hand no further.

"I have recently seen a letter," said Owain at last, "a letter that was supposedly written by my own hand. And looking at the letter, reading the words, I could not detect even a mark that was not my script. There was no word that sounded as if I had not chosen it. Only, I did not write the letter." Owain watched her carefully as he spoke, but Isabella betrayed no reaction.

"I traced the route of the letter," he explained, "the route of many of my correspondences, and it led me here."

"And you accuse me of this duplicity?" Isabella asked, stonefaced.

"Do you deny it?"

"Deny it? After your flattering description of my handiwork? Heavens no."

Her frank and cheerful disclosure surprised

Owain. Did she want to reveal her secrets to him? What, then, of her bargaining power? Of her life?

“How did I do it?” she anticipated his next question. “The details would bore you—years of refining my skill, a certain blend of esoterica....”

“Magic?” Owain asked suspiciously.

She weighed the term momentarily, then acceded. “To the uninitiated, perhaps.”

They faced each other silently. Owain tried to take stock of the questions, both asked and unasked, that she had answered, and he wondered if there was anything he could reveal about himself that she did not already know.

“I have not seen a chess board,” he said, changing tack somewhat.

“I do not own one.”

“Yet—”

“Yet I bested both you and your friend,” she finished his sentence. “Chess is a game of the intellect.”

“You kept both games only in your mind?”

“Tsk, tsk, Owain. It is not such an unlikely feat. There are doubtless hundreds of mortals who could have done the same and beaten you in fewer moves. The only difficulty was the tedious length between moves.” She rolled her eyes slightly. “You and your friend certainly do like to mull over the possibilities, even when the end is clearly in sight—*especially* when the end is clearly in sight.”

“El Greco is dead,” Owain said flatly.

Isabella did not flinch in the least. “Unfortunate.”

“Your doing?”

“No,” she said. “And save your righteous indignation for someone else. I doubt you were so grief-stricken to see him go.”

This time Owain laughed aloud at her brazen audacity. “You truly know no fear—or tact.”

“It comes from living alone,” she said. “No servants. No husband. No lover.”

Owain, rebuked by his own words, sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

“May I speak plainly?” Isabella asked after a moment.

“You have not, up until now?”

“There is too much to learn, too much for each of us to learn, for us to waste time with this verbal sparring. Already, midnight is upon us.” Her wry humor was completely absent now. “I can answer the majority of your questions—who am I? how did I do this? how did I do that?—with four words: I am a spy. I am a gatherer of knowledge, a learner of the unknown. The ‘how’ of what I do is unimportant. You are not here to learn my trade, and even if you were, I would not teach you.”

“Then why am I here?” he asked. “If you would cease the gameplaying, then tell me what I want to know.”

“Why do you think you are here?” she asked, irritation rising in her voice.

“A question for a question. It is an odd way that you ‘speak plainly.’”

“Why do you think you are here?” she repeated.

Owain was near the end of his patience with this bickering and opted for brutal honesty. “I came here to find the person who violated my privacy, and to have my revenge upon that person.”

“And to find out why that person—*why I*—did so?” she asked.

“Yes,” Owain snapped.

“Well, let me tell you why.” Her tone was sharp, as if she were speaking to an ignorant schoolboy, a fact not lost upon Owain. “There was only one reason I had the messages redirected, one reason that I interfered in your correspondence with the dear, departed El Greco. It wasn’t for the entertainment of the game. You’ll be glad to know that you were the better player of the two, but neither of you were particularly challenging. Lords of night, indeed. No, I stole the games, I wrote the letter about Carlos, because I knew that eventually you would catch on. Eventually you would come here. So whichever it is you *think* you are here, Owain ap Ieuan, know that you are here because I wanted you to be here.”

Owain latched onto the edge of the table. Of course it was true. She was so prepared for him be-

cause she had expected nothing less than his presence from the beginning, whenever that might have been. His fingers dug into the wood, gouged deep furrows in the grain. He was seconds from reaching across and taking Isabella by the chin, twisting her head around until her eyes bulged and her neck snapped.

She leaned over the table toward him—practically placing her fragile skull in Owain's hands—and she whispered to him. Her words were like the hiss of a snake. "And would you like to know *why* I wanted you here?"

Owain imperceptibly slid his chair back from the table. *Tell me, you heathen bitch. Tell me and then you die.*

Isabella sat back again in her chair. "I wanted you here so that I could learn of your visions. And interpret them for you."

The hatred that was coiled within him, the mounting violence, all dissipated in shock. *The visions... But how...?* Owain again found himself dumbfounded. She knew at least something of his mortal days. She had interposed herself between him and El Greco. And she knew of the visions—the visions he had spoken of with no one. *I should kill her and be done with it*, he thought. *No matter what knowledge dies with her...* But then he pondered what that knowledge might entail. *If she knows of the visions...*

“I can ease the pain of the visions, Owain,” she said. “I can make them stop.”

Owain’s face snapped upward; his gaze met hers. Gone were all thoughts of violence, or even denying what she said. “Who are you? How do you know?” he demanded through clenched teeth.

“I know.”

Owain pushed his chair farther back from the table. He stood and began pacing. His steps were slow and ponderous, in a random direction until he reached a wall. Then he turned and walked slowly in a different direction. For a moment, Owain thought he heard the faint lilt of the siren’s haunting melody. That song had begun all this by flaunting before him images of a home he could never return to—*adref*. For Owain realized now, close as he was to Wales, that even if he returned, almost all of what had made home *home* would be gone. The same hills would be there, and the seashore. But so would mortals of this modern day with their automobiles and paved roads and televisions. There would be no hearth of family, no days stalking boar through the forests...no Angharad. The visions reminded him of that which he would never again have. Never.

I want to forget! What release that would bring—to slip back into forgetful numbness. It was the nearest semblance of peace he would ever achieve. Owain put one hand on either side of the window

and placed his forehead lightly against the glass. Outside, not far away, the tor loomed.

The shadow of Time is not so long that you might shelter beneath it. Those were the words of his visions. The shadow of Time. Nor is it short enough, or forgiving enough, that I might escape it, Owain thought.

There remained, however, the question of Isabella. Owain had many doubts, and she had proven little except her wiles.

“Words,” said Owain, his back to his host. “Only words.” He turned to face her. “You speak knowledgeably of much, yet you have done nothing *but* talk since I arrived.”

“How do you think I have learned that of which I speak?” Isabella asked as if his questioning of her was little better than asinine.

“That,” Owain said, returning to his seat, “is exactly my question. The ‘how’ of what you do is unimportant, or so you say. But perhaps I have no further use for you unless I know something about what you do and *how* you do it.”

Isabella sighed. A grim frown wrinkled her normally smooth features. “Very well,” she said. She rose from the table and turned to a small box on the nearby shelf. “What is that you have in your hand?” she asked, still sifting through the box. Several seconds passed before Owain realized that he had, in fact, taken from his pocket the golden

locket and was sliding it and the chain through his fingers. "Place it on the table," she told him.

After a moment of indecision, Owain did so reluctantly.

Almost at the same instant, Isabella turned from the shelf. She held in her hands a golden locket dangling from a chain. Owain's surprise quickly gave way to cynicism. *Parlor tricks*, he thought. Obviously, he had absentmindedly exposed the locket, habitually fiddling with it as he had just then, at some point earlier during their conversation. But then Owain saw that the locket she held was exactly the same as the one he had acquired from Albert in Atlanta.

Isabella sat down opposite Owain and laid her locket on the table as well. Then she took the clay pitcher and began to pour what appeared to be water into the shallow bowl. When the bowl was full to the rim, she returned the pitcher to its place on the table and again took in her hands the second locket. She opened it to expose a small, hand-drawn picture—a woman of striking beauty with a long, slender nose and doe-round eyes of deep soulfulness. The style of the artwork was familiar to Owain. The lines, at first glance, appeared crudely sketched, but then one noticed how the few sparse markings somehow conveyed a sense of the person more emphatically than could any photograph. As with Albert's picture, the eyes were

captivating. Owain found himself wishing that he could speak with this woman, that she could communicate to him whatever it was her eyes so desperately wanted to say.

Without warning, Isabella slid the picture from the locket and let the slip of paper fall into the bowl of water. Instinctively, Owain reached up to stop her—the picture would be ruined!—but it had already sunk just below the surface of the water. Strangely enough, the ink did not run, the paper did not curl at the edges. It hovered placidly just beneath the surface, and the woman's eyes stared up at Owain.

Isabella interposed her open hand, palm down, above the bowl. Then, focusing very intently on the picture, she began to mutter under her breath. Owain almost asked her to repeat herself but then realized that the words were not directed at him—if words they were. Owain possessed at least a passing familiarity with the Romance languages and could identify Arabic and several Middle Eastern dialects, but Isabella's utterances, now falling into a pattern of soft, rhythmic chant, were from a land—or a time—beyond his experiences. He watched the calm movement of her lips; he tried to note which sounds were made by the pressing of her tongue against the roof of her mouth or against the back of her teeth. Any clue might help him connect the words to a pattern he recognized,

and from a pattern he could potentially derive a language group, a geographical area, a hint to what she was doing here.

Isabella, ignoring Owain's scrutiny, slowly withdrew her hand from above the bowl. Owain was only slightly distracted from his investigation by her movement, but all thoughts of speech patterns and language families were driven from his mind when he saw the contents of the bowl. The picture of the woman was no longer there, or at least no longer visible. The water was not clear but dark, cloudy as if mixed with ink, and though the surface was placid, free of ripples or waves, the clouds were churning. They looked impossibly deep for the shallow bowl, but before Owain could begin to unravel this new mystery, the churning of the clouds resolved into a shape.

At first, Owain could make out only a dark mass, but as he looked more closely—or perhaps the clouds receded somewhat and the image grew clearer—he distinguished a hand, and then another, except the second lay to the side at the end of what appeared to be a limp, malformed arm. Owain leaned closer to the bowl. The first hand clutched something tightly, but Owain could discern little else. Then suddenly the rest of the murky image made sense to Owain. He saw the face that, before, he had not recognized as a face because it was misshapen and warted. The distortion was not

of the image but of the subject itself. The creature lay huddled, its good hand clutched to its chest. Now that Owain saw the face for what it was, he recognized the deformed visage.

Ellison. The Nosferatu from Berlin.

No sooner had Owain formed the name in his mind than other words interjected themselves as well—words that seemed to be spoken in Ellison’s voice, yet the gnarled lips of the image did not move.

“Melitta, my love, come back to me. Soon.”

Owain was surprised by the depth of pain and loss conveyed by the voice. Was it possible that such a monstrous creature had suffered disappointment and sorrow to rival Owain’s own? Owain instantly discarded such an absurd notion, yet he was uncomfortable playing the emotional voyeur, hearing, feeling the thoughts of the Nosferatu. Owain did not feel so guilty, however, as to turn away.

“My dearest love, my Melitta, how much longer must I go on without you?”

The image grew increasingly clear. Ellison lay in some tiny, dark cave where he was curled amidst mud and filth like a misformed fetus in a corrupted womb. For an instant, however, he opened his clenched fist, and Owain saw in the creature’s hand a flash of sparkling gold—a locket that Owain needed to see for only a second to know that it

matched those on the table before him.

But then the image was gone. Owain saw Isabella lifting the picture from the water, though he had not noticed her reaching into the bowl. Neither had he been aware when she had ceased chanting, but the absence of the rhythmic cadence was palpable between them.

Owain stared at his locket—at Albert’s locket.

I am a spy.

Isabella was far more than a spy, he realized. She was a witch, and it was her magic that served her as well as electronic gadgets might serve a modern spy.

Owain picked up Albert’s locket and crushed the soft gold in his hand.

Isabella frowned. “I don’t believe that was necessary.”

Owain let the lump of gold that had been the locket fall into the bowl. Water splashed onto the table.

“There is your proof,” said Isabella. “I can interpret your visions, Owain. I can rid you of them.”

He stared at her grimly. Having seen something of her power, he believed her. Yet he distrusted her more intensely. “You have used his pain,” said Owain nodding toward the bowl and the vanished image of Ellison.

Isabella shot him a sideways glance. “Really, Owain. Scruples? At this late date? Would you tell

me that you have never used to your advantage the knowledge of a rival's illicit love, or the aspirations of a mortal who, in exchange for mastery over the night, would serve you as ghoul? Are you so arrogant, or merely ignorant?"

Owain repressed a shudder at hearing his own thoughts divulged so crassly. He stared for several moments into the water in the bowl then again faced Isabella. "I would be rid of the visions," he said. "I am not so naïve as to think that you do not harbor your own reasons for wanting to learn of my visions. I doubt you undertake this from the goodness of your heart. I am not without leverage in the matter, so know this...."

He leaned forward over the table. "You seem to know much about me. You should know, then, that I hail from a noble family, a proud family. That which you name arrogance, I name pride." He leaned even closer to Isabella. "I, too, believe that we can help each other, but I do not need you so much that I will abide insults or aspersions." He punctuated his statement with a long, clawed finger that he held inches from her face. "I would rather suffer visions throughout eternity. Mind your sharp tongue, woman, or you will find it plucked from your mouth."

Isabella regarded him dispassionately. "Then let us begin."



Owain sat alone at the table. The candle, tall at the beginning of the night, was burned down to a nub. Trails of wax streamed down to form a cold, hard lump on the table. From the flame, thick smoke rose only to hang heavy in the air and obscure vision. Owain could barely see the far walls of the room. He shifted his gaze to the table before him, to the golden bowl and the image that faced him from it.

Again the water was perfectly still, and again the flat surface reflected a scene that it could not possibly reflect. Gentle white clouds passed tranquilly across a blue sky—a *daytime sky*. Owain instinctively recoiled from the rays of light emanating from the scene, but to his surprise, he found that the light did not cause him pain, did not burn the undead flesh from his bones. Hesitantly, he leaned forward again.

Materializing in the midst of the sky and the lazy clouds was the shape of a face he knew well. Angharad appeared faintly at first, then slowly became more distinguishable from the surrounding scene. It was not, however, her face as Owain was used to seeing her. Instead, her reflected visage was a crude collection of drawn lines, as if someone had sketched her among the clouds. Nevertheless, her eyes seemed to Owain very much alive, as deep as the sky itself.

Without meaning to at first, Owain reached a

hand toward the bowl. He caught himself and stopped. What if he touched the water and her image was dispelled? Even with the longing evoked by the sight of her, Owain experienced a certain peace when he gazed upon her. He owned no picture of Angharad, and over the years he had found himself, on occasion, unable to recall exactly the curve of her cheek, the set of her brow. He was loath, now, to disturb the image that eased his centuries of pain.

A tremor crossed the surface of the water, and Owain nearly despaired. *Don't leave me. Not again. Not yet.* But the tremor was the effect of Angharad's movement. Slowly, she opened her mouth.

"Owain."

Hearing her call his name, hearing the perfect pitch of her voice, he was wracked by desire for she who was denied him. Again, he lifted his hand, and as he reached closer to the bowl, her image became more lifelike—less a sketch and more the smooth face he wished to caress.

His hand moved closer. Each fraction of an inch was equal to years of torment. Her lovely, pale skin lay just beneath the surface.

"Owain," she called again.

His fingers broke the surface of the water, and she did not flee. He reached deeper, fearing each moment that she would disappear, but finally his fingertips touched not the golden surface of the bot-

tom of the bowl, but soft, perfect skin, the skin of his beloved. As the ripples on the water died away, Owain saw his fingertips resting against Angharad's cheek. She closed her eyes, and Owain could feel as well as see as her hand came to rest upon his own.

Owain had no idea how this strange magic worked, how it was that he could reach into a shallow vessel and touch his love. He did not know, and he did not care. To be so close to her after centuries of separation was almost more than he could bear. Owain's vision began to cloud. So moved was he by this meeting of flesh that a single tear of blood fell from his eye into the water.

The teardrop landed, and Angharad's eyes shot open. She glared up at Owain and again opened her mouth to speak:

"Kinslayer."

Owain couldn't bring himself to take his hand away. He could not let go of her. The touch of her cheek, of her hand, was so much more than he had hoped for.

"Kinslayer."

But now the image beneath the surface of the water was growing stormy. The clouds that had been white turned dark and threatening. Angharad's countenance conveyed loathing, contempt. She took hold of his hand, but her skin was no longer soft. It was grown hard and dark, like wood—like the fine grains of a hawthorn tree.

Owain tried to pull away his hand, but he could not move it. With his free hand, he grabbed his forearm and pulled. It did him no good. The surface of the water remained calm, though the image beneath was of swirling clouds in the midst of a terrible gale. Angharad was barely visible. Owain pulled with all his might but could not free his hand.

Suddenly, rising from the water sprang more hardened, wooden hands. They latched forcefully onto Owain, to his arms, his hair. They grabbed him by the back of the neck and with unrivaled strength pulled him down toward the water.

Owain was surrounded by the tempest. He fell through the raging clouds. The wind tore at him. Lightning flashed all about as he fell ever downward.

He crashed to the ground with the sound of cracking ribs and vertebrae. Beneath the raging storm, he lay immobile on the hillside, and above him stood the old man, Joseph, staff in hand.

“The shadow of Time is not so long that you might shelter beneath it,” said Joseph. *“And by these signs, you shall know I speak the Truth which abides no darkness. I have seen the Isle of Angels trembling as if struck a great blow. Michael, most exalted of that Glorious Company—he that cast the Dark One from on high—is himself thrown to the Earth. Men look up without understanding at the darkened sky and the Children of Caine waken at dawn.”*

Joseph stepped closer to Owain. The old man held his staff before him with outstretched arms as if a ward against the evil he confronted. Owain could see standing behind Joseph the chapel to St. Michael, a fortress against the storm. Joseph leaned closer still, righteous indignation welling up as he spoke:

“I have seen a Cross, steeped in the blood of our Lord, burst forth into new life. I have seen it ring itself in Holy Thorns, lest the impure approach and taste of that forbidden fruit. I have seen a great white Eagle perched in its branches. It opens its mouth and lo it speaks with the hidden voice of mountains. Words of Undoing it speaks for the Children of Caine.”

Owain’s crumpled body would not respond to his wishes. As he watched helplessly, Joseph raised his staff overhead. He held it in both hands like a great wooden stake and, with a final bellow and all the strength he could muster, brought it crashing down on Owain’s chest. The staff crushed bone and rent flesh as it plunged into Owain’s heart.

Pain flooding his vision, Owain saw the tower, the Isle of Angels, trembling as if from the blow.

Suddenly, the scene before Owain blurred and swirled. The crashing of thunder was all about. Owain imagined he heard the tower crumbling, falling to the earth, brought down upon his head, no doubt.

But slowly, Owain’s vision began to clear. The

swirling chaos gave way to stability. There was no tower tumbling toward earth to crush him. There was no Joseph, no staff, no hillside.

Owain sat at the table. Before him, the candle was burned down to near nothingness. The bowl of water rested undisturbed, and next to it the vial containing whatever elixir Isabella had given him to induce the visions. Isabella was present as well, seated across from him, but her attention was directed elsewhere. An expression of genuine puzzlement and concern creased her brow.

“What was—?”

Another crash sounded from downstairs—the sound of wood splintering.

Owain, extracting himself from the fog of his visions, was not as quick as Isabella. She was up and heading for the stairs. He fumbled after her. Even now his body responded only lethargically to his commands. He almost stumbled over Isabella, who had stopped partway down.

The front door of the cottage was smashed open and partially ripped from its hinges. Standing in the doorway, half-crouched and ready to spring, was a pale, wiry figure. His unnatural pallor and the exaggerated sunkenness of his gaunt, hawkish features suggested that he was one of the Damned, and Owain sensed that such was the case.

Kendall stood back in the hallway toward the kitchen. She held her gun leveled at the intruder,

daring him to advance farther. The Cainite's wild eyes darted back and forth and he shifted his gaze rapidly from Isabella and Owain to Kendall.

The intruder blurted out something in a hiss. The words escaped Owain at first. Then he realized that the intruder was speaking French, but not the language as Owain had come to recognize it in modern times. The accent was very strange. *No, not the accent*, Owain thought as he recognized more fully what he was hearing. *The pronunciation in general—word stress, not much elision...* The intruder's words were Old French, the language as Owain had originally learned it hundreds of years ago.

"The Kinslayer!" growled the intruder. "I am here for the Kinslayer!"

TEN

The intruder took a step toward Kendall. She cocked her pistol. He seemed unsure about the weapon and hesitated.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Isabella, who remarkably had shifted into Old French. Her authoritative manner gave the intruder pause. He also seemed calmed somewhat by the fact that his arrival had not been greeted by instantaneous attack.

“The Kinslayer,” he repeated. “He is here. He possesses the relic.” With the last word, his eyes flashed madness. His newly established control wavered, and a shudder ran through his entire body. He glared at Kendall but held his ground. “I seek the relic. I seek the blood.”

Owain stepped past Isabella. "I am the Kinslayer," he said. The visions had been clear enough on that point. Owain would not deny his heritage, nor did he fear this lunatic.

The intruder's eyes flared. His hand shot toward Owain's throat.

The deafening blast of a gunshot thundered in the hallway. The intruder's hand, partway to Owain, exploded in a shower of blood and shattered bone. The force of the bullet knocked him against the wall, and he yowled in pain.

"Merciful gods!" said Isabella as she shoved past Owain. "Put that thing away," she told Kendall in English, "before the entire village is pounding on the door."

"A bit late for that," Owain said dryly, nodding toward the splintered remnants of the front door.

Isabella shot him an irate glance. She stepped to the stranger, who sat huddled against the wall clutching his ruined hand against his chest. He watched in shock as she ripped the sleeve from his shirt and wrapped it tightly around the wound. "Who are you?" she demanded as she worked.

"My name is Montrovant," he answered, confused that she was aiding him. "I seek the relic."

"So you said." She pulled the knot tight, evoking a wince of pain from Montrovant. "Go in there." She pointed toward the sitting room. "Keep your head, and no one will hurt you. Can you do

that?" Montrovant nodded dumbly. "And try not to bleed on everything." He climbed to his feet, leaving a bloody smear on the wall, then sidled into the sitting room. He kept close watch on Kendall as he did so.

Montrovant. Owain tried to remember if he knew the name, but over the years he had forgotten more than most mortals would ever know in a lifetime. Still, the name tugged at his memory. *Montrovant.* Owain thought back to his days in France, to the time he had spent toying with the Knights Templar....

"Step aside." Isabella elbowed her way past him up the stairs.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She answered but did not take time to stop. "There are rituals that I must perform if we are to avoid being discovered. I can make sure that no one traces the sound of the gunshot to this house, and that no one notices the door, but I must begin at once." With no further explanation, she disappeared upstairs.

Owain and Kendall watched Montrovant until Isabella returned half an hour later, by which time, Montrovant's hand had almost completely healed. He clenched and opened his fingers stiffly, only occasionally glaring in Kendall's or Owain's direction. Any doubts of Owain's that Montrovant was a Cainite quickly vanished. Owain could tell by

the distasteful curve of Kendall's lips, as she watched Montrovant, that she disliked the newcomer even more than he did. Why, Owain wondered, was Isabella being so accommodating? Could she not see how unstable, how close to frenzy, he was? Did her insight only extend to those she'd had ample opportunity to spy upon, and not to an unexpected visitor?

Owain was tempted to summarily execute the intruder. *He attacked me. What other cause do I require?* But would doing so preclude further cooperation—halting and grudging as it was—from Isabella? Owain decided to bide his time.

Presently, Isabella descended. "No one has discovered us," she assured him. "The proper wards are in place. Innocent bystanders will remain just that."

Her pronouncement did little to put Montrovant at ease. He stalked around the sitting room muttering in French and tugging occasionally at the oversized shirt that hung from his shoulders. Dirty workpants were tucked into his boots, which, although old and weathered, were the only item of his apparel that seemed to fit him properly.

"Now, tell us, Montrovant," Isabella said, slipping smoothly again into Old French, "about this relic that causes you such anxiety."

Montrovant ceased pacing at the sound of his name, but his eyes were never still. They shifted

about constantly, his gaze scanning every corner of the room and each of its occupants in turn. "I seek the cup of Christ," said Montrovant. When he began speaking, his gaze locked onto Owain. "The sangrail. And you have it, or know of its whereabouts."

"The sangrail?" Owain was not sure what exactly he had expected to hear, but this was not it. "I have the Holy Grail?" He tossed his head back and laughed loudly.

Owain's laughter served only to provoke Montrovant. His eyes glazed with pure hatred. He snarled and took several steps toward Owain. Kendall reached behind her, but before she could draw her gun, Owain's sword was in his hand and the tip pointed directly at Montrovant's throat.

"Hold your place," said Owain.

Montrovant halted. Some semblance of awareness of his surroundings returned to him. The madness that had seized him receded, but not far.

"Why do we suffer this lunatic?" Owain asked Isabella.

For a moment, she surveyed the scene before her—Owain with sword drawn, the more darkly complected Montrovant ready to spring—and when she spoke, her tone was that of a teacher who knew the answers to all of her own questions and was merely waiting for the pupils to catch up. "According to legend, Owain, who was the bearer of

the grail? Who brought it to Britain?”

“What difference...?” Owain wanted to glance over at Isabella to see if she was joking, to see if perhaps there were more lunatics in the room than he had at first suspected, but he did not shift his gaze from Montrovant.

“Who brought it to Britain?” she asked again.

Owain could see the point she was making, but he didn't care for it. “Joseph of Arimathea,” he admitted.

“There is nothing that happens that is not for a reason,” said Isabella.

Owain did not argue with her. Not because he agreed, necessarily, but because the visions were intensely personal, and though he had agreed to share them with Isabella in hopes that she could rid him of them, they were not something he wished to discuss in front of the psychopath Montrovant.

Suddenly Owain went stiff. He kept his sword between himself and Montrovant but looked over at Isabella. The true weight of her words landed squarely upon him. With her question, Isabella had drawn the connection between Montrovant, with his ramblings about the grail, and one of the principal figures of Owain's visions, Joseph. The connection was tenuous, but Owain could not deny the possibility. The realization that struck him so forcefully, however, was that Isabella had drawn

that connection *though Owain had not yet told her about Joseph.*

She watched Owain patiently, and he knew with a sick certainty that she was aware of the realization just visited upon him.

“Montrovant,” said Isabella, changing tack completely. “I have given Owain my assurance of safety in my home. I would offer the same to you, but I must first have your word that there will be no further confrontations. I believe there is much that we all can learn from one another,” she shot a pointed glance at Owain, “but not while fearing for our safety.”

Montrovant looked at the sword pointed at him and then at Kendall, who had nearly blown off his hand. His eyes shone with a fanatical gleam. Would his word, Owain wondered, outweigh that fanaticism? Finally, Montrovant turned to Isabella. “I agree,” he said.

“Very well,” she said, apparently satisfied with his response. “Owain, put away your sword.”

Owain hesitated. He was rapidly coming to the conclusion that being freed of the visions was no longer worth the risks involved. Dealing with Isabella was one thing, but exposing himself to this crazed Cainite, who spouted gibberish about the sangrail and had already threatened violence against Owain more than once...that was something completely different. He was bothered also

by Isabella's knowing questions. She revealed, intentionally, no doubt, things she should not know, yet she did so without admitting anything. Perhaps he would be better off simply to kill her and then destroy the lunatic as well. He suspended judgment for the time being.

Slowly, Owain lowered his sword and this time pointed his finger at Montrovant. "Know this. You have raised your hand against me twice. If you do so again, my sword will not be stayed."

"Please, gentlemen," said Isabella, but neither Cainite looked at her. Their eyes were locked. "Sit." Again, they both ignored her. She sighed but then pressed on. "Montrovant, Owain is understandably skeptical regarding this rather wild claim of yours. Why do you think he has the grail, or knows where it is? Montrovant...?" She snapped her finger until he blinked and turned to face her.

"I was sent by an ancient known as Kli Kodesh," said Montrovant. "He told me that the Kinslayer could lead me to the relic, that the Kinslayer would go by the name Owain ap Ieuan." Montrovant paused and glared at Owain.

Owain, for his part, glared back. He had spent centuries largely keeping to himself, trying not to draw undue attention, and yet now his name seemed to be known far and wide by individuals he'd never met.

"Owain ap Ieuan," Montrovant repeated. "It was

a name I remembered from before...from my nights with the Templars.”

“The Templars...” Owain had almost remembered this earlier. “Montrovan. The dark one.”

Montrovan nodded solemnly. “You knew the Templars as well, Kinslayer. And you sought the grail.”

Isabella, her chin propped contemplatively upon her knuckles, watched Owain.

“I spent several years among the Templars when I first left Wales,” Owain explained. “They were so self-righteous—the ones who weren’t corrupt and stealing from, or for, the order. But none of them, not even the devout, were beyond temptation.”

“So you did know each other?” asked Isabella.

“No,” said Owain. “I heard stories of the dark one, but I never met him.”

“And I heard stories of you,” said Montrovan to Owain. “On my journeys searching for the relic, I often heard your name. You were so often ahead of me, it seemed. I did not know you had succeeded.” The madness again glistened in Montrovan’s eyes, as if the very thought of someone having achieved his goal was enough to drive him to frenzied violence.

“I never searched for the grail,” said Owain, hand on hilt. “You’re mad.”

“And you said an ancient called Kli Kodesh told

you this?" Isabella asked Montrovant. He nodded. "What do you know of this Kli Kodesh?" she asked.

A grim smile crept across Montrovant's lips. "He is as old as time, and I have been a part of his games too often."

"Then why do you believe what he says?" asked Isabella.

Montrovant chuckled at her question. "He plays his games for sport. Life, death, hours, centuries—they are all the same to him. There is enough sport in the truth. He does not need lies. He sets me upon my quest to provide entertainment for him."

"And you play along?" Owain was disgusted.

"This time I will succeed!" Montrovant raised his fists before him. He hissed and bared his fangs.

Owain was an instant from drawing his blade. Kendall held her pistol aimed at the dark one. She had been watching intently, ready for the first sign of aggression from Montrovant, though the conversation in French was meaningless to her.

"Montrovant." Isabella's soothing voice cut through the air and restored a facade of calm to the room. Montrovant regained control of himself and eased back a step. Owain, in turn, lightened his grip upon the hilt of his sword as Kendall lowered her weapon.

"You must tell me more of this Kli Kodesh and what he has told you," said Isabella.

Owain scoffed. "The dark one is not only a mad-

man but also an idiot. You can put stock in his insane drivel if you like, but I do not." He turned and stalked out of the room, secure in the knowledge that Kendall would watch his back should Montrovant decide to take advantage of the opportunity. Also, as Owain passed, he flashed an unobtrusive hand signal to his trusted ghoul for her to hold her position. She would know to keep a watch on Montrovant. Isabella seemed to trust this lunatic, but Owain was not about to share her folly.

Ignoring Isabella's calls for him to return, Owain stomped outside past the propped front door and hoped, as he did so, he that he would not trigger whatever magical wards the witch had set. Despite the bit of arcane trickery he had witnessed from Isabella, Owain was still skeptical that she could bring any power to bear that might harm him. When he turned back toward the house from the front walk, however, he saw a front door that had not been broken to pieces. There was nothing unusual about the house, nothing to distinguish it from its neighbors. Owain was impressed, but even this illusion gave him no pause to fear for his own safety.

The streets of the village were not as deserted as Owain had seen them before. Here and there, mortals passed on the street with friendly words of welcome to one another. Owain was not reliant on Isabella to remain unnoticed by mortals. The shad-

ows stretched to welcome him, and as he stood in relatively open ground, not even the nearest mortal saw him.

Not wishing to tempt fate, however, Owain slipped alongside the house. He stood beside the building and looked off to the west at the imposing tower atop Glastonbury Tor. To the east, he knew, stood the Holy Thorn, waiting for his next vision so that it might terrorize him again. Owain had no desire to travel to either landmark. He had seen more than enough of each. Instead, he looked up and found the window he sought.

As silently as a shadow, he scaled the twenty or so feet to the window. His fingers dug easily into the bricks and mortar. The slightest concentration saw the latch click open, and after just a few more seconds, Owain stood inside. The shelves were set the same as they had been last night. The same items sat atop the small table against the wall—candle, golden bowl, pitcher of water. A wave of equal parts relief and trepidation washed over Owain as he stepped closer and saw also the small, stoppered vial beside the pitcher—the vial holding the elixir that had launched him into the most vivid dreamings he had experienced, the elixir that had allowed him to touch Angharad and to feel her at the tips of his fingers.

Owain waited by the window as he listened. He could make out the voices from downstairs—the

infuriatingly composed Isabella, the considerably less composed maniac Montrovant. Isabella continued with her questions, no doubt, leading Montrovant to say what she wanted him to say. It was unfortunate, Owain thought, that Kendall did not understand Old French so that she could report back to him more fully.

Quickly but silently, Owain took his seat at the table. His gaze fell immediately upon the tiny vial, and he thought back several hours. Isabella had offered him a dram, though the thimble-like cup was now nowhere to be seen. She had intoned no incantations and made no gestures as she had when they viewed Ellison. Was the elixir, then, all that was required? Owain looked at the sad little wick protruding from the glob of wax that had been a candle. It had been lit before, but was that a necessary component of what had happened? He could light the burned-down nub, but the aroma might well alert his host, so he decided against.

Owain lifted the vial from the table. He had assumed that he and Isabella would discuss what he had seen, what he'd experienced. His expectation had been that she could provide some insight as to why the visions plagued him. She claimed that she could make them stop. Yet Owain knew that to be rid of the visions was no longer his most potent desire. There were other considerations to take into account.

Angharad.

When the songs of the now-destroyed siren had first brought images of Angharad back into Owain's mind, he had seen her from a distance, through a window of his ancestral home. Shortly thereafter when the visions had begun, he had seen her as a dream—oh so real at the moment, but quickly fading into vague recollection upon waking. Earlier tonight—a shudder ran down Owain's spine at the mere thought—he had touched her face, had felt her hand upon his, and now, hours later, *he still believed that he had touched her.* Despite what his rational mind told him, Owain's memory was not of a dream that had been snatched away from him. His fingertips, the palm of his hand, had caressed the softest of skin. Angharad, not some shade of his mind, had spoken to him. He had been in her presence as surely as he had sat across the table from Isabella. He could rationalize to eternity the possibilities of being rid of the visions, Owain knew, but he had the opportunity—he possessed by way of the tiny vial that he held in his hand the means—to see Angharad again. To touch her. To hear her voice. And he could no more pass up that chance than he could summon the courage to greet the rising sun and put an end to his lonely existence.

Owain took the stopper from the vial and raised the container to his lips. He felt the sweet burn-

ing of the elixir passing over his lips and tongue, down his throat. There was not much left, so he tilted back his head and drained the vial.

He had no idea what was in the elixir. He had not asked Isabella. She undoubtedly would have skirted the question. As he waited for something, anything, to happen, Owain's thoughts turned to his enigmatic host. He knew little more of her than he had when he had arrived. He had thought himself quite clever tracing the route of the chess moves. Confront her and punish her for her interference—that was what he'd planned to do. But everything he discovered about her, beginning with his finding her in the first place, was what she wanted him to discover. The interference with the chess game that had led him here had been designed to do just that. Or so she said.

She could have foreseen that he would go to the drop-off point for the chess moves, to Berlin, but how could she have known that Ellison would send Owain here? There was too much coincidence, and Owain knew better than to trust coincidence. Was Ellison an accomplice in the scheme? After viewing him via Isabella's magics, Owain doubted somehow that the Nosferatu was knowingly a conspirator. Looking back on the encounter, Owain could see that Ellison had changed once he had seen the locket that Owain carried, the locket that was so similar to Ellison's own. *Perhaps he thought I*

threatened his secret treasure, Owain thought, remembering how desperately the Nosferatu had clutched his locket, how he pined after his Melitta, whoever that might be. *But how could Isabella have known that it would happen that way?* Owain wondered.

Again, there was no certain answer.

Owain shifted in the chair. The problem was that he could not be sure of anything he learned about Isabella. Was any fact a true discovery, or did he learn only and exactly what she wanted him to learn?

She was not Kindred. Of that he was sure. He had always been able to recognize others of his kind. It was a skill that not all Cainites possessed, and one that Owain had never been able to explain completely. She was not Kindred, but she was older than a mortal had right to be. Otherwise, she could never have derailed a chess game that sometimes went decades between moves.

She was also an adept gatherer of knowledge, a *spy*, in her own words. She had written the false letter to El Greco, which meant she had garnered information from deep within Carlos's faction of the Sabbat. The experimentation that had brought the blood curse crashing down upon the Cainite world was far from common knowledge, and Carlos would kill to keep it that way. Some of this knowledge Isabella could have gleamed from her

eavesdropping on the Nosferatu, those capable traffickers of secrets, but would even they know so much about the inner workings of the Sabbat?

She knows of my early life, Owain reminded himself. Enough to practically reconstruct his chambers from mortal days. *How could she learn such things? How?*

The questions burned in Owain's mind, and as he pondered the various riddles, his eyelids grew gradually heavier and heavier. How quickly the night had passed, he thought, for the call of the rising sun already to be summoning him to slumber. The night, however, had not passed. Darkness still blanketed the countryside beyond the window and was not nearly ready to surrender its domain. Upon the tor, the tower stood monolithic in the moonlight.

Owain's eyes fluttered. They could not have been closed for more than a few seconds. *Strange*, he thought, *that I should feel so tired when sunrise is still hours away*. He turned his attention back to Joseph, who had been speaking to him.

"You seek the grail as proof that God exists?" the old man asked. His dark beard was cut short, trimmed neatly close to his jaw, which jutted slightly as if throwing forth the question as a challenge.

"No," said Owain. "I know He exists. I know only too well." He rose to his feet from where he had

sat cross-legged on the ground. The grassy hillside was empty except for the two men. "For years I have heard His voice." Joseph cocked his head, interested by the notion. "Yes," said Owain. "Whenever I pass a babbling brook, or when I hear the roar of a waterfall, I hear His laughter. He laughs at my pain, at my loss. When I hear the shriveled leaves of fall rustling along the breeze of their final journey, I hear Him mocking the sorrows that He has heaped upon me!"

Joseph's face saddened. He leaned heavily upon his staff. "Then why, Owain? Why have you come seeking the sangrail? Do you wish to make of it a mockery?"

Owain's cruel laugh rolled over the hillside. "I would hold in my hand that most holy vessel, the chalice that held the blood of the Christ. Not because I discount the power of the relic. Far from it. I, more than most, believe in the power, and the glory, and the life everlasting." Owain stepped closer to Joseph. "I may be the most devout Christian you have ever met."

Owain turned away from the old man and could see to the east the lone tower, the chapel to St. Michael. "I would hold the grail because it is the symbol of that which our God holds most dear—his beloved Son. I would hold the grail so that I might crush it in my own hands, so that I might obliterate that vestige of God and the Christ on

earth.” Owain turned around and, again, stepped closer to the old man. “And you, Joseph, will tell me where it is—if you value your life, and you would not have lived so long if you did not.”

Joseph did not retreat before Owain but held his ground. “I have lived quite some time,” said the old man. “It is true. But I am not like you. The curse of Caine does not stain my forehead. I do not live in fear. I do not fear you.” His blue-gray eyes presented an open challenge to Owain. “I am not here out of fear but out of hope. Though the curse is upon you, it is not too late for you or your kind.”

“*Hope?*” Owain scoffed at Joseph’s words. “You are a man of God, but do not tell me that you are a man of hope. I, as an infant, saw hope pass out of this world with my mother’s soul. As a man, I saw hope die as my brother married the woman I loved. Then, I felt hope flee my body as a monstrous beast took hold of me and made me his forever. I saw dying hope in the eyes of my decrepit brother before I snapped his neck. I saw hope die as I sent my nephew to his death. I watched hope die as I turned my back on my homeland.” Owain, as his fury mounted, had moved closer to Joseph until their faces were only inches apart. “Do you dare claim to offer me hope?”

Still, Joseph held his ground. “I do.” A low growl began to form in Owain’s throat. “I offer hope. I offer you the hope of God the Father’s eternal love. I offer—”

His words were cut short as Owain grabbed away the staff. With a roar of pure outrage, Owain swung the shaft. It caught Joseph across the side of the face, and the old man, his cheek and jaw shattered, crumpled to the ground.

Owain stood over the bloodied figure. "You offer me hope so that your God can snatch it from me yet again!" Owain raised the staff high above his head and brought it down, not with the arching swing of a cudgel, but with the stabbing motion of a spear. The staff, though not carved to a point, struck with such force that its tip plunged into and through Joseph's chest and dug nearly a foot into the ground.

The old man did not cry out. His left eye was already obscured by swelling and shunted-aside bone from the first blow, but his right eye stared wide at Owain standing above him. Joseph would tell Owain nothing else about the grail, but Owain was too rabidly in the throes of frenzy to care. He dropped onto the impaled figure and sank his fangs into Joseph's neck.

As Owain fed, the body began to wither and draw up beneath him, while above, the staff underwent a miraculous transformation. Driven into the ground through Joseph's broken body, numerous shoots began to separate from the wooden shaft. Roots formed and bore down into the earth. Branches reached in every direction toward the heavens.

As Owain tasted the last of ancient blood, Joseph's body completely crumbled to dust, lying in a pile at the foot of what had been the old man's staff, but now was a full-grown hawthorn tree. Owain watched buds come forth within seconds and open into leaves. Blossoms also flowered, opened wide, then rained down a sprinkle of red and white petals on him.

Suddenly the very ground quivered and Owain, trying to stand, was knocked from his feet. Atop the tor across the way, the tower to St. Michael trembled violently. Bricks broke free from its highest reaches, and then the crowning statue of Michael tumbled to the ground as well. Owain watched as it tumbled, as if in slow motion, head over heels—an archangel taken to flight—and then was dashed to pieces on the ground.

Then the wind swept in from nowhere and churned into the air the ashes that had been Joseph. Owain, half-blinded by the silty wind, heard and felt more than saw as the chapel tower collapsed in upon itself. From the village and the abbey, he could hear cries of panic as the earth rocked and shook.

One voice, coming from closer by than the rest, stood out above the chaos. "The Kinslayer has killed the keeper of the grail!"

Owain looked down at the shallow bowl on the table before him. The image of the collapsing tower

was fading away into the expanding circlets of ripples. The sounds of destruction and the fury rushing through his veins were fading as well. That fateful night gave way to the present. Owain looked up and saw Isabella and Montrovant watching him from across the table. Kendall stood behind them by the door, her concern for her master apparent on her face.

“He killed the keeper of the grail,” said Montrovant again, staring into the now clear water of the bowl. His eyes shifted, looking up from beneath sharp brows to take in Owain. “You *must* have found it.” Montrovant almost pleaded, but the awe in his face and voice turned instantly to something far more deadly. “You must tell me!”

The memories of the magnificent, flowering tree and the blue-gray eyes of the old man still clung in the fore of Owain’s mind. The resonance of the sound, of the vibration, of the staff tearing through flesh and into earth below held him apart from what he now saw and heard. He stared up at Isabella and Montrovant, but they seemed very distant to him, as if the feet separating them were actually miles.

Owain watched helplessly as Montrovant, his claws reaching for Owain’s throat, dove headlong across the table.

ELEVEN

Montrovant scattered bowl, pitcher, and candle as he dove wildly over the table. Owain, still disoriented, could do little but watch as claws dug into his throat and the force of Montrovant's lunge tumbled the chair over backward. They landed in a heap. The impact of the fall tore Montrovant's claws from Owain's throat. The burst of pain was instantaneous as Owain felt his larynx sliced from side to side, and the blood began to flow.

Owain clasped one hand to his throat even as, with the other, he went for his attacker's eyes. Montrovant jerked his face to the side. Only when Owain was not immediately pummeled or clawed by another blow did he realize that Montrovant's

hand was already on the hilt of the sword at Owain's hip.

Owain let go of his throat and with a bloody hand grabbed Montrovant's wrist, sunk his claws deep into the dark one's flesh, carving through muscle and tendon, scraping bone. Owain's other hand dug into Montrovant's face in search of an eye.

Montrovant shifted his weight and brought his shoulder smashing into Owain's chest. Owain fell back. The back of his head bounced hard against the floor. Any advantage in strength that he enjoyed, Montrovant's leverage and unrelenting aggression recouped.

Montrovant, despite his gouged wrist and forearm, ripped Owain's sword from his belt. With a triumphant roar, the dark one rolled to his left and quickly rose on both knees. Blood streaming down his arm and face, he raised the sword for the *coup de grâce*.

For the second time that night, an explosion rattled the walls of the cottage, and then a second blast. Kendall's first shot slammed into Montrovant's upraised arm between shoulder and elbow. The second ripped into his chest from the side, shattering ribs and exploding through whatever internal organs he still possessed. The force of the blasts knocked Montrovant completely over Owain and into the wall.

Given a moment to regroup, Owain was quickly on his feet and ready for the next attack. His potent vitae was already speeding along the healing process as the gash in his throat scabbed over and the bleeding stopped.

With the combatants separated, Kendall stood poised for another shot, which Owain felt sure would take off most of Montrovant's head. Isabella stood back from the fray, her expression grim, but didn't try to stop Kendall this time.

Montrovant, staggered by the gunshot wounds, pressed against the wall and slid upward to his feet. His right arm, ripped open by the first shot, hung limp at his side, but still his fingers were wrapped in a death grip around the hilt of the sword. He glanced at Owain but spared more attention for Kendall. Fury and determination burned in Montrovant's eyes yet, but the modern weapon that had so grievously injured him three times now gave him pause. He seemed unsure how to deal with it, confused by the thunder and awesome pain it unleashed.

Then Montrovant was in motion. His lunge was too fast for even Kendall's reflexes. She had no chance to get off another shot.

Owain was prepared to receive an attack or to defend Kendall if need be, but with one step, Montrovant shot across the room and dove through the window. The crash of glass and snap of panes

was sharp and shrill after the reverberating boom of the gunshots that still rang in Owain's ears.

Before the shower of glass had completely fallen to the ground, Montrovant was gone, escaped into the night.

The three who remained stood in shocked silence for a moment.

"My thanks for your assurance of safety beneath your roof," Owain said to Isabella.

"I had not accounted for you provoking him," she snapped.

"Provoking...?" Owain began to protest but then followed her gaze to the overturned golden bowl on the floor and the puddle of water draining away. "You saw...."

Isabella nodded. Her eyes met his. "Yes."

The sensations came rushing back to Owain—the tenor of Joseph's voice, the visceral thrill of staff piercing flesh and earth, the taste of ancient blood upon his lips, the tremors of the tower collapsing—and he knew that this had been not vision, not prophecy, but *memory*.

"You were there," said Isabella. "You killed Joseph, ran him through with his own staff."

"Yes," Owain whispered as much to himself as to her.

"The prophecies speak of you, Owain. *'Thence shall come the Kinslayer. His is the blood of sacrifice. His are the sorrows of the ages.'*"

Owain stared at her, uncomprehending. The worlds of memory and present experience were dizzyingly superimposed for him. Her words mingled with those of the dead, the murdered, Joseph. *Thence shall come the Kinslayer.... I offer hope.*

Memories flooded over Owain—memories of the murder; memories of that forgotten trip to Britain, to Glastonbury; memories of his denied quest for the grail. Montrovant had spoken the truth.

Owain stepped toward the door. Whether from loss of blood or from the weight of realization, his legs failed him and he stumbled. The golden bowl skittered off his foot and across the floor. Kendall rushed forward to catch her master as he faltered. Her strong arms held him upright.

“There is still much to learn,” said Isabella. “But rest for now.”

Kendall helped Owain down the stairs and to the cellar room. The rich smell of gunpowder clung to her like perfume. She laid Owain gently onto the bed.

Montrovant spoke the truth, Owain recited over and over to himself. He picked at the memories like a half-torn scab. The visions loomed from a new perspective suddenly—equal parts fantasy and history. The shock of recognition as he’d stood before the Holy Thorn on Wearyall Hill made sense now. *I was there before*. His strong sense of the place had not derived from legends and stories alone. *I*

was *there before*. He had been there, and the memory had been hidden from him. *But how?* He knew the answer before he asked the question.

Owain could taste again the blood of the ancient upon his tongue. The blood of Joseph of Arimathea—so completely human, yet so much more than mortal. The power of that blood had overwhelmed Owain, had buried deep within his mind the events of that night, of those years. His quest for the grail had not been a spur-of-the-moment undertaking. Though he might have sought less compulsively for the relic than had Montrovan, Owain had expended considerable time and energy gathering the numerous stories, investigating the sightings both ancient and more current. Yet he had spoken the truth when he denied the search altogether—the truth as he had known it. Now, scant hours later, he knew differently.

How much else is hidden from me? Owain wondered.

He clutched his hands to his temples and pressed sharp nails into his scalp as if he could physically extract the obscured wisdom of the ages.

“Owain?” Kendall’s voice intervened upon his self-mutilation.

Owain saw the confusion and the concern for her master in her eyes. She was so pale, and though she had supported him earlier, he could see that

she was weakened as well, that she leaned against the wardrobe to remain upright. He had fed on her so often recently to recoup his own blood loss, and he had not replenished her strength as he should have. *She cannot serve me and take on the burden of serving as my herd*, he chided himself. But as he rubbed the small wounds at his temples, a pang of guilt pricked his conscience. Hadn't he resolved to release her from her servitude? To cease the charade of *quid pro quo*—her service for the gift of eternal unlife?

He looked with pained eyes upon her. The strength of her slight form amazed him. She had proven herself dependable and lethal. Again tonight, she had saved him. In this world that was increasingly different from the one he had known, could he truly do without her? Could he, if he allowed her to walk away, survive?

Owain motioned her to him. With the quick slice of one finger, he opened his wrist and offered it to her. She raised his hand to her lips and drank.

Just one last time, he promised himself. There was too much going on for him to be blind and helpless during the day just now. *Just one last time. When we are away from this place, I will release her.* Owain tried to tell himself that she had never asked for her freedom, had never expressed the slightest apprehension about her condition. But she did not know the truth as he knew it. She could not know

that he would never Embrace her, that he would never play God by spreading the curse to another.

Just one last time.

As she drew blood from his wound, Owain savored the flow of the vitae. She was more than his connection to the mortal world, he realized. She was his connection to the world of humanity. Yet as she drank from him, as she became more like him, he took her humanity from her. Caught up in the ecstasy of this inverted Kiss, Owain could imagine that the items around him in the room were actually the props of his mortal days, of his days of unbridled vigor and complete humanity.

In stark contrast was the vital, discovered memory of that night on Wearyall Hill, the night he had slain Joseph. That night was perhaps the farthest Owain had ever strayed from possessing any shred of recognizable humanity. He had given in not to hunger, to the Beast, but to evil. He had plummeted far beyond the ravaging hunger that plagued the soul of all his kind. The Beast was more human than Owain at that moment long ago.

He felt the flicker of Kendall's tongue on his wrist as she eagerly accepted what he offered. Owain laid back his head on the feather pillow, just one of the trappings of his lost humanity. Suddenly, he felt that absence, the gaping nothingness within his soul, more keenly than he had in years. He had drunk the elixir in search of Angharad, in search

of mortal passion. Instead, he had found sure proof of his own utter damnation. Last night he had tasted of humanity. The apple had been dangled before him, but tonight it was revealed as the forbidden fruit.

I will not give up! he raged at the God who vengefully had laid the curse upon Caine's brow, who had stolen first love and then humanity from Owain. *I will not give up!*

Kendall's lips moved rhythmically against Owain's skin. The sensation was one of excruciating pleasure. Already in her veins, the blood flowed more forcefully—a mixture of Owain's curse and her humanity. Some night, Owain knew, if he did not release her, his blood would win out, and there would be only the curse.

Not withdrawing his tapped vein from her, Owain took hold of her hand. The scent of her blood was strong. He ran his tongue along the length of her forearm and was rewarded by the rise of goosebumps on her skin. In his mind, he saw Angharad's face as he reached for her. He felt her delicate cheek, heard her moan in ecstasy as he pressed his fangs into the flesh of the arm before him.

The blood came hot and fast. Owain drank deeply at first, but then tried not to imbibe more quickly than the flow of blood from his own wrist. It was a precarious balance.

Kendall panted against his wrist as she drank—for, yes, it was Kendall and not Angharad. Her body was taut against him, her leg wrapped around his. Amidst the surroundings of his mortal days, Owain tasted her humanity flowing into him. He grabbed the back of her head and forced her mouth more firmly against his wound. She drank greedily. His claws traced the vertebrae on the back of her neck. Then he was taking hold of her shirt, ripping away her clothing, and she his, neither one relinquishing the flow of blood.

She slid her hand through the hair on his chest, sank her nails into his flesh when he drew more forcefully of her blood. Her heady aroma and tang filled Owain's awareness. She was what he had lost, what he could no longer be. He pressed his fingers against her yielding breast, slid them down across the belly that might still one day bear a child to suckle. Her lingering humanity in the face of his curse enticed him beyond measure.

Owain's desire took hold of him. He careened toward the point where he would no longer be able to control himself. Raw bloodlust mingled with rampant longing. Hunger and passion were one. Kendall's naked humanity enveloped him, took him in, beckoned him onward.

His restraint fell away. Owain drank fully of her. Her heart pounded furiously, attempting to compensate for the volume of blood leaving her body.

She would not last long, but Owain did not care. He would have her. His mouth and throat were awash with her blood. He would possess her humanity, consume it. She was his completely.

Kendall's jaw slackened. Her hand fell limp across Owain's thigh. The circle was broken as he feasted upon her sanguine essence, but she no longer drank of him. Her consciousness was falling away. She was surrendering to him. She could do nothing else, confronted by the full force of his passion.

Owain drank, but his hunger and his lust were merely primed for the consumption of Kendall's very soul. Owain could feel as her frenetic heart, increasingly overburdened with each beat, weakened. A few more minutes and it would be over. Still, Owain hungered. Not even Kendall's sacrifice would satiate him. And she would be gone.

Suddenly, Owain recoiled as if stung. He pulled away so quickly that Kendall's siphoned blood stained the blanket beneath them a rich, dark red. Owain took her by the shoulders. Her eyes fluttered and rolled back in her head, but she still breathed. Her heart still beat. Owain clutched her to him, buried his face against her breast. He fought down the hunger as he nuzzled her. She was his sole link to humanity, and not for centuries had he felt the spark of that fire engendered within him so powerfully. Yet he had almost destroyed her. For had he taken her

much further, he would have had no choice but to lose her or to Embrace her—and even had he chosen the latter evil and not killed her, then she would have been like him. The spark of life, of humanity would have ceased to burn within her.

Owain pressed his face more tightly against her. She was his font of humanity, and he had nearly destroyed her. He listened, thankfully, as her heart-beat grew stronger. He measured time, as he lay there against her, by the rhythm of her pulse, and he was not aware when the pull of daybreak overtook him and he surrendered to slumber.



Evening came and Owain awoke alone in the bed. Kendall's blood was dried black on the blanket, but she was gone. Her tattered shirt lay in a heap on the floor, but her change of clothes, also, was gone. Owain lay there for some while contemplating the grave mistake he had come close to making. He had very nearly deprived himself of his most valuable resource. Of all the ghouls Owain had employed over the years, Kendall was quite possibly the most adaptable and self-reliant. For those very reasons, her absence did not concern him overly much. Probably she was assuring herself that the area was secure, that the lunatic Montrovant had fled in earnest and was not laying in wait for Owain nearby.

Montrovant. Owain's thoughts turned to the dark one. He had fled with Owain's sword, one of two items that still held a certain amount of sentimental value for Owain. He would be wanting that back. Owain thought calmly of how he would track down the dark one and, for the trouble he had caused, destroy him.

Other matters, however, required immediate attention—the vision that was not a vision; memories that, for centuries, had been hidden from Owain. There was more to unravel. Twice, he had utilized Isabella's elixir, one tool of her mysterious trade, but neither time, thanks to intrusions from *Montrovant*, had Owain and Isabella been able to investigate further what he had seen—what *they* had seen, he reminded himself, for apparently the watery mirror of the golden bowl had reflected the images that otherwise existed only in Owain's mind.

Finally, he rose from the bed. *I must find out what Isabella knows.* He opened the wardrobe and from the pocket of his overcoat removed the one item he still possessed that carried any meaning from his mortal life—the tattered remnants of his commonplace book. *I will deal with Isabella, and then I will deal with Montrovant.* The latter task, he realized, would require Kendall's aid, if Owain were to be traveling abroad. The fulfillment of his pledge to release her would have to be delayed. First, he

would settle scores with Montrovant. *Then I will free her*, he promised himself again.

Owain found Isabella waiting for him in the sitting room. She held a large, leather-bound book open across her lap. "So, it is just us again," he said.

Isabella carefully closed the book. "Yes."

Owain was struck by the utter calmness of her manner. Despite all that had happened the past nights, she had remained very much in control—of herself and of the situation, for the most part.

"If Montrovant comes back," said Owain, "I'll kill him." Isabella watched him intently but did not respond. *Damnation!* Owain cursed her. *Is there nothing I can do or say to fluster this woman?* He stood silently for a moment more before trying again to catch her off guard. "You brought him here on purpose."

This accusation elicited a response from her, though it was not the reaction Owain had expected. She smiled and laughed quietly to herself. "I did not know him," she answered. "And I didn't know he would come here, but..." she drew in a long breath as she searched for the proper words, "I cannot say that I was completely surprised."

"You speak nonsense."

"To some." She set her book on the couch beside her. "Please," she gestured to the chair opposite her, "sit." Then she waited until he had done so. "I did suspect that *someone* might arrive, and it ap-

pears that Montrovant was, in fact, that someone. The Unholy Triad complete.”

Owain sat silently for a moment but could hold his tongue no longer. “You’re as insane as he is.”

“What do you know of Kli Kodesh, the one Montrovant said sent him?” Isabella asked.

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure?” she prodded.

What do you know? The answer to that question was, Owain realized, less straightforward than it would have been even twenty-four hours ago. A large block of time, several years that he hadn’t even known were missing, had been restored to him somehow. How could he be sure anymore of what he did or did not know? He thought for a while, as Isabella sat patiently, of those years that he had hunted for the Christian relic that might never have been more than myth. Owain had been driven by an icy determination to crush in his own hands that most potent symbol of the divine, to spite God as surely as God had spited him. The original notion had blossomed into compulsion and later crusade. Never since had Owain known such powerful motivation. Those years of the search, spent largely in France and Britain, he remembered now. Montrovant, who had likewise sought the grail, he remembered also. The confrontation with Joseph, the foul murder—Owain remembered that now as well. But Kli Kodesh...?

“Nothing.”

Isabella nodded. “I believe you.” But whether she meant that she believed Owain did not know or that she believed there was nothing to know, he was unsure. “I have never met Kli Kodesh,” she said, “but I have heard of him. He is quite old, as Montrovant said. The ancient one’s name surfaces occasionally in stories of the grail. And that does seem to be the connection between you and Montrovant.”

“Does this Kli Kodesh claim to know the whereabouts of the grail?” Owain asked.

“He claims many things, and he has claimed to be many people,” said Isabella. “Some stories have him claiming to be Judas Iscariot, traitor among Christ’s disciples. Other stories reveal him as Merlin, advisor to Arthur who, some legends say, conquered Rome. Still other stories say that he is a madman for the ages, overcome by time and tedium, that he believes all of the contradictory tales surrounding him. Myth? Legend? History?” Isabella shrugged. “All that is certain is that he is ancient, and that he is a keeper of the dark prophecies.”

Dark prophecies.

Owain’s thoughts whirled back to the stormy night in Toledo, to the alabaster stranger who had spoken and then vanished, another question mark in a book of questions that had neither beginning nor end. Owain thought back. He heard the words again and spoke them:

“The path ahead will take you to the center of the widow’s web. It will take you to the very foot of the holy thorn. It will take you into the hidden presence of the sacred vessel. It is there you must speak the words of undoing for the children of Caine. This is the task that has fallen to you. Let it be thus. Thy will be done.”

For once, Isabella’s eyes widened with surprise. She recovered almost instantly, but Owain saw. “The widow’s web?” he said as he glanced around the room meaningfully. “No doubt, he spoke from madness.”

“It seems as if you are not so completely uninvolved with Kli Kodesh as you thought,” said Isabella.

“It seems so.” Owain’s surprise was less than it might have been before his earlier revelation about Joseph. The Ventrue elder was beginning to develop a sense of just how little he actually did know. Briefly, he described to Isabella the strange meeting on the streets of Toledo.

“And some of what he said to you were the same words from your visions?” she asked.

“Yes.” Owain held in his mind the brief glimpse of Isabella surprised as he recited the words Kli Kodesh had spoken. Owain thought, also, of that disturbing encounter, of his frustration at the stranger who spoke as if he knew secrets that involved Owain.

Isabella waited patiently for Owain to describe his visions, but looking at her, he made an interesting connection. She, like Kli Kodesh, treated Owain as if he should know more than he did. More precisely, he realized, they both treated him that way *knowing that he did not know* whatever they did, and they relished that sense of power, lorded it over him.

“You said he is a keeper of prophecy,” said Owain. “Prophecy of what?”

“The knowledge is within you, Owain.”

Owain leaned forward in his chair. “I have had enough of being led by the hand like a child. Either answer my question, or I will leave this house, and your game will be over. I can stand to leave your riddles unsolved. Can you?”

Isabella considered his question thoughtfully. “The riddles will be solved,” she answered at last. “Perhaps this is not the appointed time, but they will be solved. And it will be you who solves them.”

Commonplace book in hand, Owain rose from his chair and turned to leave the room, to leave the house and never return.

“The prophecy,” said Isabella calmly, “is of your destruction.”

Owain stopped, turned to face her again, and the words she spoke turned his blood to ice.

“*This is the Endtime. This is the fading of the Blood.*” The words he had heard so often in the visions flowed from her mouth.

Owain thought back to the most recent visions, those induced by the elixir, those of Angharad and Joseph that Isabella had witnessed through her magic. *This is the Endtime. This is the fading of the Blood.* Those words had not been spoken!

But Isabella was not finished:

“This is the Winnowing.

“And in the last days the master will once again take up his tools. The firmament will tremble and the earth itself will be split asunder. The secret places of the earth will be cast up into the air and the creatures of darkness will shriek in the light of day. For it is written that Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Caine a tiller of the ground.”

The words took hold of Owain. They fit like a missing puzzle piece against the words of his visions. He stood helpless before them. Isabella’s voice took on a harsher tone. Her eyes blazed with righteous conviction.

“The First-Born comes in fury. He harrows his children from their graves. His wrath is a hammer, an unhewn cudgel wet with the blood of the Kinslaying. He drives the lightning before him.

“His voice is a dark wind scouring the plain. At his word, the sky opens, raining blood upon the furrows he has prepared. His children raise expectant faces to the Heavens, but they are choked and drowned in the torrent of spilling life. Such is the price of their hungers.”

Isabella's fierce gaze bore into Owain. She basked in the prophecy of doom.

"Only then shall Caine unyoke his red-eyed ox, whose name is Gehenna, for none may abide its countenance."



Memory of the egregious deed gave direction to Nicholas's motion and to his hunger. He traveled westward along the precipice between the worlds. Neither was completely whole to him. In neither could he find solace from the pain and rage that drove him. To balance between this world and that was no longer such a struggle, and exhaustion had given way again to burning hunger. Hunger for blood, hunger for vengeance. With each step, not two worlds but three demanded his attention—here, there, then.

There, he stood ever atop the cliff. The chasm was filled by the glowing and expanding Rent. Soon it would overflow the canyon and wash over the plateau of all the worlds. The restless dead, who tracked Nicholas still, had fallen behind, but not far. Now that he had stopped, their excited gibbering and whuffling drew closer.

Here, Nicholas had gone as far as he was able. The foam of the English Channel washed over the rocks at his bare feet, swelled around his naked ankles. The light of the Rent streamed from him

with every pant of rage, like the fiery breath of a stallion on a winter morning.

Then, Nicholas saw, as he had so often, the foul deed through the eyes of Blaidd, except now Nicholas was the ancestor and Blaidd the progeny. The pain of the spear throbbed within Nicholas's chest. The odor of his own fear and final death clogged his nostrils as the Kinslayer leaned closer, closer.

Ancestral blood united all the worlds within Nicholas—the sound of it calling out to him, the rich smell of stolen vitae, the terrifying void as the blood was drained from him.

Nicholas stalked back and forth along the shore while the uncaring waters lapped at his feet. The expectant cries of the shades were very close now. Many of the creatures had followed him from Grunewald. Such prolonged and focused action would normally have been beyond them, but the smell of ancient blood and the attraction of the shimmering Rent drew them onward. Their numbers stretched back to the horizon like a black river, and their shrieks of mindless joy rose to a crescendo as they sensed the closeness of their prey.

With a slavish devotion to instinct, they waded into the water after him. Nicholas was waiting. He took hold of the first shade and lifted it off the ground. It cried out, perhaps in pain, but only for a moment as he squeezed it in his powerful hands,

raised it to his open mouth, and devoured it whole. As he greeted the second shade similarly, he could feel the first sliding down his gullet to be consumed in the burning of the Rent it so desired to touch.

The streaming light and fire from Nicholas's mouth and fingertips only heightened the frenzy of the approaching dead. They could not see or did not care about the fate that met one and then another and another. They grabbed onto Nicholas's legs, scrambled up his back, and always more marched on toward him.

Soon Nicholas did not even need to raise a hand. The hapless dead crawled over one another for the chance to shove themselves down his throat. They came onward, one after another, and he consumed them in turn. For how many hours, he did not know, for time was liquid on the precipice and flowed like the Channel at his feet. They flocked to the Rent, which began to shine through him now. His skin took on a translucent quality as the fire within him grew. Still they came, and his feast continued, yet the hunger within him only grew. The corpora of the dead could not satisfy him, could not ease the burning that had begun so long ago. Should he turn and consume all the seas of the earth, still he would burn.

Atop the precipice, Nicholas felt the Rent as it expanded and reached the edge of the chasm. The streaming light washed over his feet and knees, and

still it grew. The weight of the shades grew too much, and as he toppled with them over the cliff into the fiery chasm, he knew his journey was near its end.



Several hours had passed since Kendall awakened dizzy and nauseated. She hadn't needed to check her watch to know that the sun still shone outside. The deep slumber that gripped Owain was enough to tell her that. For quite a while she lay there simply breathing, ignoring the pounding at her temples and the itching of the freshly healed scar on her forearm.

Eventually, she was able to sit up. The damp air of the cellar was stifling, and while that was not a problem for her master, she needed to breathe. *At least it's not as bad as the cabin on the damn ship was*, she thought. She dressed slowly. Each button on her shirt was an effort. She laboriously slid one foot and then the other into the pants legs. She would have to see about more clothes soon, she decided, looking at the torn remnants of what both she and Owain had worn last night. She stood and looked at his naked body for several moments—unnaturally pale coloring, no movement of breathing or beating heart. He didn't really resemble a person sleeping so much as a cadaver. But, then, that was much closer to the truth, she reminded herself.

As she watched him lying there, still as death, Kendall couldn't help thinking of how they had both fed just hours ago, how the embrace had been more than a mere exchange of blood. *Strange*, she thought. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Not that normal feeding wasn't pleasurable. It beat the hell out of the best mortal sex, but something was different last night.

The room began to spin slightly. *Fresh air*, she reminded herself. She stuck her .45 magnum in her belt under her shirt and slowly made her way upstairs. No sign of Isabella or Montrovant. Too bad, that, because Kendall would have loved a chance to put a few slugs in the vampire's brain. *Dark one*, she chuckled to herself. *Dim one is more like it.*

The brisk, late afternoon air did perk her up a bit. Her head began to clear, and she felt her strength returning. She could still tell that she had lost some blood last night, but fresh vampiric vitae went a long way toward making that up.

The town of Glastonbury seemed a pleasant enough little place. The locals puttered about, not taking much notice of Kendall. Even so, she made a point of not drawing attention to herself. She was intrigued to see that, from the outside, there was no sign of the damage to Isabella's front door, which had not yet been repaired. The house appeared much the same as the others around it. What other tricks, Kendall wondered, did their

mysterious host have up her sleeve?

Now that Kendall was beginning to feel stronger, she made an inspection of the area around Isabella's house to look for any signs of Montrovant's passing or other possible danger. With most of last night's conversation having been in French, Kendall did not have a good idea of what was going on, but that didn't preclude her from keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.

She finished her circuit as the sun was dipping below the horizon. Having found nothing out of the ordinary, her gaze wandered east to the tor, which dominated the landscape. She had investigated the hill and the tower chapel the first night she and Owain had arrived in Glastonbury. Thinking of Owain, she couldn't help again remembering the ferocity with which they'd embraced last night. Perhaps it had been her imagination, but she had felt at one point that he had been on the verge of draining all of her blood. Maybe he would have taken her and made her like him. Maybe he would have left her a dead and withered corpse. She felt, though, that she had been close to one end or another. Kendall had felt him fighting himself, fighting his desire for her, and she didn't know what to think about that.

Though her vocation was not a typical one, she'd always viewed Owain as her employer and the job as the means to an end. Perhaps in a way she was

addicted to the physical prowess his blood engendered within her, but she took pride in serving him well. Last night, however, they each had crossed the line of employer-employee. Owain, she was almost sure, had wanted more than her blood. He had wanted her. And she had wanted him. She had wanted his blood; she had wanted to be like him, to be *with* him from that night forward.

The feelings distressed Kendall. Losing control during the feeding was bad enough, but to tie her emotional as well as physical well-being to the whims of another...

And not just a man, she chided herself. *A vampire, for Christ's sake!* She tried to push such unproductive thoughts out of her mind.

With the onset of dusk, Glastonbury's residents quietly made their ways home or to the local pub. The last of the bargain-basement, early-season tourists wandered back to the village and their B&Bs, or climbed into rental cars and headed off to Bristol or Bath or wherever they were staying. Kendall hoped that she and Owain would be long gone before tourist season kicked into full gear in a few weeks. She didn't want to be near when the hordes of New Agers and trendy Wiccans descended on the village. Legends connected the tor with everything from King Arthur to the druids to the faerie world. Kendall's first impulse was to scoff at such fantasy, but then again, she worked for a vampire, so who could tell?

But that was exactly what she didn't want to think about at the moment. As she attempted to ignore the implications of her evolving relationship with Owain, Kendall's eyes turned to the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, which were not far from Isabella's house, maybe a hundred yards to the south. Numerous portions of walls and arches still stood after centuries of disuse. In the deepening shadows, Kendall imagined the abbey was still intact, and she was seeing the surrounding countryside in much the same way that someone hundreds of years ago might have.

She rounded a corner and traced the weathered stone with her fingers. *Hundreds of years*, she thought. *If Owain makes me like him, I could be around that long.* She sighed, finding it impossible to keep her mind off her master and what had, or had not, transpired between them. She had heard Owain refer to his curse, but what a sense of contentment she would feel to walk the earth for century after century! Kendall frowned at the wistful turn of her pondering. *Don't kid yourself*, she thought. *Does he look happy to you?* She didn't understand the melancholy that hung over Owain like a relentless stormcloud, but it was none of her business. *And there's no point in romanticizing about becoming one of the Kindred*, she scolded herself. He would bring her into the fold, or he would not. There was nothing for her to do except her job.

She was curious, however, about what it was like to live for hundreds of years. The world changed so much, yet some places, like these surroundings, she imagined, seemed almost untouched by time. Perhaps it would not be too presumptuous of her to ask Owain one night. For someone like Kendall, who was not quite thirty years old, the perspective of time on that broad a scale was unfathomable.

To her dismay, Kendall found herself thinking increasingly of Owain as more than her employer, more than her master and the source of her heightened abilities. If she could, without stepping over unspoken boundaries, she wanted somehow to ease the pain that she saw in his face. *I'd like to be there for him*, she admitted, if only to herself.

A noise roused Kendall from her reverie, though she didn't consciously register what the sound was. Acting from instinct, she whipped the gun from her belt in one fluid motion and spun.

TWELVE

“Only then shall Caine unyoke his red-eyed ox, whose name is called Gehenna, for none may abide its countenance.”

The transformation was nothing short of astounding. Calm, caustic Isabella, as she spoke, was gripped by a passion, a sense of urgency, that Owain would not have thought possible of her. It was as if the words of prophecy had ignited a fire within her eyes.

The words affected Owain also, but differently. *Gehenna. The Endtime.* The darkest night when the eldest of Cainites would rise from their centuries of slumber and consume all their progeny. The night, some said also, when the Dark Father him-

self would return to walk the earth, and if the prophecies were to be believed, he would be none too pleased with what he found.

The First-Born comes in fury. He harrows his children from their graves. His wrath is a hammer, an unhewn cudgel wet with the blood of the Kinslaying.

Owain had indeed slain kin, both mortal and Cainite. He had even destroyed the bearer of the chalice of Christ.

His voice is a dark wind scouring the plain. At his word, the sky opens, raining blood.... His children raise expectant faces to the Heavens, but they are choked and drowned in the torrent of spilling life. Such is the price of their hungers.

Owain doubted that his sins, considerable as they might be, would stand above those of others of his kind. That final day of reckoning would bring final damnation for all Cainites, he suspected.

The prophecy resonated within Owain. It struck a chord of truth, clawed its way into the blackness of his soul. In his very bones, he could feel the power of the words. The visions that had assaulted him for months began to flash through his mind. Some images were glimpses of the personal hell that had clung to him since the days of his mortality. Others hinted at the fate that awaited the race of monsters he had joined. More of Isabella's words than not overlapped those that echoed in his mind.

"The Winnowing," Owain said quietly to him-

self. For so many weeks, he had tried to ignore, to forget, the haunting visions, but now hearing Isabella speak, he realized that the message was not his alone. It was not his place to set it aside and turn to other matters.

“Is it not clear?” she asked him. “The Winnowing. All around the world, your kind shrivel and die, victims of their own boiling blood. Streets that literally crawled with the Damned now are empty.”

“But you, of all people,” said Owain, remembering the letter to El Greco that Isabella had forged, “know that the blood curse was set loose by Carlos. A Sabbat plot out of control.”

“Does that make it any less true?” she asked, a trace of condescension returning to her voice. She raised from her lap the leather tome she held. “These are the words of Joseph of Arimathea. Prophecy written by his own hand. Must he personally set each piece in motion? Does he have to tap the corpse of a curse-stricken vampire and pronounce ‘Winnowing’ for the prophecy to be fulfilled? Divine vision often comes to pass at the hands of unsuspecting agents.”

“The words of Joseph of Arimathea?” Owain asked, staring at the large book she held.

Isabella nodded. “He foretold the blood curse. He foretold the fading of the blood.” Her gaze hardened on Owain. “He foretold much more... Kinslayer.”

His mind still roaming through the visions, Owain very slowly retook his seat and opened his beleaguered commonplace book across his knees. The pages were blood-splattered and ragged. He began from the back, flipping through the blank pages until he came to the last entry that he had written:

What would Angharad think?

The words were those of Albert, the slain Malkavian. Albert, who had spoken a name he should not even have known. Albert, who had given to Owain the locket that had allowed Isabella to spy upon him. Owain looked up from his book to Isabella.

“Divine vision often comes to pass at the hands of unsuspecting agents,” she said again.

“Albert?” asked Owain quietly in disbelief.

“I have watched you for many years,” said Isabella. “I have used various means, countless agents. Albert was not the most...reliable source of information, but he was in contact with you, on and off, for several centuries.”

Owain remembered the locket, the picture of the beautiful woman and the scrawled writing on the back—*mother*. As with Ellison and his Melitta, Isabella had provided Albert with a connection to someone dear from his past.

What would Angharad think? For a brief moment, hope flared within Owain. Could Isabella do the

same for him? But then he would be indebted to her. He would become a pawn in her game as surely as Albert and Ellison had. That he would not tolerate.

Owain turned more pages of his commonplace book, past the entries that he had written over the years, and came to the pages that were rendered in the graceful script of his one love, Angharad. He saw the outline of a leaf that was now crumbled to dust, and he saw the words that, for so many years, the leaf had concealed.

“Let it be thus. Thy will be done.” Isabella, from where she sat, recited the words that Owain read. They rang in his mind. They were the same as in the visions. They were the same as Kli Kodesh had spoken on the streets of Toledo. “Angharad knew of Joseph’s prophecy,” Isabella said.

“How?” Owain asked weakly. He barely heard Isabella’s response. His thoughts were reaching years into the past.

Isabella tapped the book in her lap. “Joseph was not a mere mortal, Owain. Do you think he would have met with one such as yourself, that he would have put himself in a position to be murdered and his blood consumed, if not for some greater purpose?”

I offer hope. These, too, were Joseph’s words. But what, Owain wondered, could Joseph have hoped to gain by his own death?

Isabella spoke more of the prophecy, which she seemed to know by heart:

“I have seen a Cross, steeped in the blood of our Lord, burst forth into new life. I have seen it ring itself in Holy Thorns, lest the impure approach and taste of that forbidden fruit.

“He knew it was going to happen, Owain,” Isabella insisted. “The Isle of Angels trembling...Michael thrown to the Earth. In 1375, an earthquake shook this part of England. The chapel to St. Michael atop the tor was destroyed.” Her eyes shone with conviction. “These words were written hundreds of years earlier! The night that you drank Joseph’s blood, the period of time that was hidden from you—when would that have been?”

Owain thought back to when he had fled from Wales at the outset of the fourteenth century, to his time in France, to the newly remembered journey to Britain. “It was that year,” he whispered, full of dismay.

“Joseph speaks of his own sacrifice, the end that he knew would come. Just as the cross was the instrument of Christ’s execution, Joseph’s staff served as his, and it burst forth as the Holy Thorn!”

Owain shook his head. There must be some other explanation. How could Joseph have known hundreds of years before what Owain would do? Owain surrendered to dismay and shock as the age-old

words and visions assailed him with renewed vigor.
*...the Isle of Angels trembling...Michael...thrown
to the Earth.*

The hillside pitched and shook. The tower listed to one side and then another. The stone cross within fell to the floor and smashed to pieces. Stones pulled loose from the tower. It leaned dangerously. A portion of wall gave way. The entire structure tumbled earthward....

“Owain.”

His vision cleared. He saw again the furnishings of the sitting room, but the dichotomy was too great. He stared uncomprehendingly at Isabella.

“There is more,” Isabella said. She turned to her own tome. Her finger followed the words on the page:

“Thence shall come the Kinslayer. His is the blood of sacrifice. His are the sorrows of the ages. Lamentations stain his soul. Winnowed are the Children of Caine. Winnowed is the Kinslayer. He weareth a crown of thorns.”

Owain heard the words. He heard the name that seemingly had been ascribed to him. Kinslayer.

“And when the Winnowing shall have come to pass, the Kinslayer will stand before the Betrayer of the Blood. Wails and gnashing of teeth are the shadow of the Betrayer, following more surely than night behind day.

“And lo, the Earth shall open her womb and the

Beast shall crawl forth seeking the blood to sate its thirst. Michael, most exalted of the Glorious Company, trembles at the Unholy Triad complete. The Beast walks the Earth. The Undoing of the Children of Caine is at hand.”

“I have not heard those words before,” said Owain.

“Because it was not time,” said Isabella. “Until now.”

“Time for what?”

Passion flared again in Isabella’s eyes. “Time for all that Joseph strove for to come to pass. Time for the destruction of all your kind. Time for all that I have striven for to come pass. It is your destiny, Owain.”

“It is my destiny to destroy all vampires? To destroy myself?” He shook his head. “You’re mad.”

“You have been destroying yourself for nearly a thousand years!” Isabella almost shouted. “What has the curse of Caine brought you other than the slow death of every ounce of your humanity? You have suffered for a millennium. *‘His are the sorrows of the ages. Lamentations stain his soul.’*” Her voice suddenly became gentle, understanding. “This is your release.”

“These prophecies,” Owain waved his hand over the books, “they are nonsense. How can you know that I am the Kinslayer, or that Joseph meant for me to kill him and take his blood?” He argued, but

out of a sense of defiance. The visions had touched his soul too deeply. The prophecies, as well as Isabella's words, whether they could be proved or not, rang true to him.

Isabella closed her book, set it beside her on the couch. "I know these things," she said, "because Joseph told me." Owain did not believe that he had heard what she had really said. "I sat as close to him as I am to you now, over a thousand years ago."

Owain sat speechless.

Isabella did not wait for him to recover. "You accused me of bringing Montrovant here. I did not. But I believe he came here to serve a purpose. '*And lo, the Earth shall open her womb and the Beast shall crawl forth seeking the blood to sate its thirst.*'"

"I'm sure you noticed the archaic French that he spoke," said Isabella. "He had just crawled out of the ground, out of whatever foul pit he had slept in for hundreds of years. And he sought the grail. He wished to drink the holy blood that might sate his thirst."

Owain could see the connection that she drew. *Kinslayer. Beast.* "But that is only two thirds of the Unholy Triad. What of the Betrayer of the Blood?"

Slowly, Isabella rose to her feet. "The timing of the prophecies," she said, "has long been a mystery to me. Like the apostle Paul waiting for the return of his Lord, I have awaited the Undoing. I left a trail for you to follow—the letters between

you and El Greco. Through my spies in the Sabbat, I even influenced the name of the experiments that led to the blood curse.”

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place for Owain. “Project Angharad,” he said almost to himself, then turned to Isabella. “That was solely for my benefit.”

She nodded. “I’m afraid my faith in the prophecies was not as strong as Joseph’s. He gave his life, yet I endeavored to construct signposts to bring you to me. I should have known that the visions would lead you here eventually. Once the Wincing struck, the visions would follow.”

“Then I’m touched by the blood curse? That is what sparked the visions?” This revelation perplexed Owain. Most Cainites stricken by the curse had died horribly within days, or weeks at the longest.

Isabella shrugged away his question. “Perhaps the curse, which Joseph foresaw, spawned the visions. Or perhaps it was the song of your beautiful siren in Atlanta that touched your soul, that pried loose those hidden memories just enough, and the visions followed. Either way, the visions came, as Joseph knew they would...and you are here. It is your destiny.”

Destiny. From the earliest days of his mortal childhood, Owain had always striven to be the master of his own destiny. He had fled Wales rather

than submit to the yoke of the descendants of the Norman invaders. He had chafed under the authority of El Greco and the Sabbat, of Prince Benison and the Camarilla. In corrupting the Templars and searching for the grail, Owain had gone as far as to defy the God he blamed for the tragedies heaped upon him.

Now, however, he found that he was not king but pawn in the games that Isabella had played for centuries. He was an unwitting piece in Joseph's prophecies.

Or so Isabella would have Owain believe.

"My destiny," he said in measured and deliberate tones, "is mine to decide."

Isabella did not attempt to dissuade him. Not in so many words. "You asked about the Betrayer of the Blood named in the prophecy," she reminded him. "The woman in your visions—she was someone you knew." It was a statement. Not a question.

Owain felt the color rising to his cheeks. Albert and Ellison may have given in to Isabella's emotional blackmail, but Owain was determined not to repeat their mistakes. He would maintain whatever control he might actually have over his own destiny. "You have sullied her name twice already," he warned. "With Albert, and with Carlos and the Sabbat. Those were lures to bring me here. We both know that she has nothing to do with this affair, so tarnish my memory of her no further."

Isabella looked suddenly concerned, her expression becoming a caricature of a worried mother. "Oh, but Owain, what of your book?" She gestured toward his tattered commonplace book. "Wasn't it she who gave it to you? Why do you suppose she would have copied part of Joseph's prophecy into it? And how could she have known it?"

Owain tensed at Isabella's questions. He had been asking himself much the same thing and had no reasonable answers.

"And what of the visions?" Isabella asked.

"What of them? Dreams and phantasms."

"But didn't all your visions seem coincidental and random at first? And now you see that they are signposts pointing to the prophecies."

"Do I?" Owain asked. For a brief time he had been taken in by her story. There were uncomfortable similarities between his visions and the prophecies, to be sure, but more than that? "Coincidence," he stated. "Pure coincidence. And even if you were right, even if I am the Kinslayer, and Montrovant is the Beast, Angharad could not be the Betrayer. She is dead and long gone. Your prophecy is unfulfilled."

"Are you so sure?" Isabella asked.

"You are mad," Owain said. "You would have me play your game so that I might destroy myself?"

"What good fortune have your centuries of unlife brought you, Owain?" she asked sharply. "All those

you have known and loved have died, while you linger on. Have you not, during those endless nights, felt the pull of the sun, the longing for your eternal nightmare to end?"

Again, Isabella's questions eerily mirrored Owain's own thoughts. She had watched him too long for the Ventrue to fool her. It was that very espionage, however, that infuriated Owain, that led him to resist her at every turn. She had manipulated him enough. No more. "You claim to have lived for more than a thousand years. Answer your own question."

"Ah, but I am not like you, Owain," said Isabella. Her voice turned cold. "You are a blight upon the face of the earth, a curse upon humanity. Joseph said that he offered hope. He spoke the truth. He offers the hope of release. For you, the hope of release from your curse. For the world, the hope of release from you.

"I am not like you," she said again. "I live for a purpose. I do not rise every night to steal life so that I might go on only to steal more life, night after night until the end of time. And this is the Endtime."

Her hatred for Owain and all his kind was fully revealed. No thin veil of sarcasm or desire for knowledge masked her intentions any longer, and as much as she angered Owain, he could not refute her words. He had spent many years thinking

much the same thing—wishing for the courage to meet the sun, wanting the curse to end but lacking faith. And hope.

I offer hope.

Now he possessed, quite possibly, the means to end the curse. Not just for himself but for the entire world. Isabella was a scholar of the prophecies. He could merely follow her direction, and the eternal hell would come to an end. But faced with the prospect of the destruction of his accursed race, Owain realized that Isabella had missed one detail. A tiny spark of hope did burn within his breast.

“You are wrong,” he told her. “I don’t go on without purpose, though for some time I too have believed that.” Owain pictured Angharad as he had seen her in the most recent visions. She had seemed so completely real. After all, he had not merely stood before her. He had touched her. His hand had rested against her delicate face. The rest he tried to overlook. She had turned on him, had named him Kinslayer. But even these disturbing and hurtful actions only served to prove to Owain that her memory was still alive for him. His passions that, months ago, had been sparked by the siren’s song flamed higher through the visions. Humanity was rekindled, and so long as the fire burned, life held meaning for him.

“There is a memory I hold close to my heart,” said Owain. “I have spent too many years full of

hurt and longing, but it is not too late for me to cherish the memory. You are wrong, Isabella. I live with purpose.”

Isabella, standing before Owain, did not speak. Instead, she bowed her head and at the same time raised her hands, palms outward, before her face. With hushed voice, she began to chant. The words, barely audible, were the same foreign tongue that Owain had heard her use before. He did not dwell on her incantation for long, however.

Slowly, Isabella lowered her hands as one. Forehead, brow, then eyes were revealed. Owain rose from his chair, almost stumbled backward over it. Centuries of unlife had done nothing to prepare him for what he witnessed. His first impulse was to turn and run from this house, never to return, but he stood and watched with horrified fascination.

Her movements were ever so slow. Nose, lips, chin, were all visible now. The features were dark still but had shifted, were different. The woman before him stood taller than had Isabella. Her bearing was graceful, stately, like an ancient queen. The dark eyes and hair, the gently rounded face—the features were all hauntingly familiar to Owain.

“Angharad.”

She stood before him. He caught himself with his hand upraised, reaching toward her cheek. His fingertips tingled with anticipation of the touch of

her skin, softer than the fleece of the most pristine lamb. But then the weight of the paradox landed full upon him—this room in this house, the hundreds of years that had passed, the impossibility of what his eyes beheld.

“Witch’s trickery!” He averted his eyes. He would not look upon this debasement of his memory, this abomination. For although he was appalled, he could not trust himself not to fall to his knees before her, to shower kisses upon her feet.

“Owain.”

Her voice was all that he remembered and more. His knees nearly buckled at the sound. “She is dead,” he said, teeth gritted together. “She is dead.”

“Owain,” she said patiently. “What do your eyes tell you? What does your heart tell you?”

He still would not look. “You are a creature of deceit, a woman of lies!”

The sound of her quiet laughter, Angharad’s laughter, surrounded him and ripped bare memories of mortal days. “I am a woman of lies. You are correct. But not in the way that you think, dear Owain.”

Dear Owain.

He tried to control the trembling of his body. Nine hundred years of loneliness, and now here she was again. “She is dead.”

An easy footstep. And then another. “You are right, Owain. It would be a simple thing to take

on her appearance, to look and sound like her.” Her fingers were brushing back the hair from his face. He closed his eyes tightly, hoping to shield himself, but her touch was as he remembered it. “You are right, but it is not what you think.”

She reached down to his side now and took his hand. Owain was powerless to resist her. He was frozen between fleeing and taking her in his arms. She raised his hand and placed it upon her breast.

A tremor ran through Owain. He could feel the beating of her heart.

He had seen her only once after his Embrace—when she was old and blind, living in the abbey at Holywell. That night, he had smelled the blood running through her veins. He had heard the beating of her heart. And though his eyes might deceive him, the scent of blood would not lie. *She was Angharad.*

“I am not like you,” she said in soothing tones, as if explaining away the nightmares of a child, “but I have lived many lives. I am of the Reborn, my dear Owain, and my magics have let me be who I must so that the prophecies might be fulfilled.”

The realization of the truth she spoke took hold of Owain like an undertow dragging a shipwrecked sailor to his doom.

Her mouth was close to his ear now. He could feel her breath. Her words took on the tenor of a lover’s promises. “There is no such thing as coin-

cidence.” She used his own words. “When your brother Rhys, my husband, decided that you must die, did you think it chance that one of the Damned took you for his own? Joseph instructed me well, dear Owain. I lived that life so that you might join the accursed legions of the undead, so that you might one day arrive at this point in time, so that you might fulfill your destiny.”

The room was spinning about Owain. His foundation of the past nine hundred years was being torn from beneath him. Was he to believe that the one love that had been both his solace and his torment was a lie?

“I have lived many lives and died many deaths,” Isabella said, “only to return again to life, so that my purpose could be fulfilled. Whose womb do you think it was that birthed accursed Albert into the world? Who do you think nurtured his madness so that, one night, a Malkavian might claim him, so that another night Albert might find you?”

The true immensity of her deception began to dawn more fully on Owain.

“The appointed time for you to know these things has arrived,” said Isabella, *said Angharad*. “And know this you must—I never loved you, Owain. I cared for you only as far as caring would bring you to this point now. You have drunk the blood of the prophet, and I am your betrayer. *The Kinslayer will stand before the Betrayer of the Blood.*

The Undoing of the Children of Caine is at hand.”

A pounding like thunder rose in Owain’s head. He turned to face Angharad, to face his love. Tears of blood streamed down his face. His claw-like nails dug into his own palms. Centuries of questing to control his own destiny, and now he discovered that the most encompassing underpinning of his existence was a lie, a ruse by those he had known nothing about. *And now she would have me somehow fulfill her prophecy? She would have me achieve the goal for which she betrayed me?*

“No!”

The back of his hand struck Angharad across the face as he swung with all his might. Her head snapped to the side and the blow hurled her body across the room. Her limp form struck the wall and fell.

Owain could barely see through the blood that filled his eyes. He raised his hand before his face—the hand that had struck his love. In his other hand, he still held the commonplace book. He twisted until the spine snapped and the leather cover and every page within was torn asunder. Then he raised the crumpled mass above his head and slammed the book to the floor.

Angharad, too, lay crumpled on the floor.

Owain turned away from her. His love for her may have been a lie, but he had felt the fire of passion within his breast. Despite the overwhelming

pain, he knew that rekindled humanity still struggled to emerge from his blackened soul. He stomped from the room. He would escape this place, and though the great sorrow would linger on, he would find the person who had truly found a place in his heart. He would find Kendall, and they would leave this place and its prophecy. And he would set her free. He would release her to her own humanity, lest he snuff out that fragile flame in both of them.

He ripped away, once and for all, the front door that still hung askew by one hinge. The night called to him. It beckoned him to share his newfound freedom born of heartbreak.

But he stopped cold after only three steps, stunned by what he saw. For a moment, he was sure he heard the cruel laughter of a vengeful God.

On the walk before him lay a human hand, severed at the wrist. The lifeless fingers tightly clutched Kendall's pistol.

THIRTEEN

Owain stood over the hand. His nostrils flared as he caught the scent of blood—the same blood that, just last night, he had shared with Kendall, the blood that was a mingling of his and hers. He turned his face, and his rage, heavenward. In every direction, threatening dark clouds gathered on the horizon.

Twice in the past hour, Owain had found meaning in his empty nights—purpose that might transform his lingering existence into a life worth living. Twice, purpose had been snatched away from him, trampled before him and left to rot like carrion in the sun.

After hundreds of years of bitterness over the loss

of his one love, he had begun to see that he might hold her memory dear to his heart rather than constantly mourn what never was. Then the impossible—Angharad had stood before him, here and now, the culmination of all his dreams, only to tell him that his love was a lie, that she had carried for him through the centuries only a burning hatred.

Despite more than ample justification, Owain had not given into despair. He realized this with grim satisfaction. For certainly that had been her aim—that he renounce both life and unlife, that in despair he abide by her wishes and fulfill the prophecy. *Words of Undoing*. Perhaps she would have revealed them to him and had him perform some great magic.

But no. Even amidst unfathomable tragedy, Owain realized that the spark of humanity he felt was housed not solely within his memory of Angharad, but within his very soul. It still burned without his one love, if faintly. The spark was fanned by the woman whom he'd always viewed as a servant, a tool to be used and then discarded. And now...

He glanced back down at her hand. Owain knew who had done this. He recognized a wound caused by a sword—his own sword, no doubt. A scant trail of blood, imperceptible to any except a creature of blood, led eastward toward the tor. It was a trail,

Owain knew, that he was meant to follow. But if that were the case, he thought, perhaps he might still find Kendall alive. The dark one would gain more leverage from his captive if she still lived. Owain must find out. He stepped forward over the hand and began making his way to the tor.

With each step he took, the clouds ringing the sky advanced as well. They rolled in like waves crashing upon the shore. Thunder, distant at first, drew closer. All the primal fury of the heavens, it seemed, converged upon the Isle of Angels. Owain crossed the last of the dale and began to climb the slope to the tower. His every other step was illuminated by the flash of lightning from one direction or another. The wind whipped his hair so that he had to hold it back from his face.

The next flash of lightning revealed a shape just ahead on the hillside—a statue where none should be, where moments before, none had been. For a split second, Owain’s mind spun him back to the streets of Toledo, to the eerie storm that had raged, to the creature he had faced.

“Kli Kodesh,” Owain called above the wind.

Another flash and the statue stood with outstretched arms. Owain had not seen the other move. Neither had he seen at first the twisted expression of hope fulfilled on the chiseled features, nor the bloody tears of joy that stained the alabaster cheeks. “You have come to give me release!”

said the ancient, his face turned up to the stormy heavens.

“No,” said Owain. “I am here for another reason. I will have nothing to do with your prophecy.”

From deep within Kli Kodesh, a rumbling laughter grew, hesitantly at first, but he soon surrendered to it completely, and his booming voice rang above the noise of the rising storm. “But you are here, Kinslayer.”

“Where is Montrovant?” Owain demanded. He would have no more of games, of riddles.

Kli Kodesh struggled to rein in his mirth. Fresh, red tears speckled the grayed fabric of his once-white robe. He raised a hand and indicated the tower standing above them. “The Beast awaits.”

Owain stepped past the ancient one. Kli Kodesh, his laughter mixed with joyful sobs, made no move to stop Owain. The last hundred yards to the chapel were steep, but the very wind seemed to push Owain forward and hurry him along his way. The clouds had closed in around the tower so that only a small patch of the night sky was visible directly overhead; however, as Owain climbed the last steps on hands and feet, the storms crashed together and no stars shone through the maelstrom. Owain stood before the open door of the chapel. From above, the carved form of St. Michael, most exalted, looked down upon him.

Suddenly, Kli Kodesh spoke and Owain realized

the ancient one stood right next to him. “*And when the Winnowing shall have come to pass, the Kinslayer will stand before the Betrayer of the Blood.*” The rain began to fall, a few, large, forceful drops at a time.

“I have already dealt with the Betrayer,” said Owain.

“Have you?” Kli Kodesh cocked his head. “The widow flatters herself.”

More riddles. Owain had had more than his fill. He was surrounded by lunatics spouting puzzles and prophecy, while inside the tower, one who depended on him for her life might very well be dying. His patience at an end, Owain lashed out at Kli Kodesh, but the ancient one was gone, vanished from where he’d stood a moment earlier.

“He knew you would come,” said a voice in archaic French. Owain turned to face Montrovant, who stood in the doorway of the chapel. “You will tell me where I can find the grail,” said the dark one. He held Owain’s sword, the blade encrusted with dried blood.

“You are tiresome,” said Owain.

Montrovant snarled, and as he opened his mouth to reply, Owain sprung forward. Montrovant recovered quickly and swung the sword, but the figure through which the blade sliced was a mere figment of shadow. Before the dark one had finished his stroke, Owain slammed into him from the side, claws slashing through Montrovant’s face.

Owain ignored the cries of the fallen vampire and ducked into the chapel. He would have his vengeance, but first he would save—

Owain took only one step into the tower. Greeting him were Kendall's wide eyes, surprised, questioning. Her severed head was mashed down on top of the cross on the altar. Her mouth was open slightly, as if upon her lips was the beginning of a cry of warning.

Owain spun, but his moment of shock proved costly. The sword bit deeply into his side. Luckily, Montrovant's movement was constricted as he crossed the threshold. Still, Owain crumpled to the floor. He landed in a pool of blood that had dripped down from the altar. The scent of Kendall's vitae was all about him as he stared up at her bulging eyes.

Montrovant raised the sword above his head, and the blow fell exactly where Owain had known it would. It clanged against the stone where he no longer lay. Owain's claw tore through Montrovant's jugular. The dark one's hands shot to his throat. Owain snatched up the dropped sword before it even had a chance to clatter to the floor. Montrovant staggered backward out of the chapel.

"Your time on this earth is done," Owain said, as he advanced with the blade bathed in his own blood. He tried to ignore Kendall's questioning gaze at his back. There was never a question of mercy.

With his first step out of the tower, the wind pulled at Owain. It tugged at his hair, his clothes, his arm, his sword—as if the storm tried to lift him high above the earth. The driving rain that now fell was nearly blinding. The lightning again revealed Kli Kodesh, who stood to the side of the chapel. Owain held his sword poised between the ancient one and Montrovant.

“I see your wounded side,” said Kli Kodesh. “But what of your crown of thorns?”

Owain could barely hear over the din of the storm, and before the last word had crossed the buffeting winds, Kli Kodesh struck. He moved with more speed than even Owain could comprehend. A blow to the head staggered Owain, but before he could react, Kli Kodesh was gone.

Owain whirled to meet Montrovant’s lunge. The Ventrue’s elbow crushed the other vampire’s nose while Owain’s blade also sliced downward through the air and into flesh. Montrovant fell, hamstrung, to the ground.

Owain, the wound to his side throbbing, staggered back until he stood against the outer wall of the chapel. He glanced about for Kli Kodesh, but the ancient one was nowhere to be seen.

Another flash of lightning and Kli Kodesh stood calmly beside Owain. Owain readied his guard but wasn’t sure how to overcome the ancient’s speed. Momentarily, Owain was distracted by the rain run-

ning down his face—no, not water. Blood. He raised a hand to his forehead and quickly jerked away a pricked finger. Checking more carefully, he realized that the stinging at his temple was not from Kli Kodesh's blow itself, but from a wreath of thorns that the ancient one had slammed onto Owain's head.

With Montrovant immobilized for the moment, Owain stared through the sheets of rain at Kli Kodesh. The ancient one did not attack, however. Instead, he stared back at Owain. Kli Kodesh wore a quizzical, almost expectant, expression. "We are here," he said. "The Triad is complete. You may speak the Words of Undoing."

"Enough of your prophetic nonsense!" Owain shouted over the storm. He considered striking at Kli Kodesh again but there seemed little hope of success. Owain was as helpless against the ancient one as a mortal would be against Owain.

"The relic!" cried Montrovant, as he crawled toward Owain. "You must tell me!"

Still wary of Kli Kodesh, Owain turned again to face the other opponent, against whom he could at least defend himself, but suddenly the tower—no, the entire tor!—rumbled violently. Owain was tossed against the wall of the chapel. Montrovant fell to the ground, and even Kli Kodesh stumbled. Thunder rocked the hill again. Blinding lightning flashed from the sky—at least a dozen strikes blast-

ing the crest. Owain pressed himself to the tower and covered his face against the searing energy of the lightning. He recoiled from the electrical blasts and from the spray of charred earth they showered over him.

When he looked again, a broad crater was opened in the hill not ten yards away, and in the center of the depression rose a lone figure. At first only the head and shoulders were visible, but as Owain watched, the form of a man rose straight up from the earth, not stepping but moving directly vertical, as if the ground itself lifted him. To Owain's amazement, the very soil seemed to pack itself together to lend the body form.

"*Kinslayer*," intoned the creature. Perhaps it was a trick of the rapidly fluctuating light of the storm's pyrotechnics, but the creature's body appeared to change, to flicker—flesh one moment, something dark and insubstantial the next.

Owain, entranced, watched, and as he did, he recognized the slightly familiar features before him. He had seen the face before, though unlike before, the eyes, from corner to corner, were now solid black. The chest, legs, arms, all swelled beyond normal proportions as the creature grew in stature. Its untamed hair flailed violently on the wild gusts of the storm. Yet in the twisted, demonic face of this otherworldly thing, Owain found something familiar.

“Nicholas?”

The creature’s black glare locked onto Owain the instant he spoke the name. A cruel grin exposed a maw as black as its eyes but crowded with jagged teeth. In some way, Owain was sure, this was the Gangrel that had brought a message to Atlanta so long ago, the Gangrel that had hunted Owain in Toledo.

Toledo—the city where Owain had first seen Kli Kodesh.

Owain pried his gaze from the creature and glanced over at Kli Kodesh. *Is this the ancient’s doing?*

Kli Kodesh, though, stood with his mouth agape. Oblivious to Owain, the elder spoke: “*And lo, the earth shall open her womb and the Beast shall crawl forth seeking the blood to sate its thirst.*” In disbelief, he shook his head. “I was wrong.”

At that instant, Owain was blindsided. Montrovant crushed him against the wall and then pounced on Owain as he fell. “The grail! The grail!” Owain lost his grip on his sword. Montrovant’s eyes bulged. His claws gouged Owain’s neck. The dark one bit savagely into the side of Owain’s face. Madness consumed Montrovant. There was no rational thought left in those eyes, only the quest and centuries of failure.

“No!”

The single word from the Beast shook the earth,

rattled the stones of the tower. From its open mouth, the creature vomited a black, writhing mass. It came in a flood, a seething stew of viscous shadow, oozing toward the tower. The Beast's mouth stretched open impossibly wide as it disgorged the shadow, which was composed of many vaguely human shapes. Here an arm reached out. There an eye was visible for a moment before sinking beneath the surface of the advancing mass.

The shadow given form moved with alarming speed. Black hands took hold of Montrovant's ankles. More of the shadow climbed his back, grabbed his arms, his neck. The mass scraped at his eyes, pulled him back until, with a final ear-shattering scream of rage, he was pried from atop Owain. Montrovant's mouth and claws dripped with Owain's blood.

A moment more and only Montrovant's face was visible atop the mound of the writhing shadow. Whether or not any of the appendages that came to the surface only to sink back into the churning mass were Montrovant's, Owain could not tell, but the frenzied Cainite's expression of pain and frustration bespoke his inability to escape.

As another flurry of lightning bolts struck dangerously close to the tower, the black-eyed Beast came forward. With each step it grew larger and left a footprint of blackened, scorched earth. The Beast reached into the shadow, and the mass re-

ceded beneath its massive hands, which grasped Montrovant by the shoulders.

Suddenly, the shadow-mass rushed ahead, a tidal wave of pitch black that washed over both Owain and Kli Kodesh. Captivated by the creature before him, Owain was engulfed and held immobile by the arm-like appendages, while the inky shadow covered him like a second skin. As his head went under, all became darkness. After a moment, however, Owain found that he could see, though his vision was dimmed and gray.

The Beast raised Montrovant several feet off the ground. The helpless Cainite, as if prey hypnotized by a serpent's gaze, did not struggle. The Beast struck at the base of Montrovant's neck. Fangs drove into flesh. The dark one threw back his head, but no scream of agony escaped his contorted, convulsing form.

The Beast was easily twice the size of Montrovant. Its freakish, bulging girth dwarfed the Cainite. The Beast fed, but more than blood was sucked from Montrovant. His already pale and gaunt frame went rigid. His skin drew tight like canvas stretched over his bones. It cracked and then split. Scalp and hair shriveled away to nothing. Finally, the clothes and bone and flesh that remained all crumbled away to dust, and the Beast stood with empty hands.

It stepped toward Owain, and again the shadow

melted before it. Owain felt himself lifted off the ground. He stared directly into the black eyes. Their hunger, their hatred, drank him in. The blackness was not empty. It was a churning reflection of death, and like the shadow that had held Owain's body, it swirled with the souls of those the Beast had consumed. Owain saw Nicholas, and he saw Blaidd. He saw Montrovant dragged to Oblivion, and countless others.

The Beast shook Owain. Bones cracked, joints popped, as he was rattled like a straw doll in the tempest. The Beast's maw opened, and the stink and rot of death enveloped Owain. "*Kinslayer.*" The force of its voice reached inside Owain, took hold of his heart and twisted.

From what seemed like a great distance, Owain heard the sound of mixed sobbing and laughter. *Kli Kodesh*, he thought idly, as if none of it really mattered any more. But surely the ancient one was not so far away.

Owain's thoughts were vanquished by the shock of the Beast biting into his neck. Each of the countless fangs struck with the force of a thousand iron hammers, but even more painful, Owain felt his soul laid open by the ravenous Beast, which found purchase there. It touched the hunger that had eaten away Owain inside, that had consumed his humanity. The Beast may have taken Nicholas's body, but now it assumed Owain's face, only one

of the faces it had worn all along—since the day the Dark Father had drawn his final breath; since the time when Ventrue and Gangrel had no meaning, for the Beast was whole, yet still it hungered.

Owain's hunger rose to the surface. He thirsted as never before in hundreds of thousands of nights. Still, the Beast's hunger far outweighed Owain's. It drew sustenance from him as it reclaimed its own.

And then a voice spoke again from a great distance: "*Only then shall Caine unyoke his red-eyed ox, whose name is Gehenna, for none may abide its countenance.*"

Was this the rising of the Dark Father? Owain wondered. Somehow, though the Beast had not released him, Owain could see those bottomless black eyes. They drew him in as if he were nothing. He was falling, falling....

The black, shadowed corpses, mileposts of his hunger, swirled around Owain. There was the first, nameless mortal in the streets of Westminster. There was Blaidd, bestial Gangrel laid low. There was Morgan, and the family of Owain's other nephew Iorwerth—dear Blodwen and Branwen, little Elen and Sian, infant Iago. There was Gwilym, first of many ghouls. And Kendall, the last.

They did not accuse him, because hunger was his nature.

But what of Joseph? Owain had pierced the flesh, tasted the blood, of the Arimathean.

Slowly the blackness receded. The darkness was merely the night, and a cool breeze blew across the crest of the tor. Owain stood by the chapel, and beside him was Joseph, holding in his hands a golden chalice. Owain had heard the rumors and left France for Glastonbury Abbey. He'd sought the grail so that he might crush it in his bare hands. With laughter in his heart, he would destroy the vessel of Christ.

Yet instead, he knelt before Joseph. The grail shimmered with the glory of a host of angels, and all thoughts of a vengeful, cruel God were washed from Owain's mind.

"You have achieved your quest," said Joseph. "As are we all, you are unworthy. Yet by the grace of God, you are chosen."

Joseph lowered the grail, and Owain's hands also held the edge of the chalice. As it tipped gently toward him, vitae the likes of which he'd never tasted brushed against his lips. The hatred, the emptiness, washed away. No matter how desperately he tried, he could not hold on to his anger. As Owain gazed heavenward, the blood filled him, nourished him, made its mark on his soul.

Joseph raised the cup above his head. "Let it be thus. Thy will be done."

Behind Owain, the tower trembled and shook, and as the stones fell, so fell the darkness once again. The swirling mists of black death covered

Owain, and he knew that he was not alone. The Beast was with him, had always been with him. As it sifted through the flotsam of his soul, the Beast came upon the crown of thorns, the sanctified blood that guarded the last shred of humanity.

“*Kinslayer!*” the Beast named Owain, but even his most heinous crimes could not blot out his redemption. Uncowed, the Beast consumed the blood, and with it the thorns. Its hunger could not be checked. It could not resist the call of blood.

Owain crashed to the ground. The storm raged all around. The wind roared with the fury of the Beast, which stood over Owain. But all about, the shadow had broken into hundreds of pieces, each a shade from beyond the Veil, broken by the Beast. The gibbering shades scrambled back frantically to the Beast, but it cast them aside. It clawed at its own throat and chest, as if a great burning had taken hold of it. Owain lay unmoving on the ground. He lacked the strength to raise himself up. The Beast snarled and spit vitriolic blood as it clawed through its own chest.

Kli Kodesh lay only feet from Owain. The ancient one spoke:

“I have seen a Cross, steeped in the blood of our Lord, burst forth into new life. I have seen it ring itself in holy thorns, lest the impure approach and taste of that forbidden fruit. I have seen a great white Eagle perched in its branches. It opens its mouth and lo it

speaks with the hidden voice of the mountains. Words of Undoing it speaks for the Children of Caine.”

Slowly, Owain marshaled all his strength and climbed to his knees. He had seen the truth of the humanity that dwelled in his soul even despite the power of the Beast. He had seen the designs of Joseph, the folly of Isabella and Kli Kodesh. And Owain, too, spoke:

“Let it be thus. Thy will be done.”

The Beast let out a deafening roar, and around it the milling shades were drawn into a mighty vortex. The Beast’s cry of pain and outrage was cut short as more shadows were torn from its throat. The spiral gained strength. Its swirling wind tugged at Owain, but he resisted. Higher and higher the black vortex climbed. All the while, the screams of the restless dead were flung into the night. With a final crash of thunder and a flash of lightning through the center of the writhing cloud, the shades exploded into the sky. Wisps of shadow shot toward the horizon in every direction. Only a greasy, acrid smoke hung over the tor.

Almost instantly, the storm subsided. The dark clouds still concealed the stars above, but the wind ceased, and the thunder died away. Before Owain stood Nicholas, neither larger nor more monstrous than a man. He stood with his bloody hands raised before him, his chest ripped open to reveal a shredded heart. Bewilderment creased his brow. He took

a step, but then fell to his knees and collapsed to the ground.

Before Nicholas had come completely to rest, the Isle of Angels again started to quake and tremble. Owain pitched himself forward and rolled as, behind him, the tower collapsed, and the crater of the Beast's rising was covered by tons of rubble.

EPILOGUE

The house smelled like a Confederate field hospital. It smelled of death. Instead of rooms and rooms of bloodied and broken young men, however, there was only one individual in Rhodes Hall who was struggling to survive.

Prince Benison sat unmoving by Eleanor's bed as he had for two days and two nights. His eyes were small slits, swollen with fatigue. Though the sun had not been a problem in his and Eleanor's shielded room, he had exercised great force of will to sit through the days, and he would sit through the next day, and the next. However many it took, for he feared they would be the last days he spent with his beloved wife.

Banish such thoughts! Benison charged himself. *I will not let her slip away. I will stay with her, and she will not leave me.*

Eleanor tossed and mumbled in her delirium occasionally, but for the most part she suffered quietly as her fever raged. The blood curse had struck quickly. One evening she had been fine, the next she had raved and destroyed the parlor, apparently defending her home and family from nonexistent Yankee invaders. When Benison had carefully restrained her, she'd swooned and remained in this coma-like state ever since. The prince had remained by her side constantly. The divine transformation of Atlanta to Benison's holy vision of Primus had not yet been achieved, but Benison felt confident that the Lord would, nevertheless, reward him for loyalty to both wife and city.

For several months, the curse had receded, with a death reported only infrequently. But was that, Benison had wondered, because he had appeased God, or because the weak and susceptible had all fallen previously? He could not forget how, earlier in the year, the curse had spread through his city like wildfire. Apparently, the danger was not past.

Eleanor stirred restlessly. It pained Benison to witness the anxious expression on her unconscious face. "Benjamin..." she called out weakly.

Benjamin. The prince cringed. Obviously, she was so ill that she could not pronounce 'Benison'

clearly. Or perhaps she fretted over the insurrection of the Atlanta anarchists, which Benison had not yet completely put down. Benjamin, after all, was of Eleanor's clan. She would be embarrassed and angry, and understandably so, that he had not remained loyal.

Benison gently stroked her wrinkled brow. With a fresh white kerchief, he dabbed the sweated blood from her face. "Do not trouble yourself," he whispered to her. "All will be well."

A quiet knock sounded at the door, and the ghoul Vermeil entered. "Sir, Theo Bell has arrived."

The name sent a flash of anger through the prince, but he maintained his calm. Theo Bell—Brujah archon. Benison had suspected for some time that Bell's justicar master, Jaroslav Pascek, watchdog of the Camarilla Inner Circle, was looking for an excuse to intervene in Atlanta. Thus far, Benison had quelled the anarchist unrest to the point that there was no great disturbance, a fact that must gall Pascek and Bell, since the leader of the revolt, Thelonious, was Brujah.

Of course he is Brujah! In Benison's opinion, the entire clan was a collection of troublemakers who didn't know their place, and now Theo Bell was using the blood curse as an excuse to rummage around in Benison's city.

The prince took a deep, calming breath. *This is for Eleanor*, he reminded himself.

Three sets of footsteps in the hall and another knock.

“Enter.”

Vermeil opened the door, and Bell stepped into the room. “Prince Benison.”

Benison nodded but did not turn from his wife’s sickbed. He had met the archon before—a handsome, large, black man, as large as Benison himself. Certainly, Bell was aware of Benison’s sympathies during the War of Northern Aggression, and though Benison had been a supporter of states’ rights rather than of slavery, he was sure Bell was resentful. Add to that the natural recalcitrance of the Brujah, and this was someone Benison wanted as little to do with as possible.

“I have brought the wanderer,” said Bell.

Benison nodded again. He and Eleanor had declined this opportunity before, but now he felt that he had little choice. “I hear that he aids the Sabbat as well,” said Benison without preamble.

“He offers aid where it is needed,” Bell responded. “That is his condition for helping us as well.”

And we may not survive without his help, thought Benison.

“May he tend your wife?” asked Bell.

Slowly, Benison rose to his feet. Stiff joints cracked in protest. He stepped back from the bed and saw how disrespectfully the archon was dressed,

in blue jeans and a bulky leather jacket—no way to enter the home of the prince. But this was all for Eleanor’s sake. “He may.”

From the hallway, a robed and hooded figure entered the room. His face was cloaked in shadow. Without speaking or pausing, he stepped past Bell and Benison to the bedside, then stood for a long moment looking down at Eleanor. Her face, again, was covered with tiny beads of bloodsweat.

The wanderer raised open hands before him, then touched one lightly to the other. After a moment, he separated them again, and in the center of each palm was a tiny wound where before there had been only unmarred flesh. Rich, red blood welled to the surface. He lowered a hand to Eleanor’s mouth, and even in her stupor, she licked the vitae that dripped on her lips.

“And this will heal her?” Benison asked doubtfully.

“I haven’t seen it fail yet,” said Bell, “and I’ve been all over with him.”

Benison bristled at this thinly veiled barb. He knew that Bell had aided the anarchists who opposed the prince, yet there was nothing Benison could do. The leaders of the Camarilla were quite clear that all disputes were secondary compared to the havoc and carnage wrought by the curse. A cure having miraculously come to light, they were making every effort to eradicate the curse.

The wanderer turned and held out his other bleeding hand toward Benison, but the prince, with a gesture, stopped the stranger.

“He says the blood acts as a ward against the curse as well,” said Bell. “You know how quickly the curse can spread. It would be best if the Prince of Atlanta were beyond danger.”

Benison glared at Bell. Did the archon speak solely of the curse, or of the political situation as well? Reluctantly, the prince accepted the proffered hand. The few drops of blood were warm and fresh upon his tongue, and the warmth quickly spread throughout his body as he swallowed.

The wanderer withdrew his hand, and a sudden wave of lightheadedness washed over Benison. He staggered forward and grabbed the stranger’s shoulder to steady himself. Beneath his hand, the prince felt a protrusion of misshapen bone, a past injury, perhaps, that had not healed properly, and as Bell helped Benison regain his balance, the prince caught a split-second glimpse of part of the face within the recess of the hood. The jawline and nose were familiar, but Benison could not at first place them.

“Are you all right?” asked Bell.

Benison shook his head to clear it, and the dizziness passed. “Yes.”

The archon looked back at Eleanor. “I think your wife looks better already. I hope she recovers

quickly," he said. "We'd better be moving on. He has agreed to help us," Bell indicated the wanderer, "but not forever, and we've got lots of work to do."

Eleanor did seem to be resting more easily, Benison noticed, but something about the stranger nagged at the prince. Benison stared intently at the wanderer as he and Bell turned to leave. "You offer us miracles," said the prince.

Bell was already in the hallway. The wanderer stopped in the doorway but did not turn back around. "I offer hope," he said, and then stepped out of the room.

The picture snapped into place for Benison—the voice, the face. Rage welled up within the prince. He started after them.

"Benison...?"

The sound of Eleanor's voice stopped him in his tracks. He turned to see her eyes open, the madness and pain vanquished. He started to turn back toward the hallway and the receding footsteps, but he moved to his wife's bedside instead.

The wanderer had performed a miracle, indeed. Perhaps mercy was in order. Besides, he was under Camarilla protection, and it would be unwise for Benison to antagonize the Brujah archon.

Go on your way, Wanderer, Benison thought, but know that old transgressions are not forgotten.



Crumbled stones, after months, still covered the Isle of Angels. But what were months except the blink of an eye to Kli Kodesh? As still as one of the stones himself, he sat among the rubble that had been the chapel to St. Michael.

Most exalted of that Glorious Company.

Eventually, the mortals would repair the damage done on the night of the Rising. For now, they spoke in hushed tones of the great storm that had swept down upon them and shaken the very earth. A great storm had swept down upon the world of the Cainites as well.

The Beast walks the earth. The Undoing of the Children of Caine is at hand.

As Kli Kodesh retraced again and again the strands of prophecy in his mind, he was filled with both anger and anticipation. Anger, because he had been wrong. Not once, but twice. He had assumed that Montrovant was the Beast, but the dark one's hunger was not that to which the prophecy referred. Kli Kodesh had tampered with the threads, but could a prophecy of truth ever truly be denied? Surely Montrovant had played his part despite Kli Kodesh's misinterpretation, but Montrovant had been part of the Triad no more than the hapless Gangrel who had acted as a portal for the Beast's crossing from beyond the Veil.

For now the Beast was loosed. Its seed had always existed, Kli Kodesh knew, within the soul of

each Cainite—the insatiable hunger that withered roots to the shallow soil of the human world. But now the Beast was given form, and the ascension of the Dark Father was that much closer to realization, for the Kinslayer had managed to vanquish the hunger—but to destroy it?

The Kinslayer, Kli Kodesh mused, *or the Wanderer, as some have taken to calling him*. That, of course, was the master-stroke of the Arimathean, and Kli Kodesh had been completely blind to it.

There was absolution, however, in the fact that Kli Kodesh was not the only one to err despite countless centuries of study. *The widow thought that she was the Betrayer*, he mused. *Ah, the hubris of youth*.

But had it not been pride that led Kli Kodesh to his mistakes? His second misinterpretation, galling as it was, was also his cause for anticipation. The Kinslayer. The Betrayer. The Beast. The Unholy Triad complete. Kli Kodesh had assumed that the end would come at once, but he of all creatures on earth should have known that time was ever-flowing. In his own timelessness, though, he had lost track of that fact.

The widow, too, had misjudged both the Arimathean and his prophecy. She'd labored for the destruction of the Cainite race, but, in the end, a savior had emerged from the wreckage of her schemes—the Wanderer, an enlightened one who,

already, younger Cainites flocked to in hopes of overcoming the hunger. He offered hope of deliverance from their curse, and that was Joseph of Arimathea's crowning achievement. His prophecies had unfolded over centuries not to destroy the Dark Father, as the widow had been led to believe, but to redeem the souls tainted by the original curse.

Kli Kodesh admired the audacity, the misdirection. Had not he himself, after all, been taken in? Redemption, however, he left to others. One might as well offer atonement to the sun or the stars.

Yet all was not lost. The Beast was risen into the world.

Only then shall Caine unyoke his red-eyed ox, whose name is Gehenna, for none may abide its countenance.

The corners of Kli Kodesh's lips turned up in a smile. It was the first time he had moved in many hours. No matter his failings, the time of his release was still at hand. The next step along the road had been taken.

And the road's name was Gehenna, and it was paved with dying dreams.

Let it be thus. Thy will be done.