

C L A N N O V E L :

TOREADOR

S T E W A R T W I E C K



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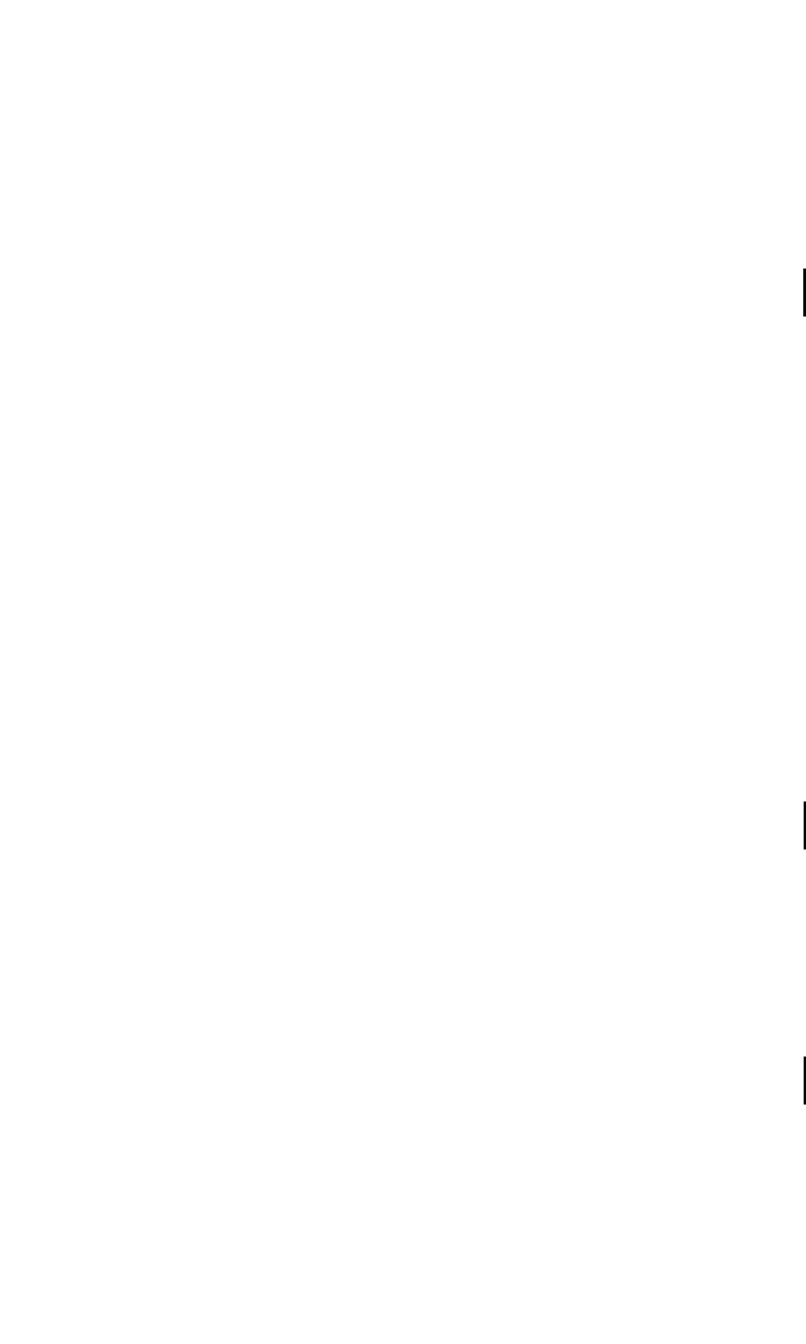
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Love and thanks to my parents
—my own Medici—
for never failing to encourage
my artistic aspirations.



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part one:
Leopold



Saturday, 20 June 1999, 4:29 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

Leopold sat with Michelle draped across his lap. They were both naked, though the cold of his workshop basement did not affect Leopold's body as it did hers. Though unconscious, Michelle reacted to the chill. The nipples of her small breasts were pointed and ripples of goose bumps appeared and disappeared across her long legs and up the small of her back to her slender neck.

He'd bitten her inner thigh, where the femoral artery began its descent down the length of her leg. She had feigned her passion at first, but she was slightly startled when he bit. He swallowed several mouthfuls of blood very quickly then, and her excitement became more authentic. Light-headed almost instantly, Michelle must have imagined Leopold very talented and eager to please.

After those first few mouthfuls of blood, though, Leopold was only interested in satiating himself. He fed infrequently because he felt awkward luring women to his basement for what he knew they assumed was sex despite the excuse of modeling for him. They always laughed at that, and then took it back a little when they saw that he really did have a workshop in the basement, but then laughed again when he asked that they take their clothes off.

It was even harder with men, because the man he might desire as a model wasn't necessarily gay, so rarely did he get them to his basement willingly. With them, it took some careful convincing, Kindred-style.

Like some of the girls—or perhaps they were women already, Leopold found that he was already losing the ability to guess the age of a human—Michelle simply took her clothes off and came at Leopold. So many of them just wanted a place to stay for a night. They were willing to work for the roof over their head, but the only work they knew was sex, and Leopold imagined they'd rather have it over sooner than later.

As he did with all the potential models he brought home, Leopold had picked up Michelle along Ponce before nearing his Piedmont Avenue home. Those that seemed disinclined to join him could always be nudged a bit. Leopold knew few of the potentially awesome powers possessed by some Kindred beyond this one, but he had no trouble convincing most mortals that he was harmless and friendly.

Michelle came along without such need to exert himself. She was a pretty girl who had obviously been on the streets just long enough to know how to use her good looks, but not long enough to understand that her good looks wouldn't last. There was something in that tarnished beauty that fit Leopold's mood.

When she sought his sexual attention immediately, Leopold regretted the lost opportunity to sculpt his vision of her, but he was not interested in imposing his will over another mortal that night. He accepted her desire and hopefully did something toward fulfilling it as well. At least she would have a safe roof this night.

He laughed a little at his idea of a safe house. He was keeping her safe by his standards, but Leopold

doubted Michelle would characterize a place where she lost a couple of pints of blood to a fanged monster as safe.

Then he sobered and swallowed his laughter. Could this be what Kindred meant when they spoke of losing their humanity? Leopold had felt the Beast—that part of him that exulted when he stalked and killed and lost control of himself—but it was a simple matter to keep it at bay if he let his conscience be his guide.

But where had his conscience led him tonight? Laughter over draining the life blood from a world-weary soul like Michelle? Yes, he needed that fluid to live, but when had it become comical? Where was the sense of violation? Tragedy?

He knew there were many Kindred who regretted the loss of what they considered to be the human parts of themselves. Not the superficial losses, like breathing, or even the psychological ones like sunlight. But the essential qualities that defined humanity. The capacity to love, to dream, to empathize.

There were also plenty of Kindred who did not regret the loss, particularly the vile members of the Sabbat—those murderous and heinous vampires who cared little for Kindred other than themselves and to whom Kine were cattle indeed. Kindred of the Sabbat, and some of the Camarilla too, seemed to toss away carelessly a vital portion of themselves. Perhaps they considered such sentiments as mercy or love as the vestigial organs of mortal existence, but Leopold could not fathom the profound impact of such loss.

But perhaps he was on that very road.

Leopold inspected the wound he'd opened on Michelle's inner thigh. The ragged gash were he'd bitten her was right along the line molded in the skin by the elastic of her skimpy bikini underwear. That made him feel oddly queasy. Regardless, his work couldn't be left undone and especially when he could undo some of the harm, so he wet his tongue in his mouth and tentatively extended it toward the wound. As he licked it, tasting the blood of the injury once more, the rent skin mended. So well, in fact, that the traces of the elastic line were gone too.

Then Leopold regarded Michelle herself. She was paler now, and prettier for it. The ruddiness of the strains she placed upon her body with hard living and low-grade drugs was somewhat washed away. Her almost luminescent skin made her starved body diaphanous and the bruises from frequent injections less evident.

Hers was a beauty he could still capture and preserve. Many Kindred, especially Toreador, might think to cup their hands around her flame through the Embrace, transforming her into a Kindred as well. Leopold didn't wish to have such thoughts himself, and he was pleased that such ideas were still secondary to his first impulse: to immortalize her in stone.

Leopold gave this more thought as he continued to sit cross-legged on the floor with her body supported by his bare lap. Though he was tempted, it was too close to dawn, so even a *bozzetto* would be rushed and ill serve the purpose of sparking his memory later.

With one of his slender fingers, Leopold wiped a few strands of dirty hair from her face and gazed at her. He suddenly felt silly for all the attention he gave

her. She was pretty, yes, but he was never one for pets, and on some level he needed to ingrain the reality of his still relatively new station in life: he was Kindred, a being that could only be considered superior to mortals.

With that, he stroked her hair again, but this time more as if Michelle were a sleeping puppy than a person.

It was a funny business, he thought, this means by which Kindred fed. He laughed at the dichotomy of his thought of the Kindred set apart and above humanity, while it was they who skulked about at night and lived a life akin to much earlier humans, like the ancient forefathers of ones such as Michelle who survived by hunting and gathering.

He carefully shimmied out from under Michelle, leaving her like a rag-doll on the floor. After gathering her clothing and tucking it under his arm, Leopold then stooped and gained hold of each of her armpits and partly dragged and partly carried her toward the stairs and then up into the first-floor kitchen.

The kitchen was a large room, as were all the rooms of the old and worn-out house. Unlike so many bachelor kitchens, though, this one was nearly spotless, though that was from complete disuse and not any sort of perfectionist attitude of Leopold's. For the sake of camouflage for house guests such as Michelle, he did keep a few dry goods such a peanut butter and cereal in the pantry and cupboards as well as a handful of imperishables like cheap beer and frozen pizzas in the refrigerator and freezer, respectively.

As dawn inched closer, Leopold could feel cold trembles in his heart, something as he thought it had felt when his pulse raced when he was yet mortal.

An icy hand clutching at him and urging him to seek shelter.

He hurried Michelle through the kitchen, down a hallway and toward a door he kept shut. He propped Michelle's naked and deadweight body against his thighs and knees and thus freed a hand to work the doorknob. Cool air rushed into the hallway as the door opened. It was the only room of the house that Leopold kept air-conditioned, and he did that only for the comfort of his guests. The expense was little enough and he reasoned that it helped maintain appearances.

The room was a bit of a mess. A bed with blankets and sheets half on and half off the bed. Many articles of men's and a few of women's clothing sprinkled about the floor but mainly gathered in one big pile by closet doors that folded open to the right and left. A long dresser of decent make with empty beer bottles and packed but not yet overflowing ashtrays.

Michelle's clothes fell to the floor and then Leopold hoisted her onto the bed and covered her with a sheet and a blanket. He adjusted the wall unit air-conditioner—the house was too old for central air—and then opened the closet. A small safe was bolted to the floor beneath the draping shadows of shirts and pants on hangers.

Leopold worked the dial and promptly opened the safe. He withdrew a few items, closed the safe and the closet doors and walked to the dresser in order to complete his camouflage.

He spread the items across the wood surface in a somewhat random fashion. Twelve dollars in a five and seven ones. A film of cocaine powder and a nose

straw. And the *coup de grâce*: a small bag with several draws of coke still in it. This he placed underneath an old issue of *Time* magazine so it seemed overlooked.

Almost without fail, the desperate women he brought to his house would grab the cash and the coke and flee the premises before the man she didn't remember returned to catch her or perhaps desire intercourse again. Such a small amount of coke was inexpensive enough, but it was an item of great psychological value that allowed a woman to feel it was she who had come out better for the evening. Plus, the coke explained the headache and weakness they would have after losing a fair amount of blood.

Leopold closed the door behind him and locked the front and rear doors of the house before descending again to the basement. The basement door he bolted and barred from the inside. Only one guest had ever been so brave or greedy as to go to the great effort required to break down that door. She had taken a few small sculptures, but Leopold regained them three nights later when he fed a little more deeply than usual. Even then, she had not troubled to tamper with the root cellar wherein Leopold spent his days.

Dawn was less than a half hour away, and Leopold didn't wish to risk the slightest exposure, so he retired to that root cellar. The ancient doors were of heavy and practically unbreakable oak. When he'd moved into the house, Leopold had removed and reversed the doors so the heavy bar to hold them shut was on the inside. A badass Brujah could smash his way through them, and a Kine with a chainsaw could do the same, but he stayed clear of badasses, and women for whom a small bag of coke was worth over-

looking a night of forgetfulness did not go to such trouble.

So, Leopold was safe, at least for the moment and the coming day.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 5:00 AM
Boston Financial Corporation
Boston, Massachusetts

The dark-suited man nervously tapped at one of his cellular phones. It was the newest model, sleek and wafer-thin with sophisticated programming options that allowed Benito Giovanni to perform any number of acts of amazing communications wizardry.

His insistent tapping finally proved too much for the light object and it sprung out of position. Benito's brow furled even more deeply and his intense, angry eyes bore upon the black device. He straightened it and with a few deft moves realigned it with the other two cellular phones atop his massive, antique red cherry desk.

Benito greatly preferred things to be structured and dependable, but something was definitely amiss.

His face relaxed a bit as he gazed about his orderly office. The ivory decorations on the desk were almost fluorescent in the darkness. The perfectly polished and meticulously organized stands of oriental weapons cast strange shadows on the tables to either side of the enormous leather couch. Each end table held a set of matching katana and wakizashi, and the pommels of all four weapons pointed toward the couch. Above the couch, two original Chagalls hung in frames painstakingly aligned at the height of the third that hung behind Benito and between the absolutely spotless windows that overlooked the Back Bay of Boston.

His black suit was pinstriped with blue, and though it was almost dawn, his tie was still wrinkle-

free and wound tight about his neck. Diamond-studded cuff links were positioned to be perfect mirror images of one another, and fabulous rings of white gold and diamonds were bound around each ring finger.

Benito was clearly of Italian extraction, and the fullness of such ethnic traits as his Mediterranean skin and black hair and handsome face made it probable that he was not too many American generations removed from his homeland. He wore a slight mustache that helped fill his narrow face, and his hands were clasped with index fingers projecting and pressed together against that line of hair above his lip. He rubbed them slowly back and forth, while his dark eyes glittered in the greenish light of the desk's bankers' lamp. Though in repose now, he looked like a predator, a man who was thoughtful in his stalking patience yet could ambush with an extreme extroversion if the situation required it.

He was also a powerful and wealthy man, and the office could have been that of any such man pondering unwanted and mysterious intrusions. But Benito was no ordinary man. Beyond the fact that the blood of the wealthiest family on Earth once flowed in his veins. Beyond the fact that he had risen toward the top of his family. Beyond the fact that this family was virtually unknown to the world at large. Beyond the fact that he worked only at night. And beyond the fact that he feasted on the blood of any secretary who could not properly maintain the attitude of his office while he slept during the day.

For beyond all these facts, and likely others of note too, Benito Giovanni, like some of his family, his clan if you would, was Kindred. Vampire. And

few trifled with Benito's rare mixture of substantial intelligence, devilish good looks, ungodly wealth, raw physical power, and eternal existence. Of course, there were other Kindred from other clans that possessed many of these advantages as well, but they were not Giovanni, and to Benito's thinking at least, that meant a lot. Benito managed a grim grin, for even he—a Giovanni himself—was sometimes scared of his family. Even he, a powerful member of the family, suspected only slightly the extent of the power and influence the Giovanni wielded.

But someone taunted him tonight, and had in fact been doing so all night long. Now that dawn approached, Benito continued to wait patiently but with rising ire to see if more information would be revealed. Yes, someone was clearly stupid or immensely confident because the phone rang yet again.

Benito pulled snug the black leather gloves he wore. They were pinstriped like his suit, and he made certain the lines were acceptably oriented before picking up the phone after its fourth ring.

"Hello." It was not a question like the previous three times he'd answered. Instead, it was familiar, but with a slight bite of anger, for Benito wished the caller to believe he now knew the caller's identity.

There was silence on the other end. Benito did not speak again, waiting silently to press a potential advantage, but also so that he might detect the slightest revealing noise.

The connection clicked dead. Benito knew he'd gained ground. If there was another call—and perhaps there would not be since dawn was so near, though he guessed there would be at least one more so the caller might reassert his earlier dominance—

then Benito believed he could crack the fool. After all, Benito had reached his present position largely because he was a skillful negotiator. He didn't know law particularly well, though that knowledge would come in the centuries ahead, and he didn't have a grasp of the subtleties of international economics, but he did know people. Not what gave them joy. Not what they might want. But what they did not want. What they feared. And once Benito knew that, he cracked them, often seeing them capitulate without the need to raise his voice or make subtle indirect threats.

He knew, of course, that the calls were on purpose. A misdialing caller might have inadvertently tapped the numbers for his left-most phone, with its 212 New York City area code, or his right-most phone with its 310 Los Angeles area code, or even his wireless desk phone with its 617 Boston area code. But the **# area code existed only for use by the Giovanni family, and that was the prefix of his central cellular. It was his most important communications device, for it put him in immediate touch with other members of his family, and they would know the call an important one if it required the use of **#.

Regardless, he turned off the other two cellulars. The ring of the **# phone was singular in its tone, so there was virtually no chance Benito was mistaking the ring of another phone for it, but this was becoming worrisome, so he took no chances.

A fourth time cinched it. This was a provocation. The first time was odd, but perhaps the caller was suddenly detained and delayed his call. The second could have been the call-back that was likewise delayed, though it still aroused Benito's suspicions.

The third hang-up was frustrating, but no one on the other end only worried Benito that a family member was in trouble and could spare but a moment at odd intervals to make a call. The fourth call, though, had revealed it as a game. The delay before disconnection was too great, so Benito began to tabulate possible responsible parties.

No Giovanni would have such lack of respect for this secret area code to play games on an `**#` line, but Benito did not know who else might possess the secret. Of course, there could be scores of others who did.

Who among these individuals, though, would call Benito thus? A mage, perhaps a member of the Technocracy? An ancient Kindred? Of those who might possess the secret, Benito could only imagine a stinking Nosferatu playing such games. Those vile sewer rats collected more information than they could profitably use.

None of his mortal enemies could have possibly managed to crack the security precautions that protected his phone and its communicating bandwidth from unwanted intrusion. No one accidentally overheard conversation over the `**#` line, and Benito knew the axiom most appreciated by Madelaine Giovanni, a famed assassin the family called upon when its need was greatest: whatever cannot occur through happenstance will not occur through intent.

Most certainly, no one accidentally misdialed the `**#` area code. There were no triple-digit area codes, and the only double-digit beginning that was close on a key pad was the 77 of 770 for Georgia.

Nevertheless, the phone rang again.

Benito quickly considered his best strategy. Feigning knowledge had rattled his opponent earlier, so he stuck to that tactic.

“Why now?” he asked of the unknown party. He spoke with some insistence but also with a hint of concern or befuddlement so the caller might perceive an advantage and strike for it.

There was silence, but the connection remained.

Something more, Benito thought. *He or she needs some bit more of evidence that I’ve seen through this charade.* He wanted to press the game to the next stage, beyond the bullying that seemed to give his assailant pleasure, but he might also dramatically weaken his position if his blind guessing revealed a complete lack of credible suspicions.

Therefore, after a moment, Benito added, “I’ve been waiting. Why now?”

The voice from the other end was surprisingly clear, as if the call was from the next room and not from Chicago, though it was foolish for Benito to imagine his foe was still there and not in hiding. It was this clarity, though, that somehow kept Benito from panicking, or at least from revealing any panic in his voice. If the voice from the past had been muffled and revealed the speaker’s identity to Benito over the course of seconds instead of an instant, then he suspected the surprise and fear would have shown.

There was a chuckle first. “How could you know it was me? If only you’d seen through things so well a couple of years ago, Benito.”

Benito said, “You used subtlety then. Now without shame you reveal your bullying nature.” It was a quick quip of a response, and thank goodness words came easily to him, for he’d have otherwise been lost.

Without further banter, the Kindred on the other end of the line said something more before disconnecting. Benito allowed the phone to clatter from his hand onto the desk. His sense of despair and helplessness was such that several minutes passed before he straightened it and the others which it disturbed as well.

After that first hesitation, though, Benito reacted calmly and thoroughly. First, he buzzed his present secretary, Ms. Windham.

“Sir?”

“Cancel my plans for Atlanta but do not reopen that time for appointments.”

“Of course, sir.”

Second, he buzzed the head of building security, his strong-willed and militant cousin, Michael Giovanni.

“With particular attention to my own suite, double building security until I can speak with you about more specific and applicable plans.”

“Is there immediate danger, Benito?”

Benito exhaled for the effect of impatience. “No, or there would be no reason to save a discussion of specifics for later.” Then he hung up.

Benito reclined in his plush leather chair and was momentarily aware of the unconscious gesture to bring his index fingertips to his mustache again. He’d best be vigilant for all such events normally invisible to him.

Then he spun the chair around and looked at and into the Chagall hanging behind him.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 10:55 PM
East Ponce de Leon Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

Tireless step by tireless stride, immortal day by immortal night, Leopold incrementally left behind a life like that of the Kine surrounding him. And that was a shame, for he felt more at home among these shadows of his old life than he did inside the halls of Elysium or within the edicts of the Masquerade, which were only two of the trappings of his life among the Kindred of Atlanta.

Yes, he felt more a part of the world, more connected to its vibrancy, its core, when among mortals and not among his vampire brethren. And that was foolish, because better than any other stalking the shadows of this street, Leopold knew these mortals were damn ignorant and completely out of touch with the greatest—or at least the most relevant—truths of the world.

It made him quiver with loathing and hate and resentment, for he knew that he was only incompletely informed himself, yet he comprehended mysteries these people could not begin to suspect, let alone fathom. Yes, the Kine yet wielded great power, for otherwise the Camarilla would not order the vampires belonging to that group to maintain the Masquerade, to make certain the first priority of nightly Kindred life was to continue to hide themselves from prying mortal eyes. The Inquisition had taught the Kindred well. But the essence of mortals was weakness and vulnerability.

Perhaps that's what drew him to them. Especially

these people, the night people of East Ponce. They were on the fringes of human society just as Leopold remained on the fringes of vampiric society. They were the artists, the poor, the mad, the whores. And for his part, Leopold frankly felt he knew too much already, so participation in the events of Kindred society would only increase the uneasiness he felt among his own kind. He did not want to know that Prince Benison controlled the police department so no man or woman or child was safe even from their mortal kin if he desired it to be so, or that Victoria Ash could with a thought so thoroughly pillory an artist's lifetime work that he might be forgotten even on the cusp of being recognized and perhaps immortalized.

These were some of the basic and everyday truths of a world where creatures who lived by night also ruled the day.

Leopold shuddered, but the terribly muggy and humid summer weather did not encourage it. Thank goodness the solstice was but two days away. That would mark the height of summer, but its decline as well.

He stopped walking and leaned against a streetlight post, his back to the roar of too-fast cars cruising in and out of this seductive area of the city, his feet pointed toward the center of the sidewalk.

This heart of East Ponce, north of Little Five Points, stretching eastward from Peachtree Street and Atlanta's downtown, was a congested area. The streets were not wide, though four lanes managed somehow to run through the area. The sidestreets were packed with small houses with patches of green that passed for lawns. And Ponce itself was a jumble

of the everyday and the unusual or even unique. Recognizable fast food joints rubbed shoulders with eclectic coffee houses. Just east of Leopold was the neon-lit corner of Ponce and Highland, where the old Plaza Theatre still showed small-run movies and where an ancient 24-hour diner still bustled.

Leopold felt that he should light a cigarette, but he'd quit that when he stopped breathing. It was too much effort to draw and circulate breath, and without that, the fortifying burn in the lungs was missing, and so there seemed little point to smoking.

He watched the people pass by. Many didn't look at him at all. Others glared at him and flared their nostrils in an effort to provoke him. But no one made a special effort to avoid him, as he did not appear threatening.

Except for the clean T-shirt and khaki painter's pants he wore, Leopold might well have passed for a permanent resident of the street. His hair was an unkempt mop of black that looked like it was meant to be short but had grown for six months or more without any care. His hands were filthy with dirt, which was caked under his nails and between the base of his fingers too. He had an unhappy face, like a man who was looking for something but never expected to find it. His mouth was small, and his lips pursed. Though he was quite slender and of average height and build, his face seemed heavy, almost sagging. His eyelids drooped and his too-ample cheeks seemed to contain cotton wads used to calm a toothache.

Mostly, he was just tired. He'd been disappointed to discover that vampires felt fatigue as acutely as mortals.

As he watched the people, he noted that while he felt comfortable among them, he still did not interact with them, except when his various needs of sculpting or dining demanded it. He wondered why. Perhaps it was genetic—or at least the Kindred equivalent of genetics, blood ties, that made him seek human company at all. It was a Kindred's blood—not an egg or sperm—that provided his new genetic imprint, but did that overwrite what he'd been as a man?

Leopold was Toreador, which meant, of course, that his sire—whoever she was, whatever her mortal life had been and no matter how different that was from his own—was Toreador too. And her sire, and the sire before that and before that, back however many generations it required to reach the so-called third, the legendary Antediluvian who founded the Toreador bloodline in some ancient time. This founder was only two generations removed from the hypothetical original vampire, to whom Leopold had read references as “Caine,” the man Western mythology reviled as the first murderer.

Leopold could come to no conclusions about whether it was Kindred blood that prompted him to act certain ways, or whether it was a clan's predilection for a certain type of human—like the Toreador's choice of artists, or the Malkavians' tendency to Embrace the insane—that created such a likeness among Kindred of a specific clan. Did his Kindred blood redefine him, or did he fit the Toreador mold even before his Embrace?

Amidst the furor of Leopold's thinking, a thick evening mist of rain rolled in and left the streets and outdoor denizens of Atlanta covered by a film of wa-

ter. Then cool air rolled in on the heels of the short midsummer storm, and this refreshed Leopold so that he did not mind the dampness.

In fact, the reflections of the street lights in the oil-streaked lanes of East Ponce provided Leopold with a less personal focus for his thoughts. He stared into the wavering ghost images and concluded that he still carried a human program within him—the DNA and nurture his mortal parents had provided—but that was now supported, not supplanted, by his vampiric blood.

Then he forced himself to abandon this line of thought. To some extent, it was a moot issue with him, or at least he couldn't very well look to himself as an example of any side of this internal debate. Perhaps if he felt he knew himself better. Perhaps if he felt the past he remembered was indeed his own. He needed his past. Then, and only then, would he be able to determine more about his future.

Although, Leopold wondered if all Kindred lost touch with their past selves and became a new being at Embrace. If so, then surely he was a mortal reborn in the fire of blood. It was a thought that scared him, for the work of an artist could come only from experience, and without a past he had little to draw upon.

Leopold had fed well on Michelle last night, so there was no need to worry about food tonight. He was glad. It was time he seriously addressed the matter of his sketchy past. It was time for a test or experiment of sorts.

The walk back to his home on Piedmont Avenue was not formidable, but he didn't wish to cover such a distance on foot twice in one evening, especially now that he was resolved upon his

investigations. A phone call gained him a cab in little time, so Leopold gazed upon the hot and humid streets of his city from the backseat.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 11:38 PM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

The marble just didn't seem to live beneath his fingers when he tried to sculpt a Kindred. He couldn't say why, exactly. Leopold wondered if this block regarding sculpting Kindred had something to do with the past he could not clearly recall. He remembered "a" past, but he doubted it was truly his own. A neophyte in the complex scheming of the other vampires he called Kindred only because that was the civilized way to refer to a fellow vampire, Leopold now understood that some Kindred could as easily tamper with memories as he could with emotions, so he did not trust the odd past he thought his own.

Foremost, it was too pat, too storybook—an artist willing to sacrifice anything for his work, he apparently ran away from parents who expected him to assume the family warehousing business, and instead scraped together a living in New York City. He barely found the time to pursue his craft amidst the problems of earning money for meager supplies of room and board, fighting the cockroaches away from both of the former, and refusing more chances to sell out than he could even falsely remember.

Then the break for which every such authentic artist dreams: a benefactor, a modern-day Medici. Someone, anyone, with great wealth, who sees the heart of the artist's work and recognizes the greatness therein, and beyond that is humbled by it. Someone who realizes how empty their lives of wealth-attainment have been and fervently feel that

in the work of the artist they have discovered is the purpose that will redeem their lives.

In Leopold's case, this benefactor was a gorgeous woman who offered more than just her wealth. Hers was a voluptuous and pristine form that could have inspired even a mediocre sculptor to great heights of prowess, let alone an artist who actually possessed some talent. After six months as the beneficiary of her wealth and posing, Leopold finally awakened to the fact that she had other designs for him as well. Unfortunately, those designs were not sex. They involved his entrance to the ranks of the undead.

One night—for she only posed for him at night, of course—after hours and hours of intense work, she stepped down from her platform and confidently approached her sculptor. Leopold had made some benign remark about how her lovely form deserved to be immortalized in marble, and that was when she approached. As her fangs flared and she drew Leopold toward her, she said, “My flesh shall endure longer than any marble.”

The next snippet of Leopold's memory recalled his face being pressed amidst her bare breasts, where he partook deeply of a vertical crimson band that ran along her sternum. Then the waters of memory muddled, and he recollected very unclearly nights of flight and pain that ended in her death and his deposit in Atlanta.

Vampires might have vast powers, but they sure were clichéd storytellers. Or maybe Leopold had in fact lived a storybook mortal life. For some reason, though, he simply doubted that, or at least his subconscious mind doubted it and gave him a funny feeling whenever he contemplated the story.

So Leopold was attempting to reconstruct his true past, although he had compiled only three details thus far: first, the hollow ring of his supposed past; second, the fact that he could not recall questioning his past until about two years ago, and finally, his inability to sculpt anyone he knew was a Kindred. It was this final matter that most concerned him, and he'd conducted a few experiments to investigate the matter. Namely, he'd asked his friend Sarah, another Toreador neonate who had been new to Atlanta but subsequently succumbed to the Blood Curse, to set up some blind sittings for him. Specifically, he did not wish to be told whether or not the sitter was Kindred. And what had happened? Well, nothing, but that was the point. Half of the sitters had been Kindred. When he did not know their nature, Leopold had little trouble manifesting their likeness in clay. One of the sitters who was unable to be discreet about his nature so shook Leopold that he thanked the Kindred but asked him to leave—an unfortunate incident, as that Kindred was Trevor, one of the Brujah street sergeants who now bore a grudge for the slight Leopold had leveled him.

Certainly, Leopold could imagine that his difficulty sculpting Kindred derived from his work with the beautiful Toreador (who had conveniently insisted on anonymity, he clearly recalled) who ultimately shattered his life by Embracing him and forcing him to save his life by devouring her blood. Leopold was certain even non-Freudian psychotherapists would relent on a dramatic cause-and-effect such as this case, but it didn't seem right to Leopold.

After all, he knew about that event, or thought he knew about it anyway, and the contemplation of

it directly did not concern him. Yes, his memories of that time were terrible indeed, and there could presumably be something of the saga he was keeping from his conscious thoughts, something so heinous that the solitary event was stricken from his memory and now unconsciously caused his troubles.

However, he just didn't believe it. Mostly, it was the lame story of the starving artist that did it. Leopold knew that he did fit that archetype. He was unkempt, lost long hours as though a fleeting moment while at work, did indeed starve for lack of blood when he sculpted instead of hunted. But he didn't think he could long overlook a beautiful woman who clearly wanted his hands to enact more carnal pleasures than fashioning her stone likeness.

For instance, though she probably thought him immune to her stunning good looks, Leopold had not overlooked the Toreador primogen of Atlanta, Victoria Ash. If anything, though, she gave some authority to his life story, for she was walking (not living) proof that such gorgeous creatures did exist. Another permutation of his new suspicions regarding his true past suggested that Victoria was his sire, and had concocted this simple cover story to hide that fact from him.

As soon as he imagined that, though, Leopold felt ashamed of such dull-headed paranoia as dominated conspiracy theorists. It's not as if those theorists were not right, for there were conspiracies aplenty, but they should stick to their best guesses, and not indulge any crazy suspicion that happened to catch their imagination. There were vampires behind many of the conspiracies, but not aliens or yetis or whatever silliness was presently in vogue. And just so,

Leopold stuck to his central theory of an entirely other life now unknown to him, and not any number of possibilities he could concoct to fit the evidence. The idea of a missing life just *seemed* right.

Besides, Leopold felt such a brand of skullduggerous activity did not become the ravishing primogen. Victoria seemed stronger than that, and not one to trifle with loose ends. He recognized her obvious beauty, but his gift as an artist was to see more deeply into people than that, and he believed that if Victoria was responsible for his past, then she would not hide him from it. She would simply kill him if he wasn't of use to her.

He suddenly realized that part of this foolishness with Victoria was some vestige of mortal lust. She was just so damned beautiful that he couldn't clear her from his mind. Frankly, it excited him to imagine that he was her childe, and he suspected he would harbor this crazy thought for some time.

In fact, while he had spoken with her on the phone recently, Leopold had never been alone with Victoria Ash, though she was the head of his clan in this city. There was no point. He did the work that seemed important to him and steered clear of politics. Politics got one killed. Better just to follow everyone's rules—the Prince's, the Anarchs', the Camarilla's—and no one would have reason to be hostile, or even offended. The chance that he might accidentally blunder was what convinced him not to attend even events like the Summer Solstice Ball tomorrow night at the High Museum of Art. Such a density of Kindred would surely include one who thought Leopold a perfect foil or dupe for some scheme, and the fewer that knew of him, the better.

That had not stopped him from accepting a commission from Victoria for the party when she called a week ago. She had very specific requests, but suggested that completing the work was doing clan work, so for the pride of the Toreador he was required to accept. He did, and workmen—ghouls, Leopold imagined, for they hefted his sculpture as two mortals could not—had arrived to take possession of the work last night.

He was actually proud of the piece, and wondered if he'd ever see it again. The fifty thousand dollars the ghouls paid him in consecutively numbered new one-hundred dollar bills would have to eliminate or at least alleviate that thought. He already owned this house that served as his workplace and his haven, but eventually he would need more money in order to survive safely as an immortal being. He made pains to cross no one, but one haven was not enough, and until now one was all he could afford.

He almost put his plan aside in order to look through recent papers for clues to good second homes, but for some reason the itch to attend to the matter of his past was severe. Such thoughts had been idle speculation in the past, but now he felt the need to get toward the heart of the matter.

However, this was in all likelihood pure foolishness, for unless there were greater motivations at work—and Leopold doubted he could figure so prominently in any truly grandiose plan—then his fantasy-like life story was probably true. It bored him to think that. Since the past was gone already, he wished for something more vital in it, something he could tap to create truly great art, not just the fine

showpieces he could create when concentrating on technical merit, or the outlandish pieces that came when he let himself loose. He was after all a good sculptor, so that part of his possible past was not a charade, for such talent could not be concocted, though Leopold knew that some Kindred were capable of patiently amazing things. But who in history was the last sculptor to be concerned with plots that might change the world or affect lives beyond those of wealthy patrons or other poor artists dreaming of living as pathetic a life as most skilled but unexceptional artists experienced? Somebody from long ago, Leopold decided. Maybe Leonardo or Michelangelo. Not even the great Rodin shaped international events, or at least so he thought.

So, Leopold decided to engage in an experiment that he hoped would either dissuade him from his theory or recommend it even more strongly. It was his intention to sculpt the bust of his Toreador sire. She was gone, and the memories of her were limited, but there was yet a strong picture of her in his mind, and Leopold decided to see if he could sculpt her. If he could not, then the explanation he would have to accept was that the terrible pains she had inflicted upon him were indeed the reasons for his troubles, and consequently she must be real.

On the other hand, if he could sculpt her when he could sculpt no other Kindred, then he reasoned this would prove a conscious connection to the still unconscious knowledge that his lovely benefactor was not real at all. That is, he believed that if he could sculpt the one Kindred who was presumably the source of the block that prevented such work, then she must not be the real reason and that would be

because his unconscious mind might know better than his conscious mind that she did not exist. It would be no different than the likenesses of Bela Lugosi as Dracula that he sculpted, since he knew Dracula did not exist, yet it was a vampire he managed to portray in clay.

He would still not know for certain, but such a result would give him the confidence to proceed with other possible experiments. Perhaps even to go so far as to seek out another—maybe even Victoria—to see what might be done to help him regain his former knowledge. Such a gross move would be dangerous, though, for what if the Kindred he sought for help was part of the charade perpetrated against him? What if it was Victoria, and he revealed even slight suspicions to her?

Leopold laughed to himself. At the worst, he supposed, he might find himself in another city, perhaps on another continent, but maybe the story of his life would be a better one.

And maybe the discovery that his remembered life was a charade would only ruin his life. Should he give up a storybook past in order to learn that the truth might be otherwise? If his sire was a farce, a fable invented by someone hiding something from him, then what trouble, what very possibly dangerous trouble, might he stir up with the return of his memory?

But Leopold was decided in his course of action. Art was about truth, he believed. Though his work of Kindred might never be for public consumption—as such might be considered a dangerous leak in the Masquerade—Leopold felt it might reveal some truth to some few among the Kindred who sought it as well.

But not if he couldn't sculpt those who would see his art, for such an absence would have a clear impact on how his message was broadcast and hence received. Sculptors from Rodin to Brancusi spoke about humans with Kine as the center of much of their work. Maybe there was a way to speak about vampires without Kindred in his work, but for his message to be honest, that method would have to come naturally and not be an impediment around which he constructed a method.

He finally exhaled a great breath and unrolled the cloth covering a large piece of clay he'd cut and covered with a wet towel earlier this night. He was anxious to get to work immediately, for although he was perhaps eternal so long as he fed on blood, his patience to achieve self-discovery was not likewise infinite.

The thought of blood made his stomach tighten, and his throat. He considered delaying his work to seek sustenance, but he resisted the possible procrastination and returned to gazing at the block of clay before him.

He stood and pushed the stool away so he might have freedom to pace about the pedestal upon which the clay rested. He placed his right hand on the clay and then walked clockwise about it. His strong fingers left four slight furrows in the medium, and these he lengthened through several revolutions by spiraling them higher as he continued clockwise.

He played thus for several moments—a cat toying with its prey. And just as suddenly as a cat realizing the game has breached the boundary into tedium, Leopold pivoted and attacked the clay. He was now a bird of prey, his fingertips pressed together like hawk

talons as he struck the clay and withdrew a small piece of clay that he tossed to the floor outside the reach of his pacing feet.

Within a matter of ten flurried moments, the ungainly lump of clay was whittled down to a vaguely humanoid bust and Leopold was covered with dollops of the stuff. His fingers were shod in thick shells of grey, completely transforming them from implements seemingly capable of precise work to bludgeons presumably meant only for destructive endeavors. But then there was much that was destructive in sculpting, and Leopold believed in creation through annihilation, perhaps explaining why he was willing to destroy his current life if a new one was created in the process.

He felt himself letting go, though, which was always a good sign for his work. This was a feeling of separation from himself that he could not explain, and he could only describe it as an out-of-body experience wherein he imagined he sometimes looked down upon himself as he worked, though in such cases he had no conscious control over the work he did. Alternately, he sometimes faded completely and only when he grew desperately tired—or, now that he was a vampire, when dawn was near—would he wearily regain his senses and find a sculpture that was a stranger to him.

Invariably, though, this letting go resulted in better works—ones where technical concerns did not intrude and restrict him. It was also this letting go that in his youth had convinced him that he was a great artist and would eventually be recognized as such. The genius of greatness manifested in such odd ways, and he presumed this his eccentricity.

That hubris, however, is what in later years, more recent years, convinced him he would never achieve such greatness. Only when the artist was not aware of his own folly, his own freakishness, could greatness be realized. He realized then that he used this loss of control as an excuse to deserve greatness, instead of a whip with which to flog himself to greatness.

This time, he did at first feel like he floated over his studio. His reasoning was intact enough to be impressed with himself despite his lingering reservations about his talent. He saw a confident artist boldly striking marks into the surface of the clay model. Careful consideration seemed to occur instantly, for the work was steady and constant and there were no errors; at least there was no work that dissatisfied him, for no move was countermanded or covered up.

The form of a woman's face slowly gouged, carved and smoothed its way into existence. It would be a beautiful woman, Leopold understood, so long as the whole of her lived up to the sensuous stretch of the neck and the mischievous tilt of the head.

Then Leopold watched as the sculptor faltered. The rhythm of the work lost its 4/4-time magic and bumbled into a tragedy of inexpert improvisation. The sculptor even dropped his carving blade, and stood slack-jawed and dazed for a moment before retrieving it. Then it was as if an automaton were at work, as if the Leopold floating above the sculptor was the soul of the artist and not the artist's Muse. The sculptor worked methodically, inevitably detracting from the work by virtue of his attention to it, and in fact not adding to the work at all, because Leopold saw now that the sculptor was working in a loop of

cutting, smoothing and replacing those same three areas of the bust.

Leopold was then certain that this was his unconscious block asserting itself, and this was without doubt the most demoralizing instance, for never had this fugue state failed to produce something which Leopold held in high personal regard. Even this state, the seat of his fervently desired genius, was incapable of success.

He felt doomed. And lost.

And he felt himself fading farther away, ever higher, though now it was escape, blessed escape.

It was the sensation of gradually losing focus on himself and the clay sculpture. Instead, he began to be aware of the entire studio, and he took it all in without the capacity to concentrate on any one aspect of it. He saw the pattern of the long tables along the walls and the portions of them that T-ed toward the main work space. He saw the boxes of bozzettos and unfinished works atop the tables along one wall, though he was unable to pick out any specific piece. And atop the other tables he could only sense the blacks and greys and whites of clay, stone and marble.

Even these items of the large work studio faded and he gleaned the periphery of his haven: the loosely mortared bricks of the walls of this basement, the warped and water-stained but resolutely sturdy wooden staircase to the ground floor up into which he felt himself drift, and the door to the dry and cool vegetable cellar that went deeper even than the basement and within which Leopold spent every daylight hour comatose on a firm mattress, feather pillows and down comforter.

From the vantage of his height, though, he felt for a moment that there was something deeper even than his root cellar. Something dark and formless and powerful. Then it was gone, but shapeless appendages still tickled his brain as he floated even higher.

He eventually encountered the ceiling that was the ground-level floor. In his present state, the ceiling was also a permeable barrier that separated waking from sleeping, and the blurring details of all he had sensed snowed to pure white in a brilliant flash that suddenly brought Leopold fully conscious again.

Sunday, 20 June 1999, 11:57 PM

An abandoned steel mill

Atlanta, Georgia

The motorcyclist shot over the dark streets of Atlanta. He chose to remain off the main north-south arteries of I-75 and I-85 that cut downtown Atlanta in twain. The better to dodge tails if there were abundant side streets to screech along, and with a virtual Blood Hunt declared on anyone remotely considered an Anarch, it was imperative that the Prince's minions not follow the courier to his destination.

He wove through the criss-crossing streets for which Atlanta is notorious and so only gradually made his way in the proper direction. Satisfied that no one tailed him, the courier made a final dash across a stretch of open ground toward a massive edifice of brick and steel.

He knew this was the time he would be most vulnerable, so he poured on the speed. The BMW motorcycle responded admirably, and the skilled driver edged the wheels around the numerous potholes and breaks in the road.

As he neared the facade—and that's all it was, as the bulk of the old steel mill was collapsed and left only this single proud wall—the courier took a final glance over his shoulder to make certain he was clear.

He was.

But then there was gunfire.

The thunder of large ammunition roared from the wall of brick and steel before him. The courier nearly laid the bike down on the broken pavement, the hard edges and potholes of which would surely

have shredded him like a cheese grater.

When he recovered from the shock of being fired upon from his own side's position, the courier noted that the large-caliber weapons were firing into the sky over his head. First setting a course over the road that seemed stable for a moment, the courier craned his neck around and up. He couldn't hear them above the grinding of his own engine, but he could now see the three helicopters. One in the front appeared to be black and unmarked, and that was presumably the one that tailed him. The other two were closing rapidly from a distance, and they appeared to be police copters.

The courier cursed and then pumped the gas handle hard back to unleash all the might of his Bavarian motorcycle. The bike responded with a great burst of acceleration even though it had already been traveling at over 120 m.p.h. Not only was he likely to die for the sake of some fool message—no matter that it was deemed urgent—but he had also failed the most basic aspect of his duty: don't lead the enemy to the hideout.

Bullets suddenly sprayed around the courier like the patter of heavy rain. One of the bullets tore through his arm and lodged in his right thigh. He nearly spun out of control, but the ghoulish strength of his intact left arm was enough keep him in control, at least for the moment. The arm was almost worthless. He could still muster enough hand strength to manipulate the handlebar gas control, but there was no sturdiness in his elbow and the courier knew his ability to drive the motorcycle was severely impaired.

He glanced back again and saw there was a substantial gap between the lead helicopter and the two police ones. If he could maneuver himself into that crease, then he might live.

The courier slammed on his brakes. At the same moment, he laid the bike down on its right side and leapt off the saddle. He landed with both feet firmly planted on the top or left side of the bike and he surfed the road, his sole good arm maintaining its grip on the handlebars.

Sparks and pieces of the motorcycle flew as the courier struggled to maintain his balance as the bike careened over the potholed road. And then the helicopter whirled overhead, unable to check its speed as quickly as the motorcyclist. The courier could barely spare the time to watch the helicopter, but he did see it begin to slow as if the pilot thought to circle back for the kill. Then it sped forward.

Once the helicopter was past and committed to strafing the Anarchs' position in the gutted steel mill, the courier hefted the bike back up with a herculean tug of his left arm. His speed had reduced to perhaps only thirty miles per hour or so, but after he landed back in the saddle, the courier quickly accelerated beyond that meager pace. He fell in behind the lead copter, but ahead of the other two yet swooping in.

The bike was in sorry shape and it wanted to go to the right, but the courier tugged with his left arm to keep the wheel pointed straight ahead.

He watched as the black helicopter dove past the wall of brick and steel. Its forward guns demolished a section of the wall, and the courier saw the figure of one of his Kindred friends fall with the mass of debris.

The helicopter looped around to take another pass, and it was likely to be joined in its next attack by the two police vehicles.

Additionally, the courier was able to see the left-branching I-75 split from the downtown artery to his left, and a long line of streaking cars with flashing blue lights dotted the highway.

He cursed again and coaxed what speed he could from his damaged bike. He let the bike's rightward tendency assert itself and he circled around the wall to seek shelter behind it with his doomed comrades. He wondered briefly if it was any different facing Final Death than the mere mortal's death that stared him down. He might be a ghoul with Kindred blood in his veins, but he would still die in all the normal ways. How would the police handle his friends who wouldn't fall to a hail of gunfire?

It seemed to the courier that the Prince carelessly toyed with breaking the Masquerade by sending his police after the Anarchs.

So much passed through his mind in these final moments. The kinds of thoughts the courier had never had before, and would never have again.

Safe for a moment behind the walls and under a fragment of what might have been the second story's ceiling, the courier killed the motorcycle engine and hopped off the bike. His decimated right arm flopped at his side.

He saw Thelonious and hurried to the mighty Brujah. The man seemed unruffled in his fine business suit. He cradled a cell phone to his ear, but hung up just as the ghoul neared.

Thelonious looked too mild-mannered to be a Brujah, especially one so sought by the Prince that

these hordes of police were called into the fray, but the young and congenial black man could be ferocious when required. In fact, he was one of the few individuals—Kindred or Kine—to face Prince Benison in battle and survive. Of course, the Prince survived too, or else the war between the Prince’s elders and Thelonious’s Anarchs would not be raging.

The ghoul said, “I’m sorry, master. I led them right to you. Once we beat them back or escape, I will submit to your punishment.”

Thelonious seemed to not hear the ghoul at first, but then the Brujah said, “Don’t be a fool, Thomas. This attack was underway before you arrived. They found us by some other means. A spy perhaps. One of us interested in the profoundly arrogant and demeaning society the Prince has established in our city.”

“If that’s so, then I’ll kill the traitor.”

“I’ve already taken care of that,” Thelonious said, holding a bloody palm toward the courier. Then he continued, “As for the police, perhaps we can frighten them off, or at least buy ourselves a little time.”

At that, Thelonious raised his hand. Though the ghoul could only catch brief views of the black helicopter through broken windows and holes in the building as it whirled toward the edifice again, he could see that it was making another approach.

The guns began to tear at the bricks again, and Thomas flinched. But then two great whistling noises sounded, and a pair of fiery streaks blazed through the air. One streak whistled out of sight, but the other intercepted the helicopter and a tremendous explosion shook the air and earth.

A cheer went up among the Anarchs, and Thomas saw that Thelonious smiled too.

“Let’s see if that makes them think again,” said the Brujah.

Indeed, the two police helicopters, which were also ready to make strafing runs, quickly gained altitude instead and shot high over the old steel mill.

The Brujah said, “Now’s our chance.”

Thelonious let loose a shattering whistle and he waved both his arms. The bulk of the Anarchs on the ramparts immediately abandoned their positions and climbed or jumped to the ground. A couple, however, remained for a moment longer. They readied another missile, and Thomas watched as one of Kindred, a tough Brujah named Trevor, leveled the weapon at the receding helicopters.

The vehicles didn’t perform their escape quickly enough and the missile launched from high on the old wall shot directly at them. The missile quickly outpaced one of the helicopters, and the pilot was not a vet skilled in dogfighting, so it too was snuffed in a crackle and thump.

“Here,” said Thelonious, drawing the ghoul’s attention back to his leader.

When the ghoul turned, he saw that the Anarch leader was stripping off his clothes. The black skin of his magnificently sculpted body glistened in the moonlight. Then Thelonious thrust his forearm toward the courier’s face.

“Take some blood. Without it that wound will be the death of you and you’ll never survive the flight we’re about to take.”

The ghoul was astonished, but he did not delay. He grasped the Brujah’s arms and thrust his greedy

face full upon it. He knew he was fed on the authority of his leader, but he'd never actually tasted the blood of Thelonious, only his underlings. Therefore, the ghoul had never before tasted blood so fine, so aromatic, so full of life and power.

When the blood flooded into his body, the ghoul felt it go to work immediately. In an instant, it knitted his pulped arm and even restored some flexibility and strength. Kindred blood was amazing, he thought. Especially the blood of a Brujah primogen. Well a *former* Brujah primogen. In the wake of the Anarch revolt, the position was no longer official.

Suddenly, the delicious sustenance was gone. A dribble of blood slithered down the Brujah's arm, but the bleeding itself stopped as soon as the ghoul's mouth was removed.

Then Thelonious pushed the ghoul so that he started to jog and then run under cover of night. The entire pack of eight other Anarchs ranged behind the two of them. Five of those were Kindred, and three were ghouls like Thomas. Thelonious had promised the ghouls they would be Embraced as full vampires if this war was won.

As the ragged group ran across the debris-littered grounds of the old steel mill, Thelonious looked at Thomas and inquired, "Do you bring a message, or were you simply returning to HQ?"

Thomas could not so easily speak and run at such a demanding pace, but he managed to say, "I...do...have...a...message."

"Then give it to me," commanded the Brujah leader.

Thomas pulled a sealed envelope from his waist and thrust it clumsily toward Thelonious. The Brujah

deftly grasped it and tore it open as they ran. How Thelonious then managed to read it while remaining cognizant of the terrain and maintaining his speed, Thomas didn't know, but it made him wish to become Kindred even more than ever.

"It's from Benjamin," the Brujah revealed.

Thomas was growing weary, but he felt the flush of the last of his leader's blood course through him, and he regained his breath. "Benjamin?" he asked.

"The Ventrue," explained Thelonious. Then the Brujah looked away as if revealing the content of the message only to a part of himself. "He says I should attend the party tomorrow night. Benison will be there...." His words trailed off, but his feet flew furiously and he stormed ahead of the others.

His voice echoed back to the group, "Meet at the next safehouse in two nights." Then the seemingly polished surface of his skin refused to reflect any more moonlight, and as he disappeared into the pitch black of the night, Thelonious wondered if Benjamin's price was too high. Why should the Brujah trade one Prince for another?

Monday, 21 June 1999, 1:50 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

Leopold was instantly fully alert and conscious. This particular period of having let go was not marked by the confusion and sluggishness that sometimes greeted him when he reawakened.

He was momentarily confused by the shackles he imagined his hands were encased within, but he soon understood that his digits and palms were simply caked with dried clay. When he flexed his fingers with a slight bit of strength, the dried clay cracked and fell to the dusty floor in shards.

It was this dirty floor of his work area upon which Leopold reclined. His body was covered in the debris of many previous projects, as he was motivated to clean the space only when it accumulated in piles over which he might trip, and that meant once every six months or so.

He looked up at the ceiling, and for a moment imagined that he saw himself floating there. Now it would be the sculptor looking up at the Muse. All he saw, though, were the heavy wooden beams that had supported the ground-level floor for a hundred years and would do so for a hundred more. They appeared indomitable and immune to the passage of time. If only one of his sculptures—just one of them!—would stand up so well to the test of generations of Kindred and Kine.

When he focused his sight nearer the floor, Leopold found that he rested with his head near the pedestal upon which he'd worked the clay bust. A

sense of failure still consumed him. And frustration. And foolishness too. How could he have truly imagined that his past held any odd surprises? Was this the dementia of eternal life that some Kindred claimed afflicted the minds of the elders? Leopold had not even scratched the surface of the mortal years allotted to some Kine, and already he was cracking. He imagined himself being served up as an example of the weak-willed Toreador—a poseur sculptor who could not even last four score and seven or whatever it was the Bible promised.

Though clear-headed and strong of limb, Leopold felt no motivation to move. His vantage from the floor provided him as much of a view of his clay bust as his remaining confidence allowed: a slight nose poked out over full and perhaps parted lips.

And there he remained for a good length of time, lost in thoughts that led to little and amounted to nothing. Finally, the grit of the floor and enough of a desire for some sustenance urged him to his feet.

He stood and trod slowly toward the wooden staircase. His hand clutching the railing, he took slow steps up. Then, just as his eyes were going to disappear from the basement over the threshold of the floor above, he looked back at the bust.

An astonishingly lovely woman stared back at him, her head tilted to one side and her neck stretched outward. This was not a piece lost halfway to completion. It was a realized work, something of beauty, and Leopold cracked his head on the ceiling as he started and raced back down the stairs and across his studio to stand before the bust.

The woman's shoulders were bare and slim and smooth, so he imagined her either naked or in a low-

cut dress that a woman with such lovely features might favor. Bones easily made themselves known beneath the clay skin of the woman, but something in how the shoulders were arranged or held square indicated strength or at least confidence.

The face was lit by a slight smile, but it was the other woman's other features which gave dimension to this expression. This came mostly from the eyes, which seemed slightly Asian in their bent. There was amusement in them, though it was somewhat hidden within the shadow of their long shape and the fact that they were partially closed. The cheeks were full but tapered to a narrow chin. Above, a single lock of hair fell across her forehead. The remainder of the hair was more controlled, as it was short and slightly curly.

What Leopold failed to note, as he'd not even thought to look for them, or perhaps because he saw them so often now that they did not seem out of the ordinary, were the woman's fangs. They weren't obvious, but the slightly parted mouth revealed the narrow tips of both upper teeth.

That was out of ordinary, and Leopold steadied himself on the pedestal, leaning forward with both palms pressed on the surface that also supported the bust and his legs spread a long pace behind him as if he were about to be frisked by policemen. His head dropped between his arms and hung like a motionless pendulum from his torso.

The teeth not only meant that he had sculpted a Kindred, but it was the particular Kindred he sculpted that disturbed and excited him even though it was not the beauty from the Embrace he remembered.

He couldn't believe what he'd done, nor could he believe he hadn't recognized her immediately.

He raised his head and looked the woman squarely in her dark clay but lifelike eyes. This was Victoria Ash, primogen of Atlanta Toreador. Her lush, pre-Raphaelite sumptuousness was the epitome of beauty in Leopold's sculptor's eyes, though there was enough slenderness in her face to balance it and bring it closer to modern opinions of loveliness. The armless Venus held nothing over her as metaphor for timeless beauty.

He gazed at her for a long time, wondering what this told of his circumstances, his past. Perhaps it had nothing to do with the past, but was an augury of the future. Maybe Leopold would be doomed to know more of his future than his past. However, if Victoria was significant in his future, then Leopold decided he could forgive a lost past.

Then, Leopold slowly stepped away and gave himself the advantage of distance to look again and make certain. It just a moment though. The tapered face, the slightly oriental cast, graceful neck. It was definitely her.

Leopold stepped forward again and bent down a bit. Methodically, as the Toreador savored each moment, he pressed his lips fully against the clay of the bust and held the kiss as he diligently worked his tongue into the clay of Victoria's open and smiling mouth.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 2:02 AM
The Skyline Hotel
Atlanta, Georgia

Benjamin stood on the top floor of his downtown hotel overlooking the beautiful nighttime skyline of Atlanta. One of his dozens of dummy corporations or shell companies—or some combination thereof that even he couldn't precisely quote—owned the building, and this top floor was officially full of equipment and only partially completed because the company's funds ran low before its design could be finalized.

It's true that it was only partially completed, but that was because Benjamin preferred it that way. He could afford great luxury, and he indulged himself with it at many of his other havens, but when Benjamin wanted to think, he required more spartan furnishings. A computer on a desk. A small side table. A large map table with ten flat drawers to store documents. A trap door for a quick escape.

Benjamin gazed north of downtown, past the highrises. He wished he'd been watching when the missiles were launched. His perch would have afforded a fine view of the battle even though it took place two miles north of this haven. The Ventrue adjusted his glasses. It was a nervous habit from his years as a mortal. Otherwise, Benjamin appeared relaxed in his black and white crewneck shirt and black slacks. If not for the crossweaves of white in the shirt, Benjamin, a handsome black-skinned man, might have disappeared in the low light of the room. He would as soon disappear when in the midst of deep-

thinking, but something about all black didn't appeal to the Ventrue. Too trendy. Too rebellious. And he was neither Toreador nor Brujah. He'd leave such things to them.

Except he did have to intrude in their matters tonight. At least in the business of the Brujah and whatever other clans might be represented in the group of Anarchs Thelonious led. Perhaps a Gangrel or two, but Benjamin's information pointed to a handful of Brujah and probably a couple of ghouls. And Thelonious, of course. It was a sad army, but the Blood Curse had reduced their ranks terribly, and Thelonious seemed against Embracing others simply to provide shock troops—a tactic preferred by the Sabbat, who cared little for the future of such troops.

No, the war Thelonious fought was a legitimate one, and the Brujah was too scrupulous to stoop to tactics that, if implemented, would risk a long-term victory to achieve a short-term one. Which meant that the Brujah's message must have a longer-term benefit that the Ventrue was presently overlooking.

Anyway, Benjamin was a little more pragmatic. He'd consider the shock troops if they would guarantee victory that would afterwards give the opportunity to more than make up for that wrong.

Of course, Benjamin's grudge against Atlanta's establishment was of a more personal nature, whereas Thelonious fought an ideological battle against Prince Benison. Benjamin fought for an ideology too, but he admitted to himself that the defeat of the Prince and his damned wife Eleanor—his bitch of a sire who would exert control over him if she thought he might never return to her of his own free will—dramatically affected the methods he might employ.

Did Thelonious understand the subtleties of the decision Benjamin was about to make?

The Ventrue walked away from the window and returned the map table. All the intelligence his agents had gathered the prior day was spread across the flat surface. Benjamin had read through it many hours ago and found little of interest.

His hand drifted to a single sheet of paper, which he picked up and read again. Upon it was written, "Now is the time to take steps to block Benison. I know your secret, Benjamin, and Benison could learn of it at tomorrow night's affair."

It was signed, "Thelonious."

The message had arrived via a motorcycle-riding courier about an hour ago. It was enclosed in the letterhead envelope of a non-existent contracting company, and the courier who delivered it had told the front desk it was a work order that should go the top floor. This strange request had naturally gained the attention of Benjamin's ghoul, August Riley, a sharp young woman who managed the hotel and used the blood he granted her to stay on her feet twenty-four hours a day. Benjamin had used to work so tirelessly too, but that was before he was Kindred and could not remain active in sunlight.

Benjamin now accepted that it could be to Thelonious's benefit to reveal the Ventrue's secret at the Summer Solstice party this coming night. Anything the Brujah could do to divert the Prince's attacks and attention might grant Thelonious time to regroup for possible counterattacks. But that still seemed awfully short-term. Still, short-term survival was a necessity for long-term victory.

Benjamin could indeed slow the Prince's pursuit of the Kindred rebels, for while Benison controlled the police force of the city, all of the judicial system was under Benjamin's sway. Any number of steps could be taken by Benjamin's Kine to shut down the attacks Benison was staging with his own puppets. Hell, even a search warrant denied here and there could buy Thelonious several days.

But did Benjamin dare such an action? There was no doubt that he did not care for the threat Thelonious leveled at him. Threat or not, Benjamin would have to do what was best for him.

What it really came down to, Benjamin concluded, was deciding the better pawn—or ally, if he choose to look at things that way—between Thelonious and Eleanor. Whichever way he chose—and he would have to consider the permutations for the remaining hours of darkness this night—Benjamin knew he could take no steps against the Prince before the party.

Benison would know immediately that it was Benjamin's interference that slowed his pursuit of the Anarchs, and the Ventrue reasoned there was no reason to create one's own trouble when others already had the ability to heap it upon you.

Monday, 21 June 1999, 3:18 AM
Piedmont Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia

It was the result Leopold feared the most: an answer. But one plagued with innumerable more questions.

His answer was only that he could indeed sculpt a Kindred, though it required him enter his fugue state, a process he had never been able to control. More than that, this instance of letting go seemed different than ones before it. He recalled the details of what he considered his astral projection with little clarity, but he did remember feeling that his mental block had defeated even this magical state of creation. Then, he had floated even higher until he'd faded back to consciousness.

Normally, his ghostly presence lingered an arm's reach above his working self. Perhaps, though, his Kindred nature was heightening this power of his, or perhaps his was a power with even greater range than he supposed. Perhaps it was potent enough that he could again imagine himself an artistic genius—a creator with enough madness and extreme behavior to qualify.

Whatever had happened and was happening, Leopold knew he needed more answers. His pursuit would be defeating the hydra, for where Kindred were concerned, every answer created two more questions, but perhaps he would stumble across an eventual truth that would let him begin to cauterize the bloody stumps before more mysteries could sprout.

The problem was that his friends were as few as

his enemies. He remained clear of politics in order to avoid creating enemies, but without an area of clout or control he could claim, other Kindred also had no reason to seek him as an ally. There were a handful of mortals he could turn to if desperate need arose—Rose Markowitz in particular, since he had saved her from the street and returned her to a life in art she presumably found infinitely more appealing—but there were no Kindred.

Unless Hannah might help him. He thought on that for a moment.

He remembered thinking of her mansion as he passed it last night. He thought of it as hers, though he guessed it was really the Atlanta chantry house of the Tremere, an extremely hierarchical clan that Leopold believed was bonded together by a common bloodline as well as common blood. That is, he'd heard that all neonates—newly created vampires—were required to drink the blood of all the elders of the clan.

Blood was a powerful force for Kindred, and not just because of its sustenance. After all, any substance that could transform a bloodless human into a Kindred held secrets as yet beyond Kine science. A mortal who drank Kindred blood became a ghoul. A Kindred who drank another Kindred's blood could become the latter's thrall. In fact, Leopold had heard stories of countless ways that the power of Kindred blood could be tapped, and at the heart of a majority of these stories were the Tremere, a clan rumored to be descended not from Caine but from a secret cabal of wizards who had transformed themselves in the Middle Ages.

Leopold shook his head in frustration. There were so many stories. Each likely untrue but carrying within it a kernel of truth. He would need eternal life in order to sort all of this out.

He thought of Hannah and how he was almost glad for his inability—at least at that time about a year ago—to sculpt Kindred. He had never encountered such a morose, unanimated and unengaging Kindred or human. Hannah struck Leopold as combining all the worst characteristics of a prudish Victorian, prissy schoolmistress, and dour Quaker. She was skinny to severity, expressionless to stupefaction, and eerie as a Salem witch who wanted to burn.

She would not have been an impossible subject to sculpt, but Leopold did not imagine she would be an entertaining one. Not that Leopold doubted her ability to sit for hours or even days—interrupted by daylight, of course—if the sculpting required it, but he doubted his ability to find anything within her to animate the soul of her depiction in clay or stone or marble.

But he had tried that evening she suddenly arrived in his workshop. Leopold recalled that he had been having some trouble with an uncooperative model, when suddenly the frustratingly twitchy girl screamed and pointed at a black-clad and hooded figure standing at the base of the stairs. Leopold almost screamed too, but Hannah promptly lowered her hood and Leopold recognized her from one of his very few social engagements among the Kindred.

“I understand that you cannot sculpt the likeness of a vampire,” she said in a voice so uninflected that Leopold had to pick the words out of the me-

chanical hum that was the register of her voice.

The frightened Kine shrieked again, hurling herself at Leopold and pleading for protection, but her voice gurgled to a halt and she collapsed to the floor with such suddenness that Leopold imagined that her bones must have liquefied.

“Yes, that’s true,” Leopold believed he’d said, as he crouched to the fallen woman and rolled her over. He brushed some debris from one of her breasts and off her stomach and propped her into a sitting position against a pedestal.

Leopold must have looked worried about the mortal, because Hannah remarked in passing that she would be fine and would be forever incapable of recalling the ten seconds immediately prior to collapsing as well as the first ten seconds after awakening.

She’d warned that it was actually approximately ten seconds, and then she asked what Leopold might do to her in that time. From anyone else, the question might have been mischievous or even malefic, but Hannah did not crack the slightest grin or reveal the minutest twinkle of her eye. Leopold gained the impression that everything she did was calculated to draw a response and her presence could not be a variable in her experiments, so she remained constantly withdrawn and was present only to record the results.

Leopold didn’t recall how he’d answered, but if he had it to do again, and his courage didn’t fail him, then he would like to say something outrageous to see how Hannah would react. He shook his head. She would probably take any suggestion, no matter how grotesque or enlightened, with the same stoicism.

This impression of Hannah’s methods was con-

firmed, at least in Leopold's mind, when she then requested that he sculpt her. Leopold protested and a bit testily snapped at her, "Unless you know Tremere magick that can break my block, then you're wasting your time."

She pretended not to hear him, and Leopold was grateful, not resentful, of the fact, for she was an elder vastly more powerful than he. He swallowed his tongue and inwardly berated himself for his foolish outburst.

Hannah had then seated herself in the chair in which the Kine woman had wiggled. Though an impossible subject, Hannah did at least sit still, though the absolute stillness was unnerving. Leopold was used to the Kindred's lack of breathing—though the rise and fall of a Kine chest was a rhythm by which he paced his work—but Hannah's frozen demeanor was eerie.

When the witch grabbed the mortal woman by the foot and dragged her toward the chair, Leopold shivered at the creepy sight. She hefted the naked Kine to her black-robed lap and held her still as well. "Start with the Kine and slowly include me in the sculpture," Hannah had instructed.

Leopold spent most of the night at it, and the Kine slowly revealed herself in his clay, but Hannah's image remained a crude outline without mirroring a single distinguishing characteristic.

Hannah let the torture end when she suddenly stood, toppling the human off her lap into a haphazard pile of pink flesh and jutting limbs. She then walked to the base of the stairs where Leopold had first seen her, and all this without a word before suggesting, "I brought no magic to break your block, but

that does not mean that Tremere magic cannot assist you in the future.”

Leopold tried to apologize for his failure, but a curt movement of Hannah’s hand cut him off. “You have ten seconds,” she said, pointing behind Leopold to the human.

Leopold glanced at the woman, then back to Hannah, but the Kindred was gone. The Toreador couldn’t recall what he did with the eight seconds that remained to him after that. He chuckled to himself now as he understood that he may have forgotten, but Hannah probably had not.

That mysterious offer—if it was even that—from Hannah was all he had. He had no one else to turn to that he thought would be interested enough to listen to his predicament. He could go to his primogen, but that was Victoria and he would be embarrassed. He did not wish to reveal any of his thoughts regarding her. Besides, if she was involved in some deception, then it would be dangerous.

Not that any deal with Hannah would be anything other than a deal with the devil, but for some strange reason, she seemed to have a personal interest in Leopold, and if his visit could intrigue her for selfish reasons, then she might be motivated to take action that could potentially benefit Leopold too.

Leopold refused to fool himself into thinking Hannah might be cultivated as a friend. She was the type who simply did not have friends, or at least the friends she did have were known only to herself and not to those she marked with such favor. Her attitude was the same toward friend and foe, and in that she was both perfect and imperfect in the world of the Kindred. No one would ever be fooled by Hannah,

for she seemed not to attempt deception, and while that removed a wide range of gamesmanship options from her arsenal, she also gained by this attitude. She was not shy about letting others know when their desires or goals aligned, as with Leopold.

The summer solstice was tomorrow, so the nights were short and it had been an exhausting evening, but there was still plenty of time to attempt to visit Hannah before dawn. Besides, the sooner she knew he hoped to see her, the sooner she might deign to do so.

Leopold didn't relish visiting the Tremere chantry, but he wanted to see Hannah before the party that would mark the night of the solstice, especially now that he believed he needed to attend the party. He would be careful and not stray from the piece he had donated, but whether he liked it or not—and at this moment he was definitely troubled by the future—Leopold needed to circulate among the Kindred and better learn the ways of their games.

He was truly damned.

Leopold supposed the mansion was one of the first Reconstruction homes in Atlanta. It was awesomely huge enough to have been the home of an important Kine who saw to his own needs first. Or perhaps it was built at the behest of Kindred who needed safer hiding after untold dangers when Atlanta burned.

The mansion was indeed enormous. Four complete stories high with gables that seemed to crisscross in a confusion of dizzying angles. Great windows capable of illuminating entire ballrooms with sunlight, now cloaked by thick, velvet curtains perpetually

drawn. Leopold guessed it must have more than fifty rooms within its walls. Hannah was surely in one of them, but was she too engaged in some bizarre magical activity to receive him this evening?

The Toreador was tempted to assume that was the case and try again another night before it was so late in the morning. But his need for answers drove him from the sidewalk along a short path toward the great iron gate at the foot of a brick walkway that terminated at the massive front doors of the mansion. The gate and narrow-spaced bars of the fence towered more than half again Leopold's height above him.

He noticed two security cameras rotate toward him and stop. They were mounted on the top of the brick columns that held the iron gate. The tall iron fence continued beyond each column.

Leopold looked directly into one of the cameras and hesitantly waved. He glanced back at the street to see if anyone was passing, and when he saw all was clear, he spoke quietly toward one of the cameras. "I am Leopold of the Toreador Clan, and I request an audience with...ah, Hannah." He stuttered because it seemed inappropriate to refer to the chantry leader as simply "Hannah," but he knew no other name or title. It would suffice. Or so he hoped.

And it must have, for in a moment the iron gate creaked open. Leopold looked at the hinges as he stepped through. He could detect no mechanisms that powered the opening, but he didn't wish to ascribe to magic every event he witnessed at the Tremere chantry.

Once through the gate, he walked steadily toward the front doors. The walkway was poorly lit,

and a nervous feeling tickled him when the gates behind him closed. As he mounted the first of six brick steps, Leopold detected a shadow out of the corner of his eye.

He nearly tripped on the step in fright when a better inspection of the shadows revealed a pair of black mastiffs. They were both hunkered down and seemed ready to pounce and in an instant rip out his throat. Leopold knew enough about dog attacks to throw his forearm in front of his neck for protection should one or both leap, but the Toreador doubted such tricks would do him much good against these muscled beasts.

He stood for a moment watching them drink in his scent with twitching noses. Then the front doors of the house opened, and Leopold retreated toward the rounded and open frame. Only after his feet were beyond the threshold and his arm brushed one of the mammoth door handles did Leopold turn away from the dogs and regard the interior of the house.

It was dark and incense-scented within the room, though “chamber” was probably more apt for the impressive enclosure. This door too swung shut of its own accord, and Leopold gained the uneasy sense of entering a carnival’s haunted house—a place meant both to frighten and invite, so that a guest’s discomfort could be turned to the hosts’ advantage.

Still, there was no one to greet him, so he paused a moment to examine the decorations. They were all unsettling. A two-dimensional skeleton of the extinct dodo bird in a shallow, well-illuminated and glass-covered crypt in the center of the floor. A framed document on the wall that careful inspection revealed to be the signed confession of a woman who had

burned at the stake in Salem, Massachusetts. A small, almost circular table with a half-inch lip around it to keep three perpetually spinning tops from hurtling off the edge. Two black tops seemed to harry a small white one.

Leopold noted a mirror on the wall past the framed document, but despite great curiosity, he resisted peering within it.

The room itself was large and high. The ceiling extended at least three stories up, and various macabre portraits decorated the upper reaches of the walls. A great curling staircase wound along the wall at Leopold's left up to a landing that disappeared into hallways to the right and left on the second story. The stairs did not continue any higher, but Leopold noted a third-floor balcony that overlooked this chamber.

There were also two pairs of great double doors in the room, one set in the walls in front of Leopold and another pair to his right. All four doors were closed.

The Toreador stood for a moment, alternately surveying each of the vantages the room held over him, but spying nobody to attend to him, he took a seat on a large red divan near the table of the spinning tops. The clatter and motion of the tops helped pass a moment or two, especially as Leopold did not desire to gaze upon the recessed bird bones which the divan so neatly overlooked.

Soon, a white-bearded older man entered the chamber through the doors that faced the front door. He was tugging at the sleeves of his tuxedo coat. "Pardon me, sir, but in absence of expectation of visitors this evening I'm afraid the staff has gone a bit lax."

The man was Caucasian and his white hair bristled along the line of his jaw only. He was of average height and rather haggard appearance. As soon as he neared, Leopold ascertained that he was mortal, or at least a ghoul. Probably the latter, but it didn't matter to Leopold. He wasn't gathering information for a future raid on the mansion; he simply hoped Hannah could provide some answers, or even a solitary answer.

"I wish to speak with Hannah, mistress of this chantry."

"Indeed, Lady Hannah has been apprised of your presence, Mr. Leopold, and she has instructed that you be escorted to her at once. You will please follow me, and please sir, do not stray a step from the path we take. If you do, you are liable to come to great harm, great confusion or both."

"Great confusion?" Leopold asked.

"Yes, sir. Though the hallways seem entirely trivial to navigate, a wayward step is likely to deposit you in another wing of this house, or another house entirely. So please do take care."

Leopold dusted off his pants as he stood. Perhaps the dim light of the chamber hid the dust, but a thin layer of it had covered his body while he waited.

The man took a small candle-holder from a low shelf at the foot of the stairs. Also on that shelf were a number of narrow tallow candles. He placed one within the holder and snapped his fingers above its wick. It lit instantly, burning with a steady yellow flame.

The man, or ghoul perhaps, stepped to the base of the stairs and looked over his shoulder toward Leopold before mounting the first step. The Torea-

dor took this as a sign to follow, and he immediately fell in step behind the servant. He reacted too quickly, though, and stepped on the servant's heel, causing the old man to stumble forward.

"Sorry," Leopold said as he moved to help the man to his feet.

The servant accepted the help, but he didn't reply to the Toreador's apology or even look at him. He merely dusted himself off and mounted the first step.

Leopold was still close, so he heard the ghoul whisper a name, "Hannah."

Though he couldn't see the flame directly, Leopold gained an impression of the candlelight from the flickering shadows and an aura of illumination that surrounded the ghoul's body. At the mention of Hannah's name, the light lost its yellow hue and assumed a violet-colored flame.

And because he couldn't see the flame directly, Leopold could not be certain of this, but he suspected that the purplish flame somehow led the servant to Hannah's current location. He surmised this from the way the ghoul's head flinched downward as if he were inspecting the light every time the pair achieved an intersection of possible paths.

The path the flame and/or the ghoul led Leopold along was extremely confusing. They passed through archways, traversed long and empty corridors, entered hallways and rooms through doors that seemed to serve no purpose, and generally took such a circumlocutious route that Leopold retained absolutely no hint of the direction by which he might return.

Additionally, he was so careful not to stray from

the path prescribed by the ghoul that he barely had half a mind to record the route anyway. He would surely rely on this ghoul or another servant to exit the mansion, so there was no reason to risk a misstep that might hurtle Leopold from this Atlanta abode to some other place entirely. That threat was a bit fanciful, and Leopold would have been tempted to ignore it anywhere but in the chantry house of the Tremere.

The ghoul led the way without comment but for occasional polite formality: “Duck here, sir, the ceiling’s a bit low,” or “Careful of the step, sir.” Eventually he came to a halt before an ornate door that Leopold could not clearly see and turned to the Toreador.

The servant said, “Hannah is within this chamber. I will not announce you as it was her request that I not do so. She might be in the midst of careful work, so I implore you to enter quietly and await her to address you. To do otherwise would be to abuse her generosity sorely in seeing you at all this evening, young Toreador.”

“I understand,” Leopold said. “But should I not simply wait outside the door until she beckons me within?”

The servant shook his head and answered, “Such was not her request. Now please enter.” At which the ghoul stepped aside and then quickly strode past Leopold and down a long hallway the pair had traversed a moment ago.

As Leopold watched the ghoul’s figure recede down the hallway, he marked the point at which he suspected he might no longer catch the ghoul even if he dashed at his fastest. Once the servant passed that

point, Leopold was left with no alternative but to enter as Hannah had apparently requested. Pursuit of the ghoul seemed a reasonable option because Leopold did not wish to interrupt Hannah in the middle of some grisly experiment, and he could imagine no Tremere ritual that might be otherwise.

Again, though, he thought that a foolish excuse to back down from his pursuit of truth, or at least some answers. So he stepped to the door, took a deep breath in a pantomime of relaxation, as he no longer breathed, and slid his fingers through the door handle.

Only now when within a foot of the door could Leopold appreciate the quality of the carving on the oak door. It was very fine indeed, and he would have envied it if he'd ever seriously considered working with wood. He preferred marble and clay—lifeless media from which he could create life. Wood always struck him as too close to living. To carve it was less sculpting than it was experimentation, much as a scientist might do.

The door depicted a scene from the Greek myths, for the three-headed dog Cerberus stood faithfully and realistically rendered in a position before the gates to Hades. His shoulders were pressed low toward the ground, while his hind quarters pressed up. It left the distinct impression that the beast was about to lunge at an interloper, and Leopold was unfortunately reminded of the mastiffs he'd encountered outdoors. Perhaps they belonged to Hannah.

He depressed the latch with his thumb and pushed on the door. It didn't budge. Reflexively, he tried the other direction, and indeed, the door swung outward into the hallway. Leopold's domestic instincts were confused for a moment, as he believed that doors

always opened into a room. Almost always, it seemed. The Toreador wondered if there was an explanation for the change. He suspected there was; either that or it was simply another tactic to make a visitor feel ill-at-ease. If the latter, then the dodo plus the tops plus the purple-flamed candle plus this door were certainly doing the trick. However, Leopold felt he was an easy mark for such games.

The room inside was filled with a thin reddish smoke that drifted in diffuse clouds. The room was mostly dark, but candlelight from every corner illuminated the area just enough to cause the smoke to seem to glow. Leopold stepped into the room and quickly closed the door behind him. Now was not the time to be timid, he thought. If this room held danger for him, then he had been led here with purposefully dire intent. Even if he managed to circumvent such intent once, he would not escape the mansion alive if the Tremere did not desire it. Therefore, his brazen move was born not so much of bravery but of resignation.

Before his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Leopold heard the regular ding of some small percussion instrument. The tone of the sound made the Toreador think of finger cymbals like the kind utilized by belly dancers. And wasn't that a thought: Hannah cavorting and writhing like a belly dancer!

As the light became sufficient for him to see more, Leopold did in fact make out a moving figure in the center of the rectangular room. The movement was very slight, though, and the silhouette dramatically thin and pointed. He imagined that it must be Hannah.

The movement was the use of finger cymbals as

he supposed, but Hannah did not emulate the wild gyrations of Middle Eastern dancers. Instead, when her slow and steady beat called for it, Hannah lifted her left arm and mechanically crashed two fingers together. The brass implements flashed briefly in the low light, and Leopold noted this reflection was always in time with the noise they created. He doubted this was coincidental.

The perimeter walls of the room were lined with books, though no kind of book that Leopold recognized. These were of various shapes and misshapes and one close at hand that he could reliably examine bore a title on the exposed spine, but it was gibberish to him. Some oriental language, he guessed. Others he briefly investigated seemed bound in cracked leather, and the Toreador wondered if this wasn't a library of ancient tomes of magic.

Judging by the five candles, Leopold estimated that the room was about thirty feet across, though the presence of five candles suddenly alerted him to its likely pentagonal shape. Five low-rising tables with side edges cut at an angle so they could be pushed flush together sat halfway between the walls and Hannah's position in the center of the room mirrored the orientation of the walls. And through the silky strands of red smoke, Leopold noted that Hannah stood within a pentagram fashioned of metal and inlaid in the floor.

He hoped she realized he had entered, and he somewhat regretted the haste with which he'd entered. He thought it prudent not to disturb Hannah, but perhaps it would have been wiser to draw attention to himself to make certain she would not unknowingly place him in danger. Still, he reminded

himself, she apparently knew he would be coming, so if she was unable to maintain her sense while in a meditative state, then surely she would guess that he might be present. Besides, what careful Kindred—and Hannah was surely careful—would let a potential threat remain in the same room when she was vulnerable?

Nevertheless, he continued to worry.

Gradually, the pace of the beat hastened, and Hannah's ringing cymbals seemed louder. Despite the increased energy, though, her motion seemed just as controlled and precise as before.

Then Leopold noted that the candlelight began to flash in time with the beat. First one candle and in a moment a second in unison with the first flared at the musical beat. The flash was not brilliant, but it was noticeable. As Leopold watched and wondered, a third candle joined the first two.

The beat was quick enough now that Hannah was chiming her finger cymbals once a second, and she no longer lowered her arm after each stroke. Instead, it remained lifted and outstretched before her.

When a fourth candle joined the pulsing rhythm, Leopold gained the distinct impression that Hannah's work was nearing completion. Surely, the addition of the fifth candle would complete her ritual.

Just then, a slight wind seemed to blow through the room, and its gusts also joined the timing of the music and candles. The red smoke that had drifted lazily about the room now took a shape demanded by the air flow, spinning as it was blown by each timed gust. Slowly, as if unwilling to kneel to the wind, the smoke coalesced into an air funnel that surrounded Hannah. It swirled in fits and starts, for though its

motion never ceased, it accelerated each time the strange indoor wind blew.

The beat quickened further, and Leopold grew more nervous than before. Making no great effort to be quiet, while consequently working to avoid a loud interruption, the Toreador shuffled around the perimeter of the room so that he stood facing Hannah. He hoped to at least make eye contact with her, but it was fruitless—the hood she wore hung low over her face, covering it almost to the tip of her nose.

The beat was so rapid now that Hannah's fingers chimed more than three times a second. Then, the fifth candle flared and a blinding flash flooded the room as all the candles spilled intense white light. Leopold's eyes were spared great trauma because they reflexively closed. Some part of him had known that the rapid cadence had built to its crescendo, though he could not explain why or how.

When Leopold urged his eyes to open, he found the chamber mostly dark again, though the steady light from the candles still provided sufficient illumination for a mortal to see, let alone a Kindred with heightened senses. Hannah remained in the center of the chamber, and her hand was yet outstretched, though she did not clash the cymbals again.

The red smoke still swirled, but it had coalesced greatly and now formed an air funnel only a couple of feet high and not that wide that extended from Hannah's uplifted hand. The smoke became denser and denser and the red transformed to ruby and that to the crimson of blood as the funnel compacted further, reducing slowly in size until Leopold could just barely make it out in the light spinning on Hannah's palm.

Throughout, Hannah stood completely still, presumably unable to see what was happening because her hood was still lowered.

When her outstretched hand suddenly snapped closed, Leopold jumped, startled by the movement after the hypnotic spinning of the smoke. As Leopold calmed himself, Hannah threw back her hood and regarded him, her eyes already set in place to stare directly into the depths of Leopold's.

Leopold continued to lock eyes with Hannah, though he did so nervously. Not hiding his uneasiness, he said, "I thought the Tremere did not share their secrets."

Hannah was silent and it was she who broke eye contact to examine the contents of her hand. The brief look Leopold gained revealed only that the smoke must have solidified into a physical object of some sort, and it was something that was still red.

He continued, "Your magic, I mean. I thought the Tremere did not allow others to learn their magic."

Hannah's gaunt, pale and emotionless face turned back to the Toreador. She said, "That is usually true."

"Then—" Leopold began.

"From what substance have the candles been fashioned?"

"I don't—"

"What was the order of the notes my cymbals rang?"

"I'm not—"

"What direction was I facing?"

This time, Leopold remained silent, and Hannah echoed this for a split-second.

Then she said, "You see? I have revealed nothing to you. Not yet at least."

"What do you mean?"

Hannah took a moment to arrange her hood, smoothing it so it would lie flatter against her back.

She said, "Follow me into the next room, Cainite."

The statement was so matter-of-fact that it was something between a request and a command. Leopold followed. Something of the delicacy between coercion and force was in the use of the old term "Cainite." Leopold rarely heard this term used, as "Kindred" was the preferred slang among the younger vampires he encountered more frequently. Leopold wondered if Hannah was really so old that such a term came to her naturally, or whether it was an affectation like that of some Kindred who imagined themselves power-brokers with rising influence despite their youth and general ignorance.

Not that he would call Hannah ignorant. To the contrary, he'd heard her called the All-Knowing before, and while he believed her to be only a few hundred years old, she was rumored to be within a hand's digits in generations from Caine. Probably that was exaggeration, but Leopold, who was no real judge of such matters, suspected she could well be five or six generations removed from the supposed source of Kindred, or Cainite, blood.

Hannah stepped to one of the walls, and when she brushed her hands against its surface, the candles suddenly extinguished themselves. A moment later, the illuminated outline of a door was revealed where Leopold had not previously detected a door. Hannah's thin frame was silhouetted in the light that poured

through the doorway, but only for a moment as she stepped on.

Leopold stepped into a room that was in stark contrast to everything else he'd seen in the Tremere chantry. It sported the furnishings and character of an archetypical corporate office. There was a small wet bar; a large, flat-topped oak desk; aerial photos of golf courses hanging framed on the walls; two plush chairs that faced the desk with a small round table supporting a humidior between them.

The ordinariness rattled Leopold more than any of the odd and arcane tableaux he'd encountered already this night. He felt slack-jawed as he staggered toward one of the two over-large chairs and took a seat. Hannah was seated in a leather executive chair behind the huge desk.

She placed the object in her left hand on the desk, and it was immediately recognizable to Leopold as a vial of blood. He unconsciously licked his lips, though he immediately regretted this display. The blood was so obviously thick, and its dark, dark crimson surely meant extraordinary flavor.

Hannah was impassive as she surveyed the Toreador. Leopold expected her to say something, but perhaps a full moment passed and she offered no conversation. So Leopold said, "You said that night you visited me in my workshop that there might be a way you could help me in the future."

Hannah said flatly, "Indeed. There are doubtless many ways I could help you."

Again, Leopold expected her to say more, but he didn't let the conversation idle so long this time. Looking down at his lap, he said, "You're probably right, though I'm sure you could name more ways than

I could.” He looked up at that, with a slight grin on his face, but Hannah’s face was still an emotional blank.

Leopold continued. “But I’m hoping for one particular kind of help.”

Hannah said, “Of course. You seek the identity of your sire.”

Leopold was stunned. “Yes, that’s true. How could you possibly know?” Perhaps she *was* All-Knowing.

The Tremere sat straight-backed and rigid in her leather chair and seemed to take no enjoyment from the surprise she caused her guest. Again, though, she remained silent.

Leopold’s concern was only heightened, and he asked, “Are there others who know of this uncertainty of mine as well?”

“It’s unlikely that there are many.”

That didn’t reassure Leopold.

“I can help you, of course,” Hannah said. Indicating the vial of deliciously dark blood on her desk, she said, “That’s what this is for, after all.”

Leopold imagined himself shrinking into his stuffed chair. Was he so transparent? Did the Tremere witch possess some powers of detection or mind-reading that enabled her to predict him thus? Had he revealed something to her when she visited his studio, something he didn’t recall, just as the Kine woman with him would forget some of her time there? These thoughts and others raced through Leopold’s mind. Imagining that she might even now be reading his thoughts, he tried to banish them and even replace them with thoughts of confidence.

She raised an eyebrow at him, which on her face seemed to the Toreador an almost stunning display

of emotion. "But you must tell me something first."

"If I can," Leopold offered.

"Why should I help you?"

Her voice was so devoid of engagement that Leopold imagined his case closed already. There was nothing he could offer and she knew it, or she must know it if she knew so much else. He felt a hopelessness wash over him. The previous nights suddenly seemed enormously long. His sculpting of Victoria almost vanished on the horizon of his memory. But then he knew what to say.

"As I am clearly the one between us who knows so little, I propose that you tell me why you should help me."

Hannah's eyes narrowed to slits, contracting not like a human's but more like a snake's. She seemed to appraise the Toreador before her.

"Yes, there is perhaps one reason I might help you. You must promise to sculpt me—"

"But you know I cannot sculpt Kin...Cainites," Leopold interrupted. "We established that when you visited my work...shop...that...ni..." Leopold trailed off as Hannah's face registered more and more indications that she did not believe the Toreador's protest. Her left eyebrow raised, then she craned her neck forward a bit, and finally slitted her eyes in that serpent-like manner again, and Leopold cracked. Could she already know about his success earlier this night?

He said, "But I've done it once now, so perhaps I can do it again. I agree to try, but inability cannot be construed as failure."

"Agreed, but there is more to my price."

"Oh?"

Hannah stood and walked around the desk to-

ward the Toreador. "The sculpture must be life-size and life-like. No artistic interpretations. It must also be full-figure, not merely a bust or a portrait."

Leopold said, "I can agree to all that."

"Finally," Hannah added, almost running her words over Leopold's as if unaware that he'd spoken, "it must be from memory. I will not model for the sculpture."

To Leopold, the Tremere's "will not" almost sounded like "cannot," but he couldn't say why he gained that impression.

Leopold pressed himself back in the large chair, for Hannah was practically standing on top of him now. He could tell that the robe she wore was very thick, for part of it draped across his knee.

He said, "That's a bit more difficult, and some life-like details are bound to be lost, but I'm sure I can execute that work with reasonable success."

Hannah stepped even closer, so that her left leg pressed into the seat of the chair between Leopold's spread legs. "Then I will model now, to guarantee more than a 'reasonable' success."

Like a snake shedding its skin, Hannah rolled her shoulders and her thick robe slid off her torso and splashed down to her knees, where it hung only because the chair cushion would not let it sink to the floor.

Beneath the robe, she was naked, and beyond the surprise of this sudden and presumably utterly uncharacteristic gesture of Hannah's, Leopold was startled by the fine features of her body. She was almost painfully thin, but such emaciation was considered beautiful by modern standards. Her skin, like that of many Kindred, was perfect and unmarred,

but more than that her narrow waist was wonderfully fashioned and its lines tapered upward toward a stomach that gave way to precious, gem-like breasts, and downward widened slightly at her pelvis before sloping delicately along the length of her legs.

“Touch me,” Hannah commanded.

Leopold, suddenly aware that as he drank in her body he had yet to look her in the face again, glanced upward. Some of the magic of her beauty was dispelled by her plain and unemotional face, but Leopold didn’t need the suggestion again. He reached the fingertips of both hands toward the Tremere and traced them along the slight curves of her sides.

“No,” she corrected, and Leopold quickly flinched in retreat. “More. You must memorize me not only with your eyes, but with your hands as well. Explore me, young Toreador, and think on this promise you’ve given. Commit my body to memory.”

Her words offered that same ground between coercion and force suggested earlier, and Leopold wondered if the puritanical and rigid Hannah didn’t offer something more than what met the eye. Perhaps as a mortal she had had secrets of more than a thaumaturgical nature.

Hannah took one of his hands in hers and splayed the fingers wide. Then she pressed his open hand on her naked thigh.

Leopold did as instructed, softly cupping his other hand as well as he did when smoothing over a nearly complete work in clay for the final time. He closed his eyes, rubbing, and exploring.

He was amazed that she was so soft. He’d heard that the skin of many elders became hard in order to protect the Kindred. And though he could feel the

bones very close to Hannah's skin, her flesh nevertheless possessed a sensual sheen that was a pleasure to investigate.

He closed his eyes and transported his consciousness into his hands.

“Enough.”

Though softly spoken, the word jolted Leopold back to the corporate office in which he sat. He rubbed his eyes and imagined he'd been sleeping, though he clearly recalled the prior moments when he saw Hannah, still exotic and naked before him. The Tremere dipped to retrieve her robe and secure it over her shoulders again.

She turned her back to the Toreador as she stepped toward her leather chair on the far side of the large desk. She smoothed the robe and sat facing Leopold, her face still as motionless and unanimated as deerskin stretched on a drying rack.

Leopold was in something akin to shock and found himself slow to recover. Hannah's unveiling of herself was so entirely alien to what he expected of her that he didn't know exactly how to react. Nor did he know what to say to her next. Professionally, as a sculptor, he was extremely impressed with her physique. When a mortal, and even until now as a Kindred, he had never had the opportunity to work with such a model. Anyone with a body like that was doing fashion work, not standing for arduous hours while an artist worked over clay or stone.

It struck him as hugely inappropriate to compliment her, though, so he simply said, “I sometimes enter a trance when I do my best sculpting. I believe I must have done the same just now in order to memo-

alize the contour of your body as you requested.”

“You were quite thorough, indeed,” Hannah said, her impassive face not registering any innuendo or pleasure or distaste, or really anything at all.

All Leopold could say was, “The result will be better for it.”

Hannah returned her to her silent staring, so Leopold took the initiative again. “So what exactly does that vial contain?”

Hannah glanced at the crimson-filled glass tube and said, “You may imagine it to be synthetic Vitæ. It has not been drawn directly from Kindred or Kine, but it would fuel the former and transfuse into any of the latter without rejection.”

“And I—”

Hannah interrupted, acting as if she had never paused, “You will drink it tonight.”

Leopold didn’t like the sound of that. There was so much power in blood, and the Tremere were the supposed masters of tapping it for unthinkable uses. One such use might benefit Leopold if it addressed his question, but he also knew there was risk in imbibing blood. For instance, he’d been told that if a Kindred ever partook of another Kindred’s blood on a half dozen occasions, then the latter Kindred would gain control over the former with a sort of unshakable mind control.

Of course, he’d also heard it said that this happened after two such feedings. Or four. Or, the more times, the stronger the control. Lots of permutations, but it all came down to the basic fact that it was unwise to drink Vitæ—blood—offered by another Kindred, especially a Tremere whose Kindred existence was built on a foundation of shared blood.

“And afterwards?”

“It must remain in your system for a full day, so do not burn it through activity tonight. After that time, a simple ritual I can perform in but a moment at this coming night’s party will provide some information that will put me on the track of some helpful information.”

Leopold asked, “It will reveal the identity of my sire?”

“Perhaps.” Hannah’s lack of motion, and hence absence of any sort of body language, did not help Leopold guess whether this “perhaps” was a likely or remote possibility. He had little choice but to accept it either way, though, so he didn’t press any further.

“Very well, then, I’d best proceed as it seems that dawn is but an hour or so away, and I must yet return to my haven.”

Hannah pinched the vial between a thumb and forefinger and extended it over the plane of her desk. Leopold stood and accepted it.

He weighed it as he returned to his seat. The vial was heavy, so it must have been fashioned from lead glass, and the cap that stoppered it was a very dense cork that instantly reshaped itself after he pressed a fingernail along its edge.

He looked up at Hannah, expecting to find her as she was before, simply waiting patiently. Instead, she stared off into space to Leopold’s left. As the Toreador watched, the Tremere’s nose wriggled as if she was searching for a scent. Then her eyes briefly narrowed in that serpentine manner and she returned her attention to Leopold.

She snapped, “Proceed.” There was no mistaking this for anything but a command. It seemed the

patience of his hostess was at an end.

So he drank. Leopold squeezed the cork and carefully pulled it out. With the pop of a champagne bottle, the cork slipped free. A single drop of the thick blood within splattered out as well, landing on Leopold's wrist. It puckered up with impressive surface tension instead of running down his forearm, despite being a sizable drop.

A pleasing rich and earthy odor wafted from the vial, and Leopold found himself desiring the blood regardless of any future benefits that might accrue. Without looking again at Hannah, the Toreador quaffed the viscous liquid. He opened his throat as he had learned to do in order to catch every bit of the spray of blood from a mortal's punctured artery.

The blood slipped satisfyingly down his throat and it was as flavorful as he'd imagined. Leopold felt a brief rush of hypersensitivity, as if his hearing and sight were suddenly more acute, but this faded almost instantly.

He looked at Hannah now as he replaced the empty vial atop the desk.

He asked, "So, there's nothing else that needs be done tonight?"

"That completes our business for now, Toreador. We each have more services to perform for the other, but you understand that your price must be paid regardless of my ritual's success or failure."

"Yes," said Leopold. "I understand, just as you surely likewise accept that I may be unable to execute the sculpture of another Kindred. I hope that I can do so, however, as I look forward to sculpting your likeness. Your *exact* likeness."

Hannah said, "My servant awaits outside the

door. He will escort you out—a journey I believe you'll find somewhat simpler than your entrance.”

Leopold nodded, but as he turned to leave, the Toreador paused and looked squarely back at Hannah. He asked, “When you first visited me that night a year ago...?”

“Yes?” she asked to answer his pause.

“What did I do to the girl after you left?”

Hannah smiled, and that made Leopold visibly shiver, for she had never done that before, and he wished she wouldn't again because it was far, far more frightening than a thousand hours of her stoicism.

Leopold said, “I don't recall, but for some reason I'm certain you know.”

“I do indeed possess that knowledge, young Cainite.” She leveled her gaze directly into his eyes. “You got down on your hands and knees and begged for her forgiveness.”

Leopold stood still for a moment, surprised that Hannah told him so bluntly, or even told him at all. And he was partly shocked that Hannah would be privy to what he understood should have been a private display, and partly ashamed for begging thus at all.

Leopold glanced at the floor and then back up at Hannah. “Did she grant it?” he asked.

Hannah's smile slowly eased from her lips. She darted a look over her shoulder and then returned her gaze to the Toreador. “I'll tell you that tomorrow night as well. Now begone.”

Again her tone left no room for dissension, and Leopold turned quickly on his heel and left, closing the carved oak door gently behind him.